The Impact of School Closings on Parent Involvement

In the spring of 2013, CPS closed 50 schools mainly serving African American students. CEO Barbara Byrd-Bennett and Mayor Rahm Emanuel contended the closings were necessary to reduce CPS budget deficits and promised that students would receive more resources and improved educational opportunities. Still, thousands of parents, students, teachers and community members across the city protested and testified to keep their schools open.

We are researchers at UIC who are also parents and teachers working for equity and justice in Chicago Public Schools. Our project is to hear from parents about the effects of school closings on their children’s academics, social emotional well-being, and safety and the impact on their families and communities. We also want to create a space for parents to talk about alternatives to school closings and what kind of education they want for their children and all children in CPS. We are conducting in-depth interviews with parents and caregivers in South, West, and central areas of Chicago. Our purpose is to share what we learn with parents and community organizations to support their advocacy for just and equitable education.

In this policy snapshot, based on a subset of 20 interviews with parents and caregivers, we share preliminary findings about the impact of school closings on parent involvement.

School Closings and Parental Involvement
Our interviews show that most parents and caregivers played significant roles in strengthening their schools. They contributed important knowledge and skills, generational experience, and ties to their community. In turn, parents’ involvement in their schools strengthened their families and communities. However, many parents feel excluded from the new schools. They also felt excluded from the decisions to close schools. When schools were closed, children, families, and communities were deeply impacted. School closings disrupted family-school ties and deprived educators of the resources and knowledge parents/caregivers can provide.

Parent Involvement in Closed Schools
• Many parents and caregivers we interviewed were deeply involved in schools that were closed. They were volunteer coaches, safety monitors, classroom aides, mentors, community liaisons, and security assistants. They led fundraising drives, advocated for improved services and resources for children with special needs, collected and purchased school supplies, prepared food for staff and students, served on Local School Councils and in Parent Teacher Associations, and participated in citywide campaigns to improve schools. One parent stated that at the closed school, “the community started pitching in and everyone started participating with the school, because they allowed us to volunteer, to help whenever we could, to get in where we could fit in.”

• Parents play a vital role building relationships between schools and community.

• Neighborhood schools were like families. “Centro Elementary [pseudonym, closed school] was my home. Centro was my kids’ school, their home, their second home, they loved it, it was like family.”

School Closings and Parent Exclusion
• School closings were devastating to families and community. When schools were closed, children, families, and communities were deeply impacted. For parents, especially those who spend hours every week supporting their school, the closing of their neighborhood schools represented a great loss. “A lot of the people, most of the people, are just disheartened… It’s like you just snatched the heart of our community out. You dismantled it. You blew it up. And it wasn’t like it was something bad. It was something good.”

Photo by Sarah-Ji Rhee
Parents feel excluded from receiving schools. Some parents report that they are no longer able to volunteer or participate in their new schools; others don’t get information on what’s going on; others do not feel welcome.

Parents felt excluded from the decision to close their school. The vast majority of the parents we spoke with did not support the decision to close their school; yet, many felt that CPS did not listen to their concerns. One parent stated that the meetings were a “waste” because “they had already made up their mind on which school was closing.”

Parents Continue to Work for Positive Change

• While many parents expressed sadness and anger with CPS’s school closing process, they continue to work for ways to ensure their children and other affected students have the best possible educational experience. Parents have shared their concerns with the media, school board, and other parents; volunteered to monitor children’s safety; and circulated petitions to improve transportation. One parent is contemplating running for the Local School Council, while many others spoke about working with parents at their school or throughout the district to create citywide changes.

• Parents share their hopes for their children’s education. Parents have expressed hopes that the shared struggle against school closings could result in community actions to improve education. As one parent states, “...I also know that we could bring about change. It’s not fast and it’s not easy, but we can bring about change.”

• Parents have expressed many ideas about changes they would like to see, including: more holistic and relevant curriculum, schools that are more humane and joyful and respectful, increased parental involvement at the district level, more access to local schools, an elected school board.

What the Research Says:

• Strong parent-community ties is one of five essential supports for school improvement.¹

• Community involvement is essential for sustainable school improvement.²

• Improved neighborhood schools have strong Local School Councils.³

Moving Forward

• Committed parents and caregivers should be involved in decisions about school actions.

• Parents are resources. Schools need strong parent voice and participation at the school level, e.g., strong Local School Councils, robust opportunities for parents to contribute wisdom, skills, and energy.

• Sustainable school transformation must draw upon the wisdom and experience of parents and community.

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-Parent from closed school