

“We Are the Forgotten of the Forgottens”: The Effects of Charter School Reform on Public School Teachers

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In this article, Erika Kitzmiller analyzes the reactions of teachers to district officials’ decision to close their traditionally managed public school and reopen it as a privately managed charter school. While many scholars have examined the impact of this reform on communities, families, and youth, little attention has been paid to the effects of charter school reform on the public school teachers who worked in these schools. Here Kitzmiller considers one of the key but largely overlooked stakeholders in charter school reform: public school teachers.

Keywords: charter schools, urban education, teacher morale, school turnaround, teacher response

On a dreary afternoon in the middle of February, the assistant principal of Pine Ridge Middle School made an impromptu decision.¹ At 2:50 P.M., only minutes before the school day ended, she switched on the schoolwide public announcement system and told the entire school community that district officials had decided to turn Pine Ridge Middle School, a traditionally managed public school, into a privately operated charter school. With tears streaming down her cheek, she instructed teachers to check their mailboxes for a letter that detailed their rights as union employees. The school dismissal bell rang. Pine Ridge students, many of whom had no understanding of the implications of this announcement, spilled out of the building and made their way home. Some teachers gathered in the hallways to comfort one another. Others rushed to their mailboxes. While they did not yet know all the details, it

was official: Pine Ridge Middle School was one of several public schools in the district slated for charter school reform.

In recent years, school districts across the nation have engaged in turn-around reforms that involve converting traditional public schools into privately managed charter school organizations. Behind this move is the belief that charter schools expand choice and competition among schools, which, in theory, should improve education outcomes (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Hill, 2010). Families from various racial and class categories have expressed strong support for charter schools and school choice policies (Cheng & Peterson, 2017; Romero, 2019). Republican voters tend to support charter schools more than Democrats, but data indicate strong and growing support among Black, Latinx, and millennial Democrats (Barnum, 2019a; Barone, Laurens, & Mullan-Penney, 2019; Cheng et al., 2018). And both Republican and Democratic administrations have advocated for the expansion of charter schools, particularly in urban school districts (Berkshire, 2019; NCES, 2016; Payne & Knowles, 2009; Scott, 2011).

Charter school reforms are often built on an ethos of “no excuses,” the idea that poverty is not a barrier to academic achievement. This approach maintains that implementing a new schooling approach with more flexibility, standards, and accountability will increase education outcomes (Oberfield, 2016). Some researchers contend that charter schools often outperform their district-run counterparts (Betts & Tang, 2011; Cremata et al., 2013; Denice, 2014). Others critique charter school reforms for failing to make significant improvements in outcomes, particularly in communities that serve poor, Black, and Latinx youth (David et al., 2006; Henig, 2008; Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010; Lubienski, Weitzel, & Lubienski, 2009; Zimmer et al., 2008). Scholars also note that these reform efforts often negate or downplay the effects of poverty and inequality on education outcomes (Noguera & Wells, 2011) and often fracture communities, pitting families, teachers, and students against one another as they compete for limited resources (Apple, 2013; Buras, 2014; Cucchiara, 2013; Fabricant & Fine, 2012; Lipman, 2013). Others have noted the devastating effects on families and communities when charter schools close (Karaxha, 2013; Paino et al., 2014). With charter school reforms’ disproportionate effect on poor, majority-Black and majority-Latinx schools (Lipman & Haines, 2007; Scott, 2011), evidence suggests that charter school expansion has intensified racial segregation (Frankenberg et al., 2010; Miron et al., 2010; Wells et al., 2019). The efficacy of charter schools remains a highly contested and contentious debate among communities, practitioners, researchers, and policy makers.

One of the key distinctions between traditionally managed public schools and privately managed charter schools is the way that these institutions hire and manage their teachers. These distinctions are particularly evident in urban school districts. Payne and Knowles (2009) assert that the ability to hire

and fire teachers allows charter schools greater flexibility with staffing. Since charter schools are typically free from union regulations, principals are generally responsible for hiring and firing teachers. Most research supports the idea that school leaders should hire teachers who fit the school’s culture and mission (Engel & Curran, 2016; Heneman & Judge, 2008; Jabbar, 2018; Laura, 2018; Minckler, 2014). However, researchers have raised concerns that charter schools are more likely to hire less experienced teachers, pay lower salaries, require longer hours, and offer fewer job protections and benefits. Scholars argue that these factors contribute to lower job satisfaction among charter school teachers compared to union-protected public school teachers (Bodine et al., 2008; Farinde-Wu & Fitchett, 2018; Ni, 2017; Roch & Sai, 2017; Torres, 2016).

Most of the current research about charter school reform, however, focuses on its effects on students but downplays the effects on teachers, particularly as the reform process unfolds (Barnum, 2019b; Gawlik, 2012; Gilraine, Petronijevic, & Singleton, 2019). This study is among the first to examine the challenges that one underresourced public school’s teachers faced and their reactions to the charter school reform.

Pine Ridge Community and Middle School

Pine Ridge is one of Philadelphia’s poorest neighborhoods. In 2016, the proportion of census blocks in the area with households that made less than \$25,000 ranged from 33 percent to 80 percent (Social Explorer, 2018). Despite its challenges, the community is currently undergoing a small but significant demographic shift. Microbreweries, urban nurseries, and pilates studios serve the small but growing population of white professionals who are steadily moving into the area. But while Pine Ridge’s southern border marks a clear class distinction between the gentrified and the working-class communities, the neighborhood’s main thoroughfare, Chapman Avenue, marks a clear racial divide. One administrator referred to Chapman Avenue as “the Berlin Wall.” The census blocks on the east side of Chapman are 80–100 percent white. East side residents form a white, mostly Irish enclave of single-family row homes with shamrock lawn ornaments. (One row home has a large Confederate flag painted on its brick facade.) The census blocks on the west side are 60–80 percent Latinx and 30–40 percent Black. Every block on the west side contains abandoned homes with plywood doors and windows to prevent trespassing. These abandoned homes on the west side of Chapman Avenue are a constant reminder of the level of poverty, neglect, and disinvestment in the community that Pine Ridge serves.

Built in the early 1920s, Pine Ridge Middle School is located one block west of Chapman Avenue. The teachers, who represent a range of racial and class backgrounds, understand that their students, who are predominately Black

and Latinx, are not welcomed on the east side of Chapman Avenue. Diane Hill, a white Pine Ridge teacher who grew up in the white section of the community, recalled taking her students to the local public library and the librarian telling her that she should not bring her students to the library in the future. According to Hill, the librarian, tapping into the pervasive racism in the area, just thought that Pine Ridge students “were just too loud and too big for their little library.”

The middle school had struggled for decades. The year before it became a charter, Pine Ridge enrolled approximately 800 students: 36 percent Black, 53 percent Latinx, 8 percent white, and less than 2 percent Asian and/or multiracial. More than 20 percent of the students received special education services; nearly 20 percent participated in an English language learner program. Pine Ridge had about 150 serious disciplinary incidents in that year and about 50 reported assaults on teachers and students. The majority of students scored in the below basic range on state standardized tests in math and reading in the years leading up to the school district’s decision to turn Pine Ridge over to a charter organization.

Pine Ridge’s challenges made the institution a natural target for charter reform. Under the Bush and Obama administrations, Philadelphia school district officials instituted several districtwide initiatives to identify, reform, and sometimes close and outsource low-performing or underutilized public schools (Bach, McWilliams, & Simon, 2019; Bierbaum, 2018; Bross, Harris, & Liu, 2016; Good, 2017; McWilliams, 2019; McWilliams & Kitzmiller, 2019; Morel & Nuamah, 2019; Nuamah, 2017). School officials replaced the struggling schools with either traditionally managed public schools under strict district management structures or with privately managed charter schools free from oversight (Gold, Bulkley, & Christman, 2010; Gold, Christman, & Herold, 2007; Lytle, 2013). District officials selected Pine Ridge as one of the many traditional public schools targeted for charter school reform.

Once the school district announced its intention to close the school, charter organizations had the opportunity to bid on it, submitting proposals that detailed how they planned to operate and turn the school around. Those selected as finalists presented their proposals to the school community. Following a period of deliberation during March and April, a small district-appointed school committee, comprised of mostly white community members and school families, voted on the organization they wanted to operate the school. Critics argued that the reform timeline was too rapid for thoughtful feedback and planning. A counterargument was that low-income students and families had suffered long enough in low-performing schools, and thus they had to act quickly (McWilliams, 2019; McWilliams & Kitzmiller, 2019).

Officials in the selected charter organization encouraged Pine Ridge teachers to apply for positions in the new school. But even though the teachers had a range of ideas about the reform, none of them applied for a position in the charter school. In this article I seek to understand why this was the case.

Methodology

My fieldwork in Pine Ridge took place across two consecutive years—during the first year of my research the school district hired a new principal to turn around the public school and then decided to close the institution; in the second year Pine Ridge Middle School reopened under a new charter management organization. During these years I visited the school regularly, spending at least one day a week in the school building observing team meetings and classroom instruction and interviewing teachers and students.

I obtained access to Pine Ridge Middle School first through the new principal, Chris Morris, with whom I had worked in a variety of education settings; then the new charter organization granted me permission to conduct research. Morris allowed me in the school before the district announced the charter reform. I initially planned to study Morris’ practice as he tried to turn around Pine Ridge. But when the district announced the charter school reform, I shifted the focus of my study to examine how this reform affected the school community. Here I focus on the first year of my research, when teachers struggled with the decision to turn their public school into a charter school, to examine that decision’s effects on the teachers, a largely overlooked but critical component of the reform. I consider the following questions:

- What challenges did teachers face before the school district announced its decision to close the public school and turn it over to a private charter organization?
- What were the teachers’ reactions to the school district’s decision to close Pine Ridge Middle School?
- What factors influenced their decision to leave Pine Ridge once it became a charter school?

I recorded over 200 hours of field notes and conducted 25 semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with teachers about the reform process. Initially I coded the field notes for emergent themes and used those themes to construct my interview protocol, but when I realized that my study focus had shifted, I put a memo in teacher mailboxes that outlined the aims of my revised study and asked for volunteers to participate. Eleven teachers volunteered. After I secured their interviews, I asked those 11 teachers to reach out to their colleagues to see who else might be willing to be interviewed. Once I reached 25 teachers a few weeks before the school year ended, I stopped participant recruitment. The 25 teachers in the sample represented a range of experience levels, racial backgrounds, and gender identities and reflected the teacher population at the school.

I conducted the interviews at mutually convenient times. I did not compensate teachers for their time. In the interviews I sought to examine the perspectives that teachers had about the culture of the school before the reform, their reactions to the reform decision, and the factors that influenced their

decisions to leave the school and apply for positions in other public schools. I audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim all teacher interviews. Once the interviews were transcribed, my research assistants and I double blind-coded each interview to identify themes that emerged from the data (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). The primary themes that emerged included the teachers' commitment to the school, their frustrations with district and charter officials, and their refusal to interview for new positions with the charter organization. To guarantee participant confidentiality throughout the study and in any subsequent publications, I use pseudonyms throughout this article.

As both a graduate of a traditional public school and a former traditional public school teacher, I have always been skeptical of the charter school movement. Even though I have numerous colleagues who are committed charter school educators and advocates, I have concerns about the loss of democratic governance and accountability as school districts expand privately operated schools. In the state and district where Pine Ridge is located, evidence suggests that these concerns are warranted. Under the current state funding mechanism, the Pine Ridge school district has lost millions of public school dollars due to the expansion of charter schools (Griffith & Millard, 2015).

Charter school leaders in the state and district have been convicted of mishandling public dollars, which raises questions about accountability measures in a school district perennially strapped for public funding (Gross, 2011; Jason, 2017). Beyond funding concerns, evidence suggests that charter schools often have higher suspension rates (Davidson, 2017; Larkin, 2019; US Government Accountability Office, 2018), fewer special education students (Miron, 2014; Rhim & Kothari, 2018; Winters, 2015), and fewer English language learners (Vaznis, 2016; Winters, 2014). No doubt the practices could be amended for a more just and transparent system of charter schools, but, based on what I witnessed, this has rarely, if ever, occurred in Pennsylvania or Philadelphia. And so while I, as an educational researcher and Philadelphia resident, recognized the challenges at Pine Ridge Middle School, which I saw first-hand while conducting research, I did not fully support the decision to turn another Philadelphia public school over to a charter organization.

I was careful not to share these perspectives with the teachers I interviewed. But my positions as a former public school teacher and as a white female researcher may have influenced the ways teachers interacted with me during their interviews, as well as how I coded and analyzed the data. My positions afforded me several benefits. Teachers understood that I was committed as a researcher to strengthening the public school system in Philadelphia, and so they willingly shared their hopes and frustrations with the charter school reform as well as their own histories and experiences as public school teachers. Since I had been there for the year, they felt comfortable describing and reflecting on what we had collectively experienced that year, the struggles and successes that they had faced before and after the announcement of the

reform. They routinely expressed their frustrations with the situation at Pine Ridge, and most believed that the school warranted reform. Moreover, my relationships with the staff allowed me to capture a diverse sample of new, experienced, and veteran teachers from a range of class, gender, and racial backgrounds. These teachers offered their opinions and challenged me when they disagreed with something that I might have said during an observation or an interview.

I did several things to mitigate my own biases. First, my research team transcribed the interviews using an anonymous coding scheme that they devised. The transcription process took several months. When it was completed, I received a copy of the transcription with the code, which only the transcribers knew, in the header. So unless I remembered a specific detail or story, I did not know the identity of the teacher during the data coding and analysis phase. Second, my research team and I blind-coded the data independently and then compared and contrasted the coded data. My research assistants did not know the teacher's identity or the school context. Finally, it is important to note that this is a study of one charter school reform process; the process in this school district and this school does not necessarily reflect the national landscape of charter school reform.

Hope and Despair Before Charter School Reform

At the start of each interview, I asked the teachers why they selected and then stayed at Pine Ridge Middle School. The teachers routinely said that they had chosen to work at the school to help lift the city's most vulnerable youth out of poverty through education. Many of these teachers were women, many of them Black and Latinx, who had attended the city's public schools and felt that they were carrying on the legacy. Elizabeth Robinson, a Black female special education teacher who had worked in the school for nearly three decades, told me that she worked at Pine Ridge "to give back to the city's children." Heather Lamb, a white female teacher who worked in the school for two decades, said that she became a teacher in the public schools that she attended as a child because she felt that her students, many of whom lived below the federal poverty line, "need you to make a difference in their lives. I mean, things we consider simple . . . to them it's a big thing." She had a stash of small gifts and cards she purchased with her own money that she gave to each student on their birthday. She also made homemade desserts to make the day special for her students and to remind them that she cared about each of them.

While female teachers like Robinson and Lamb often talked about teaching as a personal and political act (Collins, 2000; Dixson & Dingus, 2008; Farinde-Wu & Fitchett, 2018; Foster, 1993), the male teachers I interviewed often focused on the significant mismatch between their ideas about teaching when they entered the profession and the realities of teaching at Pine Ridge Middle School. Eric Collins, a white teacher who had worked in the school district for

eleven years and taught at Pine Ridge for the past two years, said that “being a teacher at Pine Ridge isn’t what I envisioned [about] being a teacher.” He explained that the teachers at Pine Ridge juggled a variety of positions during the day—“You’re a police officer, a body guard, a doctor, a counselor, a father, a mom, a best friend . . . I think a lot of [these positions] all come before even being a teacher at Pine Ridge.” He noted that “it must be tough for the kids to see” the violence in the community and had no doubt that “it’s all brought into this building. That’s probably one of the biggest issues with having to educate the kids.”

While most Pine Ridge teachers understood the connections between these challenges and students’ ability to learn, the teachers worried that they were not equipped with the skills or training to handle these challenges and that they lost precious instruction time they could not afford to lose given the academic performance of students at Pine Ridge. The teachers I interviewed agreed that Pine Ridge needed counselors, nurses, and therapists to support the youth. Teachers often had to provide counseling for these students even though they lacked the training and skills. The burden of this additional work generated exhaustion and frustration. Pine Ridge teachers were “operating in a place suffering from collective depression” (Payne, 2008, p. 31). This collective depression made it difficult for these teachers to trust one another and invest the collective energy needed to improve the school. Teachers also routinely became preoccupied with the stories of poverty and trauma that their students shared with them, which, over time, contributed to high levels of stress and anxiety (Borntrager et al., 2012; Lander, 2018; Newell & MacNeil, 2010; Steen, 2019; Wolpow, Johnson, Hertel, & Kincaid, 2016). Jorge Ortiz, a Latinx teacher who had worked at the school for more than a decade, called Pine Ridge “a punishment school . . . it’s a piece of Philadelphia that people don’t pay attention to unless you are making fun of it or telling people not to go near it.” He said that he stayed “for the kids . . . I can do it. You put a lot of heart into it, but I wouldn’t drive past this school in the summer because of the flashbacks of what happened in the school.” Teachers routinely called out sick, visited therapists, and took antidepressants to cope with the vicarious trauma they experienced as they listened to their students’ stories. The trauma that these teachers experienced made them question their commitment to the school. And when they were given the chance to leave the school, many of them did.

Six months before district officials announced their decision to close the school, they hired Chris Morris as Pine Ridge’s new principal. Morris was an administrator with a proven track record of strengthening struggling schools. Several teachers recognized that a strong administrator who valued and recognized instructional practice and classroom teaching was key to improving academic outcomes (Hitt & Tucker, 2016; Klar & Brewer, 2013), and they were optimistic that now, together, they could change their school. Unlike his predecessors, Morris understood that principals needed to be visible and pres-

ent to staff and students. He made a practice of everyday walking around the building. He asked teachers to stand outside their classrooms during class changes and casually checked in with them as he passed them in the hallway. He learned the names of the eight hundred students at Pine Ridge, and as he walked he greeted them and shook their hands. This visibility served as a constant reminder that he was watching them, that he wanted to redirect misbehavior and address grievances, and, most importantly, that he recognized the importance of developing relational trust inside the school (Bryk et al., 2010). Rebecca Arnold, a white teacher, recalled that “the first time I had hope for this school was when Morris became the principal.”

Morris often noted that while he had seen poverty throughout the city, Pine Ridge was different. The youth of color who made up the vast majority of students enrolled at the school were not represented politically or socially by the powerful whites who occupied seats on city council, who ran community nonprofits, and who managed the few religious institutions in the area. The racism in the area, coupled with the high poverty rates, made it virtually impossible for the school to leverage any institutional support in the community for extracurricular and afterschool programs. Pine Ridge students were not welcome in afterschool and community programs in the local Catholic churches or even at the local public library. This, Morris argued, made the Pine Ridge situation much more dire than other low-income, underresourced public schools he had led in the past.

Widespread budgetary shortages in the School District of Philadelphia compounded Pine Ridge’s challenges (Baker et al., 2017; Bruce, Ermasova, & Mattox, 2019; Payne, 2008; US Commission on Civil Rights, 2018). Teachers, some of whom had worked at the school for decades, told me that they never had the resources to meet their students’ needs. Teachers often had to rely on outdated textbooks that were torn and battered from decades of use. The library had outdated books and no librarian. Teachers rarely had enough desks to accommodate the students in their classrooms. Eric Collins, who had taught at the school for several years, recalled that he only had twenty-two desks even though he had thirty-two students in his class. He said that only Pine Ridge’s chronically high absenteeism made the situation bearable—except on the rare day that all thirty-two students came to class.

Beyond the resources, teachers also noted that the school’s physical condition made it difficult for them to teach and for students to learn. Research suggests that poor school facilities have a negative effect on student achievement and teacher retention (Buckley, Schneider, & Shang, 2004; Uline & Tschanen-Moran, 2008). The school’s once-magnificent assembly room, where students gathered in the morning for attendance and the Pledge of Allegiance, had peeling plaster and cracked windows that district officials promised to repair but never did. Elizabeth Robinson recalled that no one painted her classroom during her nearly three-decade tenure at the school, despite her repeated requests. She refused to believe that the district did not have money

for this: “You can’t tell me that you [the school district] do not have money for that. You know . . . these are basics.” She purchased her own paint to patch peeling plaster and covered cracked plaster with inspirational posters. Even though she did what she could, she knew that these conditions impeded her students’ learning. Other teachers echoed this sentiment. One day, Jorge Ortiz noticed brown stains on the walls of his basement classroom. After closer investigation, the building engineer said that these stains were mold from sewage that had leaked from the bathroom a floor above. It took months to get the mold removed, but the stains remained, serving as a daily reminder of the neglect that had plagued the school for decades.

Teachers argued that this neglect was tied, at least in part, to the historical demographic shifts in the community and school. Linda Morales, a Latinx teacher, told me that Pine Ridge Middle School was a “forgotten school.” “When the school was predominately Caucasian, Pine Ridge was okay,” she said. “But when the neighborhood started to shift everybody forgot about Pine Ridge . . . And that is why I think of it as the forgotten school . . . It is like we are the forgotten of the forgottens.” Destiny Jacobs, a Black female educator, described Pine Ridge and its community as “the forgotten land of the school district.” Another teacher told me that Pine Ridge represented the school district’s “headache” due to its location in a low-income community with no other public services in the school catchment zone—“the only city service down here is the school district. There’s nobody else down here. There’s no water drop in . . . there’s no hospital, there’s no food market, there’s no library.” Like countless other American urban communities and schools, Pine Ridge suffered from practices and policies that promoted disinvestment based on race and class (Dougherty, 2004; Erickson, 2016; Fullilove, 2016; Katz & Rose, 2013; Rothstein, 2018; Sugrue, 2005; Todd-Breland, 2018).

Reactions to the Announcement of the New Charter Organization

The day after the district announced its plan to turn Pine Ridge into a charter school, district-employed building engineers visited classrooms to replace broken radiators, fix cracked door frames, and repair peeling plaster.

A few weeks after that, the charter school executives who had won the right to manage the school met with Pine Ridge teachers to share their organization’s education philosophy, and plans to reform the school. They presented Pine Ridge teachers with splashy promotional materials featuring images of well-stocked libraries, pristine hallways, and smiling students. They told the teachers that the charter school executives planned to offer an array of after-school programs and summer trips to Spain and Montreal and promised to provide students with more resources—new uniforms, desks, and supplies—and a longer school year and school day. They told the teachers that they also planned to remove security measures—the metal detector at the school entrance and bars on windows that made their school look and feel more like

a prison than an education institution (Noguera, 2003; Shedd, 2015; Thompson, 2013).

In their interviews, Pine Ridge teachers expressed their hope that these changes might make a difference in the lives of the students they taught but also their frustrations that these changes occurred only after school district officials announced the charter school reform. Erin Sanders, a Black female teacher, thought that the charter school reform would be "good for the kids." She felt optimistic about "the programs that they [charter school educators] have coming in, the resources, the extra time after school." Cara Swisher, a Black female special education teacher who had taught in the city's public schools for over two decades, believed that the renovations would improve the school climate and ultimately student outcomes. However, like many teachers, she resented that district officials had neglected the building for decades but then made repairs once they had decided to turn it over to a charter organization. She argued that the willingness to improve the building made her and others feel like school officials did not think that Pine Ridge teachers and students were "worthy" enough to merit the renovations and resources that the charter school promised:

The district really didn't offer us [Pine Ridge] any support . . . They're fixing things that should have been fixed ten years ago. And so now the kids are worthy for it to be fixed, they weren't before? It's the same child, so why couldn't the improvements be made within the [public school] setting? If they had made some of the improvements they're willing to make now, the kids would have valued it a little more. The whole building was in disarray, the paint was peeling . . . mice running all over the place. It was horrible.

Elizabeth Robinson shared the frustration "that now, after all these years, [school district engineers] are coming in and fixing things in the building." Her frustration mounted once she saw images of the renovations planned for the building under the charter organization: "That brochure really pissed me off . . . Why didn't we deserve [a beautiful building]? Were the Pine Ridge kids not good enough?"

The range of emotions that Pine Ridge teachers expressed about the physical plant improvements stemmed, at least in part, from their concerns that district officials had allocated public dollars to improve a charter school facility that many Pine Ridge students might never attend. Several teachers worried that the charter organization wanted to remodel the school to attract middle-income white families who lived on the east side of Chapman Avenue and who had not attended Pine Ridge. In the wake of the 2008 recession, many of these east side white families were struggling to pay their children's Catholic school tuition and had been campaigning for, as one white resident said, "better public school options" in the neighborhood. Several of the Pine Ridge teachers I interviewed worried that these white families who had refused to enroll their children at the public Pine Ridge might now enroll their children in the new

renovated charter school, which might, in turn, displace the Black and Latinx students who made up the majority of the school's students. Research suggests that demographic changes from urban revitalization and gentrification are often associated with the opening of a charter school (Davis & Oakley, 2013). Research also indicates that college-educated white families are far more likely to gentrify communities and remain in those areas with their school-aged children when school choice expands (Pearman & Swain, 2017). This is particularly true when charter organizations take over and remodel older public schools like Pine Ridge (Hankins, 2007).

Responding to rumors and stories circulating in teacher networks throughout the district, Pine Ridge teachers also worried that charter school officials might implement harsh zero-tolerance disciplinary policies that too often disproportionately affected Black and Latinx students. They worried that charter school officials might leverage harsh disciplinary policies to expel their students. As one white male teacher said, charter schools in the city often “kick out the [students] that they want to kick out” and send them to the neighborhood public schools. This teacher said he knew this because he had worked in a public school near a new charter school. There were multiple times during the year when, “all of the sudden,” the school received an “influx of new kids” who charter school officials expelled from their school for myriad reasons. Research substantiates the concerns that Pine Ridge teachers had about the attrition of Black and Latinx youth due to zero-tolerance charter school policies (Joseph, 2016; Losen, Keith, Hodson, & Martinez, 2016; Rizga, 2016; Skiba et al., 2014).

Finally, Pine Ridge teachers worried about the pushout effects of charter school reform on the school's most vulnerable populations: students in special education and English language learner programs. Before the charter organization took over the school, several Pine Ridge administrators urged the organization's executives to provide charter school applications in Spanish and English to serve the needs of Spanish-speaking students and their families. The charter provided an English application immediately but delayed the Spanish applications for weeks. As a result, many of the teachers were concerned that the new charter school might enroll fewer Latinx youth and more white youth from the east side of Chapman Avenue. Diane Hill supported expanding school choice but worried about the effects of charter reform on the school system. She expressed concerns that the charter organization might siphon off the most advantaged students, leaving the remaining and shrinking public schools with the students “that need the most services, English language learners, special education students.” While this teacher supported school choice options, including charter schools, she worried that these reforms might have an adverse effect on education equity and justice in her community and city. She understood that “things had to change at Pine Ridge,” but in her interview with me, she expressed her hope that the school district officials put policies in place to guarantee that English language learners and special

education students were not concentrated in the city’s remaining and ever-shrinking system of traditionally managed public schools. While the evidence is somewhat mixed, scholars who have studied charter school reform argue that some charter schools underenroll English learners and special education students (Miron, 2014; Rhim & Kothari, 2018; Vaznis, 2016; Winters, 2014, 2015). Researchers believe that this underenrollment stems from the fact that English learner families often do not apply to charter schools due to barriers like the ones that the charter organization put in place at Pine Ridge Middle School (Buckley & Sattin-Bajaj, 2011; Winters, 2014). While Pine Ridge teachers could not confirm that this was the aim of the new charter organization, their concerns, according to these researchers, were warranted.

The teachers’ anger and frustration with the renovations was also connected to slow but steady erosion of their power and agency to influence education practice and policy at Pine Ridge and, collectively, in the city. Most of these teachers entered the profession in the 1980s when urban public school teachers had more authority and autonomy over what happened in their classrooms and schools. Standards-based reforms stripped teachers of their authority to shape the practices that governed their work and their students’ learning. The state takeover of Philadelphia’s schools eroded the collective power of teacher unions to shape or challenge reforms. The frustrations of Pine Ridge teachers stemmed from the loss of authority over their classrooms and schools. They told me repeatedly that they felt disrespected and, as two female teachers of color said, “voiceless” in the city’s system of public schools. When the school district announced its decision to turn Pine Ridge Middle School into a charter school, teachers lacked the political power to shape the reform (Buras, 2014; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006; Morel, 2018; Perrillo, 2012; Scott, 2011; Todd-Breland, 2018).

Choosing to Leave Pine Ridge Middle School

In April and May, the charter organization hosted several hiring fairs and urged Pine Ridge teachers to apply for teaching positions in the new school. As these fairs approached, teachers expressed their concerns about the effects of the reform on the Pine Ridge students and families who, at least for the moment, remained under their care. Mary Kaye Rodgers, a white female teacher who had worked at the school for fifteen years, explained that the teachers were told that those who wanted to look for new positions would have the opportunity to do so and that they would know their new schools by the end June. As she described the process, she said, “We’ll see what happens. We have to work it out. We’re in the business of still educating children. You have to do that wherever you are. You just have to know you’re going to make an impact on somebody else’s life.” She then reflected on what her departure might mean for her students:

The sad part is here a lot of kids know where to find you, over the years, they come back. They bring their kids back. They've brought me prom invitations . . . Or an invitation to a graduation because they finally made it. They always knew where to find us. Now that's going to change. And that part is very disheartening because the kids knew they could go back to Pine Ridge . . . They always came back to find us, even if it was report card time, they could bring their report cards back and share their successes or even their hardships. Kids will come back and be like, "Ms. I really can't get this math. I really can't." So we're able to give them some supplemental work or try to help them out. So that part, knowing that, kids that came back and really extended that relationship after they left you, they really won't be able to find you.

This teacher understood that the students who had visited her in the past might not be able to find her once she left Pine Ridge. Yet, even though many Pine Ridge teachers worried about their students' futures, none of them applied to work at the new charter school.

Destiny Jacobs, who had worked in school for nearly a decade, said that she had already decided to leave Pine Ridge months before school officials announced the charter reform. When I asked her how she felt about the decision to turn the school over to a charter organization, she said, "Honestly, I didn't really care too much . . . I knew I was leaving." She explained that earlier that year she received a phone call from a medical assistant in her doctor's office who told Destiny that the doctor needed to move her appointment to have routine surgery and asked if she might be able to come earlier. Destiny agreed. On the day that she had surgery, she turned on the news and heard about a drive-by shooting that occurred on the corner of the school's playground. Three people were shot. If she had been at school that day, she would have been on the playground and might have been shot. "That was it," she said. "I was like, I am not coming back. I was just like, I can't get shot." The violence in the neighborhood and her own secondary trauma, not the charter school reform, was what convinced Destiny to leave Pine Ridge.

Other teachers refused to apply for positions because the charter school employed nonunion teachers, who had to work more hours for lower salaries and fewer benefits than unionized public school teachers. Pine Ridge teachers calculated that if they had accepted a position with the charter school, their work days would be 20 percent longer for 30 percent less pay. These teachers, like any rational economic actor, refused to work more hours for less money. One white male teacher told me that he refused to apply for a charter school position for a simple reason: "They don't pay enough. That's my only reason . . . If the charter school offered to pay me what I'm making or more, I would work for a charter school. I have no problem with that." His personal economic interests and basic workplace dignity, not animosity toward charter schools, pushed him to leave Pine Ridge.

Other teachers refused to apply for positions in the charter school because, in addition to not wanting to work for lower wages, they did not want to lose

their union protection. They expressed support for the union, which had fought for better wages and working conditions for city teachers for decades. Jorge Ortiz justified never taking a charter position by saying, "I strongly believe in the union. People who have come before me have laid forth, and I am not going to go against that. Nor could they afford me when it comes down to business. Business is business, they [the charter organization] cannot afford me." Mary Kaye Rodgers, a white female teacher, said that she was not going to interview for a position with the charter organization because "I am going to stick with the union . . . I am up there with the pay scale, what am I going to do, go back down to making half of my salary? Sure, why not, I live in this [poor] neighborhood, I can just afford to go to the corner store and get a bag of chips and soda."

Rodgers resented the idea that the charter school executives assumed that teachers might be willing to sacrifice their own economic security to stay in the community and serve their students. This idea has a long history in feminized professions, including teaching (Apple, 1985; Rousmaniere, 1997; Rury, 1991). Moreover, it reflects gendered stereotypes about female teachers who have chosen their profession for the "right reasons," for the children in their classrooms rather than the money (Cammack & Phillips, 2002; Gannerud, 2001; Sabbe & Aelterman, 2007). Even though many Pine Ridge teachers worried about the effects of their departure on their students, these teachers refused to accept the terms that the charter school offered and, thus, decided to leave Pine Ridge.

A few days after the school year ended, school district officials held a meeting for teachers who worked in the public schools targeted for charter school reform. Before the meeting began, union leaders provided teachers with detailed information about their rights as union employees and gave them an overview of the process of selecting their new schools. District officials reminded the teachers that they had provided the teachers with a list of vacant positions and urged them to use this list to select their priority schools. They also told the teachers that they would select their positions in order of seniority; the teachers with the most experience would select their positions first. If the position was open, teachers would receive their first choice; if not, they would move on to their next choices until a match was made. Teachers with less experience were not guaranteed positions in public schools.

After the district officials concluded their remarks, they gave the teachers a short break before the meeting officially began. During the break, many of the teachers conducted brief informational meetings with their union representatives to ask questions about the schools with vacancies. Some teachers wanted to know about the school administration and community. Others wanted to know about the nature of the positions—Is it an elementary school? Is it a contained classroom? How many students could they expect to have? What kind of professional development would they receive? After the break, district officials entered the room with the list of teaching vacancies across the dis-

district and briefly reviewed the protocol for selecting new positions. One by one they called the teachers in order of seniority to the front of the room to select their new schools. Heather Lamb leaned over and whispered in my ear, “After years of service, I get to pick my next job like I am picking ham in a deli line.” Even though they were demoralized, the teachers who had enough seniority found positions in district-operated public schools. Less experienced teachers did not always have this privilege. Due to the city’s efforts to privatize public schools, there were not enough public school positions for all the displaced Pine Ridge teachers.

Later that afternoon, I visited the school and sat in Chris Morris’s empty office. Four Black janitors dusted the empty bookshelves. After twenty-seven years of service in the district, Morris had retired. Pine Ridge was his last school. As the janitors finished their work, a district employee, a Black man who none of us had seen before, walked into the office with a set of building keys for the charter organization. One of the janitors asked him why the district had decided to close the school and turn it over to a charter organization. Without skipping a beat, he said, “It was because of the teachers. The school was full of bad teachers.” The janitor looked at him and asked somewhat sarcastically, a tinge of bitterness in her voice, “Bad teachers?” The district official replied quickly and confidently, “Yes, bad teachers.” At that moment I noticed a team of charter school executives dressed in dark suits with colorful plastic leis draped around their necks gathered outside the main office door. Someone had tied a ribbon across the banister of Pine Ridge’s once-majestic main staircase. The executives, most of whom did not live in the community or even the city, cut the ribbon, as a photographer captured the moment to celebrate their management of the school.

Mourning the Loss of Philadelphia’s System of Public Schools

It is easy and convenient to blame the failures of traditionally managed public schools on “bad teachers,” for it pins the shortcomings on individuals who work inside our nation’s public schools rather than on the systems that govern these institutions. None of the teachers I interviewed thought they were perfect teachers; at the same time, none of them thought that rapid-fire, top-down school privatization represented the best approach to reform their school. In their interviews, Pine Ridge teachers repeatedly expressed their frustration and resentment that school district officials blamed them for the district’s and the school’s systemic and historical challenges. Teachers asserted that Pine Ridge never received the resources to create decent working conditions or engaging learning environments. Linda Morales said that “the system failed us . . . because knowing the population of students that we had, I don’t really think they put programs in place to help us.” The teachers felt that school district officials rarely acknowledged the shortage of resources, the decades of disinvestment, the escalation of childhood poverty, the decimation of social

services in their conversations and decisions about Pine Ridge's future. Evan Jacobs, a Black educator, commented that Pine Ridge administrators and school district officials "from the top down . . . just say it's the teachers' fault."

Over the summer, stories emerged from both my fieldwork and from conversations I had with former Pine Ridge teachers that many students who had attended Pine Ridge had not enrolled in the new charter. Some of them could not afford to pay for the new "Catholic school-like" uniform. Others did not understand that the charter school required an application for admission. When students tried to enroll, charter school administrators turned them away because the school did not have space. Some of these students enrolled in the state's online charter schools; others enrolled in the public school next-closest to their home. The movement of students from the charter to the public schools strained resources in the city's public school system. The public schools did not have enough teachers, textbooks, or classrooms to accommodate the influx of students from the Pine Ridge community.

Many of the teachers I interviewed had predicted these challenges and shortcomings when they discussed their concerns about the reform at Pine Ridge Middle School. Their concerns about and resistance to the charter school reform movement illustrate differing ideas of education equity and justice for the youth and families who called the Pine Ridge community home. School choice advocates, including many policy makers and officials in the school district, argue that expanded school choice will lead to more opportunity and, ultimately, better outcomes. They believe that expanded school choice will contribute to an equal and just education for every student.

The Pine Ridge teachers I interviewed shared this commitment to expanding education equity and justice in the city. They simply did not believe that turning their public school over to a charter organization represented the best, and perhaps even the only, way to achieve this aim. In their view, school choice reforms, including charter schools, represented another mechanism to limit the power of teacher unions and to further fracture the city's public school system along class and race lines. In the increasingly gentrified, white, and wealthy parts of the city, expanded school choice often translated into splashy new school buildings with selective admissions procedures, innovative curricular programs, and autonomous governance structures. In low-income communities, expanded school choice often meant outsourcing traditionally managed public schools to privately managed charter or education management organizations with limited public accountability and oversight. While several teachers hoped that the charter school officials could improve the education experience that their Pine Ridge students received, Pine Ridge teachers also felt that the school district's decision to turn their public school over to a charter organization was part of a larger movement to dismantle public education, particularly in majority low-income, majority Black and Latinx communities like their own (Anyon, 2005; Fabricant & Fine, 2012; Ferman, 2017; Lipman, 2013; McWilliams, 2019).

The reform affected these teachers deeply. “My heart was broken,” said Jorge Ortiz. “I felt disappointed. I felt like I was getting kicked in the teeth. I still feel that way.” When school district officials announced the school’s closure, Pine Ridge teachers grieved the loss of their institution, this one school (Ewing, 2018; Pattillo, 2010). But, as they reflected on the ways that this one school closure fit into the wider school privatization movement, these teachers engaged in what I call *system mourning*, the loss of a system of public schools in their city. Pine Ridge is not a traditional school closure, like the one Ewing (2018) examined. Pine Ridge still exists. It exists within a system of schools that have been closed and reopened as privately run institutions. Many of the teachers I interviewed had witnessed and experienced the transformation of Philadelphia’s public schools from a system with four charter schools in 1997 to a system today with nearly one hundred charter schools that serve half of the city’s school-aged youth. The system mourning they experienced centered around the loss of a system of traditionally managed public schools that, in their ideal form, promoted democratic governance, dignified work, and equitable access. The system of public schools represented the values, ideology, and manifestation of particular social, cultural, political, and civic understanding around access and equity that public schools embodied in their lives as public school students and as public school teachers. They recognized the shortcomings of public schools in practice but remained committed to upholding and revising their values and ideals. When Pine Ridge closed, they mourned the collective loss of these schools, not just their own.

The system mourning these teachers experienced was connected, in part, to their concerns about the futures of Pine Ridge youth as school district officials turned the city’s remaining public schools over to private education management organizations. When I asked Cara Swisher about the decision to turn Pine Ridge Middle School into a charter school, she said:

I don’t think that turning a school over should be a way to turn it around. We have [a governing body in the school district], so what do you have in place for our children? Don’t sell them or turn them over to a charter. What’s in place within the public school system? What’s in place to help them? Because these children are really a representation of our city. A true representation of every neighborhood, an inner-city child . . . I don’t think that the school district is in the business, right now, for whatever reason to help children that really need help.

Swisher worried about the children who attended Pine Ridge, who were “a true representation of every neighborhood” in the city. In her interview she also revealed her concerns, which other teachers shared, that within a district or system, separate schools—publics and charters—are never equal: “I’m not a proponent of charter schools because . . . it’s a varied education program. So what I’m doing in one charter school might not be happening in another charter school, and to me, separate is never equal.”

Elizabeth Robinson grew up in the city, attended its public schools, and dedicated nearly three decades of her professional career to Pine Ridge. She mourned the loss the city's system of public schools that she had been fighting to preserve and improve.

I've been here for twenty-seven years and seeing all the changes and really being in the fight . . . for the kids and just struggling. Like, having to fight to get a regular class size, having to fight to just buy materials. I mean, we fought every step of the way for everything. And we're still fighting. And we're still not even given the chance.

She said that the decision to turn Pine Ridge into a charter school left her with a sense of

hopelessness to the point that I'm ready to walk away from my career, period. And I would never encourage anyone to come into this field. And that's sad when I realized that I have no joy when I speak of my profession. That hurts me . . . But now just seeing how they are like really just tearing down all the schools going to charters. One day, I'd like to go back and ask, why don't we [public schools] deserve a fair shot?

The system mourning that many of the teachers experienced did not end the moment Pine Ridge closed its doors as a public school and reopened as a charter school. A few months after Pine Ridge closed, I spoke to Linda Morales, who had accepted a new position in a traditionally managed public schools that served poor Black and Latinx youth. She told me that the decision to close Pine Ridge and reopen it as a charter school "hurt me . . . It still hurts me . . . It's like a depression that has been on me for months now." As she talked, her speech slowed, she choked up, and tears streamed down her face. She explained that the closure hurt her because city and school officials gave Pine Ridge "away to some people who don't know the school, don't know the kids, and they tell us we did a bad job, and we didn't." She said that "you have to look at everything to be able to say that the school is no good" and noted that "people in the school worked in conditions that were so bad." Then, she looked up, wiped another tear, and said, "I am a product of the public school system . . . I believe public schools are the way to go."

Note

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