

West Side High School Faces Relocation to the East Side

West Side High School, New York City's first alternative high school, has lost its fight to stay in its building on West 102nd Street. In what is described as a “swap,” West Side High will be relocated to a converted office building in East Harlem, while the current occupant of the East Side space, the Young Women’s Leadership School (TYWLS), will move into the West Side High School building.

The decision came at a public meeting on May 1, when the city’s Panel on Education Policy (PEP) heard hours of testimony from teachers, students, and others who pleaded to keep West Side at its current site. At the end, Schools Chancellor David Banks urged the PEP members to support the move of the two schools. There were 9 no votes, 1 abstention, and 1 absence. So with just 12 of 23 votes, the PEP voted to proceed

with the move.

Numerous West Side and East Side elected officials had also previously expressed opposition to the relocation of West Side High. They included Council Members Gale Brewer, Shaun Abreu, Diana Ayala, and Kristin Richardson Jordan; Assembly Member Edward Gibbs; Manhattan Boro President Mark Levine and Public Advocate Jumaane Williams; and State Senators Cordell Cleare and Robert Jackson. In the end, their opinion too was ignored.

West Side High School is a transfer school that serves students who have one last chance to get a high school diploma. Many of its students are in their early 20s. Some have babies. The West 102nd Street building has a child care center, a large gym, a kitchen big enough for cooking classes, a health clinic, and more.

The Department of Education cited low enrollment at West Side as the reason for the move. However, the

DOE failed to help West Side boost enrollment, particularly throughout the pandemic. Also, calling the relocation a “swap” with TYWLS implies equivalent facilities. But nothing could be further from the truth. The current TYWLS building has no gym, no day care for teen parents, and no health clinic. Also, it is served by only one subway line, making commuting especially difficult for students with jobs.

There are also serious safety concerns in moving West Side High School out of its longtime neighborhood. Gang conflicts between neighborhoods and specific housing projects are serious, and serving gang-involved youth has been part of West Side’s work since its inception. West Side High School has had a long relationship with Frederick Douglass Projects that has helped ensure the safety of West Side students as they travel to and from school, making West Side High School a safe place for young people who may not be safe in their own neighborhoods.

So why go ahead with the move? The Young Women's Leadership School (TYWLS), which is taking over the West Side High School building, is one in a chain of single-sex girl schools for grades 6-12 founded by Ann Tisch, a member of one of the wealthiest and most powerful families in NYC. Tisch and her associates have given millions of dollars to the non-profit that subsidizes her schools. The students of TWYLS, most of them college-bound, deserve a facility adequate to meet their needs. But the DOE has failed to meet their growing needs year after year, and the burden of that failure now falls unfairly on the students of West Side High. This move deprives the vulnerable, at-risk students of West Side High of the resources they need.