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## “It Just Doesn’t Add Up”: Disrupting Official Arguments for Urban School Closures with Counterframes

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**Abstract:** Mass school closures have become commonplace in urban school districts. To explain their actions, school system leaders often rely on a dominant frame that presents closures as an inevitable, data-driven, and politically neutral phenomenon in an educational landscape defined by shrinking budgets, demographic changes, and increased school choice. In response, research has typically focused on how communities tell counternarratives that seek to interrupt official accounts of school closures. Using a critical frame analysis of qualitative data from the 2013 school closure process in Washington, DC, I discuss another grassroots approach to disrupting school closures: counterframes. Drawing on Critical Race Theory and social movement theory, I discuss counterframes as discursive arguments that allow communities to directly challenge official rhetoric and offer alternatives. Findings show that communities in DC crafted counterframes that pushed back on the notion that the closures were inevitable, questioned the data guiding the process, and attempted to expose hidden agendas and interests behind shuttering schools. The article concludes with the relevance of counterframes to broader educational mobilizations as well as their limitations.

**Keywords:** school closures; urban school reform; social movements; framing

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**“Simply no cuadro”: Interrumpir los argumentos oficiales para el cierre de escuelas urbanas con *counterframes***

**Resumen:** El cierre de escuelas se ha vuelto común en los distritos escolares urbanos de EE.UU. Para explicar sus acciones, los líderes del sistema escolar a menudo confían en una narrativa dominante que presenta los cierres como un fenómeno inevitable, basado en datos y políticamente neutral en un entorno educativo definido por presupuestos ajustados, cambios demográficos y una mayor elección de escuela. En respuesta, la investigación a menudo se centra en cómo las comunidades cuentan narraciones contrarias que buscan alterar las cuentas oficiales de cierre de escuelas. Basado en un análisis de datos cualitativos del proceso de cierre de escuelas de 2013 en Washington, DC, analizo otro enfoque popular para interrumpir el cierre de escuelas: *counterframes*. Basado en la teoría crítica de la raza y la teoría del movimiento social, analizo los *counterframes* como argumentos discursivos que permiten a las comunidades desafiar la retórica oficial y ofrecer alternativas. Los hallazgos muestran que las comunidades en DC crearon *counterframes* que impulsaron la idea de que los cierres eran inevitables, cuestionaron los datos que guían el proceso e intentaron exponer agendas e intereses ocultos detrás de las escuelas cerradas. El artículo concluye con la relevancia de los *counterframes* para movilizaciones educativas más amplias, así como sus limitaciones.

**Palabras-clave:** cierre de la escuela; reforma escolar urbana; movimientos sociales; *counterframes*

**“Simplesmente não vale a pena”: Interromper argumentos oficiais para o fechamento de escolas urbanas com *counterframes***

**Resumo:** O fechamento de escolas tornou-se comum em distritos escolares urbanos dos Estados Unidos. Para explicar suas ações, os líderes do sistema escolar geralmente confiam em uma narrativa dominante que apresenta encerramentos como um fenômeno inevitável, orientado a dados e politicamente neutro em um cenário educacional definido por orçamentos reduzidos, mudanças demográficas e aumento da escolha da escola. Em resposta, a pesquisa geralmente se concentra em como as comunidades contam contra-narrativas que buscam interromper as contas oficiais de fechamento de escolas. Com base em uma análise de dados qualitativos do processo de fechamento de escolas em 2013, em Washington, DC, discuto outra abordagem popular para interromper o fechamento de escolas: os *counterframes*. Com base na teoria crítica da raça e na teoria do movimento social, discuto os *counterframes* como argumentos discursivos que permitem às comunidades desafiar a retórica oficial e oferecer alternativas. As descobertas mostram que as comunidades em DC criaram *counterframes* que empurraram a ideia de que os fechamentos eram inevitáveis, questionaram os dados que norteiam o processo e tentaram expor agendas e interesses ocultos por trás das escolas fechadas. O artigo conclui com a relevância dos *counterframes* para mobilizações educacionais mais amplas, bem como suas limitações.

**Palavras-chave:** fechamento de escolas; reforma escolar urbana; movimentos sociais; *framing*

## Introduction

As the number of urban public school closures continues to swell in the United States, so does the immense pushback from parents, communities, and youth working to safeguard their local institutions (Ewing, 2018; Fine, 2012; Green, 2017; Journey for Justice Alliance, 2014; Kirshner & Pozzoboni, 2011; Lipman, 2013; Noguera & Pierce, 2016; Pappas, 2018). Attempting to quiet the growing discontent, education officials present arguments for closures that they hope will convince students, families, and educators of their actions. Sticking to efficiency metrics related to utilization, academic performance, and fiscal management, they present what they see as unimpeachable evidence for the necessity of school closures in cities where public education is subject to tight budgets and competition to enroll students (Dowdall, 2011; Engberg, Gill, Zamorro, & Zimmer, 2012). When faced with these arguments for closures, how do affected communities respond? Often, research points to the power communities wield in telling counter stories or narratives that cut through discussions of utilization rates or educational failure to focus on themes like identity and community (Fine, 2012; Galletta & Ayala, 2012; Kirshner & Pozzoboni, 2011). However, after previously resisting school closures myself as a teacher and now studying these processes as a researcher, I have observed another important strategy employed by communities. While mining their lived experiences to craft impactful stories, I find that communities also voice discursive arguments that seek to disrupt the very logic behind school policy and demystify what is presented as a data-driven process.

Focusing on the local school district in Washington, DC, I analyze the city's most recent wave of mass closures that occurred in 2013 when officials decided to shutter 15 schools. By examining qualitative data from the community engagement process and supplemental interviews with community leaders, I demonstrate how communities actively and intentionally attempted to deconstruct the logic of school system leaders by presenting counterframes to the official reasons given for closures (Benford & Snow, 2000). In particular, they pushed back on the notion that the closures were inevitable, questioned the measures guiding the process, and attempted to expose hidden agendas and interests behind them. The findings build on earlier work on the logics of school closures and document another important approach to resistance: using counterframes to debunk the reasons for closure (Good, 2016; Lipman, 2013; Noguera & Pierce, 2016). Beyond the specific issue of school closures, I conclude with a discussion of how these findings can be applied more broadly to processes of mobilization around issues of educational inequality.

School closures are an important site for studying community engagement and mobilization around public education. First, they have become a relatively permanent fixture of contemporary schooling. In their longitudinal study across 26 states, Han et al. (2017) paint a grim picture of just how widespread an issue it is across the country, albeit with uneven impact on some communities. While the study tallied a total of 1,522 low-achieving public schools closures between 2006 and 2012, about 70% were in urban areas (Han et al., 2017). The sheer volume of shuttered schools has also spawned a nationwide movement focusing specifically on impacted urban communities. The Journey for Justice Alliance (2014) is a network of parent, youth, and community-led organizations from 30 cities across the country including New York, Chicago, and Detroit where collectively hundreds of schools have closed in recent years. The activist group has galvanized these local communities to take action through demonstrations, rallies, networking, and policy advocacy at local and federal levels. Second, when schools are closed, they bring to the fore a host of contextual factors related to public education, such as changing demographics, racial inequality, and urban redevelopment (Duncan-Shippy, 2019). As a result, school closures appeal to a wide variety of stakeholders with very different interests. Finally, school closures reflect the crises that have come to

define urban education, namely those related to educational funding, racial injustice, and school choice. Closure policies continue to be sources of immense conflict that have eroded trust and exacerbated tensions between communities and school district leadership (Dowdall, 2011; Pappas, 2016).

The concept of framing can help us better understand the arguments around school closures. While utilized across the social sciences, I largely reference social movement literature to develop the discussion of framing. Ryan and Gamson (2006) explain framing as the discursive strategies movements use to construct political debates in ways that challenge official rhetoric and advance their agenda: “If those who aim to reframe political debates are to compete successfully against the carriers of official frames, who have lots of resources and organization behind them, they must recognize power inequalities and find ways to challenge them” (p.18). Thus, issues may be framed in ways that can either confront or cement underlying power dynamics. For instance, school closures are at times framed as a form of “creative destruction” or a “school turnaround” model that improves a school system’s overall quality and effectiveness by getting rid of poorly performing schools (de la Torre et al., 2012; Smarick, 2010). When viewed through a critical lens, however, we come to see closures as a form of dispossession and institutionalized racism disproportionately impacting communities of color (Johnson, 2012). After providing additional context in the next section, I outline the dominant frame presented by education officials responsible for school closures and follow with how this account is disrupted by communities seeking to preserve their schools.

### **Context: Washington, DC’s 2013 School Closure Process**

Washingtonians have become accustomed to school closures over the last several decades. Just a few years after the district shuttered 23 schools in 2008 (Branche, 2012), subsequent actions by the school system left open the possibility that the city would see additional closures. In the spring of 2012, DC Public Schools (DCPS) released a report conducted by the Illinois Facilities Foundation (2012) that included a “supply and demand analysis” of student enrollment across school facilities and recommended closing lower-performing and underutilized schools and converting them to charters. A few months later, in November 2012, DCPS released the names of 20 schools it proposed to close. Although D.C. is no longer home to a largely Black population, its public school students still are (Lei, 2014). Over half the schools on the closure list were located in Wards 5, 7, and 8, three areas of the city that have the highest concentration of Black students, the highest proportions of students receiving free or reduced lunch, large numbers of closed schools, and higher proportions of students in charter schools (21<sup>st</sup> Century Schools Fund, 2014; Tuths, 2016). The list also included two neighborhoods in Ward 2 that, at the time, demographic and real estate data indicated were gentrifying or transitioning as more affluent and mostly White residents were moving in (Brown-Robertson, Muhammad, Ward, & Bell, 2013; Maciag, 2015). The school closures occurred as the demographic profile of the city was changing, forcing residents and city leaders alike to contend with the racial implications of the policy.

Along with their announcement of the proposed list, the district outlined a community engagement process to seek public input on the matter. While the final decision on which schools to close rested with DCPS, other city agencies and offices also offered communities a platform to voice their concerns. Immediately after the proposal’s release, the city council held two packed hearings that ran for several hours. A few weeks later, DCPS held four community meetings around the city to provide affected communities an opportunity for feedback and deliberation. At these meetings, attendees including parents, educators, activists, and other community members were invited to sit

around tables and participate in a facilitated discussion meant to elicit feedback and reactions to the proposal. Soon after, in January 2013, the district released a final closure list ostensibly based on community input that included 15 schools (DCPS, 2013). Not surprisingly, communities of color bore the brunt. Records show that in the schools that were eventually closed that year, 93% of students were Black and only 0.2%, or six students, were White (Boasberg, 2014). On the basis of those racial impacts, a local community organizing group, Empower DC, filed a federal lawsuit on behalf of parents and unsuccessfully sought an injunction to halt the closures.

From the outset of the process, district leaders hoped to represent their decision-making as reasonable and logical. Kaya Henderson, who served as the top school district executive at the time, replaced Michelle Rhee as chancellor in 2010. Overseeing the 2008 closures, Rhee had taken a decidedly brazen approach that shattered public support for her leadership and contributed to her premature resignation from the position (Turque & Cohen, 2010). Seeking to strike a more inclusive tone and distance herself from the political fallout caused by her predecessor, Chancellor Henderson said that the district “invited the community to come and talk to us, not scream at us in a town hall meeting where only a few voices get heard, but a really collaborative conversation” (Martin, 2013, n.p.). The shape these conversations took has much to do with the way the district framed the closures, a topic I turn to next.

## **Literature Review: The Dominant Frame of School Closures**

Powerful actors often propagate and institutionalize dominant frames that shape how we come to understand policy and its impacts (Benford & Snow, 2000; Carrol & Rattner, 2010). Identifying components of a dominant frame allows activists to understand “what you are up against” and is a critical step in determining strategies for action (Gilliam, 2006, p. 7). Following suit, I outline key features of the dominant frame of school closures to better grasp what community counterframes are seeking to challenge. The dominant frame of school closures I present here is primarily based upon the work of Lipman (2013), who argues that the neoliberal turn in education has sought to apply economic logics and ideologies to schooling in ways that promote efficiency through such means as scientific management and privatization. In the public consciousness, Lipman observes, the neoliberal agenda has gained greater momentum due to its presentation as inevitable, positive, and politically neutral development in the course of human history. Based on Lipman’s analysis, I have distilled three, interrelated components of the dominant frame of school closures that also reflect themes in the broader literature on the topic (Bierbaum, 2018; Diem & Welton, 2017; Ewing, 2018; Good, 2016; Noguera & Pierce, 2016). First, given school choice and changing demographics of cities, some district leaders claim that school closures are an inevitable reality that must be accepted. Second, they emphasize that these are data-driven decisions that should result in improved schools for all. Third, they claim that since closures are driven by unbiased metrics and ostensibly do not target particular communities, they are politically neutral and colorblind. In this section, I elaborate on these claims in order explain the relevance and implications of counterframes discussed at greater length in later sections. In addition to the research literature, I draw on various media sources that captured the public messaging of the school system’s chief at the time, Chancellor Kaya Henderson, to illustrate how the dominant frame was deployed. Additionally, I present cases and findings from studies of various cities that compare official rhetoric with the actual causes and costs of school closures. As dominant frames often set the parameters for public discourse, introducing these three components now provides a useful heuristic for analyzing the counterframes discussed later in the findings.

## **Inevitability**

In some cases, school system leaders may assert that right-sizing is a necessary remedy to keep districts afloat amidst the many challenges they face. In many city school districts in recent decades, shrinking urban centers and increased school choice have meant declining student enrollments (Dowdall, 2011; Engberg, Gill, Zamarro, & Zimmer, 2012). Closures also take place as cities like Philadelphia or Chicago have undertaken austerity measures meant to compensate for budget shortfalls in recent years (Good, 2016; Uetrict, 2014). The compounded effect of these various trends, some school system leaders argue, has forced their hands. As a result of this supposed inevitability, one multi-city study on school closures concluded that community engagement around these decisions should then be designed to foster “public acceptance, though not necessarily enthusiasm” (Dowdall, 2011, p. 2). In this sense, districts are asking communities to swallow a bitter, but necessary, pill.

The message that D.C.’s school closures were inevitable was most consistently and emphatically communicated by Chancellor Henderson. In an interview with NPR, she discussed the unpopular decision she had made:

[I]n leadership, trying to do the difficult work of really providing our young people with an excellent education, you have to figure out whether you’re expending your resources in the right way. . . We have about 47,000 children now. Most districts my size have about 90 buildings. I have 123 buildings, but I have buildings that are severely underutilized. (Martin, 2013, n.p.)

Her argument also noted that with funding tied to enrollment, schools with dwindling student populations would not be able to sustain specialized or even basic programming and resources. Presenting the situation as dire, Chancellor Henderson attempted to lay out a formula that would identify underutilized schools for closure.

Various trends and evidence warrant some skepticism around the framing of closures as being inevitable in all cases. The simple fact that closed schools may reopen as charters or with specialized programs seems to suggest that alternatives exist and that traditional schools may benefit from similar investments (Fabricant & Fine, 2012). Research has also documented innovative alternatives to closures. Green (2017) documented the story of a school that was re-opened after drawing on support from strong local partnerships, suggesting such community-based innovations could pose a possible alternative to closures. Still, more dramatic examples diminish the apparent destiny of closure. Putting their bodies on the line, hunger strikers supporting Dyett High School in Chicago were able to save it from closure in 2015 and got the city to agree to introducing arts-focused programming (Ewing, 2018). In fighting back against closures, some affected communities in D.C. and New York have been successful in promoting marketing and re-investment proposals that have saved their schools, albeit reinforcing the neoliberal logic that leads to closures (Syeed, 2019, Pappas, 2018). The reversal of closure decisions points to potential alternatives that could be applied to other schools as well.

## **Data-driven**

Some district officials argue that school closures are inevitable because the data say so. With a supposedly firm grounding in data, they tout school closure decisions as purely “objective” and positive. The central metrics driving school closures typically focus on utilization and fiscal efficiency in beleaguered urban school districts (Basu, 2007; de la Torre et al., 2015). In some cases, decision-makers also cite poor academic performance data as a reason for closure (Engberg et al., 2012). Chancellor Henderson emphasized that transparency in the 2013 closure process would lead

to clear and acceptable results. In an interview, she noted the data-driven nature of the process, assuring participants, "We'll show you the building utilization rates. We'll show you the enrollment over time. We'll show you achievement over time. We shared all of the data that we used to make the decision" (Martin, 2013). Such data was included in reports and presentations to communities throughout the closure process. She further clarified what type of advocacy would be most effective by issuing a warning at a community meeting: "Don't come to me with a petition with 500 signatures saying, 'Don't close my school'. . . Come to me with 500 enrollment forms" (Bannon, 2012, p. 32). So rather than using emotional pleas or drumming up grassroots support, district leaders called upon communities to counter closures with measurable interventions to reverse enrollment trends.

Further, rather than doing harm, school officials often claim that by shuttering poorly performing schools, students can then theoretically be assigned to higher-performing ones (Brummet, 2014; McNeil, 2009). Their actions previously had the backing of federal guidelines under No Child Left Behind that identified school closure as a possible "turn around" model for consistently underperforming schools. The notion that school closures can actually be beneficial was clearly embraced by D.C. officials. Throughout the months-long process, school system leaders sidestepped the explosive term "school closings" and instead opted for the more technical-sounding "school consolidations" or "school reorganization." The final closure plan released by DCPS (2013) that outlined the closures and consolidations was hopefully titled, "Better Schools for All Students."

Critics argue that the data on closure outcomes, however, tell a different story. Findings from reports on closures across several cities have shown that districts experienced only modest short-term financial gains, minimal academic improvements of displaced students, and significant political fallout from affected communities (Dowdall, 2011; Dowdall & Warner, 2013). In D.C. itself, an official audit of the 2008 closure process indicated that the city saved far less than anticipated and that malfeasance resulted due to mismanagement of the process (Branche, 2012). Furthermore, claims of academic improvement are similarly inconsistent. Despite claims of improving academic achievement, studies have shown no conclusive evidence that closures have provided such benefits as most displaced students land in schools of similar quality (de la Torre & Gwynne, 2009; Han et al., 2017; Kirshner et al., 2010; Özek, Hansen, & Gonzalez, 2012).

School closure processes have often earned their characterization of being chaotic because they lack transparency and do not provide adequate information to communities (Deeds & Pattillo, 2014; Sunderman & Payne, 2009). In a study of one school district, for instance, Kretchmar (2014) captured an erratic and inconsistent process that left community members confounded when schools that district leaders previously praised became slated for closure. Finnigan and Lavner (2012) documented another school closure process they described as burdensome for those who participated, citing the dense material and "academic" nature of discussions that sidelined already marginalized groups. One outcome of the community-involved process that Finnigan and Lavner studied was a series of discrete measures to rate and rank which schools should be closed, including factors related to enrollment trends, economic reuse, and other financial considerations. But when compared with the schools that the local school board actually recommended for closure, they were inconsistent with the rank-ordering based on the agreed upon metrics. The supposed "objective" process had faltered. Far from being immune to attack, the deployment of data has become a contested terrain in school closure battles.

### **Politically Neutral**

Given the presumed basis in utilization or other hard data, some district officials may claim that political interests do not drive school closures despite the racial disproportionality in their outcomes and the political clamoring around them. Reformers and proponents of school choice, for

example, have argued that school closures are driven by students and families opting for educational alternatives outside their local neighborhood schools (Garnett, 2014; Smarick, 2010). Education officials have also attempted to tamp down on community accusations that closures are driven by systemic racism. At a public hearing in D.C., Chancellor Henderson tried to quell suspicions of bias by reassuring residents that she would “make sure that this is not a case of the squeaky wheel gets the grease” (Brown, 2012, n.p.). In other words, she saw the district as offering a fair and equitable platform to determine how and if schools were to be closed. Similarly, when Empower DC filed a civil rights lawsuit against the city over the 2013 school closures, the federal judge overseeing the case found that race simply did not explain why schools were shuttered. In the initial hearing, which I observed, the judge referenced the fact that Chancellor Henderson was Black as a rebuttal to claims that closures were racially motivated. Elaborating in his official written opinion, the judge noted that the pattern of closures in communities of color “is explained by the single, race-neutral justification for the school closings that DCPS has offered throughout: closing under-enrolled schools will save resources that can then be spread throughout the school district to benefit all students.” (Boasberg, 2014, p. 16). The ruling dismissed the case, and along with it, the notion that racism was operating in school closure decisions.

By focusing on utilization rates, the dominant frame renders invisible the broader social, political, and economic contexts of schooling that would point to underlying causes or potential consequences of closures like institutionalized racism, the expansion of charter schools, changing real estate values, or urban redevelopment (Brazil, 2018; Dowdall, 2011; Good 2016; Lipman, 2013; Pedroni, 2011). However, recent cases help us understand how school closures are deeply embedded in their social, economic, and political contexts. Johnson (2012) described the shuttering and privatized reconstitution of a high school in Austin’s predominately Mexican-American Eastside as the city’s way of giving the steadily gentrifying community a “fresh start” (p. 239). Likewise, Smith and Stovall (2008) present the case of a transitioning neighborhood in Chicago where city officials re-opened previously closed schools that once served lower-income families as selective admissions schools to lure gentrifying families. Despite mounting evidence about the intersections of race, class, and school closures, the dominant frame positions closures as colorblind or race-neutral outcomes of increasingly competitive educational marketplaces (Diem & Welton, 2017).

Far from an apolitical or unbiased phenomenon, school closures must be seen in light of who stands to gain or lose from them. A critical and irrefutable fact of closures is their disproportionate impact on lower-income communities of color (de la Torre & Gwynne, 2009; Nuamah, 2017; Sunderman & Payne, 2009). In a report compiled by Journey for Justice (2014), the group takes a cue from those in the food justice movement and similarly asserts that their neighborhoods are becoming “education deserts” without schools (p. 11). On a district-wide level, research has indicated that closures may play a role in deepening racial segregation (Siegel-Hawley, Bridges, & Shields, 2016). These racially disproportionate outcomes may reflect the political nature of school closure decision-making processes that often marginalize communities of color (Lipman, Gutstein, Gutierrez, & Blanche, 2015; Pappas, 2016). Studying a district-wide turnaround effort in North Little Rock, Arkansas that included closures and consolidations that reduced educational opportunity for Black students, Lowery (2019), demonstrated how education officials employed colorblind frameworks that dismissed the ever-present legacy of systemic racism in the city. A comprehensive, multi-state study on school closures has further questioned the role of equity in the actual decision-making processes themselves, finding that closures targeted the most disadvantaged schools (Han et al., 2017).

The relationship between charter growth and school closures has become particularly fraught and deserves closer attention given the context of the study. In D.C., where charter

enrollment has reached nearly half of all public school students, the growth of the sector at the expense of closing neighborhood schools may appear to simply respond to market forces driven by families seeking higher-quality education options (Lei, 2014). But a cursory understanding of charter enrollment and waitlist numbers belies important political facts. Local charter advocacy organizations like FOCUS D.C. (2010) and their allies, have lobbied local government to successfully gain access rights to closed school buildings in a city with pricey real estate. As a city, D.C. has consistently received top ratings as a charter-friendly district with a policy environment that facilitates and actively supports charter expansion (Wohlstetter, Zeehandelaar, & Griffith, 2015). School choice advocates have also spurred grassroots support for school closures among parents in other cities like New York where they want to see shuttered schools converted into charters (Pappas, 2016). Far broader in scope is the case of New Orleans where, after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, local authorities were empowered to more easily close traditional public schools and authorize new charters through a complex web of foundation support and policymakers acting on various levels (Buras, 2011; Jabbar, 2016). Closures are not merely an outcome of neutral market forces brought about by school choice, but rather the result of complex urban political dynamics.

### **Countering the “Common Sense” of School Closures: Narratives and Frames**

School closure processes put on public display the competing logics shaping education policy and decision-making. To better grasp these competing voices and the meanings they hold, I draw on theoretical foundations including Critical Race Theory (CRT) and social movement theory. In particular, I tease out the differences between the meaning-making tactics of frames and narratives to better understand their role in school closure processes. Both tactics are utilized to disrupt the fairly straightforward argument put forward by education officials that underutilized or underperforming schools must be shuttered. In its apparent simplicity, the argument becomes part of the prevailing “common sense” on schooling, a key component in building a hegemonic educational ideology (Kumashiro, 2004). In disrupting the arguments for closures, frames and narratives take on different forms and offer unique contributions.

One way to challenge the “common sense” of closures is through narratives of the parents, students, teachers, and minoritized communities adversely impacted by them. Subverting the dominant narrative of closures, these stories form a powerful counternarrative that is grounded in the lived experiences of people of color. In the tradition of CRT, counternarratives serve as an opportunity to “name one’s own reality or voice” in contexts that often dismiss or undermine them (Ladson-Billings, 2013). Narrative accounts of communities’ opposition to closure practices have surfaced the symbolic, emotional, and historical implications of these closures on the people, spaces, and geographies where they once existed. In Philadelphia, Good (2016) captured how communities invoke a sense of place and belonging to defend their schools against narrow administrative considerations. Similarly, Galletta and Ayala (2012) discussed how in addition to erasing the history of individual buildings, school closures also blot out histories of community organizing and resistance. In yet another account, Kirshner and Pozzoboni (2011) presented student voices and narratives countering claims that they needed to be rescued from a failing school. These examples exhibit how the use of stories or narratives not only disrupts dominant or normative accounts, but they can also be effective in helping audiences connect with the struggles that find expression in them (Enriquez, 2014; Ganz, 2011).

In resisting closures, communities have also utilized framing tactics to challenge the logic and reasoning of education officials. However, these tactics have received less scholarly attention. In this article, I see these discursive acts as strategic counterframing moves. Rooted in social movement

theory, counterframes emerge as activists engage in framing contests or disputes by targeting official frames and their inconsistencies in messaging, empirical credibility, and the credibility of the claim-makers themselves (Benford & Snow, 2000). In constructing a frame, actors attempt to focus a targeted constituency's attention on particular sets of facts or ideas (Ryan & Gamson, 2006). Thus, frames are essentially selective and open to contestation. Since frames typically offer both a diagnosis of the causes of a problem as well as a prognosis for action, challenges are likely to focus on defining these elements of the issue at hand (Gamson, 1990). Further developments in the field situate counterframes in the neo-Gramscian tradition as tactics that both provide critiques of power and offer alternative visions of what could be (Carroll & Rattner, 2010). This approach reflects the critical paradigm's emphasis on deconstruction as an important precursor to transformative social change (Antonio, 1981; Apple, 2014). A counterframe, then, is not simply an alternative set of facts or arguments. Rather, it is an attempt by marginalized actors to directly challenge official rhetoric and expose contradictions, thereby calling into question institutional legitimacy and opening up alternative paths for action.

Because the literature on school closures has provided many accounts of communities' counternarratives, as discussed above, I focus here on counterframing in order to broaden our understanding of these discursive battles and the tools available to communities and researchers. By bringing framing into the picture, we can observe the relative differences with narratives and how they are deployed. For example, Ladson-Billings (2013) has critiqued the tendency of some scholars to employ counternarratives that become too intensely personal and lose sight of the larger goal of uncovering systemic injustices in law or policy. Following on this assertion, Dixson and Anderson (2018) have reviewed the past 20 years of CRT scholarship and conclude: "We would urge scholars who take up counternarrative in CRT to remain cognizant of the analytical power of the other constructs from CRT." While acknowledging the power of counternarratives, the authors also "raise a warning flag to remind scholars to look beyond the story to develop and inform our understanding of how race and racism operate in education" (p. 124). Neither of these assessments should be read as an indictment of counternarratives or storytelling. Rather, they indicate that the principles of CRT may also open up a multitude of other approaches to challenging institutionalized racism.

At this critical juncture, recent scholarship has sought to expand the methodological toolkit at the disposal of CRT scholars to include such approaches as document analysis, archival research, and quantitative methods (DeCuir-Gunby, Chapman, & Schutz, 2019). Following in this vein, the present study specifically sets out to explore the possibilities of yet another approach in critical education research: frame analysis. Looking back to earlier CRT works, Crenshaw (1989) noted the importance of "shifting frames." While writing in the context of law school classrooms, Crenshaw's advice on broaching topics of racial injustice are relevant to researchers with similar concerns in mind. To approach racial injustice in a liberatory manner, she has suggested starting with "altering the way racial issues are framed, by presenting racism as a serious societal problem, and by explicitly deprivileging dominant perspectives... (p. 8)." Crenshaw provided an education-related example of this approach,

As an alternative to asking how it feels to go to a segregated school, it might be more illuminating to start the discussion with how property laws and the judiciary's interpretation of the fourteenth amendment protect the current distribution of wealth and thus perpetuate substandard schools. (p. 8)

Building upon these assertions, Carbado (2011) has asserted that one of the central tasks of the Critical Race Theorist is "highlighting the discursive frames legal and political actors have employed to disadvantage people of color" (p. 1615). Framing is thus situated in both social movement

literature and CRT scholarship as a tactic for collective action and a discursive construct ripe for analysis.

In adopting this framework, I do not intend to make claims about the effectiveness of one tactic over another. Both constructs ultimately are aimed at disrupting dominant paradigms, but differ in how they are presented: counternarratives take the shape of a story and counterframes take the form of discursive arguments. Other important distinctions relate to the contexts in which they are deployed and their resonance with different audiences. Dominant institutions that set the conditions for public participation in decision-making processes often dismiss the subjectivities of storytelling in favor of ostensibly logical or evidence-based argumentation associated with framing tactics (Benford & Snow, 2000; Polletta & Chen, 2012). Community engagement spaces that seek such “rationalistic” and formal participation, like the school closure meetings discussed here, have faced scholarly critique for catering to more privileged groups (Curato, Dryzek, Ercan, Hendriks, Niemeyer, 2017). As a result of being marginalized from decision-making processes and lacking resources to mount advocacy campaigns or conduct research, communities of color often *have* to turn to cultural forms of protest that include telling and preserving their own stories (Avila, 2014). Despite these limiting institutional arrangements and norms, the discussion of counterframing allows us to locate less apparent forms of resistance in minoritized communities.

The study attempts to complicate the dichotomy between frames and narratives, which is at times overstated and may further reinforce problematic race, gender, or class norms regarding who is deemed rational or emotional (Calhoun, 2001; Polletta, 1998). Studies of collective action in other contexts have in fact demonstrated the synergy between both constructs in achieving grassroots goals like recruiting or mobilizing supporters (Olsen, 2014). Taking a targeted approach, I see this research as providing a closer examination of how counterframes are uniquely deployed in response to supposedly objective neoliberal education reforms and to consider their relevance more broadly in education mobilization. Grassroots actors have long seized upon the various contradictions, weaknesses, and failings of an otherwise seemingly efficient and powerful educational establishment in the pursuit of more democratic and equitable schools (Carnoy & Levin, 1985). Thus, I analyze counterframing as yet another tactic used by communities to challenge the prevailing educational “common sense” that informs school closures decisions.

## **Research Design and Methods**

The study’s research design is informed by critical frame analysis, a methodological approach aimed at uncovering the power dynamics in how diverse actors frame policy problems and solutions (Verloo & Lombardo, 2007). Given its roots in both social movement and policy research methodologies, critical frame analysis takes an expansive view of relevant “texts” to explore policy discourses (Meier, 2008). For example, in addition to public input data, policy documents and official accounts are valuable sources for understanding the various logics at play in policymaking processes. The “critical” component also emphasizes discerning whose voices are centered when examining these various texts and considering the varying levels of power actors have in decision-making (van der Haar & Verloo, 2016). In the context of this study, critical frame analysis leads us to consider discursive patterns in school closure processes from a wide range of data sources while emphasizing the counterframes advanced by communities of color.

A reflexive account of the research process helps explain the study’s methodological approach and its relationship to my positionality and personal background. As a former D.C. teacher, I once worked in a high school that district officials shut down in 2008. During that time, I attended several community meetings, took students to testify before the city council, and became

familiar with the dynamics of these spaces. With a history of activism and engagement within the research context, my role does not neatly fit the traditional relationship of a researcher only entering their fieldsite to commence their study (Maxey, 1999). Instead, I acknowledge how my pre-existing ties shaped my approach. To ensure a systematic study built on sources that expand beyond my own experiences and observations, I gathered a wide array of data to explore themes I may have not previously considered (Berger, 2015).

As a researcher of color, my study was informed by an interest in dismantling systems of misinformation and discrimination (Childs & Johnson, 2018). With a critical eye towards race, I am also sensitive to the fact that community and public engagement processes in education are often dominated by the voices of more privileged or powerful groups (Ishimaru, 2017; Schutz, 2006). Because the closing schools in D.C. disproportionately served communities of color, I sought to center their voices in my data collection and analysis. My stance also informs the line of inquiry followed in this study. Like Graeber (2009), I see this work as moving beyond scholarly concerns to directly respond to the questions raised by the actors discussed within the article and their pursuit of strategies for transformative change. The question guiding my research is: How do communities utilize counterframes to disrupt the logic of school closures? By providing an answer to this question, I see the study as a rare opportunity to contribute to knowledge production on critical education policy issues and to more practically further the repertoire of tools used to further educational justice.

### **Data Sources and Collection**

Since I began my research just as the closure decisions were finalized, I was not immediately present in the community engagement meetings described below. However, as a public process, there were many sources to draw from for this study, whether through official documents, social and news media, as well as records of public input. To best capture frames and counterframes of school closures, I relied on notes taken at community engagement meetings and uploaded to the district's public engagement platform at that time ([engagedcps.org](http://engagedcps.org)). The website posted notes taken by school district personnel from 40 different small table discussions held across the four community meetings. Based on DCPS' (2013) report, these meetings drew nearly 800 people. District-appointed note takers at these public meetings recorded the impressions and feedback offered by participants on the closure decisions. The notes typically include participant names and affiliations (parent, educator, community member, etc.) at the beginning. However, their particular statements are not attached to their names. Further, a limitation of the table notes is that no data was collected on participants' demographic backgrounds. The only information that is included for all participants is the city ward where they attended the public meetings, geographic areas of D.C. that roughly correspond to race and class. In cases where it is not possible to provide specific identifiers for speakers, such as parent or teacher, I use the more generic label of "participant."

Supplementing the table notes, I also reviewed two online videos of testimony from the public hearings devoted to the closure issue at the city council. To build on sources from the official community engagement process, I conducted a series of semi-structured interviews that helped to add nuance to the narrative of how different school communities strategized and responded to the potential closing of their schools. I conducted interviews with 16 community members from across the city who were directly involved in the school closure process. Five of the interviewees were organizers and longtime activists who voiced opposition to school closures on a citywide level, seven were from predominately Black and working class communities in Wards 5, 7, and 8, and the remaining four were parent leaders in the gentrifying area of Ward 2. Pseudonyms are provided to protect the confidentiality of the interviewees.

Interview participants reflected the diverse array of actors involved in the coordinated resistance to school closures, including parents or family members, church leaders, community organizers, and other neighborhood representatives. I utilized a relatively targeted approach to recruitment and sought participants who held leadership positions in their schools or community organizations, were quoted in the media or had a social media presence, and were highly engaged in local education issues. My rationale was that as leaders, these individuals' perspectives would reflect broader community concerns and framings around school closures, rather than their own personal opinions on the issue. Also, as the study focuses on grassroots attempts to subvert the logic of closures, I only interviewed those who opposed closures (though data do not reflect that any coordinated pro-closure constituency existed in any case). Because many of those who led these campaigns remained active in public education issues even after the closure process concluded, I was able to connect with them through my attendance at subsequent community meetings over the course of several months. After first recruiting some of the most vocal community members from neighborhoods across the city, interviewees readily introduced me to their peers to allow for further snowball sampling.

### **Data Analysis**

To make sense of the immense amount of public input data and official accounts of school closures, critical frame analysis offered a useful analytical approach that builds on the methodological tools discussed above. In the place of a closed or hierarchical set of codes that is more typical of content analysis projects, critical frame analysis focuses on capturing divergent discourses. As a result, researchers adopting this paradigm suggest analyzing frames in response to sensitizing questions around how participants diagnose issues and develop prognoses for action (van de Haar & Verloo, 2016). Of interest to me in this article are the specific ways in which these arguments directly responded to and countered the common sense of closures presented by school district leadership. Thus, even as communities did make other arguments, such as those who voiced concerns over student safety when the district proposed consolidating schools across rival neighborhoods, I focus here on the broader patterns of how they sought to unseat the underlying logics of school closures. The three components of the dominant frame discussed above were helpful starting points for analysis, but additional codes and themes became necessary to capture dynamic community responses. Triangulating across data sources (Creswell & Miller, 2000), I sought to enhance the validity of my findings by following common threads shared across interviews, official accounts and documents, and media sources. Interviews were particularly useful in contextualizing claims drawn from table notes that presented primarily anonymous data. Public hearings provided testimony that was captured in its entirety, and provided insight into how education officials directly responded to participants.

### **Findings**

Given the bitter legacy of the 2008 closures, D.C. school system leaders attempted to carefully craft their proposal for the 2013 process. The power of the dominant frame claiming that school closures were inevitable, data-driven, and politically-neutral informed the lines of argumentation that communities took up in their resistance to the policy. Local communities supporting their schools pushed back by using three key arguments: (a) school closures are avoidable and alternatives exist, (b) the criteria for closure lacked consistency or transparency, and (c) closure decisions are informed by political interests and hidden agendas.

### **Tough Medicine or False Choice? Contesting the Necessity of Closures**

From the outset of the controversial process, public officials typically stuck with an argument they felt to be rock solid: school closings were inevitable. When first announcing that closures were coming, then D.C. Mayor Vincent Gray cautioned against emotional responses to school closures. “Just do the math on it—it's not sustainable,” he said. “We're going to have to consolidate” (Gartner, 2012). In a public hearing after the initial proposal had been made public, Councilmember David Catania offered the metaphor of the closings as “tough medicine” that had to be swallowed to improve the health of the school system (DC Council, 2012a). His colleagues on the dais took up the metaphor as a way to temper the impassioned testimony of many residents. While fully acknowledging the painful impact that accompanies the decision to close a school, public officials attempted to reiterate that it was solely a matter of accounting and efficiency.

Participants routinely challenged the supposed inevitability of the process. Even as discussion facilitators posed the closure of schools as a definite reality, participants dismissed any attempt to accept the possibility that their schools would close. For example, when facilitators tried to elicit ideas from participants in a Ward 7 meeting about their suggestions for re-use of one of their local school buildings, the notetaker wrote, “Re-use is a moot point because people are not interested in considering this question.” Another question posed by facilitators sought to ask how the district could promote a “smooth transition” for families at closing schools. The emphatic response from one school community was captured by a notetaker: “Parents don't want to transition!!!” Similarly, Crystal, a Ward 7 neighborhood leader, recalled a private meeting with the Chancellor where the district leader asked the community how they could help make the closures “work.” Aghast, Crystal recalled thinking, “That’s a joke. Like, that is a false premise. Because I said to you, we said to you, this does *not* work. . . That’s not the conversation we need to have. Because that would assume that I’m okay with this.” Through their input and responses to these meetings, participants challenged the fundamental inevitability of closing decisions. Communities also argued that closing schools was an active decision that officials were making, rather than a budgetary necessity that had forced their hand. For example, in a public hearing, parents from different schools questioned the school system's preeminent focus on “efficiency.” Donna, a Ward 2 parent, stated that through its actions, the district would be sending a damaging message to young families by choosing to forsake school improvement efforts by turning to closures to address systemic issues: “Public schools do not matter, and if D.C. is left with none, that is okay because efficiency is the number one priority, not public education” (DC Council, 2012a). Later in the same hearing, witnesses and Councilmembers debated whether the city should invest in already underutilized schools. Suzanne, a parent leader involved in city-wide education advocacy, stated “I think that's a false choice. I do think that DCPS does have the money to pay for [staff] . . . It's a policy decision that they're making, it's not really a budgetary decision” (DC Council, 2012a). Although not directly impacted by the 2013 closures, she went on to bring up the illustrative example of a now thriving elementary school in her diverse community that was once maligned as a poor performing and slated for closure years earlier. The school was eventually allowed to stay open and benefitted from “sensible and steady improvements” like the introduction of a Spanish immersion program. Others chimed in regarding matters of poor fiscal management and misplaced spending priorities that have led school quality to slide in some communities. Citing the growth in central office staff, for example, a community meeting participant stated, “It just doesn't add up. We can get rid of librarians but we’re not hesitating to add administrative layers.”

In interviews and community meetings, I often heard long-time residents recall a particular historical episode that indicated that alternatives to closures existed. Following waves of “white flight” as the city was overcome by the unrest of 1968, schools in the city’s most affluent and White-

dominated enclaves of Ward 3 became severely underpopulated. But rather than see their local schools entirely shuttered, parents and community members coordinated with the school system to develop plans to retain their neighborhood schools. The resulting plan took effect in 1975 and called for the consolidation of some buildings, the creation of an attractive arts-focused program at one school, and outlined a busing system that brought in students from overcrowded schools in largely Black neighborhoods. Janine, a longtime parent leader in the impacted neighborhoods, recalled her role regarding the process in an interview: “We pulled together our little committee... got parents and teachers involved, and they listened to us downtown... So we literally wrote a proposal, did not ask for extra money, we did ask for one bus because we wanted to move kids over to the arts center.” The additional bused students helped pad the enrollment numbers that would keep the schools open through this period of depopulation (Jones, 1987). Many long-term residents’ memories of this episode, however, were not nostalgic. Those in communities of color recalled the busing experiment in public meetings not as a path to desegregation, but rather as an indication of how far the district was willing to go to maintain the schools of their more affluent and White neighbors on the other side of town. Against this stark historical backdrop, some school communities cited a precedent to find alternatives to closures.

As part of the process, school communities also offered their own proposals to district leaders. The proposals, which were uploaded to the online public engagement platform, laid out various strategies for recruiting more students, including establishing strong community partnerships, introducing specialized programming, and upgrading facilities. Community proposals also cited data on neighborhood demographics, real estate values, and enrollment patterns. For example, a Ward 5 community group referenced the importance of maintaining local schools that could foster racial diversity, claiming that their “growing neighborhood is very ripe for an integrated elementary school.” While district leaders would mostly wave these aside as unfeasible and costly, the proposals reflect a belief held by communities that alternatives were possible. Empower DC, a local community organizing group, posted signs in affected neighborhoods with a straightforward message that reflected a broader community consensus: “Fix Schools, Don’t Close Them.”

### **Flimsy on the Details: Questioning Closure Criteria**

Given the conundrum of deciding how to right-size the school district, school system leaders emphasized that all closing criteria were clearly based in relevant data. The messaging trickled down into community meetings as well, as one facilitator told participants in table notes that “this is a quantitative approach to the issues we are seeing in the community” and that they were going to “let the data speak for itself.” Despite the school system’s attempt to plant the discussion in the bedrock of data, participants continued to cast aspersions on the accuracy of the criteria used in closing decisions and further sought to access or produce their own evidence to refute official claims.

One participant dismissed the data used to inform closure decisions as “sketchy,” and in a public hearing a witness questioned why a “school system so focused on data is so flimsy on the details.” District leaders also frequently muddled the closure issue by moving beyond the frame of underutilization by referencing test scores as well. Chancellor Henderson said of the closing schools that “it might be OK if those places where we were overspending were seeing outsized results, but they weren’t” (Martin, 2013). By veering into academic achievement territory, it seemed to many that there was not a consistent set of criteria for closing schools. With test scores typically serving as the bottom-line for many decisions in contemporary urban school systems, some school communities found the criteria for closures curious, if not confounding. For example, the Ward 7 community supporting Smothers Elementary highlighted test score improvements in recent years. Similarly, supporters of Davis and Francis-Stevens elementary schools, located in Wards 7 and 2 respectively,

noted that their schools were to be consolidated with others that were lower performing. In community meetings, table notes show that participants questioned why achievement data was included in the school system's proposal when officials repeatedly and explicitly had stated that the closing decisions were not based on test scores. Without clear or consistent criteria, communities condemned the lack of transparency in the process.

To support their claims that the closures were irrational or misguided, participants also brought up recent changes and investments that signaled potential improvements. Among the 20 schools to be closed, interviewees pointed out, nine had received "Proving What's Possible" grants from the district within the past year for proposing compelling plans for improving performance. In a community meeting, a participant asked, "How can [a combined amount of] \$10 million can [sic] be granted to schools 6 months ago through these grants and now those schools are on the chopping block?" The staff of one elementary school mentioned in a community meeting that personnel had been reconstituted that very year as part of a turnaround effort, leaving the community wondering why such a drastic measure had been undertaken only to see the school's doors shut by the end of the year. Finally, a few interviewees shared that the district had assigned a central office staff person to help recruit young families in the gentrifying Ward 2 neighborhood surrounding Garrison Elementary only a few years earlier. Connecting through a Facebook group and facilitating meetings, the district had hoped to get young, middle-class families to invest in their local school. One of those parents, Ann, who later became the PTA president, said at a hearing, "You asked us to take a chance on you, it's time to return the favor" (DC Council, 2012a). For the system to retreat on these various investments, communities claimed, made the closure decisions appear arbitrary or contradictory.

Community efforts to counter official data through anecdotes, observations, and other analyses were also formalized through carefully crafted reports and presentations. When Jeanette, a community leader from Ward 7, learned that the school district planned to present a PowerPoint showcasing evidence on why they were closing schools, she wondered "why don't we do a PowerPoint to counteract the claims that they made?" At the public meeting held by the district, "we were prepared with a rebuttal," Jeanette said, "we had all the evidence that we accumulated and put together... Everybody talked about how well informed our presentation was." Crystal, who also worked on the presentation and spoke at the meeting, said that district officials had underestimated her community's ability to engage the issue. "I don't think [they] knew that I did my homework, really, or like how much I understood," she said. Efforts to pushback on the data were also bolstered by support from important community allies. Local school budget experts prepared analyses, attended community meetings, and testified in public hearings about the financial considerations behind the closures and questioned whether the school system would stand to benefit in any significant way (Bhat, 2013). They also noted that consolidated schools may ultimately not reap greater school quality as class sizes would be expected to rise. Through data analysis and critique, communities and their allies were also able to chip away at the supposedly solid evidence for closures.

### **"Sold Out": Exposing the Agendas Behind Closures**

With closures carrying wide-ranging implications for academic achievement, school choice, real estate, and local government, communities also sought to uncover the agendas behind them. Given that communities viewed the official criteria as flawed, they expanded their counterframes to include speculations and investigations into the supposed political calculations behind the closures. District leaders themselves pre-empted such critiques, presenting the process as fair and equitable.

Nonetheless, participants emphasized the racialized impacts of closures, the impact of gentrification, and their connection to the growing charter sector.

In a segregated city like D.C., the disproportionate impacts of school closures on communities of color were ever apparent. Participants regularly referred to the inequitable racial implications of the process, with some referring to the closures as a form of “child abuse” and alleging that the school system was “fertilizing an underclass” with its actions. But it was in the school system’s final decision on which schools to close that residents saw more blatant evidence of racism. Two schools on the closure list, both of which were in Ward 2 and were ultimately spared, had several middle-class and White families recently enroll who also took on leading roles in keeping them open. John, a longtime resident and church leader from a historically Black congregation in one of these communities, talked about his support for the school:

Now that this neighborhood has changed, hearing those voices and seeing those faces helped the Chancellor change their mind... When the truth is told, it boiled down to a political, racial issue that had nothing to do with schools... We're as happy as we can be that it's open, but also remember that part of the motivation to keep it open was political.

Residents in other neighborhoods also took notice of the two spared schools. Brianna, a community leader from Ward 5 where several schools closed, recalled seeing a lot of “white faces” and people of “higher socioeconomic status” turn up to advocate for their schools at various public meetings and hearings. “I remember seeing those parents testify,” she said, “and [my friend and I] were like ‘watch, those two schools are going to stay open.’ And they stayed open. It was just sad.” Daniel, a community organizer, further speculated that the closings were planned “to essentially push Black and brown people out of the city” and to keep “white schools open for like the longer term.” To him and many long-term residents, the 2013 closures were only the most recent example in a historical pattern of disinvestment from public institutions in communities of color.

In a rapidly gentrifying city, communities had a heightened awareness of the re-use possibilities for closed school buildings. Participants in table discussions cited examples of school buildings being converted into high-end condo buildings or turned over for private development. At the beginning of one community meeting in Ward 8, a local Councilmember made clear that he supported selling the Malcolm X Elementary School property for commercial development—a decision that many participants aggressively opposed. Educators from the Malcolm X community voiced their opposition to sell off the school at a table discussion, stating, “It feels like we’re being sold out for money.” Similarly, just off the redeveloped H Street corridor—a haven for newly arrived millennials—supporters of nearby Spingarn High School in Ward 5 expressed a wariness of the impact these changes would have on their historic school. “The area is being gentrified,” a notetaker recorded a participant saying at a community meeting, “[t]he students that used to lay claim to Spingarn will no longer being laying claim. They are going to lose the neighborhood.” For many participants, neighborhood change signaled irreversible loss driven by residential and commercial development.

By the time the 2013 school closures took place, nearly half of the school district’s student population was attending charter schools (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2014). Many participants brought up the fact the district’s approach to closures was heavily informed by a study conducted by the Illinois Facilities Foundation (2012). The organization is funded in part by the charter-boosting Walton Family Foundation and the report specifically called for closed schools to be converted to charters. In the eyes of many participants, the closures appeared to be part of a

broader city-wide agenda to tip the scales towards a fully chartered school district. Chris, a Ward 2 parent, said the closures signaled the district's "surrender to charter schools." In community meetings, some participants voiced skepticism when they saw representatives from the charter sector in attendance. In an interview, Shanice recalled seeing the writing on the wall when the district's central office began making changes at her granddaughter's Ward 8 school that was ultimately closed. "Y'all better watch out," she recalled saying to teachers and families at the school, "cause they're going to either try to close this school or they going to try to make it a charter." Table notes from these meetings reflect a pointed critique of the sector, particularly in those areas with the largest concentration of charters. Participants in those meetings made numerous claims about the adverse effects of charter school expansion or their quality of education. Some expressed a desire for a "moratorium" or "freeze" on authorizing new charters. In the notes, participants repeatedly and specifically requested that their schools not be turned over to charters. Additionally, participants speculated that families from closing schools would exit to charters, further depleting the district's student population. Many school communities came to see charters as a cause for closures whose proliferation would further erode neighborhood schools.

In addition to participating in more conventional public hearings, community organizers took to the courts to disrupt the closures. Empower DC sponsored a lawsuit with plaintiffs from closing schools to seek an injunction on the closures due to their disproportionate racial impact. As part of the process, the organizing group gained access to 18,000 pages of discovery including school system leaders' emails and other internal documents. In a press release, Empower DC's (2014) attorney said that the documents and later depositions would bring to light the "infrastructure that was responsible for decision making within DCPS" (n.p.). In their analysis of official documents, the group and their legal team exposed the priorities of city officials and their relationships with grant-making institutions, foundations, and consultants that influenced the decision to close schools. A separate investigation has affirmed many of Empower DC's allegations, finding that private, pro-charter foundations had direct access to school system leaders and advised them on school closure decisions (Anderson, 2015). Although the lawsuit was eventually dismissed, Empower DC helped pull back the curtain on the political intrigue behind the process.

## Discussion

Despite wide-ranging resistance to closures in the form of demonstrations, the development of alternative proposals, a lawsuit, and media outreach, the district ultimately decided to shutter 15 of the original 20 schools first slated for closure. Given the outcomes, it may appear that community efforts were ineffective in achieving their ultimate goal. But through the interconnected efforts of parents, activists, analysts, and legal experts, opposition centered on the system's failures and shortcomings that led to the closures. Rather than focusing on the overall outcomes of the process, I find it more useful to consider what the counterframings discussed above offered to communities. In particular, counterframes formed an emerging critique that (a) focused on addressing underlying causes of closures over the particulars of individual schools, (b) broadened the participation in the resistance to the closures, and (c) rooted communities' expertise in complex analyses of school policy.

School closures often position communities in a defensive role, requiring them to spell out the value of their individual school. It is telling that some of the studies of communities developing counternarratives to school closures mentioned above were focused on cases of resistance from individual school communities (Green, 2017; Johnson, 2012; Kirshner & Pozzoboni, 2011). By adopting a common set of counterframes, however, it became possible for communities across

different wards to move beyond defending their own schools. Instead of taking the shape of bulleted "talking points" common in sophisticated advocacy organizations, counterframes developed more organically while still reflecting a growing consensus among effected communities. While geographic, racial, and class divisions kept the impacted communities from developing a true coalition to combat closures, they still sought to undercut the very legitimacy of the process by disputing the data or motivations behind them. In doing so, they shifted the conversation from narrating the history, strengths, or potential of individual schools to confronting closures as a symptom of much deeper problems like those related to increased school competition or bureaucratic bloat.

One other interesting aspect of the use of counterframes is to critically examine the claim-makers themselves. In the school closure process, not all those who raised their voices in resistance were students, parents, or teachers who could offer counternarratives based on their personal connections to the impacted schools. Budget analysts, legal experts, church leaders, and neighborhood representatives all voiced similar claims about the logic of the closures. By broadening the ranks of the opposition with a diverse group of visible supporters, communities hoped to also debunk the notion that they had completely divested from their neighborhood schools. Further, while counterframes were bolstered by personal experience, they also allowed for others to participate in critiquing the closure policy who may not have had a direct relationship to the schools. Lessons from other cases of education mobilization similarly indicate that while counternarratives may help ground campaigns in authentic lived experiences, allies with greater access to power may also find supportive roles to play based on their social positions (Enriquez, 2014). Given the alliances that formed between schools, local organizations, and churches, we are reminded of the important role that community-based partnerships play in supporting education mobilization through providing expertise in areas like research or organizing (Ishimaru, 2014; Oakes, Rogers, & Lipton, 2006; Warren, Hong, Rubin, & Uy, 2009).

Finally, the use of counterframes in this case reflects an underappreciated form of expertise that local communities may wield. In addition to relying on their lived experience as "expertise," as is the case with counternarratives, parents and community members in the process exhibited systems-level awareness and insights. By articulating their underlying concerns with trends related to school choice or gentrification, for example, communities can employ powerful tools of contextualization that are often missing in education policymaking processes (Dumas & Anderson, 2014, Honig 2006). Participants felt that district officials underestimated their ability to make informed contributions in closure discussions that could engage data or other evidence. Just as counternarratives shift dominant notions of what constitutes data to encompass lived experiences, counterframes shift assumptions of who is capable of accessing data or performing policy analysis. For example, in a public hearing, Crystal noted that her neighborhood's seemingly reactive concerns over charters and school closures arose "not because we don't understand financial structures, not because we don't understand how the school system works, but because we understand how our communities work, how our families work..." As mentioned above, it was the school system that provided limited data on closure decisions and at times did not effectively marshal evidence. In describing the district's approach to the process, Jennifer, another parent interviewee told me, "there was not a lot of curiosity about the why's" behind the closures. Thus, in the face of policies with significant blind spots, counterframes that are built on grassroots-level insights can direct decision-making processes to consider aspects of the broader political economy and context of schools.

## Conclusions

Since the 2013 school closures in D.C., cities across the country have continued to shutter schools, and there are signs that more school closures are on the horizon. Given the neoliberal orientation of the U.S. Department of Education and connections to deep-pocketed supporters of that vision, a renewed and robust resistance to policies that exacerbate educational inequality is forming. More than filling a gap in the literature, I believe this study contributes to enhancing the politics of education organizing. As with other critical and engaged studies of activism, the research helps bring into view another tool in the repertoire of protest that may not be readily observed by outsiders or represented in scholarly accounts (Chari & Donner, 2010). In addition to offering communities a common language for critiquing closures specifically, counterframes can also be applied to the “common sense” guiding education policy on a much wider scale. As other scholars have pointed out, a frame may be expanded or shifted to incorporate a broader set of relevant issues (Carroll & Rattner, 2010). An anti-neoliberal or anti-racist education frame, for example, can be expanded to interconnected issues beyond school closures to encompass such concerns as those around standardized testing, school choice, equitable funding, and labor.

In building an educational movement, counterframes also help us view the role of quantitative data in a new light. For instance, the opposition to school closures incorporated budgetary analysis to dispute the district’s claims that closures would lead to greater fiscal efficiency or educational improvements. Participants also provided anecdotal observations to counter the school system’s claims of scarcity. Long considered a contributing factor to supporting institutionalized forms of racism, critical scholars are rethinking the role of quantitative data in liberatory educational projects. The emerging QuantCrit field, an extension of CRT, has sought to address underlying epistemological and ontological assumptions in quantitative approaches so that they may be reoriented to social justice efforts (Garcia, López, & Vélez, 2018; Pérez Huber, Vélez, & Solorzano, 2018). In the context of school closures, grassroots activists and researchers may subvert the limiting quantitative measures of utilization or performance that decision-makers invoke, and instead generate data that better contextualize these phenomena with regards to race, inequality, and neighborhood change.

As a broader movement seeking educational justice continues to form and bring into its ranks a wide range of actors (Anyon, 2005), future studies of organizing efforts may more closely explore the relationship between counterframes and counternarratives. Closer attention may also be paid to their relative efficacy in different contexts and with different types of policies. In the data-driven world of education policy (Dumas & Anderson, 2014), communities may need to reason with how various tools may help unseat the supposed objectivity driving such phenomena as school closures. As communities and grassroots groups take on an adversarial role towards data regimes, scholars may adopt similar approaches in their work that expose the “junk science” of philanthropist-sponsored research and advocacy (Burns, Green, & Nolan, 2018, p. 11). At the same time, we are reminded of a vital lesson from social movement literature: effective framing or storytelling is not enough to bring about social change. In order to make their strategies of shaping political debates most potent, community members, organizers, and their allies must also participate in movement-building work that requires organizational support, strong relationships, and access to resources (Ryan & Gamson, 2006). In D.C., for example, resistance to closures was not limited to participants articulating counterframes in public meetings or hearings. Instead, counterframes become part of a larger set of strategies that included public demonstrations, legal action, and media advocacy. Given the immense challenges facing urban schools, a broader repertoire of tactics may be needed to push for greater democracy, transparency, and equity in public education.

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