

# Mass School Closures and the Politics of Race, Value, and Disposability in Philadelphia

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**Background:** *With the expansion of charter school networks, population losses in urban district schools and stretched budgets have encouraged struggling districts to adopt closure-as-reform. School closings have received considerable attention in the media as a controversial reform, reconfiguring the educational landscapes of over 70 post-industrial cities like Chicago, Detroit, and New Orleans. However, in the last decade, few scholars have considered the project of examining closures—their process and their effects—empirically.*

**Purpose:** *In this article, we examine the rollout of 30 school closures in Philadelphia in 2012 and 2013 to explain how school closures have become yet another policy technology of Black community and school devaluation in the United States. Moving beyond educational studies that have focused on the outcomes of mass school closures like student achievement and cost savings, we argue that a thorough theorization of how race, violence, and community values relate to school closure as process could help to explain the ways in which contemporary educational policy reforms are creating new modes of communal disposability in cities' poorest zip codes.*

**Setting/Participants:** *Data collection occurred in two comprehensive high schools in Philadelphia slated for closure in 2012 and 2013: Johnson High and Franklin High. Participants at both schools included students, teachers, parents, community members, and district officials.*

**Research Design:** *The authors spent several years in their respective schools recording observations of instructional practice, community meetings, and district events and interviewing key informants such as students, teachers, administrators, and district officials. The first author spent three years at Johnson High School, from September 2011 to June 2013. The second author spent five years at Franklin High School, from September 2008 to June 2013. She also spent hundreds of hours at the high school examining archival materials and interviewing students, teachers, and alumni about their experiences in the school and community. In addition to their individual case studies, the authors jointly transcribed and coded over two dozen community and district meetings' video recordings during the 2012 and 2013 closures. In the aftermath of the school closures process, we used a comparative ethnographic method to compare and contrast the events that occurred at these two schools.*

**Findings:** *Suturing anthropologies of violence and education to frame the analysis, we explore moments of collision between policy discourses deployed by state and local officials that crafted closures as inevitable and threatened school communities’ articulations of the racialized implications of the closures. We further localize our analysis to demonstrate how two school communities—one majority Asian and another majority Black—with similar performances and characteristics met dramatically different fates. Given the lack of transparency in how decisions were made around which schools to close, the ways in which these communities read and responded to the closure threat offer a window into the ways in which race informed the valuation process across schools.*

**Conclusions/Recommendations:** *We conclude with a plea to state and federal policymakers to consider the long-term ramifications of school choice expansion and state disinvestment for the health and stability of traditional public schools. We encourage policymakers to move in a more reparative direction, prioritizing the needs of those “unchosen” by choice and imagining a system that might serve all students more equitably.*

**Figure 1. Outside School Reform Commission, June 15, 2017**



Photographer: Edwin Mayorga

Tonight, I stand as an advocate for all of the children and the families of North Philadelphia and L.P. Hill School. As a mother and educator who grew up in North Philadelphia I understand the importance of stability in the lives of the youngest citizens and their education. The community of North Philadelphia has been neglected for decades, none of which is the fault of the young

children, but they said we had to bear the brunt of the consequences. North Philadelphia is in desperate need of stability, institutions that its residents can count on to produce educationally healthy children. Schools have always been held as cornerstones of every society. These young children deserve the opportunity to receive an education where they live. They deserve to be given the message where you live has value, where you live has the right to the same resources as where everyone else lives. For the young people and the families who live in the L.P. Hill Community, John Dewey says it best—Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself. Please reconsider closing L.P. Hill Elementary.

– Testimony, Philadelphia’s School Closure Hearings (February 21, 2013)<sup>1</sup>

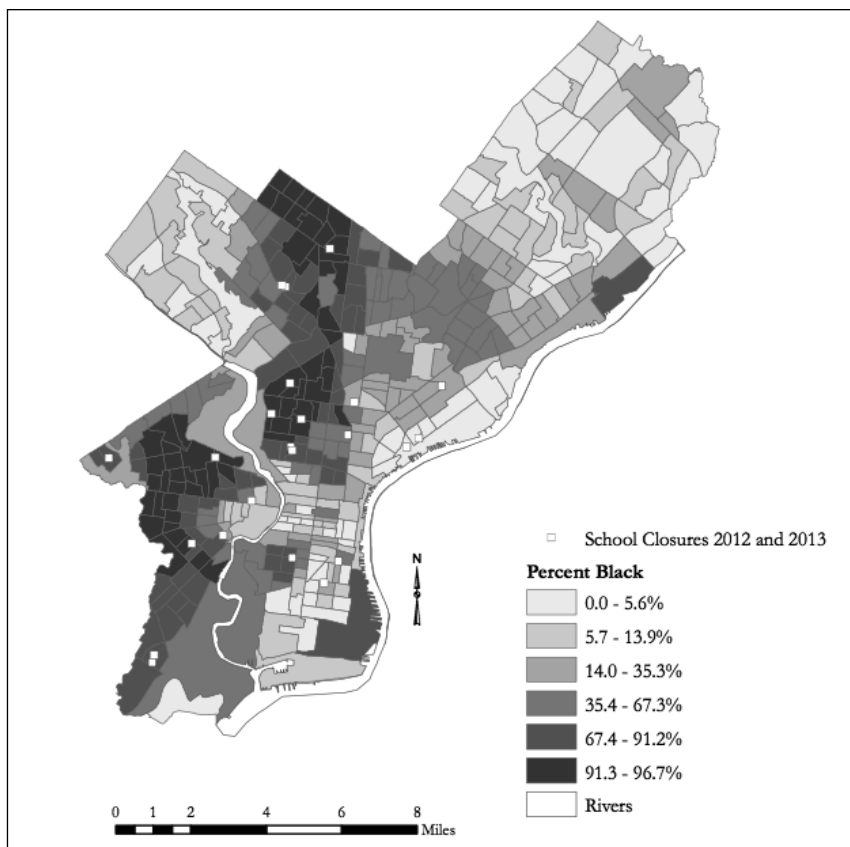
On a cold evening in the late winter of 2013, Linda Cliatt-Wayman, a principal and mother of children who attended the city’s public schools, offered an impassioned entreaty to the School Reform Commission (SRC), a state-appointed governing body voting after a three-day series of hearings to close 37 public schools throughout Philadelphia. While the vote marked Philadelphia’s first foray into mass closures, shuttering 30 of the 37 schools that the school district had initially proposed to close, Linda’s testimony embeds a more insidious critique of temporal interplays of community devaluation that informed the decision to close some public schools and spare others. Invoking a history of divestment, deprivation, and institutional neglect, she uses L.P. Hill Elementary and its slating as an instantiation of North Philadelphia’s relationship with the larger city and region. Transformed in the mid-20th century by the accelerative decline of the densest concentration of industrial labor in the United States, North Philadelphia today not only boasts the highest poverty rates in the city, but also stands among the poorest neighborhoods in the nation (Lubrano, 2015).

This testimony and others throughout the two years of planning for this consolidation of Philadelphia’s schools are significant for understanding the racialized dimensions and discourses of neoliberal educational reforms as closures disproportionately targeted schools like L.P. Hill in deeply poor, overwhelmingly Black neighborhoods (Research for Action, 2012). In this article, we examine the closing and selling off of public infrastructure as a form of slow violence. Much of the fractured but emergent literature on school closures has focused on closures’ effects on academic achievement for transferring students (Engberg, Gill, Zamarro, & Zimmer, 2012; Ozek, Hansen, & Gonzalez, 2012), cost savings for struggling urban districts (Pew Charitable Trust, 2013; Pew Charitable Trust &

Philadelphia Research Initiative, 2011), and ramifications for social justice as working-class Black communities lose their neighborhood schools (Aggarwal, Mayorga, & Nevel, 2012; Deeds & Pattillo, 2014; Good, 2016; Means, 2008). We situate ourselves in this latter camp by exploring how the process of closure unfolded across two demographically different neighborhood schools (one majority Asian, another majority Black) with similar academic performance statistics. Through an archival excavation of Philadelphia's rollout of mass closures in 2012 and 2013, we first compare how discourses of race and value informed the politics around these closures at the district level through document analysis of district deliberations as well as dozens of interviews with district officials.<sup>2</sup> We then move to a school-by-school neighborhood analysis, drawing on hundreds of interviews and hours of participant observation across our two distinct research sites: Franklin High School, a predominantly Black high school that closed in 2013, and Johnson High School, an increasingly Asian high school that was on and then removed from the closures list in late 2012, prior to the closure of 30 schools between June 2012 and June 2013.

Given the different racial demographics and disparate policy outcomes, we argue that analyzing race in relation to the ways in which school value is produced is necessary in order to understand how school closures structure and reproduce racialized inequities across schools and their neighborhood communities. Citing recent social studies of mass incarceration and police brutality, we focus on anti-Blackness as a register through which communal value and disposability is coded and rationalized through market-principled reform projects like mass school closures. We do not suggest in this article that district officials deliberately and explicitly championed the closing of Black schools, but argue instead that a discourse of crisis and technocracy sanitized the racial politics of value that elevated the status of some schools over others. In turn, this discourse naturalized the disproportionate closure of Black high schools under the rationale of "failure" and amendable inefficiencies, ignoring the Black communities' legitimate critiques of the closures and the deleterious impact they would have on the health and stability of their neighborhoods and communities. Drawing on Deborah Thomas's (2011) notion of "reparations framework for thinking" where analyses of "exceptional" displays of violence are grounded in the structuring forces of historically codified institutional discrimination, we ultimately ask: In what ways does the veneer of objectivity that works to justify school closures reflect as well as perpetuate the devaluation of Black communities and their schools in the United States?

**Figure 2. School closure (2012 and 2013) concentrations in Philadelphia by race and neighborhood**



Adapted from U.S. Census 2010; School District of Philadelphia, 2013.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### CRITICAL STUDIES OF SCHOOL CLOSURES AS REFORM

School closings have received considerable attention in the media as a controversial reform, reconfiguring the educational landscapes of over 70 postindustrial cities, including Chicago, Detroit, and New Orleans. However, few scholars have considered the project of examining closures—their process and their effects—empirically (Bierbaum, 2018; Deeds & Pattillo, 2014). Emergent social studies have noted the

disproportionate targeting of low-income Black neighborhoods within these cities for closures, eliminating schools as key institutions of community forum, socialization, and economic stability (Good, 2016; Means, 2008; Research for Action, 2012, 2013). This trajectory of critical work has likened closures to another mechanism promoting “accumulation by dispossession” (Lipman, 2011, p. 55), linking school closures to a long line of selective disinvestment and reinvestment in urban space. These scholars examine how the sale of school buildings to private developers and/or private charter operators—in order to be repackaged for upper and middle-class White communities in gentrifying neighborhoods—displaces working-class communities of color and the public educators that serve them (Cucchiara, 2013; Davis & Oakley, 2013; Harvey, 2012; Makris, 2015; Posey-Maddox, 2016; Saltman, 2007; Stillman, 2012).

Many studies have also linked school choice movements to discourses of fiscal crisis and immediacy as districts attempt to maintain two strained yet parallel education systems: an expanding charter network and traditional district schools (Berends, 2015; Briggs & Wigglesworth, 2015; Butkovitz, 2014; Jabbar, 2015; Lubienski & Lee, 2016; Public Citizens for Children and Youth, 2015). Several of these studies concern themselves with the normative limits of neoliberal school choice in urban public education systems for equity when disproportionate numbers of high-need students like English Language Learners and special needs students are attending district schools that are targeted for closure (Baker, Libby, & Wiley, 2015; Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, & Wang, 2010; Stern, Clonan, Jaffee, & Lee, 2015).

#### ANTI-BLACKNESS AND NEOLIBERAL EDUCATION POLICY

Central to these studies is an existential concern the privatization of public education’s governance and financing, leaving poor children and their families of color exposed to the vagaries of market fundamentalist logics and their ensuing vulnerabilities (Buras, 2013; Miron, Urschel, Mathis, & Tournquist, 2010; Saltman, 2007; Somers, 2008). Focusing on deregulation and punishment for student and school underperformance, Leonardo (2009) has argued that education policy reform since the passing of Bush’s No Child Left Behind Act in 2002<sup>3</sup> constitutes an aggregated set of “acts of whiteness” that deem “racial disparities as unfortunate outcomes of group competition . . . or worse, as stubborn cultural explanations of the inferiority of people of color” (p. 127). More recent work has attempted to link theorizations of anti-Blackness to policy logics around “no-excuses” charter schools, limited access to enrichment and unstructured activities and curriculum, the turn to fundraising to compensate for inequitable funding structures in schools, as well as school closures in

disproportionately Black neighborhoods (Dumas & Ross, 2016; Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Leonardo, 2004; Noguera, 2003; Rios, 2011).

Arguing that policy circles serve as a terrain where educational actors operationalize anti-Black racism in their construction of Black students as “always already problem—as nonhuman; inherently uneducable, or at very least, unworthy of education,” this critical policy tradition specifically tethers genealogies of Black struggle for educational opportunity to the recent turn to neoliberal education policies encouraging school choice and privatization (Dumas, 2016, p. 16). While the language around Black children and their educability has changed over time, moving from explicitly racist depictions of Black intellectual inferiority, these scholars point to the durability of anti-Black racism in “color-blind,” marketized discourses around the “quality” of Black students and their schools (Bonilla-Silva, 2009; Dumas, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2006). The register of the market sanitizes the public policies in housing, employment, and education that have fueled divestment, segregation, and concentrated poverty, normalizing and justifying the dispossession of public institutions in Black neighborhoods on the grounds of “failure.” Invoking Nixon’s (2011) notion of “slow violence” or “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is not typically viewed as violence at all” (p. 3), Aggarwal, Mayorga, and Nevel (2012) point to punitive accountability policies that have divested already resource-poor schools while simultaneously raising the bar of performance through high-stakes tests and “data-driven” decision-making around schools’ fates.

We seek to build on this work, specifically attending to how anti-Blackness permeates neoliberal policy processes like schools closures. Spatial analyses of school closures across American cities reveal high concentrations of closures in poor, overwhelming Black schools in the most divested neighborhoods. These studies also acknowledge the enormous negative social, fiscal, and psychological costs of schools closures on these neighborhoods, including blight and the loss of community and neighborhood history. However, the mechanisms through which closures reflect as well as perpetuate the devaluation of Black communities and their neighborhood schools in the United States remain under-examined. While we know that school closures propagate racial inequities, we know very little about how race as a construct implicitly informs the valuing of particular schools over others, or how communities weaponize race in order to engage and beat technocrats on their own terms.

## RACIAL TRIANGULATION AND SOCIAL DEATH AS A THEORETICAL FRAME

Focusing on the discourses, practices, and politics stemming from policy structures linked to mass closures in Philadelphia in 2012 and 2013, we seek to understand how school communities invoked race in their responses to district officials' rationales for closing targeted schools. Building on anthropologies of violence that conceive of the "everyday," naturalized nature of structural violence (Bourgois & Scheper-Hughes, 2004; Das, 2011; Farmer, 2004; Povinelli, 2011; Taussig, 2004), we also focus on the extent to which district and state education officials delegitimized school communities' affective enactments of value and social worth, rendering particular communities disposable while reinforcing other communities' value through the school closure process. Technocratic rationales offered by district officials, such as weakening "enrollments," "building quality," and "academic performance," crafted an inevitability around closures that collided with the affective labor performed by educators, families, and students fighting to survive as communities. **These moments of collision offer insight into how the veneer of educational policy reform became a discursive technology that legitimizes state-sanctioned violence.** While anthropologies of education have historically engaged with the reproduction of social inequality vis-à-vis formal and informal educational institutions (Spindler, 2000; Sutton & Levinson, 2001), we suggest an engagement with more contemporary anthropologies of violence to more fully capture new modes of human disposability and disenfranchisement through educational reform.

As literary scholar Lindon Barrett (1998) argues, "objects" of value need "other" values for which "negativity is a resource" (p. 14). Human and community value are therefore relational, particularly in situations where markets encroach upon public goods like education, forming the ground of possibilities for value and expendability through the closure of schools and erasure of their communities. Value and violence do not simultaneously constitute each other, but "value introduces itself by way of a violent agency that it seeks to deny" (p. 17). Using Cacho's (2012) renovated framework of "social death" to think through the policy process of mass school closure, we interrogate the anti-Black messaging in Philadelphia's school closures process. Cacho explains: "The production and ascription of human value are both violent and relational, both differential and contextual. Value is ascribed through explicitly or implicitly disavowing relationships to the already devalued and disciplined categories of deviance and nonnormativity" (p. 19).



Because market fundamentalist logics are assumed to be both commonsensical and irrefragable, the degree to which educational communities deviate from the norms of performance and “quality” inflect them with particular statuses of both legal and moral value.

Anthropologists have long interrogated how notions of social value emerge from the triangulation of particular communities and their norms in relation to Whiteness (Lee, 2004; Lei, 2003). Within the United States’ racial hierarchy, particularly since the 1960s, Asian communities both in the United States and abroad (e.g., “Asian Tigers”) have been valorized as “model minorities” and employed as weapons to justify the maintenance of colorblindness as well as attempts to modestly redistribute wealth through the state through affirmative action and investment in historically marginalized communities (Kim, 1999; Prashad, 2002; Tang, 2011). Racial triangulation therefore functions to protect Whiteness by celebrating Asian nations and Asian Americans as “models of civic values” while simultaneously perpetuating harmful tropes of African Americans. Lee (1996) explains: “Asian Americans are only constructed in model minority terms in comparison to African Americans who are thus constructed in blatantly negative ways. Thus, Asian Americans achieve the status of honorary whites at the expense of African Americans” (p. 125).

This relative valorization of Asians to African-Americans also becomes embedded in marketized calculations that form the contours of neoliberal education reform in cities, particularly with regards to school closures. Decisions over which communities “matter” and are worth preserving emerge from a process of racialized value ascription where both the actors making the decisions (e.g., district officials, consultants), as well as those responding to the decisions (school communities), understand anti-Blackness as the fulcrum on which these decisions hinge.

By examining key discourses among district officials as well as the strategies that two racially different but statistically similar communities engaged to save their schools from closure, we analyze how rationales for closure pivoted upon racially coded notions of community value. Given the lack of transparency around the district’s final decisions to close some schools over others, our analysis is based on the responses of the communities to the threat of closure and how those responses contributed to dramatically different fates. Both schools were identical across qualifying indicators, with the exception of their racial demographics. In other words, should the district have followed its methodology for closure with fidelity, both schools should have closed. Yet the different strategies that each school adopted to fight closure provide insight into how race and school value became mutually constitutive, elevating one school over dozens of considered others considered for closure. One school’s deliberate

effort to exploit race reveals much about its power to shape a compelling rationale for being spared.

We ultimately argue that while many treated mass school closures as an isolated event that robbed Black communities of their schools (Bierbaum, 2018; Kerkstra, 2014; Popp, 2014), various temporalities of racialized violence converged to set the stage for closure, including historical divestment in Philadelphia's schools, accelerated charterization of "failing schools" in the last decade through federal and state-backed school choice policies, and the reign of high-stakes tests since 2002 as a heuristic for "quality" educational institutions. School closures represent a racialized historical process of Black community devaluation, codifying and naturalizing the erasure of vulnerable communities of color. While the actors who carried out the closures knew about the negative impact on Black communities specifically, anti-Black invocations of "failure" and "crisis" normalized the structural violence exacted, and forged yet another mode of historical dispossession.

## METHODOLOGY

### FIELDSITES AND METHODS

The authors conducted two independent, longitudinal ethnographic studies in two comprehensive high schools. Both authors spent several years in their respective schools and used traditional ethnographic case study methods—writing fieldnotes on observations of instructional practice, community meetings, and district events, and interviewing key informants such as students, teachers, administrators, district officials, and community advocates (Emerson, 1995; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Yin, 2014). Initially, the studies were not focused on school closures. Rather, the authors were conducting two distinct studies at Johnson and Franklin high schools, respectively.

The first author spent three years, from October 2011 to June 2014, at Johnson High. In early 2011, the school received word of their consideration for shuttering. The author spent three years studying the school's response to the closure threat, capturing the constellation of strategies that the school set in motion with hopes to distinguish itself from other targeted institutions. Interviews with 151 participants and hundreds of hours of participant observation among administrators, teachers, and students in their classroom illuminated these strategies. The author also conducted 24 interviews with district and state-level administrators, as well as participant observation in district offices, city hall councils, and community organizing meetings in the larger neighborhood of the school, in order to capture the scaled impact of school reform and closure policy on the school's response.

**Table 1. Case Study 1 Interviews by Race and Gender**

Participants	Total	Black	White	Asian	Latino	Other	Female	Male
Students	94	15	4	61	12	2	40	54
School Staff	57	8	29	19	1	0	32	25
District Officials	24	6	12	3	1	2	9	15

The second author spent five years, from September 2008 through June 2013, at Franklin High School, a school that had been threatened for closure at least two distinct times during this period. She spent hundreds of hours at the high school examining archival materials and interviewing 51 students, teachers, and alumni about their experiences in the school and community. When the high school appeared on the list of 37 schools slated for closure, the author observed, documented, and analyzed the closure process as it unfolded—visiting the high school, attending city-wide rallies, and interviewing key stakeholders (including school district officials, teachers, students, and alumni) about the effects of the proposed closure on the school climate, teacher morale, and student engagement.

**Table 2. Case Study 2 Interviews by Race and Gender**

Participants	Total	Black	White	Asian	Latino	Other	Female	Male
Alumni	26	16	10	0	0	0	15	11
School Staff	11	6	5	0	0	0	9	2
Community Members	14	12	2	0	0	0	8	6

When the School District of Philadelphia initiated conversations about school closures and leaked the list of schools slated for closure in late 2011, Franklin and Johnson High School were on the list. Naturally, the two authors leveraged this turning point to understand the reasons why these schools were on the closure lists, the reactions that the school community had to the school closures, and ultimately, the arguments that educators, families, and youth made to save their buildings. We engaged in a comparative, multi-sited ethnographic analysis of our data to examine the racialized dimensions of the school closure process, and we began this analysis post-closure of the 2012 and 2013 mass closures. The sites afforded the authors a unique comparison to understand the racialized dimensions inherent in the process that the district engaged in to select and close schools.

From 2010 to 2012, private consultants assessed the school district’s public school system. The consultants selected nearly 180 schools for closure based on their district-wide audit of building quality, student enrollment, and academic achievement. The fact that both schools were on the school closure list made sense. Built and opened in 1914, Franklin and Johnson had buildings that needed significant repairs. For years, school administrators had struggled to raise scores on state-mandated tests. Both schools had experienced similar enrollment declines due to population loss and charter growth in their neighborhoods, one in Northwest Philadelphia—Franklin High School, and the other in South Philadelphia—Johnson High (see table).<sup>4</sup> The authors decided to conduct a comparative ethnographic study because these schools met the criteria for closure. However, as this analysis illustrates, school district officials closed Franklin in June 2013 and spared Johnson during the same round of mass closures. The question is, why? The most striking difference between these two schools is the racial composition of their student bodies. By 2013, Asian students constituted more than half of Johnson High’s population, while Franklin High remained 97 percent Black throughout the closure process. These demographics and their processing at the school and district levels, we argue, provide critical insights into the ways that race informed the school closures process and these schools’ divergent fates (see table 1).

**Table 3. Comparative Data on the Two Research Sites**

	<b>Franklin High School</b>	<b>Johnson High School</b>
Built in	1914	1914
Enrollment in 2000	1,802	1,193
Enrollment in 2013	728	696
Utilization Rate	36.4%	34.8%
Free and Reduced Lunch (FRL)	100%	100%
Percent Black (2010–2011)	97%	45%
Percent Asian (2010–2011)	0%	32%
Percent Black (2012–2013)	97%	29%
Percent Asian (2012–2013)	0%	51%

**Table 4. Percentage of students scoring “Below Basic” in reading and math by school and year**

Year	Johnson Math	Johnson Reading	Franklin Math	Franklin Reading
2000	64%	63%	81%	60%
2001	65	67	81	67
2002	65	62	80	62
2003	44	64	77	73
2004	65	64	81	77
2005	77	67	79	62
2006	48	58	77	66
2007	57	56	79	66
2008	60	51	80	65
2009	33	51	80	68
2010	20	26	74	67
2011	42	52	74	59
2012	22	32		
2013	22	33		

For the purposes of this paper, we used fieldnotes, interviews, and documents that we collected in our respective research sites. Even though our original studies were not focused on the school closure process, as the process unfolded, the conversations naturally led there. We coded these data that addressed the process from our two schools to understand how the school community understood and reacted to the school closure process and decisions. In addition, we jointly transcribed and coded over two-dozen community and district meetings’ video recordings from December 2012 to March 2013. At these meetings, community members, teachers, students, and district officials engaged in intense conversations and debates over both the closure process and justifications for school closures. The meetings illuminated the disagreements between school officials and the communities that might be affected by the closures.

In addition, we analyzed 200 pages of School District of Philadelphia (SDP) transcripts and documents to understand the conversations at the SRC meetings and the ways that SDP officials described the process to their constituents. These meetings and transcripts allowed us to analyze the rhetoric that the district used to justify the school closures and the discourse that the communities used to save their schools. Race, we argue, often framed these disagreements and discourse.

#### DATA CODING AND ANALYSIS

The authors developed a coding scheme to analyze data from their multiyear ethnographic studies and the data that the SDP officials published around the 2013 school closures described above. The coding scheme

built on the theoretical framework to examine how race-inflected notions of school deservingness and value circulated to construct rationales for the closure of particular schools over others. The authors triangulated the coded data from their respective school sites with the data from the community meetings and SDP documents to connect the processes in their schools to the larger conversations about school closures, community, and race throughout the city. We undertook an iterative coding process that allowed us to examine the data for themes that helped us answer our primary research question: How did the various stakeholders—district officials, educators, families, youth, and activists—use and disrupt racial discourses that enabled the officials to close a disproportionate number of schools in low-income, Black communities? More specifically, how did these stakeholders leverage racialized discourses to save Johnson High School, an increasingly Asian high school? Why were stakeholders unable to save Franklin High School, a majority Black high school? Given that the schools were identical according to the criteria used to prioritize schools for closure, what can the outcomes of the closure of Franklin and not Johnson reveal about the role of race in valuing some schools over others?

As this article illustrates, the discourses that these stakeholders used to claim that their school was worthy of staying open illustrates a role that race and racialized discourse played in the process that unfolded from 2010 to 2013. Even though district officials repeatedly insisted that the process was objective, our analysis highlights the moments that stakeholders evoked racialized discourse in this process. We argue that the racial composition of these schools provided a leverage point for one school—because it served an increasingly Asian population—and represented a death knell for the other—because it served a predominantly Black population. Despite the arguments that the Johnson and Franklin school communities focused on student safety and academic advancement, the school district officials saved Johnson because the racialized discourse of Asians as model minorities gave the school community a way to negotiate in a neoliberal era of reform—an era where Black communities (and their schools) seem disposable while others should be preserved. The racialized discourses that these communities evoked, coupled with the power that they had under neoliberal reforms, contributed to the school district's decision to close Franklin and keep Johnson open—a decision that reinforced systemic racism against and structural oppression of economically marginalized Black communities.

First, we coded the data for discourses that discussed race explicitly. In other words, we pulled data that mentioned racial demographics explicitly. Second, we coded the data for less explicit, but widely understood,

**Table 5. Examples from Coding Schema**

Codes	Themes	Data
Explicit Race Discourse	Racial Demographics	Data from 2010–2011 school year
References to Student Groups	References to Student Groups	<p>“The only reason we’re not closed is because we have our [Asians]. They come here all the way from Chinatown. Let’s be honest, when 15 [Asian] kids come in and are like ‘Oh, we want to go to your school,’ [the principal] is like, ‘Ok, sign em’ up!’”  <i>Interview, March 19, 2014, Johnson High School</i></p>
Student Achievement	Student Achievement	<p>“If you close [Franklin High School] where are the children going to go to school? Why would you relocate our children to King whose performance has declined? Why put them in an environment that they worked so hard to get out of?”  <i>Testimony, Day 2, School Closing Hearings, Franklin High School</i></p>
School Safety	School Safety	<p>“I am a graduate of Martin Luther King High School, 1979, and I never thought I’d be here trying to defend . . . when I was here at Martin Luther King there were a lot of behavioral issues between the schools, Germantown and Martin Luther King. I know that that has not changed. I was just talking to some children back there. I know that the rivalry has not died down and what protocols that you guys will have in place for these children who have so many behavioral issues, coming to school, walking to school, getting a ride, taking the bus. My concerns for my grandson is coming to the school, walking to school and being safe. There’s a lot of safety issues.”  <i>Testimony, December 11<sup>th</sup>, 2012 Northwest Planning Meeting</i></p>
		<p>“I mean, come on, you have zero issues with those kids [Asian students]. You have issues but you wouldn’t have fights, weapons, or things like that. You wouldn’t have those issues, ya know? And for a guy who’s been here 11 years, if that’s the way to keep it open, then I’m all for it.”  <i>Interview, March 19, 2014, Johnson High School</i></p>
		<p>“If they close the Asian high school and those kids go to other schools and get beat up, that would hurt their numbers and get them sued and they know that. It’s not my intention to make this into an Asian high school, but it would be great if it could be. It’s a neighborhood school so I have to take everybody. However, it doesn’t hurt to attract more Asian students because this district will never close down a majority Asian school.”  <i>Interview, May 1, 2014, Johnson High School</i></p>

**Table 5. Examples from Coding Schema (continued)**

Codes	Themes	Data
	Student/ School Value	<p>“[Closing Franklin High School] will further reinforce the mistrust for adults and force on them another unstable environmental change that so many of our children know too well. These changes harden kids; teachers see it every day. And though we try our best to counter what the world does to our children, how can we make our children happy and functional when the District decides that they are not worth the classroom to learn in?”</p> <p><i>Testimony, Day 1, School Closing Hearings, Franklin High School</i></p>



discourses on race. These discourses demonstrated the ways that district officials valued these communities, the ways that they discussed the safety of these neighborhoods, the importance of a school to the community, and the decline of the population. While these discussions are coded, they illustrate the ways that school district officials in Philadelphia and other urban areas affected by closures have promoted a veneer of objectivity in the closure process in spite of the known racial bias they exacted upon Black neighborhoods and communities. We blind coded the data and then compared the codes to increase the validity of the process. We started the process with the community meetings to understand how these stakeholders engaged in racial discourses in the citywide discussions of school closures, and then triangulated these findings with our data from our respective sites. Again, we blind coded the data and compared findings to increase the validity of the process.

## RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY

The authors are White females in their 30s. We met in graduate school at a university with a historic, sometimes fraught, relationship with the SDP, particularly with the schools in its neighboring communities. We were aware of this relationship during our respective fieldwork experiences and therefore tried to be sensitive to what our representation meant to the communities we built relationships with.

The first author volunteered in several nonprofit organizations in the Johnson High School neighborhood teaching ESL to refugee youth. She also volunteered in Johnson High's classrooms. It was this initial volunteer work that brought her into the school community when it received word of its potential closure as well as an impending budget crisis. The author's initial project was to study the camp-to-work transitions of refugee youth. She spent time volunteering at the school by helping these students with their applications, aiding teachers in their overcrowded classrooms, and attending community meetings with parents and nonprofits. Over the course of three years, the first author became embedded in the school, eventually becoming a community member by moving to the neighborhood. Throughout this time, the focus of her fieldwork shifted from first-generation Asian youth and their schooling experiences, to the ways in which the school was positioning them within their survival strategies.

Given her former experience as an ESOL teacher, she spent a disproportionate amount of time with Asian English Language Learners in their classrooms, therefore having more contact with their teachers and parents. These perspectives are more clearly marked in her data. She was

aware of this and worked to build relationships with Black students and staff in order to account for this discrepancy. She conducted more focus groups and interviews with these students and staff in the latter years of her fieldwork, yet acknowledges that race and her alignment with Asian students as a tutor in their classrooms made those relationships more difficult to establish.

The second author worked with the principal of Franklin High School for several years in graduate school. It was the relationship with this principal that afforded her the opportunity to conduct research at the school. When he left for another position in the school district, the author decided to focus on the history of neglect and inequality in the school and community. She leveraged the relationships that she had cultivated at the school under the principal's tenure to conduct the historical study and to gain access to the stakeholders who were concerned about its ultimate closure. When she made this research shift, she made a deliberate effort to work with local residents and activists to find and interview school alumni, teachers, and activists about Franklin's future. Many times she conducted these interviews with two Black male high school students, who at the time attended Germantown High School. These students were summer interns through a community-wide intergenerational oral history project and worked with her for four weeks during the summer. Other times, she conducted these interviews with active Black residents. The inclusion of these individuals in the process bridged a racial gap that might not have been possible without their participation. As one person told her, "we are willing to talk to you because you are trying to get the real story about what happened to our school."

## FINDINGS

### *The Fiscal Road to Closures*

The SDP, like many districts in post-industrial cities across the United States, has struggled historically to reconcile precipitous population loss and a declining tax base with rising rates of poverty, need, and infrastructure erosion in its schools (Cucchiara, 2013). As a democratic stronghold in a conservative state, the city and SDP have faced difficulty in securing supplemental funding to offset lost tax revenues, particularly for the district. In spite of the state's takeover of the district in 2001, representation has not delivered on its promise to equalize funding. Numerous lawsuits have plagued the district as parents and community groups have sued the district for chronic underfunding that has resulted in unsafe/unsanitary building conditions, sustained extracurricular programming

cuts, overcrowded classrooms, materials shortages, and violations of legally mandated accommodations for students with special needs (Graham, 2016a; McQuade, 2014; Roseman, 2016). Making national headlines in 2012, the district faced a \$330 million shortfall, resulting in the firing of 4,000 teachers and support staff and the slashing of supply budgets by upwards of 90 percent in June 2013 (Gabriel, 2013). Scholars, activists, and educators argued that gross underfunding and the overwhelming needs of educating students in a city with some of the highest poverty rates in the country have made it incredibly difficult to meet federal and state standards. State and district officials, on the other hand, routinely blame educators, families, and students for these results.

District officials contend that the low enrollment and dwindling resources spurred the school closures. Recent studies suggest that the expansion of charter schools over the past two decades in the city of Philadelphia played a significant role in the loss of funds and students. Federal and state-level mandates to expand school choice under both Bush's No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Obama's Race to the Top (RTT) education legislation pushed many urban districts across the country (Jack & Sludden, 2013). From 2002 to 2012, charter schools in Philadelphia more than doubled in number—from 43 to 96 (Bulkley, Henig, & Levin, 2010). This expansion contributed to the exodus of over 50,000 students from district schools. It is important to note that during this time, Philadelphia's students have become increasingly stratified across charters and neighborhood schools by socioeconomic status, race, and ability; this trend has mirrored patterns in other cities like Chicago, New York, and Washington, D.C. that have also experienced high charter growth (Lacireno-Paquet, Holyoke, Moser, & Henig, 2002; Miron et al., 2010). Neighborhood schools serve a 30% larger share of special needs students than charter and magnet high schools (Public Citizens for Children and Youth, 2015). Eighty percent of charter schools city-wide serve fewer English Language Learners than district schools on average (Public Citizens for Children and Youth, 2014). Overall, the effects of the 2008 recession, the state's inequitable funding formula, and the growth of charter schools generated a fiscal crisis in the school district: a fiscal crisis that prompted the examination of underutilized school buildings in the city.

From 2010 to 2012, school officials hired consultants—first from URS Corporation and then from Boston Consulting Group (BCG)—to conduct audits of district schools. The consultants generated a list of 180 schools for closure. These lists were based on an analysis of building quality (the costs to fix or maintain the school), school enrollment (whether the enrollment number matched the school's maximum capacity), academic performance (the school's performance on state-mandated

tests), and school climate (the number of violent incidents, school suspensions, and attendance rates) (Boston Consulting Group, 2012; Herold & Mezzacappa, 2011). When the consultants finished their assessments, school district officials held a series of community meetings and additional statistical testing to finalize a list of schools for closure.

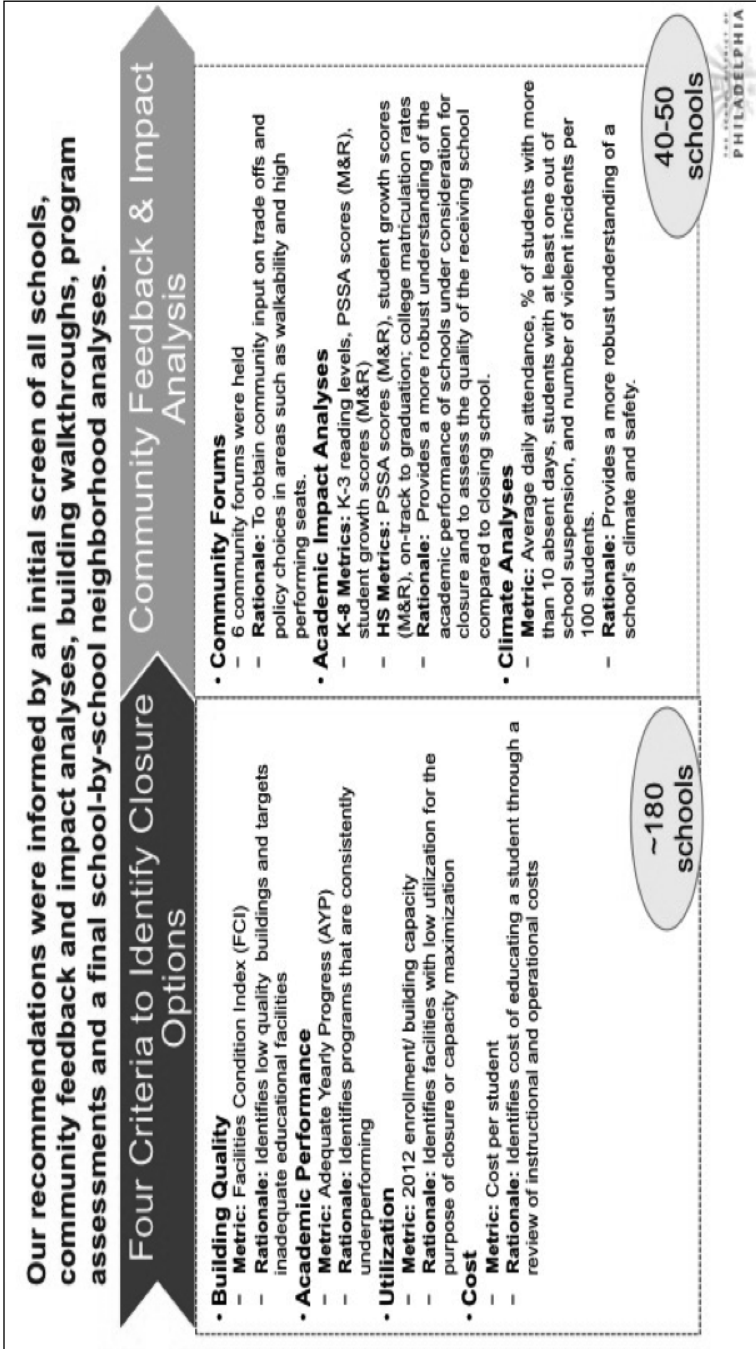
*Anti-democracy and the Smokescreen of “Community Input”*

While a complete excavation of this process is beyond the scope of this article, our paper focuses on the ways that these two school communities tried to save their schools and what value their strategies carried in the neoliberal education market. We pay particular attention to the racialized discourse in these processes and understand the final decisions to close one school and save the other as reflective of how race undergirded school selection. We argue that these discourses of school failure illustrate the mechanism that codified devaluation of Black communities over others. District officials in interviews and community meetings throughout December 2012 and January 2013 consistently evoked a sense of crisis to justify the extremity of mass closures. Relying on what Naomi Klein (2007) refers to as “shock doctrine,” or public disorientation following a major crisis, community meetings served as perfunctory veneer for democratic participation as emotionally wrought testimonies begging the district for a moratorium on action clashed with a discourse of emergency that officials championed. In what follows, we will first examine the ways that school officials and families responded to the district’s decision to close schools, and then provide a close examination of how this process played out at Johnson and Franklin high schools.

In a public statement in late December 2012, Dr. William Hite, the superintendent that oversaw the 2013 school closures, said, “We are undertaking this process now because we have few options, but we also believe that at the end, we will have a school system that is better run, safer and higher performing” (Hite, 2013).<sup>5</sup> Arguing that the district could barely afford to operate its schools, Hite pointed out that continuing to pour precious resources into schools with high percentages of empty seats would be irresponsible (Hurdle, 2013).

School district officials hosted community meetings from December 2012 to January 2013 to gather feedback about the school closures process from educators, families, and youth. Throughout these meetings, district officials crafted a narrative of inevitability around closures that privileged technocratic and fiscal rationales for the necessity of closures. An impending budget cut at the state level that would drastically leave the district \$300 million short in its operating expenses for 2013–2014 bolstered these

Figure 3. School closure methodology—Timeline and process



Source: School District of Philadelphia, 2012

arguments. While the methodological rollout of closures began as early as 2010 with the hiring of URS Corporation, the first consulting firm to conduct a district audit, district officials deployed the narrative of crisis to rebut parents, youth, and other community members at meetings who requested closure moratorium. Officials argued that closures would help the district to avoid fiscal insolvency and eventual collapse, give them the funds to help their schools compete in the educational marketplace, and reclaim students from charter schools. As questions around the racialized effects of closures emerged in community meetings, district officials, particularly Hite, consistently harkened to a future of fiscal ruin to justify their actions. For example, in a December 2012 community meeting, Hite and a parent had the following exchange:

**Parent:** I'm a product of the Philadelphia Public School system. I graduated from FitzSimons and Gratz—two schools that are currently closed.<sup>6</sup> You guys say that the numbers of the students are down—how can the public get access to these numbers? How do we know that these numbers are accurate? How do we know that you're not playing a game with us just to close these schools? The majority of the schools that are closing are closing in the African-American communities and the majority in North Philadelphia. Why?

**Hite:** There is a part of the city that's being more impacted than others. We looked at the students attending the schools in those neighborhoods and many parents are exercising choice to send students elsewhere. There is a disproportionate impact on North Philadelphia. This is about making sure that we can provide better academic options for every student. We can't do that with thousands of vacant seats. We have to provide better academic options because individuals who can select are selecting out for better quality options. We're trying to utilize these investments to improve academic programming in other facilities.

**Parent:** Our children's education is not always about efficiency. It's about community. And you're getting rid of that. (Community Meeting, South Philadelphia High School, December 12, 2012)

As community members like the parent above pointed out that the school closure list targeted schools in the city's poorest and most segregated neighborhoods, officials and Hite appealed to the language of the market, conflating race and poor educational quality to explain the turn to closures. School officials routinely sanitized the partisan politics behind state and district disinvestment in the neighborhood schools over time

that contributed to the declining infrastructure, climates, and academic performance (Cucchiara, 2013). From this vantage point, the choice exercised by parents in sending their children to charter schools delineated the value of charter schools versus neighborhood schools within the market, placing the onus squarely on neighborhood schools themselves for determining their worth.

Individual interviews with several district officials responsible for rolling the closures indicated a clinging to technocratic narratives of crisis and school failure as a way to justify the lack of transparency and democracy around decision-making. One official, when asked to recount how individual schools were selected and then narrowed following the community meetings, described the initial process of selection.

Ms. Crow: From an academic perspective, we look at AYP as a flag, so if you think about it, a filter mechanism. From that point, we look at the test scores by grade level. Over time, we look at their growth score. We look at their feedback score, their attendance, their violent incidents, and suspension rates. So basically it's a mixture of climate and academic data in our decision-making process. We look at the facility condition index which basically determines what cost it would take to bring the school back to good repair. From a student impact perspective, we look at how far the average student would be going to transfer. From a financial perspective, we look at how much savings closing the school would yield. So those were kind of the chunks. We went from academic to climate to facilities to finances. So it was fairly comprehensive across the board. (Interview, September 8, 2013)

In these moments between officials and communities, we see an inscription of value onto particular schools that pivots on the deployment of technical vocabulary. Anthropologists have long noted the mystique of language that is tethered to society's high-status groups like doctors, lawyers, and scientists (Latour & Woolgar, 1986; Mehan, 2000; West, 1984). Invoking the terms developed by managerial consultants, district officials privileged the framing of the district's predicament as one of amendable inefficiencies. Yet when asked about the selection of individual schools after schools were pooled for consideration, district officials acknowledged that most of the decisions were made by a small group of officials and ultimately ratified by the School Reform Commission, the unelected board in charge of governing the school district. When asked if community meetings and their testimonies informed selection, answers were vague.

Ms. Lord: It's a case-by-case basis. I have to be honest with you (pause) . . . it's a little bit hard to disaggregate because we we're trying to close so many schools at once. A lot of it was messy. (Interview, May 4, 2014)

While acknowledging the racialized implications for particular communities, officials leveraged the power of this language to trump concerns over social inequities resulting from their actions. Across community meetings and interviews with officials, this specific representation of the problem perpetuated violence by first silencing community members that decried the underlying anti-Black racism texturing the ultimate selection of schools. Second, the policy process became a technique through which austerity and disposability was naturalized and de-democratized, and put into place by officials in the name of averting crisis (Klein, 2007). By accepting at face value the technical terms that framed these schools as poor quality, the district created a policy mechanism that circumvented democratic process and decision-making around closures and rendered failing school communities as disposable—schools that were located in Black communities. Community members voiced concerns over violence after schools merged, truancy, and reinforcing the school-to-prison pipeline through education deserts in historically Black neighborhoods. Yet district officials clung to the narrative of inefficiency and crisis, ultimately making decisions independent of community input. We do not suggest that district officials targeted Black schools intentionally, but that they proceeded with their disproportionate closing knowing that these communities would disproportionately suffer adverse consequences.

*“They’ll never close us with more Asians”: Resisting Closure at Johnson High*

While the district did not execute its first round of mass school closures until June 2012, rumors of the closures began circulating as early as June 2011, when the *Philadelphia Notebook*, a popular source of school news in the city, leaked URS Corporation’s first compilation of recommended schools (Herold & Mezzacappa, 2011). Johnson High, the first author’s site, fell on this list, inciting a flurry of administrative strategizing to keep the school open. Similar to Franklin High’s profile, Johnson boasted precipitously declining enrollments, serious structural issues including a collapsing roof, and poor academic performances on standardized tests. However, a small boom in first-generation Asian immigrant students following alleged attacks on this population at a nearby neighborhood high school one year prior began to give Johnson High a distinct reputation. Prior to these attacks, the school was only 25% Asian and that figure climbed to 31% after the attacks.



**Figure 4. Water Damage and Black Mold, Johnson High School Classroom**



Following the school's placement on the URS closure list, Johnson High's media portrayals stood in dramatic contrast to those of other considered schools. In a widely circulated newspaper, a journalist said it was "surprising" to see Johnson High on the closure list given what a "special place" it was for so many first-generation immigrant youth. Referring to its "racial harmony" and "unusually safe" atmosphere for a neighborhood school, the journalist, like many others that covered the story, likened the school's potential closure to an "educational travesty." "There's one story that a spreadsheet tells you. But then you go to a school like Johnson, and there's that 'soft data' that's equally important." This "soft data" traded on perceptions of Asians as model minorities, students that embodied a form of educational aspiration that bolstered the school's brand (Fong, 2008; Lee, 1996). To close Johnson High would eliminate a haven for students that district and school officials framed as an institution investing in their educations and aspirations for college.

As Johnson students and teachers processed media valuations, they realized that their first-generation Asian youth gave them two advantages. First, the school community perceived Asian students as central to improving both their "hard" and "soft" data. A teacher explained:

The only reason we're not closed is because we have our [Asians]. They come here all the way from Chinatown. Let's be honest, when 15 [Asian] kids come in and are like "Oh, we want to go to your school," [the principal] is like, "OK, sign 'em up!" It also helps because as we grow in numbers it's harder for them to close us down.

This school used to house 1,200 kids so I mean, we need to be up to 700 or 800 to be safe. Two years ago we were pushing 500. We've gotten 200 kids from all over the city. I mean, come on, you have zero issues with those kids. You have issues but you wouldn't have fights, weapons, or things like that. You wouldn't have those issues, ya know? And for a guy who's been here 11 years, if that's the way to keep it open, then I'm all for it. (Interview, March 19, 2014)

As this teacher explains, “soft” data and “hard” data around “school quality” are mutually constitutive. While Johnson High’s teachers and administrators knew that their first-generation Asian students in particular would perhaps not perform well on tests due to limited English fluency, they believed that their boasting of strong attendance and “good behavior” would contribute to a positive culture and reputation that would spur further enrollment and allow them to rise above the fray of considered schools in at least two categories of evaluation: enrollment and climate. Returning to earlier media representations of the school, the production of hard and soft data become linked processes that hinged on the racialization and valuation of youth subjects. These administrators and teachers traded on the same model minority tropes circulated by the media to build their school brand. Yet in the process, the school took on a selective mission, only operating in the service of students seen as valuable enough to save from closure.

These youth also allowed the school to exploit a cultural politics in the larger neighborhood that positioned Asian students as endangered by Black students and in need of a safe haven. Aware that the district desired to avoid further lawsuits, administrators and teachers believed that the recruitment and retention of increasing numbers of Asian students would insulate the school from the threat of closure. Conversations with the school’s principal reflected this logic:

The district is focused strictly on one thing—numbers. It’s about saving money, utilizing space, and not getting sued. They do not take into consideration the uniqueness of each school unless it has something to do with those three things. So you have to beat them at their own game. If they close the Asian high school and those kids go to other schools and get beat up, that would hurt their numbers and get them sued and they know that. It’s not my intention to make this into an Asian high school, but it would be great if it could be. It’s a neighborhood school so I have to take everybody. However, it doesn’t hurt to attract more Asian students because this district will never close down a majority Asian school. (Interview, May 1, 2014)

Alluding to the political capital that Asian students would afford the school in a hostile district climate, the principal organized strategies around the recruitment of more Asian students in the greater catchment area's elementary schools, as well as bringing in nonprofit partners that worked specifically with this population. In conversations, I learned that several of these nonprofit partners were affiliated with Asian American groups throughout the city and, a few years prior to the closures, had been active in a lawsuit against the school district involving violence against Asian American students at another neighborhood school. Many had lobbied to keep the school open to protect Asian American students from bullying and attacks by native-born, African American students at another neighborhood high school (Fieldnote, January 9, 2014). Teachers and administrators voiced the importance of this political coalition of partners in terms of keeping the threat of another lawsuit against the district alive, bolstering the school's political position for preservation.

Again, racial triangulation became central to determining the value that Johnson High not only had in relation to other schools, but also to the district through the possibility of an expensive lawsuit. School value was therefore forged as the school interpolated the anti-Black messaging inherent to the closure methodology and crafted strategies around distancing themselves politically and demographically from associations with Black youth. These strategies included not only recruiting Asian students from across catchment lines and courting community partnerships with organizations that worked exclusively with Asian groups, but also instituting policies that would minimize the enrollment and visibility of Black youth that they felt would damage their reputation. Conversations with the school secretary revealed that the principal would often not allow students with a record of behavioral issues to enroll at Johnson High if they were from outside the catchment, and these students were almost always Black. However, the principal would enroll first-generation Asian students indiscriminately as most of them did not come to the school with records.

I mean, every time a student comes in, the principal asks them a set of questions and why they're here, and they also look at the address. If the student lies beyond the catchment and they have a lot of discipline issues at their old school—usually a charter—then he doesn't have to take them, and he won't. But if they're in the catchment, he has to take them, so usually we'll get like two or three kids in the two days per week that I'm here that are like that. If the kid is a good kid, doesn't have issues, or doesn't have a record because they're just coming to the country, then he takes them even if they're not in the catchment. They are usually Asian kids. (Interview, May 12, 2014)

Aside from creating an enrollment method that disparately enrolled Asian students and excluded Black students, the principal also kept students deemed “disciplinary risks” in two isolated classrooms in the school’s basement adjacent to a “dean’s room” where students served in-school suspensions. These students entered through a separate entrance and did not interact with the rest of the student body. Ironically termed the “Success Academy,” these students had a shortened school day. The principal and staff justified the measure, citing that the school was “one violent incident away from being closed” (Interview, October 14, 2013) and therefore could not risk the “problems” these identified students might create in hallways or overcrowded classrooms. To teachers, the Success Academy was a “necessary evil” and would keep the Asian students returning to Johnson without fear of violence (Interview, March 23, 2014). In 2013, while the school was 53% Asian, 80% of the Success Academy was African-American.

**Table 6. Racial Breakdown of the Success Academy<sup>8</sup>**

Race	Male	Female
Black	19	9
Caucasian	3	0
Mixed <sup>9</sup>	2	1
Asian	0	1

The intertwined processes of risk management of Black youth and elevation and attraction of Asian youth had profound effects on the composition of the study body by 2013. The formerly small, stable Asian population had almost doubled its percentage of the overall school population in a four-year period.

**Table 7. Racial Composition of Johnson High School 2008–2014**

Year	Asian	Black	Latino	White
2008	27%	50%	9%	14%
2009	28%	47%	10%	13%
2010	32%	45%	9%	12%
2011	39%	39%	9%	11%
2012	43%	35%	9%	11%
2013	50%	29%	12%	8%
2014	53%	29%	15%	8%

Staff credited the school’s preservation to the racialized rebranding strategy set into motion in 2009 by the former principal and sustained by the

current principal. After escaping the 2013 closure of 24 schools, a veteran security guard commented on what he perceived to be the school's future:

I think Johnson High will be here for a while because of the climate and because of the type of students the principal is accepting here. Well, it's first and foremost a neighborhood school, but there are students that can apply here outside the catchment that, in my opinion, may end up turning it into a 100% Asian school. If that were the case, I believe they would never close us. (Interview, January 16, 2014)

By exploiting the model minority stereotype, recruiting and enrolling Asian students, and truncating access to Black students, Johnson High administrators and staff were able to weaponize race as a political and semiotic tool. In doing so, they manipulated both their "soft" and "hard" data to rise above the fray of considered schools and evade closure. Ultimately, their strategies succeeded when the district retracted the school's death sentence in late 2012. These data yield insight into how individual schools read and responded to the anti-Black undercurrent running through the school closure rollout. For Johnson High administrators, Black students, particularly those with a record of violent incidents, represented a risk to their fate as a school. Not only did they damage their enrollment numbers, but also prevented the administrators from building a reputation that could promote their cause among district officials making decisions. By creating a "safe haven" for Asian students, school officials traded on stereotypes of Asian students as innocent and aspirational and Black students as threatening and apathetic, effectively pushing a narrative that they believed public-relations minded district officials could not deny. We do not trivialize the safety that Johnson High's administrators worked to ensure for Asian students in not closing Johnson. However, we will argue in the next section that safety concerns among Black community members and students at Franklin were not taken as seriously by district officials as Johnson High's concerns when they decided to close Franklin.

*Saving a Historical Landmark: The Campaign to Keep Franklin High School Open*

When school district officials announced their plans to close Franklin High School, they proposed transferring the majority of Franklin students to Martin Luther, Jr. High School or Roxborough High School—two neighboring schools that, like Franklin, enrolled an almost entirely Black student population. Even though the schools shared similar racial demographics, Franklin High School and Martin Luther King, Jr. High School had a tumultuous history mired in neighborhood rivalries that in the late

1960s and 1970s erupted into gang violence in both schools.<sup>10</sup> Fearing that the school district's plan might actually increase violence when Franklin students transferred to Martin Luther King, Jr., administrators, teachers, and families repeatedly questioned the school district's plans and argued that closing Franklin High School might indeed spark racial unrest.<sup>11</sup> While these concerns were not limited to the proposed Franklin–Martin Luther King, Jr. merger, Franklin and MLK alumni repeatedly questioned the school district's preparations to control violence in their neighborhood and communities. One MLK alumna said:

I am a graduate of Martin Luther King High School, 1979. . . . When I was here at Martin Luther King there were a lot of behavioral issues between the schools, Franklin and Martin Luther King. I was just talking to some children back there. I know that the rivalry has not died down and what protocols that you guys will have in place for these children who have so many behavioral issues, coming to school, walking to school, getting a ride, taking the bus. My concerns for my grandson is coming to the school, walking to school and being safe. There are a lot of safety issues . . . and I'm wondering what you guys are going to do about that. (Community Meeting, January 15, 2013)<sup>12</sup>

School district officials repeatedly responded to these comments with assurances that they were working closely with the school district and police to monitor the situation. Although many educators, families, students, and alumni had serious concerns that this school district's plans might spark a new wave of youth violence, the leaders of the campaign to keep Franklin High School open deliberately avoided this narrative because it promoted the racialized tropes and stereotypes of low-income urban Black youth as dangerous gang members whose very presence generated violence in the city's schools (Alexander & West, 2012; Anderson, 1999; Gregory et al., 2010).

Instead, from the moment that they heard that the school was slated for closure, elected officials, Franklin alumni, and community activists argued that Franklin High School had served as an anchor in the community for nearly 100 years, and thus deserved to be spared from closure. To make their case stronger, Franklin's residents and families argued that school district officials had neglected the institution for decades, and that finally, under the leadership of Franklin's new principal, students had demonstrated significant academic gains on the state's standardized tests. In addition to these gains, state officials removed the school from the list of persistently dangerous high schools due to a significant decrease in the number of violent incidents at the school. Even though the school had made some

improvements during the current principal's tenure, it remained classified as a Corrective Action II—a category that deemed the school “failing” under the federal No Child Left Behind Act mandates. Rather than focus on the standardized tests, Franklin students testified about the strengths of the educational programs offered at the school and the adverse effects that the school's closure might have on the younger students at the school. In these testimonies, students emphasized the trauma that the school's closure might have on students who regarded their school and their teachers as family. In a citywide meeting, one student said:

When you shut down a neighborhood school then children do not go to alternative schools, drop out rates go up. Franklin High School should not been closed. We have motivating and successful programs that have taken place here for some time now. We are a family so when you shut us down, you will break up a family. This simple action has major consequences for the community and will take years to heal. Can you really afford that? (Community Meeting, January 15, 2013)<sup>13</sup>

When it became clear that these arguments had little persuasive power, the committee to save Franklin High School proposed the creation of a K–12 school within the high school. Their proposal aimed to combine nearby Haines Elementary School and Washington High School, a magnet program that had once been housed inside Franklin High School in the 1960s. The objective was to raise student enrollment and increase the building's utilization rate, which one Franklin parent noted was “technically, the real reason why they're closing” the school. Due to increased enrollment in the city's ever-expanding number of charter schools in the community, Franklin High School's enrollment had shrunk from 943 in 2010 to 676 in 2012. Stephen Kinsey, the newly elected state representative for the area and a Franklin High School alumnus, understood that “we need to find a way to get some other students in here.” Kinsey and the others on the committee strongly believed that their K–12 school proposal represented a way to do that, which might in turn convince school officials to keep the nearly 100-year-old school open.<sup>14</sup> Community members also urged school district officials to consider converting the empty space in the school into a mixed-use space with local businesses or as a center for senior citizens.<sup>15</sup>

Although these proposals addressed the district officials' concerns about underutilization, Franklin High School remained on the closure list. On February 22, 2013, only a few days before the SRC cast its final vote to close Franklin High School, Vera Primus, the President of Franklin's alumni association and leader of the effort to save the school, testified before the SRC and said:

We submitted a proposal as instructed by the February 6th deadline focusing on the schools in our community, Franklin High School Promise Academy, Fulton Elementary and Roosevelt Middle School, which if approved would keep our students safe and in their communities. . . . Again, it was our surprise that Franklin is still on the list of schools to be closed. . . . If you close Franklin High School . . . where are the children going to go to school? Why would you relocate our children to King, whose performance has declined? Do you realize that the current damage that you created on all these students who every day [are] worried about what is going to happen to them in next four months? . . . The students of Franklin High School have been a victim of this District for years who have shown little to no respect to who they are. We ask that you revisit our plan to expand Franklin to a K to 12 and don't destroy the young people. They deserve better. Our students are not seats or dollars. They're our future. Attached is a revised proposal, a petition of over 1,600 supporters to support our mission. Thank you. (Community Meeting, February 22, 2013)<sup>16</sup>

Despite Primus's pleas and support for the nearly 100-year-old high school in the community, on March 7, 2013, the SRC voted to close 23 public schools, including Franklin High School.<sup>17</sup> The students who remained at the school were relocated to neighboring high schools—most went to Martin Luther King, Jr. High School (Interview with second author, July 13, 2015). Franklin High School, a Black comprehensive high school, closed its door for the final time at the end of the 2012–2013 school year. As one resident remarked, the closure of three public schools—including Franklin High School—deprived the neighborhood of “anchor institutions that have stabilized the neighborhood over the years.”<sup>18</sup>

## IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This be a done deal. This deal be greased and rollin' forward. I don't even know why I come to these things. —Parent, Community Meeting over closing of Samuel B. Huey Elementary, November 17, 2015

Throughout this article we have argued that the lack of a democratic process around school closures as well as the district's discourse of crisis and school failure clouded the racial politics undergirding the disproportionate closing of predominantly Black high schools. Our comparative case studies, Johnson High and Franklin High, had similar school profiles. Both schools suffered from the effects of infrastructural neglect and population loss—a



product of charter school expansion across the district and historical divestment in funding for the SDP. Each school wore the marks of nearly a decade of privatization that has siphoned resources and students to charter schools. Returning to the notion of “slow violence,” Johnson and Franklin high schools demonstrate the faulty assumptions of the school choice movement and the decades of district neglect. As one teacher said:

The school had been deprived of resources for years, the student body had been siphoned off by magnet and charter schools, and staff were driven off by district initiatives and administrative changes. [The SRC’s decision to close the school] felt like a setup.” (Interview with anonymous Franklin High School teacher, April 24, 2014)

Instead of school improvement, competition between schools contributed to the decline of resources and political will to improve neighborhood schools desperate for supports (Aggarwal et al., 2012; Nixon, 2011). In other words, Johnson and Franklin high schools stood trial for a long line of policy decisions in the last decade that have increased accountability for neighborhood school performance while simultaneously undermining schools’ capacity to realize loftier performance goals (Neckerman, 2007).

However, if we examine these case studies side by side, Johnson High and its enrollment of Asian students allowed the school to secure the political capital afforded to model minorities in neoliberal education markets in order to rise above the amalgam of majority Black high schools. The school ultimately remained open, removed from the first list of potential closures in late 2012 as the selection narrowed, and grew its Asian population to almost 60%. Racial violence preceding the announcement of the closures only strengthened the power of Asian community groups and organizations, and therefore the clout they carried in shaping citywide politics. In contrast, Black community members at Franklin High did not have access to the same narrative or ability to exploit a valued racial niche to rebrand their school. It remained a consistent consideration and faced closure with 23 other schools in June 2013. If the district had followed its methodology with absolute fidelity, both schools would have closed.

This is not to say that district officials compared Johnson and Franklin high schools directly in their calculations or statements to the public. As we demonstrated, the veil drawn by district officials and the consulting firms that rolled out the closure deliberately obfuscates exactly how they arrived at the final 30 schools and therefore minimized resistance to the closures at the time. Yet from schools’ racial reading of the criteria through which schools were deemed “failing” and worthy of sparing and their subsequent responses to this reading, we can deduce an anti-Black valence (Dumas, 2013). These case studies bring into relief how the production of school

value lies in a school's figurative and literal distancing from Black communities, specifically in the case of Johnson High. The application of market rationalities to historically significant, community-driven spaces like neighborhood schools pits neighborhood schools against one another. These rationalities eschew "race" and replaces it with terms like "quality" and "failure" to justify their closing. Therefore, instead of forming political solidarities across schools to fight these measures, schools must read the threat of the market and differentiate themselves from the fray of considered schools in order to survive.

Returning to Cacho's (2012) theory of social death, we can see that school, and subsequently community value, become relational and "ascribed through explicitly . . . disavowing relationships to already devalued and disciplined categories of deviance" (p. 19). Across these constructions of school value ran a thread of racialized valuation of these two school communities, informing radically different perceptions of justice and violence in relation to their closure. Threading the "soft data" of both Johnson and Franklin high schools is a degree of racial triangulation that pits the relative value of one school with a majority Asian population against that of a school with a majority Black population (Kim, 1999; Xu & Lee, 2013).

Through both the media and the narratives of the schools themselves, particularly Johnson High's, we see an invocation of race as it relates to notions of quality and value of the school to closure. More simply, the "shame" in closing Johnson, in spite of its similar performance statistics, condition, and enrollment, would be a far greater loss than the loss of Franklin. Such a comparison shows how racial politics insidiously coalesce with market rationalities to produce inequitable and disastrous outcomes for schools in the poorest neighborhoods of the city. Here, the media does not account for the stratifying effects of school choice that allow for families with the cultural, social, and financial capital to choose gentrifying neighborhoods and navigate the complex lottery system around magnet and charter schools. This omission naturalizes the "failure" of the schools that they attend and lays the blame on the families for not seeking out alternative opportunities in the emergent school choice market.

The School District of Philadelphia was not unique in its methodology for closing schools. Urban districts across the country, from Chicago to Detroit to Washington, D.C., have also relied on a process of aggregating data along building costs, utilization, academic performance, and climate to justify the mass closure of neighborhood schools (Basu, 2007; A. Bierbaum, 2018; Lipman, 2011). Like Philadelphia, they have faced stark opposition in their rollout and eschewed democratic decision-making among diverse community stakeholders in order to swiftly close schools, often using fiscal "crisis" as a rhetorical device to steamroll resistance

(Ewing, 2015; Good, 2016). The prevalence of both closures and resistance suggest that this is not an isolated string of events, but rather a process that continues to unfold repeatedly in districts serving majority low-income populations of color. Throughout the writing of this article, the SRC voted to close three other elementary schools in Philadelphia and reopen them as charter schools in January 2016 (Graham, 2016b). The parent in the opening quote voiced her frustration at an information meeting held at Samuel B. Huey Elementary, a K–8, majority Black elementary school in West Philadelphia, in November 2015, prior to the January 2016 vote to close the school. She and other parents pleaded with district officials to place a moratorium on the closure until resources and staffing from three years of continuous budget cuts were returned to the school. District officials dismissed their feedback, inciting a walkout of exasperated parents, angry that they had worked a 10-hour day, cooked dinner, and mustered the energy to attend a meeting staged perfunctorily by the district.

While it might be easy to fault the parents from Huey Elementary for not offering the district officials an alternative plan, Franklin High’s experience demonstrates that even detailed, feasible alternative plans are often drafted, presented, and go unheeded. Such findings raise questions about closure-as-reform as a form of faux democracy in public education. When no process exists to take up and act upon community input with transparency, district officials erode community trust in their decisions and undermine future community participation and democratic spirit around school reform. Furthermore, legitimate concerns around safety, lopsided school closure geographies, and the politics of school selection that disproportionately and adversely impact poor Black neighborhoods are ignored. These findings further suggest that while community input is no doubt messy and difficult to harness effectively, a veneer of objectivity and democracy followed by backroom, political decisions around school selection only reinforce a climate of distrust and conspiracy among school communities. We have shown that these politics within the closure process inform a devaluation of low-income communities of color over others, carrying racialized valences. Our participants noticed this and testified to it repeatedly and widely at both the school level and on public record in an effort to disrupt the marketized logics driving the closures.

For policymakers and districts carrying out closures, our aim is not to make a case for or against them. The difficult realities of the school choice era where districts are struggling to support two “separate but unequal” education systems in their cities—one of charters and magnet schools, the other of traditional neighborhood schools—elude any simple policy recommendation (Public Citizens for Children and Youth, 2015). Pennsylvania, among other states like Illinois, has been classified as

“savagely inequitable” in its funding formula (Baker, 2014), simultaneously pushing “choice” as a educational failure antidote while also disinvesting in public education. For poor districts like Philadelphia and Chicago that heavily rely on state funding in their budgets, fluctuations in state monies have injected high degrees of fiscal instability into their districts. Coupled with state mandates to expand charter schools seats and pay per-capita rates to charters, districts like Philadelphia must do more with less in their neighborhood schools. If districts continue to expand “choice” without the injection of more resources and funds, they will have to close district schools and other charter schools alike or risk fiscal collapse.

We do not wish to resolve this political dystopia here, but rather to show that there are enormous social, economic, and civic costs to closures, the ultimate outcome of unfettered choice expansion coupled with disinvestment. We have demonstrated that the swift, anti-democratic school closure rollouts that center performance data and decenter community input marginalize cities’ most vulnerable neighborhood communities by removing their schools as anchoring institutions, as well as removing their agency as neighborhood democracies. We suggest that social death is therefore not a circumscribed outcome of closure as school communities of color are systematically and disproportionately extinguished. Instead, we encourage education researchers to consider how the closure-as-policy creates new derivatives of social exclusion and disenfranchisement for American cities’ most vulnerable youth and their families, as well as weakens the role of civic engagement in shaping urban school reform. Further, in encouraging schools to compete by carving out market niches—brands built upon perceptions of selectivity and race—policymakers sacrifice an opportunity reimagine neighborhood schools as democratic spaces worthy of all of the students that walk through their doors.

## NOTES

1. The School District of Philadelphia, “School Closure Hearings: Day 1.” Retrieved on January 23, 2016, from [http://webgui.phila.k12.pa.us/uploads/8S/4W/8S4WXhYkxTBqQHbXXqsqGA/Manu\\_2013-School-Closure-Hearings\\_Day-1\\_022113.pdf](http://webgui.phila.k12.pa.us/uploads/8S/4W/8S4WXhYkxTBqQHbXXqsqGA/Manu_2013-School-Closure-Hearings_Day-1_022113.pdf)

2. The Bush Administration signed the No Child Left Behind Act into law in 2002 to increase the federal government’s role in closing the achievement gap. High-stakes testing as well as other accountability measures became tied to federal funding for education (Klein, 2015).

3. “Johnson High” and “Franklin High” serve as pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of participants.

4. This was an excerpt taken from an interview with WHY? public radio’s host, Marty Moss-Coane.

5. Simon Gratz is a former district-run neighborhood high school in Philadelphia that was closed and reopened by Mastery Charter Schools. Thomas Fitzsimons is a former district-run neighborhood school that is now operated by KIPP Charter Schools.

6. Because the authors’ IRB required them to keep their schools anonymous, the articles in which these quotes appeared are un-cited.

7. Anonymous Franklin High School teacher, Interview by Author, July 13, 2015; Anonymous Franklin High School teacher, Interview by Deborah Grill, May 4, 2014.

8. Martin Luther King, Jr. High School alumna testimony, FMP Meeting-Martin Luther King, Jr. High School, Northwest Planning Area, January 15, 2013. Retrieved on May 2, 2016 from <http://webgui.phila.k12.pa.us/offices/c/communications2/videos/fmp-meeting—martin-luther-king-high-school>

9. Franklin student testimony, FMP Meeting-Martin Luther King, Jr. High School, Northwest Planning Area, January 15, 2013. Retrieved on May 2, 2016 from <http://webgui.phila.k12.pa.us/offices/c/communications2/videos/fmp-meeting—martin-luther-king-high-school>

10. Aaron Moselle, “We Will Not Let Franklin High School Die,” *WHYY/Newsworks*. Retrieved on December 19, 2012 from [www.newsworks.org](http://www.newsworks.org)

11. Community Member and Franklin High School Alumna testimony, FMP Meeting-Martin Luther King, Jr. High School, Northwest Planning Area, January 15, 2013.

12. School District of Philadelphia, Public Hearings on School Closures, February 22, 2013. Retrieved on May 2, 2016, from [http://webgui.phila.k12.pa.us/uploads/QI/9N/QI9NR-FDir2HdP3D2mEozQ/Manu\\_2013-School-Closure-Hearings\\_Day-2\\_022213.pdf](http://webgui.phila.k12.pa.us/uploads/QI/9N/QI9NR-FDir2HdP3D2mEozQ/Manu_2013-School-Closure-Hearings_Day-2_022213.pdf)

13. Newswork Staff, "Philly School-Closings Vote Marked by Protests, Arrests, and Raw Emotion," March 8, 2013, *WHYY Newsworks*. Retrieved on December 29, 2015, from [newsworks.org](http://newsworks.org). Aaron Moselle, "Principal's Passionate Plea Goes Unheeded, District Mulls Possible Roosevelt Expansion," March 11, 2013, *WHYY Newsworks*. Retrieved on December 29, 2015, from [newsworks.org](http://newsworks.org)

14. Aaron Moselle, "Northwest Philly Community Fights to Keep Three 'Anchor Institutions' Open," February 22, 2013, *WHYY Newsworks*. Retrieved on December 29, 2015, from [newsworks.org](http://newsworks.org)

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