Title

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Permalink

Journal

Author

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Publication Date

2023

DOI

Copyright Information

Peer reviewed

Framing of Black and Latinx School Closure in Redeveloping Hartford, Connecticut

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Abstract

In January 2018, the mayoral-controlled Hartford Board of Education voted to officially close four mostly Black and Latinx schools as part of a district reorganization for "excellence." This decision followed a decade of market-oriented reforms of school choice and closure promoted as a reform lever to improve academic achievement in a district under a school desegregation order and settlement. As part of a broader case study, this article draws on framing theory and the concept of accumulation by dispossession in order to compare stakeholder responses to the proposed closure of two schools in Hartford, Connecticut, at a moment of shifting public funds towards urban redevelopment. This article argues that stakeholders' framing of responses connected to the form of school closure and their frame resonance, or effectiveness to connect with each other and the audience, related to status and identity in the district. This study supports the need for deeper understanding of how families, educators, and community partners experience school closures in urban contexts and how these groups provide alternatives to permanent school closure. The study also notes a particular form of school closure: desegregation by dispossession.

Keywords: school closure, choice, desegregation, urban redevelopment, dispossession

> My daughter has been here since Pre-K. And to take her family away from her, something, the only family she's known other than her biological family, I think it's gonna' do a disservice to our community.
>
> —Sabrina Smith, parent, Simpson-Waverly School[1]

> Closing Batchelder and giving our campus, our neighborhood, one of our safest locations to a Montessori magnet is a slap in the face. You are telling our children they don't deserve to stay here. You're telling our children that they are not good enough.
>
> —Shirley Aponte, parent, Batchelder School

In January 2018, the mayoral-controlled Hartford Board of Education voted to officially close four mostly Latinx and Black schools as part of a district reorganization for "excellence" in Hartford, Connecticut (de la Torre, 2018; Hartford Public Schools, 2017). In the preceding months, the then-mayor framed the problem as one of "significant

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[1]The names of people and schools in this text are actual names shared at public hearings.

under-enrollment in neighborhood schools" and the superintendent announced that closings could result in a solution of "freeing up resources to be reinvested" in a smaller number of schools (Benford & Snow, 2000; Megan, 2017). At subsequent public hearings, the schoolwide stakeholders framed the problem and solution in different ways. Hundreds of mostly Latinx and Black students, families, educators, and partners attended citywide and school-based public hearings to oppose closures before the vote (de la Torre, 2018; Megan, 2018). Similar to other cities, this district would also require families to choose new schools for their children amidst a complicated landscape of neighborhood, charter, and interdistrict magnet schools (Cowhy et al., 2023; Hartford Public Schools, 2019). Despite Hartford's national recognition as a model of voluntary school choice to meet desegregation goals, the contradiction between the diagnostic and prognostic framing by a White mayor and Black and Latinx stakeholders raised questions.

School closures such as these are a key feature of education policy across the United States. From 2000 to 2013, nearly 20 percent of school districts across the United States permanently closed at least one school (Duncan-Shippy, 2019). Permanent closures equated to hundreds of schools closed and thousands of children and families impacted. These closures have disproportionately fallen on urban communities with Black students and families and an increasing number of schools with Latinx students and families (Duncan-Shippy, 2019; Morris, 2021; Schott Foundation, 2013). As in the past, recent school closures can displace educators, families, and students from these key community spaces (Bell, 1983; Ewing, 2018; Lipman, 2011; Valencia, 1984). Even after temporary closing and reopening during the COVID-19 pandemic, districts across the country proposed to permanently close schools. In the face of these new proposals, there are benefits of "community-based research on the experiences of closure for students, families, schools, and communities," particularly amidst shifting institutional and ecological conditions (Duncan-Shippy, 2019, p. 48). Across the United States, communities face different forms of school closure today that must be interrogated.

The Hartford context provides a useful site for understanding school closures through examining school-based experiences. These proposed closures above resembled other cities with market-oriented education reforms over the last two decades (Aggarwal et al., 2012; Brusi & Godreau, 2019; Buras, 2014; Cucchiara, 2013; Duncan-Shippy, 2019; Ewing, 2018; Hernandez & Galletta, 2016; Nuamah, 2023; Shiller, 2018). However, most of the academic literature and media on Hartford-area schools identifies the city and region as a model of voluntary school choice to fulfill a court-ordered school desegregation agreement in confined legal terrain (Black, 2020; Cobb et al., 2011; Cohen, 2017; Dougherty, 2017; Joffe-Walt, 2015; Johnson, 2019; The Editorial Board, 2015; Orfield & Ee, 2015). However, over the last two decades, school desegregation in Hartford has operated in tandem with a market-based choice system (i.e., portfolio) that sanctioned schools with permanent closure or some type of conversion (i.e., turnaround) into a new or existing charter, magnet, or themed school (Hill & Yatsko, 2011; Pappano, 2010; Quinn & Ogburn, 2019). Viewing Hartford as a site of school closure and choice provides new insight on these education policies and school-based responses.

This article examines responses from the people—or stakeholders—that faced two different forms of school closure and challenged them at public hearings in Hartford. As actors connected to these schools in various ways, these stakeholders publicly shared their

meaning of the closures. The article employs framing theory and the concept of accumulation by dispossession to examine these responses, which include the voices of students, families, educators, and partners that responded at public hearings for two of the previously mentioned proposed closures in Hartford in 2018 (Aggarwal et al., 2012; Bierbaum, 2018; Benford & Snow, 2000; Ewing & Green, 2022; Park et al., 2013; Woulfin et al., 2016). Importantly, these proposed closures occurred in a context of state-funded desegregation and urban redevelopment (Creswell, 2014; Duncan-Shippy, 2019; Yin, 2018). As such, understanding forms of school closure and the framing by various stakeholders can assist in finding ways to respond and prevent new proposals that may again surface in the United States (Ewing & Green, 2022).

Drawing on frame analysis used in education policy scholarship, this paper analyzes public hearing testimony for the proposed closure of two schools in Hartford Public Schools (HPS): Batchelder and Simpson-Waverly (Park et al., 2013; Woulfin et al., 2016; Bierbaum, 2018). This study asks: How did school-based stakeholders frame their interpretation and opposition to the closure of their affiliated school in the city of Hartford, CT in 2018?

Literature Review

Understanding Black and Latinx Family Responses to School Closures

A key part of understanding the school closure process is how stakeholders respond. Responses vary and can depend on group history, context, and opportunities provided by districts to families, educators, and students to participate or reshape school closure plans (Diem & Welton, 2020; Syeed, 2019). Stakeholders can be part of planning, but school closure plans do not always include significant community input toward equitable collaboration (Ishimaru, 2020). In response, communities have planned direct protest and community organizing to challenge school closures (Ewing, 2018; Wilson et al., 2019). Communities have also applied research and legal action to contest school closures (Bell, 1976; Kirshner & Pozzoboni, 2011; Shiller, 2018; Valencia, 1984, 2012). In other cases, communities can create or utilize relationships within existing power structures to preserve or transform their schools (Finnigan & Lavner, 2012; Green, 2017; Warren & Mapp, 2011). As Welton and Freelon (2018) argue, community response to school closure is a form of leadership that educators can work with or ignore.

The language of responses may also vary based on the form of school closure. For example, Nuamah (2019) categorized several forms of school closure. In Hartford, each school faced different forms of closure. First, the district proposed closure of the Simpson-Waverly school building (251 students) until further notice. Second, the plan implicitly proposed dissolving the Batchelder school (397 students), to be replaced by an existing Montessori magnet school in the former school's building. Third, the district planned to consolidate the Capital Community College Magnet Academy (33 students) with a larger nearby existing interdistrict magnet school. Last, the proposal included the official closure of the John T. Clark school building after being shut down several years earlier when a renovation effort found toxins that were never remediated. Nuamah also notes that "interpretations of school closings by citizens were also based on their experience with

one or more of these practices respectively" (p. 275). In other words, stakeholder responses can connect to past experiences and their familiarity with particular forms of school closure.

Hartford Public Schools: School Desegregation through Choice and Closure

The path of school desegregation in Hartford and Connecticut focused on the use of school choice to meet racial desegregation of schools (Green, 1999; Dougherty, 2017). Under *Sheff v. O'Neill*, magnet schools expanded to enroll students from the city and suburbs to create racially diverse schools. In one of a series of agreements in the *Sheff v. O'Neill* (Stipulation and Proposed Order, 2013) case, the Reduced-Isolation Setting meant the "percentage of enrolled students who identify themselves as any part Black/African American, or any part Hispanic, (and) does not exceed 75 percent of the school's total enrollment" (p. 6). Depending on the year of each settlement and order, variations of this definition were used to determine whether schools and programs met a numerical desegregation goal. By 2017–18, the district served Hispanic or Latino (53 percent), Black or African American (30 percent), White (10 percent), Asian (4 percent), two or more races (2 percent), and American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, or Other Pacific Islander (combined less than 1 percent) students with both neighborhood and interdistrict magnet schools (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2022). In particular, many interdistrict magnet schools met this Reduced-Isolation Setting goal. As a result, Hartford schools are often noted as a key example of contemporary desegregation. For example, Orfield & Ee (2015) noted that this case was a "victory over great odds" (p. 6). Hartford has been also described as being "desegregated differently" or "impressive" for convincing "white families it's in their self-interest to go to integrated schools" (Cohen, 2017; Joffe-Walt, 2015). In addition, Johnson's (2019) book on school integration noted that Hartford had "recently" adopted a model that has "had success in luring suburban parents to its system with the promise of high-performing magnet schools" (p. 262). To be sure, magnet schools met Reduced-Isolation Setting goals with quality, resources, and managed choice (Cotto & Feder, 2014).

By the 2010s, the Hartford district operated through a combination of market-based policies including magnet and semi-private charter schools. Notably, the district featured school turnarounds, reconstitution, and restart that closed schools temporarily or permanently to make new programs. The combination of reconstitution rules from the No Child Left Behind Act (2002) (NCLB) and local accountability rules for redesign through making new schools or closing existing ones operated in the 2000s and 2010s (Hill and Yatsko, 2011; Hartford Public Schools, 2007; Pappano, 2010). Engineered by the Center for Reform of School Systems (CRSS) out of Houston (Aarons, 2009; Hartford Public Schools, 2008), Texas and the Broad Foundation, Hartford's policy centered on a "Theory of Action" that would give high-performing or improving schools autonomy in operations. The low-performing schools would get intervention, redesign, or replacement (Royal & Cothorne, 2021). The result was a district with schools as assets in a portfolio with various themes, mixed public-private ownership, and enrollment processes.

Last, the school district faced many legal questions related to education funding and desegregation. Two-thirds of the operating budget for Hartford Public Schools came from the state's Educational Cost Sharing (ECS) grant combined with local revenue drawn from

property taxes. Despite new state magnet school funding and generally better overall funding compared to other states, Hartford and other cities faced increasingly regressive school funding over this period compared to other more affluent school districts (Baker et al., 2021). In addition, the State Supreme Court decided against more adequate school funding when the State defeated the *CCJEF v. Rell* (2018) state school funding adequacy case (Moukawsher, 2016). The State also faced the *Robinson et al. v. Wentzell* (2018) federal lawsuit contesting the implementation of Hartford's school desegregation that was propelled by the Pacific Legal Foundation. This was a contentious moment for schools.

Competing Development Priorities: School Construction and Downtown

The effort towards desegregation through magnet schools competed with a new phase of urban redevelopment. State-subsidized bonding for new construction or renovation of school buildings had particular emphasis and higher subsidy for interdistrict magnet schools to meet *Sheff* desegregation goals (Rabe Thomas, 2021). Thus, public school construction with added subsidy for magnet school construction was a form of urban land redevelopment. However, by the early 2010s, Governor Dan Malloy pushed a different form of "economic development" as a feature of his administration (Office of Governor Malloy, 2016). Malloy's plan was intended to meet the housing needs of existing or future workers at businesses that the governor intended to support and attract to the city, particularly the downtown space (Bordonaro, 2012a,b). At that time, eighty percent of these new housing developments were market-rate rentals while only 20 percent would be affordable. Given the average income of Black, Latinx, and White residents, this meant that these rentals were most likely accessible to White residents given that group's higher median income (Cotto & Mahoney, 2020). This State-sponsored redevelopment project also contrasted with most Black and Latinx peoples' access to power in the city. Along with state financial support, a new zoning code reduced public hearings, regulations for land redevelopment, and "cost of real estate development" (Bronin, 2019, p. 746). This approach to land redevelopment and zoning reform would, "stimulate economic growth by envisioning residential options that are attractive to young professionals as well as others interested in urban living" (Bronin, 2019, p. 749). At a moment of shifting priorities, elite control of governance and resources ensured that "residents live in a climate of disenfranchisement" (Myers, 2020, p. 164).

Competing redevelopment projects of downtown construction or funding for schools and desegregation eventually conflicted in public. In January 2016, Governor Malloy's general counsel was elected as Hartford's mayor and later appointed five of nine school members to the Hartford Board of Education. By March 2017, Governor Malloy argued that the school choice response to the *Sheff* desegregation case was itself unconstitutional and worked against low-income Black and Latinx families that could not get enrollment in a magnet school. *The Hartford Courant* reported that "as a means of improving education in Hartford, Malloy suggested that the city school system could free up resources by closing or consolidating schools whose enrollments have dwindled as students left for *Sheff* magnets and the Open Choice program" (Kauffman & de la Torre, 2017). In its budget, the district implicitly reported savings of roughly $1.5 million per closed school per year (Hartford Public Schools, 2018). The estimated savings of school

closures contrasted with hundreds of millions of dollars in state support through bonding, grants, and tax relief allotted towards downtown land redevelopment (See Figure 1).
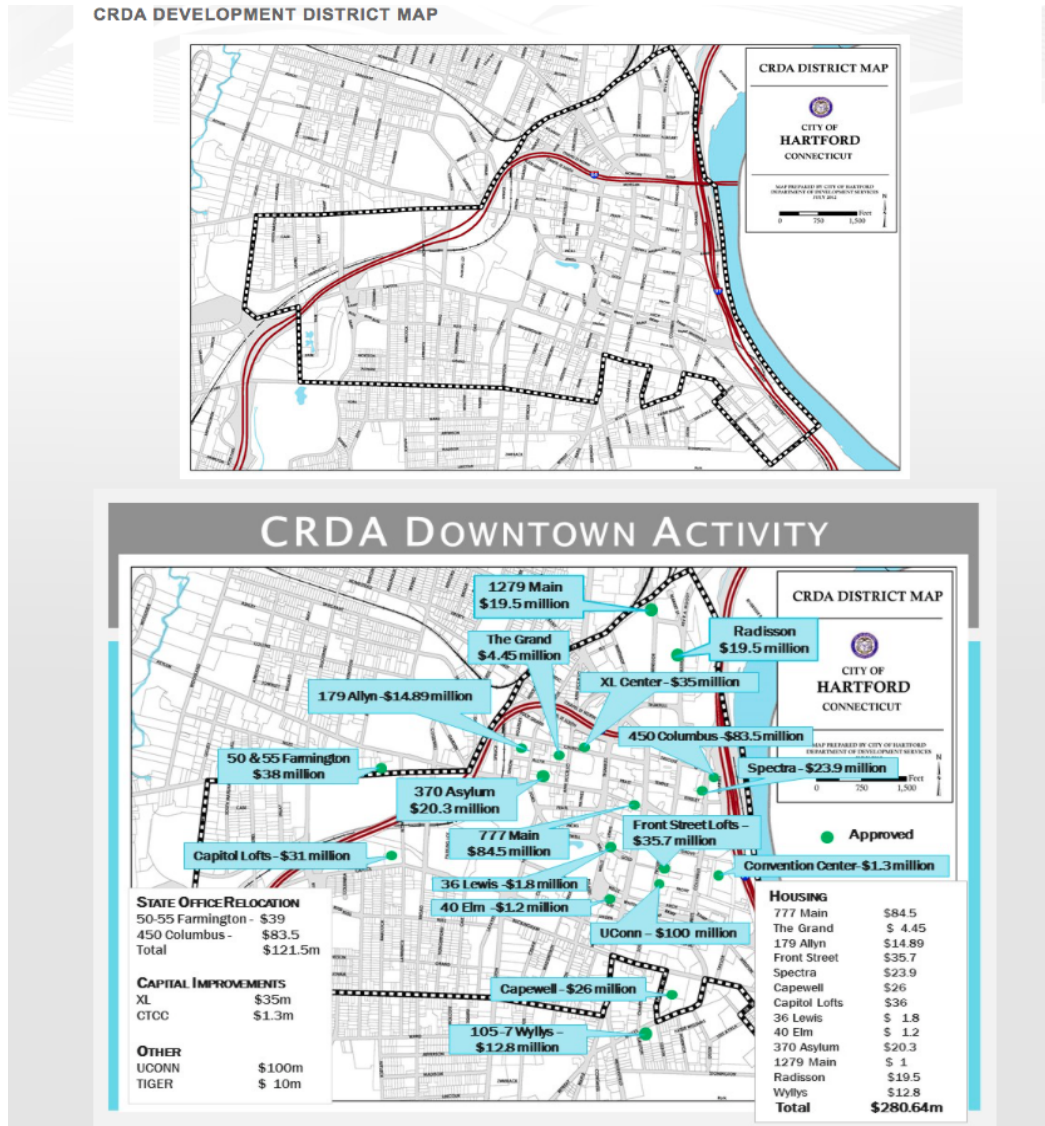
Source: Capitol Region Development Authority, 2018

Figure 1

The closures of the Simpson-Waverly and Batchelder schools directly coincided with this conflict of reconstructed schools for desegregation and downtown land redevelopment. In 2015, the active *Sheff* agreement ordered state construction funds (e.g., bonds) for the relocation of the Montessori Magnet, which was co-located at a school a mile away from Batchelder. The *Sheff* agreement ordered the State to use bonding for a new building in,

"a desirable new location…with the goal of attracting the required applicant pool to meet compliance expectations for Sheff magnet programs" (Stipulation and Proposed Order, 2015). In January 2016, the State bonding commission, which included the governor and state senator representing Batchelder's legislative district, approved $2.6 million in renovation capital funds for Montessori Magnet. This met the *Sheff* agreement to move Montessori Magnet to a new location rather than remain a program within a school (CT Office of the State Comptroller, 2019). Amidst competition for land and resources, a new site within the City of Hartford for the Montessori Magnet was not approved despite other possible locations.

With regard to Simpson-Waverly, redevelopment plans for the nearby Swift factory also emerged. The State of Connecticut bond commission loaned $4.3 million in public funds the previous year through the gubernatorial and mayoral-controlled Capitol Region Development Authority (CRDA) to rehabilitate a worn-down industrial building known as the Swift factory into a food production business outfit (CT Office of the State Comptroller, 2019). This loan added to a federal grant of $2.8 million to "spur jobs" at this building only a half mile and walking distance from Simpson-Waverly School (de la Torre, 2017). That summer, the Planning and Zoning Commissioner Chair also promoted the Swift factory as an example of New Urbanism with transit-oriented efforts and mixed-use rezoning of historical buildings as a means to economic development (Bronin, 2017). With a State bailout to avoid city bankruptcy, the governor and city mayor promoted a shift of resources to redevelopment (Rojas & Walsh, 2017). Last, a charter school proposal emerged near Simpson-Waverly (Community First School, 2017).

Conceptual Framework

School Desegregation, Closure, and Choice

There are many similarities between past school closures of the desegregation era with the educational landscape today. As Siddle Walker (2000) argued, there was a record of valued Black schools before and after the *Brown v. Board of Education* school desegregation case. Looking back at the era of school desegregation, scholars such as Bell (1983) critically examined the assumptions and implementation that favored numerical desegregation of students over equal resources, control, and input from Black communities. One aspect of this implementation was the widespread closure of Black schools (Martin, 1972). More recently, scholars such as Leslie Fenwick (2022) note the mass displacement of Black teachers when schools in the Deep South closed in response to desegregation orders. Responses to past Black school closures depended on location, time, and context (Burkholder, 2016; Erickson, 2016). Latinx schools have also faced desegregation and closures (Bowman, 2004; Hernandez & Galleta, 2016; Valencia, 1984). School desegregation efforts have made lasting impacts on communities that are still being unpacked today (Douglass, 2011; Green et al., 2019).

Many early school choice programs and school closures were in part responses to court-ordered desegregation (Orfield, 2013). As Douglass (2011) highlights, Black school closures were linked with the creation of school choice policies to evade desegregation orders in states such as Virginia. In terms of implementation, Rossell (2017) identified

three different types of magnet school formation: whole school attendance zone, program within a school, and dedicated magnet schools without particular attendance zones and deliberate enrollment. Dedicated magnets may be viewed as "more effective in achieving racial integration than other magnet structures" (Rossell, 2017, p. 199), but they also raise questions. As Rossell pointed out:

> voluntary programs typically don't have enough control over student assignment to be able to empty a school out and assign the students to desegregated locations. In addition, closing an existing school to create a dedicated magnet is politically difficult and school boards with voluntary plans are reluctant to do this. (p. 199)

Depending on implementation, this designated magnet school type can serve to displace, and civil rights efforts can transform into school choice (Arias, 2005; Mead, 2015; Martinelli, 2015; Scott, 2011). Thus, policymakers must carefully consider desegregation implementation.

In Hartford, there are a range of magnet school types with varied implementation. Some dedicated magnet schools began as entirely new programs later placed in buildings not previously schools (i.e., empty office space). Other dedicated magnet schools took buildings from closed schools. Magnet schools in Hartford are noted by scholars as a key method of voluntary desegregation in a secondary school market beyond housing (Cobb et al., 2011; Dougherty, 2017; Murnane, 2005; Johnson, 2019; Debs, 2019; Black, 2020). However, school closure and choice are interrelated in Hartford's school desegregation context.

Connecting Urban Redevelopment to School Closure

Scholars also identify connections between school closures with current and past urban redevelopment. Sociologist Teresa Irene Gonzales (2021) defines redevelopment in the United States as "the process by which cities and residents attempt to (re)imagine physical structures and available (i.e., vacant, abandoned, free) land" (p. 6). According to Gonzales, redevelopment can range in fairness from "growth-based" to "asset-based" approaches. Growth-based development focuses on increasing an area's wealth through improving the climate for local businesses and the built environment (Gonzales, 2021, p. 7). This approach can exacerbate displacement while often inviting White and/or upper-class residents (Hyra, 2015; Pearman & Greene, 2022; Pearman & Swain, 2017). On the other hand, asset-based approaches include "people- and place-based processes that focus on identifying local strengths and resources in order to transform or change local conditions to improve the quality of life for all residents (regardless of income)" (Gonzales, 2021, p. 7). As Fenwick (2013) argued, education reforms that include school closures are more about redevelopment, broadly speaking, than education. The competing demands for funds and land, which is limited in cities, invites further analysis.

Critical scholars have also raised concerns about the interaction of school closure, race, and political economy that often prioritizes growth-based urban redevelopment. As Lipman (2011) notes, "closing schools and opening 'mixed-income' schools is contributing to displacement while few low-income students of color have access to schools marketed to the middle class" (p. 83). Across fields, dispossession is defined as

taking of land, in particular, as well as related resources such as cultural heritage and social rights (Baldwin & Crane, 2020; Bensaïd, 2021; Park, 2021). School closures are often attached to policies connected to racial hierarchy through performance measures and inadequate funding for operations and facilities. School closures can thus be a form of racialized dispossession (Fine & Ruglis, 2009; Hernandez & Galleta, 2016; McFadden, 2023; Pearman & Greene, 2022; Royal & Cothorne, 2021).

School closures as dispossession can also relate to accumulation of capital. Racially segregated schools can become a source of profit (Rooks, 2017). In a context of racial capitalism, various scholars also interpret school closure as a process of "accumulation by dispossession" (Aggarwal et al., 2012; Harvey, 2005; Lipman 2020; Melamed, 2015; Pierce, 2018; Robinson, 2020), or the taking of public spaces into a new market or into private hands (Buras, 2011; Lipman, 2020; Mayorga et al., 2020; White, 2020). As Mayorga et al. (2020) explain, this process involves "assets that were either public or never owned are circumscribed into the sphere of the market and as such, become new sites for the investment and circulation of capital" (p. 5). Rather than a peaceful process, this dispossession is viewed by critical scholars as slow or structural violence (Aggarwal et al., 2012; Hernandez & Galletta, 2016). In this analysis, dispossession of public schools is also a process of enclosure of common spaces for accumulation of capital.

In the context of urban redevelopment, school closures communicate messages about who belongs in a city. Calling it a form of educational redlining, Tieken and Auldridge-Reveles (2019) note that closures can show that the "community is not worthy of investment, that its space is open for the use and exploitation of others" (p. 939). In addition, Lee and Lubienski (2017) point out that closures, "may also produce the undesirable effect of increased sociogeographic inequality in access to education" (p. 70). Scholars also identify displacement in housing and schools via redevelopment that raises questions about minoritized people's "right to the city" (Good, 2017; Grant et al., 2014; Nuamah, 2019; Scott, 2019; Syeed, 2019). In other words, school closures can provide public messages beyond educational and urban policy. By employing framing theory and the concept of accumulation by dispossession to compare responses to two cases in the Hartford context, this study examines the ways that people at Black and Latinx schools interpreted and confronted school closures.

Methods and Procedures

Comparison of School-wide and Sub-group Frames of School Closures

As a form of qualitative analysis, examining stakeholders' frames in educational reform can be a useful tool (Grbich, 2013). People make sense of events in their life through frames that help them organize these experiences (Goffman, 1974). Building on this concept, social movement scholars utilized the notion of framing as the process of meaning construction engaged by people with some degree of agency that can differ from or challenge existing frames (Goffman, 1974; Benford & Snow, 2000). Diagnostic framing includes problem identification and attributions that focus blame or responsibility on particular causes and/or culpable agents (Benford & Snow, 2000). Prognostic framing "involves the articulation of a proposed solution to the problem," a plan of attack, or

"strategies for carrying out the plan" (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 616). Framing theory can illuminate how people at these schools as a group and in subgroups, including students, families, educators, and partners, interpreted (i.e., constructed diagnostic frames) and represented their position (i.e., constructed prognostic frames) to the district's proposal to close their schools. Frame analysis is often employed by scholars of social movements as a tool to examine stakeholders' responses to challenges.

In addition to diagnostic and prognostic frames, this paper examines resonance and counterframes. Frame resonance is the way that stakeholders lend credibility and salience to their collective action frames that makes them relevant to their target audience (Benford & Snow, 2000). In other words, this term refers to degrees in which a frame is effective and resonates with the audience for which the frame is intended. Credibility includes issues of consistency, empirical knowledge, and stakeholder position or status (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 619). In addition, salience refers to centrality, experiential commensurability, and narrative fidelity (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 622). The degree of resonance can vary based on salience of frames that range from broader themes of rights and everyday experiences to specific cultural references. The point is to assess the degree to which frames connect to the people intended to be mobilized or be moved by the mobilization. Last, counterframes can also be used to contest previous understandings or ideas about an issue. For Benford and Snow (2000), counterframes meant, "refutations of the logic or efficacy of solutions advocated by opponents as well as a rationale for its own remedies" (p. 617). These counterframes are often embedded in prognostic frames and can be in response to the people in power being challenged.

As part of a broader case study, this paper compares how stakeholders responded to two cases of school closure within the same city. Case studies investigate contemporary phenomenon "within a real world context" (Yin, 2018, p. 15). In addition, case studies attempt to triangulate "multiple sources of evidence" to better understand these school closures (Yin, 2018, p. 14). These two schools are cases of "organizations with multiple stakeholders" in the same district and facing different types of closure (Deeds & Pattillo, 2015). Rather than district-level analysis, this paper examines responses to closure at the school level (Diem, 2017; Diem et al., 2018; Frankenberg et al., 2017; Holme & Finnegan, 2018; McDermott et al., 2015). This paper focuses on stakeholder framing at two school cases and a context of redevelopment.

Data Collection, Participants, and Limitations

This analysis will utilize hearing testimonies, existing sources of school data, and contextual information about redevelopment. The author viewed and transcribed testimony by all stakeholders at school-based hearings related to the proposed closure of the two schools. This testimony is publicly available for viewing and download on YouTube. Existing materials included descriptive data on the State of Connecticut's public *Edsight* data portal that provided achievement and demographic data for the schools. This descriptive data situated each school along the lines of achievement, race, class, and formal special education and bilingual designations of students at these schools. Redevelopment evidence focused on written accounts of urban planning, Connecticut state court documents, and state bonding commission data.

To gather school stakeholder responses to the closure proposals, the author viewed the video footage of the school-based public hearings at each school. This first viewing also served as a preliminary step to draft an initial list of broad issues at the hearing related to stakeholders framing of school closure. The author also transcribed public hearing testimony (most in English, but some in Spanish) by downloading and revising a transcript provided by *YouTube* transcription. Finally, the author re-read transcripts to identify framing categories expressed by key stakeholders and found in related literature to create a set of deductive codes (Good, 2017; Ewing, 2018). These categories were used to analyze all comments at the two hearings. Using NVivo 14 analysis software, framing categories, or codes, were compared by frequency for each school stakeholder group and roles within the group.

Positionality

In terms of positionality, the author experienced both insider and outsider positions that are a key component of an ethnographic toolkit (Reyes, 2018). This ethnographic toolkit involves researchers' characteristics including social capital and background that, "shapes field access, field dynamics, and data analysis" (Reyes, 2018, p. 221). The author served as one of four elected members of the Hartford Board of Education from January 2010 to December 2017. The Board had a total of nine board members including five mayoral appointees. The hearings analyzed in this study and the subsequent vote to close these schools occurred after the author's exit from the Board. Despite being Latino like many of stakeholders, the author's educational, gender, racial, and class background differed compared to many students and families that testified at the school hearings. Following the school closure announcements, the author also worked with families at Batchelder to submit a formal state complaint contesting the legality of proposed closure after these hearings and Board vote (Parents for Batchelder, 2018). This position assists the author's ethnographic toolkit through knowledge of policy and context.

Setting

In 2018, the school-based hearings took place on January 16 and 22 for Simpson-Waverly and Batchelder, respectively. School-based hearings were official district meetings. According to district policy, each school proposed for closure would have two hearings at the school and have a feasibility study for each school (Hartford Public Schools, 2004). However, there was also a school redesign and repurposing policy approved by the Board years later based on NCLB and internal, test-based accountability ratings (Hartford Public Schools, 2007). These school closure policies conflicted. In practice, an external vendor prepared a district, not school-based, closure study and the district held only one hearing at each school proposed for closure along with one larger district-wide hearing. At the Batchelder school-based hearing, 72 stakeholders testified. At the Simpson-Waverly school-based hearing, 18 stakeholders testified (See Table 1).

Table 1
School-Based Closure Hearing Participation

Participants/Stakeholders	Simpson-Waverly School	Batchelder School
Parent/Guardian	6	14
Student (includes alumni)	0	26
Teacher/Staff	3	18
Community resident	0	2
Partner Organization	9	7
Elected Official	0	2
Political Committee Member	0	3
Total	18	72

School Accountability Ratings and Demographics

These schools had very different characteristics according to accountability ratings and demographics. Simpson-Waverly, was labeled as a five out of five and in the lowest "turnaround" category in the state accountability system. By 2017, the school was 51 percent Black (129 students) and 49 percent Latinx (113 students) out of 251 total students. Nearly a quarter of students were identified as having a disability (22 percent), 14 percent identified as officially bilingual, and 92 percent eligible for free meals. In terms of state achievement ratings, the Batchelder school was average to above average in the district. In years prior to proposed closure (2015–2016 and 2016–2017), the Connecticut State Department of Education (CT SDE) rated Batchelder a four out of five and in the "focus" category for English Language Arts (CT SDE, 2017, 2018). By 2018, Batchelder had 77 percent Latinx (304 students) and 19 percent Black enrollment (76 students). At Batchelder, more than a quarter (26 percent) of the school identified as officially bilingual (e.g., English Learner) and 15 percent identified as students with a disability. Finally, 85 percent of students were eligible for free meals (CT SDE, 2022). With district-controlled enrollment, Batchelder and Simpson-Waverly had nearly all Hartford residents as students. In comparison, the Montessori Magnet had 307 students and was given a three-out-of-five accountability rating from 2017 to 2018. Montessori Magnet had half (50 percent) Latinx students and half Hartford residents. At the Montessori Magnet, 12 percent of students were considered officially bilingual (e.g., English Learner) and seven percent identified as students with disability.

Findings

Facing the closure of Batchelder and Simpson-Waverly, stakeholders in each school framed their responses in ways connected to the form of closure and how they identified at the schools in the context of their lives, district, and city. There were key similarities and differences. First, people that testified at the Simpson-Waverly hearing used

diagnostic framing of the problem as one of school closure of the building as a place (13 responses). People that testified at the Batchelder hearing provided diagnostic framing as one of closure (38 responses) or replacement and displacement (31 responses). Second, in terms of frame resonance to connect with the mostly unelected, mayoral-appointed school board, stakeholders at Simpson-Waverly explained the school as one of family (7 responses) and community (6 responses), while Batchelder stakeholders emphasized school being a home (19 responses), family (18 responses), or a choice (12 responses). Simpson-Waverly stakeholders also offered frame resonance through identity of the people at the school as community and Batchelder identified as a group of deserving people. Last, Simpson-Waverly and Batchelder stakeholders had prognostic framing of no closure (10 responses; 29 responses), but stakeholders at the latter proposed delay (10 responses) or reconsidering the vote (15 responses). Nearly all stakeholders opposed closure.

Finding 1: Different Diagnostic Framing of Problem

At Simpson-Waverly, the stakeholders' most frequent diagnostic framing of the problem was school closure and shut down of the building (13 responses). At the hearing, one Simpson-Waverly parent stated, "I don't see how any good is gonna come from closing this school." Another parent connected the families to educators by stating that, "closing a school is gonna be not only detrimental to the children, but to the staff here as well." Another parent remarked that the closure "will be very devastating to us." Three teachers also offered diagnostic framing of the problem as one of building closure. One teacher claimed that "a closing of this school will leave an enormous void." Another teacher diagnosed the problem as limited resources. They stated:

> money for classroom supplies has been dwindling significantly over the years. Requests for resources can often go unheard. Yet, our educators are here every day working with their students and families to make a difference in the lives of children.

These comments identified the toll of the proposed building closure. But they also made it clear that they understood the problem as the building closure itself rather than some other issue identified by administration (e.g., achievement, facilities, enrollment). This diagnostic framing helped shift problem definition and culpability to outside instead of inside the school.

At Batchelder, stakeholders used diagnostic framing of the problem as one of both closure and replacement or displacement instead of permanent school building closure. Diagnostic codes of school building closure had the highest frequency (38 responses). The second most frequent diagnostic framing was of replacement and displacement (31 responses) along with a diagnosis of the school being taken away (11 responses). In addition to Shirley Aponte, who was a Puerto Rican mother featured at the beginning of this article, many parents framed the problem this way. In Spanish, a Latina mother framed the problem at the hearing as *"desemplazar a esta escuela por otra."* In translation, this parent saw the problem as displacing this school for another. Both diagnosing and

contesting this problem, one Batchelder parent stated, "please don't kick them out, don't let them replace our kids."

Educators also identified the problem as either closure and/or replacement. One teacher noted that plans were already being made to move teachers into positions at other schools before a board vote. Another teacher noted a mismatch in receiving schools that would lose music and art rooms to fit displaced students from Batchelder. Critically, another teacher also framed the issue as one of displacement in order to satisfy school desegregation goals. She stated,

> You aren't closing our building, you are displacing our children, our parents, and staff. You're replacing them with a Montessori magnet. You're replacing 437 neighborhood students with approximately only 250 Montessori students in an effort to lure more suburban students as you are already out of compliance with the *Sheff versus O'Neill.*

This teacher framed the problem as displacement of students and dispossession of the building for school desegregation. Commandeering their school for desegregation goals was the problem.

Importantly, a number of students at Batchelder also participated in the hearings. Out of the 26 current and former students, all opposed the closure of the building. Many students noted the problem as one of closure that would interrupt their education and relationships. As one student noted, "I don't want the school to close because I was here since kindergarten and I won't be able to see my teachers if this school is closed." Another student acknowledged having attended multiple schools with Batchelder being "the most good school." Several students also provided diagnostic framing of the school being taken away. As one student stated, "I don't understand the politics of why this is getting taken away from us." Simpson-Waverly students attended but did not testify at the school hearing.

Finding 2: Difference in Frame Resonance and Identity

Despite most speakers identifying as families or parents, there were key differences in frame resonance by this category at each school. At Simpson-Waverly, stakeholders offered two key frame resonance concepts of school as a family (7 responses) and community (6 responses). One parent connected both frames and demanded, "I hope you guys sit and really listen to this community because this is not only community, this is a family. And we care about the kids. That comes first." Many stakeholders offered the frame of school as a family, community, or a combination. For some, school was a home that was the backbone of the area and a safe haven. Community and safety concerns resembled Black family responses to school closures in cities like Chicago (de la Torre et al., 2015). This frame resonance connected to everyday experiences to make shared meaning, or experiential commensurability (Benford & Snow, 2000).

In addition to families, educators and partners also framed the school as a community. One Black male teacher drove thirty to forty-five minutes each day from New Haven to work at Simpson-Waverly in Hartford and found it was "really a strong structured group here from the families to the students." Community partners including a church choir,

dance, and tutoring program participants and leader also drew on the resonance frame of school as a community (four responses). For many, closing or shutting the Simpson-Waverly building would be a mistake and would mean "severing the bonds these children have formed with each other and dissolving the adhesive that connects the surrounding community." Another parent also explained, "to close our community. It's taking our family away." This framing challenged district claims about closure.

This connection was also made by two Black women that led the Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO). As a Black leader, Sharonda James, stated, "the PTO which is the parent-teacher organization of Simpson-Waverly school works very closely with our principal, staff, and students. We have a bond in our family." For James, this community was like a family or group of people that worked together where,

> We spend a lot of time at our school putting together events, and (uses tissue to dry tears in eye) fun things for the kids to enjoy such as bake sales, arts and crafts, family dinners, movie nights, bingo nights, staff breakfasts, Harvest Fest, talent show, end of school year field trip, and much more.

Their identity in this frame resonance as community members that were a family was prominent. In fact, the Hartford Federation of Teachers president, partner university teaching programs students and professors, and other program leaders also spoke on behalf of the schools in opposition to closure. In addition, Batchelder speakers also included at least three elected officials that represented the city and legislative district.

At Batchelder, many families and educators identified as a deserving group. Like Simpson-Waverly families, Batchelder stakeholders also drew on resonance frames of school as a home, family, or choice. But the resonance frame of deservingness was prominent. Without reference to any racial group or identity, this group was worthy and deserved the school. This identification weaved together the idea of school as a home, family, and choice with being a group worth staying in the school building. As one parent, Liliana Medina, argued, "our kids deserve this school because our kids matter. Please don't kick them out, don't let them replace our kids. They deserve this school. They deserve their school because this is their school. Their second home." Related to this frame resonance, several people reformulated the Batchelder school's name to the phrase, "We are a batch worth keeping!"

While one parent at Simpson-Waverly suggested that their family would choose another school if it closed, the frame resonance of school as a choice was more frequent at Batchelder. For families within the broader Batchelder group of respondents, there were seven responses of school as a choice and seven responses as a home. As one parent noted, the family purchased his home "so that he can attend Batchelder." Indeed, several parents noted buying a home in the neighborhood or selecting the school as part of a choice process. Some parents also called Batchelder school their second home. The closure of this second home could amount to a particular resource loss related to their owned home or dwelling. In addition, there were six unique responses of the school as a family and four responses as a place of safety. School was a choice, home, family, or place of safety at both buildings. But more Latinx families at Batchelder revealed a socioeconomic position of working-class homeowners.

The frame resonance with ideas of collective identity were different at Simpson-Waverly. The frame resonance with an identity of being worthy and deserving of a school was rare at Simpson-Waverly. However, three stakeholders at the Simpson-Waverly school—a college professor, a volunteer visitor, and a parent that had left and recently returned to the community—used the ideas of worth and deservingness at Simpson-Waverly. Deservingness frame resonance may be related to collective identity along lines of race, class, gender, or other group affiliation (Negrón-Gonzalez, 2015; Patel, 2015; Verhey, 2017). The frequency at Batchelder and not Simpson-Waverly suggested a differing interpretation due to difference in socioeconomic status.

Finding 3: Keep Schools Open as the Main Prognostic Framing, with Differences

Nearly all stakeholders responding at these hearings wanted to keep their quality school open, but their counter- and prognostic framing was slightly different across schools. While both Simpson-Waverly and Batchelder stakeholders had prognostic framing of no school closure (10 responses from 11 stakeholders; 29 responses from 50 stakeholders), stakeholders at the latter offered ideas of delaying (10 responses from 50 stakeholders) or reconsidering the plan (15 responses from 50 respondents). Counterframes also connected to their definitions of quality. Batchelder stakeholders linked quality with their frame salience along lines of collective identity of deservingness, while Simpson-Waverly connected to community.

At Simpson-Waverly, parents provided counterframes of the school as quality. As a quality school, one Latina parent noted her children ranged from, "two in college, two in high school, high honor, very active in every sport." Another parent also noted that the school, "Put a lot into him. He thrives. Connecticut tests, he does very well on." And another parent noted, "Simpson-Waverly is creating future." Unlike frames used by families contesting school closures in other cities interacting with urban redevelopment, these comments suggested a different moment of time, context, and way of understanding (Moll et al., 1992). They noted the quality and contested negative views about the school.

One key comment coincided with material support of families at Simpson-Waverly as a key part of quality for schools. Among the Parent Teacher Association (PTO) leadership, key supports were mentioned such as the location related to family access to walk to the school and the additional programming for student learning and support. For instance, PTO Secretary Sharonda James noted that after-school and summer programs were critical because "many of our parents utilize [them] because they work late and cannot afford childcare." Closure of Simpson-Waverly could jeopardize family and economic well-being by ending access to various childcare programs. An open Simpson-Waverly supported learning and broader well-being of the community.

In addition to framing the school around the concept of the future, many offered prognostic frames of not closing the school because of future actions. As parent Sharonda James stated, "Simpson Waverly is not just a building, it's home to us. And closing our school would be a devastation to our neighborhood, families, and staff, but most of all our students." This comment included prognostic framing of keeping this school building open. In more rallying tones, some families and community members explained they would fight for the school. For instance, PTO President Sabrina Smith stated, "We're here, we're

fighting, we're not gonna let this end here tonight. I'm gonna fight for my, for my school." Another parent prognostic frame was to find other solutions. Combining diagnostic with prognostic framing, they stated, "there's other options besides it's just closing a school where these kids have built relationships." Despite this framing, alternatives were unclear, next steps undefined, and elite political support invisible.

At Batchelder, the prognostic frame of keeping the school open to the current stakeholders also connected to the counterframe of school quality. Aspects of a quality school meant a place where students' needs were met, treated as individuals in caring relationships, and safe. Contrary to the idea of this school as a failure, one parent noted, "this school has definitely contributed to my kids' success." This counterframe about school quality also included ideas of "goodness of fit" and "caring" relationships made by Latinx parents in other contexts (Valencia, 2012; Valenzuela, 1999). As one parent noted, "I'm speaking to everybody because you're not just messing up. You're messing up jobs for these teachers, you're messing up families. You are messing up the rapport that these children have built with these teachers." In other words, closing would interrupt this quality created by stakeholders at the school. The prognostic frame of keeping the school open as it currently stood drew on this resonance framing to explain the value of these schools to the Board of Education with an explicit policy of school closure based on quality. However, this prognostic and resonance framing did not show a clear recognition of all the culpable agents beyond the school board (Benford & Snow, 2000).

Some parents combined prognostic frames keeping school open with frame resonance ideas of worthy and deserving identity to show the school did not merit closure or replacement by a magnet school. For example, using gender-specific language, Lilliana Medina identified as, "a mother who cares deeply about my kids' education." Standing "strong" and "from the bottom of her heart," she urged the Board not to close the school by connecting to ideas of deservingness. Lilliana combined the prognostic framing of saving Batchelder with a diagnostic frame of not replacing because their children deserved it. Medina ended comments with, "I ask you to vote no to closing this school and save Batchelder please because our kids are worth it."

A final key difference in the prognostic framing was from educators at Batchelder. While families and students there pushed the prognostic frame of not closing the school, educators offered the combination of quality counterframe and deservingness identity into practice. Educators offered prognostic framing of reconsider/think twice (seven responses), separate schools (six responses), and delay the vote (six responses). One educator reflected on the poor past of state takeover and privatization in the 1990s and 2000s. Another educator stated,

> If your true motive is to serve the needs of the most vulnerable and deserving, you will carefully consider this information and determine that closing Batchelder school is not the appropriate decision.

Based on past policy and knowledge, the educators offered a prognostic frame to respond to their school individually rather than the whole district's issues. As a quality school in terms of district accountability and family perspectives, Batchelder should stay open. As one educator proposed, "we recommend that when you vote tomorrow, and hopefully

postpone that vote, you vote on individual schools, rather than as a whole package." This counterframe of school quality and frame resonance meant to address empirical credibility as educators with knowledge of test-based accountability and school ratings used to close schools.

The above recommendation by several educators at the mostly Latinx Batchelder was not an explicitly racist argument to leave the mostly Black Simpson-Waverly school behind to be closed. Voting on each school closure separately based on school-level ratings was how the school redesign policy was written. As state ratings suggested, Batchelder was a higher "focus" and Simpson-Waverly a lower "turnaround" category (CT SDE, 2018). For these educators, displacing Batchelder and replacing it with Montessori Magnet violated the district's racialized school closure policy targeting low-achieving schools to be intervened, redesigned, or replaced.

Discussion

Stakeholder responses to the proposed closures of the Batchelder and Simpson-Waverly schools add to our understanding of school closure policies and practices. The stakeholders at Simpson-Waverly responded with diagnostic framing as school closure that was shutting a building. Their frame resonance and collective identity of the school as a community that provided resources to learn, as well as events, safety, and childcare that may not be easily found in other schools or spaces in the city or region. Batchelder stakeholders' diagnostic framing, or problem identification, was one of a particular type of closure that kept the building open while displacing the people there and replacing them with a nearby interdistrict magnet school with lottery-based and regional enrollment. Stakeholders provided a frame resonance and collective identity as a deserving group worth keeping in the building rather than replacement by a numerically desegregated magnet school. These frames and collective identities contrasted with past Puerto Rican and Black civil rights and identity politics in Hartford and beyond (Cruz, 1998; *Sheff et al. v. O'Neill*, 1989; Ramos-Zayas, 2004). This shift invites further investigation.

Stakeholders' prognosis framing also suggests the need for educators' nuanced analysis of stakeholder responses for better alternatives. As Ewing and Green (2022) note, leaders must offer a "preemptive lens" to school closures to ensure that districts find alternatives, partner with community members to plan for effects of a permanent closure, and/or collaborate with educators to "buffer" negative impacts of school closures (p. 63). In addition, Royal and Cothorne (2021) call for a moratorium on school closures as prudent in absence of equitable resources, analyses of school enrollment, and democratic processes. In these cases, stakeholders provided alternatives to closure such as not closing them, redesigning, co-locating schools, and simply more time for planning. Yet, the district voted to close these schools with little modification. Interpreting school stakeholder diagnostic framing and understanding their collective identities in the policy context may also help find better alternatives to school closure.

In addition, there may be space for rethinking school closure and related policies. Policies of market-oriented, test-based accountability to keep schools open or closed particularly connected to the educator understanding of which school deserved to stay open in this study (Aarons, 2009; Hartford Public Schools, 2007, 2008; Pappano, 2010). Framing of people as deserving (or not) in policy debates (e.g., welfare) may connect to

beliefs of anti-Blackness and/or placement within racial capitalism (Bridges, 2011). In other words, people in particular types of schools as well as higher socioeconomic or racial hierarchies may identify as deserving more often (Negrón-Gonzalez, 2015; Patel, 2015; Rodriguez, 2018; Verhey, 2017; White, 2020). As Nuamah concludes (2023), closures can also further separate people from democracy. Rather than improvement, school closures may exacerbate existing inequality in education.

Thus, policymakers must better contend with the relationship between school closures and contexts, including the political economy of land redevelopment. Unlike other cities where stakeholders and scholars note connections between school closures and urban redevelopment, these stakeholders' responses at these hearings did not publicly identify this interaction (Drake Rodriguez, 2023; Makris & Brown, 2020; Syeed, 2019). At a moment of economic instability, there was a shift of public resources away from state budgets and borrowing for public schools to downtown redevelopment including a baseball stadium, more subsidized private luxury housing, and new spending on police equipment (Cotto & Mahoney, 2020; Baker et al., 2021; Connecticut Office of the State Comptroller, 2019). In the same year, three Hartford library branches also faced closure (NBC Connecticut, 2017). Perhaps because of timing or physical distance from downtown Hartford, stakeholders did not provide diagnostic frames of closures related to redevelopment.

In conclusion, these school closures were part of a process of accumulation by dispossession. The mayoral diagnostic framing of school closure was about consolidation for better resource allocation. However, both groups of stakeholders did offer diagnostic framing of closures as taking away various resources that resembled home, family, and safety. These closures dispossessed educators, students, and families and shifted both public land and resources for the use of the selective Montessori Magnet and publicly subsidized, downtown redevelopment for accumulation of financial, social, and cultural capital. The State then forced families to choose other schools, which often puts an added burden on female family members (André-Bechely, 2005; Cowhy et al., 2023). Like many desegregation efforts, this shows a paradox in the State's implementation through legally sanctioned school choice and closure, or dispossession (Cotto, 2018; 2023; Morris & Parker, 2019). A paradox also exists with a redevelopment project that seeks to attract people to the city rather than sustain current residents.

School closure displaced and dispossessed key resources from many stakeholders at both schools. The district closed the Simpson-Waverly school building that sits empty as of this writing. But the State and district gave the Batchelder building on the city/suburban municipal line to an interdistrict magnet school to, in theory, attract and enroll more non-Black and non-Latinx students to meet *Sheff* desegregation goals. In a context of racial capitalism, this form of school closure took away resources from an open-enrollment school, then shifted land and resources towards capital accumulation to a lottery-based magnet school and downtown land redevelopment meant to build housing to attract a professional class to the city. This process can be identified as State-guided desegregation by dispossession. Moving forward, the long-term impact on children's learning, family well-being, and communities as a result of this process of dispossession must be further interrogated. More broadly, school closure must be reframed.

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