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**Desire for Democracy: Perspectives of Parents Impacted by**  
**2013 Chicago School Closings**

*Kelly Vaughan*

Purdue University Northwest



*Rhoda Rae Gutierrez*

University of Illinois at Chicago  
United States

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**Abstract:** In this article, we discuss the historical shifts in the purposes of public education and examine how neoliberal education policies, like Chicago's school closings, attempt to limit the purpose of public education to be in service to and at the whim of the market. We juxtapose this dominant neoliberal narrative of public education with the voices of the parents from closed schools, whose deep involvement with and beliefs about public schools counter neoliberalism's shallow concept of the public purpose of public education. Drawing upon a 2014 qualitative

study of parents and caregivers who were impacted by school closures and actions, as well as publically available data, we find that parents believe school closings cause great harm to students, families and communities, aim to reduce citizens to consumers in an educational marketplace, and seek to further undermine democracy in education toward a “thin democracy” (Gandin & Apple, 2002) of marketized education. However, we argue that there is an alternative to the neoliberal narrative reflected both in the ongoing historical struggle about the purposes of schooling and in the wisdom, experiences, and desires of parents most directly impacted by neoliberal education policies.

**Keywords:** School closings; neoliberalism; history of education; parent voices

### **Deseo de democracia: Perspectivas de los padres impactados en 2013 cierres escolares de Chicago**

**Resumen:** En este artículo, discutimos los cambios históricos en los propósitos de la educación pública y examinamos cómo las políticas educativas neoliberales, como el cierre de las escuelas de Chicago, intentan limitar el propósito de la educación pública para el servicio y el capricho del mercado. Nosotros yuxtaponemos esa narrativa neoliberal dominante de educación pública con las voces de los padres de escuelas cerradas, cuya profunda implicación y creencias sobre escuelas públicas cuestionan el concepto superficial del neoliberalismo del propósito público de la educación pública. En base a un estudio cualitativo de 2014 sobre padres y cuidadores que se vieron afectados por cierres y acciones escolares, así como datos públicamente disponibles, creemos que los padres creen que el cierre de las escuelas causa grandes daños a los estudiantes, familias y comunidades, Ciudadanos a los consumidores Un mercado educativo, y tratan de minar aún más la democracia en la educación para una "democracia delgada" (Gandin & Apple, 2002) de educación comercializada. Sin embargo, argumentamos que existe una alternativa a la narrativa neoliberal reflejada tanto en la lucha histórica en curso sobre los propósitos de la escolaridad como en la sabiduría, experiencias y deseos de los padres más directamente impactados por las políticas de educación neoliberales.

**Palabras clave:** cierre de escuelas; neoliberalismo; historia de la educación; voz de los padres

### **Desejo de democracia: Perspectivas dos pais impactadas em 2013 fechamentos escolares de Chicago**

**Resumo:** Neste artigo, discutimos as mudanças históricas nos propósitos da educação pública e examinamos como as políticas educacionais neoliberais, como o encerramento das escolas de Chicago, tentam limitar o propósito da educação pública para o serviço e ao capricho do mercado. Nós justaponemos essa narrativa neoliberal dominante de educação pública com as vozes dos pais de escolas fechadas, cujo profundo envolvimento e crenças sobre escolas públicas contestam o conceito superficial do neoliberalismo do propósito público da educação pública. Com base em um estudo qualitativo de 2014 sobre pais e cuidadores que foram afetados por fechamentos e ações escolares, bem como dados publicamente disponíveis, achamos que os pais acreditam que o encerramento das escolas causa grandes danos aos estudantes, famílias e comunidades, visam reduzir os cidadãos aos consumidores Um mercado educacional, e procuram minar ainda mais a democracia na educação para uma "democracia delgada" (Gandin & Apple, 2002) de educação comercializada. No entanto, argumentamos que existe uma alternativa à narrativa neoliberal refletida tanto na luta histórica em curso sobre os propósitos da escolaridade quanto na sabedoria, experiências e desejos dos pais mais diretamente impactados pelas políticas de educação neoliberais.

**Palavras-chave:** fechamento de escolas; neoliberalismo; história da educação; voz dos pais

## Introduction

*Our schools belong to us in the community. We need it for the education and advice for our children . . . it's like a place like home for them, they feel very accepted, and it's a place they need to learn social skills and all those other good things along with our parents. We, too, have a place that we can give ourselves, of ourselves, and at [our school]. It is the village, and we're always saying it takes a village to raise our children so don't close our school.*

-Grandmother testifying at a 2013 Chicago Public Schools community meeting on school closings

*I felt angry, I felt helpless, I felt like the system had given us a precious jewel and they took it back, and I felt displaced, all of those feelings. So, I started to go to the rallies, I went to a couple rallies, and hearings, and my [child] and the [other students] went too....*

-John, parent from a school closed in 2013

On May 22, 2013, the Board of Education of Chicago Public Schools (CPS) approved the closure of an unprecedented 50 public schools, making Chicago the school-closing capital of the nation. This was the continuation of years of racialized neoliberal education policies in which markets, choice, and competition have become the dominant tools of school reform and human capital development the primary goal, weakening the democratic promise of public schools. While there is long history of school reforms influenced by corporate and business interest (see Katz, 1992; Shipp, 2006), neoliberal reforms represent a marked shift in the purpose of public education. Neoliberalism, which “seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market”, (Harvey, 2005 p. 3), attempts to define education primarily as an individual (as opposed to a social) good.

These mass school closures have further fueled a growing grassroots movement calling for democracy in decision-making over Chicago’s public schools. Across the country, as cities like Chicago experience school closures, grassroots coalitions of students, parents, teachers and labor—led by people of color—are posing powerful challenges to these undemocratic neoliberal education strategies (Journey for Justice, 2014). Even though policymakers are pushing school closures and other austerity measures as the new normal for public education, there are alternatives that recognize the “desires and knowledge of parents and communities of Color” most impacted by the closures (Lipman, 2015, p. 75).

This is a pivotal moment in the struggle over the purpose of public schools. As CPS and other urban school districts advance massive budget cuts and school restructuring plans, this moment of crisis should be the time to look both to our past and to put forth bold and new possibilities regarding the purpose of education. Reflecting on historic struggles over the purposes of public education shows that the belief in democracy as the goal of public education is still very much alive despite the decades-long neoliberal assault on public schools.

At the time of the 2013 school closures, the academic literature on the impact of school closures from perspective of parents was limited. Therefore, we and other researchers working with the Collaborative for Equity and Justice in Education (CEJE) at the University of Illinois at Chicago aimed to bring their voices to the forefront (Lipman, Vaughan, & Gutierrez, 2014). We interviewed parents and caregivers from impacted schools to better understand the effect these drastic policies have had on their children, families and communities. We also sought to understand parents’ hopes and desires for their children’s schooling experiences. The purpose of this research was to understand the experiences, wisdom, and desires of parents directly impacted by neoliberal policies.

In this article, we discuss the historical shifts in the purposes of public education and examine how neoliberal education policies, like Chicago's school closings, limit the purpose of public education to be in service to and at the whim of the market. This historical perspective emphasizes the importance of this current moment and the power people most affected by neoliberal policies have to move public education toward more democratic purposes. We juxtapose this dominant neoliberal narrative of public education with the voices of the parents from closed schools, whose deep involvement with and beliefs about public schools counter neoliberalism's shallow concept of the public purpose of public education. We find that parents believe school closings cause great harm to students, families and communities; aim to reduce citizens to consumers in an educational marketplace; and seek to further undermine democracy in education toward a "thin democracy" (Gandin & Apple, 2002) of marketized education. Our analysis of parents' perspectives on school closings highlights that even as neoliberal education policies have sought to limit the purpose of schools, many parents still believe schools to serve not only the needs of individual students, but also communal and democratic purposes.

## **Background and Theoretical Framework**

In this article, we are informed by both the literature focused on the historical purposes of schooling and critical literature focused on neoliberal policies. We believe it is important to understand the school closings, which are the result of neoliberal policies in education, within their appropriate historical context. While schools have always served multiple, often contradictory purposes, we assert that understanding history makes it clear that current policies are neither inevitable nor immutable.

### **Changing Notions of the Purpose of Schooling**

The purpose, content, and form of schooling continue to be contested in academia, schools, and communities. As scholars have documented, the history of schooling in the US is a history of contestations between various groups with different ideological and pedagogical commitments (see Kliebard, 1995; Schubert, 1986; Tyack, 1974). At different time periods, often related to social movements, schools have focused on democratic aims (e.g. common school movement, 1960s and 1970s), while at other moments, economic purposes were the primary purpose of schooling (see Tyack and Cuban, 1995). In practice, school policies are implemented differently in different contexts, both as a result of local beliefs, contestations, and power dynamics and as a result of the social contexts in which each school operates. As such, schools have historically served both democratic and academic goals, but also operated as sites of deculturalization, marginalization, and exploitation of children of color, poor children, and children with disabilities (see Anderson, 1988; Spring, 1997; Watkins, 2001). Thus, even as we argue that neoliberal ideologies, of which school closings are a part, represent a change in notions of schooling, we do so within a context of ever-changing and ever-contested notions of schooling. We resist notions to glorify a "past" in which public schools were valued and we recognize that schools have always served both as sites of enlightenment and sites of oppression.

Despite the ongoing contestations, public schools have historically served both private and public purposes. From the establishment of the first public schools in the 1830s through the 1970s, education reform largely reflected America's faith in schooling to cultivate democratic practices, serve the communities in which they were located, and ameliorate social problems. In fact, a central goal of the Common Schools Movement, which established universal public schooling in many parts of our country, was to create education for citizenship and socialize students into the political

process. The first few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, while conservative educational reformers were arguing about the need for more efficient schools with a focus on testing and sorting students, the progressive education movement affirmed the central roles schools played in nurturing and expanding political and social democracy. In 1915, Dewey and Dewey (2008/1915) argued that the school, more than any other social institution, should serve as the center of a community and should “exist for a democratic purpose, for the good of citizenship” (p. 120). Dewey represented a progressive movement for democratic practices inside and outside of schools, the cultivation of creative intelligence and problem solving, and an ethic of care and responsibility to the larger community. The focus on democratic principles was affirmed in 1918, when the National Education Association’s Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education Report expanded the scope of schooling to include: (a) health, (b) vocation, (c) citizenship, and (d) character (Kliebard, 1995, p. 98). Yet, there was no single “progressive” movement. While some progressive reforms stressed democratic practices and child centered pedagogy, others focused on efficiency and individualization of the curriculum based upon perceived ability, and still others focused on social change. In practice, the form and goals of progressivism largely depended on the race, class, and power of the children being served (see Semel, 1999). For example, when the Common School Movement of the 1830s began at a time when many African Americans living in the South were still enslaved and teaching literacy to enslaved people was illegal (Anderson, 1988, p. 2). It was not until the 1920s and 1930s that universal schooling for African American children was established in the South. Even then, many of the schools established for African American children relied on private philanthropic funds and focused on a curriculum of manual labor, vocational skills, and acceptance of current racialized ideologies (see Anderson, 1988; Watkins, 2001). This ideology largely fit in with conservative efforts during this time period to create more “efficient” schools by testing and sorting students into specific academic “tracks.” Thus, at the same time progressives advocated for the centrality of democratic reforms and more equitable schooling, conservative reforms focused upon efficiency, standardized measurement, vocational training, and student tracking by ability.

In the 1930s and 1940s, there were calls both to increase democratic practices within schools and an emphasis on strengthening democratic practices by helping students cultivate intelligence and problem solving. During this time period, prominent African American progressives focused on the need for education philosophies that address contemporary social issues and to consider “[p]rogressive education [that] was not only healthy for the individual child, but for the race” (Goodenow, 1975, p. 380). In 1933, for example, the Senior Specialist in Education of Negroes, Ambrose Caliver, argued that key questions about curriculum and pedagogy needed to be addressed within the context of “the larger problems of education in our American democracy” including the “practical life and necessities of the Negro race in its relation to our social order” (p. 440). From the 1950s through 1970s, activists, community groups, and educators fought to create more equitable education outcomes for students, including students of color, English language learners, and students with disabilities. Yet, the stories of progressive reforms are only part of our history. It is important to acknowledge that there are multiple competing purposes of schools, which include not only democracy and equity as described above, but also economic purposes.

However, since the late 1970s and early 1980s, there has been a fundamental shift in the conception of the purpose of public schools. In the 1970s, many reformers argued that schools were serving too many purposes and that the quality of education decreased, as did our economic competitiveness internationally. The crisis, which Berliner and Bindle (1995) argue was manufactured “by powerful people who—despite their protestations—were pursuing a political agenda designed to weaken the nation’s public schools, redistribute support for those schools so that privileged students are favored over needy students, or even abolish those schools all together,”

shifted public confidence in governmental reforms (p. xii). A sense of optimism about the government's ability to reform education was replaced, after the 1970s, with a sense of pessimism leading to the very notion of "public" being redefined to represent public-private partnerships (Katz, 1992, p. 64-65). In 1983, *A Nation at Risk*, popularized this conception of schools in crisis and further shifted education policies toward neoliberal reforms in education and a narrowed conceptualization of the purpose of schools.

Neoliberal policies in education have a de-democratizing effect (Apple, 2006; Brown 2015). By creating a discourse that values schools only "in service of the economy," the purpose of school has been transformed to produce globally competitive workers that serves not citizens but consumers in an educational marketplace (Bartlett et al., 2002, p. 2). As Lipman (2004) argues, the very concept of equity has shifted to focus on individual responsibility and choice and is used to refer to "ending the injustice of social promotion", "holding all students to the same high standards," expanding "a variety of educational opportunities," rather than referring to the system's responsibility to provide equitable and high quality education for all (p. 172). Within this marketplace of schools, there has been a shift from neighborhood public schools to complex systems of "choice": charter and magnet schools "competing" with neighborhood schools. Fabricant and Fine (2016) argue that by replacing neighborhood schools, which often serve as centers of community, with charter schools that do not have the same place-based connections, "the capacity of public education to function as a collectivizing and democratizing institution for neighborhood residents is further minimized" (p. 76). By forwarding a political agenda and making it appear that neoliberal policies are politically neutral, neoliberals have offered a market based approach to reform as the only option. Further, proponents of neoliberal policy, specifically privatization often set up a false dichotomy. After identifying many problems with public education (which many have experienced), imply that "either you are skeptical of public education or you're satisfied with mediocrity" (Kohn, 2004, p. 80). By framing the conversation in this manner, many who have experienced problems with public education may see public-private options as the only alternative.

While the influence of conservative economic reforms can be seen in Chicago and the US since the early 1900s, neoliberal reforms are not simply a continuation of these reforms. Rather, they represent a shift in the conception away from *public* purposes of schooling. To understand this shift, we employ David Labaree's (1997) description of three competing purposes of public schooling and the tensions between those who view education as *public* good and those who view schools as a *private* good. Labaree defines the conflicting purposes of schooling as: *democratic equality*, which views schools as a public good focused on education for citizenship; *social efficiency*, which views schools as a public good but focuses on economic development with the goal of preparing workers for society; and *social mobility*, which views schools as a private good with a focus on economic development with the goal of preparing individuals for competition in the economy/society. Labaree (1997) warns that while all three purposes of public schooling have influenced the development of public schools, the social mobility orientation has often combined with both of the other purposes to influence schooling practice. He further warns that the "the increasing hegemony of the mobility goal and its narrow consumer-based approach to education have led to the reconceptualization of education as a purely private good" (p. 73).

Within this argument, many of the progressive and conservative reforms from the 1890s to 1970s, while often contradictory in nature, were defined in terms of the *public* purpose of schools. Yet, the neoliberal reforms in the past few decades more narrowly define the purpose of school as private, and in service to individual rather than societal needs. Neoliberal policies, which can be viewed within the tradition of the social mobility model, refocus the purpose of education on the

cultivation of individual's capacity to compete in today's economic climate. Neoliberal reforms call into questions some of the inherent contradictions between the multiple political purposes of schooling and the tension between the public and private purposes of school. For example, Labaree (1997) argues that "the effort to create a school system that promotes social mobility is antithetical to the ideal of equal educational treatment" because the way to move up the social ladder is to outperform one's peers (p. 66). Similarly, progressive efforts to prepare students for citizenship through the teaching of civic virtues can be undermined when the focus is sorting and tracking students to prepare for the workforce (Labaree, 1997, p. 66). As such, social mobility goals in general and the social mobility goals expressed in neoliberal policy reforms can undermine the democratic purposes of public schooling.

Severing communities from their neighborhood public schools have consequences for the historic democratic promise of public education, as does the creation of education markets. In essence, the neoliberalization of education transforms "our very idea of democracy, making it only an economic concept, not a political one" (Apple, 2006, p. 15). In educational marketplaces, parents become consumers of education and children the products. Human capital development then becomes the primary goal for public schools. Lipman (2011) writes, "in this framework, education is a private good, an investment one makes in one's child or oneself to 'add value' to better compete in the labor market, not a social good for development of individuals and society as a whole" (pp. 14-15). Democracy under neoliberalism is reduced to "possessive individualism...where citizenship is reduced to simply consumption practices" (Gandin & Apple, 2013, p. 98).

## **Chicago Education Restructuring and Resistance**

Chicago, an epicenter of neoliberal education reforms and community resistance, is an important place to study the impact of neoliberal education strategies, specifically school closings, on the very people they purport to help. Corporate management and other systems of top-down accountability, privatization of public schools and services, and school "choice" are key neoliberal education reforms (Saltman, 2012). School choice, in the form of charter and selective enrollment schools for example, has become a cornerstone of neoliberal education policy especially in large cities with majority students of color and low-income students. Schools that cannot compete for their market share of students are forced out of the system, and "under-enrolled" schools are reconstituted or closed. The implications of choice and markets on neighborhood public schools and families are severe. In Chicago, these reforms contributed to the record-number school closures in 2013. School closings have been an important strategy in the neoliberal restructuring of public education and cities as a whole for finance capital and real estate development (Lipman, 2011; Lipman & Haines, 2007; Smith & Stovall, 2008). Race is central to these processes as coded racialized meanings of failing or underutilized schools and the communities in which they are housed shape the political and economic policies that have destabilized and segregated communities of color throughout our city (Lipman, 2011, 2015; Stovall, 2013).

The closure of 50 public schools in 2013 was a pivotal moment in Chicago's history of neoliberal education reforms, which began more than a decade ago. In 2004, former mayor Richard M. Daley with former CPS CEO Arne Duncan launched Renaissance 2010, a plan to reform education by closing 60-70 underperforming schools and opening 100 new schools, mostly charters (Lipman & Haines, 2007). School closings and other drastic school actions<sup>1</sup> have disproportionately

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<sup>1</sup> School actions include closings, phase-outs (schools closed over a designated period of time), consolidations (students from these schools are moved to schools nearby), and turnarounds (schools still serve the

impacted students of color and students with special needs (Lutton, Karp & Ramos, 2011). In fact, 88% of the students affected by school actions from 2001 to 2012 were African American (Caref et al., 2012).

This CPS policy of closing public schools continued and intensified under Mayor Rahm Emanuel's tenure, as he steered the decision to close a record-breaking number of schools in 2013. In the fall of 2012, CPS announced schools would be closed based on underutilization<sup>2</sup> rather than poor academic performance, the criteria for previous closings, as the district sought to consolidate resources in the face of a \$1 billion budget deficit (CPS, 2012a). The closure of 50 schools disproportionately affected African American students—87% of displaced students were from schools that were predominately African American (CPS, 2012b; Vevea, 2013). Homeless children and schools with higher than average percentages of students with special needs were also adversely impacted. These closures, combined with the more than one hundred previous school actions, have created public school “deserts” in some West and South Side neighborhoods with nearly half of the students attending schools other than their neighborhood public school (Karp, 2013).

This upheaval of thousands of CPS students and their families compounded by years of CPS policies of disinvestment and destabilization created a groundswell of resistance to these neoliberal education reforms led by powerful community-union coalitions organizing for education justice (Gutstein & Lipman, 2013). The 2013 school closings further fueled “grassroots coalitions of parents, students, and teachers, led by people of color” who have a deep understanding of the racial and economic politics of the restructuring of public education and can offer an alternative to these neoliberal policies (Lipman, 2015, p. 75). In the years following the closings, resistance has continued and has included a historic 34-day hunger strike by parents, grandparents, teachers and community members on the city's South side struggling for a community designed open enrollment neighborhood high school (Perez, 2015). Community and parent groups have also successfully organized to put pressure on the Illinois legislator to create an Elected Representative School Board (FitzPatrick, 2016). In public demands for increased community participation and in many of the interviews with parents, parents are echoing the ongoing ideological debates about the very purposes of schooling and asserting the need for schools to serve public as well as individual purposes.

Many scholars have examined the impact of neoliberal policies on schools in Chicago. There are numerous studies and articles focused on the impact of school closing on academic outcomes (see de la Torre & Gwynne, 2009; Dowdall, 2011; Pacer, 2013). Yet, there is limited scholarship on closures from the perspective of parents. This project was born out of a desire to understand the impact of school closings from the perspective of those most impacted.

## Research Methodology

For this article, we utilize a hybrid research methodology, which includes philosophical inquiry, historical analysis, and qualitative research. Drawing upon a long tradition of philosophical inquiry in educational research, we “questio[n] a particular educational practice or policy” (school closings) and engage in the longstanding debate about “what the proper aims of education should be, individually and societally” (Burbules & Warnick, 2006, p. 490, 496). We also examine both the policy of school closings and the debate about the purposes of education within their historical

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neighborhood students but the principal, teachers and other school staff are changed); see Data and Democracy reports by UIC CEJE and Voorhees Center at <http://ceje.uic.edu/publications/>.

<sup>2</sup> The CPS underutilization formula for was based on an ideal number of 30 students per classroom  $\pm$  20%. See Apples 2 Apples for an explanation and analysis of this formula at: <https://cpsapples2apples.wordpress.com/2012/12/04/space-utilization-show-your-work-part-1/>.



context. We then considered how the philosophical questions about the purposes of school, which has been contested throughout history, continue to be contested today even as dominant neoliberal policies narrow the purpose of schooling. We examine the perspective of parents and community members about both the impact of school closings and about their understandings of the purpose of schools.

To understand parental perspectives, we draw upon two sources of information: 1) parent interviews analyzed in a 2013-2014 school closings study by the Collaborative for Equity and Justice in Education (CEJE; the authors were part of the research team); and 2) transcripts of Chicago Public Schools-sponsored community hearings on school closings in February 2013. First, we re-examined transcripts from our 2013-2014 Collaborative for Equity and Justice in Education (CEJE) study. In the CEJE study, we worked with a team of scholars to study the impact of the 2013 Chicago school closings from parents' perspectives. In this qualitative study, we interviewed 23 parents/caregivers from schools impacted by closures or turnarounds<sup>3</sup> on the city's West, South, and Northwest sides, areas of the city that have experienced multiple school closures and actions in the last decade. We interviewed 16 African American women, three African American men, two Latina women, one Asian woman, and one White woman. Many of the parents we interviewed held leadership positions at their school, including positions on Local School Councils, Parent Teacher Organizations, and school wide and citywide groups to improve schooling. While 21 of the 23 parents we interviewed had children in schools that were closed, only 10 of the parents reported that their children had to change buildings as a result of those closures. It is also important to note that of the 21 parents with children at closed schools, three sent their children to schools other than the official "receiving" schools, with one leaving the city and two others choosing charter or magnet schools in the city. Other parents explained that they were in the process of exploring other schooling options. Finally, we interviewed one parent at a receiving school and one parent at a turnaround school. We worked with community-based organizations that resisted the school closures to identify parents who might be interested in participating in the study. We then utilized "snowball sampling" and asked parents to recommend other parents who may be interested in the study (Glesne, 2011). Our research team conducted and transcribed our semi-structured interviews. Using Atlas.ti software, a few members of the team (including Vaughan and Gutierrez) conducted initial coding and over a series of meetings drew out broad themes from the interviews. This initial coding largely suggested harmful effects of school closings on students and their families. This was certainly important to understand, however, drawing from Eve Tuck (2009), we believed that "damage-centered" research could pathologize the families we interviewed and their communities. Therefore, in subsequent levels of coding we used a "desire-based" framework to also understand the "wisdom and hope" of the parents we interviewed. Our research team presented our findings, as well as policy recommendations, in a report entitled *Root Shock: Parents' Perspectives on School Closings in Chicago* (Lipman, Vaughan & Gutierrez, 2014).

Second, for this article, we coded transcripts from three regional community hearings that took place in February of 2013<sup>4</sup> and which are publically available on the Chicago Public Schools

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<sup>3</sup> Turnaround schools are schools in which all the faculty and staff are replaced, and curriculum and school culture changed.

<sup>4</sup> Transcripts were downloaded from Chicago Public Schools website (CPS, 2013a) in September 2014 from: [http://www.cps.edu/About\\_CPS/Policies\\_and\\_guidelines/Pages/qualityschools.aspx](http://www.cps.edu/About_CPS/Policies_and_guidelines/Pages/qualityschools.aspx). Please note that in February 2013, there were 120 schools on the school-closing list, less than half of which were ultimately closed. Thus, not all of the speakers' schools were closed. Also, please note that we used pseudonyms for parents in our 2014 CEJE study; however, when quoting from publically available transcripts, we did not use pseudonyms.

website. We choose one hearing from each of the areas of the city that we focused upon: the South, West, and Northwest sides. In both the interview transcripts and the community hearing transcripts, we focused on codes related to themes related to democracy, decision-making, purposes of schooling, and parents' hopes for their children's schooling experience—themes from our CEJE study. We analyzed the parents' perspectives in the context of our questioning about the philosophical purposes of schooling.

In our work, we position ourselves as scholar-activists who were actively engaged in the efforts to oppose school closings, as well as mothers with children in the very system we are studying. As such, we began this project not because of neutral, academic interest, but rather as a way to analyze the work of those being most impacted by neoliberal policies to close schools. We “work from a position of solidarity” with the communities impacted by school closings (see Gutierrez & Lipman, 2016, p. 1243) and our work is influenced by both our academic work and our work in the community. Our participation in public forums, community meetings, and community actions, has provided valuable insight and knowledge about closings, neoliberal policies, and ongoing contestations. Yet, because we identified many of our research participants through their relationships with community-based organizations that were opposed to school closings, we understand that not all perspectives on school closings were represented in our findings. Future studies could include a wider sampling of parents impacted by closings and other school actions, as well as follow up interviews that happened a few years after school actions were taken. Future research is also needed to examine the historical context of resistance to undemocratic educational policies.

## Findings

In this article, we build upon findings in our previous report (see Lipman et al., 2014) to understand how school closings impacted the relationships between schools and families/communities and the manner in which parents responded (both actions and words) to neoliberal restructuring (school closing) reflects parents' broader understandings of the purposes of public education. We also explore the ways in which parents' opposition to the closings and expressions of hope for alternatives relate to the tension between the different historic purposes of school. In this article, we offer three findings:

- 1) While school closings were framed as a solution to inequity in Chicago's public school system, parents believed that school closings had a harmful impact not only on their children, but also on families and communities.
- 2) Despite CPS' stated commitment to a more transparent school closings process, parents did not trust CPS and believed that CPS school closing decisions were predetermined. Parents expressed a desire for democracy in Chicago education.
- 3) While neoliberal policies seek to emphasize schooling for private purposes, many parents rejected CPS's rationale for school closings and argued for a broader purpose for school.

**While school closings were framed as a solution to inequity in Chicago's public school system, parents believed that school closings had a harmful impact not only on their children, but also on families and communities.**

Man, we did so much stuff in this school, for this school. That is what made the school uplifted.... Whatever they needed. If they needed me to walk kids home, I

walked kids home. If they needed someone to sit at the front desk, I would sit at the front desk. Whatever they needed. . . I was just volunteering. . . it was something I wanted to do for the community. . . that is my way of giving back.

- James, parent from a closed school

In Chicago, CPS and city leaders argued that school closings would help students in the closed school. One news outlet reported that “Mayor Rahm Emanuel has said the key reason to close schools is about getting children ‘trapped’ in low performing schools to a better place” (Vevea & Lutton, 2013). In a CPS Media Briefing from March 21, 2013, CEO Byrd-Bennett states:

Every child in every neighborhood in Chicago deserves access to a high quality education that prepares them to succeed in life. For too long, children in certain parts of the city have been cheated out of the resources they need to succeed in the classroom because too many of our scarce resources are being spent on maintaining underutilized, under resourced schools.

In the above quotes, Mayor Emanuel and CEO Byrd-Bennett express a belief that school closings will benefit children by providing them “better” opportunities. However, these statements fail to acknowledge that multiple studies have found that most students impacted by school closing do not have better academic outcomes (see de la Torre and Gwynne, 2009; Dowdall, 2011, Engberg et al., 2012; Pacer, 2013). Byrd Bennett’s reference to the under resourced school neglects to acknowledge the role city and CPS Board policies, especially the decision to open 120 new schools since 2000, have had on enrollment (Vevea, Lutton, Karp, 2013). Finally, these statements do not fully acknowledge the impact school closings have on children, parents, and communities.

As detailed in our earlier report, *Root Shock: Parents' Perspectives on School Closings in Chicago*, many of the parents interviewed felt the closings had a negative impact on their children, their families, and their communities (Lipman et al., 2014). While some parents did address concerns about the schools their children attended before the closings (including lack of materials), most of the parents we interviewed explained harmful consequences of school closings. Parents detailed problems with transitions, including lost records, improper class placement of students, and challenges for students with special needs. Other parents shared with us stories of anxiety and pain. The closing process was prolonged and many parents, students, and teachers were uncertain about the fate of their school. When the closings were announced, some of the parents we interviewed shared that their children were upset that they would not be returning to schools with teachers they knew well. Sarah, described a nightmare her child experienced about going to school to find an empty building, shared that “. . . you’d hear whispers of different kids talking about nightmares, you’d hear whispers about parents with kids waking up screaming. You’d hear nightmares all the way from the beginning all the way to the end.” Parents also shared their own anxieties, including worries about the safety of their children and the transition for students with special needs. Cassie, a parent of a child with special needs, explained that during the school closing process, she spoke at community meetings:

. . . I didn’t want them to just close the school. . . They were not really taking into consideration how it was going to affect everybody. . . and of course I am concerned with all of the students and all of the schools. But I knew how it would affect my daughter and the whole special education program. How the sense of familiarity is important to her.

Cassie explained that her daughter “hates the new school.” She felt that “special education programs are like a second thought” and that the chaos of the closing was harmful to her child.

Yet, it was more than the transition that was difficult. While there were at least two exceptions, most parents in our study did not find the quality of education increase after the closings. While parents were promised improvements to their school and while some did describe positive changes to facilities, many also described significant losses, including less attention from teachers because of increased class sizes, loss of arts and music programs, absence of established community partnerships, the loss of parent centers, and the rupture of significant relationships with teachers and school teachers and faculty. A few of the parents in our study talked about the loss of real knowledge of the children, explaining that when you transfer a student with special needs, there is a loss of knowledge of that child. For example, Sarah talked about work with children with medical needs and special needs. She stated:

[O]ur kids all started there together you’d know who had the allergies, it wasn’t just that somebody would have to give you a piece of paper and tell you somebody had an allergy, or you’d know who the runners were, or you’d know which exits the kids would head for, you know how to handle them, you knew how to calm them down . . . from one teacher to the next.

Parents also felt a personal and community loss when schools were closed. Parents recognized the historic function of schools to operate as community spaces that foster relationships and build community. Many parents used the word “family” to describe their closed school. Sophia, a parent at a closed school, explained:

[The closed school] was my home. [It] was my kids’ school, their home, their second home, they loved it, it was like family...where the teacher...had my personal number, where I had the teacher’s personal number, where I can call...and say, you know my kid’s having a hard time with homework or my kid said this happened in class today...it was almost family....

Parents recognized school as a community space for which they had great responsibility. Many of the parents we interviewed were school leaders, elected members of Local School Councils,<sup>5</sup> participants and leaders in city wide coalitions, volunteer coaches, and advocates for children with special needs. In this way, schools were places where parents served as leaders, shared governance with administrators and teachers with whom they had developed relationships, and experienced “thick democracy.” As James, the father quoted above expresses, the school closing represented a loss of meaningful relationships and a loss of a significant way to contribute to his children and community. While some parents were actively involved in their children’s new schools, we also found many parents who were less active because they felt excluded from participation or demoralized by their previous experiences.

**Despite CPS’ stated commitment to a more transparent school closings process, parents did not trust CPS and believed that CPS school closing decisions were predetermined. Parents expressed a desire for democracy in Chicago education.**

I think they [Chicago Public Schools officials] had their minds made up...before you go up there to address them. This was on the drawing board long before we

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<sup>5</sup> Local School Councils are elected governing bodies comprised of parents, community members, and school faculty and staff in each Chicago public school. LSCs approve discretionary budgets, develop school improvement plans and hire and evaluate principals. See <http://cps.edu/Pages/LocalSchoolCouncils.aspx>.

even had a hint of it. So, they knew what they were going to do, their game plan was in place....There was no great debate, or rebuttal. It was just, 'hey we're doing this' and that's it. Plain and simple.

--John, parent from a 2013 closed school

The above quote was John's response when asked if he thought testifying at CPS school closing hearings made any difference in the district's final decision. It was a response not unlike those of other parents we interviewed and is indicative of parents' dual position when CPS slated their children's schools for closure—many parents advocated to save their schools at these CPS meetings even though they suspected speaking up was futile. How can we make sense of the incongruous actions and beliefs of parents like John who fought to save their children's school even though they thought CPS already had its "game plan" in place?

Neoliberal policies fundamentally undermine democratic governance. Harvey (2005) writes that while individual freedom to choose is a central tenet of neoliberalism, for neoliberals this freedom must be limited so that individuals do not choose to pursue their "desire for meaningful collective life" (p. 69). Neoliberal limits on democratic governance take the form of "undemocratic and unaccountable institutions...to make key decisions" (p. 69).

In school governance, neoliberalism calls for mayoral control and appointed school boards (Lipman, 2011) to enact policies with an overpowering "economic rationality" for "efficiency and an 'ethic' of cost-benefit analysis" with students as "human capital" (Apple, 2006, pp. 31-32). Over the years, Chicago's mayor-appointed board members have created a market of school options from which parents can choose by comparing standardized tests scores and forcing poor performing schools out. CPS used this economic rationale to justify closings in the past, and intensified this discourse of economic prudence in the 2013 closings (e.g. CPS, 2012a).

Mandated by state law to hold public hearings on school closings, CPS organized a series of hearings and community meetings that spanned most of the 2012-13 academic year which CPS called its "community engagement process." CPS CEO Barbara Byrd-Bennett claimed the decision-making process on school actions would be different from years past and that "no steps will be taken until we have rebuilt trust with the community by engaging them in an inclusive, open and transparent manner" (CPS, 2012a).

Yet, in our research we found that many parent did not trust the CPS engagement process. Regardless of whether or not parents participated in CPS public meetings or engaged in community actions to stop the closings, the parents we interviewed had similar doubts about the authenticity of CPS' democratic process during this school closings process. The inadequate notice and timing of some of these meetings prevented parents from participating. The structure of these public meetings, such as the lack of deliberation by CPS officials or dialogue between officials and community members, the disrespectful timeline for decisions, and the little time given to communities to speak against their schools' closure, have deterred parents from further participating in CPS' public engagement process. In many respects, the ritual of CPS school closing announcements and public meetings over the years has fostered a deep distrust, resentment, and lack of faith in CPS governance. It is not a surprise that the people directly affected by these policies would feel it is useless to challenge CPS' school closing decisions. Parents' refusal to participate in the hearings makes sense considering this context.

Numerous parents and participants in the public hearings also pointed out that the very Board making decisions was neither representative of nor responsible to the community. John, who was a member of the Local School Council at his daughter's former school, asserted:

Even the LSC members, we have to get elected. We have to go to training. ...So what I'm saying is the process the Local School Council members go through is...it's almost like we're vetted and the Board is not. They're just appointed by the mayor...appointees, you're always going to go in favor of your job, the guy who is signing the checks. That's plain and simple.

Even though parents were participating in the hearings, they felt excluded from the decision-making process. Many parents said they felt that the decision to close their schools had occurred before the CPS public hearings.

The parents we interviewed had different reactions to this community engagement process. Some believed that the decisions were already made and did not participate in the process. Others, even when they distrusted the process, testified at the hearings because they didn't want CPS officials to close their schools without a fight or they wanted to demonstrate a need for transparency. These parents' experiences echo those of parents from previous CPS school actions<sup>6</sup> and show that despite CPS' guarantee of greater transparency and inclusion of parent and community voice in the 2013 school closing decisions, parents found these promises to be hollow.

Although many of the parents we interviewed believed the school closing decisions were predetermined, many of them also testified and participated in other organized efforts to save their schools. Stephanie, a parent from a closed West Side school claimed, "[t]hey already had on their mind which schools were going to be closed. So you can march and protest, but they already had it in their mind. This school was definitely going to close. That's the way I feel." Although Stephanie believed taking action seemed futile, she stated that she would do what was needed to help save her child's school: "[I]f [the LSC president] tells me that they're having a protest like downtown, and I was telling her that this is my schedule... You let me know if you need me to change that day off to another day. And basically, I was willing to do whatever it takes to help." Even though John said that these closings were on the "drawing board long before we had a hint of it," he was also engaged in the fight to save his child's school: "I felt angry, I felt helpless, I felt like the system had given us a precious jewel and they took it back, and I felt displaced, all of those feelings. So, I started to go to the rallies, I went to a couple rallies, and hearings, and my [child] and the [other students] went too...." These parents saw the importance of struggling collectively with others from their school community to save their school, even though they justifiably believed that these were sham public hearings.

Not all parents we interviewed participated in the CPS community engagement meetings like Stephanie and John. Some parents did not attend because they received short notice of the meetings or the meetings conflicted with their work schedules. Keira, a West Side parent, said the CPS meetings "were during my work hours and when I would find out about them, it would be at least the day before the actual meeting or something like that. So it wouldn't allow me to take time off." Some were discouraged to participate because of bad experiences at previous CPS board meetings. Tracy, a South Side grandparent, who attended a board meeting said "I decided not to go [to the CPS hearings] because I know that all the people from the Board, they was sitting there as statues. People was talking about that they didn't want their school closed and how important it is....But they was sitting there and they weren't listening because they already know what they was going to do." Sandy, a West Side parent, had a similar experience:

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<sup>6</sup> See Data and Democracy reports co-authored by the University of Illinois Collaborative for Equity and Justice in Education and the Voorhees Center for Neighborhood and Community Improvement at <http://ceje.uic.edu/publications/>.

We went down there [CPS headquarters] and all the parents...maybe 20 of us, and we were there thinking that we were gonna be able to speak and then we got to the meeting...[we were] upstairs in a room where we couldn't ask any questions. [Board members] had no sense that we was there. And then when it was [our] turn, we could only have one speaker and then there was a minute...but when you get in...the minute was cut into 25 seconds. He barely had a chance to say what he had to say and like the middle of his actual proposal, okay that's enough, next. And I felt that that was wrong. I felt that was very disrespectful.

As parents described their feelings of disrespect and lack of accountability from CPS, they also reveal a deep desire for democracy and a more just education for their children and communities. Lisa, a parent from a closed school on the South Side, said:

I just want transparency. Every child who walks up in the school, the government, the state, and we are paying taxes towards the school. Their salary is from our children, but they treating them as second class citizens and they are not taking the children seriously...You are taking away their education and it's frustrating them. These kids are already below. You have children who are waking up to an empty house, wearing the same clothes, and then they go there and you cheat them? They are not teaching them. They are dumbing our children and not teaching them. They are taking this money and doing garbage. Some of these children...they want better. Some of them want to go pass their parents. This is supposed to be a safe haven and you are giving them less.

Overall, many parents we interviewed did not trust CPS and did not believe the 2013 school closings process to be "inclusive, open and transparent" as the CPS CEO had promised. Despite this distrust, many parents alongside others from their school communities attended the CPS hearings to contest the closing of their schools. Others who refused to participate did so out of past experiences with CPS' undemocratic process. Because of their experiences with CPS, parents from closed schools expressed a desire for democracy that honors the strengths of their schools and communities and addresses the needs of the students.

**While neoliberal policies seek to narrow purposes of schooling for private purposes, many parents rejected CPS' rationale for school closings and argued for a broader purpose for school.**

I think the teachers, staff, and principal at [the school], I didn't think of them [as] staff, but part of my family who could talk to them about anything or if they need to talk. I know I can depend on these guys. [The principal] always made me feel like you are part of this...you are part of [the school].

--Stephanie, parent from closed school

Even as neoliberal reforms serve to narrow the purpose of school to a private good focused on the development of human capital, our Chicago school closings research found many parents and community members actively reject the notion that schools were closing as a result of failure. They also reject the narrowing of the purpose of school and assert the need for schools to build democracy and community and to serve public, not just private, interest. Many parents wanted schools that prepared their children for academic success, but also taught them "values," provided opportunities for enrichment activities in the arts, and helped them develop as whole people.

While neoliberal policies attempt to place the blame on schools for their own failures, many parents, teachers, and community members rejected the arguments that their schools were failing and further rejected the notion that any “failure” was due to a personal/school deficit. During the CPS public hearings and in our interviews with parents, many pointed to mistakes in the CPS utilization formula and argued that those making decisions did not understand how their space was being utilized. Others commented on the demolition of public housing, neighborhood disinvestment, and the opening of charter schools as having created the very under enrollment that CPS was using as a reason to close their schools. Many also rejected the very premise that schools were failing academically. Instead of accepting the narrative provided, many parents and community members questioned the system’s accountability to their schools and children. At a CPS Community Meeting in February 2013, a community resident and teacher at a CPS high school, described the “whole process [as] absurd” and asked if residents of Winnetka (a wealthy suburb) would ever be in the position to “beg” for their schools to remain open. At another a CPS Community Meeting, a state representative stood up between speakers and read a note passed to her by a parent in the audience. The note asked, “Why must black children beg to be educated?”

Further, many parents rejected the notion that the only purposes of schooling was academic and economic purposes. While neoliberal policies seek to position the “person . . . not as a member of a community or society, but rather as a self-interested individual who, given proper conditions, makes rational choices as a ‘consumer’ within a competitive marketplace” (Pedroni, 2007, p. 18), many of the parents interviewed still saw the historic promise of school to strengthen and serve the community, not just the individual. At the hearings, many parents, teachers, and community members cited academic data (test scores, teacher quality, attendance rates) to prove that their school should remain open; however, they also focused on schools as institutions that taught young people “values,” provided opportunities for enrichment activities in the arts, taught democratic practices, and helped them develop as whole people and members of the community. During a CPS Community Meeting in 2013, a grandmother from a South side school stated:

Our schools belong to us in the community. We need it for the education and advice for our children . . . it’s like a place like home for them, they feel very accepted, and it’s a place they need to learn social skills and all those other good things along with our parents. We, too, have a place that we can give ourselves -- —of ourselves, and at [our school]. It is the village, and we’re always saying it takes a village to raise our children so don’t close our school. (CPS, 2013b)

Parents and community members affirmed the historic goals of schools to teach democratic processes and community values. Sophia, a parent at a closed school, stated “my point is for my kids to have values, to learn values, to learn how to grow with others, to share, to, to be non-robotic, non-systematic, you know...I want my kids to be a kid.” This parent, like numbers of other parents interviewed, also saw a value in public education to help prepare students to learn to work with “different races, different people.” During a community meeting in 2013, a parent and LSC member from a West side school stated: “Our students deserve the best education possible, in order for them to be successful citizens” (CPS, 2013a) At another CPS community meeting, a parent said “the bottom line is if you really concerned about a better nation, a better town, and a better city, then you don’t never think about closing schools” (CPS, 2013a).

Finally, parents rejected to the idea that schools only served individual students. Many parents and community members recognized schools as community centers. For some, schools held multigenerational value. For others, schools served as the centers that provided resources, medical care, and job training programs, and tutoring. Within community meetings and in our interviews,



multiple participants described their school as a home, safe haven, a family, family friendly, a village, the heart and soul of community. Yet, it was not simply the schools that were in service to communities. As we mentioned above, many of the parents in our study volunteered in their children's schools as a way to both give back and to belong to a community. Parents also recognized that schools, as centers of community, provide a sense of place—what Fullilove (2013) describes as “essential place relationships,” the disruptions of which can lead to a sense of displacement (p. 43).

The parents in our study knew that schools do more than teach academics. Schools teach democratic practices and provide support for children and parents, especially in the context of disinvestment in many of the very neighborhoods in which schools were closed. During a CPS Community Meeting in February 2013, an alderman who was an outspoken critic of school closings, argued that when local public housing was destroyed, the schools “remained as a stable elements in our community. . . . [S]chools provided learning, nutrition, recreation, and social services” (CPS, 2013b). Despite their problems, schools, as Pedro Noguera (2003) describes, are “indispensable to those they serve. Without any viable alternative available, urban public schools cannot be written off as rotten structures in need of demolition” (p. 4).

## Conclusion

David Labaree (1997) argues that while there are many threats to the public purpose of schooling, we have a long tradition of competing education purposes, including a focus on democracy. He reminds us that “we can defend the public school as a public good by drawing on the deeply rooted conceptions of education that arise from these traditions” (p. 74). We believe that providing historical context to contemporary policies can be helpful in both understanding ideological underpinnings of the neoliberal agenda, but also provide context for resisting unjust policies. In this article, we have situated current neoliberal policies, including school closings, and the resistance to such policies within a historical context.

When faced with neoliberal policies and ultimate disinvestment, many parents rejected the notion that the closings were inevitable or that they made good sense. In fact, we found that despite the promise that school closings could offer improved opportunities for children, many parents believed that school closings had a harmful impact not only on their children, but also on families and communities. We further argued that even as CPS claimed to have a more transparent process, many of the parents we interviewed believed that the decisions were undemocratic and that their knowledge was not valued. In our work, we found that even when parents participated in the CPS “community engagement” process by testifying at public meetings or participated in the educational marketplace by choosing schools other than the official “receiving” school, many did so with skepticism about the process and a desire for more just choices. Some parents, including two parents who chose to send their children to schools that were not designated receiving schools, found positive educational opportunities at their children's new schools. Yet, such participation should not be understood as an endorsement of neoliberal policies. Rather, as Pedroni (2007) explains in his own study of parental participation in voucher programs in Milwaukee, “such support is therefore not indicative of a primary commitment to education free markets as a solution to social ills, nor is it, for the most part, a rejection of a critical and progressive vision of education reform” (p. 4). For many in our study, schools continue to be sites of struggle and imagining.

Finally, we have noted that while neoliberal policies are often based upon a narrowing of the purposes of schooling, the historical struggle about the purposes of schools continues in both academic and community settings. Parents in our study did not accept a reconceptualization of

schooling as a private good; instead, parents recognized the historic value of schools as community centers and expressed a desire for more transparent and democratic governance, more equitable funding practices, a well-rounded curriculum, and democratic practices both in the classroom and within the school system. In so doing, parents were articulating an alternative way forward that was rooted in the public promise of schools. We believe that further research that examines current reforms in their historical context is needed, as is more research that centers the experiences, knowledge and desires of those most impacted.

This research shows that the historical purposes of schooling, including schooling for democracy, still have meaning in the struggle against school closings and in ongoing struggles for equitable and democratic schools. This research illustrates the importance in listening to the voices of parents, many of whom continue to struggle for a more just education for their children, not just one that trains them to be workers; a different vision for their communities, where they are not treated like second-class citizens; a different kind of government, one that is truly transparent and accountable to the public. It is in this tension between the community's desire for real democracy in education and CPS' performance of democracy that warrants greater attention.

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## About the Authors

### **Kelly Vaughan**

Purdue University Northwest

[vaughak@pnw.edu](mailto:vaughak@pnw.edu)

Dr. Kelly Vaughan is an assistant professor in English education at Purdue University Northwest. Her research interests include curriculum history, English education, education policy, and disability studies in education. Prior to joining the faculty at Purdue University Northwest, Dr. Vaughan worked with the Collaborative for Equity and Justice in Education at UIC.

### **Rhoda Rae Gutierrez**

University of Illinois at Chicago

[rrgutier@uic.edu](mailto:rrgutier@uic.edu)

Rhoda Rae Gutierrez is a doctoral candidate in Educational Policy Studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Her research interests include neoliberal education policy, cultural politics of race, and social justice. She is a researcher with the Collaborative for Equity and Justice in Education and a parent activist.

## About the Guest Editors

### **Federico R. Waitoller**

University of Illinois at Chicago

[fwaitoll@uic.edu](mailto:fwaitoll@uic.edu)

Dr. Waitoller is an assistant professor in the department of special education at the University of Illinois at Chicago. His research focuses on urban inclusive education. In particular, he examines how neoliberal informed policies, such as top-down accountability, portfolio district models, and school choice converge with inclusive education efforts, and how these initiatives affect Black and Latinx students with dis/abilities. His research also examines teacher learning efforts and pedagogies for inclusive education.

### **Rhoda Rae Gutierrez**

University of Illinois at Chicago

[rrgutier@uic.edu](mailto:rrgutier@uic.edu)

Rhoda Rae Gutierrez is a doctoral candidate in Educational Policy Studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Her research interests include neoliberal education policy, cultural politics of race, and social justice. She is a researcher with the Collaborative for Equity and Justice in Education and a parent activist.

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