

About 50 Chicago public schools to face closure: City Hall sources

By Fran Spielman and Lauren FitzPatrick Staff Reporters March 20, 2013 4:52PM

Updated: March 20, 2013 7:10PM

Chicago Public Schools officials are expected to announce Thursday about 50 elementary schools will be closed — believed to be the largest number of schools ever closed in one place at one time in the country, the Chicago Sun-Times has learned.

Four City Hall sources put the number of closures at 50 or slightly higher.

Several aldermen set to lose schools in their wards have been notified by CPS.

CPS could not be reached immediately for comment, but was expected to release a statement Wednesday evening.

Ald. Howard Brookins (21st), who served on an independent school closing commission, told the Sun-Times that he's been informed that two school in his South Side ward are on the hit list: Mahalia Jackson Elementary and Garrett A. Morgan Elementary.

But Brookins said he's not giving up the fight for either of those schools.

"Morgan has been trying to set up as a speciality school servicing the needs of kids who are deaf or hard of hearing. It has three full-time teachers who do sign language. One-third of that school is special needs kids," Brookins said.

Trumbull Elementary, a school with nearly 32 percent special education students located in the North Side ward of the mayor's floor leader Pat O'Connor, also has been named, according to a City Hall source.

CPS CEO Barbara Byrd-Bennett has until March 31 to announce her final list that the Board of Education must vote on.

An independent commission she tasked with helping her decide recommended that she handle no more than 80 schools of the 129 elementary schools that are eligible, whether by closing, consolidating, or academically turning them around. And a recent district request for vendors solicited moving and other transitional services for school buildings for 20, 40, 60, 80, 100 or 129 schools.

The schools chief said she had no target in mind when she set out to "right-size" a district she says has 100,000 more seats than students. The district reports facing a \$1 billion deficit by summer.

CPS has estimated that each closed school would save \$500,000 to \$800,000. The district has acknowledged that closing schools won't save money in the first year but will allow school leaders to redistribute resources.

Byrd-Bennett has promised that every student whose neighborhood school closes will be directed to a new school that is academically better.

On Tuesday, she and the ex-Marine in charge of transitioning students from closed schools to new ones said that the costs of adding improvements and supports to the new schools would be paid for within two years with savings from the closed schools. They would not yet put a dollar figure on any of the costs or savings, saying only that a "majority" of the costs would be covered in the first year.

Schools receiving children from shuttered buildings will all be outfitted with air conditioning, a contentious issue during the recent teachers' strike, they said. The district also announced plans to update security infrastructure in the schools receiving children and to add Safe Passages community members to guard routes from children's old school to their new one.

Byrd-Bennett, an experienced educator, is an old hand at closing schools in urban district, having overseen the shuttering of 30 schools in Detroit, 20-some while heading the Cleveland district, and another 21 while consulting in Pittsburgh.

The Chicago Teachers Union has been calling for a moratorium on all school closings until a state-mandated Chicago Educational Facilities Task Force completes a Master Facilities Plan, saying the closings won't fix the budget hole and have historically affected black and brown students unfairly.

A Sun-Times analysis of the 129 schools showed that an average nine of ten affected students are black. And 117 of the schools located mostly on the South and West sides are majority black.

"This city cannot destroy that many schools. It will send our district into chaos," CTU president Karen Lewis said in a statement Wednesday. "These actions will put our students safety and academics at risk and will further destabilize our neighborhoods."

Lewis said the union and supporters would use nonviolent direct action, and are holding a rally March 27 in Daley Plaza.

"Enough with the lies--school closings will not save money and taxpayers will not see costs benefits in two years," she continued. "Vibrant school communities quickly transform into abandon buildings, neighborhood eyesores and public safety hazards."

The state law governing school closings requires Byrd-Bennett to notify any affected aldermen, state representatives and state senators, in addition to school principals, Local School Councils and parents.

Ald. Pat Dowell (3rd) refused to disclose the number of school closings in her ward, claiming she's "still negotiating" with CPS.

"I know how many they're talking about, but we're still trying to reach agreement. I've been fighting for all my school. I have not been supportive of the wholesale closing of schools," Dowell said.

"I understand that there are under-utilization issues. But, I want them to take a wholesale look at the 3rd Ward because Bronzeville has been the focus of [previous] school actions that have de-stabilized schools in the past. I'm looking for a long-term approach [to ensure] that these closing result in better technology and better facilities."

Ald. Will Burns (4th) cut short a call from a Chicago Sun-Times reporter to take a call from CPS.

When Burns called back, he refused to comment on the school closings in his South Side ward, which is home to both School Board President David Vitale and the CTU's Lewis.

"There's a concern about where these kids would go to get that type of care and attention."

Ald. Jason Ervin (28th) was tight-lipped.

"I've had some conversations, but nothing concrete. You've probably got better information than I do. I've had some conversations, but I don't know what the finale is," he said.

Aldermen Carrie Austin (34th) and Emma Mitts (37th) did not return repeated phone calls. City Hall sources said they have all been told about school closings in their wards.

Outside Garrett Morgan Elementary School, parents and children wanted more answers.

"Where are these kids gonna go, especially if they're closing Mahalia Jackson, too. This school is good for the community" said Charles Daugherty, whose daughter, Caniya attends kindergarten at Morgan.

Daugherty's nine-year-old sister, Duanae, is in 4th grade at Morgan.

"I'm upset. There are good people here," said Duanae, who helped make a roller coaster from marbles and tissue paper Wednesday in an after school program.

As 10-year-old Cache Nelson exited Morgan, Vina Lucket, a close family friend, walked with her.

"I feel real sad about it," said Lucket. "There are a lot of children here with learning disabilities. Where are they going to go?" she continued, throwing her hands into the air.