

## INTRODUCTION: CLOSED FOR SCHOOL, OPEN FOR BUSINESS

### When Citizens Become Targets in the Era of Mass School Closure

When I met Leanne Woods<sup>1</sup> in 2013, she was the proud mother of four kids, all of whom had attended or were attending Steel Elementary, a public school in North Philadelphia. She was an involved parent: She regularly attended parent meetings available to her, got to know her kids' teachers, and stayed abreast of what was happening at the school. As a working parent, she did not have time to do much else.

One year later, in 2014, Leanne found herself unemployed and decided to spend her excess time involving herself in city, state, and regional parent groups. Through participation in one of these groups, she discovered something shocking: Steel Elementary was marked for closure and conversion into a charter school. She thought: "My school is slated to be a charter and I didn't know . . . How did I, an involved parent, not know?"

The fact that Leanne considered herself an involved parent and yet was unaware of the district's decision was suspicious to her, so she decided to dig deeper. "I got my hands on a copy [of their plan] . . . well, actually someone leaked it to me . . . and it said that Mastery Charter was looking to build a network. Steel falls between two Mastery high schools . . . so they were trying to fit this into their charter expansion . . . so I am like, okay, this is somebody's *business* plan."

<sup>1</sup> All names of persons interviewed are pseudonyms. School names are not.

## 2 / Introduction: Closed for School, Open for Business?

After Leanne realized that the closure of Steel Elementary was connected to a larger “business plan,” she reached out to other parents and shared what she knew, and the community began organizing a response. In particular, she recalls, “We are known in this community, we live in this community, we know our neighbors. So, we went door to door talking to parents and telling them the truth. Little did I know Mastery [Charter Schools] had been doing this for a year . . . they told the parents that it was already going to happen.”

At this point, I would like to make it clear that Leanne’s story is not novel: Public institutions have been threatened for closure in cities like Boston, Philadelphia, and Chicago for decades (US National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Orr & Rogers, 2011; Common Core of Data – National Center for Education Statistics, 1993–2013). Across the nation, these closures are disproportionately affecting public schools like Steel Elementary with large low-income Black and Brown populations.

The large scale and racialized nature of closures raise serious concerns about the fairness by which the government distributes public goods and the impacts on the political beliefs and actions of those most affected. Despite the common nature of Leanne’s story, and the concerns it raises, there are no major authoritative texts on the interplay between mass public school closures and democratic participation. The field of political science is largely silent on this topic, and the field of education offers little commentary on the effects of school closures on political behavior.

*Closed for Democracy* is about the mass closing of public institutions and the consequences for Black Americans’ relationship with democracy. It is an investigation of the impacts of shuttering schools – one of America’s last remaining public institutions – on the political beliefs and civic participation of those most affected. It interrogates the response and political engagement of parents like Leanne who demand these institutions remain open. It illustrates how members of affected communities take the initiative to become informed about the closure policies and, in turn, protest them, even when the government claims the closures are in their interest. Further, this book highlights how affected communities go on to engage in the political process more than any other group, despite lacking the resources traditionally associated with high levels of participation. Yet, the book ultimately reveals, they feel a sense of loss even when they successfully save their school because many

### 3 / The Cost of Empty Victories: The Collective Participatory Debt of Black Americans

participants realize that theirs is a Pyrrhic victory: They have won but at a great and unsustainable cost.

## The Cost of Empty Victories: The Collective Participatory Debt of Black Americans

*Closed for Democracy* exposes the costs of “winning” while poor and Black in American democracy. It describes the feeling of empty victories that hard-fought battles tend to leave behind but that remain under-discussed as the efforts of Black citizens continue to be described through a static and binary lens of total wins *or* losses. For instance, it is perhaps unsurprising that those who lost their schools felt a sense of loss, but what about those who were able to keep their schools open, or lost and then regained their schools? Were they any more relieved? Did *they* win?

Leanne and the Steel Elementary community, for example, do win the battle to stop Mastery’s larger “business plan” and keep Steel open, but they lose faith in the democratic establishment altogether. While Leanne could have viewed the victory as an indication of external efficacy and/or her value as a citizen, she and other affected citizens conclude the opposite: that their wins felt more like losses.

These feelings of loss, even when those targeted appear to “win” can be described as indicative of their *collective participatory debt* (CPD),<sup>2</sup> defined as a type of mobilization fatigue that transpires when citizens’ repeated participation is met with a lack of democratic responsiveness. Citizens affected by CPD question the utility of political participation even when they achieve policy gains as they recognize those gains are inconsistent with, or represent an insignificant fraction of, their broader demands.

These feelings of CPD, or loss even when supposedly “winning,” are not new. Decades after the civil rights movement, scholar Manning Marable (2007) wrote in his classic text *Race, Reform and Rebellion* that the “movement was flushed with victory, yet in retrospect, it was a victory in defeat” (p. 144). Following the murder of Michael Brown by the Ferguson police in 2014, political theorist Melvin Rogers described Black people as “perpetually losers in

<sup>2</sup> Described in more detail later and in Chapter 4.

#### 4 / Introduction: Closed for School, Open for Business?

American democracy.” Relatedly, more than ten years ago, Zoltan Hajnal (2009) found that Black voters tend to lose “more regularly than other voters” in American democracy (p. 50). He concluded that this persistent loss “could, if not addressed, lead to disillusionment with the democratic process” (p. 55).

Drawing on the concept of CPD, the book demonstrates how the experience of being targeted for school closure leads to prolonged disillusionment and disengagement with government and politics. And through their disillusioned responses, we learn that affected citizens were never simply seeking to save their schools. Rather, their fight to save public school was and is indicative of their larger fight for racial justice and liberation. The impending chapters explain how.

But first, some necessary context.

### The Era of Mass School Closures

Each year, nearly 1,000 public schools close, affecting nearly 200,000 students (Tilsley, 2017). One fundamental reason for the mass closure of public schools in recent years is the passage of federal policies such as No Child Left Behind in 2001 and Race to the Top in 2009.<sup>3</sup> Both policies emphasize high-stakes standardized testing and implement punishments for failure to meet preset standards.<sup>4</sup> The punishment for failing to meet these standards includes, but is not limited to, takeover by charter operators and/or the state, reduced federal funding, and closure (Manna, 2006; McGuinn, 2006; Morel, 2018).

In 2009, for example, the US Department of Education proposed a “turn-around”<sup>5</sup> of the nation’s 5,000 lowest performing public schools within five years. In 2013, nearly 2,000 public schools were closed, in part due to this turnaround effort. The number of schools closed that year represented nearly double the number of schools closed across the United States only a decade earlier in 2003 (US Department

<sup>3</sup> For details related to No Child Left Behind, see [www2.ed.gov/nclb/landing.jhtml](http://www2.ed.gov/nclb/landing.jhtml). For details related to Race to the Top, see [www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop-district/index.html](http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop-district/index.html)?

<sup>4</sup> For example, No Child Left Behind requires that states “restructure” any school that fails to make “adequate yearly progress” (McGuinn, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> “Turnaround” refers to a set of actions funded by school improvement grants, including: (1) students stay in the same school, and staff are replaced with new public school staff; (2) students stay, and staff are replaced with a charter operator; (3) new standards and strategies are developed to better tailor to the needs of students; or (4) the school is permanently shut down. For more details, see [www2.ed.gov/news/speeches/2009/06/06222009.pdf](http://www2.ed.gov/news/speeches/2009/06/06222009.pdf).

5 / Mass School Closures in Context

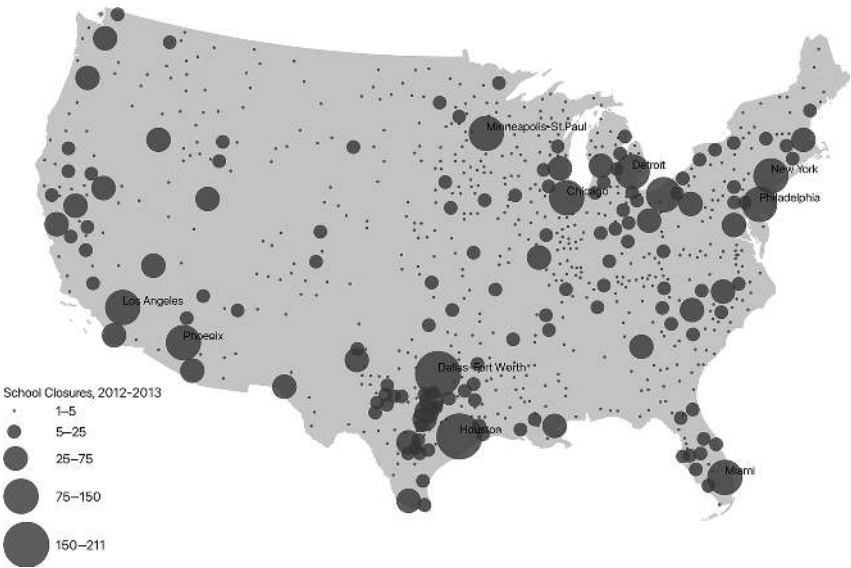


Figure I.1 Map of school closures across the United States (1993–2013)

of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). In other words, they were indicative of a new *era of mass school closure* across the United States.

An increasing number of these closures occurred in large cities, such as Chicago and Philadelphia (see Figure I.1). Of the 2,000 schools closed in 2013, for example, 49 were from the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) district, the highest number of schools closed in a single year in US history (Ahmed-Ullah, Chase & Sector, 2013). That same year Philadelphia, New York, Washington, DC, and Newark, New Jersey, also experienced enrollment declines followed by subsequent closures in their respective districts (Cohen, 2016). In each city, a disproportionate number of the students affected were low-income and Black; see Table I.1.

Mass School Closures in Context

While I frame school closures as a modern issue, they can be documented at least as far back as the 1920s. These early closures were generally thought of as rural issues and typically occurred through the merger of multiple districts of one-room schoolhouses. For example, in 1929, Arkansas legislators advocated for the passage of Act 149,

**Table 1.1.** Percentage of public school population in top three cities affected by closures, by race and income in 2013

City	Number of Schools Closed	Black Population		Low-Income Population	
		% Affected in School System	Total % of Population in School System	% Affected in School System	Total % of Population in School System
Chicago	49	87	42	94	76
Philadelphia	23	85	55	93	81
New York	22	55	30	81	73

Source: Local school data for Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York

which facilitated the consolidation of smaller school districts into a single district. Its proponents argued that because migration to larger cities had resulted in lower enrollments and fewer resources, the consolidation of school districts would improve education for all students by distributing more resources to fewer schools. Following its passage, more than 1,500 public school districts closed.<sup>6</sup>

Act 149 is illustrative of the type of education policies (and rationales) made across rural areas struggling with similar issues of industry and population decline in the early years of closure (Ledbetter, 2006). Yet, by the 1960s, the population across the United States was estimated to be shrinking by 1 percent each year and up to 3 percent in the largest school districts. Soon, public school closures began to affect urban areas as well, albeit in the form of closed school buildings rather than districts.<sup>7</sup> This shift was partly due to the desegregation of schools as a result of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 and subsequent “White flight” to the suburbs from the more racially mixed cities in the 1960s (Faust, 1976; McPherrin, 1979).

To a significant degree, once public education was “uniformly” available (at least legally) through *Brown v. Board of Education*, school

<sup>6</sup> Act 149 was followed by a similar, but unsuccessful, effort called Act 1, which sought to reduce the number of school districts from 1,900 to 500 in both 1946 and 1948.  
<sup>7</sup> It is important to distinguish between school district consolidation and school closure. The former refers to the collapsing of multiple smaller school districts into a single district, which is common in rural areas. The latter refers to the shuttering of a single school building and/or school program, which is common in urban areas. While consolidation can lead to the shuttering of a physical school and/or program, this is not necessarily the case. This book is specifically interested in school closure, not consolidation.

## 7 / Mass School Closures in Context

closure became primarily a racial issue. The complete history of racial segregation is complex and out of the scope of this text, but it is well known that Black people were historically blocked from education in the United States, as many states made it illegal for them to learn and attend school (e.g., Todd-Breland, 2018). Even once they were allowed to attend school, through Jim Crow laws, Black Americans were segregated into colored-only schools that were unequally funded and of inferior quality compared to White-only schools. Recognizing this clear racial disparity in schooling, leaders of the civil rights movement made the issue of school integration central to their efforts because they understood that the attainment of equal education would be critical for accessing full citizenship and, thus, all that democracy promised.

The fight for equal education culminated in the passage of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, barring school segregation that had come under *Plessy v. Ferguson*'s separate but equal precedent (Todd-Breland, 2018). While states were forced to desegregate, school districts in places such as Arkansas decided to close all their high schools for an entire year rather than integrate. The limited research on this topic, referred to as the “lost year,” finds that 3,665 students were left out of their public schools once they reopened and suggests that 50 percent of the Black students impacted did not attend school for over a year (Gordy, 2009).<sup>8</sup>

By the end of the 1970s, more than approximately 7,000 public schools had been closed across 80 percent of the nation's school districts. But this time, the lion's share of these closures occurred in the twenty-five largest districts, in places such as Chicago, New York City, St. Louis in Missouri, and Cleveland and Columbus in Ohio. Still, the publicly stated reasons for these closures in the 1960s and 1970s are like those of today. Proponents cited enrollment decline and expected cost savings from consolidated resources. More specifically, school districts expected to gain savings from either the lease or sale of high-maintenance buildings. Nonetheless, these cost savings were rarely realized because most of the budget was typically expended on personnel costs, an issue unresolved through the closure of schools (Colton & Frelich, 1979; Valencia,

<sup>8</sup> I should note that, in the case of Arkansas, I am referring to the fact that there was an emphasis on the closure of schools rather than school districts *and* the specific racialized reasons, in this case, integration, as justification for closure (as opposed to industry decline, cited in the earlier example).

## 8 / Introduction: Closed for School, Open for Business?

1984b). In some cases, the difficulty of selling a building and the cost of maintaining a closed building resulted in almost no cost savings at all. Instead, new costs were created as school districts struggled to pay realtors and leasing agents to intervene under public pressure to document the utility of the closure. As scholar Richard Valencia (1984b) deduced, “one can infer from the literature that closing schools reduce [s] per-pupil costs very little, if at all. Thus, it appears that the strategy of closing schools to save money is largely symbolic” (p. 10).

Similar to today, those affected by school closures raised questions about the legitimacy of the process, specifically the policy’s seemingly racially targeted nature (Cuban, 1979). In fact, national data going back to 1975 demonstrate how public school closures were unequally stratified along the lines of race and income (Valencia, 1980, 1984b; Dean, 1981). For example, a study conducted on school closures in St. Louis between 1968 and 1977 found that of the seven schools shut down before 1975, all of them had majority Black enrollments because White enrollment had been declining in those neighborhoods (Colton & Frelich, 1979). In particular, the study found that “closed main site schools ... tended to be ... located in neighborhoods serving clients who were poor and African American. Schools in these neighborhoods were also relatively close together” (pp. 17–18). Another report conducted by Valencia (1980) further confirmed these findings and discovered that “investigations of school closings in five major cities indicate that schools with primarily low socioeconomic status and minority students have suffered the brunt, if not the exclusive burden, of closings” (p. 6). These historical findings make evident that when schools close in the United States, there are clear winners (the White and affluent) and losers (the minority and low income).

### The Racially Targeted Nature of Closings Today

Today, racial disparities in school closings persist. In urban areas, specifically, school closures affect Black people more than any other group, including Whites, across class.<sup>9</sup> In fact, some studies have

<sup>9</sup> For urban closure see, [https://apps.urban.org/features/school-closures/child\\_map.html](https://apps.urban.org/features/school-closures/child_map.html). The literature is much less clear regarding the racial and economic impacts of rural closure. More specifically, there exists competing literature on this topic, with a slight majority suggesting that its racial and economic impacts are uneven. Since this is not the focus of my



## 9 / The Racially Targeted Nature of Closings Today

demonstrated that closure can be predicted by determining the percentage of Black students in a school (Burdick-Will, Keels, & Schuble, 2013; Weber et al., 2018). Further, schools that have high concentrations of students on free or reduced lunch are more likely to be threatened with closure (Han et al., 2017). Since economic segregation and racial segregation are closely linked in the United States, the burden of school closures is often borne by communities at the intersection of socio-economic deprivation and anti-Black racism. It is unsurprising, then, that when a school closes, the most devastating effects are concentrated in communities that can least afford them.

Increasingly, cities with declining economies and high rates of poverty are the central sites of uneven school closure by race (Tieken & Auldridge-Reveles, 2019). For example, in Chicago and Philadelphia, which have two of the largest public school districts in the nation, nearly 90 percent of the students attending schools targeted for closure in 2012 were Black or Latinx (US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). In Chicago, Black students made up about 47 percent of the total public school population in 2013; yet 88 percent of these students, many of whom were also eligible for free or reduced lunch, were affected by closure. In Philadelphia, Black students made up 48 percent of the public school population; yet they represented nearly 81 percent of those targeted for closure (Good, 2017).<sup>10</sup> Across the nation, the racialized patterns of closures are the same: Black students are over-represented as targets for closure relative to their proportion in the public school system. The large number of closures in cities such as Chicago and Philadelphia – and their disproportionate racial impacts – should raise serious questions about how the closures of public institutions shape the political beliefs and actions of the Americans most directly affected.

investigation, I hesitate to uphold or deny this claim, but see Tieken and Auldridge-Reveles (2019) for more information.

<sup>10</sup> See Chicago Public Schools website, CPS Schools Data – Race and Ethnic Report, 2012–2013, <http://cps.edu/SchoolData/Pages/SchoolData.aspx>. See School District of Philadelphia, School Information, <https://dashboards.philasd.org/extensions/philadelphia/index.html>.

## How Engagement with Educational Policies Forms Black Political Behavior

Citizens learn about politics through their engagement with the local institutions they encounter in their everyday lives. The education system is an institution that directly affects most people's lives daily, first as students and then as parents, with most Americans directly acquiring civic skills through public schools (Hochschild & Scovronick, 2003). For example, schools may be the first place where students take a formal civics course or parents engage in politics, usually via school board elections. In either case, Americans likely use their experiences with education as a microcosm for understanding not only related policies that affect them but also politics and government at large.

Political and social scientists have long acknowledged the importance of examining the political consequences of public policies, including education policy, on citizens' political attitudes (e.g., Soss, 1999; Mettler & Soss, 2004; Mettler, 2011; Jacobs & Weaver, 2015; Cramer & Toff, 2017; Lerman & McCabe, 2017; Bruch & Soss, 2018). Yet, while some scholars of policy feedback have touched on education policy and political behavior specifically (e.g., Bruch & Soss, 2018; Rose, 2018), the field has tended not to focus on it. Instead, the focus is typically on nationalized issues such as the GI Bill, Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid.

Suzanne Mettler (2005), for instance, finds that veterans' experiences with the benefits of the GI Bill (Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1994) increased their civic engagement. More recent scholarship demonstrates the potential demobilizing effects of Medicaid policy on those who rely on it (e.g., Michener, 2018a), although these same experiences can "lead to meaningful opinion formation or attitude change," particularly among voters (Lerman & McCabe, 2017, p. 624). Together, these studies of policy feedback demonstrate the significant role of personal experience in a range of political dispositions (e.g., attitudes, behavior, self-conceptions) that one would expect could be easily applied to educational issues.

The relative lack of focus on educational issues by policy feedback scholars, then, may be due to the decentralized complexity of education governance, especially at the K-12 level. But this oversight is unfortunate because K-12 education is an area of government from which students, their families, and members of the broader community receive a variety of essential resources, from free meals to flu shots. The ability of schools to provide these resources in addition to academic