Collaborative for Equity and Justice in Education
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Acknowledgements: We thank the parents and caregivers who generously shared their experiences of school closings with us.
Executive Summary

On May 22, 2013 Chicago’s appointed Board of Education voted to close 50 schools, turn around five others, and co-locate 17 elementary schools, affecting roughly 40,000 students. This was the largest number of schools closed at one time in the U.S. Since 2001, Chicago Public Schools has closed, turned-around, phased-out, or consolidated over 150 neighborhood public schools in low-income African American and Latino communities. This policy has disproportionately affected African American students and communities. At the same time, CPS has expanded privately run charter and turnaround schools. These actions should be understood in relation to CPS’ “portfolio” district agenda in which schools are part of a market of largely interchangeable public and private services, rather than stabilizing neighborhood institutions.

Drawing on in-depth interviews with a sample of parents from the West, South, and Near West sides of Chicago, as well as testimony at public hearings and publicly available data, this study examines the effects of school closings from the point of view of parents. The study focuses on effects of school closings on children’s academic performance, social/emotional well being, and safety and the impact on their families and communities as well as parents’ experiences with the process of school closings. In addition, the study documents parents’ substantial contributions to the life of their schools, ways parents stepped in to mitigate the harm of the closings, and parents’ visions of the education they want.

Findings

Although parents had a variety of experiences with school closings, five common themes emerge from their stories:

1. Parents believe school closings had a negative impact on their children, and most believe their new schools are not better.

2. Closed schools had deep meanings for children, parents and, communities. Closings were a great loss.

3. Parents made many vital contributions to their schools, were proactive, and have a holistic vision of education.

4. Parents felt excluded from school closing decisions and some feel excluded from new schools.

5. Parents distrust CPS, have a critical analysis of the reasons for school closings, and want a voice in CPS decisions and the Board of Education.

Recommendations

This study demonstrates that parents are resourceful school participants and have a rich store of knowledge, expertise, and wisdom. They are a significant resource for school improvement and source of educational vision. Their contributions could be enabled through fundamental shifts to democratic decision-making structures and processes and through school-community based processes of school improvement and transformation. Recommendations:

1. There should be a moratorium on school closings, turnarounds, charter school expansion, and other disruptive school actions. School closings have caused harm and not generally improved education.

2. School reforms should result in equitable high quality holistic education in all schools. Every school should have fully resourced and fully staffed arts and physical education programs, a rich culturally relevant curriculum, extracurricular activities, supports for students with special needs, necessary wrap around services, and an environment of care and respect.

3. Plans for sustainable school transformation should be developed by school based educators.
and parents with the assistance of educational experts. They should be research based and draw on the wisdom, experience, and resources of parents and community.

4. CPS needs democracy in decision-making.
   a. No school actions should be taken without approval of the elected school decision-making body comprised of parents, community, teachers and school staff—the Local School Council.
   b. CPS should support strong, independent Local School Councils in every public school with adequate resources and training by experienced community organizations, as a means for stronger parent involvement and decision-making in schools.
   c. Parents and community members should have a voice in CPS policies, and CPS should be directly accountable to the public. An elected school board representative of parents and communities is a necessary step to establish democracy and begin to heal the deep mistrust between school district leaders and parents.

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Introduction

On May 22, 2013 Chicago’s appointed Board of Education voted to close 50 schools, turn around five others, and co-locate 17 elementary schools. This was the largest number of schools closed at one time in the U.S. Since 2001, Chicago Public Schools has closed, turned-around, or consolidated over 150 neighborhood public schools in low-income African American and Latino communities. As a result, some African American areas of the city have almost no public open enrollment schools. However, Chicago is not alone in closing its public schools. Philadelphia, Washington, DC, New York, Detroit, and many other cities have closed schools, citing budget problems, under enrollment, aging building infrastructure, and/or student underperformance (see Dowdall, 2011).

There has been controversy and protest surrounding school closings in Chicago and throughout the nation. In Chicago, proposed closings were met with an outpouring of protest. Tens of thousands attended public hearings across the city, marched, picketed the Board of Education, sat in, and more. Parents, students, teachers, and community members expressed their anger and frustration to school officials, pleaded and demanded that their schools be kept open, provided data about their schools’ strengths and successes, proposed plans for school improvement, and demanded that the Board of Education support their schools, not close them.

While proponents argue that closing schools can help the district consolidate resources and offer better educational opportunities to students, critics, including some authors of this report, argue that school closures are part of a larger agenda to privatize public education, gentrify some areas of the city, and abandon others (Lipman, 2011; 2013). They argue that massive school closures disrupt communities, jeopardize students’ safety, interrupt learning, and disproportionately harm students of color and students with special needs. In particular, critics point to the disproportionate impact on African American students and communities that have experienced not only the loss of their schools but a significant decline in African American teachers. Yet, despite both the increase in school closures and the controversy surrounding them, there is very little data available about the impact on students, parents, and communities.

We draw the title of this report from Dr. Mindy Fullilove’s (2005) account of experiences with urban renewal from 1949-1973. Fullilove’s research documents the devastating loss of community and psychic pain of displacement experienced by African Americans uprooted by urban redevelopment and gentrification. Drawing on the stories of community members forced out of their communities, Fullilove describes their experience as “root shock,” “the traumatic stress of the loss of [one’s] lifeworld” (p.20) whose ripple effects last for decades. In our interviews for this study, “root shock” captures the experience of dislocation due to school closings experienced by many of the children and families. The material loss and psychic pain are not confined to the schools. Neighborhood public schools are an integral part of a neighborhood or community ecosystem. Thus root shock extends from children, their parents and caregivers, teachers and other school staff, to the neighborhood and community in which the school is embedded.

Relevance of this study now

When CPS announced plans for massive school closings, CEO Barbra Byrd Bennett promised not to close any more schools for five years (CPS, 2012). However, school closings and their effects must be understood in
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the context of CPS’ larger agenda of being a “school choice” or “portfolio” district. Portfolio districts are based on a market model of multiple education providers or “venders”—public, private, charter, and contract. Each vender has a performance contract and those who do not meet the terms of the contract are not renewed, e.g., are closed, re-engineered, or replaced. The portfolio strategy assumes that schools are much like private services or retail outlets, largely interchangeable, moveable, replaceable, and defined by uniform performance standards.¹

However, decades of research in education establishes that public schools have historically been community institutions to serve the public, not private interests. Schools are not like retail outlets that provide goods and services. Schools are embedded in and integral to communities. They are the glue that binds together a neighborhood of adults as well as children. They have generational significance and meaning for their communities, often embody a community’s heritage and culture, and are stable institutions through families’ economic and social ups and downs. As public community institutions, schools have historically played a central role in democracy, a space where social issues are debated and social change is focused, e.g., around questions of racial desegregation, bilingualism, treatment of people with disabilities, and gender equity. School closings disrupt these important functions for families and communities. So do school turnarounds, which are closings by another name—all that remains of the old school is the physical structure. Its history, culture, tradition, and all the adults in the building are replaced. And charter schools run by private providers and education management organizations as franchises are neither rooted in, accountable to, nor automatically open to the communities in which they locate. Like other businesses, cost-benefit analyses and economic metrics may dictate their longevity. Thus what is learned about the effects of school closings is relevant to turnarounds, charters and the larger portfolio-district model of education provision that is premised on a potentially shifting array of providers.

**Study focus**

This study examines the effects of school closings from the point of view of parents whose children have experienced them. (We use the term “parents” throughout to refer to parents and other caregivers of children.) Our purpose, through in-depth interviews with a sample of parents,² is to give school closings a human face. Specifically, the study builds on parents’ narratives about the effects of school closings on their children’s academic performance, social/emotional well being, and safety and the impact on their families and communities. The narratives also focus on parents’ experiences with the process of school closings. In addition, the study documents parents’ stories about their substantial contributions to the life of their schools. The narratives reveal the human side of school closings that cannot be captured by numbers or surveys—the deep meanings their schools have for families and communities and the pain they continue to experience from the school closing process.

As parents tell their stories, we hear the ways in which parents are critical assets to their schools, how they step in to mitigate the effects of detrimental CPS policies and lack of resources. Detailing ways parents
strengthen neighborhood schools can help policy makers and the public better understand the implications of closing schools and can point the way forward to policies that build on these strengths. Moreover, parents have their own educational goals and visions of what constitutes a quality education for their children. The study shines a light on parents’ critiques of CPS and their hopes and desires for their children’s education, their visions of the schools their children need and deserve. We draw on these visions to inform recommendations for the content and processes of school improvement. We draw on scholar Eve Tuck’s (2009) warning to researchers to avoid one-dimensional, pathologizing portrayals of marginalized communities as damaged, and to reformulate how research is framed and conducted and to “reimagine how findings might be used by, for, and with communities” (p. 409).

Significance of this study

The sheer magnitude of Chicago’s school closings calls for vigorous research. Since 2001, over 150 schools were closed, turned around, phased out or consolidated. In the 2013 Board actions, “roughly 40,000” students were affected (Vevea, 2013). School actions have hit African American students disproportionately. Some shuttered schools were iconic institutions of African American cultural and intellectual life.

Moreover, Chicago’s policy of closing public schools and opening charter schools is one of the most salient and contested public policies in the city. It is linked to policies that mandate dismantling public housing, limit affordable housing options, and support gentrification (Greenlee, et al, 2008; Fleming, et al, 2009; Lipman, Smith & Gutstein, 2012). Closing a school is a drastic action. Schools are stable institutions in communities facing the destabilizing effects of public and private disinvestment, poverty, high unemployment, and housing insecurity. Closing a school may result in children traveling outside their neighborhoods, siblings attending different schools, trauma to children, and the loss of jobs for teachers, as well as other education workers who are often community residents. Nonetheless, the trend of closing schools (and replacing public neighborhood schools with charter and “choice” schools) is increasing despite very limited data about either its effectiveness in increasing academic performance or the impact closings have on children, families, and communities.

The limited research on the impact on achievement shows that only the very small percentage of students who transfer to the districts’ top scoring schools gain an academic advantage. By definition, school closings also create mobility. Research on student mobility reveals that students lose at least four months of academic gains every time they change schools (Kerbow, 1996). Even turnaround schools, where the students remain in the building but all the adults are replaced along with the curriculum and school culture, produce negative effects of mobility —loss of connection with trusted adults and familiar programs, new curricula, etc. (Lipman, 2011). School closings in Chicago have also resulted in spikes in violence and safety concerns as students travel to schools outside their neighborhoods and sometimes across busy streets or through unsafe areas (Brown, Gutstein & Lipman, 2009).

In public hearings and community meetings parents, teachers,
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Students, and community residents raised additional concerns about school closings. They condemned decisions to shutter schools that are community anchors and that provide programs and resources families and community members consider valuable in neighborhoods otherwise disinvested of public resources. Parents and community members also spoke of their involvement in their schools and the generational meaning they have as cohesive institutions in their communities. Schools are clearly more than bricks and mortar or an educational service that can simply be transferred from one building to another. At the same time, in public hearings, parents and students made clear that they wanted much more from their schools and called for fundamental improvements. Despite this anecdotal evidence, there is little systematic research on the meaning of closed schools to students, families and community members, even though they are the ones directly affected by school closings. These questions can only be addressed qualitatively, by listening to the perspectives and narratives of those affected.

The limited research on school closings focuses on academic effects on students and treats schools as isolated, separate from neighborhoods and communities. Yet, as Berliner (2006) puts it, “both students and schools are situated in neighborhoods filled with families” (p. 951). Borrowing from Fullilove (2005), this report assumes schools are part of a human ecosystem, “a web of connections— a way of being” (Fullilove, 2005). Nonetheless, there is little research on the impact school closings have on families as a whole or on their communities. This is of particular concern for African American communities that have experienced public and private disinvestment, where schools are often anchors of community and centers of community involvement and civic engagement as well as intellectual and cultural heritage. We suggest that “root shock” is thus a valuable rubric to assess the deeper impact of school closings on children, families and communities.

Goals of our research

The purpose of our research is two-fold: 1) to gather and analyze parents’ in-depth narratives on the impact of school closings on students, families, and communities, 2) to engage the larger community in a discussion about the implications of such closings. We believe it is critical that data on these impacts be available and accessible to the public in order to contribute to public discussion about a policy of widespread concern. Thus, we will share our findings in various accessible formats that will facilitate meaningful public engagement. We intend to work with community organizations to inform dialogue with parents as they advocate for educational reforms they believe to be in the best interests of their children and communities. In February through April 2014, we released three Research Snapshots (CEJE, February 2014a; CEJE, February 2014b; CEJE, April, 2014) based on preliminary findings from a subset of interviews and have shared them with parents, community members, and community organizations and at research conferences and public forums.

Research questions

Our research seeks to learn about parents’ perspectives on the effects of school closings on their children, families, and communities. Specifically,
through parents’ narratives we want to document their perspectives on:

• How children’s academic opportunities and performance are impacted
• How their children’s social/emotional wellbeing is affected
• How their children’s safety in getting to/from school and within the school is affected
• How the family is impacted by school closings
• How the community is impacted when schools are closed
• How the school closing process influences the relationship between parents/community and CPS
• The kind of education parents want for their children
• Other issues of concern parents have related to school closings

Research design and methods

We focused on closed schools in three areas of the city—West, South, and Near West side—that have experienced multiple school closings over the past 13 years. We completed in-depth interviews with 23 CPS parents impacted by school actions in 2013. Of the 23 parents interviewed, 21 had children at closed schools, one had a child in a turnaround school, and one was a parent at an official receiving school. All but three parents from closed schools enrolled their children in the official receiving school. Yet, it is important to note that of the 21 parents from closed schools, 11 remained in the same building as their closed school. We talked in-depth with 9 parents from the Near West side, 7 from the South side, and 7 from the West side of the city. The racial/ethnic breakdown of the parents is as follows: 19 African Americans, 2 Latinos, 1 Asian American and 1 White.

We interviewed parents who had experiences with school closings and turnarounds, beginning with parents who we knew or who were recommended by community-based and parent organizations and then used “snowball sampling”—following recommendations of interviewees to other parents (a common practice in qualitative interview research.) Interviews lasted from one to three hours, and we interviewed some participants more than once.

Our goal was to capture parents’ perspectives, stories, and theorizing about education—to probe for the meaning school closings have had for their children and in their own lives and communities and what they want from public education. The advantage of narrative research of this kind is that it captures, in-depth, a variety of people’s ideas and experiences, yet, by comparing narratives, we can identify common themes that indicate experiences of parents more broadly.

We audiotaped and transcribed interviews and gave participants the opportunity to review the transcripts and to correct, edit, or make additions. We analyzed transcripts for common themes using AtlasTI qualitative data analysis software. We also attended numerous community forums and meetings related to school closings and reviewed and analyzed official transcripts of community hearings leading up to the school closings to identify parent concerns. For context, beginning September 2013, we also tracked news media stories related to the aftermath of the school closings. Our analysis is based on these multiple data sources. All identifying information is masked to protect confidentiality.
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Background: Disproportionate Racial Impact

Cities across the U.S. have closed schools or turned them over to private operators, citing under-enrollment and/or poor performance as the primary rationales. While this report primarily focuses on the impact of the historic closing of 50 schools and the turn around of five others in Spring 2013, it is essential to understand this round of school actions in a broader context (see Journey for Justice, 2014). It is important to bear in mind that between 2001-2012 over 100 Chicago public schools were closed, consolidated, phased out, or turned around (Vevea, Lutton & Karp, 2013, attached spreadsheet). Across the United States, including in Chicago, these school actions have disproportionately impacted students of color and students with special needs (Lutton, Karp & Ramos, 2011; PACER, 2013). In Chicago, 88 percent of the students affected by school actions from 2001 to 2012 were African American (Caref, et al, 2012).

Again in 2013, the vast majority of closed schools were in African American communities. While African Americans make up 40.5% of CPS students, 79% of students impacted by the latest round of closures, co-locations, and turnarounds are African American (Vevea, 2013). When we examine only the school closures (including closures where students remain in building while the school is phased out) 87% of students impacted are African American (CPS, 2012; Vevea, 2013).

This policy has dramatically impacted African American communities. Fifty school closings in 2013, combined with the 104 actions that occurred in the decade before, means that some South and West side areas of Chicago are now public school “deserts.” In the North Lawndale community, 60% of elementary students do not attend their neighborhood school (Karp, 2013). In many neighborhoods in the South and West sides of Chicago, less than 55% of students attend their neighborhood school. This school churn is destabilizing for families and the community in general.

In Chicago, school closings, turnarounds, and consolidations have been a matter of policy since 2001. Beginning with Arne Duncan’s time as the CEO of Chicago Public Schools, CPS was transformed into a school “choice” district. School closings, phase-outs, turnarounds, and consolidations, coupled with charter school expansion, have resulted in a market of school “options.” Yet, while the rhetoric of equality is used to support the shift from neighborhood schools to education marketplaces, multiple studies have shown that education markets lead to greater educational inequality and increased class and racial segregation (See Rotberg, 2012 for a comprehensive review of the research.) In Chicago, racial gaps on the National Assessment of Education Progress (the gold standard of national assessment) have increased under these policies. The rhetoric of “choice” detracts from what most parents in this study want—high quality, fully funded neighborhood schools.

Decisions to close schools and expand charter schools have been made by a mayor-appointed school Board that is unrepresentative of, and unaccountable to, the public. Chicago has had a mayor-controlled board since 1995, despite the fact that there is no conclusive evidence that mayoral control and mayor-appointed boards are more effective at governing schools or raising student achievement (Lipman & Gutstein, 2011). The lack of democracy has been a major focus of contention in the
school closing process. Yet Chicago has a strong structure for local school control—elected Local School Councils (LSCs) in every public school. Mostly comprised of parents and community members, LSCs hold significant power including hiring the principal and approving the school budgets. The Consortium on Chicago School Research (2010) defines parent/community involvement as one of five “essential supports” of school improvement.

**Examining the rationale for Chicago’s school closings**

Districts often cite the need to save costs as a rationale to close schools and argue that school closings and consolidations can result in the provision of better educational opportunities for all students. Yet, numerous studies find that there is no significant improvement in student achievement for the majority of students impacted by school closings (de la Torre & Gwynne, 2009; Dowdall, 2011; Engberg et al., 2012; PACER 2013). While many school districts, including Chicago, contend that school closings will help save the district money and consolidate resources, savings are often “relatively small in the context of big-city school-district budgets” (Dowdall, 2011) and drastically overstated (e.g., Branch, 2012).

As public schools are closed, states and school districts authorize the dramatic expansion of privately run, publicly funded charter schools. Yet, a substantial body of research on charter schools shows that, overall, they perform no better than traditional neighborhood schools, serve lower percentages of English Language Learners and special education students, and increase segregation (see Rotberg, 2014 for a summary of research). Waitoller, Radinsky, Trzaska, & Maggin (2014) found that Chicago charter schools serve a significantly lower percentage special education students with severe disabilities, who require more services and supports, than neighborhood public schools.

**Under enrollment**

CPS contends that closing schools is necessary because there has been a dramatic decrease in the number of students. This bears closer scrutiny. First, the data show a much smaller drop in enrollment than stated by CPS (Lutton & Vevea, 2012). Also, it is important to note that student population declined during a period in which over 19,000 units of public housing were torn down and a number of African American, Latino, and other working class communities experienced significant gentrification (see Fleming, et al, 2009; Greenlee, et al, 2008; Lipman, 2011). This under enrollment reflects public policies and private investment decisions that push some people out of neighborhoods and attract others.

Further, while the population of school-age children in Chicago has decreased since 2001, the declining enrollment of students in traditional public schools is also impacted by charter school expansion. According to data compiled by the Chicago public radio station, WBEZ, total enrollment numbers in all Chicago Public Schools decreased by 28,289 since 2000 (Lutton & Vevea, 2012). Yet, the decrease in enrollment in neighborhood schools was more than 75,000. At the same time, the number of students in charter and contract schools has drastically increased. Since 2000, charter and contract schools have increased their total number of students by 47,391. In 2000, only 1% of Chicago Public School students attended charter
or contract schools. By 2013 charter and contract school enrollment increased to 13%. More than 120 new schools, most of which are charter schools, have opened since 2000. This represents a significant change in Chicago Public Schools from traditional public to charter and contract schools (Vevea, Lutton & Karp, 2013). As of spring 2014, 32 contract schools were turned over to the private operator Academy of Urban School Leadership.

Even as public schools were closed, expansion and funding of charter schools continued. As CPS closed schools to reduce deficits, it began implementing a compact with the Gates Foundation to open 60 more charter schools and increase funding for charter schools.⁸ CPS budgeted $350 million in 2012 for the Office of New Schools, dedicated to developing new charter and contract schools, and $71 million in the 2013 budget was dedicated to developing new charter schools. According to the parent group Raise Your Hand (2013), in the FY2013-2014 budget, neighborhood schools received a cut of over $100 million while charters received an increase of $80 million. In some community areas that have experienced large losses in enrollment (Austin, West Town, Englewood, West Englewood), and in which individual schools have lost substantial enrollment, CPS nonetheless authorized charter school expansion. More public schools in these areas were closed in 2013, creating a market for charter schools. In sum, CPS provided additional funding to charters, cut funding from neighborhood public schools, and then closed “under-enrolled” and “low-performing” neighborhood schools.

**Academic achievement**

The second reason given for school closings is poor performance. Research shows that only those students who transfer to schools in the top quartile of academic performance benefit academically (see de la Torre & Gwynne, 2009). Yet, in Chicago, between 2002-2012, most students who left closed schools did not attend schools that were significantly better. In 2009, de la Torre and Gwynne found that, “[m]ost students who transferred out of closing schools reenrolled in schools that were academically weak” (p. 2). In the 2013 closings, the majority of receiving schools were not, according to CPS’ matrix, top schools. Our analysis indicates that even if every student from a closing elementary school went to their official welcoming school, only 14 of the 56 total “moves” from closed to receiving schools would result in students attending a CPS level one school (and only 6 of those schools were considered top quartile schools). This means that 88% of the “moves” would not result in students attending top quartile schools (see Lutton, 2013a). During hearings, parents expressed many concerns about designated receiving schools, and, in fact, only 60% of students enrolled in their official receiving school (Lutton, 2013b).

In March 2014, CEO Barbara Byrd-Bennett shared her *School Consolidations Report* at the Board of Education meeting. Almost a year after the closures, CPS reported success in achieving many of their goals. The report points to improved attendance, increased GPAs, improved “on track to graduation” rates, and decreases in misconduct reports, for students impacted by the closings. But this is misleading. A closer look at CPS’s *School Consolidations Report* reveals improvements are minimal, and in some cases...
less than in schools where no actions were taken. For example, the average GPA of students from closed schools increased from 2.36 to 2.38 while the average GPA in “non-action” schools increased from 2.75 to 2.80 (CPS, 2014). It appears that the miniscule improvements, in some cases less than the non-action school improvement, do not represent significant academic gains in this first year.

Concentrating resources
Third, school district officials stated that closing schools would allow the district to concentrate resources. They promised “welcoming” schools would have an infusion of resources. The Chicago Teachers Union’s examination of the evidence found that, in many cases, CPS did not fulfill its promises to receiving schools and only partially fulfilled them in others (Caref, Hainds & Jankov, 2014). Their report found that receiving schools remain disproportionately under-resourced compared with the district’s elementary schools overall. Also, there are a number of “de facto” welcoming schools that “took in more students from closed schools than designated welcoming schools” but which did not receive any of the resources that official welcoming schools received (Lutton, 2013b). As noted above, close to half of students from closed schools did not attend their designated welcoming school. At the same time, in public hearings leading up to school closings, parents, teachers, and students listed many programs, resources, and community partnerships that would be lost if their school was closed and reported their schools already had some of the resources CPS promised to add to receiving schools.

Findings
Parents we interviewed from three different areas of the city. Although they had a variety of experiences with school closings, five common themes emerge from their stories:

1. Parents believe school closings had a negative impact on their children, and most believe their new schools are not better
2. Closed schools had deep meanings for children, parents and, communities. Closings were a great loss
3. Parents made many vital contributions to their schools, were proactive, and have a holistic vision of education
4. Parents felt excluded from school closing decisions and some feel excluded from new schools
5. Parents distrust CPS, have a critical analysis of the reasons for school closings, and want a voice in CPS decisions and the Board of Education.

1. Parents believe school closings had a negative impact on their children, and most believe their new schools are not better.

Most parents were critical of the academics in their new schools.
Whatever parents thought of their closed schools, in our interviews we found that most did not believe that their children had better educational opportunities in their new schools. The exception was three parents in our study, two of whom chose to enroll their children in schools other than the
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official receiving school. Yet, for most of the parents we interviewed, the school closings, combined with changes to the curriculum and CPS budget cuts, left them feeling that the education their children received was incomplete and inadequate. Some parents talked about a loss of advanced academic classes and the lack of certified teachers. Many parents also described problems associated with their children’s transition to their new schools – loss of student records, mistakes with student scheduling, confusion about students’ services and IEPs, and the absence of teachers who knew the students. Another parent said that in both the closed and receiving schools, her children did not have adequate textbooks. While her child “likes school . . . he is not learning like he should be. He is struggling. He is coming home with homework that he cannot do.” She explained that when her older child brings homework that she cannot do,

We try to go over it, but, for instance, in math, she has division problems now…. She is still struggling with that and multiplication, we try to help her, I ask her, you know, where your notes are. She don’t have any notes, she don’t have any reference books. So, it is hard for me. I am not a teacher. I am her mother but I am not trained to teach math.”

Her assessment: “[CPS] could do a whole lot better.”

A few parents pointed out that their new schools were neglecting high quality teaching for test preparation. One parent explained, “I feel that if you’re going to have a school, give them the resources they need to be successful, instead of standardized tests.” She called for more hands-on learning for her children. Another parent was concerned that her child’s performance in school was based primarily on test data. Echoing what research says is the limitation of using standardized tests to assess student learning, she noted, “They don’t go back and take into account anything. That the classroom, that the teacher has that’s evidence of what the child knows.”

Numerous parents also commented that the increased class sizes in their children’s new schools made it more difficult for teachers to meet the needs of all students. One parent explained,

I feel that my kids going from a class where there were 15 kids, and a hands-on teacher to a class of 27 to 30 kids where my child is coming home every day saying, ‘Mama, I didn’t get the lesson…’

When schools were closed, some children lost resources—fine and performing arts, sports programs, field trips.

When CPS closed 50 schools, CEO Barbara Byrd-Bennett argued the closings would allow the district to concentrate resources and provide better learning opportunities in students’ new schools. While some parents noted improvements in the receiving schools, such as air conditions, WiFi, new furniture, many parents talked about lost resources that had been in place in their closed schools. It is ironic that the CPS officials responsible for providing adequate resources for all schools and all children would argue for

...from a class where there were 15 kids, and a hands-on teacher to a class of 27 to 30 kids where my child is coming home every day saying, ‘Mama, I didn’t get the lesson...’
closing some schools due to lack of resources. But, while CPS admittedly had failed to provide some closed schools with appropriate resources such as libraries and air conditioning (a persistent issue facing schools serving African American and Latino students, Chicago Teachers Union, 2012), community organizations, parents, teachers, and administrators rallied to provide programs and recruit resources their schools needed. The potential loss of hard won community partnerships, programs, and resources school staff and parents had obtained for their schools and put time and energy into was a repeated theme in the many public hearings on school closings during the fall and winter of 2012-2013 (Chicago Public Schools, 2013).

Numerous parents described the things their children missed from their closed schools—music programs, after school activities, incentive programs, field trips, traditions, and tutoring services—some of which were provided by community groups in partnership with their schools. Parents emphasized that these programs provided meaning and motivation for children. One parent explained that at the closed school, her child had art, theater, gym, and music. She commented, “I don’t see any of that now... she got all of those things that kept her balanced.” Another parent talked about her child’s participation in after school programs, including a music class and a sewing program, at her closed school. She questions, “... how do you take all that, when she was doing good... she was even passing the test scores ... So how do you tell me taking her music is better quality education?”

One parent regretted the loss of a well-rounded curriculum and extracurricular activities. She stated:

You can have the math, you can have the reading, you can have the arts, but if I don’t get to explore I’m not getting the whole advantage here. That’s what those programs do. It’s mental and it’s creativity. That’s how students know if they want to be doctors. They want to be scientists, they want to be, whatever they want to be....You don’t explore yourself in math, in reading, in writing, in science. I didn’t think about the whole student. I lost that. I didn’t think about...how important those things were to [my child] and they are missing now. I didn’t think about that when they decided [to close the school].

The loss of school relationships negatively affected children academically

Some parents believed that their children’s academic success was also negatively impacted by the loss of the relationships they had in their closed school. Parents discussed the positive impact that not only teachers, but coaches, security workers, parent volunteers, and administrators had on children. One parent, recalling her connections with all the educators and staff at the closed school, stated

I think the teachers, staff, and principal at [the school], I didn’t think of them [as] staff, but part of my family who [I] could talk to them about anything or if they need to talk. I know I can depend on these guys. [The principal] always made me feel like you are part of this... you are part of [the school].

When the schools were closed, those relationships were weakened and the children did not have the extra support. One parent explained that he could no longer look in on children that he had previously coached, as a volunteer.
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In many cases, this parent exclusion has not only harmed the students (who no longer have a parent or adult mentor monitoring their progress), but it has also harmed the parents, who found great joy in helping children at the school.

Parents also commented about the loss of teachers who worked with parents to support their children’s education. One parent talked about how parents and teachers worked together to ensure smooth transitions for children with special needs. The parent commented that because...

...our kids all started there together you’d know who had the allergies, it wasn’t just that somebody would have to give you a piece of paper and tell you somebody had an allergy, or you’d know who the runners were, or you’d know which exits the kids would head for, you know how to handle them, you knew how to calm them down... from one teacher to the next.

The parent worried: “How are you gonna do that from school to school? No one’s gonna do it.”

School closings were painful for children

A parent whose child was entering his last year of middle school said, “the first month in [the new school], he said he didn’t like the school, he didn’t like the staff. He didn’t like the principal... but there was, you know, his friends. That’s the one thing... his friends were there.” She continued to say that when her son learned about his school closing “he was disappointed because of the staff. The staff was leaving... like any other child they get really cautious because, you know, it’s gonna be a new round of staff, a new principal, new teachers, you know. It’s just, no one is familiar. That’s why... he was kinda hesitant about the new school year.”

Many parents talked about the anxiety their children felt about starting a new school. For many, the anxiety was related to the loss of relationship with teachers and peers. One parent explained “the anxiety about new teachers and you know new students, or whatever, that’s about it. And you know, when kids are trying to fit in, you know they worry about the smallest things, whether they’re gonna do good or is this teacher gonna be harder than the other teachers that I’m used to, you know stuff like that.”

Other parents talked about the stress of uncertainty—during the process, children didn’t know if their school would be closed and where they would be attending school the following year. One parent talked about the uncertainty surrounding the teachers’ futures—she explained “[t]eachers that have been there. . . They couldn’t even tell children if [the teachers] were going to be seen again in August.... That certainly frightens students. Not being able to see familiar faces.” Another parent shared that her child had a nightmare about going to her school and finding locked doors and an empty school. The parent realized it was not just her daughter experiencing nightmares: “...you’d hear whispers of different kids talking about nightmares, you’d hear whispers about parents with kids waking up screaming. You’d hear nightmares all the way from the beginning all the way to the end.”

Many parents talked about issues with the transition to the receiving school. One parent explained that the school was using outdated test data to determine her children’s academic level. Other parents talked about the

...you’d hear whispers of different kids talking about nightmares, you’d hear whispers about parents with kids waking up screaming. You’d hear nightmares all the way from the beginning all the way to the end.
emotional toll the transition took on their children. Three parents specifically commented about the lack of counselors to support students during the transition. One parent explained that at the receiving school “I had saw a certain amount of sadness, disruption. It was no counseling for the children such as a transition like that. [The closed school] was a lot of the children’s first home. Didn’t nobody take that into consideration.” Another parent commented:

You know what, they should’ve had crisis counselors or transition counselors, whatever you want to call ‘em, at [the closed school]. That would have made the transition much...smoother and it would have erased a lot of the fears that the kids have. But they didn’t think enough about the kids in that instance to do that. And I often wonder, well, these are some very intelligent people, you know, am I missing something here? Don’t you think a transition counselor or I don’t care what you called them, a transition counselor, a grief counselor? ‘Cause the kids were grieving. It was just like somebody had died, and it had. The school died.

Once the decision was made, many children experienced stress associated with their new school. While a few parents shared stories of success, including a child who was happy in her new school and another who was achieving better academically, numerous parents shared negative experiences. A number of parents talked about incidents in which their children were physically or verbally assaulted in their new school. One parent explained that her child is

...stressed out everyday...because now she has to not only worry about her being a child at the school, she has to worry about herself being bullied by other students that she didn’t know....her friends left. Others came and she didn’t know them and, she’s just stressed out everyday [emphasis], everyday is a new story about some person hitting her or this person touching her, or this person stealing....

Another parent explained that while he did not feel his daughter was in danger because he was able to drive her to her new school, his daughter was worried about other children. “She wanted to know, how are the kids going to get to school, she wanted to know about the safe passage program because she was aware of the gangs in the neighborhood.” Another parent said that her child “absolutely hates school....She says like ten times a day, I don’t want to go tomorrow. I don’t want to go to school tomorrow. I don’t want to go.”

2. Closed schools had deep meanings for children, parents, and communities. Closings were a great loss.

Parents and children had deep personal connections to their schools. They were like “family.”

For parents we interviewed, schools were more than buildings that provided academic services. They were a web of human connections. Many described their neighborhood schools like families. Parents spoke of the close and caring relationships they had with teachers, administrators and staff of their former neighborhood schools. Some of these family-school relationships spanned multiple generations. When CPS closed their schools,
parents expressed that their families and communities experienced a great loss. Many parents described their closed neighborhood schools as extensions of their family. One parent said,

"[Closed school] was my home. [It] was my kids’ school, their home, their second home, they loved it, it was like family...where the teacher...had my personal number, where I had the teacher’s personal number, where I can call...and say, you know my kid’s having a hard time with homework or my kid said this happened in class today...it was almost family...."

Another parent commented that her closed school was “not just a school. The teachers made [her children] feel like they could come to them and talk...about anything... Not just as teachers, but as...members of our family, our extended family.”

Parents reported that in some families in the neighborhood multiple generations had attended schools that were now closed. One parent recalled, “There are people who have lived in this community longer than I and watched kids come....So these are people that have long relationships with [closed school]. They family. Generations come out of this school.”

Describing her relationship to the closed school, another parent said, it “was deep because, you know, I attended the school myself and...it was a known community, staff, teachers, you know teachers that taught me, you know had my kids and you know, it was, it was a relationship where it couldn’t go wrong.” One parent explained how her child cried, was disappointed and hurt by the school closing. The parent reported that her child said, “Why would they close [the school]? I want to graduate from [closed school]...I don’t want to graduate from [receiving school] because that’s not where my sisters graduated from.”

Parents longed for the familiarity of their children’s former school and the people who worked there. Comparing her children’s experiences at the closed and receiving school, one parent claimed, “From the crossing guard, to the security, to the teacher. Yes. They knew who my kids were. That’s gone [now].” When parents recalled details of the school closings during interviews, some cried, expressed anger and even mourned. The emotional attachment to their closed neighborhood schools was palpable. When describing her reaction to first hearing of her school closing, one parent said,

"My heart dropped. Right now it feels like it’s starting to drop again. Feels like my heart’s in my stomach. When we actually got the news...I was with the teachers in the library...I sat on the floor, behind some books and I heard [the principal] say something and I just started crying, everybody was crying."

Some parents also discussed school-based programs that offered services and classes to parents and community members. Although one parent commented that her child’s new school offered more after school programs for the whole family, in other schools, parents shared that programs were lost. One parent commented that the Child Parent Center housed in the closed school was not reopened in the receiving school. She asked “Why would you take those type of resources away from parents who can walk their kids to school, drop them off, go in and use the computer,
learn crochet, learn sewing, learn how to make little kids books? You know, I was doing all of that. Why would you take that from people?”

Many parents talked about the deep meaning the closed school had in the lives of their children. One parent explained:

*You know you still have your old students [at the new school] who felt like [their closed school] was not just a school. You had a lot of kids who had issues at home that the teachers knew about and could help these babies....So if you, once again, if you are used to a certain thing and you just throw me out to something and you say okay I want you to deal with this...you are not being fair. Even though they are kids...they do have a voice. And a lot of times we have to listen to what those kids have to say....A lot of times we have to. I mean...even though you might think that they are kids...give them a chance...you’ll be surprised.*

School closings were a loss for the community as a whole. Schools are often the center of the community. Some communities that experienced school closings and turnarounds in 2013, have experienced multiple closings, beginning in 2001. Each closing marked yet another community institution that was lost (see for example, case studies in Data and Democracy Reports: Fleming, et al, 2009; Greenlee, et al, 2008; Lipman, Smith & Gutstein, 2012). Some community areas now have almost no public schools left.

One parent said, “*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.*” Emphasizing what a significant loss the community experienced, one parent recalled that when her neighborhood school closed, “*we also had a candle vigil for that school; it was really nice. We had a lot of parents and community members and priests out there to mourn the death of our school...the last public school that’s in [that neighborhood].*”

3. Parents made many vital contributions to their schools, were proactive, and have a holistic vision of education.

*Parents played many important and varied roles in their closed schools.*

Too often there is a public perception that parents, especially low-income parents of color, are uninvolved in their children’s education or have little to contribute to schools (Greene, 2013). Our research contradicts this stereotype. Our interviews show that most parents and caregivers with whom we spoke played significant roles in strengthening their schools. Parents we interviewed were volunteer coaches, safety monitors, classroom aids, mentors, community liaisons, and security assistants. They led fundraising efforts, 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 city-wide efforts 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....*”
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Many of the parents we spoke with played vital roles at their schools – one parent was at the school daily, having successfully advocated for school-wide improvement for children with special needs. Another parent who was regularly in the building, helped with arrival, dismissal, and all things in between. The contributions that parents made extended beyond their own children to the school as a whole. For some, volunteering in their neighborhood school was a way of contributing to their community. One parent said,

*Man, we did so much stuff in this school, for this school. That is what made the school uplifted....Whatever they needed. If they needed me to walk kids home, I walked kids home. If they needed someone to sit at the front desk, I would sit at the front desk. Whatever they needed...I was just volunteering...it was something I wanted to do for the community...that is my way of giving back.*

Parents reported working with teachers, administrators and staff to improve their school. They contributed important knowledge and skills, generational experience, and some had connections with their community that school staff did not. As one parent stated, “I think I got more response from the community than a teacher because I’m a parent, and Ma she’s a parent; she’s on the LSC...I got more feedback than an outreach employee at the school.”

School closings not only disrupted parent-school ties, they deprived educators of vital resources and knowledge parents can provide. This was illustrated by one parent who was an essential volunteer in the school, effectively functioning as an additional staff member:

*I used to volunteer at [the closed school]. I was also helping the coach with the basketball team. I was there at every game. I missed only one game. I would take the kids to the game and bring them home. I would volunteer in my [children’s classrooms..]. I volunteer in the lunchroom. When they were going to recess. We had the chance to do that.*

When schools closed parents proactively stepped in to mitigate the harm of the transition process.

Many parents described collective struggles to keep their schools open. They described how they testified at hearings, participated in marches, helped to organize other parents. When their schools were closed, parents reacted in a variety of ways to mitigate the dangers and harm of the school closings, to try to find a better school alternative for their children, to continue to advocate for better education in CPS. Yet, one parent explained that she was angry that parents, community organizations, teachers, and administrators had to do extra work to compensate for school closings. She said,

*But we should not be [providing extra support] doing that. The parents should not have to do that. And the principal should not be, have to adapt to such tasks that she would not be able to perform. She doing the best she can but it’s not fair because that is how they set it up to do. And then in a couple more years, we’ll be talking about closing up [the receiving school].*
Some parents transferred their children to schools other than the designated receiving schools.

Across the city, 40% of students from closed schools did not enroll in their designated receiving school (Lutton, 2013b). Three parents in our study did not send their children to their official receiving schools, including one parent who left the city to find better educational opportunities. A few parents told us they are exploring other options, including home schooling and charter schools. It is important to note that at least two other parents investigated other options, but found limited choices. One parent commented that she believed the school would remain open and by the time it was officially closed, “there were, you know, mentions that the schools in our surrounding area were crowded, overcrowded because of many schools closing.”

The parent who relocated so that her children could attend a suburban school explained, “I wasn’t going to go to another [CPS] school. I wasn’t going to be lied to. I wasn’t gonna have to deal with second best for what I thought was best for my child or children.” Speaking of the increased services and resources in her suburban school, she stated “it’s shock[ing] how different this can be in the same state, in the same country.” The two other parents chose schools other than the welcoming school within CPS. One parent didn’t send her children to the official school because she “didn’t like the attitude of the people that were there. They didn’t engage with me.”

Other parents advocated for changes at the receiving schools and intervened to ensure safety and services absent in the school transition process.

During the closing process and the beginning of the school year, parents spoke to the media, testified at the school board, spoke at community meetings and organized with other parents. Some parents ran for the Local School Council at the receiving schools, while many others spoke about working with parents at their school or throughout the district to create citywide changes. Another parent said that while he opposed the school actions, he was hopeful that out of the actions the community came together and could demand changes, including the creation of a CPS parent advisory committee.

Contrary to CPS assertions that their safe passage programs and transition processes created a smooth transition to receiving schools, through the interviews we found that it was parents who intervened to mitigate some of the potential danger and damage created by school closings. One parent went every day to the new school and to busy intersections to monitor children’s safety to and from school. Another parent used her position as an LSC member of a receiving school to create a bridge between her school and the closed school that was merged with her school. When asked about possible conflict between parents, she stated there wasn’t as much conflict as there might have been because “we went and organized with those parents and we fought with them.” It was important for her that the parents of both schools worked together to ensure that the new combined school would be functional for all students. Others circulated petitions to get buses to safely transport children to their new school. Some of the parents have expressed hopes that the shared struggle against school
closings could result in community actions to improve education. As one parent stated, “...I also know that we could bring about change. It’s not fast and it’s not easy, but we can bring about change.”

Yet, it is also important to note that for some of the parents we interviewed, the exclusion they felt from their children’s new schools, as discussed in Finding number 4, below, resulted in less school involvement. There simply was no way into the school. For some parents, this meant that they began volunteering at other places (park districts, religious institutions). Others expressed cynicism about being involved. One parent said, “I’m more nonchalant. I could care less. I’m not going to be as involved as I was coming to a new school or a new environment.” She explained, “last year I participated a lot...but this year I really, I really don’t feel the need to because I really don’t like it.” When this sentiment is coupled with the findings above about the valuable roles parents played in their own schools, it reflects a real loss of resources and ideas that parents provide when they are involved in their children’s schools.

Parents have a broad and humanistic vision of the education they want for their children.

In their comments about what their children lost when their schools closed (Finding number 1 above), parents lamented the loss of arts, extracurricular activities, and fieldtrips that had been in their closed schools. For them, these were essential to a quality education. When we asked what kind of education parents wanted for their children, most parents offered a holistic vision. One parent said,  

Well, I would like my daughter to be well-rounded. So consequently, I would like a well-rounded curriculum, that’s consistent, that does not interrupt the flow. Education has a rhythm...you gotta get ‘em a routine. And I would hope that my daughter has a strong foundation, that will carry her into high school, because, this is like they say, is the first day of their life. And if she has a strong foundation, she’ll succeed in high school, and she’ll go on to college. So, what I want for my child is what all the other parents want. I want her to succeed ...I don’t want her to be displaced, I don’t want her to be fearful, I don’t want her to be bullied. I want her to be educated.

The parents in our study had different hopes and desires for their children. Yet, many of them spoke about schooling that provided students with a “strong foundation” through a challenging curriculum in key content areas, including mathematics, science, reading, and writing. Parents want an educational environment that meets children where they are and supports them to reach higher. Many parents advocated for necessary academic supports and resources to be in place in their school. This includes “qualified teachers,” “classroom aides,” “smaller class sizes,” “community,” opportunities for “parent involvement,” access to “advanced courses,” “extra-curricular programs,” “technology,” appropriate services for children with special needs, and “resources.” They want instruction that does more than simply help students “pass the test” and instead “will carry [her/him] into high school” and college, a place where they feel “challenged,” “can be creative,” and encouraged to “think outside of the box.”
Parents’ educational goals extend beyond academics. They described an education that attends to children’s full development and that is respectful and caring. Many parents expressed a desire for their children to develop as “well-rounded” people, to have a rich curriculum, and to be valued and respected. Numerous parents expressed a desire for their child to know that she/he is “important” and “equal” in the school and not to “feel like [she/he] doesn’t matter.” One parent talked about the importance that her child feel loved in school. For parents we interviewed, a high-quality education emphasizes not only core curriculum, but also the arts and extracurricular activities. Speaking about her daughter, a mother stated “I want her to have the best education that’s possible, but I also [want] for her to be able to be in extracurricular activities.” Parents we interviewed want their children to have access to dance, music, drama, sports and arts and crafts. One parent proposed that having these programs opens up a world for children that they may have never experienced before. Parents recognize that the absence of extracurricular activities and non-academic programs significantly impacts their child’s entire learning experience. Ultimately, most parents want their children to be challenged and to be happy, excited, and love learning.

What the parents we interviewed want from their schools is supported by academic research. All students deserve, and benefit from, a meaningful and challenging curriculum that helps them reach their academic and personal potential while learning to be critical, active participants in democratic society (e.g., Ladson Billings, 1994; Meier, 1995). Enrichment programs and extracurricular opportunities are important as an integral part of a high quality school (Darling Hammond, 1997; Iwai, 2003).

4. Parents felt excluded from school closing decisions and some feel excluded from new schools.

The Board of Education and CPS officials did not listen to parents and did not respect their knowledge of their schools.

Parents, many of whom were greatly involved in the leadership of the closed school, felt that their expertise was not valued and that their opinions were largely ignored by school board members and CPS officials. A parent active in opposing the closing said, “We were powerless” to influence the decision. The sense of exclusion undergirds the feelings expressed by many parents, for example, one parent said,

*I felt that they didn’t understand where we was coming from so they didn’t really care. They didn’t give the parents or the staff…a chance to actually tell our story to what we were losing, how we were being affected. Like I said I went to the majority of the meetings because I had firsthand experience on what [our school] can do [and] how much it really changed or made an impact.*

Another parent captured the frustration of many parents with CPS officials who did not know what was actually going on the schools and did not bother to listen to parents. [They] “should’ve been stepping up and doing what [they] were supposed to be doing,” which would require spending time at the school and talking to parents about their experiences.

Parents said CPS officials and outside experts, many of whom had
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spent little to no time in their schools, decided the fate of their schools without knowledge of the school’s resources and actual utilization. Meanwhile, parents with valuable knowledge about the school were excluded. One parent explained that she spoke at the school closing hearings because she wanted to make certain that those making decisions would know “how [school closings] would affect my daughter and the whole [special education] program.” She detailed how a number of experts testified at the hearing. They listed their credentials and “it just showed like, that this was like the group of like professionals who knew like what was best for the school. And I felt that they did not really know the school.” Other parents expressed frustration that those making the decision to close their school did not know all of the wonderful things happening at their school.

Another active parent also argued that those closing the school were unaware of the ways in which the school was actually being utilized. She stated that when she walked around her school with the school engineer, she saw how the spaces were being used for resource rooms for students with special needs. She mentioned the need for designated space for special education teachers, therapists, social workers. She stated that the need for social workers, therapists, and service providers “wasn’t taken into consideration.”

These critiques mirror those of previous CPS school closings when teachers, principals and parents challenged the Board’s utilization formula for failing to account for how school space was actually used. Our previous research showed that CPS’ simple formula for calculating school utilization did not account for tutoring rooms, parent centers, and other essential supportive academic uses of school space (Greenlee, et al, 2008; Fleming, et al, 2009). We propose that an alternative way to assess use of school capacity is to consider what is “educationally appropriate” relative to the programs and goals of each particular school and within a context of educational best practices.

Many parents we spoke with also expressed frustration about the lack of clear information from CPS. Our interviews also highlight that there was no single source used to communicate information to parents. Communication-sharing, for example, came by way of flyers passed out from school bus drivers, letters from school staff, phone calls from community organizations, and conversations with school principals during a chance meeting in the hall, conversations with LSC members, or simply by word of mouth. It was often the proactive work of parents, teachers, and community organizations—not CPS—that provided whatever communication about school closings parents had. Over half of our interviewees mentioned to us that they got information and heard about decisions from other parents, teachers, community organizations or “the news.”

CPS ignored parents’ ideas about how to improve their schools rather than close them.

When asked about their experiences at their closed schools, parents had a range of responses. A few were pleased with the new school’s performance, others thought that their old school had made progress, still others had unresolved issues. Yet, no matter what the opinion was of the closed school, parents had experiences, wisdom, and ideas about how to
move the school forward that were ignored in the closing process. One parent commented that changes, including stronger leadership, more parental involvement, and better organization, could have happened within the existing school. She explained,

> I could have been swayed when they were telling me about all of the improvements. I was definitely open-minded. I think they could have done that at [the closed school], they could have just kept the school open and paid attention to that before and not make the children suffer.

**Parents’ involvement and access is limited in their new schools.**

Although their experiences varied, across the interviews parents told stories of exclusion in their new schools. Some parents said that they are no longer able to volunteer or participate in their receiving schools; others do not get information about school events or meetings; still others feel unwelcome. For some parents, the exclusion was physical – they were no longer allowed to volunteer in their children’s classrooms or schools and did not have the same access to teachers and administrators as they had in the school that was closed. Many parents mentioned that they no longer were allowed to speak to teachers or administrators without an appointment. A parent, who was actively involved in the day to day operations of the closed school, stated, “I cannot describe [receiving school] because I cannot get in there.” Many parents discussed the difficulty they were having even when they were offering to volunteer. One parent stated “…we are not allowed to volunteer…. [The principal] doesn’t want anyone in the school, like any parents viewing what is going on, like any criticism.”

Other parents complained they no longer knew when school events and meetings were taking place. A parent explained that in the closed school, “everybody, the security guards, the teachers, the administrators everybody say “hey you know there’s a meeting coming up and don’t forget,” while in the new school, notices are sent home, but there are no personal reminders. Another parent commented that the principal from the closed school had “promised to keep the community informed about what’s going on” and was often seen “in the community.” However, this parent lamented that the new principal is not seen in the community.

These are weighty criticisms because many of the parents we interviewed had played very valuable roles in their closed schools. These contributions are lost when they are excluded. Moreover, the involvement of parents and parents being informed about their children’s school contributes to children’s academic success and well-being in schools. When parents are welcomed in schools and able to partner with teachers it benefits the child and the teacher. CPS recognizes this in its “School Culture and Climate Report” on individual schools in which “Involved Families” is one of the “5 essentials” (http://www.cps.edu/schools/documents/SampleElementarySchoolReport.pdf).

Others expressed that although they were officially welcomed into the new school, they were discouraged by the new school culture. Many parents feel a lack of relationship-building in the new school. One parent conveyed that she “felt like a celebrity” when she entered her children’s
former school. Everyone knew and greeted her and her children. In the receiving school, this parent explained “Now you walk up in there and it’s nothing. It’s just dry because they don’t have all the things they used to have when [our school] was [our school].” She went on, “the love and the warmth...it’s not there” and the result is that she has stopped volunteering at the school and her child is “pretty much doing what she needs to do to pass onto the next grade.” Another parent expressed a similar view of her children’s new school. She said, “[T]he experience there has been cold...they don’t acknowledge me, you know so I have to almost earn it, like to start building a relationship from ground zero, and it’s tough.” Another parent talked about the sense of community at the closed school: “the experiences I had that I knew that it was a community, and we were together and we were willing to work together, it was a partnership, and we loved it [emphasis] everybody loved each other [emphasis].”

5. Parents distrust CPS, have a critical analysis of the reasons for school closings, and want a voice in CPS decisions and the Board of Education.

Parents see racism, privatization, breaking unions, and gentrification as the real motives for school closings.

Many parents we interviewed expressed deep distrust of CPS. Many African American parents are angry that closings “targeted” Black communities and believe CPS does not care about their communities or their education. They see CPS’s school actions as racist. One parent commented that

No one in the community trusts [CPS]. We trusted you [CPS] to hear us out and make sure that we got the best education or the best stability for our kids and you choose to close schools in the community I felt should have never been closed...You know, I feel they don’t care about the African American communities. They don’t care if we get an education...

Another parent describes the closings as “discrimination against African American children...So, I think that it is sad that once again we are being overlooked and all our ancestors and everybody did and we trying to find a way to say it’s okay. It’s not okay.” When asked if the move brought better educational opportunities for his child, one parent stated, “No I don’t think so. When you ask me that question, I think well why did they move just the Latino and the Black communities? I mean, the people who need it the most, we got hosed.”

Parents who are not African American, also pointed to racism in CPS’ school closings. This parent believed the racial unity in her closed school was something CPS did not want.

...when you have a school of compassion, of, of difference happening in one school, it’s not okay. You know, when you have blacks, browns, Mexicans, all type of, you know whites, you know we have whites in our school and everyone’s okay with it, it had to be broken down...no, they had to stop that.

Not only did parents feel as though what CPS did in closing the schools was racist against Black and Latino communities, many parents that we interviewed had strong opinions that closing schools was not really about
Many parents believed the decisions to close schools had been all but decided before the hearings. For example, one parent we interviewed captured the feeling expressed by many that the CPS hearings were “a waste” and the decision to close the school was made before they ever happened. Another said, “This was on the drawing board long before we even had a hint of it.” Moreover, many of the parents we interviewed had a developed social analysis of the real reasons for school closings.

Numerous parents made connections between the school closings and changes that were occurring in neighborhoods as a whole. They connected closing neighborhood schools to gentrification and plans to take over Black communities and push out community residents. One parent explained that the decision to close schools is an example of discrimination:

“I think it is sad that we have to accept discrimination like that. And I’m not teaching my kids…I tell my kids all the time, it ain’t nothing but discrimination for the Black children. And you fight, and that is why I talk to anybody. When it come to it, because it’s wrong. And I think everybody should know what’s going on because they are always talking about our rights, and what we, um, how we have overcome. But we haven’t overcome that much because we allow them to disrespect our community, close up our schools, and do whatever they want to our children, without a voice.

This same parent expressed a concern that the receiving school would also be closed. She disputed CPS’s reasons for closing her school (underutilization and low performance) and linked school closings to charter school expansion and displacement of African Americans:

“They lied about [the closed school]. They said that they was closing the school because it was underutilized. [The closed school] was not underutilized. [Our] test scores had been going up for the last two to three years. And then the building is in good condition as you can see. So, they lied about the reason they was closing these schools. The reason they closing the schools so they can fade out our schools and open charter schools and push the people out of our communities.

Some parents believed their school was really closed to turn it over to a charter school operator. One parent said, “So it’s just you know, a whole bunch of lies. You know they said that they was not going to close schools and turn them into charter schools, and I found out that the school down the street that we were fighting for also…they is trying to make it into [charter school].”

Multiple parents shared their observations that the closed schools had extensive repairs and construction just prior to the school actions. One parent expressed the belief that school closings were part of an effort to “get rid of the unions” and create charter schools. One parent drove us by her closed school and pointed out the construction trucks that were there every day. “What are they doing in there? Getting it ready for a charter?” She also pointed out the new condominiums and expensive restaurants in her community as evidence that city policy, including school closings, was aimed at pushing her, and other low-income residents out of the neighborhood. She was convinced the closings were part of a plan to take the building. She was angry that,
they already had it planned what they were gonna do, and just had us out there rappin' and raging looking like crazy parents, when they already had this mapped out what they were going to do....Throughout the fight, when we were fighting, they were fixing up the school with new lighting and electricity and so we...So why would you put money into a school if you’re going to close it?

There is evidence to support parents’ suspicions. More than half the schools opened in closed school buildings are AUSL turnarounds or charters. While most closed schools served neighborhood children, 65% of the schools now in those buildings are either selective enrollment or admit students by lottery (Vevea, Lutton & Karp, 2013). After Lafayette elementary school, in West Town, was closed in 2013, CPS announced plans to relocate Chi Arts, a contract school, from Bronzeville on the South side to the Lafayette building.

The skepticism parents express about the motivations for school closings is grounded in their knowledge of the larger privatization agenda in CPS, the gentrification and displacement they experience in their own communities, and the clear concentration of school actions in Black communities. Their analyses are supported by data on disproportionate impact of school closings since 2001 on Black communities and research on the relationship of school closings, gentrification, and displacement in Chicago (Caref, Hainds & Jankov, 2012; Fleming, et al, 2009; Greenlee, et al, 2008; Journey for Justice, 2014; Lipman, 2004; 2011). The Catalyst reported that as of Spring 2013 40 percent of closed schools housed charters (Forte, 2013). CPS’ $660 million capital budget plan for 2012 allocated almost $125 million (about one-fifth of the entire budget) to 11 schools that the district closed and made into turnaround schools (six of which were run by a private operator) or that the district required to share space with charter schools (Ahmed-Ullah, 2011; Chicago Public Schools, 2011).

Many parents believe CPS is dictating to parents. They believe parents should have a voice in CPS decisions and the Board of Education.

Some parents described a Board of Education that does not know the schools or the communities but is “telling us what to do” with our children. Another parent succinctly summarized the views of many:

I just . . . think that instead of...I just don't know how to put it...just stop dropping demands on the parents and let us have a say so in what our kids should be, being educated in. Let us be more of a part of our child’s education...you know it should just be, parents should be able to be involved in their child’s education, be involved with the teachers and staff and just, it's just so frustrating to put everything into words. I just know it's time for them to quit dictating to us what our kids need and let us make decisions on what our children should be doing.

Like the parent above, many of those we talked with believe that key to improving education in Chicago is having real parent and community voice in CPS and Board of Education decision-making. Several parents we interviewed served on the Local School Councils of the closed schools. In these leadership roles, they had first-hand knowledge of the strengths and needs of their schools and had a voice in decisions about school leadership,
budget, and school improvement plans. This is in contrast to the appointed Board of Education. Chicago has had a mayor-appointed Board of Education since 1995. The Board has been composed predominantly of bankers, corporate CEOs and real estate developers, most of whom do not have children in CPS. One parent concerned about the Board’s lack of accountability to communities said,

Even the LSC members, we have to get elected. We have to go to training. ...So what I’m saying is the process the Local School Council members go through is...it’s almost like we’re vetted and the Board is not. They’re just appointed by the mayor...appointees, you’re always going to go in favor of your job, the guy who is signing the checks. That’s plain and simple.

Some parents explicitly call for an elected school board composed mostly of parents and community members who have a stake in their children’s public education. One parent captured this sentiment:

I feel that instead of these...officials dictating things, they should have an elected school board where...if you was on a Local School Council for a certain amount of years, you volunteered for a certain number of years, you should be able to run....Some of these parents with hands-on experience should be able to be inside those decision-makings about our kids...That’s the one thing that I really feel.

Another parent pointed out that an elected board would be more responsive to the concerns and hopes of parents and students:

My experience with CPS has been that parents never mattered... [It] has been a very bad experience to where I’ve noticed that your emotions, your pleas, your efforts mean nothing... We need an elected board...parents need to be on that board, students need to be on that board, LSCs need to be able to have a last say-so in decisions by the board, I mean it’s a lot of changes that need to be made.

...[W]e cannot allow our mayor to pick his...cronies anymore because that’s what he’s doing and so...a lot needs to change and it needs to start with the board. It really does.

Conclusion

In the narratives of parents we hear that neighborhood schools have deep material, cultural, and symbolic meanings for their communities. They are spaces of inter-generational connection and personal relationships. They often provide essential resources to families and children, particularly in communities that have been disinvested in by public policy and private interests. Some are remembered for the important cultural and intellectual leaders who were educated there and the strengths and contributions the community has made to the broader society. The neighborhood impact of closed school buildings is not unlike that of foreclosed homes. The physical space, once a home, becomes negative space, as empty, shuttered buildings cast long shadows over children and their community, and both the short and long-term impact is detrimental to neighborhood stability. Fifty school closings in 2013, in addition to over 100 previous school actions since 2001, concentrated in African American and Latino communities, constitute massive displacement. Yet, the “root shock” (Fullilove, 2005) that follows school closings is largely invisible once news about board meetings and
parent protests fades and another school year begins. Our study brings the meaning of this root shock to light.

Our study also sheds light on the submerged stories of parents’ significant contributions to their schools. As our data indicate, parents possess a store of knowledge, expertise, energy, and commitment that makes schools work and enriches teaching and learning. Moreover, parents’ and caregivers’ lives are enriched by their involvement in their schools, the opportunity to “give back.” We also learned that parents did not simply want to save their schools; they wanted to improve them. Parents have broad, holistic, and humanistic visions of the schools they want for their children and all children. The parents we interviewed valued academic achievement but their definition of quality education extends to the full development of children’s talents and interests, and to schools that are caring and respectful.

We found that school closings limited parent participation and excluded parents from decisions that affected their children. When schools are closed and the bond is broken between families and schools, these school contributions are lost. We also found that many of the new schools did not have the resources for a quality education that CPS promised when they closed schools. (See Caref, Hainds, & Jankov, 2014, for data corroborating parents’ perspectives.)

In general, parents expressed that their knowledge and perspectives are largely excluded from plans for school “reform” and from decisions to close schools. Instead parents are “managed” or urged to “buy in” to decisions made by “experts” and appointed officials with little knowledge of education or connection to the communities affected (see Broad, 2009, for this strategy). Those affected say that they have no access to democratic process. This study documents both the contributions and proactive involvement of parents and their sense of exclusion from decisions to close schools and often from the new schools their children attend. This is a significant loss to the children, schools, the school district, and the parents themselves who described their closed schools as like “family.”

Decisions to close or turnaround schools that are based on technocratic notions of education, e.g., scores on standardized tests and enrollment-to-capacity ratios, miss their more complex roles and value. Decisions that assume schools are isolated fixtures do not account for the total impact that the school space has on the neighborhood it serves. Parents we talked with believe CPS and the Board made decisions without considering the strengths of schools and how buildings are actually used, how schools might be supported to improve, and without looking at schools in their contexts. When school district authorities decide to close schools without the full participation and decision-making of parents and community members, CPS dismisses their significant insights.

Parents we interviewed want a voice in their schools and in decisions about CPS policies, particularly decisions leading to drastic school actions. Many do not trust CPS. African American parents in particular have a strong critique of racism in CPS school closings. Many believe the mayor-appointed Board and other city and school officials do not care about African American children and have a plan to privatize schools and displace African American people. The expansion of charter schools and displacement of African
Americans due to dismantling public housing and gentrification lend credibility to their analyses. Parents call for more democracy in CPS, particularly in the composition and selection of the Board of Education. Their views are aligned with 87 percent of voters who voted in a non-binding referendum (November 2012) in favor of an elected school board in Chicago (Communities Organized for Democracy in Education, https://sites.google.com/site/codechicago/).

Education policy in Chicago, and nationally, is highly contested. School closings, in particular, have been the focus of intense debate and contention. This study brings the perspectives of parents, those who—as advocates for their children—have the most at stake, into that debate.

**Recommendations**

There is a deep chasm between CPS top-down policies and decision making, on the one hand, and the wealth of family resources and parent participation in schools, on the other. Yet our findings also point a way forward. Parents in this study are resourceful school participants and have a rich store of knowledge, expertise, and wisdom. This is important because meaningful involvement of community/families is a necessary component of school improvement and quality education (Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2010). Committed parents and community members are a significant resource for school improvement and source of educational vision. Their contributions could be enabled through fundamental shifts to democratic decision-making structures and processes and through school-community based processes of school improvement and transformation. We make the following recommendations:

1. There should be a moratorium on school closings, turnarounds, charter school expansion, and other disruptive school actions. School closings have caused harm and not generally improved education.
2. School reforms should result in equitable high quality holistic education in all schools. Every school should have fully resourced and fully staffed arts and physical education programs, a rich culturally relevant curriculum, extracurricular activities, supports for students with special needs, necessary wrap around services, and an environment of care and respect.
3. Plans for sustainable school transformation should be developed by school based educators and parents with the assistance of educational experts. They should be research based and draw on the wisdom, experience, and resources of parents and community.
4. CPS needs democracy in decision-making.
   a. No school actions should be taken without approval of the elected school decision-making body comprised of parents, community, teachers and school staff—the Local School Council.
   b. CPS should support strong, independent Local School Councils in every public school with adequate resources and training by experienced community organizations, as a means for stronger parent involvement and decision-making.
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in schools.
c. Parents and community members should have a voice in CPS policies, and CPS should be directly accountable to the public. An elected school board representative of parents and communities is a necessary step to establish democracy and begin to heal the deep mistrust between school district leaders and parents.

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This project was funded in part by the Institute for Policy and Civic Engagement and the College of Education at the University of Illinois at Chicago.
Works Cited


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2 In addition to parents, we interviewed two grandparents who were caregivers for students. We use “parents” and “caregivers” interchangeably in this study.
3 See de la Torre and Gwynne, 2009, Dowdall,2011 ; Pacer 2013, Engberg et al., 2012
4 Calculating total school actions is complicated because some schools were impacted more than once, e.g. from 2006-20010, South Shore Community Academy was closed, converted to four small schools, three of which were later consolidated into the fourth which was later phased out.
6 In 2011, when NAEP last assessed the urban districts, Chicago’s Black/white 4th grade math gap was 29 points; in 2013, it was 40 points.
8 Out of nearly 900 local school districts in Illinois, Chicago is the only district that has a mayoral appointed school board (Education Commission of the States, 2014). In 2008, 96 percent of school districts nationally had elected boards (Hess, 2008).