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How Chicago Public Schools Engaged African American Parents in the Closing of Austin Career Academy High School

Shani Blackwell

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

HOW CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS ENGAGED AFRICAN AMERICAN PARENTS IN
THE CLOSING OF AUSTIN CAREER ACADEMY HIGH SCHOOL

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

PROGRAM IN CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL POLICY STUDIES

BY

SHANI R. BLACKWELL

CHICAGO, IL

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my parents, Tommy L. Blackwell, and Jacqueline J. Blackwell for their unconditional support in my pursuit of this degree. My parents survived Jim Crow residential and school segregation laws in Canton, GA, before moving to Chicago, IL to live through a different, yet equally potent form of segregation. I have grown to respect their sacrifice and commitment to Chicago's African American, West Side communities, and local public schools. My parents supported five children through Chicago Public Schools from 1979-2008. Between me and my siblings, we attended four public elementary schools, and four public high schools, for at least one academic year. That represents many teachers, school leaders, and reform efforts. My parents challenged school leaders and teachers to consider them outside traditional parental engagement roles. Some teachers and administrators welcomed my parents' engagement, while others thought my parents ventured outside of school sanctioned parental engagement roles. Below are a few stories that stand out from my parents' engagement in schools I attended, and their engagement with schools on behalf of my siblings.

At the second elementary school I attended, I remember attending indoor recess as a 2nd grader in the school's auditorium. It was winter in Chicago, and too cold to go outside. There was nothing to do. We just sat there. My mom would sometimes provide supervision during recess, and recognized this issue. Her response was to supply yarn for us to play games with. We would wrap the yarn around our figures, and make yarn figures like brooms, or geometric designs. I had a lot of pride in my mom's presence during recess because she made it something

my classmates and I, and other students, looked forward to. When I was in 5th grade, at the third elementary school I attended, my dad served as the president of the Local School Council. I often heard teachers, the school counselor, and principal speak of how fair and professional they thought my dad was. I was very proud of him, and did not realize the powerful work he engaged in, along with other parents, teachers, and principal to direct decisions in our local school.

Two more stories stand out from discussions I have had with my parents about their engagement with Chicago Public Schools. My parents shared they often asked teachers questions about the quality of the curriculum and the level of instruction in our classrooms. My parents wanted to understand how the curriculum was presented so they could support us at home with our homework, and insure that the curriculum was of a high level. After probing schools officials about the curriculum, a school official asked my dad, “What are you getting at, Mr. Blackwell?” My parents were taken aback at being met with such hostility around their goals to support our education at home. The second story involves a meeting with a vice principal, and a teacher who had told my parents that he saw my brother as a low achieving student who would not receive a passing grade. My mom asked that my brother not have to return to this teacher’s class after this comment. The teacher responded, “He has to come to my class!” This was an interesting claim for the teacher to make, instead of wanting to understand why a parent would not want their child in their class. The vice principal affirmed my mom’s right to make this request and suggested that my brother could go to the library or study hall as opposed to continuing to go to this teacher’s class.

My thesis may be the only opportunity for my parents' experiences with Chicago Public Schools to be heard. My parents' experiences with west side neighborhood school officials inspired me to form questions about a society that claims to be equal, passed legislation stating this, but allows schools to exist so unequally. I believe Chicago Public Schools are designed to be a difficult and challenging experience for African American parents and students. I dedicate this work to my parents and other African American parents who try to navigate schooling in Chicago.

I would also like to thank my advisor, Kate Phillippo, Ph.D. She believed in me, my writing and my research when I doubted each of these. At each step of the process, she provided encouragement, direction and support. I realize how critical it is to do the pre-grad school research to not only find the right program, but make sure there are faculty in the program that share similar interests, which may allow you to form good working relationships. Advisors are on this journey with you, and should support you however and whenever they are able. Kate has exceeded this. I am proud to join this field and to consider her a colleague.

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ABSTRACT

The role of African American parents in education reform initiatives in Chicago is not clearly defined. Local School Councils (LSC) allow parents to make school related decisions in Chicago. But LSCs are removed from decisions about whether or not to place school on or off probation, and whether or not to close schools based on performance or building utilization. In 2013, African American and Latinx parents expressed outrage over the decision by Chicago Public Schools (CPS) to close 49 schools with protests, including a hunger strike by a group of parents, and pleas to the Chicago Board of Education (BOE). These efforts were unsuccessful. Six years before, in 2007, Austin Community Academy High School (Austin HS) parents, students, and engaged in efforts to prevent the closing of the only neighborhood high school. These efforts were significant, but also unsuccessful. Austin parents, students and community members were highly engaged, and organized events for parents and students to share how the decision to close Austin HS would be a problem for the community, and plan actions to let their voices be heard. The policy decisions by CPS that led to the phase out and closing of Austin HS are evidence of how parental engagement and the authority of LSCs in predominantly African American communities are undermined. Additionally, the experiences of Austin families and community members, including parental engagement using non-LSC, community led methods, were not acknowledged by CPS. Schools in African American communities have been the most affected by school reform initiatives in Chicago. When a LSC is removed from making school

related decisions, CPS does not insure parents in communities in most need of resources are included or heard in discussions and decisions that affect their communities.

INTRODUCTION

In December 2012, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) released a list of 330 schools at risk for closure due to underutilization or low academic achievement status. Of the schools under consideration, most were located on the South and West sides of the city, in predominantly African American and Latinx communities. Over the next few months, a Commission on School Utilization was formed to review school closing criteria. The Commission held public forums across the city where parents, students, community members, and Chicago Teacher Union representatives voiced their overwhelming support to keep schools open, and expressed disappointment in the school closing process. The Commission worked with education experts, district officials, students, and consulted school district policies around the country to “understand the lessons others have learned in closing schools” (Commission on School Utilization, p. 4). The “Commission Final Report” determined that the utilization formula used by CPS to make school closing decisions should not be the sole determining factor, and recommended the district initiate a discussion on school utilization. The report also recommended a shortened list of 129 schools to CPS for closure. Ultimately, the Chicago BOE voted to close 49 schools in March 2013, despite the pleas of parents, students and other community stakeholders.

CPS’ 2012-2013 Guidelines for School Actions states, “[d]ecisions surrounding actions will be made with a rigorous community engagement process that gives parents and CPS communities a voice in the process and the respect they deserve”. However, local media

coverage of parents' opposition to the process that created the guidelines, and ultimately the decision to close schools, provides a different picture. Parents, students, teachers and other community stakeholders expressed a lack of direct involvement in the final discussions and decision making during the 2013 school closure process. Concerns about whether parents have a role in education reform initiatives deserve to be addressed.

CPS began closing schools in 1995 as part of "a punitive system of 'school actions' for low-performing schools" (Weber, 2016, p. 5). A 'School Action' is how CPS refers to the consolidation, closure, phase-out or "turnaround" of schools with low enrollment or poor academic performance (p. 7). Since 1995, 46 high schools have been closed, turned around or consolidated. In 2004, former Mayor Richard M. Daley announced the Renaissance 2010 (Ren10) initiative and called for the closure of 60 to 70 public schools, while opening 100 new schools (Lipman, Haines, 2007). School action decisions have disproportionately affected African American and Latinx communities on the South and West Side of Chicago (Generation All Policy Brief, 2017; Myers, 2008; Vevea, Lutton, Karp, 2013).

Since the implementation of the Ren10 initiative, activists and researchers have argued that parents' role in school related decisions have decreased because the authority of Local School Councils (LSC), a school level decision making organization made up of teachers, parents, community members and school principal, is reduced or eliminated when a school is placed on probation, designated a turnaround school, or closed (Ayers and Klonsky 2006; Duckett, 2010; Lipman, Haines, 2007; Lutton, 2014; Smith, 2014). In this study, probation was defined by the 2003 Board of Education report 03-0924-EX16 as a status assigned to schools that had fewer than 15% of the students score at or above state standards on the Prairie State

Achievement Test and had a history of low student achievement over the past several years. The retreat from LSCs as the primary, research supported, parental engagement mechanism, should be a concern to those who believe parental engagement is an important part of school reform.

In the late 1980s, and early 1990s, school districts like CPS, sought to more clearly define parental engagement at the local school level. In 1988, the state legislature passed the Chicago School Reform Act which created Local School Council (LSC) in an effort to decentralize school district decisions at the administration level, while giving more control of schools to a group of local community members. The LSC existed at every public school and provided a platform for parents to have direct input in school related decisions. Since the mayoral takeover of CPS in 1995 from the state's authority, LSC authority has been reduced and a recentralization of school district decisions has occurred. As CPS continues a cycle of school actions every 2-3 years, LSCs continue to not have a formal role in the process.

In November 2015, 12 parents from Chicago's Bronzeville neighborhood on the city's South Side led a hunger strike for 34 days to demand school and city officials listen to their proposal and allow the only neighborhood, open enrollment high school to remain open. While initially ignored by local media and school district officials, the story received national and international media attention. Parents and allies across the city and country organized on social media using #FightForDyett. This hashtag became a rallying cry on social media for those concerned with the exclusion of African American and Latinx parents from school action decisions. As result of the consistent coverage, CPS officials, along with the current Mayor Rahm Emanuel, announced Dyett would re-open as an open enrollment arts high school in

Bronzeville. However, the #FightForDyett parents were excluded from this discussion and their proposal for a green technology, STEM high school was ignored.

Seven years before Dyett parents took action, Austin parents, students, community members organized themselves to draw attention to the concerns and needs of their community that were created by the decision to close Austin HS. Their engagement activities attracted the attention of city and Austin newspapers, and the latter closely chronicled parents and students' efforts. The closure of Austin HS eliminated the neighborhood high school option for students who did not apply or were not admitted to selective schools, or whose families cannot afford private school tuition. Many Austin students had to navigate school assignments outside the neighborhood (Duckett, 2010).

In discussions about low performing schools, and low income African American parents, many education stakeholders cite a lack of parent engagement as a reason for student underachievement. But this argument “ignores the structural inequalities that have placed low income children of color at a disadvantage...” (Greene 2013, 36). Additionally, the parent opposition to school closing decisions in Chicago, at public forums, protests, and in statements to the media, challenges the belief that African American parents lack concern about their children's education. A review of how parents were engaged during the closing of Austin HS and research supported models for low income African American parent engagement in schools may provide districts with better practices. It is important to define meaningful parental engagement for African American communities like Austin and Bronzeville that maximizes opportunities to participate in school level decisions.

A study of the experiences that parents, students and community members had throughout the school closing process, and the aftermath of the decision, is timely. If parental engagement is part of CPS's reform initiative, safeguards are needed to ensure parents, students, and community members are provided as many opportunities to be involved in the decision process as necessary.

Literature Review

Historical analysis of parental engagement policies over the last 40 year reveal how a deficit discourse came to "...[permeate] current education reform efforts...[and] how inequities related to race, class, and immigration...are shaped by parental engagement programs, practices, and ideologies" (Baquedano-López, et al., 2013, 150). The language of the deficit discourse is found in the argument for parental engagement as part of President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty initiative "as a remedy for 'problem' in minority populations" (p. 151). This discourse was furthered by Secretary of Labor D.P. Moynihan's report on the African American family. "This report turned national attention to the locus of families, and of families of color more specifically, where the perceived gaps in the country's economic stability were to be found" (p. 151). The report spearheaded efforts to develop the federally funded Elementary and Secondary Act (ESEA) of 1965, Head Start, and Title I programs.

The early deficit framing of minority communities, along with testing and achievement reports, also led to a discourse of crisis or failure of public education to prepare students to compete internationally (Baquedano-López, et al., 2013, p. 151). Furthering this message was the Coleman report commissioned by the US Department of Education which "blamed the loss of parents' interest in the education of their children which he traced to mothers who were leaving the home and joining the labor force" (p. 151). These claims were used to "homogenize diverse student populations in the late 1980s and 1990s through policies and measures such as the elimination of bilingual education and the perceived unfair advantages of affirmative action

programs” (p. 152). The No Child Left Behind law in 2001 continued the emphasis on parental engagement, and “suggested that school were not doing enough to outreach and *engage* parents from cultural and linguistically diverse backgrounds” (p. 152). Federal education policy emphasized the engagement of parents and families in their child’s education as having “...the transformative potential to affect students’ academic achievement beyond any other type of education reform” (p. 152). This shift in rhetoric also serves to shift the blame away from social injustices affecting families of color to the perception that a lack of parental engagement is the reason for the quality of education their children receive (Baquedano-López, et al., 2013).

An examination of current parental engagement policies reveals that many operate from a “traditional parental engagement deficit model”, to frame parental engagement in high poverty, urban communities as low because of parents do not participate in “school-sanctioned ways” (Barton et al., 2004). Few parent engagement policies place parents on the same level with decision makers, do not consider how networks of individuals and resources impact participation, and acknowledge how environmental factors influence parental beliefs and ability to gain “parental capital” (Barton et al., 2004). These policies are also based on school centric and individualistic approaches that exclude the experiences of parents from “non-dominant cultures” (Baquedano-López, et al. 2013; Fine, 1993; Lopez et al., 2013).

It is not clear if parental engagement leads to academic achievement. Lareau and Shumar (1996) challenge whether parental engagement in schools has significant positive outcomes for students: “[n]ot only has this claim not yet been adequately demonstrated [...], [t]here has been a near-complete failure to study the negative consequences of active family involvement in schooling...” (p. 31). Although researchers have not been able to link parental engagement to

educational success (Epstein, 1987; Domina, 2005; Lareau, Shumar, 1996), many agree that meaningful parental engagement in schools is critical to school reform efforts.

Many education stakeholders also hold different understandings of parental engagement (Barton et al., 2004), and differ on the expected outcome of parental engagement policies. In addition to this framework, parent engagement policies should also have the capacity to acknowledge differences across communities. Across the country, school district policies on parental engagement reference Epstein's (1992) Family Involvement Framework of 6 Types of Parental engagement (Lopez et al., 2013; de Carvalho, 2001). In fact, a simple Google search returns links to numerous state or local school district websites referencing the framework in the top 10 results, including a website for the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) at Johns Hopkins University whose purpose is "to develop and maintain effective partnership programs". The website calls Epstein's framework part of "NNPS School Model" The six types of involvement are defined as follows.

Type 1: Parenting – Help all families establish home environments to support children as students

Type 2: Communicating – Design effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communications about school programs and their children's progress

Type 3: Volunteering – Recruit and organize parent help and support

Type 4: Learning at Home – Provide information and ideas to families about how to help students at home with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions, and planning

Type 5: Decision Making – Include parents in school decisions, developing parent leaders and representatives

Type 6: Collaborating With the Community – Identify and integrate resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development (Epstein 2002).

Criticism of Epstein's framework notes the lack of acknowledgement of race and power in urban education. Described as narrow, individualistic, and school centric, Epstein's (1992) framework

is seen as based on white middle class values, and expectations that ignores issues of race, class, and immigration, which impact experiences of parents from “non-dominant backgrounds” (Baquedano-López, et al., 2013). These issues along with inequalities between communities and schools must be considered in order for educational reform to succeed (Fine, 1993).

School-based engagement policies, such as Epstein’s model of family-school-community partnerships, are useful “for designing programs and survey research”, and assumes shared goals, and a level playing field for all (Auberbach, 2007). But these policies fail to “account for the needs and experiences of many low income parents, and parents of color as well as structural constraints on their actions and relations with schools” (p. 253). Additionally, existing parental engagement policies continue a deficit narrative toward low income, and minority communities, that is “linear, [and] unidirectional” (Barton et al., 2004), and “perpetuate[s] the myth of uninvolved minority parents” (Auberbach, 2007).

The one-size-fits-all parental engagement narratives and policies based on these narratives are similarly problematic. Such policies do not acknowledge “observable differences in parents’ and guardians’ educational skills, occupational and economic flexibility, social networks, and positions of power” brought to “home-school encounters” (Lareau & Shumar, 2006). Additionally, “[p]arents approach schools with different perspectives about how best to help their children in school and with different assessments of their power relative to that of the schools” (p. 24). These differences influence the rate of parental compliance with parental engagement policies. “[P]olicymakers [must] confront the diverse perspectives that parents bring to family-school encounters” (p. 34). Once this occurs, schools can identify and correct communication sent by educators to parents include messages that appear to solicit cooperation

or participation as opposed to engagement, because “what they truly desire is deferential, positive and compliant behavior” (p. 34). Instead, schools must embrace policies that promote “conditions that facilitate the development of meaningful parental engagement...[s]pecifically...plans that foster family-school linkages that teachers and parents define as important and useful in a particular school community” (p. 34).

Lareau and Shumar (1996) also observed that “[w]orking-class and lower-class mothers [...] expressed fear that the school would turn them in to welfare agencies”, while this concern was only “jokingly brought up [...] among middle-class families” (p. 30). This fear is supported by the fact that many teachers and administrators in schools have accepted “standards for proper child rearing and caution about what constitutes incorrect child rearing” as communicated by social workers, psychologists, medical doctors, and other professionals. (Lareau 2011, 232). And schools, “for better or worse, are an arm of the state and are therefore legally required to report children they believe to be abused or neglected” (p. 232). So middle-class families enjoy benefits that working-class and poor families do not due to the likelihood that their parenting more closely match the “standards for proper child rearing” (p. 232).

The parental engagement models and policies described below attempt to address the deficit framework of traditional parental engagement policies. Specifically, these models place parents on the same level with decision makers, consider parent-defined engagement, and approach school engagement as a community based improvement plan. All models support a belief that parents of all backgrounds have something meaningful to contribute to schools, and provides a platform.

Barton et al. (2004) offer a data driven framework for parental engagement in urban schools that allows for viewpoints of “parents in relation to environment”, i.e., personal experiences both within and outside the school, and how it influences what parents should do (Barton et al., 2004) Drawing from cultural-historical activity theory and critical race theory, this framework also acknowledges the ways parents in high-poverty, urban communities participate in non-traditional forms of parental engagement.

Parental engagement as the mediation between space and capital by parents in relation to others in school settings allows us to understand parents’ roles in the schools by how they author spaces for being in schools and how they position themselves as authorities of their children’s learning. An ecology of parental engagement lens keys us into engagement as existing within the relationships parents form with other school-based agents, and how these relationships are regulated by (but also help to regulate) the artifacts they produce and draw upon, the expectations and roles they hold, and the divisions of labor they encounter and help produce or reproduce and [how] the physical and material boundaries life in schools. Parental engagement, therefore, is more than an object or an outcome. Engagement is a set of relationships and actions that cut across individuals, circumstances, and events that are produced and bounded by the context in which that engagement takes place (p. 6)

Described as “the ecology of parental engagement”, this framework allows stakeholders to view parental engagement as a spectrum of parent initiated events and interactions with schools.

Auberbach (2007) suggests that schools “need to transform their understandings of and interactions with working-class parents of color” similarly to how schools “affirm and accommodate marginalized students” (p. 276). To this effort, she offers a “role typology” as an “alternative framework for understanding parent roles beyond mainstream models of involvement” (p. 276). Auberbach assigns parents to “alternative typology of parent role orientations”, where parents “constraints and struggles”, and perspective as “protectors and advocates” are highlighted, and emphasized (p.258).

At the less proactive end of the continuum were the Moral Supporters, who emphasized indirect, behind-the-scenes moral support for education at home. At the opposite end of the continuum were the Struggling Advocates, who provided more direct, instrumental support and monitoring at home along with advocacy at school. A third category in between, the Ambivalent Companions, offered strong emotional support and occasional direct help but conveyed deeply ambivalent messages about schools and higher education. Similar to the first two categories, the Companions were moving toward college goals for their children but they diverged from the pathway toward other goals, suggesting their ambivalence. (p. 258)

While high SES parents are able to leverage economic, cultural, and social capital in schools, this framework provides a way to acknowledge “resources of moral, navigational, and emotional capital” that low income parents, and parents of color might employ in their child’s education (Auberbach, 2007).

Greene (2013) challenges research on underachievement of low income, minority students that emphasize deficits in culture, lack of parental engagement, high student drop-out rates, and the role schools play in the school-to-prison pipeline. These studies often downplay the role of “larger inequities in school and in economic development that create spaces of inequality”, and further “distort our perceptions of [African American] families and children” who navigate these spaces (p. 8). Greene (2013) asserts that researchers “have under-theorized the ways low-income parents navigate both opportunity and risk in supporting their children in socially isolated neighborhoods or the roles they have constructed for themselves in marginalized spaces where they have little voice in policy decisions that affect their children’s life chances” and seeks to illuminate the “self-defined role of African American parents within the context of race, urban development, and an economy that has created opportunity for some and displaced others” (p. 5, 8). Greene (2013) applies the concept “funds of knowledge” to describe how

African American parents navigate school and their child's education. This counter-narrative challenges the "dominant rhetoric of privilege and exclusion" and hopes to "bridge conflicting experiences between white teachers and African American families" (p.15). Utilizing an ecological framework, Greene (2013) provides a conceptual map of parental engagement that allows for a "dynamic, interactive process across the multiple spaces where children's learning occurs" (p. 15).

Parental engagement policies must acknowledge the power dynamic in urban reform efforts for both to be successful. Fine (1993) calls attention to "the contested public sphere of public education", where parents are "being positioned as subjects, and also as objects" in the struggle to reform urban schools (p. 683). Fine uses Nancy Fraser's four assumptions of a democratic public sphere to examine the politics of parental engagement.

First, in current school reform movements, parents do not even enter school based discourse 'as if' social equals with educators, bureaucrats, or corporate representatives...Second, most public school bureaucracies appetite for diversity, plurality, and critique from parents is about as rich as schools' appetite for diversity, plurality, and critique from students and educators...Third, discussions of the 'common good' typically occlude the real reason parents come to school, which is to represent their 'private interests' – their children...Fourth, the role of the state as monitor and controller of public education remains relatively unproblematized in current literature on public schooling (p. 684).

Fine (1993) asserts that real or authentic educational reform is undermined when equality between parents and schools is presumed, and power struggles are not addressed upfront. This sets up parents to be viewed as "needy", "naive", or "hysterical"; rarely viewed as being entitled to "strong voices and substantial power in a pluralistic public sphere", and provided with "the opportunity to work collaboratively with educators" toward a truly democratic system for education (p. 685). Three cases of parental engagement policy implementation illustrate the need

to directly address issues of power, authority, and control in discussions about parental engagement in public schools (p. 685).

The “With and For Parents” project, a collaborative, community based, initiative launched in 1987 with Baltimore City schools, notes a lack of a clear strategy “for dealing critically with the school-parent partnership”, and the individual-oriented approach to empowerment, that ultimately limited the effectiveness of the project (Fine, 1993). The project served a predominantly low-income, African American community that struggled with issues of drugs and violence and the impact of these realities caused the project to shift focus from parental engagement to a crisis intervention and services provider (p. 689). The shift from the project’s focus on increasing parental engagement provides insight into the larger debate that claims parental engagement “will, in and of itself, transform student learning. This assertion, benign and liberal, depoliticizes educational outcomes and exempts district and school policies and practices from accountability” (p. 691). While parental engagement is important, the practice cannot improve student outcomes “[w]ithout a serious national, state, and community commitment to serving children broadly, and to restructuring schools in low-income neighborhoods and their surrounds, deep parental engagement with schools will do little to positively affect - or sustain - low-income students or their schools or outcomes” (p. 691).

In 1990, Philadelphia adopted a shared decision making and school-based management (SD/SBM) model as part of the comprehensive restructuring of its high schools. Councils were made up of 15 individuals including the principal, one assistant principal, a union building representative, four parents selected by lottery, one non-instructional staff person, one department head, and six teachers (Fine, 1993). Fine observed that parents were invited to

provide “ ‘parental perspectives’ into critical policymaking conversations”, and that the policy improved parents “access to their educational communities” (p. 695). But Fine also noted that the policy did not initially address issues of power effectively. “Parents (as well as teachers) cannot simply be added to the mix of decision making unless the structures and practices of bureaucracy - school-based and central district - are radically decentralized and democratic” (p. 697).

However, after six months of implementation, parents and teachers are working more collaboratively, and are learning how to manage the power dynamics of the schools and central administration (p. 697).

In Chicago, school reform legislation in 1988 called “for each school within the Chicago public schools to be governed by a local school council (LSC), comprised of six parents, two community representatives, two teachers, and the principal. Their collective job would be the “hiring and evaluation of the principal, and working with the principal on school improvement plans and budgets” (Fine, 1993, 700). The author describes this policy as a systematic transformation in the nature of school-based dynamics, dismantling “the paternalistic power of the central administration” and “[decentralizing] public education in Chicago.” Parents are viewed as “the primary decision makers within schools”. However, Fine notes that while power was addressed at the school level, the “control held by the central district remains relatively intact” (p. 700). While “[i]deological power has been reversed, ...the bulk of material power has yet to be relinquished” (p. 703). Fine’s concern with this model is that with a decline in the community, school budget deficits, and economic plight in urban communities, newly active parents will be blamed for the failure of schools.

The 1998 Chicago school reform legislation sought to address issues of long standing inequities in Chicago. During the Chicago Panel on School Finances' Fred Hess noted this change, while acknowledging the limitation of LSCs.

Will empowering parents, who have differential cultural capital at their disposal, increase or diminish the current differences in privilege among Chicago schools?...The reform act moved to correct these inequities by requiring an equalizing of basic program resources at all schools, intending teacher selection by merit to all schools, and reallocating resources significantly towards schools with the most low income students enrolled... [E]mpowering...parents through LSC decision-making was only one part of the power rearrangement... (Fine 1993, 704).

The success of Chicago's reform depended on the belief that meaningful parental engagement could make a difference in school reform efforts and school based decisions (Fine, 1993). If Chicago's reform fails, the narrative will be that "parents ran the schools into the ground, when they were never given all the resources needed to drive the car" (p. 705).

Philadelphia and Chicago public schools have recently experience unprecedented school closings, and budget cuts. As a result, parents have sought grass roots support to organize their unhappiness with school district decisions. In Philadelphia, grassroots parent led organizations such as Fight for Philly Schools, Parents United for Public Education, and utilize social media to mobilize efforts and have recently joined the teacher union in protesting school district officials on school closings, and school budget cuts.

Since the mayoral takeover of CPS in 1995, LSCs authority has been reduced by the state legislature, and school actions by CPS have eliminated school LSCs. Chicago's parents have sought and created methods outside of LSCs, or in place of them, to influence CPS decisions. Groups such as Raise Your Hand of Illinois, the now-defunct Parents United for Real Education

(PURE), and More Than a Score, to protest what they believe are over testing of CPS students. These groups and parents' response to a decade of school closing bring up questions about the effectiveness of LSCs as the best way for parents to make meaningful differences in the school reform debate.

The research cited above challenges the origin of traditional parental engagement policies, and the deficit narrative that is often used to describe communities of color or non-dominant cultures. Alternative parental engagement models of the late 1980s and early 1990s sought to provide a platform for parents to be more engaged in school based decisions, and were implemented across districts. The following provides a framework for working with communities of color at the community and school level.

Warren (2005) argues for urban reform that acknowledges the success of schools are linked to the success of communities in which they are located (p. 133). Schools often share the values and culture of the communities where it is located, and “[c]ommunity-based organizations can help bring cultural and social assets into schools and foster meaningful partnerships between schools and families” (p. 135). Applying theories of social capital and relational power, Warren (2005) analyzed three schools that have adopted community based approaches to education reform. “The concept of social capital provides a useful framework to think about over-coming both the external and internal isolation of public schools in order to reweave the social fabric of schools and urban communities (p. 136). The author investigated “...the processes and methods used to build collaborations between schools and community organization...identify the nature of social capital...built and how that was accomplished...[and] identify the ways in which relational

power was addressed” (p. 139). Three approaches to collaboration between public and school communities were identified from this process.

- 1) The Service Model - community (full-service) schools, represented by Quitman Street Community School, Newark, New Jersey,
- 2) The Development Model - community sponsorship of new schools (e.g., charter schools), represented by, Camino Nuevo Charter Academy, in Los Angeles, represented by
- 3) The Organizing Model - school-community organizing, represented by Logan Square Neighborhood Association.

Warren’s work flows into a discussion about the culture of schools, and how you work to transform this as well as the practice of schooling with the help of community members, with the goal of holding school officials accountable for educational improvements at the building level.

Warren et al. (2009) provides a follow-up to his previous research that identified approaches to collaboration between public schools and community based organizations (Warren, 2005). Drawing lessons from previous research, Warren et al. (2009) focuses on three types of [community based organization] CBO-school collaborations to identify features that appeared important in connecting parents to schools in meaningful ways (p. 2211). Social capital theory is used by the authors to help understand how relationships form between families and schools, how trust is built, and how to elicit the necessary cooperation (p. 2211). The authors note “three core elements” of a shared relational approach to parental engagement. These are: 1) an emphasis on relationship building among parents, and between parents and educators, 2) a focus on the leadership development of parents, and 3) an effort to bridge the gap in culture and power between parents and educators (p. 2211).

Warren et al. (2009) revisits schools identified in Warren (2005) as representing community based organizing (CBO) models noted above. This research represents an evolution

and adaptation of these models as lessons learned include how schools are working to improve relationships with parents. The narratives collected “draw out elements of the relational approach for parental engagement”, and highlight themes of “relationship building, leadership development, and efforts to close gaps in culture and power between parents and educators” (p. 2216). The Service Model, “ ‘[met] parents where they are at’, making the school a center for family life and community building, and thereby creating a foundation for authentic parent engagement” (p. 2223). The Development Model officials overcame initial language barriers to provide a more welcoming environment for parental engagement to take place, and was “working hard to create a community of learners and doers, with the school serving as a center for community revitalization” with a goal of having “parents play a bigger role in setting school policy, developing their leadership skills, and advocating for their own cause on day” (p. 2229). The Organizing Model “saw the potential for schools to become institutional sites around which to organize parents and develop their capacity to be leaders in their children’s education and in the broader community” (p. 2230). Warren makes the case for scalable urban school reform models of collaborative frameworks for parent engagement in urban schools.

The Chicago Annenberg Challenge was launched in 1995 to improve public schools in Chicago. The Challenge was a six year, large scale project. Its goal was the “enhancement of learning for all students through dramatically improved classroom practice and strengthened community relationships” (Smylie and Wenzel et al., 2003). “The Challenge funded networks of schools and External Partners to plan, develop, and implement school improvement activities” in 210 schools, 90 percent of which were elementary (K-8) schools. (p. 6). While the Challenge sought to improve student achievement and other social and psychological outcomes, research

showed student outcomes in Challenge schools were similar to non-Challenge schools, and schools across CPS as a whole. (p. 1).

Parent engagement in schools varies across communities according to race and socioeconomic status. Traditional parental engagement policies are not sufficient for urban communities because participation is based on school defined interactions and events that do not recognize or credit the unique ways parents of color engage with schools. It is important that parental engagement policies meet parents where they make contact with schools, and maximize parent input particularly because urban districts have built parent engagement into recent reforms. Adopting research supported parental engagement policies makes clear that parents' voices are valued in school level decisions. In the lead up and aftermath to CPS closing Austin HS, the research supported, parental engagement model, was not available for parents to provide input about school action decisions. In this void, Austin parents, students, community members, and politicians came together to register their outrage at the decision to close Austin HS. Their efforts, outside the LSC, were not enough to save the only neighborhood high school in Austin.

Research Question

This study of the closing of Austin Community Academy High School will attempt to answer the following question: What does the treatment of parents leading up to, and after the closing of Austin Community Academy High School tell us about the role of parents in the reform strategies of Chicago Public Schools, and to what extent do the opportunities for parent engagement in the closing of Austin HS reflect “best practices” in parent engagement? The response to this question will include research that answers the following: What parental engagement opportunities existed for the parents of students who attended or would attend Austin Community Academy High School? How did Chicago Public Schools respond to parents? Did parental input affect the outcome of the decision to “phase-out” and ultimately closing of Austin High School? What has the experience of parents and students been since the closing of Austin High School, and how has Chicago Public Schools responded to parents?

Research Methodology

The documentary analysis method was used to construct a timeline of events leading up to the decision to phase-out and close Austin Community Academy High School.

A qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods study would be challenging because there may be an unreasonable delay in a request for CPS data based on experiences by local media organizations that have reported CPS is unresponsive when filing Freedom of Information requests. This has resulted in a lawsuit by media organizations to compel a more reasonable response time. Additionally, requesting data for parents and/or students of Austin HS, and potential parents (or parents of 8th grade Austin students) for closed schools, including many “feeder” elementary schools, may cause a delayed response if data is no longer onsite. This event occurred over 10 years ago. Many people’s recollections might be faulty, and many people who were involved may have left the area.

Policy documents, print and electronic media, and parent and community group information are easily accessible via the internet. Dated documents such as meeting summaries, notes, and reports will insure accuracy in the policy decision timeline, and journalism media will provide parent and community commentary and context for analysis. Additionally, these data documents will identify steps, processes, and policies that can be analyzed individually, and combined to determine institutional strategies. In addition to policy documents and reports, local, and national newspapers and news magazine, and local and national television reports, and parent and community organization are available to the public.

Major school related decisions were identified to determine how parents were engaged and what role parents had in these decisions. Additionally, it was important to learn how Austin's LSCs were engaged in the school closing process, if parents and students were given the opportunity to voice their questions, and whether CPS took the steps to insure those affected by understood what changes policy decisions would have in their daily lives.

Data

The Chicago Board of Education (BOE), Office of Local School Council Relations, Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), Chicago Principals and Administrators Association (CPAA), and Chicago History Museum were contacted for access to archival materials surrounding the closure of Austin HS. The CPAA and Chicago History Museum had no archival materials, or plans to curate any materials, for closed Chicago Public Schools. BOE allowed access to reports that recorded major policy decisions related to the closing of Austin HS providing critical insight to how parents were engaged throughout the process.

The BOE archive does not house LSC records of closed schools, and referred requests to The Office of Local School Council Relations (OLSCR). OLSCR could not confirm that an archival process exists for LSC records of closed schools in time for this study. Additionally, CPS's website does not contain any information regarding a process to archive LSC records of closed schools at the time of this study. CTU referred me to George Schmidt who is described as an unofficial union historian. Schmidt is a retired CPS teacher who has run for CTU president multiple times without success. He also publishes '*Substance News: Defending the Public Schools for over 30 years*', which included numerous articles covering the closing of Austin HS.

While previously a print and online publication, *Substance News* is now only online, which allowed direct access, and made an interview with Schmidt unnecessary for this study.

BOE archival materials, along with local independent news sources like *Substance News*, *Austin Weekly News*, a news site described as a publication “committed to in-depth reporting on issues concerning the Austin neighborhood located on the West Side of Chicago, Illinois”, the *District 299: The Inside Scoop on CPS blog*, an independent site (sponsored and hosted by Catalyst Chicago and then Chicago Tribune) that covered Chicago education news, *Chicago Tribune*, *Chicago Reporter*, and *Catalyst Chicago* were important sources for collecting experiences of parents, students, community members, and politicians regarding the closure of Austin HS.

Results. LSCs are the primary parent engagement vehicle for parental input into school level decisions. However, LSCs were not engaged and were not given the opportunity to provide input into policy decisions about Austin HS’s academic status, changes to its neighborhood attendance in order to prevent new students from enrolling, and finally the decision to close. As a result, CPS and BOE policy decisions and school changes were not effectively communicated and understood by parents and students. This is supported by the lack of any Austin HS parents or community members, who were not also CPS employees, present at the public hearing to close Austin HS. Additionally, local Austin newspapers chronicle Austin community organizations, and politicians appeal to CPS and the BOE to reverse the decision to close Austin HS, and demand for a new neighborhood HS. But Austin newspapers, parents, community members and organization representatives did not refer to, or acknowledge, CPS’ public hearings on policies to reduce Austin HS’s student population, leading up to the decision to close the

school. Instead, parents and community organizations collaborated and held events outside CPS's public hearings process in an effort to keep Austin HS open. The following is a narrative of policy decisions and events leading to the closure of Austin HS, along with the experiences Austin HS parents, students and Austin community members as a result of this event.

Timeline of policy Decisions to Close Austin HS

In October 2002, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of CPS, Arne Duncan, placed Austin HS on probation. This decision removed the LSC from making school related decisions. Nearly one year later, CPS removed Austin HS's principal September 24, 2003. The CEO of CPS recommended the removal because the principal failed to "sufficiently correct the school's educational deficiencies" as a result of Austin HS having "fewer than 15% of the students scored at or above state standards on the Prairie State Achievement Test and [...] a history of low student achievement over the past several years." CPS cited authority from Section 34-8.3(d) of the 1995 Amendatory Act of the Illinois School Code to place schools on probation. This section states:

"power to place an attendance center on probation to correct deficiencies in the performance of that school", and "...with respect to attendance centers on probation which have failed to make sufficient progress in correcting education deficiencies, the Chief Executive Officer may take other actions, with the approval of the BOE, including the removal of the principal after an opportunity for a hearing."

A public hearing to determine whether the principal of Austin HS should be removed was held on August 23, 2003, less than one year since the school was placed on probation. According to the BOE report, "[a]ppropriate and proper notice was given for said hearing to the principal and Local School Council of Austin High School." The report did not define what appropriate and proper meant in terms of days in advance. A transcript and hearing officer report of the public

hearing is not available at the time of this study. The following factors considered in recommending principal removal:

- A) failure to comply with the school improvement plan;
- B) failure to show satisfactory improvement in scores on the Prairie State Achievement Exam;
- C) failure to show satisfactory improvement in student attendance, truancy, drop-out and/or graduation rates;
- D) failure of the principal to effectively and/or sufficiently follow the directives or recommendation(s) of the CPS Office of Accountability.

The procedures for removing and replacing principals are listed as follows.

“[f]or schools where the Chief Executive Officer recommends the removal of the principal, should the Board approve the principal’s removal and replacement:

- A) an interim principal will be appointed for the school by the Chief Executive Officer based upon recommendations of the Chief Education Officer;
- B) the interim principal will serve at the pleasure of the Chief Executive Officer;
- C) until the school makes sufficient educational progress to be removed from probation, the local school council of a school on probation whose principal has been removed and replaced by an interim principal pursuant to section 8.3(d) shall have no authority to select a new four-year contract principal.

Austin HS’s principal did not challenge this decision. The only reference to LSCs in this BOE report was to state that LSCs “shall have no authority to select a new four-year contract principal”, and that “LSC review or approval was not applicable to this report”. As a result of this policy, LSCs do not have any significant role in school reform planning decisions made by CPS and the BOE.

The Board decision to rescind the 2002 “Policy on the Closing and Consolidation of Schools” and adopt “Policy on the Closing of Schools”, February 25, 2004 (04-0225-PO2), represented a significant shift in how schools closings would be determined across the school district. This policy removed the requirement to hold a public hearing to receive public comment for any plans to recommend a school for closing or consolidation, 2) applying a section of NCLB

law that allows districts to close a school that has failed to make Adequate Yearly Progress for five (5) consecutive years, and convert them to charter schools, 3) re-opening schools that were closed for failure to improve one year after being placed on probation could be re-opened “as an entirely new school with a different educational focus”, and 4) LSCs at schools closed for any reason are completely dissolved. These changes gave CPS authority to close schools beyond what the 1995 Amendatory Act of the Illinois School Code provided. It is also clear that LSCs were not seen as important partners in school reform planning process having no official role deciding if schools are placed on probation or closed. This decision also further propelled plans to close Austin HS in order to open new schools.

CPS adjusted the attendance areas of Austin HS and six (6) other high schools on June 23, 2004 (Board of Education 04-0623-EX11) in order to “cease the enrollment of incoming ninth graders” at Austin HS. A public hearing occurred on June 12, 2004 “following the issuance of proper notice to receive public comment on the CEO’s proposal.” As with previous references to public hearings in BOE materials related to Austin HS, no definition of what constituted “proper notice to receive public comment” translates to in terms of days in advance. The attendance areas assigned to Austin HS were reassigned across six (6) schools. The BOE report did not identify a formula or method for determining how Austin HS’s attendance areas would be reassigned, and notes that “LSC approval is not applicable to this report.” The transcript of this public hearing was not available in time for this study. The transcript might have assisted with understanding whether parents knew that this decision would ultimately lead to the closing of Austin HS, and if parents of 8th graders understood this meant their children would attend one of six (6) other high schools according to their address.

New attendance boundaries for Austin Community Campus High School were approved on April 26, 2006 (Board of Education 06-0426-EX2). The CEO recommended the attendance areas for Austin HS, and six (6) other west side high schools be adjusted to “more evenly distribute utilization rates”, citing the March 1, 2004, Modified Desegregation Consent Decree which stated, “CPS shall alleviate any racially and ethnically disproportionate overcrowding of school sites, to the extent practicable.” Public hearings were held for these changes on March 24, and May 12, 2006, but no mention that there was “appropriate and proper notice” in the BOE report. The transcripts from the public hearings were not available at the time of this study. CPS effectively closed Austin HS by phasing out enrollment, and sending new students, beginning in 9th grade to Orr Campus High School, Marshall Metropolitan High School, Manley Career Academy High School, Clemente Academy High School, and Wells Community Academy

On July 25, 2007 (Board of Education 07-0725-EX3), the CEO of CPS recommended the BOE approve the closing of Austin HS. The BOE decisions to change the attendance area boundary halting new freshman in 2004, after convening a public hearing to receive comments and following proper notice, the May 2005 and May 2006 Request for Proposals interested in starting schools under the Renaissance 2010 initiative to operate schools in Austin, proposals submitted to BOE to operate charter, contract or performance schools were submitted August 9, 2005, July 6, 2006, and September 5, 2006, which resulted in November 2005 BOE approved the establishment of a contract school, a performance, and...

The transcripts for the public hearing on the proposal to close Austin occurred July 6, 2007, “following proper notice, to receive public comment”. Transcripts and the Hearing Officer Report for the July 6, 2007 hearing were the only documents available for examination for this

study. According to the Hearing Officer's Report, a notice of the hearing was published and advertised on July 2, and 3, 2007 in both major Chicago newspapers (Chicago Tribune and Chicago Sun-Times), in addition to notices sent to principals, LCS members, teachers and staff of Austin HS. The hearing officer found that the CEO of CPS "provided adequate notice of this public hearing". However, only 13 people signed up to provide public comments, all of whom were CPS employees, including two that were also parents of Austin students.

All 13 speakers were opposed to the closing of Austin HS. Speakers' sighted issues of job loss and displacement, continued suffering of Austin students' academic progress as result of grammar schools not doing their jobs, the lack of ability of parents to pay school related costs like graduation and pictures, and prom, and basic needs like clothing. Speakers also spoke negatively about the increase of charter and privately operated schools, and the lack of cultural and neighborhood knowledge of new school officials. They appealed to CPS officials present and CEO Arne Duncan to come to Austin, and get to know the people and the conditions. Other speakers wondered why Austin did not have long enough to improve its academic standing before closing, and why CPS is closing schools in African American communities, while opening new schools in Hispanic communities.

The transcript does not include any comments that express concern that no Austin HS parents (who were not also employees) were present. There was one speaker who questioned the manner that CPS notified parents. The only mention of how CPS notified parents of the hearing was by one of the employee speakers. . Mr. Ortiz, a teacher at Austin explains why parents were not present at the forum: "...we have kids and parents who ...notice, there's no one here. You put it in the newspaper. They can't read past the fifth-grade level. You put it in the *Sun-Times* and

the *Chicago Tribune* that there's going to be a meeting, but they can't read. Why is that?"

(Chicago Public Schools Public Hearing, 2007).

No representative from CPS or Austin HS employee who spoke in opposition to the closing of Austin HS mentioned to the importance of having a representation of parent voices or concerns at the hearing. Also, no members of the Austin HS's LSC were present, and Austin HS LSC records are not available. There is no official way to learn how parents were notified about the public hearing from Austin HS officials and Austin HS's LSC. Additionally, no one questioned whether the hearing should go forward without any parents present and signed up to comment.

According to the transcript, multiple speakers asked CPS officials why Austin HS was being closed. The hearing officer's report did not include these comments. It is not clear if speakers were not aware of previous public hearings to give comments on CPS's decision to halt new 9th graders from entering Austin HS, and subsequent decisions to adjust Austin HS's attendance area boundaries. These policy decision began in 2004, and immediately reduced Austin HS's population. These changes would impact assigned resources, and affect CPS employees, as well as parents and students. A BOE transcript and hearing officer's report of the June 12, 2004 public hearing to halt new 9th graders, along with transcripts for public hearings held on March 24, 2006, and May 12, 2006 to discuss Austin HS's boundary changes are not available at the time of this study.

Community Responds to Austin HS School Closing

On July 9, 2007, the District 299: The Inside Scoop on CPS blog, an independent site (sponsored and hosted by Catalyst Chicago and then Chicago Tribune) covering Chicago education news, published the following.

On Friday, CPS sent out a press release about a hearing that I never heard about until after it was done –

Three Chicago Public Schools will complete their phase-outs by the end of this summer under already announced plans to dramatically improve education options in underserved neighborhoods. They are Austin High School, 231 N. Pine, Calumet Career Academy, 8131 S. May, and Westinghouse Career Academy, 3301 W. Franklin Blvd.

Alexander Russo, the blogger of the District 299: The Inside Scoop on CPS blog, noted he was not aware of this public hearing before it occurred. This brings into question whether Austin parents and community knew of CPS decisions and public hearings related to the future of Austin HS, and how to make their voices heard about the impact of these decisions. This blog post refers to someone named George for tipping him off about this press release for a public hearing that the blogger was not aware of until after it happened. George is actually George Schmidt, former CPS teacher, and publisher of Substance News. The blog post, including the press release text, is still available online. The official press release is not available via web or BOE archive at the time of this project.

A review of Austin local news during the CPS and BOE decisions to close Austin uncovers the deep involvement of the Westside Health Authority (WHA), an organization based

in Austin, to organize students and community to respond. WHA is also part of the Austin Community Education Network, which also includes The South Austin Coalition and the Westside Ministers Coalition. ACEN is described as “a group of community organizations, parents and educators, formed around the new high school effort” (Dean 2007). According to its website, WHA was founded in 1988 and began as a coalition of parents, churches, healthcare providers and other community-based organizations that helped to successfully avert the closure of St. Anne’s Hospital. Its mission is “to use the capacity of local residents to improve the health and well-being of the community”.

On July 15, 2006, a town hall meeting organized by WHA and Westside School Improvement Coalition, a group of parent and community activists (Dean 2006). Outgoing BOE President Michael Scott also attended the town hall. WHA presented a resolution to reopen Austin HS, an accused CPS and the BOE of failing to prepare students and parents for changes that would occur as part of the mayor’s Renaissance 2010 initiative. Khalid Johnson, a WHA activist, claimed no one in the community understood that phased out students would be sent outside the neighborhood to schools that were not better performing than Austin HS. Johnson noted, “CPS did not do an adequate job of studying the potential for violence, and things like that.” Bob Vondrasek, Executive Director of the South Austin Coalition added, “There needs to be an impact study on the effect the school closings have had on the children” forced to attend schools outside of Austin. Outgoing BOE President Scott admitted that, “CPS and BOE failed to properly inform parents,” but that drastic changes were needed. But William Leavy, director of the Greater West Town Community Development Project, noted that “When high school

students are forced to trek across the city, possibly into rival gang territory, it can lead to poor attendance and dropping out” (Duffrin, 2006).

Outgoing BOE president Scott was not reported as having assured the community that their comments would be delivered to the appropriate decision makers. It was not clear any attempt was made to assure the community that CPS or the BOE would address their issues, or reconsider the phasing out of students, or the closure of Austin HS. Additionally, neither the outgoing BOE president, nor people representing community organizations, communicate to parents at this event the dates of public hearings on proposals to change attendance boundaries, phase out incoming students, and ultimately, the closure Austin HS. It is not clear if the community organizations were aware of the public hearings on Austin HS.

Building on the town hall discussion, ACEN sought to intentionally involve youth in organizing efforts to open a new neighborhood high school in Austin. Every other Saturday during the summer of 2007, WHA engaged in “an ongoing community blitz” with “youth volunteers, along with parents and other community organizations to pass out fliers and ask people to sign a petition in support of a new high school” (Dean, 2007). “A lot of these kids are forced to travel outside of the neighborhood, and with Austin being the largest community in Chicago, geographically and population-wise, people are calling it a crime that CPS has abandoned public education in Austin” (Dean, 2007). One parent, Beauty Winfrey, attended a “Saturday blitz with her 20-year old daughter Daisy” in order to advocate for Ms. Winfrey’s son, who would begin first grade that fall. “I’m looking way ahead because I want to make sure that when he gets out of grammar school that he has a high school to go to. If we start now, by the time he gets to high school, we’ll have what we want” (Dean, 2007).

In addition to Saturday community work, and community petitions for a new neighborhood high school, WHA conducted parent surveys to learn “where parents are currently sending their kids and if they would like their kids to go to school in their community” (Dean, 2007). Virgil Crawford, of the WHA described the work of ACEN as “doing everything it can to convince the [BOE] that Austin needs a new high school as soon as possible. This campaign is being driven and organized by students who attend school in Austin, as well as some who attend school outside of Austin. We figured the best way to kick off this campaign was to organize students- The Student Freedom Riders. (Dean, 2007). George Schmidt of *Substance News* authored a profile of Student Freedom Riders, and their work. Schmidt describes them as

“young men and women between ages of 11 and about 20...[who] demand that Chicago stop discriminating against the community and provide a general high school for their community...Many of the members of the Freedom Riders are still in elementary school and are just getting their first knowledge of community activism...The Freedom Riders...dodge traffic in the crosswalks asking drivers who are stopped at red lights to sign their petitions and take their literature (Schmidt, 2007).

Victor Dunn-Aiken, 17, is a Student Freedom Rider. A Wells Community Academy (Wells HS) senior, Dunn-Aiken was profiled in Austin Weekly News on August 29, 2007.

In 2004, Dunn-Aiken was a high achieving 8th grader and applied for a spot in one of the city’s top performing selective high schools. After being waitlisted, he would have preferred to attend Austin HS in his neighborhood. However, CPS had begun to phase out Austin HS, and Dunn-Aiken’s address was adjusted to Wells HS’s attendance area. Dunn-Aiken described waking up at 5:30 am to travel to Wells HS under very stressful conditions. He shared, “You don’t even know if you’re going to walk to the bus stop without being jumped by kids” (Johnson,

2007). The tension between peers of different ethnic backgrounds and gang affiliations was felt daily.

According to Austin Weekly News and the Chicago Reporter (Johnson, 2007; Myers, 2008) Dunn-Aiken was not the only Austin student who experienced challenges. The CPS Director of School Demographics and Planning stated, “[The real issue] is what happens in the meantime to the kids who are scattered all over the place” (Johnson, 2007). In addition to a socio-emotional toll, Dunn-Aiken shared the financial toll of attending Wells HS. He estimated it cost \$75 per month to commute back and forth from Austin to Wells HS, “I been out there with no bus fare at times. I have to walk home. It’s hard trying to keep bus fare when you don’t have a job or you’re working a job but you don’t get paid enough” (Johnson, 2007). As Dunn-Aiken entered his final years at Wells HS, he realized his role with the Student Freedom Riders was insure his sisters could stay in Austin to attend high school. “My little sisters, one just graduated (from eighth grade), and I’m wondering where she’s going to go to school at, because I certainly do not want her to come to Wells” (Johnson, 2007).

Conclusion

There are similarities between the experiences of parents to school closings in 2013 with those in Austin leading up to and after the closing of Austin HS in 2007. Parents of Dyett HS did not feel heard by CPS regarding the decision to close the high school. Dyett parents choose to risk their lives for a neighborhood high school option. But Dyett parents also worked with local universities to prepare a proposal for a new open enrollment neighborhood school. These non-LSC sanctioned activities drew national and international headlines before CPS officials and the mayor responded. Ultimately, the decision to close Dyett HS was reversed. This was only a partial victory. Parents wanted to be part of discussions about the new direction of Dyett HS but were completely shut out of the process. Austin parents and community were not successful in forcing CPS officials or the mayor to respond to their demands for a neighborhood school. Their work to engage the neighborhood through community organizing initiatives were not acknowledged as a form of parental engagement.

At a 2013 community meeting on the closure of a South Side, local middle school, two LSC member parents made the following observations while listening to parents appeal to keep Canter Middle School open.

This is merely a forum to make people come to beg for their schools
- Beth Herring, LSC member at Bret Harte Elementary School

This entire situation is surreal, we should be the ones listening to you beg,
not the other way around
- Lina Fritz, LSC member at Shoemith Elementary School
(Cholke, 2013)

CPS officials “sat mostly quiet through a two-hour meeting”, while parents pleaded their case (Cholke, 2013). The crowd was angry because they came out expecting to hear a dialog. Shoesmith, a K-6 school, has sent 7-8 graders to Canter. “Ray and Bret Harte elementary schools would add seventh and eighth grades to accommodate students who otherwise would have attended Canter” (Cholke, 2013). But CPS had not informed parents exactly which students will end up where, and provided no indication of when parents would learn student assignments. Alderperson Leslie Hairston was also present. “I was elected to represent [the] people of the 5th Ward, which includes the parents of Ray and Bret Harte [Elementary Schools]. She noted that she was never consulted on closing Canter. “I matter, my people matter, and I will not allow you to disrespect us” (Cholke, 2013). Teachers also reported feeling disrespected, and that “the atmosphere inside the school since the announcement has been demeaning” (Cholk, 2013). This response is similar to the one expressed by Kimberly Lightford, who represents Austin in the IL Senate. In 2006, she said felt the “sting of being left out of the loop...when CPS decided to close Austin HS” (Anderson, 2006).

CPS did not engage with LSCs to discuss or plan the future of their schools. This study highlighted how LSCs are not consulted to review proposed CPS policy regarding schools placed on probation, or part of the discussion to determine if a school should be placed on probation. Once a school is placed on probation, LSCs are removed from future decisions about the school. So what do LSCs at schools placed on probation, and slated for closure do? Without Austin HS’s LSC records, we cannot know exactly how the LSC was engaged, and communicated with parents, and how LSCs at schools on probation contribute to school functions. Placing schools on probation eliminates the primary parental engagement for school decisions.

Parents believed that CPS and BOE failed to prepare students and parents for changes to their schools that would occur as a result of the mayor's Renaissance 2010 initiative. Community organizations stepped in to provide forums for their concerns and feedback to the BOE, but not at BOE meetings on proposals that affected Austin HS. There was a significant information gap about how CPS creates proposals to change the status of local schools, and how the community can communicate their concerns via public hearings. There is also a lack of acknowledgement about the need to make the availability of public forums for school policy changes communicated as widely as possible to insure the maximum attendance. A campaign should have been undertaken by CPS to communicate to parents and community members impacted about the change in status of Austin HS. LSCs should have been utilized to fill gaps in information. What is clear from each school closing process since 2002, CPS does not view LSCs at schools on probation or closing as partners in the school reform effort.

At the final public hearing to oppose the closing of Austin HS in 2007, public speakers mentioned concerns about what was going to happen to the community once Austin HS was no longer an option. Austin parents were left to figure out how students would navigate public transportation, and extended trips, to their newly assigned high schools outside Austin without support from CPS. In 2007, Austin was the largest community in Chicago, in population and size with 19 elementary schools and two high schools, before the closure of Austin due to its probation status. CPS could have engaged neighborhood newspapers AustinTalks, Austin Voice, and Austin Weekly News to insure parents were informed about at each stage of this process. Austin also has a history of strong, established community and church organizations which include: Austin Coalition for Healthy Lifestyles, Austin Coalition for Youth Justice, Austin

Coming Together, Austin Peoples Action Center, Central Austin Neighborhood Association, By the Hand Club for Kids, Circle Urban Ministries, Kidz Express, South Austin Coalition Community, Westside Health Authority, and Westside Ministers Coalition. If CPS intended to have an inclusive process, any outreach to these organizations could have increased the number of parents that attended public hearings to learn about the future of Austin HS.

Parents were not an important part of the process to close Austin HS. This is supported by the fact that Austin HS's LSC was not engaged from the beginning of the policy timeline. Additionally, there is no official CPS record of parent voices regarding the closing and aftermath of the closing of Austin HS. This is due to the lack of availability of LSC records of closed schools, unavailable transcripts from public forum to halt incoming freshman and change the attendance areas for Austin HS, and the fact that no parents (not also CPS employees) were present at the final public forum. Chicago newspapers, particularly Austin community newspapers, are the only record of Austin students, parents and community voices. These reports show dissatisfaction with CPS decisions, the impact of those decisions on students, and significant involvement of longstanding Austin community organizations to help organize a community response. Considering Austin's politicians were also left out of the planning for Austin HS, it is not clear if parents in neighborhoods like Austin have any recourse to pushback on policies that may be detrimental to their children's academic success.

CPS's actions cannot be recommended as a best practice for parental engagement. Parent voices in communities like Austin are in need of additional protections when LSCs are not available. If CPS supports meaningful parental engagement policies, greater effort should be

made to communicate district goals for public forums that include a target number of parents and community members be present before moving forward in any specific school policy decisions. Austin parents and community members negotiated with CPS to re-open Austin HS in 2017 as an open enrollment HS. The new challenge for Austin is how to inform 8th graders that there is a local high school available for their consideration. CPS has not announced any plans to review its handling of the closure, and re-opening of Austin HS.

Implications

This discussion has highlighted past and continued exclusion and erasure of African American parents and students' voices that occurs when a school's action is taken by CPS. As shown above, school actions are decisions to consolidate, close, phase-out, or turnaround schools, and have overwhelmingly impacted African American families. Austin parents, and students found meaningful ways, outside of a defunct LSC, to organize around concerns for their students and community, and provide feedback to CPS and BOE. These parent, student and community designed and led parental engagement activities were ignored by CPS. The message sent to African American parents and students is that none of their efforts are valid, while not providing a valid parental engagement mechanism for parents to have direct voice in what happens to their schools. CPS is unwilling to adjust harmful education reform practices based on feedback from, and experiences of African American parents and students.

The story of how Austin HS was closed cannot only be told by major newspapers, TV, or CPS officials and BOE records, which are often missing or have excluded parent voices. The institutional narrative of African American parental engagement around school closings cannot be the only narrative. When this story is told, it is necessary to recall the absence of a robust, research supported parental engagement apparatus with a track record of success for listening to and adjusting to the needs of African American families. The importance of hyper local, community level reporting was critical to telling the story of Austin parents and students' engagement. Narratives of Austin community engagement and student experiences were not

found in either of the two major Chicago newspapers, but found in Austin's community newspapers, and a news outlet managed by a local teacher union representative. These platforms chronicled the Austin community's journey to understanding what school action decisions meant for students, what school actions were experienced, and how the community sought to reverse or redress school actions. Without these outlets, the re-opening of Austin HS in 2017 would be viewed as CPS listening to parents, or responding to the community's needs instead of in response to CPS's failed school experiments that occurred once Austin HS was closed.

In February 2018, the BOE voted to phase-out and eventually close four high schools in the South Side community of Englewood, ignoring African American parents, students and community members. Additionally, National Teachers Academy (NTA), a top performing, majority African American school in the South Loop community will be phased out in order to open a new high school. Parents, students and the community organized engagement activities similar to parents and students in 2013 and in Austin, over 10 years before. Though social media did not play a major role in 2007, it was critical in 2013, and beyond to get the word out to supporters across the city and country, using #WeAreNTA, #SaveNTA, #RahmHatesUs, and #NoCopAcademy. While social is a useful way to widely circulate your causes, generally, it does not lead to the outcomes organizers intend. The Dyett school action was an exception because of the extreme actions parents took to sacrifice their health on a hunger strike for 34 days. After Dyett parents' story was picked up by national and international media, city and CPS officials responded to the media, but not to Dyett parents directly. They were excluded. Social media, and parent and student led community organizing are important outlets, but African American

parents cannot count on their parental engagement efforts to bring them a voice in decisions made about their students' schools.

Any analysis of the success or failure of Chicago's education reform must acknowledge that CPS consistently ignores feedback from African American parents and students on the disruptive practices of school actions, yet continues them. This study highlights not only when CPS has not considered African American parents and student voices, but call in to question when CPS has ever truly partnered with African American parents despite claiming to welcome parental engagement via LSC, and not insuring the LSC is available and treated equitable. The only way to insure African Americans are heard may be to revisit organizing methods of the Civil Rights Movement, such as boycott, and disruption tactics. It seems a movement to fight for equal schools and equal treatment for African Americans is still necessary.

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VITA

Shani R. Blackwell was born in Oak Park, IL. When her parents took her home from the hospital, they crossed the street to Chicago's west side Austin community, on the Oak Park border. She was raised in Austin and North Lawndale. She did her undergraduate work at Northwestern University in Evanston, IL where received her Bachelor of Arts in Mathematics in 1998. After college, she explored the financial services field before joining an international employee survey research firm, gaining knowledge of software, paper and online survey design, and survey data management and reporting. She wanted to apply the research knowledge she gained to understanding and improving life and education indicators in her west side community and began the Master of Arts in Cultural and Educational Policy Studies in 2004. In 2008, she joined Loyola University Chicago's Center for Science and Math Education's to support work toward the implementation of high quality science curriculum and instruction in Chicago Public Schools on the southwest and west sides. Her research focus on African American parental engagement was inspired by her parents' non-traditional engagement in schools. Her goal is to support efforts that provide meaningful parental engagement, and direct decision making opportunities for African American parents in schools, and continue to research how policies can reduce economic and educational inequities in African American communities.