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Capitol doors swing open; now let's have a look inside

On Day 19 they turned on the lights at the Capitol in St. Paul and finally let the people who elected them see the wreckage. Sort of.

I dropped by to see if a crowd of angry citizens had swarmed the place to question why the governor and legislators had been deciding how to spend billions of our dollars behind closed doors and away from public scrutiny, but the place was like a church on Saturday night. The guard's lonely footsteps echoed down polished hallways while a gang of weary reporters huddled outside the governor's office.

I thought perhaps some Minnesotans would at least come down to see what the shutdown hath wrought, kind of like when crowds gather to gawk at a car crash.

Nothing.

Mike Dean, executive director of Common Cause Minnesota, an organization that essentially forced our government to open those doors by threatening court action, said that on Monday a group of Colombian soccer players dropped by to see our greatest symbol of democracy, but it was closed.

"How do you think that looked

Tevlin continues on B2 ►



DAVID JOLES • djoles@startribune.com
Cameron Walker, a third-grader at Concordia Creative Learning Academy, upper right, joined hundreds of students on the steps of the Capitol at a Tuesday rally to support charter schools.

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◀ TEVLIN FROM B1

to the Colombians?" Dean asked. "We used to be a shining example of good government, but we've lost our way. We are accepting mediocrity, we are accepting secrecy and we are getting the government we deserve."

Though the doors were open, Dean was concerned that the secrecy would continue. That's why Common Cause is asking for a 72-hour delay in voting for any bill so that people can have a chance to read it before the Legislature votes.

"Do you even think the legislators are going to read hundreds of pages before they vote?" asked Dean. "I find that hard to believe. Who knows what they might slip into a budget bill? I simply do not trust legislators."

"To have the Capitol locked when decisions are being made inside? This is completely unprecedented," said Dean. "It hasn't happened in the history of our state, maybe not our country. If this doesn't violate the open meeting law, it certainly violates the spirit of it."

I emerged from a silent building to find hundreds of charter school children gathering on the steps in the dank heat. Kids in pony tails, kids in corn rows. Kids with glasses sitting cock-eyed on their faces, kids with braces. It felt like 110 degrees, but they were singing and carrying signs: "No More Holdbacks," said one.

I found Mary Donaldson, founder of the Concordia Creative Learning Academy, on the Capitol steps. Despite the fact all her kids are poor, they are among the highest ranking academically in the state.

"Mary, I just wanted to thank you and the kids for loaning the state \$700 million so that we can save 7,700 millionaires from paying taxes," I said. "As a taxpayer myself, I appreciate the sacrifice."

As you know, the pending agreement between Gov. Dayton and Republican legislators forces schools to borrow the \$700 million, with a

promise the state will pay the schools back. Of course, they made that promise last time, too, so now the schools are \$1.4 billion in the hole.

Donaldson grimaced. "I hear you," she said. "Awful."

Concordia will have to borrow \$400,000 to make up for government's ineptitude, and unlike public schools that banks consider less risky, charters will pay market rate on interest. Donaldson estimates that to be \$32,000.

◀ WHO KNOWS WHAT

THEY MIGHT SLIP

INTO A BUDGET BILL? I

SIMPLY DO NOT TRUST

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Mike Dean, executive director of Common Cause Minnesota

"I can't cut pencils and paper clips to save that," she said. "That's a teacher's salary."

Which means the people who are really going to pay are people like Jackson Stewart, age 7. People like Destiny Meyers, 13. And people like Panu Vang, 8.

Kids: I thank you and my millionaire friends thank you. We'll get the next one. Promise.

A few feet away, Eric Mahmoud, president and CEO of the Best Academy, was showing a proper amount of anger about the budget, the budget conducted in secret.

"We have the largest achievement gap in the country!" shouted Mahmoud. That's because "we have a huge leadership gap."

Then the nice kids who are propping up the state's coffers started singing "We Shall Overcome" outside the public building that had been closed to the public for 19 days.

"Kids singing on the steps of the Capitol," said Brian Sweeney of Charter School Partners. "This is the true voice of democracy."

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BY JON TEVLIN

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