Chicago Police arrest school closing protesters camped outside Rahm Emanuel’s office

By Lauren FitzPatrick Staff Reporter November 2, 2012 9:10PM

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Chicago Police arrested protesters Friday night who camped outside Mayor Rahm Emanuel’s Fifth Floor office in City Hall to call attention to school closings.

Police said “several” people were arrested after refusing to leave. Chicago Teachers Union Vice-President Jesse Sharkey said police hauled away 10 people at about 10 p.m.

The protest began late Friday afternoon outside City Hall’s La Salle Street entrance.

“No more school closings,” they hollered hours after the Chicago Public Schools announced a new plan to figure out which school buildings to close and which to merge.

Their number grew to more than 100, their chants more elaborate, “Hey Rahm, we’re no fool, you will not close our schools,” as they made their way up to the Fifth Floor and parked outside the mayor’s office.

The protesters, in red Chicago Teachers Union and blue Action Now T-shirts, kept up the chant outside the mayor’s office. Earlier this week, Mayor Rahm Emanuel reiterated his plan to close some schools. The activists accuse the mayor of closing neighborhood schools so he can hand them over to charter operators.

“We have to let Rahm know we’re here,” a man yelled out. “We here, Rahm!”

“Let’s be honest. If you are closing public schools because there aren’t enough kids, then
why are you opening 60 new charter schools?” asked Windy Pearson of Action Now. “. . . Their real agenda is to privatize our schools. CPS and Mayor Emanuel want to do to our schools what Mayor [Richard M.] Daley did to parking meters.”

Pauline Lipman, a University of Illinois at Chicago professor and member of Teachers For Social Justice, said underutilization in regular neighborhood schools was “created.”

“Low enrollment doesn’t just happen,” she said. “CPS under-enrolls schools. They draw away students from neighborhood schools by surrounding them with charters.

“We want a moratorium, not just a phony community process,” Lipman said, referring to the CPS plan to seek advice on school closings from a panel of community members.

Aquila Griffin is a student at Dyett High School, a neighborhood school that’s being phased out. It didn’t get a new freshman class this year. Nor does it have a librarian or Advanced Placement classes, either, she said.

“My message to our mayor and Barbara Byrd-Bennett is we are not collateral damage,” she said. “CPS has to answer for ignoring the voice of the people most impacted.”

About 5 p.m., as Chicago Police said the building was closing, about 50 protesters sat down and demanded a meeting with Emanuel. By 7 p.m., Jitu Brown, of the Kenwood Oakland Community Organization, said protesters were refusing to meet with Beth Swanson, the mayor’s deputy for education, or anyone else except the mayor, and they would stay all night if need be.