

# DEATH

## BY A THOUSAND CUTS

**Racism, School Closures, and Public School Sabotage**



Voices from America's Affected Communities of Color

**Journey For Justice Alliance**

May 2014

# ABOUT US

Journey for Justice (J4J) is an alliance of 36 grassroots community, youth, and parent-led organizations in 21 cities across the country. Our members are grassroots, base-building organizations working for community-driven school improvement as an alternative to the privatization and dismantling of public school systems.

## Coordinating Committee

**Empower DC** Washington, DC  
**Kenwood Oakland Community Organization** Chicago, IL  
**Parents Unified for Local School Education** Newark, NJ  
**Keep the Vote, No Takeover** Detroit, Michigan  
**Black Parents for Quality Education** Detroit, Michigan  
**New York City Coalition for Educational Justice** New York, NY  
**Urban Youth Collaborative** New York, NY  
**Baltimore Algebra Project** Washington, DC & Baltimore, MD  
**Philadelphia Student Union** Philadelphia, PA  
**Alliance for Educational Justice** National

## General Membership

**Action Now** Chicago, IL  
**Action United** Philadelphia, PA  
**Fannie Lou Hamer Center for Change** Eupora, MS  
**Project South** Atlanta, GA  
**Detroit LIFE Coalition** Detroit, MI  
**Oakland Public Education Network** Oakland, CA  
**Labor Community Strategy Center** Los Angeles, CA  
**Boston Youth Organizing Project** Boston, MA  
**Boston Parent Organizing Network** Boston, MA  
**Action United** Pittsburg, PA  
**Parent Power** Hartford, CT  
**Kansas Justice Advocates** Wichita, KS  
**Coalition for Community Schools** New Orleans, LA  
**Concerned Conscious Citizens Controlling Community Changes** New Orleans, LA  
**Youth United for Change** Philadelphia, PA  
**Parent Advocates for Children's Education** Jersey City, NJ  
**Concerned Citizens Coalition** Jersey City, NJ  
**Paterson Education Organizing Committee** Paterson, NJ  
**Camden Education Association** Camden, NJ  
**Citizens for Public Education** Englewood, NJ  
**Center for Popular Democracy** National  
**Make the Road New York** New York, NY  
**Alliance for Quality Education** New York, NY  
**Neighborhoods Organizing for Change** Minneapolis, MN  
**VAYLA** New Orleans, LA  
**League of Black and Latino Voters** Jersey City, NJ

We are organizing in our neighborhoods, in our cities, and nationally, for an equitable and just education system, based on a belief that quality education is a civil and human right and that all children regardless of race or economic status deserve to receive a world-class education in their own neighborhood.

In an effort to “document the harm” inflicted upon our communities by corporate education interventions, we conducted Grassroots Voices Listening Projects in the following cities: Boston, Caguas (Puerto Rico), Chicago, Detroit, Jersey City (NJ), New Orleans, New York, Newark, Paterson (NJ), Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, St. Paul, and Washington DC. We would like to extend heartfelt thanks to Journey for Justice Alliance members and the national coalition IDEA for lifting up the voices of the people directly affected.

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# OVERVIEW

“What kind of nation is this that doesn’t support its children?”

*Rose, Chicago mother*

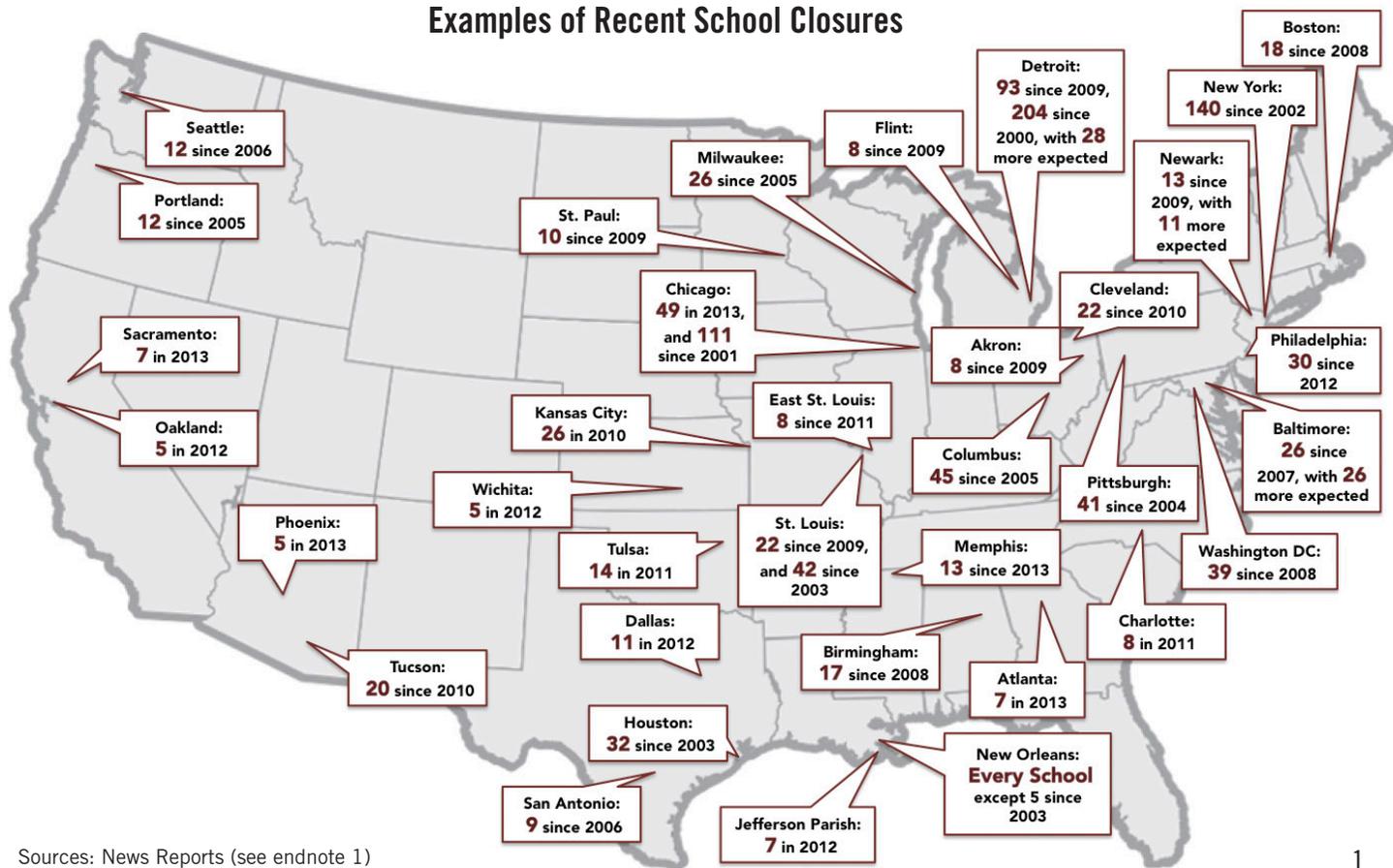
We, the members of Journey for Justice, are comprised of thousands of youth, parents, and other concerned citizens from communities of color across the United States. We write this report because we need the American people to know that the public education systems in our communities are dying. More accurately, they are being killed by an alliance of misguided, paternalistic “reformers,” education profiteers, and those who seek to dismantle the institution of public education. Some are being killed quickly; others are still in the early stages. But it is, at this point, quite clear that there will soon be little to nothing left of our public school systems – and many more like ours – unless current trends are disrupted.

As can be seen in Figure 1, America’s predominantly Black and Latino communities are experiencing an epidemic of public school closures.<sup>1</sup> For example:

- In New Orleans, beginning in the Fall of 2014, there will only be five public schools left in the entire city.
- Detroit, New York, and Chicago have all had more than 100 public schools closed in recent years.
- Columbus (OH), Pittsburgh, St. Louis, Houston, Philadelphia, Washington DC, Kansas City, Milwaukee, and Baltimore have all had more than 25 public schools closed in recent years.
- Many other urban districts – including numerous districts not pictured in Figure 1 – have also experienced multiple school closures, particularly within the last few years. And there are many others in the works.

Figure 1:

## Examples of Recent School Closures



Sources: News Reports (see endnote 1)

Even one school closure can be devastating for a neighborhood; closures at this scale are usually catastrophic. Of course, the story behind them has varied from community to community, as each has its own distinguishing characteristics, with its own particular cast of characters, politics, demographics, and history. However, they have typically been justified with one or more of the following three reasons: (1) that they are necessary because of shrinking budgets; (2) that the schools are “under-utilized” and need to be closed to “right-size” the district; and (3) that the schools are “failing” and closure will enable students to get a higher-quality education. But those explanations are largely superficial.

The real, underlying cause for these school closures is that there has been a realignment of political forces. Right-wing conservatives have long sought to eliminate public goods such as public education, and dismantle organized labor, especially teachers’ unions. Thus, for decades they have advocated – often successfully – for cutting spending to public schools. They have also long pursued the replacement of public schools with non-unionized, privately managed schools that receive public funds, either through a voucher system or a system of charter schools. Their privatization proposals received little support until they were joined by billionaires willing to invest heavily in education reform such as Bill Gates, Eli Broad, and the Walton family; members of the business community, especially Wall Street and large corporations, who realized there is considerable profit to be made by outsourcing education to private management; and Democratic policymakers who bought into (or were at least willing to promote) the unproven assertion that privatization and “school choice” would create improved educational opportunities for students. As a result of this political shift, there emerged a well-organized and extraordinarily well-funded group of individuals and organizations that has exploited any political opening they could find to destabilize neighborhood public schools – almost exclusively within communities of color – and instead promote the expansion of charter schools. (Throughout this report, we will distinguish between public schools and charters, because while charter schools often claim to be public schools, they are privately managed and as a legal matter they typically insist they are not public schools.<sup>2</sup>)

Those openings varied from city to city, ranging from natural disasters (New Orleans), to economic calamities (Detroit), to sharp rightward shifts in leadership and the de-prioritization of education in the state budget (Pennsylvania).<sup>3</sup> Certainly, the recession beginning in 2009 and the resulting cuts to state and local budgets played a major role, as many policymakers saw economic hardship as an opportunity to promote their

privatization agenda.<sup>4</sup> In many cases, “reformers” (as they like to call themselves) simply capitalized on the disillusionment with public schools caused by the longstanding lack of commitment – by both policymakers and the broader public – to the education of students of color. But perhaps the most significant development in this realignment of forces was the election of President Obama and the “reformers” successfully convincing him to not only embrace this viewpoint, but to greatly accelerate its implementation.<sup>5</sup>

The Obama Administration has been outspoken in its promotion of charter schools, demonstrating a strong preference for the dramatic expansion of this sector.<sup>6</sup> Secretary of Education Arne Duncan even said, “Hurricane Katrina was the best thing that happened to the education system in New Orleans.”<sup>7</sup> And through the School Improvement Grants program, the Race to the Top grant program, and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act waiver process, the U.S. Department of Education went beyond even President George W. Bush’s “No Child Left Behind Act” in directly encouraging the shift from public schools to charter schools. All of these programs required, or at least strongly encouraged, states and districts to adopt the Administration’s “school turnaround” models, one of which was to close public schools and turn over control to private management. Additionally, Race to the Top gave priority to states that removed any limitations on the number of charter schools. Because of the desperation of cash-strapped states and localities for additional federal funds, and to be relieved of the impossible mandates of the No Child Left Behind Act, many of them were essentially coerced into adopting the Administration’s agenda for school reform. Combined with the massive advocacy, lobbying, and public relations efforts of the other proponents of these policies, within a very short amount of time this powerful alliance has been able to convince much of the public that privately managed charter schools are preferable to public schools.

As a result, public schools are being closed in droves as an intentional result of these “reformers” actions, and urban districts in particular are shrinking rapidly (see Figure 2).<sup>8</sup> For example:

- Numerous urban districts have lost between 10% and 20% of their public school enrollment in just seven years.
- Others, such as Camden (NJ) (-20%), Philadelphia (-21%), San Antonio (-22%), Los Angeles (-23%), Washington DC (-23%), St. Louis (-25%), Indianapolis (-27%), and Cleveland (-32%) have lost between one-fifth and one-third of their students.
- Gary (IN) has lost almost half of its students (-47%), while

## Racism, School Closures, and Public School Sabotage

Detroit has lost an incredible 63% of its public school enrollment in just seven years.

Meanwhile, there has been a massive shift in resources from public entities to private organizations, especially within low-income communities of color. Nationally, the number of students enrolled within charter schools has nearly doubled just within the last six years.<sup>9</sup> At the local level, many education systems are being reshaped in an unprecedented fashion:

- In New Orleans, which was targeted by “reformers” after Hurricane Katrina for the dramatic expansion of charter schools, the 2014-15 school year will bring the nation’s first 100% charter school district in the country, the Recovery School District.<sup>10</sup>

- Among the 20 districts listed in Figure 2, which represent many of the districts serving the most students of color in the country, every single one had at least a 35% increase in student enrollment at charter schools during the seven-year period from 2005-06 to 2012-13.
- Charter school enrollment was more than doubled in 13 of the 20 districts.
- There was at least a tripling in charter school enrollment in Chicago (+219%), Los Angeles (+243%), Indianapolis (+287%), Baltimore (+366%), Memphis (+377%), San Antonio (+483%), and Pinellas County, FL (601%). Not listed is New York City, which had a 428% increase in charter school enrollment.

Figure 2:  
**Shrinking Public School Districts**

Sources: National Alliance for Public Charter Schools; U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights  
(\* indicates that 2012-13 data was not available)

School District	% Students of Color (2011-12)	Reduction in Public School Enrollment 2005-06 to 2012-13	Increase in Charter School Enrollment 2005-06 to 2012-13
Detroit Public Schools	98%	↓63%	↑53%
Gary (IN) Community School Corp.	99%	↓47%	↑197%
Cleveland Metropolitan SD	85%	↓32%	↑71%
Indianapolis Public Schools	78%	↓27%	↑287%
St. Louis Public Schools	87%	↓25%	↑88%
District of Columbia Public Schools	90%	↓23%	↑95%
Los Angeles Unified SD	91%	↓23%	↑243%
San Antonio Independent SD*	98%	↓22%	↑483%
School District of Philadelphia	86%	↓21%	↑105%
Camden City Public Schools	99%	↓20%	↑88%
Memphis City Schools	93%	↓17%	↑377%
Newark Public Schools	92%	↓17%	↑197%
Tucson Unified	76%	↓15%	↑35%
Chicago Public Schools	91%	↓14%	↑219%
Baltimore City Public Schools	92%	↓14%	↑366%
Oakland Unified	90%	↓13%	↑55%
Pinellas County (FL) Public Schools	41%	↓12%	↑601%
Broward County (FL) Public Schools	74%	↓12%	↑119%
Miami-Dade County Public Schools	92%	↓11%	↑184%
Houston Independent SD*	92%	↓11%	↑178%

The move toward the expansion of charter schools, and away from public schools, in communities of color has been staggeringly swift, and it is accelerating, creating a grave threat to the health of public education in our communities. To be clear, we are not opposed to a small number of community-based charter schools offering high-quality, innovative services that cannot be provided by our local public schools. But we are adamantly opposed to the overarching agenda of the “reformers” pushing these policies, which is to have charter schools *replace* our public schools. Unfortunately, they have been remarkably successful in recent years.

## The Perversity of “Reformers” Claiming the Mantle of the Civil Rights Movement

To justify this radical transformation to the public, the proponents of these policies have taken to talking about them as matters of racial and social justice. In fact, many of the lead “reformers” – such as Secretary Arne Duncan, Michelle Rhee, Bill Gates, Rahm Emanuel, and Michael Bloomberg – have repeatedly attempted to justify their actions by claiming that school closures and the expansion of charter schools are a critical part of the “civil rights movement of our time,” and that they are primarily intended to benefit the students and families within low-income communities of color across the country.<sup>11</sup> As the residents of the communities most affected by school closures and charter school expansion, we must take issue with this rhetorical deception.

First, it is appalling that anyone would dare to equate the billionaire-funded destruction of our most treasured public institutions with the grassroots-led struggles for racial equality to which many of our elders and ancestors made heroic sacrifices.

Second, we simply cannot tolerate anyone telling us these policies are for our own good. Because *we* are the students they claim to be doing this for. *We* are the parents and family members that they claim to be helping. The communities they’re changing so rapidly are *our* communities, and our experience with school closures and charter school expansion confirms what an abundance of research has made quite clear: these policies have not produced higher-quality educational opportunities for our children and youth, but they have been hugely destructive.<sup>12</sup> Closing a school is one of the most traumatic things that can happen to a community; it strikes at the very core of community culture, history, and identity, and (as is documented below in Section Two) produces far-reaching repercussions that negatively affect every aspect of commu-

Figure 3:

### The Resistance to School Closures

In every city in which there have been mass school closures, students, parents, educators, and other community members have resisted vigorously, engaging in extensive advocacy, filing complaints under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and holding numerous protests, rallies, sit-ins and other public actions. Many of these efforts have been led by the students directed affected by these policies. In fact, in many cities – including New York City, Newark, Detroit, and Philadelphia – there have been massive student walkouts to protest school closures.

nity life. It has been nothing short of devastating to the health and development of many of our children and youth, has put a strain on our families, has contributed to the destabilization and deterioration of our communities, has undermined many good schools and effective school improvement efforts, has destroyed relationships with quality educators, and has contributed to increased community violence.<sup>13</sup> It also frequently triggers a downward spiral from which many school systems have yet to escape.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, one of the most likely outcomes from school closures is that additional ones will soon follow, to the point that many of our communities no longer have a single public school in them.

Meanwhile, the dramatic expansion of charter schools has done nothing to address the root causes of the challenges our communities face. Though it has created a whole set of new problems, such as the proliferation of highly-regimented and excessively narrow educational approaches, admissions and disciplinary practices that exclude students with the greatest educational needs, inexperienced teaching staffs with high turnover rates, and limited transparency and public accountability.<sup>15</sup>

Third, while the proponents of these policies may like to think they are implementing them *for* us or even *with* us, the reality is that they have been done *to* us. All of these changes have been implemented despite widespread and passionate opposition from the affected communities (see Figure 3). Time and time again, the extraordinary wealth and power behind these policies have been used to override the will of our communities; to bully our communities into accepting these changes.<sup>16</sup> Why our communities? Largely because it was perceived that we lacked the political power to withstand such bullying, and

that there would be limited public outcry over such dramatic changes within low-income communities of color.

Fourth, the policies being implemented have unquestionably been racially discriminatory. That is not to say that the individuals responsible are “racists” who are deliberately closing schools in our communities and expanding the use of charter schools because they want to harm our children. What it does mean is that within the set of political, economic, and social forces that are producing these changes, there are strong tendencies to treat our communities differently than other communities would be treated. Racism, in this form, has consistently and repeatedly manifested itself by the “reformers” being:

- Less concerned about the harm caused by school closures to the people in our communities;
- More willing to destabilize the democratic institutions in our communities;
- More concerned about cost savings than the educational and developmental needs of students with respect to the schools in our communities;
- More willing to subject our children and youth to unproven education policies;
- Less willing to accept that our communities know what is best for our children;
- Less concerned with providing experienced teachers, small class sizes, and well-rounded curricula to our children and youth;<sup>17</sup>
- More willing to subject our children and youth to standardized-test-driven curricula;<sup>18</sup>
- Less concerned about the massive number of students being pushed out of school within our communities because of school closures and charter school expansion;<sup>19</sup> and
- More willing to implement a privatized education system – that is not designed to educate every one of our children and youth – in our communities.<sup>20</sup>

There is simply no way our communities would be losing our public school systems were it not for the pervasiveness of these biases. It is only possible because of how policymakers and the broader public view our communities. As a result, we face a legitimate crisis in our Nation’s communities of color, as the institutions that have long served as sanctuaries, as lifelines, and as our escape route from the oppressive conditions we face, are being taken from us as part of the “civil rights movement of our time.”

The tragic irony of this development is particularly stark now, as we commemorate the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the landmark

Supreme Court decision, *Brown vs. Board of Education*. The plaintiffs in *Brown* fought and sacrificed for the right to attend public schools, and for all children to have high-quality educational opportunities in public schools. Yet now, similar to the pre-*Brown* era of “separate and unequal” schools, the children and youth in our communities are being treated as second-class citizens, and our public schools are being treated as schools of last resort. Just as in the post-*Brown* era, when public schools were closed in some communities and the concept of “school choice” was created so that southern White families could avoid school integration,<sup>21</sup> “school choice” is being used to justify the unwillingness of our education policymakers to provide each of our children with a high-quality education in their neighborhood public schools.

However, 60 years ago the horrors of Jim Crow segregation led the federal government to pass our most important piece of civil rights legislation, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which – among other things – prohibited race-based discrimination in the public education system. In contrast, our current federal government has taken the side of those who seek to privatize and dismantle that very institution.

“The bottom line is that, this whole thing, no matter how you dissect it, no matter how much jargon the reform movement puts on top of it, this is about race and class. No matter how many minority students would go up to the microphone at a hearing, and say, weeping, ‘don’t close our school,’ nothing happened. The reason why this happened is because these are minority communities of disenfranchised individuals, whose voices not only aren’t heard, we’re never going to be heard, ever.”

*New York City community member*

### **The Hypocrisy of the Reformers’ “Movement”**

To be clear, we are the first to admit that there is an urgent need to improve educational quality in our communities, and others like ours around the country. Indeed, nobody has a better understanding of school failure than we do. And nobody is more invested in improving our schools than we are.

But when the so-called “reformers” use our “failing schools” as justification for closing them, or privatizing them, they claim that the primary failings exist within those schools. They act

Figure 4:

### **The View from the Ground: Paul Robeson High School (New York, NY)**

School community perspectives on the “phasing out” of a public high school over the last few years:

Assistant Principal: “At our peak we had 1,500 students. As they started closing other large high schools, they started giving us the students from those other schools. We started getting over-age and under-credited students.”

Teacher: “The building is built for 1,000 kids and we were up to 1,500 right before they designated us for phase-out. So you can imagine it’s pretty uncomfortable for kids.”

Teacher: “There were never gang issues inside the school. But because you were dumping kids from one closing school to the next, you had these gang issues start up.”

Teacher: “Letters go out to families that the school is phasing out. You have the option of sending your child elsewhere. But you could only leave if you were a 9<sup>th</sup> grader that was on track to graduate, or for safety transfer. But if you were already struggling, or having challenges, you couldn’t leave.”

Teacher: “We lost chemistry... We lost AP classes. We lost calculus. That hurts the students that stay.”

Parent Coordinator: “We don’t have a supply secretary, there are no more school aides, there’s not a guidance counselor, there is not an attendance teacher. I’m doing a little bit of everything. I’m counseling students.”

Teacher: “Robeson had an amazing partnership with what was originally Solomon Brothers. It goes back all the way to this school being called Robeson. The school really benefited from this connection. They jumped shipped when the [Department of Education] labeled us a failing school. We have alumni who are still working there that had incredible internships that started when they were in high school.”

Teacher: “There were a core group of a dozen faculty members that were trying to save the school. All of us had [Department of Education] investigations opened up against us.”

Former student: “Once you hear your school is phasing out, that takes a toll on you. It’s in a bad neighborhood; it’s right across the street from the projects. The name of your school now has a bad name.”

Former teacher: “The school had such a stigma on it [from being labeled as ‘failing’] that the parents from students in the other schools didn’t want their kids socializing with Robeson kids.”

Former student: “Paul Robeson High School was like a family. Everyone was connected. I’m still in touch with my friends. We feel like Paul Robeson phasing out is ridiculous... We had teachers that we built connections with and they would have to leave because our school is being phased out. Paul Robeson was our family. It hurts us that we have nothing to come back to.”

Parent Coordinator: “During the phase-out, parents become disconnected. The environment isn’t welcoming for them. When you take all the resources away from a school, everyone just goes through the motions... It’s an emotional pain; an emotional death – a mental death.”

as if there were no underlying cause for the often-unsound educational practices, or frequently uneven teaching capacity, that exist within our schools. They confuse these symptoms of the problem with the problem itself, which is that our public schools have been persistently under-resourced, under-supported, and undermined for decades, including by many of the same people that now purport to “fix” them. The harsh reality is that the equitable education of our children has *never* been a priority for education policymakers. Thus, our school budgets have been slashed, our teaching and support staffs have been depleted, our class sizes have been increased, and our schools have been continually slandered in the media. Not surprisingly, our best educators leave for jobs where they are valued and supported. And the families with means also seek out better options, whether by leaving the district, going to a private school, or trying one of the brand-new charter schools that are being given preferential treatment in policy, glowing media coverage, and the resources that had formerly been in our public schools.

In other words, when our schools have been closed because they are “failing,” it has typically been the result of our federal, state, and local policymakers being unwilling to provide that school with the support required to meet the needs its students. When our schools have been closed because they are “under-utilized,” it has usually been the result of charter schools being put in direct competition with public schools or families being driven away from the district by the effects of under-funding or previous school closures. When our schools have been closed because of insufficient resources, the real explanation has been federal, state, and local funding cuts, and the lack of political will to save public schools.

Have the “reformers,” who are supposedly acting on our behalf, objected when our children and youth suffered as a result of public school budget cuts?

Have they protested the closure of schools that our communities hold dear?

Have they objected to the reality that the expansion of the charter school sector has come at the expense of students within the public school sector?

Rarely, if ever. They have been largely content to let our public schools die while praising the policymakers who killed them for being willing to “tighten their belts” and “refusing to accept failure.”

The reality is that while the “reformers” continually talk about their “movement,” it is led by – and largely comprised of – the super-wealthy and privileged class, with very little representation from the communities they claim to be helping. In fact,

there is hardly anyone who supports public school closures and charter school expansion who does not have a direct financial stake in school privatization (though there are, admittedly, individual students and parents who have benefitted from placement in a particular charter school, and the “reformers” are quick to use them as spokespeople in defense of the much broader systemic changes). And the hypocrisy within their “movement” is becoming increasingly absurd:

- The core premise of charter schools was that they were to be given increased freedom from rules and regulations in exchange for improved academic achievement, and yet we now have over 20 years of data demonstrating that they are no more effective, on average, than public schools (even if we judge them by the extremely-limited, standardized-test-based metrics they prefer).<sup>22</sup>
- The original charter schools were designed to be small “laboratories for innovation” that could generate new instructional strategies for use in public schools, yet after all of these years, they have been unable to point to any distinguishing characteristic of charter schools that produces improved educational quality. Nor that have identified a single education innovation that couldn’t be replicated just as easily in public schools if provided the appropriate resources.
- The original charter schools were supposed to work with the students that the public schools had the hardest time teaching; now, we have ample evidence that they educate fewer of those students than the surrounding public schools.<sup>23</sup>
- Instead of the individual, community-based charter schools that were initially intended, the dominant trend is toward large corporate franchises of charter schools such as KIPP, Rocketship, and Green Dot.
- “Reformers” view charter schools as inherently superior to public schools, but that appears to only apply to low-income communities of color, because attempts to replace public schools with charter schools in predominantly White areas are exceedingly rare.
- “School choice” was supposed to provide parents with a multitude of high-quality options for their children, but after all these years, our parents still have nothing approaching a meaningful choice. We are still left fighting over crumbs in a thoroughly unequal, stratified system that undervalues the education of our children.



## Public Education: Too Big, and Important, to Fail

Despite the incredible amount of damage that has been done to our communities in the last few years by school closures and the expansion of charter schools, and the speed with which these practices are spreading, there is still time to undo some of this harm and ensure that it is not inflicted upon any more communities. As we describe below in Section Three, these are problems that can be fixed. But to do so, we need to act now. We need to recognize that behind all of the politics, and behind the arguments about test scores, and behind the fight over “school choice,” what this is really about is the *fundamental human right to a high-quality education* (see Figure 5).<sup>24</sup> Perhaps the greatest tragedy of the push to replace public schools with charter schools is the alarming lack of care that has been demonstrated for those rights. A child’s right to an education is far too important to be jeopardized because of profit motive, or political ideology, or a hunch that another type of management structure might work better.

For our communities, those most affected by school closures and charter expansion, it comes down to this: what history has shown us repeatedly, and over 20 years of charter schools have confirmed, is that well-funded public schools represent the best option for ensuring that *all* of our children and youth receive a high-quality education. And so we cannot let our public schools die. And we implore our government to not let it happen. Our education policymakers should be doing everything in their power to save, and strengthen, our public schools. Indeed, our federal government has taken dramatic action to rescue institutions far less important to the national interest. For example, they issued massive bailouts to private Wall Street banks because they were “too big to fail.” It would be the cruelest of ironies to subsequently join forces with those same Wall Street banks and others to aid in the destruction of

public education in our communities. Because if there is any institution that is too big, and too important, to fail, it is public education. And if there is any group that is in need of a bailout, it is the children and youth from our communities.

Figure 5:

### The Human Right to Education

The fundamental human right to education has been well established under Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other widely accepted human rights standards. It includes:

- Equal access to a quality education adapted to meet students’ individual needs;
- Education that is directed toward the development of each child’s personality and full potential;
- Respect for the inherent dignity of every child, the prevention of practices that cause harm or humiliation to children, and the promotion of children’s self-confidence and self-expression;
- Equitable distribution of resources across communities according to need;
- Freedom from discrimination; and
- The right of students, parents and communities to participate in decisions that affect their schools and the right to education.

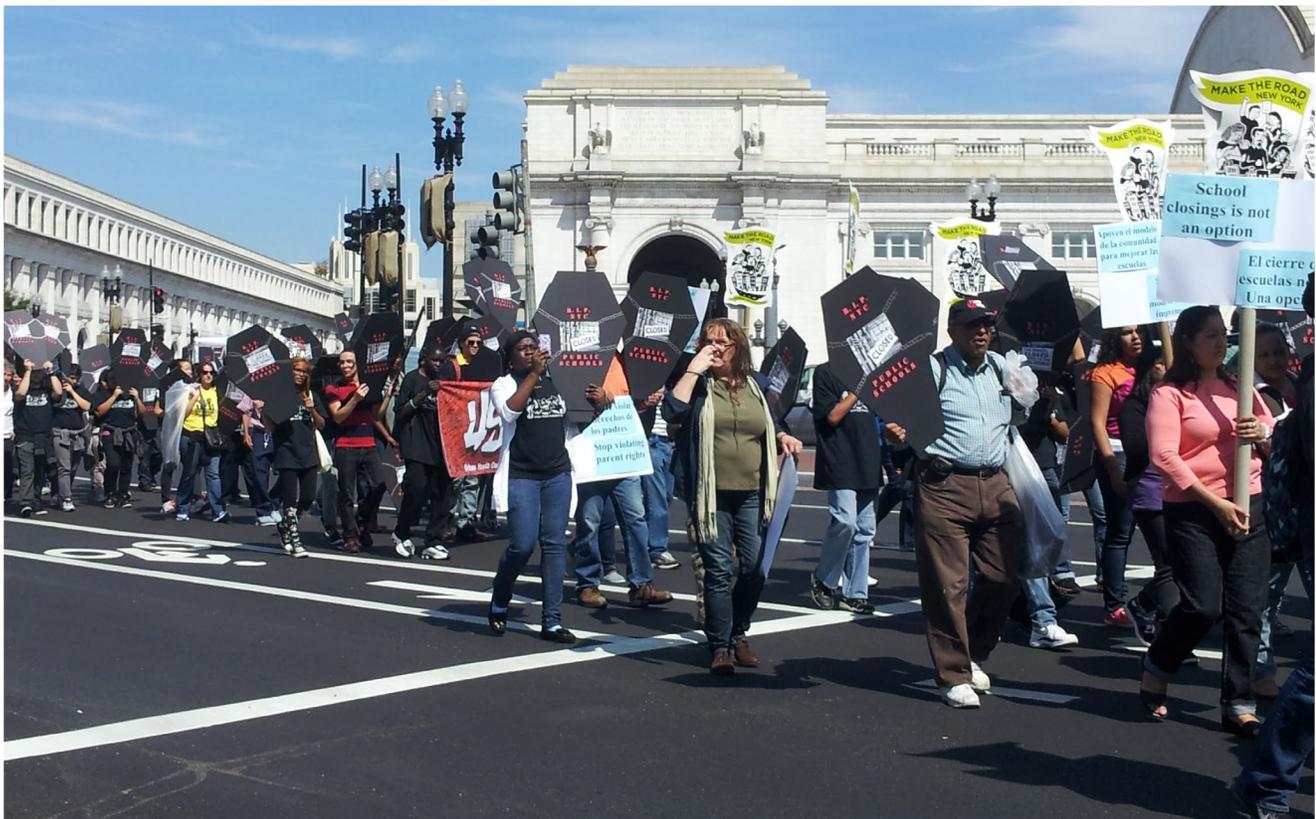
Source: National Economic & Social Rights Initiative.

Figure 6:

## Necessary Action Steps

As described more fully in Section Three, we are calling on our policymakers to take immediate action in the following six areas:

1. The U.S. Department of Education should replace its four school “turnaround” models with the “Sustainable School Success Model.”
2. President Obama should call for a national moratorium on school closures and charter school expansion and spearhead the creation of a “Public School Bailout and Revitalization Fund.”
3. Congress should revoke all tax credits and other incentives for charter school investment and replace them with equivalent incentives to invest in public schools.
4. All charter schools that fail to both provide an innovative educational model that is unavailable in local public schools and demonstrate superior performance in educating all of their students should not have their charters renewed.
5. The White House Domestic Policy Council, United Nations, and Permanent Court of International Justice (or “World Court”) should participate in a “Grassroots Impact Tour” of the communities affected by mass school closures to hear from students, parents, educators, and community members, and witness the community-wide effects.
6. Due to the harm inflicted on our communities by corporate education interventions, the Journey for Justice Alliance seeks a Senate hearing on the impact of these policies.



# SUMMARY OF RESEARCH ON, AND LIVED EXPERIENCE WITH, SCHOOL CLOSURES AND THE EXPANSION OF CHARTER SCHOOLS

The public debate around school closures rarely goes beyond how badly the schools to be shut down are “failing,” or how much cost savings can be realized through closing them. The dialogue around the expansion of charter schools rarely extends much beyond the goal of raising standardized test scores. Indeed, any attempts to raise additional issues usually results in allegations of wanting to “maintain the status quo.” Yet school closures and charter school expansion both represent major changes to the complex ecosystems of school districts and communities, and thus produce a vast array of harms that have been de-prioritized or ignored altogether.

Below, both represented in Figure 7 and discussed thereafter, is a more well-rounded, 360-degree analysis of the effects of school closures and switching to privately managed charter schools, including the findings from academic research and our communities’ lived experience with these policies. It is heavily informed by the Grassroots Voices Listening Projects conducted by Journey for Justice members and allies across the country, in which students, teachers, educators, and other community members were invited to share their experiences with school closures and charter school expansion.

Figure 7



Figure 8:

## Public School Sabotage

To support the expansion of charter schools, many “reformers” have been willing to set up our public schools to fail, sacrificing the well-being of the students within those schools in the process. Dyett High School, in the Bronzeville neighborhood on the south side of Chicago, is one example among many.

Since 2001, 20 area schools near Dyett have been closed, converted to charter or selective enrollment schools, or subjected to other “turnaround” strategies. Students have been displaced multiple times, leading to an increase in community violence and a variety of emotional, psychological, and academic harms to area youth. Dyett has been under-resourced since its founding, but because of Chicago Public Schools’ (CPS) emphasis on charter school expansion, its budget has been cut even further in recent years. CPS cut the school’s AVID college preparatory program and refused to fund Dyett’s widely acclaimed restorative justice and Education to Success programs, which had doubled graduation rates and raised college attendance by 41%. Due to CPS cuts, Dyett lost a counselor, an assistant principal, all of its art teachers, a truancy prevention program, Saturday school, and an effective literacy program. By 2011, Dyett was able to offer only one honors course and no Advanced Placement (AP) courses (compared to other local schools that offered 20 or more AP classes). After years of underinvestment, disinvestment, and destabilization, the CPS Board of Education voted in 2012 to “phase out” Dyett because of poor performance and send students to another local school that performs no better on district performance measures. Meanwhile, the District continues its dramatic expansion of charter schools.

Source: Rhoda Rae Gutierrez and Pauline Lipman, *Dyett High School and the 3 D’s of Chicago School Reform: Destabilization, Disinvestment, and Disenfranchisement*, University of Illinois at Chicago, Collaborative for Equity and Justice in Education.

## Limits Educational Access

School closures and charter school expansion have limited the ability of many people in our communities to even access a school. First, the proliferation of school closures – typically concentrated in low-income communities of color – has created “education deserts,” entire communities without a single school. In other words, something as basic as being able to send one’s child to a school in your own neighborhood is now impossible within many of our communities.

Second, charter schools have become notorious in our communities for refusing entry to students who are perceived to be more challenging to teach. For example, charter schools typically enroll fewer students with disabilities and English language learners than the surrounding public schools.

- In a study of 2010-11 data from charter schools and their “feeder” schools in 27 states, Stanford’s Center for Research on Educational Outcomes (CREDO) found that special education students constituted only 8% of charter school enrollment, compared to 11% of enrollment in comparable public schools.<sup>25</sup> The Government Accountability Office reached similar findings in its 2012 report.<sup>26</sup>

“I moved to Hazelwood because there were wonderful schools. There was a daycare, a grocery – it was nice. In 2002 the first school closed. Within four-and-a-half years the rest of the schools closed, the grocery closed, and people have left. It’s like a ghost town.”

— Hazel, Pittsburgh parent

- The CREDO study also found that English language learners constituted only 9% of charter school enrollment, compared to 13% of comparable public schools.<sup>27</sup>
- A study of KIPP charter schools – the largest corporate charter school chain in the U.S. – found that they enrolled a much lower percentage of students with disabilities (5.9%) than did their local public schools (12.1%). The same was true for English language learners (11.5% compared to 19.2%).<sup>28</sup>

Many charter schools also exclude students who are not perceived to be high-achievers or academically inclined. Charter schools use a variety of selective admission techniques, such as targeted marketing strategies, burdensome application processes, imposing academic prerequisites, and the active discouragement

“They are packing up our children like animals.”

— *April, Chicago parent*

ment of less-desirable candidates.<sup>29</sup> The result in our communities has been that there are many students who cannot find a single school anywhere near their home that will accept them.

## Undermines Educational Quality

While it is frequently claimed that students displaced by school closures will perform better academically in their new schools, the research doesn't bear that out. Studies have shown that the academic performance of students from closed schools does not improve, and often gets worse in their new schools.<sup>30</sup> That is partly due to students being sent to schools that are no better than the ones that were closed. For example, a 2012 study found that 94% of students from closed schools in Chicago did not go to “academically strong” new schools.<sup>31</sup>

However, that is also due to the often-enormous burden put on schools that receive the displaced students. The academic performance in these schools typically suffers as they attempt to integrate a new set of students – often accustomed to a different set of rules and norms, and frequently traumatized by the displacement – into their school community.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, these receiving schools often become overcrowded, and have their class sizes increase dramatically. For example, there are now many schools in our communities where the average class size is higher than 30, which precludes high-quality, personalized education, especially considering the high level of educational and developmental needs our students typically have (including a greater proportion of students living in extreme poverty, students with special needs, English language learners, and youth in the foster care system or who are homeless). In fact, because of school closures, many of our schools have classes with more than 40 or even 50 students in them, which is nothing short of shameful. And many of our public schools are now being labeled as “under-utilized” – and often closed – if they don't have what most parents and educators would consider to be an excessive number of students per class.<sup>33</sup>

It is also frequently the case that the shift to charter schools comes at the expense of the remaining public schools and the

“We developed a system that has a business model. We created winners and losers. It's all about who's the winner and who's the loser. . . . It's an education Thunderdome . . .”

— *New York City community member*

students they serve.<sup>34</sup> Not only do these schools often receive additional funds that have been siphoned off from public schools, they also enjoy other preferential treatment, such as rent-free facilities and exemption from many regulations.<sup>35</sup>

Yet despite these advantages, and a massive public relations effort to convince the public otherwise (see Figure 9), there is a substantial body of research collected over the last 20 years demonstrating that charter schools are no more effective, on average, than public schools at raising student test scores or closing “achievement gaps.”<sup>36</sup> There is simply nothing magical about being a charter school instead of a public school. Indeed, even in New Orleans, where there has been a massive investment by “reformers” in the success of charter schools – in the hope that it could be a model for the rest of the country – 79% of charter schools were recently rated as a “D” or “F” school by the Louisiana Department of Education.<sup>37</sup>

“[After my school was closed] [e]veryone was piled onto each other. . . . Literally my 8th grade classroom was the janitor's closet.”

— *Chicago 8th-grade student*

That has not prevented “reformers” from misusing or severely overstating test score results to their advantage. Indeed, the supposed ability of charter schools to improve standardized test scores has been the primary argument for their expansion. The simple fact that it has been proven to be unfounded should, in itself, end the debate. That is especially true considering that the explicit goal of many charter schools is to raise standardized test scores, as if that were synonymous with providing a high-quality education.

Indeed, while there are certainly a diversity of approaches across charter schools, many of the charter schools in our communities – including many of the most well-renowned schools<sup>38</sup> – offer a very limited curriculum that often excludes the sciences, art, music, physical education, and world languages. And, because of the intense focus placed on improving test scores in these schools, many of them employ highly regimented teaching methods directed primarily at test preparation.<sup>39</sup> Thus, even many of the students in “successful” charter schools are being deprived of enriched, engaging, and culturally relevant education. Nevertheless, the charter schools that offer the most limited approach to education are the ones that our policymakers are rapidly replicating and expanding within our communities.

Unfortunately, because charter schools have been put into direct competition with public schools, and the understand-

ing of high-quality education has been so severely distorted by many of our education policymakers, many of our public schools have also felt pressured to narrow their curricula and spend more time “teaching to the test.”<sup>40</sup> Additionally, because of the selective admissions practices of charter schools and their greater inclination to push challenging students out (discussed more below), our public schools are typically left with a higher concentration of students who require the most attention and resources. Yet they typically aren’t provided with additional funding, and in fact when students are pushed out from charter schools mid-year and enroll in public schools, the funds allocated for those students typically stay with the charter school.

Thus, far from the “Race to the Top” advertised by Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, school closures and charter school expansion have, more often than not, produced a race to the bottom characterized by low-quality education and even more severely under-resourced public schools (see Figure 10).<sup>41</sup>

## Expands the School-to-Prison Pipeline

In recent years, the overuse of harsh disciplinary practices such as out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, and school-based arrests have caused considerable damage to students, families, and communities across the country. This “school-to-prison pipeline” has been especially devastating within low-income communities of color such as ours. Far too many of our students are needlessly being pushed out of school and

“Mayor Rahm Emanuel . . . would not, and does not, subject his children to what he is forcing on us. His children go to a school where they don’t test children to death and have smaller class sizes and all the resources his children need.”

— *Irene, Chicago grandparent*

Figure 9:

### The Fallacy of the 100% Graduation and College Attendance Rates at Charter Schools

It has become disturbingly common for charter schools to receive extensive, glowing media coverage for their supposedly exceptional graduation and college attendance rates. The coverage is particularly fawning if the school educates low-income students of color, as these schools are invariably seized upon by “reformers” for media attention and expansion. While many of these schools do serve some sub-set of students well, upon closer scrutiny, their achievements are rarely as “miraculous” as their supporters claim.

For example, the Urban Prep Academies in Chicago have been dubbed “Hogwarts in the Hood,” and recently received national attention for having all of their graduating seniors accepted at four-year colleges or universities, for the fourth consecutive year. While a wonderful achievement for those students, what these reports invariably fail to mention is how many students were “weeded out” prior to graduation.

While Urban Prep’s Englewood campus had 85 students in their 2011-12 graduating class, there were 178 students who originally started in the class four years earlier. Over time, they lost over half of their students. One explanation is that the school has extremely harsh disciplinary practices. During the 2011-12 school year, it expelled 31 out of their 473 students, or one out of every fifteen, which is one of the highest rates ever recorded. Additionally, nearly one out of every 10 of their students elected – or were encouraged – to transfer out of the school, during just that one school year. In other words, *the school lost over one out of every six students during just one school year.*

Schools receiving public money are charged with educating all of their students, not the one-quarter or one-half of them who are most capable or resilient. Thus, while we can applaud the relatively small number of students who make it to graduation in schools like Urban Prep, we must also recognize that, as it relates to their broader public purpose, the schools themselves are wholly inadequate models.

Sources: Chicago Public Schools; Voices of Youth in Chicago Education.

Figure 10:

### The View from the Ground: Columbus High School (New York, NY)

School community perspectives on turning a public high school into a series of charter schools within the same building over the last ten years, and being closed altogether this year:

Student: “With our school closing they take away classes from us, so I’m currently taking a class online. The other schools [within the same building], they get a music class, they have instruments, but we don’t get that.”

Student: “My counselor, she has such a hard time, because it’s only her. You can’t really fault her . . . because there are 160 kids and just her. So you’re doing stuff on your own to apply to college, and you’re doing stuff with your parents, but they don’t know what to do. If you went to a school with more money, you wouldn’t have to be do all of this by yourself.”

Teacher: “Today as we stand, we don’t have art and music. We just have a couple electives. Some students couldn’t fit physical education into their schedules, so our Principal had to go in the budget and pay a teacher to come in on Saturday so students could graduate.”

Student at co-located charter school: “It’s just a totally different atmosphere and it’s not fair on the kids. They don’t get to experience a lot of things that we experienced and we’re three floors up.”

Principal: “We’re looked at like the second-class citizens of the building and that is not fair for my kids or my staff. We were 4,500 students and currently I’m at 160 students. We’ve been closing little by little. We had all these teams that really connected the students. It got all of the kids together. It didn’t matter what level you were on, it connected Special Ed, ESL, all of our students. We lost academically because when it was broken down, they took the high-level students and made a new school with them. They took the next level students and made a school with them. They took my Assistant Principals, they took my teachers, and I was left with whoever could not get positions in the other schools. There was nothing I could do about it. I had no control as Principal. We lost our AP classes, our Honors classes, all the higher-level classes. . . . Academically [our students] have lost out. They have really suffered.”

into – or toward – the juvenile and criminal justice systems. Yet for as extreme and misguided as the disciplinary practices are in many of our public schools, they are in many ways even worse in our charter schools. For example:

- In 2012-13, among the 19 schools with the most expulsions in Chicago, 18 of them were charter schools.<sup>42</sup> Overall, the city’s charter schools had an expulsion rate 12 times higher than that of the city’s public schools.<sup>43</sup>
- In 2011-12, the expulsion rate in Washington, DC charter schools was 72 times higher than it was at local public schools.<sup>44</sup>
- A 2011 study of Philadelphia schools found that the expulsion rate for local charter schools was three-and-a-half times higher than it was in public schools.<sup>45</sup>
- Many New Orleans charter schools have extraordinarily high suspension rates, which have led a group of students and parents to file a Title VI complaint alleging racial discrimination against African-American students.<sup>46</sup>

In addition to the high documented rates of expulsions, a common practice within many charter schools is to encourage students to withdraw from school rather than go through expulsion proceedings. Students and their parents are told that expulsion is inevitable, and that they should voluntarily withdraw rather than have an expulsion on their disciplinary record.<sup>47</sup> Thus, the actual student pushout rates are often far higher than even what is reported.

Indeed, there are a multitude of strategies used by our local charter schools to push students out. For example, even if there hasn’t been a discrete disciplinary incident, students are regularly “counseled out” of the charter schools in our neigh-

“Anytime you take New Orleans as a model of corporate education to sell nationally, you have a problem. . . . Our nation is being deceived.”

— *Chita, New Orleans grandmother*

borhoods, meaning they are advised to disenroll because of academic or behavioral difficulties. Even the famous Harlem Children's Zone's Promise Academy kicked out their entire first class of middle-school students because their academic performance didn't satisfy their Board of Directors.<sup>48</sup> Some charter schools have even invented new disciplinary methods that are particularly outrageous and exploitative, such as disciplinary fines assessed to low-income families (see Figure 12).

Additionally, many of the most high-profile charter schools have adopted disciplinary practices most widely used within prisons and the military. For example, a common sight within many charter schools within our communities is a straight painted line down each side of the hallway. As they move through the hallways, students are required to silently walk in a single file along the painted line, with their hands behind their backs, just like in many maximum-security prisons. Such practices – even if they don't result in an expulsion or a student being counseled out – still serve to “weed out” many students who are unwilling to subject themselves to such treatment.<sup>49</sup> For example, the KIPP network of charter schools, well-known for their strict, military-style atmosphere,<sup>50</sup> loses 15% of their students per year, far higher than their surrounding school districts.<sup>51</sup>

School closures also put public school students at greater risk of entering the school-to-prison pipeline. The overcrowded schools – with traumatized students – that frequently result from closures often produces additional disciplinary issues, as well as student truancy.<sup>52</sup> Also, when school budgets are reduced, the first cuts are often to student support personnel, such as guid-

“When we took our son with multiple disabilities to New Orleans schools to enroll, we quickly discovered that by having a disjointed school system there was no accountability. No one school felt an obligation to serve all kids. . . . The message very quickly was that schools had the ability to pick and choose their students and how'd they serve them. . . . Our first year here, we went to three different schools just to get the services already put into place on his IEP. . . . No one ever flat out said ‘don't come,’ but they'd say that they weren't a good fit. . . . If your child doesn't fit into the traditional mold and can't be educated inexpensively or easily, he becomes a liability. The corporate model isn't inclined to educate him.”

— *Kelly, New Orleans parent*

ance counselors, school psychologists, school social workers, and others who can address students' academic and non-academic challenges that often manifest as behavioral issues. Additionally, the adoption of more narrow, test-driven curricula can also exacerbate student alienation and provoke additional student disruption, thus exposing them to disciplinary consequences.<sup>53</sup> And all of these dynamics are especially prevalent when the students remaining in the public schools have a disproportionate share of educational and behavioral needs.

As a result, student pushout – already a major problem in many of our communities – typically becomes especially se-

Figure 11:

### **The View from the Ground: Philadelphia, PA**

Student comments on the effects of school closures:

“The frustration from the transfers and then not having the resources to learn causes fights and no interest in getting work completed.”

“There is a lot of beef in the school because students from different schools and neighborhoods are forced to be in one school.”

“There are no extra resources or supplies for students from the other schools.”

“Bigger classes have led to arguments, fights, and disruptions, which affects your ability to concentrate on academics.”

“Overcrowded classes make it difficult for teachers.”

“The new environment and having to travel from a different neighborhood is very dangerous for me.”

“It is just hard in general to adapt to a new school and different environment.”

“A lot of students are dropping out.”

Figure 12:

### **Arne Duncan, Rahm Emanuel and Chicago's Charter-School-to-Prison Pipeline**

Secretary of Education Arne Duncan recently issued a comprehensive package of school discipline guidance, urging school districts to use alternatives to harsh measures such as out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, and school-based arrests. Ironically, his other policy priorities around school closures and the expansion of charter schools are exacerbating the very problems his school discipline guidance is intended to address. Nowhere is that more evident than in Chicago, where he served as Chief Executive Officer of the Chicago Public Schools prior to joining the Obama Administration.

While in Chicago, Duncan launched the Renaissance 2010 initiative, which prompted the first major wave of school closures and charter school expansion in Chicago. Though he left Chicago Public Schools in 2009, city students are still feeling the impact of his policies, because many of the schools created under Renaissance 2010 are among the worst in the city for suspending, expelling, and pushing out their students. For example, most of the schools in the district with the worst expulsion rates were charter schools launched during Duncan's tenure.

For example, one of the charter networks to benefit most from Duncan's policies was the Noble Street Charter Network, which went from one school in 1999 to now operating 14 schools throughout the city. This network is a particular favorite of Mayor Rahm Emanuel, who claims that it has found the "secret sauce" of school success and has "the most successful high schools he's seen." He is supporting an even more dramatic expansion of the Noble Street Network. Yet Noble's disciplinary and pushout practices are among the most egregious ever documented:

- Noble issues monetary fines to its students as a disciplinary consequence. In fact, over a three-year period, Noble collected almost \$400,000 in disciplinary fines from its students, almost 90% of whom qualify for free or reduced price lunch.
- Students have reported racking up hundreds of dollars in fines for behaviors as minor as missing a button on their shirt, talking in the lunchroom, not sitting up straight, having a shoelace untied, not constantly tracking the teacher with their eyes, asking to go to the bathroom, and forgetting their belt.
- The three Chicago schools with the most expulsions in 2012-13 were all Noble schools.
- Noble suspends students two-and-a-times more often than Chicago Public Schools, and expels students at over 12 times the rate of CPS.
- In just one school year, Noble issued an incredible 43,207 detentions, for only 6,538 students.
- Noble's attrition rate – the number of students it loses from each class per year – is far higher than Chicago's public schools.
- Noble serves 13% fewer special education students and 19% fewer English language learners than Chicago's public schools.

While Secretary Duncan may want to eliminate the school-to-prison pipeline, the reality is that his policies are creating entirely new sections of that pipeline for our children and youth.

Sources: Chicago Public Schools; Chicago Tribune; Voices of Youth in Chicago Education; Albany Park Neighborhood Council

vere following school closures (see Figure 14 below).<sup>54</sup> For example, in New Orleans, there are an estimated 4,000 teens across the city that are not in school – amounting to approximately 10% of the city’s entire student population.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, when schools are closed, many students never re-enroll at another school. Following last year’s school closures in Philadelphia, 600 students are still unaccounted for.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, there are 800 students that have not been located in Chicago after last year’s closing of 49 schools.<sup>57</sup>

Simply put, too many of our young people are being put on a path to failure – and incarceration – by school closures and the expansion of charter schools.

## Compromises Student and Community Health and Safety

Every parent knows that relocating one’s family becomes especially difficult once you have children in school. Parents realize that moving to a different school can take a devastating toll on a child. Adjusting to a new environment, making new friends, and developing relationships with new teachers can all be extremely difficult, and many transplanted students experience emotional and psychological harms, and often struggle academically. Thus, most parents will only move as a last resort.

In contrast, many of our education policymakers are deliberately putting students through this trauma by encouraging mass school closures (see Figures 11 & 13).

Even worse, school closures have often put our students at extreme risk of physical harm, or even death.<sup>58</sup> When schools are closed, students from rival neighborhoods are often joined together in new schools, which can quickly lead to violence. The situation is especially volatile when the receiving school is overcrowded, as is often the case. Moreover, our students are often forced by school closures to travel across dangerous neighborhoods to get to their new schools. The combination of these dynamics can be disastrous.

For example, youth violence in Chicago has achieved national attention in recent years, as there have been dozens of teenagers who have been killed by their peers. The highest-profile example was 16-year-old Derrion Albert, who was brutally beaten to death in 2009 as he walked home from school, a tragedy captured on video and viewed by millions. What most people outside of Chicago don’t realize is how school closures likely contributed to Derrion Albert’s death, as well as the deaths of, and injuries to, countless other Chicago youth. But community members on the ground know that much of this senseless

Figure 13:

### The View from the Ground: Mollison Elementary (K-8) (Chicago, IL)

Student comments on the closing of Overton Elementary and subsequent merging into Mollison:

“There is drama and chaos and we can’t pay attention in class. [There are] more fights and arguments because we are piled on top of each other.”

“There have been a lot of conflicts. Students are bunched up. There are conflicts over pettiness. There are too many students crowded in. There is too much chaos.”

“The classes are crowded and we can’t get one-on-one attention like we used to in Mollison.”

“When our school closed, it’s like somebody died. The Overton children snap, we snap because we feel pain about our school and people are telling us just to get over it.”

“They turned the old lunchroom into the kindergarten class because there are so many students. It’s at least 50 of them in that one class.”

“Teachers are taking out their frustrations on students because they can’t control it.”

“When we go to White neighborhoods, they have activities and resources for those students, but we don’t have anything. We are not important to Chicago Public Schools.”

violence and loss of life would have been avoided were it not for the city’s recent school closures.<sup>59</sup> In fact, they warned Chicago Public Schools of the likelihood of such incidents over a decade ago, as the district began considering mass school closures. Even Derrion Albert’s mother spoke publicly against the closure of additional Chicago schools in 2013 in the hopes that more tragedies could be avoided.<sup>60</sup>

For our communities, school closures aren’t just a matter of budget savings or “right-sizing”; they are often literally a matter of life and death.

## Weakens Community Connection to Schools

“Reformers” treat the schools they close as if they were fungible businesses – as nothing more than a building with a name on it that can be easily replaced. What they fail to understand is that the schools they are closing are often the anchors of communities, the hubs of local activity, the source of immense community pride, and a powerful reminder of shared history. Schools build communities. So when they are closed, it is not a simple act of finding another place for those students to be educated – it creates a gaping hole within our neighborhoods.

Of course, communities also build schools. So it produces a deep emotional and psychological loss for the many students, parents, educators, school staff, and other community members who have invested in that school, and in each other.<sup>61</sup> Instead of the pride they once felt for their school, they now often face the stigma of having been connected to a closed school.

Additionally, school closures destroy one of the most fundamental elements of school success; the relationship between schools and the communities they serve.<sup>62</sup> School closures sever bonds that have been built – often across generations – between educators and families, leaving students without the social and emotional supports they need to succeed.<sup>63</sup> And when closures happen regularly, it becomes impossible to build the type of stable institutions our communities so desperately need.

To be sure, our public education system has never been as effective or as equitable as it should have been. Nevertheless, it took decades of unified struggle by students, parents, teachers, and other community members to achieve the admittedly flawed system that we now have. School closures undermine that unity and imperil future efforts to address our deep, structural barriers to education justice. For example, many “reformers” have attempted – and in many cases, succeeded – in driving a wedge between low-income communities of color and the teachers that serve their schools by placing the blame for budget crises and under-performing schools squarely on teachers’ unions. Additionally, the emphasis on “school choice” – with-

“Unlike the rest of Louisiana, we don’t have a local school board we can go to. . . . The Recovery School District provides no real representation that we have control of. There’s no say-so in the schools. Citizens – especially parents – are victims, because they end up in schools that are dumping grounds.”

**Malcolm, New Orleans grandfather**

“When we found out our school was getting closed, everyone was sad and depressed. When I found out what schools were getting put together, I was scared to come to school. . . . I do not feel safe in school. . . . I feel like I am not learning anything. . . . I do not even want to go to school anymore.”

**Taher, Philadelphia 10-grader**

out providing high-quality choices for all – has exploited parents’ desperation and forced communities to compete against each other for scarce educational resources.

Moreover, school closures are typically decided without meaningful community input.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, most school closures have been executed despite overwhelming community opposition. Students, parents, and community members have been repeatedly ignored, further disempowering individuals who have already been politically marginalized in our cities.

- For example, in the midst of attempting to implement a plan that would close a significant percentage of Newark public schools and convert many of them to charter schools, Superintendent Cami Anderson announced that she and her leadership team would no longer attend public school board meetings. In her view, the public’s overwhelming opposition to the plan was “dysfunction” that was “not focused on achieving educational outcomes for students.”<sup>65</sup>

The structure of charter schools also typically results in weaker community involvement in schools. Because charter schools are privately managed, our communities often (though certainly not always) find they are even more unaccountable to the families and communities they serve than much larger public school systems. Students and parents often find it extremely difficult to get information on what is happening with the schools.<sup>66</sup> They are routinely shut out of major decision-making processes, and given no opportunity to shape the direction of the school and help to build strong institutions rooted in communities. And because the expansion of charter schools creates a balkanized education system, the ability of communities to come together to effect change becomes severely limited.

Indeed, many “reformers” do not want community involvement in their schools; in fact, they often view it as a hindrance in running schools.<sup>67</sup> Aside from being undemocratic, this approach will never build anything of sustainable value in our communities, though it will continue to slice away at many of the ties that bind our people together.

## Diminishes Teacher Effectiveness

The “reformers” assert that school closures and charter school expansion lead to improved teacher quality, which they often claim is the single most important factor in determining student success.<sup>68</sup> Aside from being factually inaccurate,<sup>69</sup> what this rationale fails to explain is how they expect to improve teacher quality when the policies they implement are, in many ways, a direct attack on the teaching profession. To put it another way, how can anyone expect urban schools to attract and retain high-quality teachers when their workplace is under constant threat of being closed, their budgets are being cut, their class sizes are increasing, they face a higher concentration of high-need students, and they face increased pressure to raise test scores at the expense of legitimate educational strategies?

Not surprisingly, evidence shows increasing demoralization within the teaching profession. One major national survey recently found that teacher job satisfaction has dropped precipitously since 2008, and is now at a 25-year low.<sup>70</sup> Nearly one-third of all teachers surveyed were thinking about quitting.<sup>71</sup> The numbers are even higher in urban districts, where the instability and high turnover created by school closures and charter school expansion have created toxic teaching and learning environments. While every parent places high value on teacher experience, and a large body of research has demonstrated the importance of it to student achievement, not surprisingly, veteran educators are leaving the field – or being made to leave the field – in droves.<sup>72</sup> In fact, the field has shifted dramatically toward less experienced, and often brand-new and uncertified teachers – such as Teach for America members – particularly in our communities.<sup>73</sup> That is especially true in the charter schools that are replacing our public schools.<sup>74</sup> These dynamics have often been heavily racialized, as our experienced teachers of color have been replaced by inexperienced White teachers.<sup>75</sup>

Thus, not only do school closures and charter school expansion push students out of school; they push good educators out of the profession, and diminish the effectiveness of the ones that stay.

## Destabilizes Communities

The devastation caused by school closures extends far beyond the walls of the affected schools; entire communities are often seriously weakened by these decisions.

When schools close, people lose their jobs and their families suffer as a result. Residents lose community services housed in schools, such as pre-K programs, before- and after-school programming, adult education classes, and health clinics.

“Since our school closed, we haven’t had any consistency in teachers. We’ve had award-winning teachers leave our school, great administrators leave our school, and it’s to the point where my children are wondering if it’s something they’ve done to run staff and their favorite teachers away.”

— *Sequnely, Washington DC parent*

Property values in the neighborhood often decline, residents move away, and new residents become much harder to attract because a boarded-up school is a sure sign of neighborhood instability and deterioration.<sup>76</sup> Many of our communities experience a massive outflow of economic and human capital, which they can ill afford considering they were already substantially under-resourced.

For example, while all of the districts listed above in Figure 2 have dramatically expanded their charter school enrollment while losing substantial public school enrollment, the losses were almost always much larger than the gains, indicating that: (a) many families are responding to school closures and privatization by leaving, or avoiding, all publicly-funded local schools, both public and charter; and (b) as discussed above, students are being pushed out of school by these policies (see Figure 14). In fact, those 20 cities mentioned above lost a combined total of 248,211 students from their public schools and charter schools in just seven years. This is consistent with our experience in witnessing the implementation of these tumultuous policies. In addition to the tendency for students to simply leave school entirely, a huge number of families in our communities have responded by seeking out more stable options in the suburbs or in private schools. Thus, while many “reformers” like to talk about how parents and students “vote with their feet,”<sup>77</sup> the evidence strongly suggests that communities have voted a resounding “no” on their reforms.

The expansion of charter schools also has a destabilizing effect on communities. Indeed, one of the reasons school privatization is so appealing to many politically conservative “reformers” is that charter schools are overwhelmingly non-unionized,

“The victims are first and foremost the children. They are going to school in a super-charged atmosphere where there is tension, where teachers who love children can’t help but feel stressed out and angry towards the children who are not going to raise their scores because you could be costing me my job.”

— *Washington, DC teacher*

## DEATH BY A THOUSAND CUTS

which typically leads to lower wages and less job protection for teachers and other school employees, such as custodians, food service workers, bus drivers, and security guards.<sup>78</sup> Thus, charter school expansion can be deeply harmful to working-class and middle-class communities.

### Wastes Community Resources

Cost savings arguments have been substantially over-emphasized in school closure and charter school expansion debates, at the expense of the issues discussed above. Nevertheless, ensuring that taxpayer dollars are used appropriately and efficiently is obviously a legitimate concern. However, even these justifications for closing schools and privatizing schools have been overblown.

First, while districts that close schools typically claim they will experience a windfall of savings, the reality is that savings have usually been quite limited. City and school officials often fail to anticipate the many costs associated with school closures. For example, it cost District of Columbia Public Schools almost \$40 million just to close 23 schools in 2008.<sup>79</sup> Many districts now spend millions each year to maintain closed school buildings that they haven't been able to sell or re-purpose.<sup>80</sup> Others have had to borrow (and pay the interest on) huge sums to expand capacity at receiving schools.<sup>81</sup>

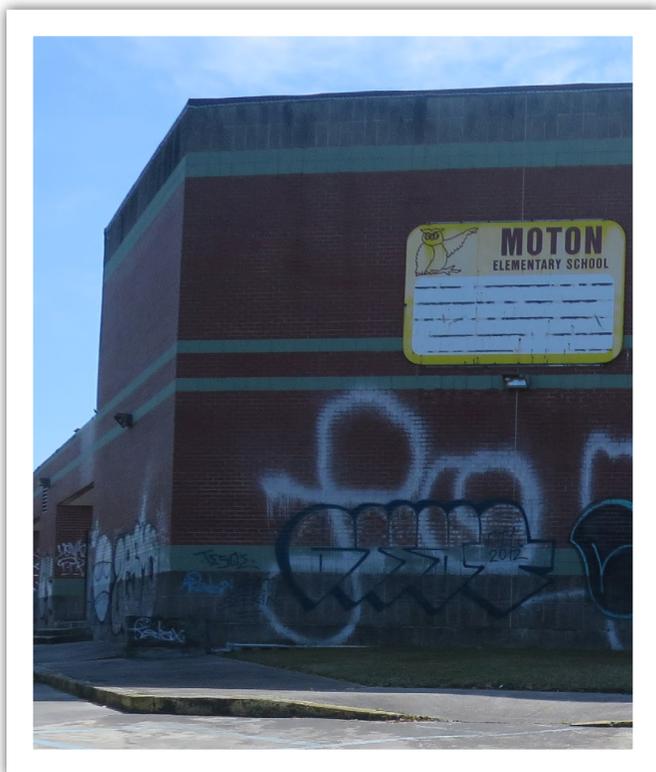
Second, because charter schools are privately managed and largely unregulated, not only does the quality of education offered vary widely, there is more opportunity to misuse public funds. As a result, many charter school administrators earn

Figure 14:  
**School Closures, Charter School Expansion, and Lost Students**

Source: National Alliance for Public Charter Schools

(\* indicates that 2012-13 data was not available)

School District	Increase in Charter School Enrollment 2005-06 to 2012-13	Change in Public School Enrollment 2005-06 to 2012-13	Net Effect on Student Enrollment in District Schools and Charter Schools 2005-06 to 2012-13
Detroit Public Schools	13,551	-84,053	<b>-70,532</b>
Gary (IN) Community School Corp.	3,255	-7,877	<b>-4,632</b>
Cleveland Metropolitan SD	6,253	-18,671	<b>-12,418</b>
Indianapolis Public Schools	8,717	-10,819	<b>-2,102</b>
St. Louis Public Schools	3,978	-8,994	<b>-5,016</b>
District of Columbia Public Schools	16,864	-13,509	<b>3,355</b>
Los Angeles Unified SD	85,648	-157,698	<b>-72,050</b>
San Antonio Independent SD*	12,590	-12,330	<b>260</b>
School District of Philadelphia	28,154	-39,290	<b>-11,136</b>
Camden City Public Schools	1,708	-3,242	<b>-1,534</b>
Memphis City Schools	5,339	-20,655	<b>-15,316</b>
Newark Public Schools	6,159	-7,159	<b>-1,000</b>
Tucson Unified	3,028	-9,295	<b>-6,267</b>
Chicago Public Schools	33,771	-57,112	<b>-23,341</b>
Baltimore City Public Schools	10,707	-11,428	<b>-721</b>
Oakland Unified	3,603	-5,417	<b>-1,814</b>
Pinellas County (FL) Public Schools	4,528	-13,106	<b>-8,578</b>
Broward County (FL) Public Schools	18,662	-29,978	<b>-11,316</b>
Miami-Dade County Public Schools	30,793	-38,622	<b>-7,829</b>
Houston Independent SD*	26,112	-22,336	<b>3,776</b>



exorbitant salaries, far higher than local public school superintendents overseeing many more students.<sup>82</sup> And many charter school officials have abused the public trust by wasting taxpayer dollars on inappropriate, or even illegal, activities.<sup>83</sup>

Moreover, while “reformers” frequently claim that charter schools can do the job of public schools with less funding, the reality is that charter schools often spend more than public schools (despite public schools often being left with more of the students who are most expensive to educate).<sup>84</sup> That is especially true for the high-profile charter schools and networks that are often listed up as models by “reformers.” Many of these schools receive considerable private donations and federal grants that allow them to out-spend local public schools. Many KIPP charter schools, for example, spend thousands more per student than local public schools, as does the Harlem Children’s Zone.<sup>85</sup> In New Orleans, per pupil spending nearly doubled after most city schools became charters following Hurricane Katrina.<sup>86</sup> While this provides excellent support for the notion that many public schools should receive substantially more funding, it certainly is not at all clear that charter schools are more “efficient” (see Figure 15).

\* \* \*

The combined effect of the dynamics described above explains why school closures typically lead to more school closures. These policies have placed many of our communities in a vi-

“I feel helpless. My opinion doesn’t matter as a parent. . . . Now after they closed down our school, our parents would rather take their children and commute farther from the community than attend the options that were given to us. The schools given to us were overcrowded and not appropriate.”

— *A.M., Detroit mother*

cious downward spiral. The under-funding of public schools, combined with extensive public criticism of those schools, drives families away from public education. Often, they head to the new charter schools that benefit from favorable media coverage and preferential treatment from policymakers. That only makes conditions worse in the public schools and the surrounding community, as they typically lose more resources while having to serve more high-need students, and eventually quality educators get driven away. Those schools are, at that point, frequently identified as “under-utilized” or “failing,” leading to their closure. However, the closures only reinforce the same dynamics: more attacks on public schools, more cuts in funding, more families being driven away, more deterioration in the remaining public schools and the surrounding community, more educators leaving, more schools identified as “under-utilized” or “failing,” and thus more closures. Over and over this downward spiral has played out in many of our communities, producing one round of school closures after another (see Figure 16).

“The Roberto Clemente School was a school that represented us as a Hispanic community and as the striving community that we are. For many years, this was one of the best schools, but due to mismanagement and the lack of support we received, the school was slated for closure. Many of the parents in this community fought to keep our school open, but it was futile; it was too late. In other words they already had plans for the floor that our school occupied. Today, it makes me sad to see the kind of supports that these new schools, that are occupying our spaces, are being offered. Today I see how many school buses arrive, full of children from many areas to fill the school and I ask myself: Why couldn’t they have done this with our school? Why wasn’t our school offered the same supports?”

— *Iris, New York City mother*

Meanwhile, to justify the dramatic expansion of charter schools, “reformers” have used many of their considerable resources on massive marketing and advertising strategies designed to highlight the most successful charter schools (while ignoring equally-successful public schools, the many unsuccessful charter schools, and the overall research on their relative effectiveness). They also never mention that the “success” of the schools they choose to feature is usually the result of: enjoying substantially higher funding than comparable public schools; using a narrow, test-prep-focused curriculum; employing egregious student pushout practices; and/or excluding students who are more challenging and expensive to teach.

To be sure, there are some charter schools that provide low-income students of color with a high-quality, well-rounded education. Yet they are far from the norm, and typically aren’t the schools that policymakers are seeking to replicate. The charter

schools that are spreading in our communities are the ones that offer a second-class education, if not worse. It’s a “Fast Food Model of Education,” where schools are viewed as franchises offering standardized, relatively low-quality products, delivered by cheap and inexperienced workers.<sup>87</sup>

In short, the harms caused by school closures and charter school expansion in our communities have been catastrophic. The benefits have been virtually non-existent. And yet “reformers” show no sign of letting up. If anything, they are accelerating their assault on our public schools and our communities, and it is now apparent that without a dramatic shift in the political landscape around these issues, the downward spiral will continue until all of the public schools in many of our communities will be eliminated.

Figure 15:

### **Financial Collapse Through Charter School Expansion: The Philadelphia Story**

When 24 Philadelphia schools were closed in 2013, the justification offered by city and school officials was that it was necessary to address the district’s “fiscal crisis.” Indeed, the school district’s consultants from the Boston Consulting Group were projecting a \$1.1 billion budget deficit over the ensuing five years. However, what city and school officials never acknowledged was that the budget deficit was created in significant part by the expansion of local charter schools.

According to the Boston Consulting Group, each student who enrolled in a charter school cost the district \$7,000 more than if the student were in a public school. That meant that the district was spending \$300 million more each year than it would have if those students were in public schools.

Additionally, despite the supposed “fiscal crisis” and plan to close schools, the district’s intention was to expand charter schools even further, until they would account for 40% of Philadelphia school enrollment in 2016-17. The district’s consultants projected that this increase would cost the district an additional \$516 million over the five-year period.

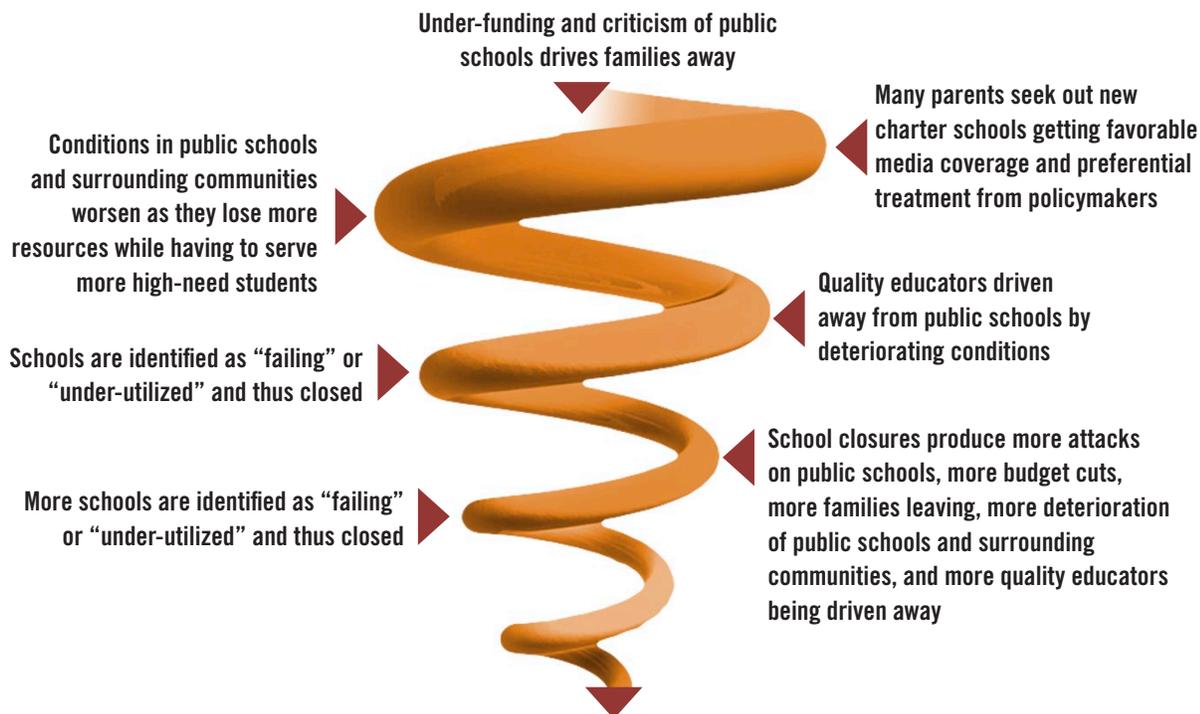
Overall, had it not been for the district’s actual and intended expansion of charter schools, they could have been facing a nearly \$1 billion surplus, instead of \$1.1 billion deficit, and the 24 school closures could have been avoided entirely. Instead, they caused considerable harm to Philadelphia students, families, and communities. And when Philadelphia’s public school students returned to the remaining schools in the Fall of 2013, they experienced a shocking – and almost-unprecedented – lack of resources. School budgets were literally cut to the bone, leaving massive class sizes and little to no funding for books, paper, school libraries, nurses, guidance counselors, art supplies, and musical instruments.

In short, the expansion of charter schools was prioritized over the ability of Philadelphia public school students to even have access to the most basic educational resources.

Source: Philadelphia Coalition Advocating for Public Schools, *The Philadelphia Community Education Plan: Excellent Schools for All Children*, 21 (Dec. 2012).

Figure 16:

### The Downward Spiral of School Closures and Charter School Expansion



**Process is repeated over and over, until policymakers intervene on behalf of public schools or they are eliminated**

“HD Woodson [in Washington DC] is one of the schools of last resort. We receive students from schools that have been closed, we receive the students that charter schools have decided they no longer want to teach and then we are asked to perform at the level of the schools who have decided they can’t teach these students. We are held to corporate standards like the test and that’s used to explain why our budget should be taken over by central office. They constantly shuffle our administration, and every year threaten to fire all the staff, which then causes teachers to burn out and want to leave because how can you raise a family or do these things when your job is constantly being threatened? It’s very hard for everyone to want to stay at the school – students, parents, teachers and administrators – because we are being told how awful we are all the time.”

— *Washington, DC teacher*

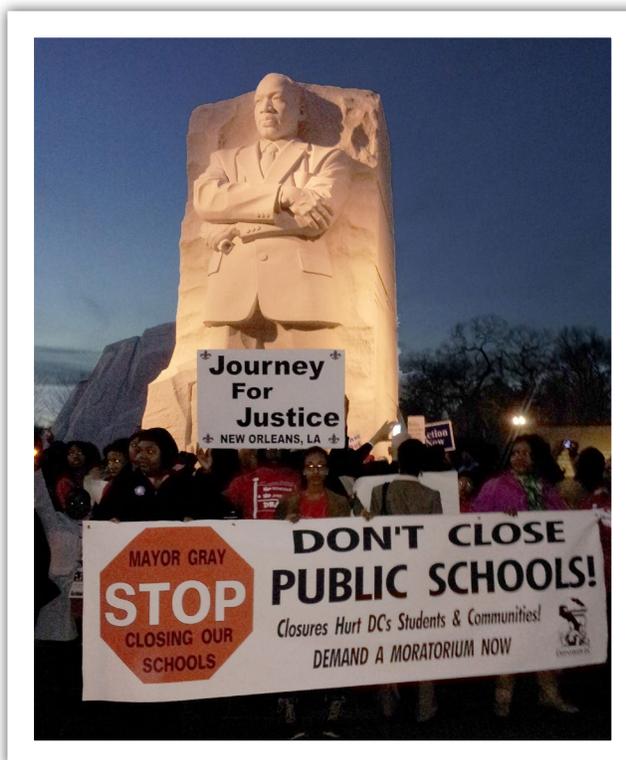


Figure 17:

### Who Benefits?

Given the severity of the crisis our communities are facing, and the lack of any sound policy justification for it, why are mass school closures continuing to occur and charter schools still being expanded at an exponential rate? Who benefits from the harm being done to our communities?

The primary long-term beneficiaries are large corporations and Wall Street. Among many benefits they realize through school privatization, the expansion of charter schools represents a massive economic boon. As Milton Friedman – an economist long beloved by political conservatives – said, “the privatization of schooling would produce a new, highly active, and profitable industry.” Or as multi-billionaire Rupert Murdoch said, when he and his colleagues look at public education, they see “a \$500 billion sector in the U.S. alone that is waiting desperately to be transformed.” These individuals don’t view public schools as democratic institutions devoted to the development of our citizenry; they see untapped markets. They see a series of tasks currently performed by public employees that could be generating profits for private businesses. Among the products and services for which businesses are currently looking to expand their markets are: the development of software that could replace teachers for all, or part of the school day; the development of curricula and corresponding standardized tests; the outsourcing of cleaning, food preparation, student transportation, security, accounting, legal, and consulting services; the rental or sale of real estate; and the expansion of for-profit charter schools. For each one of these areas, the additional transfer of public assets into private hands would create new profit-making opportunities.

Additionally, our federal government has created lucrative opportunities for Wall Street and other large-scale investors to profit from charter school expansion. For example, our federal government offers a very generous tax credit that, when combined with other credits as well as the interest they collect, allows charter school investors to almost double their money in just seven years.

Indeed, in a clear example of how the misery of many often benefits the few, large Wall Street banks, which triggered the recession that has harmed so many public schools (among many others) across the country, are now profiting heavily from the ramifications, including the massive, taxpayer-funded interest payments they collect from both new charter schools and struggling public school districts that were forced to take out loans.

Sources: Valerie Strauss, “Education Reform as a Business” (1/9/13), *Washington Post*, at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2013/01/09/education-reform-as-a-business/>; Diane Ravitch, *Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools* (2013), pg. 161, Random House; Jeff Faux, “Education Profiteering: Wall Street’s Next Big Thing?” (10/1/12), Economic Policy Institute, at <http://www.epi.org/publication/education-profiteering-wall-street/>; Reuters, “Privatizing Public Schools: Big Firms Eyeing Profits From U.S. K-12 Market” (8/2/12) *Huffington Post*, at [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/08/02/private-firms-eyeing-prof\\_n\\_1732856.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/08/02/private-firms-eyeing-prof_n_1732856.html); Stephanie Mencimer, “Fox in the Schoolhouse: Rupert Murdoch Wants to Teach Your Kids!” (9/23/11), *Mother Jones*, at <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2011/09/rupert-murdoch-news-corp-wireless-generation-education>; Milton Friedman, “Public Schools: Make Them Private” (6/23/95), at <http://www.cato.org/pubs/briefs/bp-023.html>.

# NECESSARY ACTION STEPS

Despite the claims of “reformers,” school closures and charter school expansion are not social justice initiatives. Creating a truly just education system would require ensuring that every child was receiving a high-quality education that met their developmental needs within their public schools; it would not put them through the trauma of school closures and subject them to a new, privatized education system. The just system would provide our children with the resources that would help them address the many social, physical, and emotional needs they bring with them to school and that actively impede their learning. It would ensure that all of our children were receiving individualized attention and a well-rounded, enriched, engaging, and culturally relevant curriculum, delivered by experienced and well-supported teachers in a stable learning environment. And it would eliminate the use of practices that actively push our children and youth out of school. That is the type of education our children deserve; the type of education necessary to remedy the radically uneven playing field they now face and allow them to have the same opportunities as children from

more affluent families. Yet what they are being offered by “reformers” bears no resemblance to that type of education.

Moreover, our children’s fundamental human rights to education are rendered meaningless when their schools can be taken from them as often as they are now; when students can be excluded from school as easily as they are now; and when they can be pushed out by sub-standard learning conditions as much as they are currently. Such a system of education treats education not as a right, but as a privilege that can be divvied up to those deemed worthy. Invariably, the students from our communities are the ones most often deemed “unworthy.”

Thus, the situation in Journey for Justice communities – and other communities of color around the U.S. – is undeniably dire. But it is not beyond repair. We call on our government to put aside the competing interests and do what is necessary to save our public schools, and with them, our communities’ best chance at creating a better future for ourselves. That includes, at a minimum, taking immediate action in the following six areas:

## 1. The U.S. Department of Education Should Replace Its Four School “Turnaround” Models with the “Sustainable School Success Model.”

Schools that are struggling to meet the needs of their students should continue to be a top priority for the U.S. Department of Education. However, the heavy-handed and largely unsuccessful “turnaround” models currently funded by the Department should be replaced by the “Sustainable School Success Model.”<sup>88</sup>

The Sustainable School Success Model, which was originally developed by Communities for Excellent Public Schools,<sup>89</sup> represents a more targeted, community-based, and community-informed method of improving school quality. It requires that the school community – including parents, educators, students, and other community members – conduct a comprehensive needs assessment so that local solutions are tailored to local problems. They would then create a school transformation plan that incorporates the following elements:

- The implementation of research-based strategies for enhancing instructional capacity, improving school climate, and ensuring that every student has access to a well-rounded, academically rigorous curriculum that is enriched, engaging, and culturally relevant.
- Coordinated wrap-around supports to ensure that the full array of students’ developmental needs – both academic and non-academic – are being met and they are entering the classroom healthy and ready to learn.
- Ongoing collaboration among all school stakeholders in implementing school reforms.

All across the country, open-enrollment, neighborhood public schools within low-income communities of color have achieved great success by incorporating these elements and creating “community schools” (see Figure 18). Additionally, many school districts have, or are currently, taking these reforms to scale and are implementing impressive district-wide school improvement efforts that can be replicated elsewhere. Below, in the Appendix, are examples from Austin (TX), Oakland (CA), Tulsa (OK), Chicago (IL), New York (NY), and Cincinnati (OH).

## **2. President Obama Should Call for a National Moratorium on School Closures and Charter School Expansion and Spearhead the Creation of a “Public School Bailout and Revitalization Fund.”**

We call on President Obama to do for public schools what previous presidents have done for Wall Street banks deemed “too big to fail”; he should make their preservation a top national priority. That would include establishing a fund solely devoted to addressing the fiscal challenges of schools at risk of closing in low-income communities of color and supporting the creation of more “community schools.”

## **3. Congress Should Revoke All Tax Credits and Other Incentives for Charter School Investment and Replace Them with Equivalent Incentives to Invest In Public Schools.**

The federal government should no longer provide preferential treatment to charter schools. As such, we call on Congress to exclude charter schools from the New Markets Tax Credit, as well as the EB-5 visa program allowing foreign nationals to receive visas if they donate at least \$500,000 to charter schools.<sup>90</sup> In their place, Congress should develop equivalent incentives for private donors to support public schools.

## **4. All Charter Schools that Fail to Both Provide an Innovative Educational Model that is Unavailable in Local Public Schools and Demonstrate Superior Performance in Educating All of Their Students Should Not Have Their Charters Renewed.**

The charter school sector has expanded far beyond its intended purpose, becoming bloated and severely counter-productive. It should be scaled back considerably by charter authorizers only renewing the charters of those schools that: (a) offer a unique service that is unavailable within local public schools; and (b) have achieved superior results without limiting enrollment and/or excluding challenging students. School districts should explore the possibility of converting charter schools that fail to meet those criteria into public schools.

## **5. The White House Domestic Policy Council, United Nations, and Permanent Court of International Justice (or “World Court”) Should Participate in a “Grassroots Impact Tour” of the Communities Affected by Mass School Closures to Hear from Students, Parents, Educators, and Community Members, and Witness the Community-wide Effects.**

## **6. Due to the Harm Inflicted on Our Communities by Corporate Education Interventions, the Journey for Justice Alliance Seeks a Senate Hearing on the Impact of These Policies.**

\* \* \*

For too long, wealth, ideology, and political opportunism have been allowed to triumph over the interests and well-being of our communities. Without immediate action to address this crisis, we are of the firm belief that all policymakers charged with overseeing public education systems at the federal, state, and local levels who have supported school closures and charter school expansion should resign. A continuing lack of support for public education should be disqualifying for the positions they hold. They should no longer be allowed to be complacent about, and complicit in, the flagrant violations of our children's fundamental human rights. These individuals are killing our public schools; our primary gateways to opportunity. They are causing irreparable harms to our communities, and all of our people. And they are continuing a long, ignoble tradition of treating our children and youth as second-class citizens.

For us, there is nothing more important than ensuring that our children and youth have an equal opportunity to live out their dreams. So we will not rest until justice is served and our policymakers demonstrate through their actions that they value our young people just as much as we do.

Figure 18:

## What is a Community School?

According to the Coalition for Community Schools:

“A community school is both a place and a set of partnerships between the school and other community resources. Its integrated focus on academics, health and social services, youth and community development and community engagement leads to improved student learning, stronger families and healthier communities. Community schools offer a personalized curriculum that emphasizes real-world learning and community problem-solving. Schools become centers of the community and are open to everyone – all day, every day, evenings and weekends.”

“Using public schools as hubs, community schools bring together many partners to offer a range of supports and opportunities to children, youth, families and communities. Partners work to achieve these results: Children are ready to enter school; students attend school consistently; students are actively involved in learning and their community; families are increasingly involved with their children's education; schools are engaged with families and communities; students succeed academically; students are healthy - physically, socially, and emotionally; students live and learn in a safe, supportive, and stable environment, and communities are desirable places to live.”

Source: [http://www.communityschools.org/aboutschools/what\\_is\\_a\\_community\\_school.aspx](http://www.communityschools.org/aboutschools/what_is_a_community_school.aspx)



# APPENDIX: SUSTAINABLE SCHOOL SUCCESS IN ACTION

## Cincinnati, OH: Community Learning Centers<sup>91</sup>

After years of declining enrollment and increasing levels of poverty among the student population, the Cincinnati Public Schools Board of Education decided in 2001 to transform every public school in Cincinnati into a Community Learning Center (CLC). The goals of the CLCs are to support student achievement, revitalize neighborhoods, and maximize the community's return on their financial investments through customized partnerships at each school.

Each CLC features a site-based decision-making process led by a Local School Decision-Making Committee comprised of parents, volunteers, community business leaders, school staff, non-profit neighborhood groups, and community organizations. CLCs act as hubs for community services that are provided year-round, during and beyond the school day. Services vary by school, and are determined based on the needs of the school community, but include:

- Early childhood education
- Health clinics
- Afterschool and summer enrichment programs
- Tutoring
- College and career counseling
- Arts centers
- Parent and Family Engagement
- Adult education
- Mentoring
- Community enrichment events

The school district and its community partners have also collaborated on efforts to improve professional development for teachers, create a training institute for principals at low-performing schools, and launch a campaign to recruit 2,000 math and reading tutors for the lowest-performing schools.

Since adopting the CLC strategy, Cincinnati became the first urban district in Ohio to receive an “effective” rating and is the highest performing urban district in Ohio. More children are entering kindergarten ready to learn, the achievement gap

between African-American students and White students has narrowed considerably, and high school graduation rates have climbed from 51% in 2000 to 82% in 2010.

## PS/MS 188: The Island School (New York City)<sup>92</sup>

“The Island School” is a public K-8 school full-service community school on Manhattan’s Lower East Side serving just over 500 students. Through the After School Corporation’s ExpandedED model and a 21st Century Community Learning Center for the middle grades, the Island School offers its students extensive enrichment through an extended day model and provides a full complement of health, parenting, and learning supports to families.

The Island School’s students are largely drawn from the surrounding neighborhood, which includes many public housing projects and a large homeless shelter. Nearly all of the Island School’s students qualify for free lunch and a third live in temporary housing. For the past six years, the Island School has partnered with the Educational Alliance, a community-based organization with over a century of service to the Lower East Side, to develop its full-service community school model. The model’s offerings include dental screenings, an on-site health clinic staffed by a nurse practitioner in partnership with Ryan-Nena Health Center, on-site mental health screening and counseling through the Jewish Board, adult ESL classes, parenting classes, and a Head Start program. The school and the Educational Alliance work together to offer extended day programming until 6 pm every weekday and on Saturday mornings. Almost 90% of students take part in the extended day, where activities include sports, dance, drama, costume design, comics illustration, robotics, and a Saturday high school preparation academy in partnership with Bard Early College High School. The Third Street Music School provides an articulated K-8 music program through which students can specialize in violin, chorus or percussion. An evening “Scholars Lab” in the school’s internet café provides middle-school students with access to homework help, tutoring, and a quiet place to study.

The school uses the Schoolwide Enrichment Model developed by the National Center for Gifted and Talented Education in order to provide all students with a rich, rigorous curriculum. It has even been designated a training site for other NYC

schools adopting the model. Regular school-day and extended-day programming are organized around the principles of talent development, academic support and enrichment, arts-infused curricula, Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), and project-based learning.

The Island School has been recognized by the New York City Department of Education for the quality of its arts and technology programming. Since the Department began assigning letter grades to schools in 2007, The Island School has received six “A” grades and one “B.” The school also receives high marks from parents, teachers, and students on the yearly Learning Environment Survey.

### **Tulsa (OK) Area Community Schools Initiative and Roy Clark Elementary<sup>93</sup>**

The Tulsa Area Community Schools Initiative (TACSI) was established through the Tulsa Metropolitan Human Services Commission in 2007 and is administered by the Community Service Council of Greater Tulsa. TACSI recognizes the need to engage the entire community in aligning and developing community resources to educate the whole child. It believes that community schools should serve as centers of community life, offering comprehensive and integrated programs, services, and opportunities to students, families, and neighbors in the community. Sustained by family, school and community partnerships, community schools provide nurturing environments and enriching opportunities that promote successful learning.

TACSI schools focus on seven core components:

1. Early care and learning
2. Health/health education
3. Mental health/social services
4. Youth development/out-of-school time
5. Family/community engagement
6. Neighborhood development
7. Lifelong learning

More than 9,000 students and their families are served by the 31 community schools across two school districts. Research has shown that students in TACSI schools have significantly higher rates of academic achievement than students in non-TACSI schools. TACSI schools also have healthier school climates and better relationships with students, parents, and the communities they serve.

One such school is Roy Clark Elementary, which has a student body comprised of 49% English language learners and 63% children of single parents. Yet the school consistently outperforms comparable schools by a wide margin, and has received a statewide Academic Excellence award. Among the key features of the school’s success are the following:

- Clark partners with OU Physicians Community Health Clinic to provide healthcare to all students and families. Regardless of pay source, students and families can utilize the school-based health clinic throughout their school-age years. Site-based counseling services from Family and Children’s Services, a community partner, is available anytime. Other services available to students include interventions provided by the school counselor, behavior coach, on-site therapist, and school psychologist. These efforts led to an increase in clinic patients from 300 in January 2005 to over 8,000 in 2011.
- The social and emotional well-being of students is reviewed at monthly Student Assistance Team meetings with community partners. Wrap-around services are then provided to meet a variety of needs. Improvement is evaluated for each individual student through intervention plans that include progress monitoring of targeted behaviors.
- Clark has extensive community participation through its Site Community Team, which consists of parents, staff, community partners, and the principal. The Site Community Team meets regularly to assess the effectiveness of the school’s programs. They also engage other school stakeholders and the surrounding neighborhood in identifying their local needs and priorities and providing responsive programs, services, and opportunities.

In addition to its academic achievements, Roy Clark Elementary has increased its attendance rate, reduced its chronic absenteeism rate, and achieves 100% participation for parent-teacher conferences.

### **Little Village Lawndale High School Campus (Chicago, IL)<sup>94</sup>**

The Little Village Lawndale Community High School Campus, home to four small, autonomous themed high schools, was the result of a nineteen-day hunger strike led by local grandmothers and other community women angered by delays in the construction of a promised new high school in 2001. Little Village Lawndale was intentionally designed as a community hub, and its close partnership with Enlace Chicago (formerly the Little Village Community Development Corporation) has been a defining feature since the campus’s beginning.

Once Chicago Public Schools agreed to move forward with the construction of a new high school, organizers worked to ensure that community residents would have substantial input into the school's design. Small learning communities in which students would be well known by adults were important to families. The themes for the four small schools – World Language High School, Multicultural Arts High School, Social Justice High School, and Infinity Math, Science, and Technology High School – emerged from surveys and meetings with local families. Each small school is open to all students within the attendance boundary and has a Local School Council made up of teachers, parents, students, community representatives, and administrators. The campus's award-winning design includes dedicated space for each school as well as a shared library, swimming pool, dance studio, auditorium, health center, long-distance learning labs, and child care center.

The campus and its lead partner, Enlace Chicago, have developed robust wraparound supports and afterschool and community enrichment opportunities through the Chicago Community Schools Initiative. Students from all four schools participate together in sports, afterschool, and summer activities, with an emphasis on leadership development and civic engagement. The campus remains open until 8 pm Monday through Thursday and on Saturdays, with adult ESL, computer classes, dance, swim, arts and crafts, and a women's support group offered alongside youth programming. An on-site health center serves students and their families. Citibank and the Lumina Foundation fund post-secondary advisors who work one-on-one with students to plan for college and apply for financial aid. While academic and social supports vary from school to school, strategies include a freshman academy with mentors and academic recovery.

The student bodies of all four schools are more than 90% children of color and more than 90% low-income. All four have daily attendance rates of over 90% and higher ratings for contact with parents than the district and surrounding schools. Three of the schools have higher 4-year graduation rates than the district average, and all have 5-year graduation rates well above 90%. In 2013, Infinity and Social Justice were Level 1 schools, the highest rating given by CPS.

### **Oakland Unified School District: “Thriving Students, Community Schools”<sup>95</sup>**

In 2009, as Oakland Unified School District emerged from state takeover, Superintendent Tony Smith and district and community leaders set about developing a vision for the dis-

trict's return to local control. After a year of community engagement and planning, they released a five-year strategic plan, “Thriving Students, Community Schools,” to reimagine the district as a “full service community district filled with full service community schools.”

Under the strategic plan, each school develops a representative, multi-stakeholder Community School Site Leadership Team and secures funding to hire a community schools director, who is responsible for the coordination of supports at the school site. The Leadership Team is responsible for conducting extensive asset mapping and community outreach to understand the school community's priorities, identify elements of the community school model already in place, and develop a vision and implementation plan. Each school works with a lead community partner agency, which collaborates with other community partners to develop a full range of programs and supports. Alongside the school transformations, the OUSD district central office has committed to becoming a “full-service community district” that supports and sustains community schools through equitable resource allocation, strategic partnerships, data sharing, and better responsiveness to school-site needs.

Robust community and family engagement has been central to OUSD's community schools vision. The district worked with a number of community partners, including parent and youth organizing groups, to establish “Meaningful Student, Family and Community Engagement Principles” to guide the development of community schools. During the planning year culminating in the release of the strategic plan, OUSD and its partners engaged over 500 community members and parents and more than 350 students in workshops and forums. They also held community focus groups to ensure representation of families for whom English is not their primary language. The Meaningful Student, Family and Community Engagement principles have been incorporated as one of the seven dimensions on which schools are assessed in the district's school quality review process.

The five-year strategic plan also seeks to strengthen teaching and learning through improvements to pre-kindergarten programs, new Common Core-aligned curriculum in grades K-12, and multiple pathways programs in high school. The district is investing in professional development around literacy instruction and Science, Technology, Engineering and Math education. Acceleration strategies for underserved students include the creation of an office on African American Male Achievement and the infusion of ethnic studies into middle school literacy instruction.

“Thriving Students, Community Schools” is still in the implementation phase, but thus far 27 schools have established leadership teams and developed Community School Site Plans.

### **Webb Middle School (Austin, TX)<sup>96</sup>**

In January 2007, Webb Middle School – located in Austin’s lowest-income community with a student body that is 98% Black and Latino and 49% English language learners – was almost closed by the Austin Independent School district because it had missed state accountability standards for three years in a row. However, led by local leaders and Austin Voices for Education and Youth, the community organized and was successful in having the school board adopt a community-based turnaround plan that emphasized the following elements:

- Shared leadership and planning: Webb’s turnaround plan had strong teacher, parent, and student input and addressed the most pressing issues that were affecting the school, including high student mobility, insufficient services for English language learners, and high teacher turnover. Webb’s leadership continues to involve stakeholders actively in planning, and over 30 community partners meet monthly to collaborate support for the school.
- Wraparound services for students and families: Webb had already offered a number of student services, but they weren’t coordinated and there weren’t any services for families. Austin Voices and partners began a Family Resource Center (FRC) at Webb in Summer 2007 with a bilingual social worker to support families and a director to organize partnerships and adult education.
- Working through a network of schools: Webb is fed by four elementary schools and feeds two high schools, and all of the principals now meet regularly to improve their collaboration and coordination. Together, they have created a much stronger college and career preparation pipeline.
- Strong community engagement: In 2006-07, Webb, working with state monitors, cancelled all student and parent events (pep rallies, health nights, etc.) as “distractions.” Today, Webb is a vibrant campus, with adult classes day and night, parent coffees, health nights, literacy events, community dinners, speakers, and much more.
- Leveraging partnerships: The efforts at Webb have not been funded by large grants or foundations. Instead, they are mainly achieved by leveraging relationships and making Webb a friendly and productive place for partners to bring their services. Monthly partner meetings, weekly service coordination meetings, and other structures are used to coordinate services. Key partners include United Way for

Greater Austin, Seton Family of Hospitals, Seedling Foundation (mentoring for children of incarcerated parents), Big Brothers Big Sisters, Education Austin (AFT/NEA), Austin Travis County Health and Human Services, Austin Public Library, Austin Police Department, Austin Parks and Recreation, Boys and Girls Club, Iglesia Ebenezer, Covenant Presbyterian Church, Austin Stone Community Church, and Skillpoint Alliance.

Working from that plan, Webb has made dramatic strides, and now out-performs all Austin Title I middle schools academically. Webb and the St. John community have also been recognized for excellence by both the U.S Department of Education and by the America’s Promise Alliance.

# ENDNOTES

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## DEATH BY A THOUSAND CUTS

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