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ATLANTA PUBLIC SCHOOLS CASE STUDY:
A TALE OF TWO SCHOOLS

by

KAREN COOK

Under the Direction of Dr. Jennifer Patico

ABSTRACT

This study concerns the effects of public school redistricting on communities in Atlanta. It is based upon interviews with people in two neighborhoods which are part of the Atlanta Public Schools (APS) system directly affected by redistricting. All schools slated to close are located in low-income, minority areas and serve similar populations. Of the ten schools selected for closing, three were saved during the final APS board meeting in April 2012, and will remain open. I spoke with people who reside in a neighborhood where a local school is slated to close, as well as those in an area where a school was saved from closing. I asked informants why they felt their schools were identified for closure and how they responded to the threat of closing. I learned that both communities organized to save their schools but with different results based on available forms of social and cultural capital.

INDEX WORDS: Public school education, Minority education, Forms of Capital, Community/grassroots movements, Low-income communities, Displacement, Gentrification

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KAREN COOK

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2013

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2013

ATLANTA PUBLIC SCHOOLS CASE STUDY:
A TALE OF TWO SCHOOLS

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August 2013

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my entire family, especially my parents Dr. and Mrs. Samuel Du-Bois Cook with thanks for all their love and constant support. Huge thanks to my friends who also supported me along the way and to my brave informants from Vine City and Peoplestown.

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Purpose of the Study

The subject of public school education is a hot-button issue for many people in America. Free education is a right afforded to all children and youth living in this country, but resources are not equal among public schools and these disparities often overlap or are interrelated with racial distinctions. *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* was the first step in the desegregation of American schools in 1954 (Mickelson and Smith 1992). This landmark decision was in part to ensure that the previous idea of “separate but equal” would no longer be a part of the United States public school system. Desegregation within schools was meant to give all children a chance at a quality education (Ibid.). In the more than fifty years since *Brown v. the Board of Education*, many reform programs have been put into place to raise the standards by which children are educated in this country, but inequality centered around race and class has not been eliminated. It is often said that access to a quality education is the basis for a good life and achieving “the American dream,” but is this dream attainable for all children? What are the factors and processes that reproduce racial and class inequality in education? And how do effected communities participate in sustaining and/or challenging these inequalities?

This study concerns the effects of the recent public school redistricting on communities in Atlanta. It is based upon interviews with parents and community members in two neighborhoods which are part of the Atlanta Public Schools (APS) system and have been affected by recent redistricting. The recent APS Superintendent’s redistricting proposal brings to the forefront major issues of race and class. The very idea that no schools on the north side of town, which is predominantly White and upper, middle-class, were included in the proposed list of school closings, speaks to this quite loudly. Of the ten schools originally selected for closing, three were

saved during the final APS board meeting on the subject. This meeting was open to the public and parents were able to have their voices heard. This study asks: what are the concerns of a community that lead to mobilization? What are the factors that lead to success or failure within a small-scale community movement? By doing a case study of one school that was saved and one that will eventually close, I explore the bigger perceptions of race, class and politics surrounding the APS redistricting by talking with parents who have been affected by redistricting itself, community leaders involved in the debate, as well as considering other studies of redistricting and gentrification in similar urban cities. Ultimately, my research also contributes to our understanding of how two communities perceive the importance of education and the political process through which decisions about educational access are made in their urban environment.

Pauline Lipman, an anthropologist and professor of educational policy studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago, has greatly influenced my research. Her research, teaching and activism are informed by her commitment to social justice (University of Illinois-Chicago). Lipman's research is focused on race and class inequality within education, urban restructuring and gentrification, the politics of race, the political economy of urban education and globalization (Ibid.). Lipman's work on gentrification and school restructuring in Chicago Public Schools (CPS) has been a model for my research. She questioned the motives of Chicago's political elite, including Mayor Daley, and has interviewed parents and community members being affected by school restructuring and various forms of housing displacement within the city. Her research has heightened my interest in education policy and the challenges facing urban school districts. She sees school restructuring and gentrification as pieces of a puzzle in the political economy of urban education (2011). Lipman (2005:323-324) contends that gentrification is "global urban strategy" and argues that while gentrification seeks to make cities better, replacing crumbling build-

ings with bright, shining and new facilities that cater to the middle-class, often low-income African-American and Latino families suffer and do not reap the benefits of their newly renovated cities; she argues that race is central in this debate. As in my own research, all the schools chosen to be closed by the CPS were in low-income, minority areas and were described as having a “culture of failure” (324). Lipman (324) suggests that language used by the CEO of CPS sought to demonize those in low-income areas who were ultimately displaced. She (325) suggests that programs such as Renaissance 2010 that seek to displace low-income families and close their schools in the name of progress can be a “lightning rod” for the opposition of neoliberal policies and agendas within education. My research parallels Lipman’s work; Chicago and Atlanta are both big cities with large minority populations affected by school restructuring. In both cities, minority communities were displaced and ultimately the ones most affected by the changes the boards of education chose to make. Also, both cities are seeking to become global and more visible and reforming education is a large part of making a city desirable for perspective new residents, business owners and large companies. My research can hopefully add to Lipman’s prestigious and vast body of knowledge by documenting two, small, local communities that fought against the city of Atlanta and its board of education as they sought to save schools slated for closure; one community was ultimately successful and one was not. Lipman (2004:16-17; 2005:325) sees herself as an activist who puts education reform in a social justice framework, calling for equity, agency, cultural relevance and critical literacy in the realm of educational policy. Such an approach is particularly important in a context where “culture of poverty” theories still influence Americans’ perceptions of educational access.

As the social scientific literature reflects, many Americans hold a classist assumption that low-income schools, families and people are part of a "culture of poverty" (Gorski 2008:33).

This false assumption is centered on the idea that people who are low-income are responsible for their own socioeconomic status and that they do not value education (Checker 2005:185; Gorski 2008:33). However, families and communities in Atlanta voiced strong concerns over the possible closing of their neighborhood schools (Suggs and Poole 2012). Community often becomes hugely important in such matters (Lipman 2009). There are many definitions of community, but Willie et al. (2008:4) suggest:

that community is a social organization of people that facilitates social interaction between individuals and groups of individuals by way of common bonding, socialization, and the implementation of justice for the purpose of supporting and sustaining each member of the collective, as well as promoting the general welfare within the context of a common locality.

Community activism also serves to strengthen collective identities and group solidarity when a population, community or group has been targeted unfairly, after natural disasters or various types of displacement (Checker 2005; Gamson 1992 in Rose 1997). During times of civil unrest and other turmoil, African-Americans have also looked to their churches as a place to mobilize and come together (Checker 2005:169). Often Black churches provided services and goods that the government would not such as healthcare and childcare (Bayor 1996:6-7). Atlanta especially has a long history of social movements and civil rights crusades initiated in and around Black churches that dealt with labor issues, fair housing and access to equitable education (Ibid.).

Studies have suggested that many factors contribute to a child's success including the fact that people and "parents from different ethnic groups and social class backgrounds possess different levels and types of the resources critical for their children's education" (Mickelson 2003:1061). Pierre Bourdieu (1985:197) labeled these resources forms of capital, as in human, financial, social and cultural capital. Human capital refers to a parent's education level that may contribute to their ability to help their child with homework (Mickelson 2003:1061). Financial capital is money and wealth; a child who is well fed, healthy and well taken care of coming to

school will learn better and possibly be more focused during lessons (Ibid.). Social capital deals with parents being knowledgeable about social networks within the school system as well as a cultivation of relationships with other parents that can ultimately be beneficial to their child (Ibid.). Bourdieu (1977 in Mickelson 2003:1066) viewed cultural capital as “a mechanism for transferring class advantage from one generation to another.” Bourdieu did extensive work surrounding the educational system and found that students who embodied “dominant cultural forms” such as dialect, sensibilities, tastes and “elite” knowledge did better in educational environments than their counterparts who possessed “less of this capital” (1066). In short, having the “right” skills, connections, networks and access makes all the difference when it comes to success in education and in life.

I suggest that various forms of recognized and accepted capital such as education, class position, political connections and social networks contributed to the success of one community’s mobilization efforts to save their neighborhood school. While community engagement was important to both neighborhoods I studied, the amount of available capital in each community that allowed them to mobilize was very different. Both neighborhoods in this study served low-income student populations (greatschools.org), but the communities that mobilized to save each school had different demographics. The Peoplestown community that successfully saved D.H. Stanton was mostly comprised of middle-class, educated, racially diverse people, according my informants. Stanton also had the help of faith-based organization Emmaus House and its Vicar, Reverend Jones. The Vine City community, which was unsuccessful in saving Kennedy Middle School, relied on support from a few community organizers, school administrators and teachers and mostly lower-income parents. While both communities had forms of capital, not all capital

may be acknowledged, appreciated or deemed valuable (Yosso 2005). Both communities mobilized but with different results which I will revisit further in subsequent chapters.

Sherry Ortner (1998:4) writes: when you ask people about race or ethnicity, they automatically know how to respond; when issues of class come about, often clarification is needed. Identities surrounding race and ethnicity are self-explanatory, but issues surrounding class are not so simple (Ibid.). Gorski (2007) suggests that the issue of class within education is extremely significant. Low-income students are often blamed for not wanting to learn and for being unmotivated, when in reality they may be dealing with issues many of us take for granted such as having a roof over their heads and getting enough to eat (Gorski 2007:31-32). Gorski (32) argues that students in poverty are not lacking values or a desire to perform well in school; the bigger issue may be: what are the values of a nation that continually allows systemic inequality? One school in my study, D.H. Stanton elementary, has a student demographic in which 97% are considered economically disadvantaged and 100% (98% Black, 2% Hispanic) of the study body is a minority (greatschools.org). The schools slated to close were identified in part, due to responses of the 2010 census (Paul 2012).

The goal of my research was to understand how these community members read the process of redistricting. Much of the APS redistricting debate was covered in the Atlanta media, but I wanted to get the perspective of the families and communities in their own words. What is their understanding of why these particular schools were selected to close, what was their process in trying to save their community schools, for those who were actively involved, and why do they believe some efforts were successful and others were not? Also, I wanted to learn: what is the path forward for all those affected by the APS redistricting? For parents whose children must now pick up and move to another school, how will the family deal with this? Is there a strong

sense of community in the neighborhoods where these schools will close? Ultimately, I was able to gain an understanding of how the redistricting debate has affected those on the ground, including local community activism, which played a part in successfully saving particular schools. This study helps illuminate, from community members' own perspectives, why some communities were successful in stopping their schools from being closed while others were not.

1.1.1 Perspectives on Race and Education

Understanding the nature of race and inequality in America is a difficult process. Checker (2005:185) suggests that since racial discrimination has been outlawed, identifying “everyday and structural instances of racism” becomes all the more difficult. Often the word “urban” is synonymous with poor, undesirable and Black. If schools are the heart of communities, then oftentimes they are the scapegoat for the ills and failures of that particular community. Low-income, segregated housing within neighborhoods also lead to poorer schools (15). By ridding neighborhoods of “bad” or low performing schools, legislators may hope to eliminate “bad elements” and threats to “American values.” Cook (2010:8) suggests that school reform often is framed as a means of wiping the slate clean and making right what has gone wrong in urban communities. Cook (8) writes: “reform is often used as a neutral term, but has significant political, social, and racial meanings.” Schools not only educate children, but they socialize them, as well (Ibid.). By attending school, children learn to share, navigate social situations and different personalities and also learn how to follow rules, paralleling an adult working environment (Ibid.). Therefore, schools not only shape minds, they also shape personalities and social interactions.

While minority groups have been marginalized in America, Blacks in particular do place high value on education and have fought for equality within education for many years; the strug-

gle for equal access to a quality education is part of the African-American identity (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998:550). This study seeks to counteract popular discourses concerning the lack of interest of lower income communities and racial minorities in education (Checker 2005; Gorski 2008) by illuminating how and why parents and other community members objected to the closing of neighborhood schools, including how these reactions reflect their educational values and experience of their own communities. In addition, the study asks how the redistricting controversy itself may help inform participants' understandings of the race and class politics of the city of Atlanta.

Nigerian anthropologist John Ogbu wrote extensively on minority education in America; he was a highly respected professor at the University of California at Berkeley for over thirty years until his death in 2003 (University of California, Berkeley). However, Ogbu did not seek to illuminate inequality within minority schools, instead he promoted a model of oppositional culture or the resistance model, which posits that there are racial differences in school performance specifically with respect to immigrant minorities, those who have voluntarily come to the United States and involuntary minorities, groups of people who are associated with a history of slavery or colonialism (Ogbu 1978, 1991 in Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998:536). Immigrant minorities such as Asians view coming to the United States as an opportunity for advancement and the possible achievement of the American dream while involuntary minorities such as African-Americans, who have been oppressed and marginalized through racism and unequal access, are disillusioned with educational advancement and limited employment opportunities, and therefore do not perform well in school (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998:536-537). Ogbu also writes that African-Americans view academic success as “acting white” which then causes them to fear ridicule from peers (Ogbu 1986, 1991 in Fisher 2005:201). These forms of school resistance are

in opposition to the dominant group or Caucasians (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998:536). Ogbu has had many critics of his model within the academic community and through my own research I have identified African-American students who are academic high achievers, regardless of socioeconomic status or the views of their peers. Ogbu makes some valid points in his views of the marginality of Blacks in America, but simply stating that this marginality shapes hopelessness within the realm of education for an entire community of people is short-sighted and seeks to reaffirm the “culture of poverty” thesis.

Ogbu uses oppositional culture theory to explain educational failure among all African-Americans, regardless of class (Lundy 2003:453-454). He attributes this to an “anthropological concept of fictive kinship,” assuming that all members of a particular group will act the same (Ogbu and Fordham 1986 in Lundy 2003:454). His notion of a collective identity sees strong beliefs and connections within the African-American community as “detrimental” and in order to succeed one must separate from the community (455). I argue that in times of distress, displacement and marginalization, communities can come together using common identity and common goals in order to achieve favorable outcomes; this was the basis of the American Civil Rights Movement (Bayor 1996). Lundy (455) suggests that oppositional culture theory is the antithesis of Afrocentricity and Black Nationalism, principles that have been seen as making the Black race stronger, hopeful and successful. Lundy (455) argues that in this way, Ogbu, a Black anthropologist himself, has made Blacks “the Other” and is forcing them to be measured against a White standard. Ogbu’s largely negative view of African-Americans within the realm of academic success puts Ogbu and his associates in line with conservatives whose goal is to prove that the African-American community is responsible for their own condition and the root of their problem lies in “deviant values” which can only be rectified by “acquiring the habits and values of White

America” (464). I was forced to ask myself what agenda, if any, Ogbu was pursuing within his research.

Foley (2004:389) agrees that Ogbu’s portrayal of African-Americans in his study is rife with negativity. Foley (389) compares Ogbu’s study to that of Paul Willis’ *Learning to Labor*. Willis studied working-class youth culture in Britain concluding that “the lads,” a group of young boys who rejected academic achievement and mocked their peers, who put value in education, were destined to be trapped in working-class jobs (Willis 1981 in Foley 2004:388). Feeling put down because of their working-class status, they showed resistance at school by refusing to comply with rules and by often being disruptive in class and at school in general (388). “The lads” viewed success and school work as “unmanly” and “effeminate” (Willis 1981 in Foley 2004:388). Foley (389) argues that both Willis and Ogbu use resistance as a way to explain “academic disengagement as a reaction or adaptation to an oppressive” sociocultural system. However, “the lads” in Willis’ book come off as “heroic working-class rebels,” who are able to “preserve the honor of their class” and proudly accept working-class jobs (389). In contrast, Ogbu’s characterization of African-American youths as low achieving, often engaged in shady undertakings and content with dead-end jobs, presents them as losers in need of reform and a lifestyle change (389). Ogbu harshly admonishes the youth and their parents for their failure to achieve upward mobility and suggests a return to the “culture of poverty” theory (389). When I first read about Ogbu’s oppositional culture theory I was shocked and disappointed. I very rarely read works by Black anthropologists, so I was excited to explore Ogbu’s work more closely. Sadly, Ogbu’s conclusions only feed into false stereotypes and racist notions about minorities and their relationship to education within the United States. Equally as important, Ogbu’s work speaks to the place of race and inequality in our country. My research will show that African-Americans

regardless of race or class, do care about education and their communities. My position is that both communities in my study tried to mobilize to save their neighborhood schools with different results.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) was initially developed from work by legal scholars Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman and Richard Delgado; CRT focuses “directly on the effects of race and racism, while simultaneously addressing the hegemonic system of White supremacy on the “meritocratic” system” (DeCuir and Dixson 2004:26-27). CRT has been used mainly for legal research purposes, but scholars such as Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate have used the theory to illuminate inequity in education (Ibid.). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1994:55) suggest that while the landmark *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* case sought to integrate the nation’s public schools, today’s minorities are even more segregated than ever. Civil Rights laws that were meant to protect and prevent segregation and racism within education have failed in their view (Ibid.). Ladson-Billings and Tate (Ibid.) also argue that while low-income African-Americans often perform inadequately in school, the cause of their poverty as well as the conditions of their schools and structural racism all contribute to their poor performance. Racism here is defined as “culturally sanctioned beliefs, which, regardless of intentions involved, defend the advantages whites have because of the subordinated position of racial minorities” (Wellman in Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995:55).

Two tenets of CRT are counter-storytelling and the permanence of racism (DeCuir and Dixson 2004:27). Counter-storytelling seeks to refute racial stereotypes often perpetuated by the dominant race or majority by giving voice to those that have been marginalized (Ibid.). DeCuir and Dixson (Ibid.) did research with minority students at a majority White school and suggest that letting the students tell their stories in their own words helped to celebrate the diversity that

they felt was not celebrated in their school and helped to counteract the “Othering” process they often experienced. Counter-storytelling was extremely important in my own research, especially when it came to hearing the stories of lower-income families who often do not have a voice and frequently are ignored when they express a desire to be involved with their children’s education and school educational practices. The permanence of racism refers to Bell (in DeCuir and Dixson 2004:27) and other scholars’ argument that “racism is a permanent component of American life” whether conscious or unconscious. This permanence suggests that “racial hierarchical structures govern all political, economic and social domains” including educational institutions (Ibid).

DeCuir and Dixson (2004:28) posit that using CRT to understand structural racism within educational institutions could help illuminate the culture of our schools and why racism persists, the curricula implored in predominantly minority schools and even the disciplinary practices within schools as it relates to Black students who often receive the harshest treatment. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995:58) suggest that more research is needed within communities of color that includes the voices of minority students, teachers, administrators and community members, otherwise we cannot really know anything about the state of minority education. In this study I try to give voice to minority educators, parents and community members who were concerned about the education of their own children and of children in their neighborhood schools.

1.1.2 School Choice: Access and Power

It has been said that “education is knowledge and knowledge is power” (Swain 2005:1). In this way, education can be one of the most important sources of human capital (Ibid.). Education socializes us, opens up new worlds, cultures, experiences and possibilities (Ibid.). Swain (1) suggests that “education is lasting and helps people lead responsible civic lives.” While many anthropologists have studied issues of education, race and class in other countries, very few have

done ethnographic research in school systems within the United States and there has been little work done in Atlanta in particular. Some anthropologists have argued that public schools are being used for private means, that some cities and local governments are favoring business needs over the needs of their students and citizens (Bartlett et al. 2002:6). Parents and students are becoming “consumers” of education and schooling (6). However, not all parents have the same choice in selecting schools for their children; issues of various forms of capital as well as those of race and class stratification come into play here (Bourdieu 1989; Bartlett et al. 2002).

In the United States, debates surrounding education have largely been about the quality of and access to education after segregation and throughout the 20th and now 21st centuries. Baum-Snow and Lutz (2001) studied the unintended consequences of public school desegregation, centered on school choice and residential living patterns in urban school districts. Baum-Snow and Lutz (2001:3019) write that while integration of public schools saw a rise in enrollment for Black students, it marked a decline for White students as many would move to private schools in response to desegregation. The issue of school choice has become big business in Atlanta and across the country as charter schools, which are operated by non-profit and sometimes for-profit educational foundations, but are funded with public school money, are becoming increasingly popular (Lipman 2005:322; Lipman 2011:221). A recent study done by the *Atlanta-Journal Constitution* (AJC) found that fewer low-income children attend charter schools (Downey 2012). The assumption is that demographics influence academic outcomes so poorer neighborhoods with low-income schools may not have as much academic success as more well-off schools (Ibid.). Charter schools have become a proposed way to change this, allowing for more innovation and autonomy in school curriculum and practices; however the AJC study concluded that many low-income families have yet to take advantage of charter schools. One issue may be transportation,

as school buses are often not provided by charter schools (Downey 2012; Preston et al. 2012). An argument has been made that academic performance and innovation in charter schools versus public schools is not significant (Ibid.). Teachers at charter schools are often not guaranteed tenure (Ibid.). The most positive outcome of charter schools is parental involvement which is much higher than in public schools (Ibid.). On November 6, 2012, the state of Georgia approved Amendment 1 which will allow the building of more charter schools throughout the state; public school officials vigorously opposed the amendment (Bailey-Colvin 2012). Some opponents of the charter school referendum worried that it would “open the door to a new generation of segregation negatively impacting rural and predominantly black districts outside of Atlanta” (Ibid.).

Studies of similar situations elsewhere in the United States have been instructive. Lipman (2005:322), who researched school restructuring and neighborhood gentrification in Chicago, writes that in 2004, then Mayor Richard Daley proposed to close between 60-70 schools and would then build 100 new schools, two-thirds of which would be charter schools, under a program called Renaissance 2010. Lipman (322) calls this a “marketization of public schools,” instituted by Chicago’s corporate, financial and political elite. The restructuring of Chicago’s inner city schools was a move in part towards the city becoming a “global city,” one that could be a part of the global economy and the world stage (322). Like Bayor (1996), Lipman (322) also saw a dynamic connection between school policy and gentrification.

At the heart of the Renaissance 2010 restructuring was Bronzeville, a neighborhood on Chicago’s South Side that was extremely important to the Black community (322). In 2000, Bronzeville underwent massive changes including the removal of 18,000 units of public housing in favor of mixed-income housing (322). The majority of the Bronzeville residents were displaced and moved to low-income housing and other “racially isolated urban and suburban areas;”

few have been relocated to mixed-income, racially diverse areas (322-323). Initially, the highest concentration of proposed school closings by the Chicago Public Schools was in Bronzeville until community leaders and residents used public hearings, protests and picket lines to force a change (323). An argument was made that the school closings were simply a way to push out low-income families in an effort to attract middle-class families to the gentrified area (323). Bronzeville residents called Renaissance 2010 a “war on the community” and stated that “when you destroy a community’s school, you destroy a community” (323). As a result, the plans for Renaissance 2010 changed many times as a cross section of people with interests ranging from anti-privatization and anti-neoliberal policies to teacher unions to minority based community groups came together to fight against the plan (324). Many African-Americans and Latinos have started a group that includes teachers and parents who were driven by the blatant disregard for the voice of the community and a movement to push out people of color under the veil of gentrification (324-325). Lipman (325) argues that Renaissance 2010 comes from a place of financial and political power and is not just about schools. The plan will decide who lives and works in the city, what kind of jobs are available, who has a voice and ultimately who is important (325). She (325) suggests that the restructuring is an example of “glocalization -- the dialectics of the global situation unfolding in local contexts.”

1.1.3 The History of Segregation in Atlanta and APS

Today many parents in Atlanta have access to the capital: economic, social or cultural to promote their children’s educational needs. Bourdieu (2002:282) suggests that cultural capital is often overlooked or disregarded as it cannot be measured like monetary wealth; however, cultural capital is reproduced, passed down through generations and may explain why some social classes are more successful in educational outcomes than others. Nonetheless, many parents have

a choice in schooling options for their children which may help ensure a better quality of life for them. This was not always in the case in Atlanta, as once schools were massively overcrowded during the segregation era with both White and Black schools being underfunded and overcrowded (Bayer 1996:198). In 1903, over 14,000 White children attended 20 schools while 8,000 Black children had just five; due to this fact, over 50% of Black children did not attend school at all (198). For Blacks who could afford tuition, private schooling was an option which was offered by the city's private Historically Black Colleges and Universities (199). In the first half of the 20th century, Blacks in Atlanta suffered politically, as well, since they had no representation on the city's Board of Education until 1953 (219). At that time, in anticipation of the passing of Brown vs. the Board of Education in 1954, new schools called "Supreme Court schools" were built in Atlanta for both White and Black children in the hopes of bringing Black schools up to standard with White schools, once they merge into one system (219). Brown vs. the Board was a landmark decision but did not ensure the desegregation of public schools in Atlanta (221).

By 1964-65, segregation of public schools was slow and many White families were leaving the city in favor of the suburbs (232). Black parents sought to move their children to underused White schools such as Kirkwood Elementary on Atlanta's east side (232). The APS board refused to allow the moves even though attendance at Black schools such as Whiteford and Wesley were over by 675 and Kirkwood was under by 750 (232). The school board cited a fear that desegregation was moving too fast and were concerned with further "white flight," as schooling and housing public policies ensured movement of Blacks into certain areas of the city (233). Bayer (235) argues that housing and school policies were undoubtedly linked. Parents picketed Kirkwood Elementary and the courts eventually mandated that Black children must be

allowed to attend the school; APS Board Superintendent Letson sent letters to White parents and teachers telling them of plans to integrate the school and by the 1965-66 school year, Kirkwood Elementary was all Black and overcrowded (233-234). The stalling of integration within the school system had begun and a new resegregation process was under way (234). Bayor (251) suggests that by the 1970s and 1980s, the issue of race within APS was no longer the main issue as the school system was primarily Black. The issue now was of class as middle-class and low-income Blacks had different goals for APS (251). As middle-class Blacks moved into the suburbs, APS now had issues of both racial and class segregation (251). If Whites in the 1960s feared that integration would cause school performance to decline, so too did middle-class Blacks fear that low-income families would change the direction and demographics of APS (236, 251). Many middle-class Blacks began sending their children to private schools leaving an underfunded school system with a history of race and now class issues in its wake (251).

1.1.4 Background on the APS Redistricting Debate

The Atlanta Public Schools have faced multiple challenges in the past few years. The widely publicized cheating scandal surrounding the annual Criterion Referenced Competency Test (CRCT) results which implicated teachers, principals and administrators, was just the beginning (Martel 2011). Some outside educators who have commented on the scandal and subsequent investigation blame the high and sometimes unattainable standards set forth by the “No Child Left Behind” act, put into place under President George W. Bush (Ibid.). “No Child Left Behind” puts an emphasis on students meeting particular targets on end of school year standardized tests, places blame on teachers when students fails to meet targets and ultimately can effect tenure for teachers and funding for schools and districts (Ibid.).

In the summer of 2011, APS hired an interim Superintendent, Dr. Erroll Davis. Given the timing of his hiring, it would appear that the hope was that Dr. Davis could make necessary changes within the school system that would help APS move past the CRCT cheating scandal and restore the name of APS in the process. One of those changes was a proposal to initially close ten public schools in the Atlanta metropolitan area (APS Superintendent's Final Redistricting and Closure Recommendations-Posted March 31, 2012). The case was made that the APS district serves 47,000 students, but has seats for 60,000. With APS being strapped for cash, among its many problems, school closings were the proposed solution. All of the schools identified for closing were on the south side of town and were in low-income areas raising issues of race and class, as well. Families and communities in Atlanta voiced strong concerns over the possible closing of their neighborhood schools.

Below is some demographic information on the two neighborhoods where the schools I studied are located. While Peoplestown and Vine City neighborhoods are similar racially, there are also some differences; those variations made a difference in how the particular communities were able to bring cultural and social capital into play. While the poverty level in Peoplestown is higher than in Vine City, Peoplestown residents have a higher income and have a higher percentage of home owners. The Vine City community also has a slightly older resident population.

Neighborhood Planning Unit V (Peoplestown) Demographics:

(Sources: NPU V 2010 Census Data; city-data.com)

Median household income in 2010:

Peoplestown: \$35,177

Atlanta: \$44,771

Percentage of population below poverty level:

Peoplestown: 36.2%

Atlanta: 23.8%

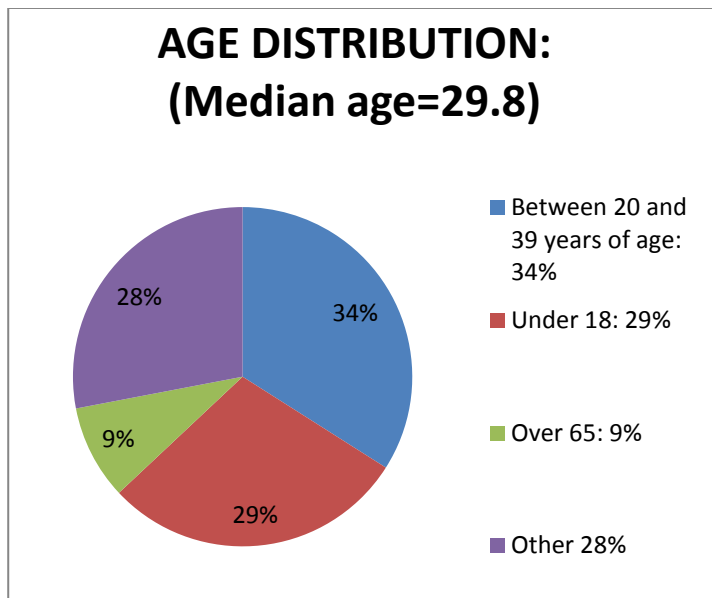


Figure 1.1 Age Distribution NPU V

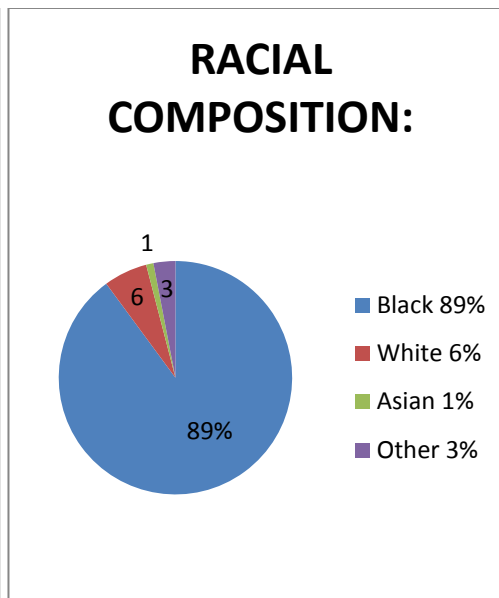


Figure 1.2 Racial Composition NPU V

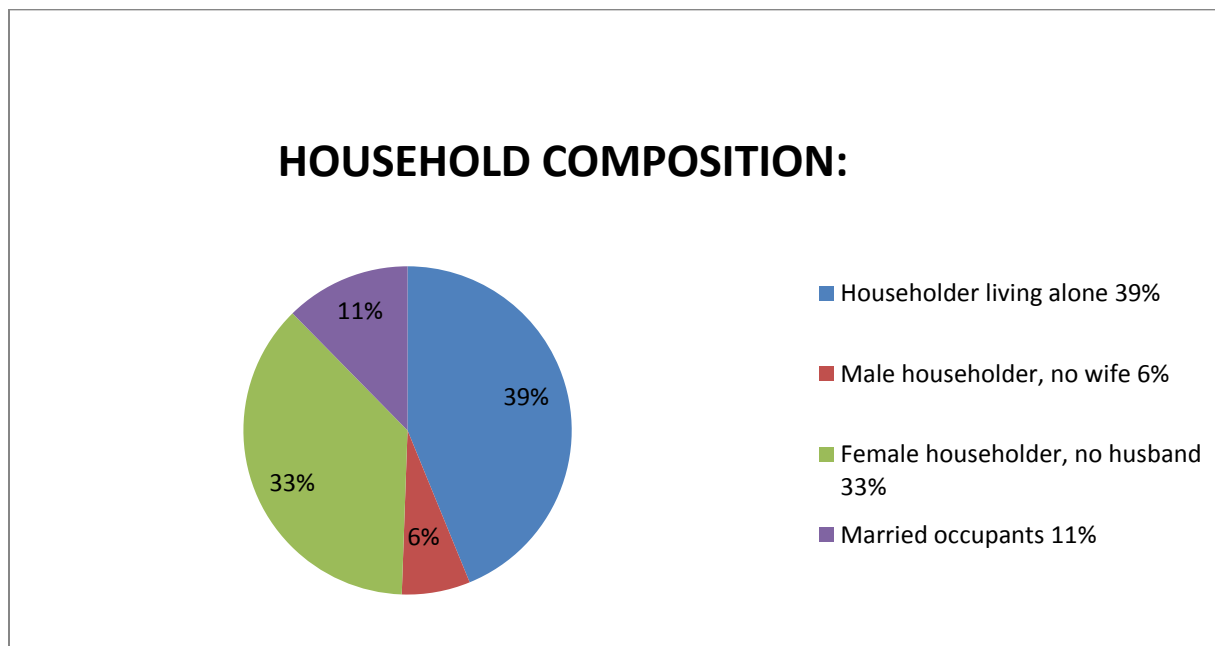


Figure 1.3 Household Composition NPU V

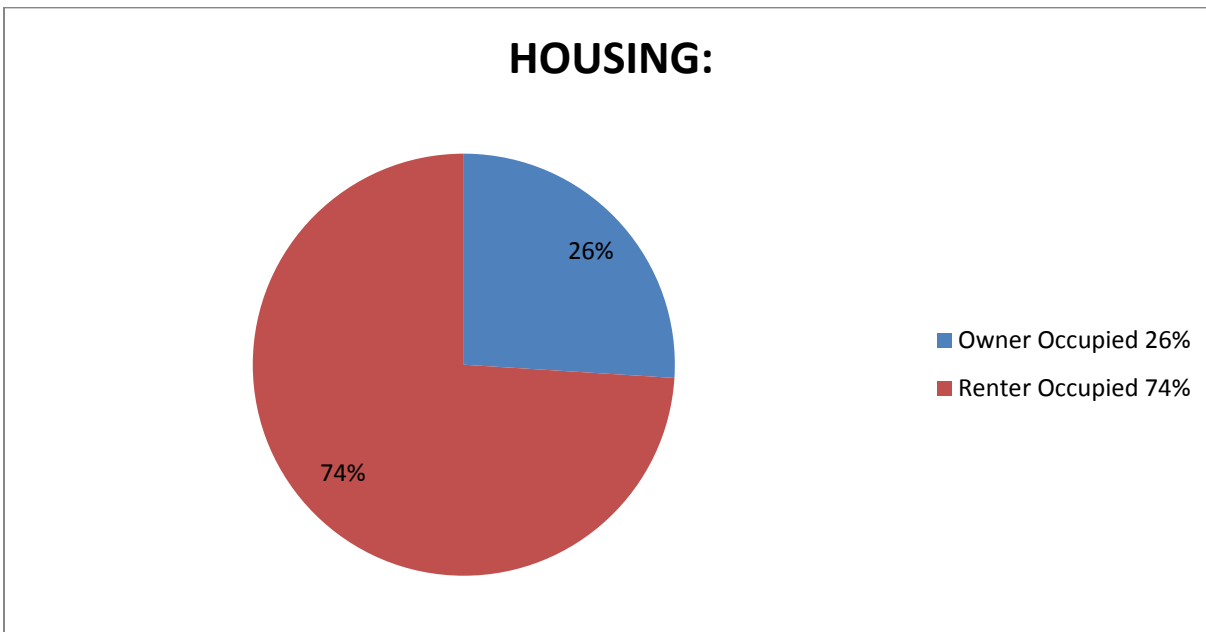


Figure 1.4 Housing (Renters versus Owners) NPU V

Neighborhood Planning Unit L (Vine City and English Avenue) Demographics:

(Sources: NPU L 2010 Census Data; city-data.com)

Median household income in 2010:

Vine City: \$23,926

Atlanta: \$44,771

Percentage of population below poverty level:

Vine City: 30.0%

Atlanta: 23.8%

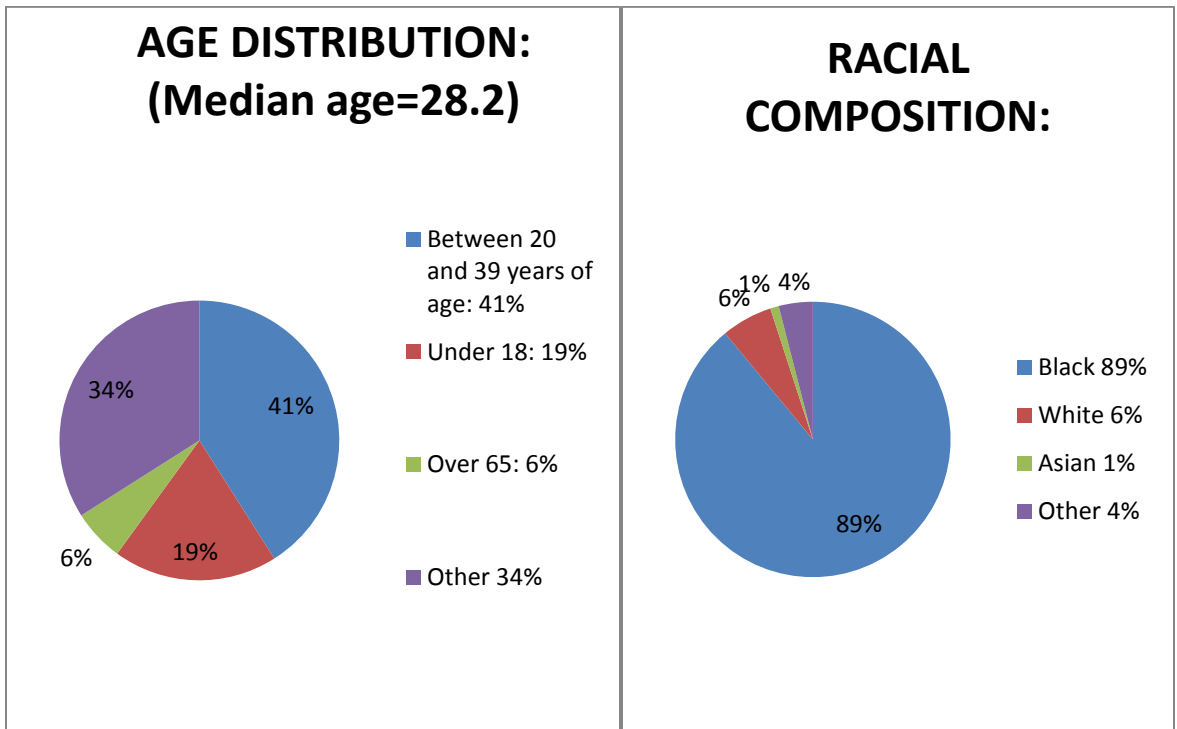


Figure 1.5 Age Distribution NPU L

Figure 1.6 Racial Composition NPU L

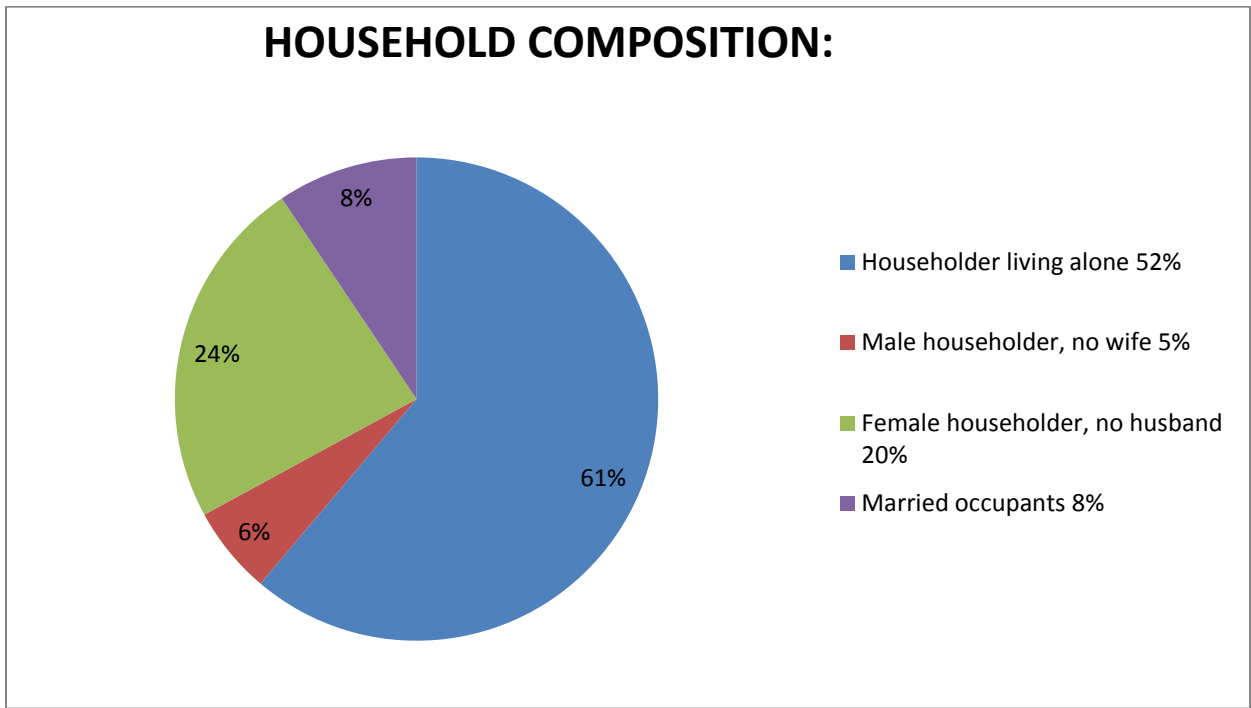


Figure 1.7 Household Composition NPU L

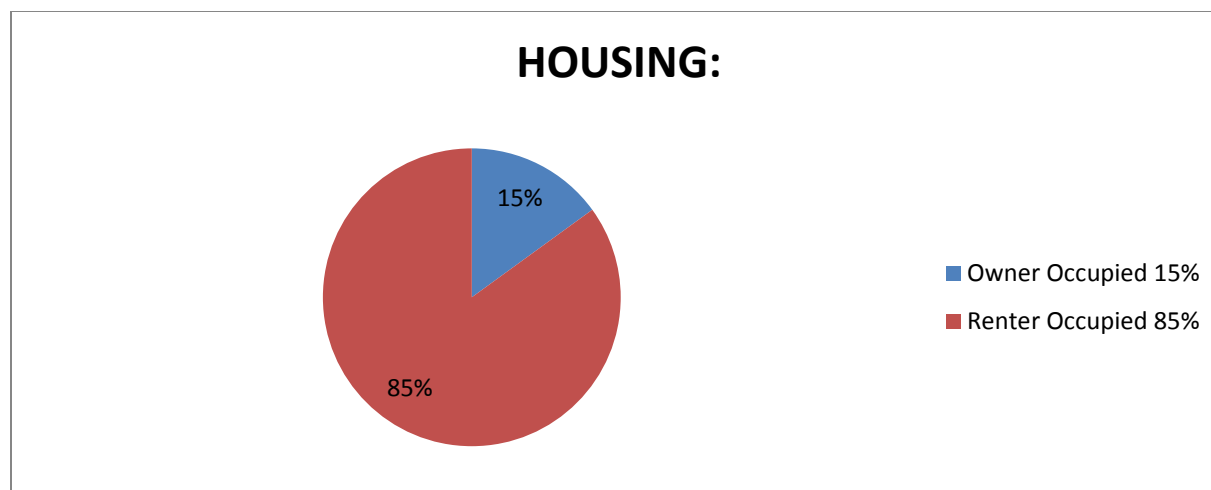


Figure 1.8 Housing (Renters versus Owners) NPU L

Along with closing ten schools, the Superintendent's redistricting plan sought to make the school district more "efficient and effective" by creating ten clusters which include an elementary, middle and high school (APS Superintendent's Final Redistricting and Closure Recommendations-Posted March 31, 2012). Students would be expected to stay within these same school clusters from kindergarten through twelfth grade. What is missing from this plan is the recognition that unlike many upper and middle-class families, low income families often experience displacement of one kind or another and often do not stay within their same communities for the duration of the children's schooling years (Cook 2010). The trend of displacement among Atlanta's low-income and poor population has continued with the closing of most inner city public housing complexes. City officials as well as those at the office of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) praised Atlanta for demolishing hundreds of public housing units in favor of mixed-income complexes that also cater to section 8 or low-income housing-eligible residents (Glanton 2009). However, I suggest that displacing families and sometimes entire communities due to renovation and gentrification can also cause the exact issues raised in the APS Superin-

tendent's redistricting plan-too many seats and not enough students. A main reason why there are empty APS seats on the south side of town is because many families have moved out of the area, some by their own choice and some not; some parents have also chosen to leave the school district in search of other educational opportunities for their children (APS Superintendent's Final Redistricting and Closure Recommendations-Posted March 31, 2012). I argue that what is also missing from the APS redistricting plan is the perspective of an anthropologist. Atlanta media reported that outraged parents voiced their complaints about the redistricting plan citing the fact that respective communities were not consulted and raising issues of race and class; Dr. Davis vehemently rejected the notion that the redistricting plan was about race or class (Thomas 2012).

Virtually every media outlet in the city has reported on the school redistricting plan (Darnell 2012; Downey 2012; Dukes 2012; Leslie 2012; Paul 2012; Sarrio 2012; Scott 2012; Suggs and Poole 2012; Thomas 2012; Whisenhunt 2012). What became clear was that schools on the north side of town as well as predominantly White schools were either not affected by redistricting or they were able to negotiate a favorable outcome for their schools and communities. Headlines such as "Buckhead parents score victory on Atlanta School redistricting" were very different than news reports surrounding schools slated to close on the south side of town (Whisenhunt 2012). Instead, the headlines associated with low-income, minority schools in south Atlanta used words such as "blindsided" and "Hundreds assail school plan" (Dukes 2012; Thomas 2012). Whisenhunt clearly stated in an early March 2012 article that parents from various areas of Atlanta were being treated differently. One parent said that the redistricting plan reminded her of the early days of segregation and stated that she was "heartbroken" her child's school, was one of the schools slated to close (Whisenhunt 2012). Dr. Davis denied accusations of bias and stated that the plan was meant to put south side schools on "equal footing with their northern neigh-

bors” (Ibid.). Apparently, schools such as North Atlanta high school in Buckhead were overcrowded while those on the south side had empty chairs. The solution: North Atlanta would get a completely new school (Bluestein 2012). The site is on the former IBM campus making North Atlanta more like a university than a high school (Ibid.). Schools with empty seats in the south east and south west parts of Atlanta would be closed. Whisenhunt (2012) noted that parents from North Atlanta voiced their concerns about the Superintendent Davis’ redistricting plan from day one and were relentless in their support of the school. By comparison, parents from some south side schools had problems mobilizing support from their communities stating “they struggled to get turnout” (Ibid.). Parents also said that they were not properly notified about meetings and considered themselves to be “disenfranchised” and without a voice in this debate (Ibid.). Davis claims that he contacted all parents affected by the redistricting plan using “multiple channels” (Ibid.). Of note is the fact that the Peoplestown community which supports D.H. Stanton elementary drafted a written response after the March 31st announcement that Stanton was on the final closure list (Paul 2012). Peoplestown, along with partners including the Atlanta Braves and Emmaus House, listed a plan for the future of Stanton Elementary (Ibid.). This community seems to have had an active presence within the redistricting debate. In the next chapter I will discuss these activities from the perspective of some of the people most involved.

In early April of 2012, I attended an open forum held by members of the Atlanta Business League (ABL) to address the redistricting. The main issue: the schools slated for closing were disproportionately in low income and minority areas (ABL meeting April 3, 2012). The ABL invited school board members, local officials, members of the religious community, as well as concerned citizens. The consensus of those on the dais was that schools make communities better and stronger; if much needed schools in parts of southern Atlanta were closed, surely the

neighborhoods would be less likely to thrive and ultimately survive. Schools are the heart of economic development for neighborhoods. Real estate properties and homes are bought and sold sometimes in large part due to the reputations of the schools in the area. Families seeking to move to Atlanta would not choose a neighborhood or community with no elementary, middle or high schools. Ultimately, the losers in the redistricting plan would be Atlanta's Black youth whom ABL board chair and former 100 Black Men President Thomas Dortch argued (Ibid.) were being groomed for prison and possibly even an early death. My question was, who has a solution for all these issues? Clearly there were no easy answers.

At the ABL forum, I was able to get some rich background on APS, race relations and the history of segregation within the city. Dr. Norman Johnson, a community advocate and former APS board member stated (Ibid.) that 40 years ago, there were 26 high schools and 100+ elementary schools in Atlanta. There were so many schools due to segregation in the south east and south west parts of town-schools were either all Black or all White; the north side of town was always White. Thomas Dortch said (Ibid.) that African-Americans make up the highest percentage of students in the school district. Blacks also account for the highest numbers of suspensions and expulsions. Dortch also suggested that closing schools could prove lucrative for the city of Atlanta. Land that housed old school buildings could be used to build new facilities and attractions for Atlanta. At that time, the city was working on the Atlanta Beltway project which would improve transportation options within the city. There was also talk of a new multi-million dollar, open-air stadium for the Atlanta Falcons, which may be built in the coming years. How will the city pay for it? Atlanta Mayor Kasim Reed had just returned from China and continues to drum up business for the Atlanta area, selling the city as global hub. Politics was also informing the decisions made in Atlanta, but were Atlanta Public Schools paying the price for this? My re-

search will add the human factor to the story of APS redistricting by examining the perspectives of a range of people on the ground and intimately involved in the debate. In a context of highly publicized efforts at downtown development, many Atlanta residents believe that such development is taking place at the expense of their own community schools. By speaking with APS parents and school administrators, community members, clergy and education advocates I can paint a different picture than those in the media. The media did highlight the efforts of some communities to save their neighborhood schools and also discussed issues of race and class in the city. However, only extremely vocal parents, school leaders and community members were quoted in media sources. The schools with less visibility or those communities that were unable to save their neighborhood schools were not covered in the media. To be fair, Atlanta media sources may have been unaware of the fact that many communities were active in the effort to save their schools. Neighborhoods such as Peoplestown used all the resources they could, including approaching the media on their own and reprinting letters sent to the APS board and Superintendent in local newspapers and online blogs. I will give voice to a school community whose story was not told in the media.

On April 10th, 2012, the APS board held a final public meeting where parents and other people in the community could voice concerns over the redistricting proposal. Over 500 people attended and what began as an hour for questions, comments and suggestions, became four long hours of heated comments and debates (Sarrío 2012). Many parents told school board members that their re-election bids were in jeopardy suggesting the choices board members made on this day could affect them down the line. Parents screamed that closing schools would cause property values to decline (Sarrío 2012). Alexis Means, a middle school student argued that the APS board was far more concerned with simply closing schools rather than being concerned with how

to reform schools (Sarrío 2012). Subsequently, three schools were saved from closure and the board voted unanimously to close only seven Atlanta public schools (Sarrío 2012). Members of the Atlanta media praised parents and community activists associated with D.H. Stanton, F.L. Stanton and Towns Elementary schools, three schools ultimately saved from closing, for their efforts (Suggs and Poole 2012). On that night, parents found their voice, refuting the “culture of poverty” theory that has so often been wrongfully assigned to low-income families and communities. Bigger issues here of community and capital must also be addressed in order to better understand the roles of these communities in the redistricting debates, which I will address in the next chapters.

1.1.5 Methods

I was initially drawn to this research topic as the daughter of educators. Most of my previous research projects involved education in Atlanta, first from the perspective of APS teachers working in urban school environments and then with middle-class Black families where I sought to understand the role education had played in their lives. I grew up in New Orleans, a Black female, a double minority and yet as the daughter of educated parents, I had more than my share of privilege in the form of access to quality education, a clean, safe, home, more than enough food to eat and protection from the outside world that may have wished to harm me because of my ethnicity and gender. By all accounts, I have lived a charmed life. My brother and I were born in Durham, North Carolina where my father was a professor of Political Science at Duke University. Soon after I was born, my father was offered the Presidency of a small Historically Black College, Dillard University in New Orleans. My parents enrolled us in one of the best private schools in the city, where I was one of three Black children in the kindergarten classes.

I do not remember being faced with much racism until I was in middle school and one of my best friends had a party at the then still segregated New Orleans country club. Needless to say, I was not invited. My friend's father called my own father apologizing for the fact that I could not attend his daughter's birthday party; it seems his parents were members of the country club and insisted on having a party for her. Ironically, my friend was multi-ethnic, being the daughter of a Caucasian father and a Japanese mother. My father, a former classmate of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. at Morehouse College, told him that he understood the situation, but denounced the family's actions saying that they were supporting racism and intolerance.

I finished High School and went on to Spelman College, another Historically Black College that is also all female. I had a good experience there but soon realized that discrimination can be felt within my own ethnic group. This time, it was about class, not ethnicity. There were a few other girls at Spelman whose fathers were also Black college presidents. Many sought to tell anyone who would listen about their fathers. I, on the other hand, chose to keep my father's profession to myself. If I was to be liked or for that matter disliked, I wanted it to be based on me and who I was, not who my father was.

I am extremely grateful that I was born into the Cook family. My parents have given me a foundation that has shaped who I am today. My mother and father fought for equality between Blacks and Whites in the 1960s; they are spiritual, political and have an extreme social and moral consciousness. They believe strongly in human rights and the dignity of all people no matter their race, ethnicity, nationality, religion or sexual orientation. I take this as a charge to use the privileges I have been given to help those who have not been so lucky. It was no surprise to them that I chose to study anthropology or that I was interested in researching inequality in education, race and class disparities and social movements.

For my thesis, I have decided to focus on the communities associated with D.H. Stanton Elementary School – a school that was saved from closing and Kennedy Middle School – a school that is slated to close at the end of the 2013-2014 school year. D.H. Stanton Elementary School, located just a few blocks from Atlanta’s Turner Field baseball stadium in the Peoplestown neighborhood, caters to a 98% African-American student demographic (Suggs and Poole 2012) and in this way is like most of the Atlanta Public Schools slated for closing within the re-districting plan. Kennedy Middle School is located within the historic Vine City community, not far from the home where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and his wife Coretta raised their family. I used Atlanta media sources such as *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 11 Alive News, Fox 5 Atlanta, as well as local neighborhood blogs and websites for background information on the re-districting plan and to initially identify parents and community members who had been vocal in the debate. Those associated with D.H. Stanton were easier to identify as many members of the Peoplestown neighborhood were quoted in many local media sources. I made a chart with email addresses, phone numbers and group and/or community affiliations to help me decide who would be most helpful to me in research. I found ten possible informants connected to Stanton and only one from Kennedy. The Kennedy school community did not seem to have an online or media presence at all. I began emailing informational flyers about my thesis research to anyone I could find. The response was slow and minimal. These were the first of many challenges I would face.

After two interviews with community members associated with D.H. Stanton, my extremely kind interviewees sent email correspondences on their own to other possible interested parties and I was put in contact with more people, but had problems getting people to respond to me after emailing or calling them. I soon realized that meeting people face to face was a more effective way to find possible informants. At town hall and PTA meetings I was able to meet

parents, community members and school administrators associated with both Stanton and Kennedy. All the parents I spoke to were single parents and lived very near the schools their children attended. Parents told me of the need for decent and safe housing and that living in their respective neighborhoods of either Vine City or Peoplestown was centered on affordable housing options. The community members associated with each neighborhood were mostly middle-class, college educated people. Many were former teachers or had worked with educational foundations or non-profits. Some of the Stanton community members were part of the school's PTA and did not have children enrolled at the school. Kennedy community members were mostly community activists that had worked on behalf of many different schools and sought to address various issues associated with APS district. Not all of the people associated with Kennedy lived in the Vine City neighborhood but instead had worked in the area. I gave my informants the option to be named in my study or to remain anonymous. Most people who had already been named in local media sources were eager to have their name used. I protected the identity of others who preferred this, recognizing that some people – perhaps especially those associated with the school district in some form – may have been concerned about expressing their opinions without protection of their identities.

I set up and conducted semi-structured interviews in order to identify common themes within the two respective communities. I asked my informants why they believed their neighborhood schools were selected for closure and how they reacted to the threat of closure. Many from the Stanton community echoed what I had already read in posts from local media outlets: the community mobilized to save the school. What I did not know was that people in the broader Peoplestown community, not parents of Stanton students, were the ones actively involved in the fight to save the school; they were ultimately successful. On the other hand, people in Kennedy's

school community were also active in trying to save their neighborhood school but had much less of a media presence. As I discuss further in Chapter 2, they felt that they were prevented from mobilizing or “fighting” for the school because often information about closure meetings with the APS board and superintendent came too late for the school administrators, teachers and parents to organize. Both communities saw politics involved in their schools being identified for closure and many felt that because the schools were located in low-income areas that the APS board and Superintendent considered them “easy targets” who would not stand up make their voices heard. I was told by many informants that they were glad that I was doing this research project and that this was a story that needed to be told.

My hope is that this study will have a general benefit in contributing to our understanding of how school redistricting impacts those who are affected on the ground and the ongoing racial and class politics in the city of Atlanta. As Atlanta continues to become a more globalized city and local and state officials promote it as such, the Atlanta Public School system will play a major role in drawing new people to the city. As the city continues to change and grow, these issues will continue to be relevant. The stories I heard from parents, educators and community members in the Vine City and Peoplestown neighborhoods fascinated me and made me believe that small-scaled community organizing can make a difference in the lives of countless people, especially children. In the following chapters, I will further discuss the role of community mobilization in the efforts to save neighborhood schools and demonstrate how the forms of capital a community possesses can effect successful outcomes. Why did two low-income school populations see such different outcomes in their efforts to save their neighborhood schools?

2 TIME FOR SOME ACTION: A COMMUNITY MOBILIZES TO SAVE D.H. STANTON

2.1 Introduction

A central theme of the D.H. Stanton story is community. As Willie et al. (2008:4) suggest, community is a “social organization” working towards the common welfare, interests and equity of people within a common location. I would argue that in the case of D.H. Stanton, the community that physically surrounded the school and its members came to the aid of Stanton and were key in helping to save the school. By emphasizing the role of community, I mean that the people living in the Peoplestown neighborhood where Stanton is located stepped in and took control of the efforts to fight for this school; most of the people involved did not have a child that attended D.H. Stanton, and yet many in the Peoplestown neighborhood felt that the school was worth saving. In other words, the efforts of Peoplestown activists were not directed towards the welfare of their own families in most cases, but were understood as supporting the general well-being of the people in their neighborhood as a whole. The importance of community and social networks in education has been observed in other African-American settings. Cook (2010) studied relationships within educational African-American communities in post-Katrina New Orleans. She (Ibid.) focused primarily on “fictive-kinship networks,” fictive meaning non-birth related “family” or “kin,” who share a deep relationship or connection. Of those Black educators, Cook (Ibid.) writes:

The fictive-kinship networks as described by black educators in this study offer a perspective of urban education reform that speaks to the ways in which educators help build community, not only within schools but in the larger community. This can enhance our understanding of how reform can build on existing strengths in communities to improve educational outcomes for African American children in urban schools.

In this chapter I build on such a perspective by recounting how community members active in the effort to save D.H. Stanton called upon social networks and a diverse set of resources that led to the successful saving of their neighborhood school. Ultimately I will examine the role of community, its meaning and actions and how it was central to the saving of D.H. Stanton Elementary School in the Peoplestown neighborhood.

2.1.1 The Major Players in the Fight to Save D.H. Stanton

I was able to speak with a few people who were central in the fight to save D.H. Stanton, including community leader William Teasley, Emmaus House Vicar Reverend Claiborne Jones and Stanton PTA President Feroza Syed. When I met William Teasley, III on a cold December day, I knew that he had been a key figure in helping to save Stanton Elementary from closing under the APS superintendent's final redistricting and closure recommendation proposal. Teasley had been quoted in countless media sources and had posted passionate letters of support for the school online and on Facebook. He has been living in the Peoplestown community for almost 15 years and currently heads up the Higher Ground Education Initiative (HGEI). HGEI expands college access for metro Atlanta high school students. The HGEI's vision is that all students regardless of family background, ethnicity and/or socio-economic status can attend a college or university by changing the school culture and providing college readiness to all students. Teasley, a father of two, recalls taking his young daughter to Stanton when she was three or four to work in the school garden and to help with other improvement projects. He calls Stanton "our school" and still gets emotional when recounting the hard fought battle to keep Stanton's doors open.

Teasley's association with the school district began after the Criterion Referenced Competency Test (CRCT) cheating scandal within the school district while he was working with the Atlanta Education Fund (AEF). The now defunct AEF was a non-profit, public education fund

that dealt with high school transformation, post-secondary access and success and Gates Foundation grants. Teasley was initially part of a public blue ribbon commission (BRC) that was formed following the CRCT cheating allegations. The goal of the BRC was simply to collect information and to audit CRCT irregularities, but they had no legal authority to do much else. He describes working with the BRC as “my birth by fire” and “diving into the deep end of the pool,” stating that at times dealing with CRCT issues was overwhelming as he worked to truly find out what happened. To his surprise, the [Atlanta] community was fairly silent throughout the process; there were pockets of dissatisfaction, outrage and even anger, but as a whole, for the schools that were greatly impacted by the CRCT cheating allegations, there was not much community involvement or a strong enough effort to say a change was needed. As a result of the CRCT cheating scandal, Stanton lost many teachers who were either fired or implicated in the scandal. Teasley said of his own community after the cheating allegations were revealed:

Even if there was limited to no cheating going on, there was a need to change and I live in the Peoplestown community, so I live 3 ½ blocks away from Stanton, you know there was just this silence and there was talk in the activist community about the level of silence with the CRCT. I have my own theories about why that is. It wasn't apathy, we were complicit in the successes, so when we're running around cheering for ourselves [saying] look at how strong we're doing, it's a direct reflection on us when it's revealed that there were probably things we noticed that we chose not to fully vet and this continued to happen. The kids knew there were issues, but we kept moving forward. There are some common sense things that really need to kick in when you see it not working the way it should. There was no level of ownership at all regarding any of this because the community, we were there, there are parents in these schools, it wasn't like it happened in a vacuum. It's easy to sort of point at APS and say, they did it all, well, we were there, our board was there and we didn't push and poke and prod as hard as we should have to make sure that whatever those results were, were entirely accurate; it's the community, it's the city as a whole.

This goes to the heart of what Teasley stands for: community. While collecting data with the BRC on the CRCT cheating scandal, he holds APS-the school district, the board of education, parents and the community-at-large all responsible for what transpired. He argues that tracking students from elementary through high school is key and suggests:

If you watch a cohort of students from an elementary school by grade, by year, you can see trends in the data that said there's something not exactly right with them arriving in 5th and 6th grade and reading on a 3rd grade level but passing the 4th and 5th grade CRCT and even in some cases, some classes passing at such high levels and then they pop into middle school and it's like the child just lost everything that they just learned in 12 weeks. That evidence was there and we didn't poke and prod hard enough I think.

Teasley and the AEF kept working on projects surrounding college access and the like for about a year and then the non-profit decided to suspend operations indefinitely, primarily because many of AEF's funders were very supportive of APS and the CRCT audit process had become taxing on everybody involved. In July 2011, Dr. Erroll Davis was hired as the interim superintendent of APS. Teasley said of Davis:

He had these planes lined up and the landing gear wasn't down so he had to bring some planes in that weren't nice and one of them was the CRCT and then redistricting was lined up right behind it. So, you know he was a doctor in the E.R., so the patients kept coming in and he had to sort of, tag 'em, bag 'em, getting ready and move them to a place where they could work, ideally with his new support system within the district.

Teasley felt that Davis had a difficult job to do concerning redistricting. Most schools on the list of closures such as F.L. Stanton and Cook Elementary had been on the list for some time. Teasley had attended several meetings across the district as a part of AEF, which was still active at the time. He said he was able to see the dynamic and the challenges that were on the south and west sides of town, most notably, the declining population of residents in large part due to the elimination of blue collar and manufacturing jobs or anything that could employ workers that have only a high school diploma or less. Unless people were willing to do janitorial or retail jobs, they were simply out of luck. South and west side residents were also dealing with issues of displacement surrounding the closing of housing projects and when the recession hit, it stalled all of the "high hopes and dreams" of the beltline and other development corridors that he claims operated on the false pretense that "if you just build it, people will live there." So there were communities that had declining populations, but also families with very few economic opportunities to

gain quality employment that would provide a livable wage. As a result, according to Teasley, APS has one of the highest transient student rates in the state. At least a third of the kids in the district move at least once a year and may end up back in the system from time to time. Again, he suggests that a tracking system for students is imperative.

The Reverend Claiborne Jones is the director and vicar of the Emmaus House which is part of the Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta. The Emmaus House has had a partnership with the Peoplestown community for nearly 50 years. The role of Emmaus House in the neighborhood has changed over the years with it initially acting as a direct service organization that engaged in political advocacy work around issues of social justice, welfare rights, school integration and busing. They later began to focus on various outreach and enrichment programs including a summer day camp for elementary aged children, a nutrition program, parenting classes and a walk-in help center that provides multiple services. Emmaus House is also a worship community and though Reverend Jones says that the congregation has shifted somewhat over the years, it is a small congregation of people open to anyone, whether they live in Peoplestown or not. Many of the congregants grew up around Emmaus House and though they have moved out of the area, they still attend worship services there. At Christmastime, the house has a festival and over 800 children from around the city come to Emmaus House to receive a gift from Santa Claus. Jones told me a story that sums up the relationship Emmaus House has with the Peoplestown community:

Emmaus House is a trusted institution, there is not very much suspicion about what we're up to, people trust that our intentions are to be in a relationship that's respectful, that we honor people. This one time, we were trying to decide what to do about celebrating Christmas as a neighborhood and we decided to do a lighting of a Peoplestown Christmas tree and we were brainstorming where to put it and I suggested the Study Hall lawn [located behind Emmaus House] and one of the long time men of the neighborhood who was actually born here, said: 'Claiborne it has to be on Emmaus House, that's the only place it won't get messed with.' So there really is a respect for the fact that this is an in-

stitution that is honored for what we do.

The connection between D.H. Stanton and Emmaus House provided an extra layer of support in the fight to save the school from closing. A resident from Vine City, where the soon to be closed Kennedy Middle School is located told me that to the best of her knowledge, no faith-based organizations offered their help to save the school. Emmaus House's involvement in the community mobilization process made a huge difference for Stanton; the House served as base for community meetings and Jones told me that she spoke at rallies and APS meetings concerning the closing of the school. Faith-based organizations and churches have often been active in community organizing and social and civil rights movements including Atlanta's own Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) once lead by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (Willie et al. 2008:117).

Jones says that right now the house is invested in helping the whole neighborhood to thrive and notes that it is in some transition at this point in time, but she sees value in the gentrification going on which she deems "a great thing for the school and saving the school, it was key." There are issues she sees in the community, however, such as people having access to affordable housing, and she tells me that there is a very high level of child poverty in the neighborhood. Around 53% of children in Peoplestown live in poverty, Jones says, so there are food shortages for children and nutrition issues. According to Jones, the zip code where Stanton is located has the highest confirmed cases of child abuse and neglect in all of Fulton county. Jones sees the need for Emmaus House and is a staunch advocate for Peoplestown and its children. She calls the house "a bridge group" that seeks to try to be an advocate for all people, but with a particular concern for those who traditionally have been at the margins of society and have had a limited voice and little power. Many Episcopalians from all over the country come to the house

to do volunteer work, service projects or to live there for a year and do an internship. She calls it “a transformative experience for most of them to get over some of their fears based on class and race and beyond that to a deep respect and love.” She told me the story of a young man who came to Emmaus House as a volunteer:

One of our 18 year old White kids who spent a gap year here put it perfectly as only an 18 year old kid would. He said: ‘you know, this is the kind of neighborhood where I use to be afraid of what would happen if my car broke down and now, if somebody’s car breaks down I go over and offer to help them.’ So, that to me captured the movement you can make if you’re willing to be present with people and be curious rather than pre-judging people based on all the garbage that’s talked about people living in poverty.

Emmaus House has been very active in the Peoplestown neighborhood and under Jones’ leadership it continues to provide needed resources for many of the community’s residents.

2.1.2 D.H. Stanton: Not a Perfect School

The ramifications of the recent recession were tangible, Teasley says. For instance, Atlanta zip code 30310, where the now closed APS school Capitol View Elementary was located, was an epicenter for mortgage fraud and now there are literally hundreds of homes vacant due to foreclosure. Pittsburgh, another neighborhood not far from Peoplestown, suffered greatly due to mortgage scams and also from investors who would buy into contracting projects that would never come to fruition. This creates housing instability which directly affects schools. Teasley watched APS board members and other concerned community activists debate what needed to change in order to justify why a school should be kept open or closed. Shock came when D.H. Stanton appeared on the final list of school closures because the school was never identified or even mentioned as a school slated for closure. He does acknowledge that Peoplestown was suffering from a declining residential population but notes that there was also a lot of politics involved in the school being put on that final list:

Stanton was a unique situation because there were people actively advocating to close the school.

In my entire existence I've never seen anyone publically go through and trash a school, as if it was beneath them. If you were providing constructive criticism about what we needed to work on, that's entirely different, but you never, ever trash someone's school. Several of them are members of the SEACS (Southeast Atlanta Communities for Schools). I know a lot of them and I considered some of them my personal friends until this all happened.

On the SEACS website it states that the organization:

was founded in 2010 to bring together parents, policy makers and community members within the Maynard H. Jackson High School cluster of Atlanta Public Schools to encourage and support safe, creative, quality educational opportunities in southeast Atlanta. (Southeast Atlanta Communities for Schools website)

Stanton is one of the feeder elementary schools in the Jackson High School cluster.

I wondered what the motive would be to close a neighborhood school. Were these parents who felt that Stanton was performing poorly and wished their children to go to another school? Were they simply invested in making their neighborhood better? This was not the case according to Teasley: "it's not their neighborhood and the primary rationale was to get the facility to use for a charter school." Suzanne Mitchell, a very vocal resident of the Summerhill community which is just north of Peopletown, was quoted in the *East Atlanta Patch* making negative statements about D.H. Stanton and other schools, two weeks before it made closure the list (Paul 2012). People had begun actively lobbying for Stanton to close and according to Teasley, some of the Summerhill residents working towards this goal were parents of students who attended Cook Elementary, which was also slated to close (Ibid.). They would be sent to Stanton and many did not want their children at the school. Some saw Parkside Elementary located in Grant Park as a more suitable place for their kids. In April 2012, these parents got their wish as Cook was closed and students in the Summerhill neighborhood were rerouted to Parkside Elementary for the 2012-2013 school year, which is now overcrowded. As a result, the enrollment at Stanton continued to decline.

Teasley does concede that Stanton has had its share of problems over the years. He has an

elementary-aged child that he has chosen not to enroll in Stanton and says he has been questioned as to why his kids do not attend the school. His children attend a neighborhood charter school which he feels better meets the needs of his kids, although he says that when he moved to Peoplestown, he did initially want his kids to attend the neighborhood public school. He remembers trying to engage the then principal of Stanton in an effort to be an involved community member, telling me: “we volunteered up at Stanton, I would go up there and I worked with the attendance specialist; I tried to engage the principal but she was very unapproachable.” At that time Stanton never reached out to the community for any kind of help. Stanton had also languished as a low achieving school on the CRCT tests, so the school was better than some but not as good as others. Teasley feels that the leadership of the school felt comfortable in the middle and tried very hard to stay below the radar.

Reverend Jones, like William Teasley, acknowledges that D.H. Stanton had some issues to overcome. The school again had been named in the CRCT cheating scandal and as a result lost teachers. The school was also under enrolled and Jones found the leadership of the school unwelcoming and unwilling to create a partnership between Stanton and the community-at-large. Emmaus House had run a summer day camp for 125 children at the school every summer for 15 or 20 years but the principal ended the summer program and the House was no longer allowed to use it. In the spring of 2012, the then current principal was removed and in Jones’ view this created an opportunity. In the interim, Dr. Clara Taylor was brought in as principal and Jones says that in her first week she had a parent’s meeting and a community meeting. She told the community: ‘come in and let’s talk about this school.’ Taylor had an open door policy, actively seeking community support and involvement and she arrived only a few weeks before the announcement was made that D.H. Stanton had been added to the list of school closures. She says that she does

not know if Stanton would have been successful under the previous principal.

While Jones was surprised to find that Stanton had been added to the closure list, she did not believe that the school had been unfairly targeted and she did not take the move personally.

She did find announcement ill-timed, however:

It was announced at midnight the Saturday of the Easter break week, so the whole week the school wasn't even in session and it was the Tuesday after Easter Monday when the board was meeting, so we had like 10 days. There were lots of people who really stepped up, but I think it was the middle-class folks, William Teasley and others who drafted this incredibly wonderful and comprehensive document that talked about all the work that was being done already to help strengthen D.H. Stanton and also to clarify some of the untruths that were being propagated about the school.

Jones felt that Stanton's empty seats and association with the CRCT cheating scandal, along with the fact that the school district was needing to close quite a few schools and consolidate, gave board members the rationale for seeking to close the school. However, she did not fault them for thinking that it was appropriate to put Stanton on the closure list.

PTA Vice-President Darlene McKnight has two children at D.H. Stanton. She too saw issues with Stanton early on and told me:

Well here's the thing, before the school year started in 2011, there was a closure list but the school was never on the list. Now in my personal opinion I felt like the school should have been on the list because I knew the enrollment was down because again I was an active parent. I was on the local school council, I was at the school, I knew the teachers weren't happy and when the teachers are not happy, there's no way the kids are getting what they need. So I felt like they should have been on the list or there should have been some attention being paid to the school for the betterment of the kids, so I never wanted the school to close but if the school's name was on the list at the beginning of the school year, I understood why because I was there.

McKnight told me of the dysfunction at the school before the new leadership of now principal Dr. Clara Taylor. She says that parents and community members were not initially welcomed at the school, but she fought to gain access, going so far as having a background check and fingerprinting done so that she could be a parent volunteer at the school. McKnight calls Dr. Taylor "a

ray of sunshine” that has helped to transform Stanton by welcoming parents and maintaining an open door policy with the surrounding community.

2.1.3 Stanton Reacts to the Threat of Closing

Even with all the challenges that Stanton faced, Teasley believed in his community school and after the shock of finding the school on the final closure recommendation list he and his allies began to mobilize. They were aware of several of the schools that were on the recommended list and those particular schools had been on all three iterations and different versions of the draft. Teasley said that what floored people about Stanton was the fact that it was never previously mentioned, but he realized that the superintendent always holds the ultimate authority of being able to decide which schools would be targeted. Teasley got calls at midnight the night the final list was released but he did not check his messages until the next morning. He awoke to multiple messages asking if he had seen that final list. This was his reaction:

Literally that day I sat there and I sent out an email and I said if you're interested in seeing what we can do about Stanton, let's all meet. The Emmaus House jumped in and said you can use our space. A lot of people were on vacation, it was a low move [releasing the list right before Easter weekend]. I had a good discussion with one of my neighbors and I sat there and I said: if only five people show up, I guess they're closing the school. I'm willing to carry the water and I can help carry the water but one person can't walk this all the way through; three or four or five people can't, so 15 people showed up and we had a meeting. A day or so later, 30-40 people showed up and then we had our big rally. You know it just kept getting bigger and bigger, people were coming back from vacation, teachers were showing up, it wasn't just us, you know, a room full of kooks, but it was actually people who see the value in having a good, quality public school.

Teasley and other community leaders did more than just show up. They had a plan because he says “in a crisis, there's a chance for an opportunity.” The main goal was to establish the value of keeping the school open and show that it could become a community asset. Peopletown residents came up with a plan for transformation at D.H. Stanton that was centered on things a community could do through engagement. Stanton PTA President Feroza Syed was also an active participant

in helping to save the school. Syed is not a parent at Stanton but has long been active in the Peoplestown community. Of the fight to save Stanton she told me:

I remember originally everybody going crazy, up in arms and what happened was, prior to the redistricting ever happening we had already had a meeting up at Emmaus House regarding the school. Everybody was already like: what are we going to do to get this school ready, we have a great new principal who's opening up doors, so there was already an infrastructure of what the group was gonna be like and then redistricting happened and everyone was freaking out and then actually that whole proposal thing [happened].

It was very important to Teasley and others to take a community school approach and many people including newer residents with small children began to engage. Teasley feels they all believed that a true choice is between good choices, not a choice between a good school versus a bad school. They started the discussion about Stanton and within a few days the community members came up with a proposal on what the community would do. The Peoplestown community sent the proposal to all of the APS board members. The community also had more and more people show up and take an interest in the school. At one final meeting at Stanton, they filled an entire auditorium. They started with 15 people and it grew to almost 200 in just 10 days. Syed, like Teasley, felt that a written proposal would be necessary to present to the APS board and Superintendent Davis. Syed said:

I remember talking to William [Teasley] because I did some research on Erroll [Davis] and it seemed like he's a businessman type, CEO type of guy so I remember telling William and everybody that I think we should have an actual proposal something hand written, not emails.

It was crazy, everything just kind of fell into place and became this whole crescendo of people doing this and in a matter of less than a few days we had this huge proposal that was like 12 pages long about everything we were going to do and there were moving parts already there so it was amazing.

All of this happened with no support from organizations such as SEACS. Teasley said they asked them for support as a community and they were simply told 'no.' He is still very emotional about the process. He feels the school was targeted and that the APS Superintendent and

board and others had crafted the argument and message that because Stanton was an underperforming school, because some of their facilities needed work and because of the disparagement of the school in general, it needed to be closed. Teasley maintains that politics was involved and says:

SEACS also attempted to close King Middle School, the first foray into the battle was King Middle School, which this group felt should be closed because it wasn't performing and it had a bad facility... let's use it for a charter school and that was the mantra. Let's close an 1100 student school, let's close a 725 student school and I think at the end of the day, money's attached to these seats in these schools. Let's close the bigger facilities so that we can have access to them for our charter schools.

Teasley calls the politics surrounding APS redistricting “the politics of me.” No matter the players, it all comes down to “what's good for me,” he says, meaning individuals and not the children or the community-at-large. SEACS and the APS board also saw Stanton as located in a low-income neighborhood, a neighborhood filled with people that did not make decisions based on rational thought. Community members were told: “we know better than you,” in the hope that those associated with Stanton would simply give up and let the school close. Instead, the Peoplestown community mobilized, counteracting all the politics. Teasley says that APS was shocked by all the support for Stanton. The APS board eventually reversed their decision on which schools would close and which would stay open based on who was in that room at the last APS board meeting. The schools with the most support were able to be saved.

I asked Teasley why he thought other communities had been unsuccessful in saving their schools. He remembers that at the last Parks Middle School meeting only five people were present and Teasley does not know why more people were not involved. Parks and Kennedy Middle School were two schools always on the list of closures and there is a possibility that people were resigned to the fact that their schools would simply close. Teasley says that “people in the seats change things” and that a “community has to own its schools; it's our school and impacts all of

us.” He believes that Kennedy Middle School could have stayed open if the APS board felt enough political pressure to do so. Interestingly enough, it is a matter of public record that Byron Amos, an APS board member did not vote to keep Kennedy, his neighborhood school located in Vine City, open. Ultimately, the board of education makes policy decisions and APS implements the policy; Dr. Davis makes independent recommendations and the board decides.

Two weeks after the APS board meeting where three schools were saved, Stanton lost the Summerhill neighborhood; students who lived in Summerhill but attended Stanton would be moved to Parkside Elementary. Teasley feels that Stanton has a “bull’s eye on its back” due to a combination of people with an agenda and multiple forces within the school district. He sees the need for continued collaboration with the Peoplestown community and says: “we have a chance here to get it right. We live with these kids.”

I asked Reverend Jones if she felt that the last minute addition of Stanton to the list of closures was an intentional move to prevent the school community from mobilizing and she said she did not. She calls the decision “an extremely poor process” and said that she saw it as an opportunity for the Peoplestown community to mobilize. She did feel that the APS board possibly thought that closing Stanton was an “easy solution” and they believed “maybe [they are] not going to be too active, but in fact we really stepped up.” For her part, Jones began by speaking with a Bishop in the diocese who told her that the chairman of the school board was a member of his church and that he would give him a call. He did just that and came back to Jones saying the problem was that the school building was in terrible shape and was therefore going to be closed. This is what the chairman of the school board had told the Bishop and Jones subsequently found out that some people from a neighborhood nearby did not want their children sent to D.H. Stanton. These neighbors had driven by the school and compiled a list of all the things they could see

that were wrong with the school facility. The information was sent to the APS board and the board took their findings as fact. A Peoplestown community group was eventually able to address every item on the list and to make some improvements to the school building. Jones said of the group:

There are several households of middle-class young adults, most of them with children who have always had a keen interest in the school and in the well-being of the children and opening up opportunities for people in the neighborhood, including themselves.

I asked Jones if these particular Peoplestown residents had children currently enrolled at Stanton and she said that most did not in part because some of the children were too young. Others have their children in neighborhood charter schools, as William Teasley does, but their children do attend the Study Hall, which is a private, non-profit after school program located behind Emmaus House. Jones does feel that many of them hope that their children will eventually go to D.H. Stanton and that they are active in the school community because better schools mean better real estate values. In Jones' view, for these parents, ultimately there is a real commitment to living in a mixed neighborhood and having an excellent public school.

Friends of D.H. Stanton called a meeting immediately which was held at Emmaus House. William Teasley was in the process of developing a document of Stanton's strengths and Jones recalls many, many emails. The Reverend tried to involve the Episcopal community as much as possible and organized a rally at Emmaus House where people marched over to school for the first hearing. Jones spoke at the hearing and talked to the press; she says that involving the press was key in the fight to save the school. She also gives a lot of credit to Brenda Muhammad who is the district 1 APS board representative for the Peoplestown neighborhood. Jones felt that Muhammad was very active and attentive even though she also represented some other schools that were slated to close. Neighbors made signs promoting the school and Stanton teachers were very

active as well. Reverend Jones did not attend the final APS board meeting; instead she opted to watch the meeting online. She recalls being glued to her computer and says that she was “ecstatic” and “thrilled” over the outcome. In Jones’ view, the success of saving Stanton did depend in part upon the fact that there were middle-class people, both White and Black, who stood up for the school and worked with the other people in the neighborhood. Jones told me:

Our success did depend in part upon the fact that we had middle-class people, a few White, several African-Americans that went to bat, working with the other people in the neighborhood. I think that helps, and I think partnership and advocacy really matter in a lot of ways, not just on this issue.

Jones was hoping for a positive outcome for D.H. Stanton, but she did not expect it. She felt that the Peoplestown community was able to mobilize and come together against the odds and she felt that they all worked very hard and accomplished much in small amount of time.

Jones does not have any harsh words for Superintendent Dr. Erroll Davis. She feels that people in leadership positions have hard decisions to make and often get a “bum rap.” She says that she does not think Davis is either a bad person or an incompetent one. Jones also did not see race or class as a factor in Stanton being identified for closure, even though she did acknowledge that most of the schools that will close are in low-income, minority communities. She is actually really pleased that part of this school reorganization was designed so that school communities can stay together as they move up to different grade levels. She sees the continuity as truly important within education systems.

Syed echoed the sentiments of Reverend Jones when it came to the diverse group of people in the community working to help save Stanton:

It wasn’t just people like me and William it was also community members who went to the school, old school residents and a lot of people who have been staples in this neighborhood for like 40 years who actually went to the school, whose grandkids went to the school, so it was a very diverse group, White people, Black people, Asian people. It was crazy and that’s what was really cool about the whole redistricting thing. I am a real es-

tate agent, I see neighborhoods changing and I watch people hate each other and the current population hate against people that are moving in, lower class versus middle-class or Black versus White and I've seen all that. During this redistricting it was like everybody just came together and there was no animosity and everybody loved each other and it's kind of continued through, we haven't had any issues and the whole neighborhood has become more of a community.

Syed told me she felt that the shared process of saving D.H. Stanton brought the neighborhood closer together and reinforced the value of and the need for community.

Stanton parent Darlene McKnight has been forever changed by her involvement with the school. She has always been a concerned parent and is an officer in the Stanton PTA but now she is seeking to go back to school to become a teacher herself. She says that she has learned about the "politics of school closings" and feels that Stanton being chosen for closure was a class issue and simply the case of a low-income community being targeted because the APS board and Superintendent thought the school would not fight and therefore the school would be an easy target. She says that this process "opened her eyes" and taught her that she needed to do all she could to fight for her children.

Castells in Willie et al. (2008:4) suggests that within a community, especially in the inner city, that there is a magnification of "interdependence of all kinds of people and their need for each other, even though they may not recognize that they are indebted to others for their safety and security." The saving of D.H. Stanton represents a community coming together for a common cause. However, the majority of community members that mobilized to save Stanton were not parents that had children enrolled at the school and they would not be considered low-income. In fact, most were middle-class, educated people with diverse ethnic backgrounds and professions; these community members possessed valuable capital that they employed to help D.H. Stanton. Community members researched Erroll Davis's background to determine the best way to approach him with their appeals to keep the school open. They put together a written pro-

posal that included the steps the community would take in an effort to make Stanton a more productive learning environment for its students; this proposal was sent to Superintendent Davis and was published in the *East Atlanta Patch* (Paul 2012). Bourdieu (1985:196-197) argues that various forms of capital “are like aces in game of cards” that give one an advantage in whatever field they may be engaging within. While the community recognized that they needed Stanton to survive as their neighborhood school and believed that they could make the school better, I suggest that without such a diverse group of people bringing together all their resources, talents and capital, Stanton would not have been saved. There is an interdependence here that has been mutually beneficial for all those involved.

3 DISPLACEMENT AND POLITICS: THE CASE OF KENNEDY MIDDLE SCHOOL

3.1 Introduction

Kennedy Middle School, located in the Vine City-English Avenue areas of downtown Atlanta, has had its share of changes and problems over the past few years. Kennedy was identified as a school that participated in the APS CRCT cheating scandal and as of early April 2013, the former principal, school secretary and school improvement specialist have all been indicted for their role in the cheating scandal (Sawicki 2013). Kennedy serves an all-Black student population, 95% of which are considered economically disadvantaged (greatschools.org). As a part of the 2012 APS redistricting plan, Kennedy was chosen to eventually close (APS Superintendent's Final Redistricting and Closure Recommendations-Posted March 31, 2012). The school will stay open at least one more school year (2013-2014) and will share space with the Charles Drew Charter School next year. Drew, located in Eastlake, serves children pre-K to 8th grade and will be expanded next year to include a high school. On May 6, 2013, District 2 APS board member Byron Amos put forth a motion to keep Kennedy open. Community members describe Kennedy as being in "limbo" since they do not know if the school will remain open in years to come.

Many themes have emerged from my research surrounding the closing of Kennedy Middle School including issues of housing displacement and gentrification. Parents and community members told me of a lack of communication with the APS superintendent and the parents, teachers and administrators of Kennedy that would have allowed them to fight against the proposed closure. Information on proposed meetings about the closure often came down too late for school officials to pass it on to parents and other community members who may have wanted to organize, protest or make their voices heard. Other themes included the issues associated with

housing displacement in the form of the demolition of public housing units in the city of Atlanta, which ultimately can contribute to low school enrollment. The school also suffered a loss of teachers after the APS CRCT cheating scandal. (Kennedy now has an acting principal whom I have seen at various cluster town hall meetings held at Washington High School. I approached her and she was very helpful to me as I tried to identify parents and community members to speak with for this study.) Finally, the revitalization of downtown Atlanta, including the proposed open air Falcons stadium, has raised questions for people in the Kennedy school community. Parents and school administrators see housing displacement and the closing of urban schools as a way to push poor people out of the city into other areas so that the land surrounding the new stadium can be used for parking or other uses. Initially, due to a lack of an online presence and virtually no media coverage, it seemed that the Kennedy Middle School community was disengaged and did not organize to save the school; digging deeper, I was able to see a variety of issues that were limiting possibilities here.

3.1.1 Low Enrollment at Kennedy Middle School and a History of Housing Displacement in Atlanta

Lipman (2009:228) argues that amongst displaced people, community often becomes hugely important as “people need to be connected to those they know and trust.” Displacement can be caused by natural forces such as hurricanes and earthquakes, but what of man-made displacement? How has displacement affected the city of Atlanta and when did it begin? It has been argued that one reason for the empty seats in Atlanta Public Schools on the south side of town is because many families have moved out of the area due to various reasons including forced housing displacement (APS Superintendent’s Final Redistricting and Closure Recommendations-Posted March 31, 2012). One example of this is Techwood Homes in downtown At-

lanta. Once called Techwood Flats, the area was considered a slum and home to high rates of poverty and crime (The New Georgia Encyclopedia-TNGE). The Techwood Homes project was approved in 1933 as part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal under the authorization of the Public Works Administration (Ibid.). Techwood Homes would be completed in 1936 and would house low-income White families in downtown Atlanta (Ibid.). Techwood Flats had been integrated, but because Techwood Homes was public, it had to be segregated and many families were displaced when the Flats were demolished; Blacks would live in University Homes near old Atlanta University, but were not allowed to live in Techwood Homes until 1968 (Ibid.). Techwood Homes was the first public housing complex built in the United States and would eventually allow for the passing of the Housing Act of 1937 which provided housing for low-income families throughout the country (Ibid.). The community that housed Techwood Homes was a major center of displacement for many of Atlanta's low-income and poor families ahead of the 1996 Olympic Games (French and Disher 1997).

Today, the trend of displacement among Atlanta's poor has continued with the closing of most inner city public housing complexes and a move towards gentrification (Brown 2009; French and Disher 1997; Walker 2009). Displacing families and sometimes entire communities due to renovation and gentrification can also cause the exact issues raised in the APS redistricting plan--too many seats and not enough students. In the mid-90s, nearly 15,000 low-income residents were expelled from the city and about 1,200 units of housing for the poor were destroyed (Santiago 2010). Lacoss (2010) suggests that while downtown Atlanta has grown economically after the Olympics, issues of crime and poverty have not been eradicated from the city. Instead, some of Atlanta's poorest residents have merely been moved further south but the core issues remain (Ibid.). By 2010, Atlanta had become the first city to undertake a massive demolition of

all its public housing units, opting instead for mixed-income communities that would house a combination of middle-class and lower income residents who were eligible for Section 8 housing (Brown 2009). Lower income residents would receive vouchers that would allow them more affordable housing in the mixed-income communities, but the vouchers were not available to all displaced residents and carried stipulations such as not having a criminal background (Ibid.). According to the Atlanta Housing Authority (AHA), at the heart of 40 public housing complexes was concentrated poverty that promoted crime and violence, poor employment opportunities and a failing public education system (Atlanta Housing Authority 15 Year Progress Report: 1995-2010). City officials as well as those at the office of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) also praised Atlanta for demolishing hundreds of public housing units in favor of mixed-income complexes (Glanton 2009). However, did the city consider the unintended consequences of the revitalization project?

Parents, community members and school administrators that I interviewed all agreed that housing displacement has contributed to low enrollment at Kennedy Middle School. Located in the Vine City and English Avenue neighborhoods of southwest Atlanta, Kennedy in part served the communities of Eagan Homes, Herndon Homes and University Homes, all public housing complexes that were demolished between 2000 and 2011 (Atlanta Housing Authority 15 Year Progress Report: 1995-2010). While AHA claims that ridding the city of poorly maintained public housing units was necessary, Vine City community members see ulterior motives for why the city wanted land in urban Atlanta areas:

If you look at the map of the new dome, it will put out most of the families in the Vine City area because of the property they are going to need for parking and other stuff they want to add. So, the whole project was to eliminate the schools in the area. Once they tore down the projects, my thing was, it was already on the map, once they tore down those projects they knew that the number was going to decrease at the schools. You had University Homes, Herndon Homes and you had the Mechanicsville homes-they rebuilt Me-

chanicsville but the prices to live in those places are so high, a regular poor family couldn't afford it. –**Kennedy Parent**

Kennedy Administrator: They tore down Herndon Homes because they're supposed to be building the stadium down in that area. They tore down Eagan Homes but they rebuilt them as Magnolia something over there now, it's on the James P. Brawley side.

Karen: Ok, so losing housing in the area hurt enrollment at Kennedy?

Kennedy Administrator: Yeah, before that but then it kind of built back up [enrollment] and then when they talked about closing it down [Kennedy] and moving our kids, we lost even more students.

Parents and community members raised issues of housing displacement in the Vine City area but also the difficulty of finding affordable housing. Displacement often has long ranging effects on communities. Herrera et al. (2007:279-280) argue that:

despite the abundance of research on gentrification, there is a dearth of work on its most dire effect—the displacement and dispersal of long-time residents evicted physically or economically as a result of renovations, demolition [and] rent increases.

As Atlanta continues to grow economically, the city will seek to appeal to a global community as “the most recent waves of gentrification are intricately entwined within the circuits of global capital” (Ibid.:278). The unintended consequence of such development, however, is the dispersion of residents of impacted neighborhoods, which has ramifications for school enrollments and educational possibilities for the families that remain.

3.1.2 *The Case for Closing and Saving Kennedy*

Lipman (2011:54) argues that often schools in African-American communities are closed due to poor performance, yet schools in other neighborhoods which may be even lower performers are kept open. Neighborhood schools serve as “anchors” in the community and when they are closed, children must leave the communities they know in order to attend school (Ibid.). Kennedy had been deemed a failing school in part due to low CRCT test scores. Due to the school's involvement in the widely publicized APS CRCT cheating scandal, the school had lost teachers

and most notably, their principal. Kennedy was to close in the 2012-2013 school year but has been kept open for one more year with a grade level being phased out each school year; this year the school housed only 7th and 8th grade students. The 6th graders were sent to Brown Middle School in West End Atlanta which has been described to me by informants as extremely overcrowded and institutional instead of an educational environment where children can learn. On May 15, 2013, Brown Middle School was evacuated due to a bomb threat (Morris, 2013). Former Kennedy 6th grade students are bussed to Brown Middle from their Vine City community, meeting the school bus at a midpoint between the West End and Vine City neighborhoods. One parent said:

I see them every morning at the midpoint. The midpoint is like the midsection of Vine City, below the train station, there are some apartments, they meet them right there every morning, so you see kids passing the school [Kennedy] to get to the midpoint; it's crazy.

There has also been tension between students at Brown and Kennedy in what has been described to me as a "rivalry." One parent shared her thoughts about Kennedy students being sent to Brown and why she feels that the merging of the schools has caused problems:

Parent: They [Brown] call parents-come pick your child up, but the school's on lockdown and they don't give a good reason why the school is on lockdown. The latest we heard was the 15 fights in one day, so we go over there to pick up the after school kids, we have to wait outside for about 30-45 minutes before the child comes outside.

Karen: Right, because lockdown means that they won't let anyone in or out? Is it because of fights between Kennedy children and Brown children?

Parent: More than likely it is, because that's what's been going on lately, the rivalry, you know, they are two schools that should have never merged because they're both in low poverty areas and you've got so many people from a low poverty area-the frustration grows because they know you're from another district or they know that you shouldn't be [there]. Everything is you know my school, this is our area, your turf and this is your turf almost like you're pushing them to do something that you know, they weren't prepared to do.

I suggest that the trouble that has been brewing between the Kennedy and Brown Middle School students provides ammunition for Vine City community members to continue fighting to keep

their neighborhood school open. With Brown being overcrowded and Kennedy being under enrolled, a possible answer is to simply keep Kennedy open. However, parents, Kennedy school administrators and teachers raise other issues. Along with the overcrowding at Brown Middle, parents at a District 2 APS town hall meeting in Vine City, spoke of “turf wars,” fights and lock-downs at the school which according to Kennedy parents, most likely involved Kennedy and Brown students. One Washington High School teacher also spoke of his concerns about the two schools merging: “I think that it is never a good idea to close schools in inner city areas and force different neighborhoods into one school. Atlanta has a rising gang problem and I know that will cause a problem in the future.” Reese et al. (2001:161) suggest that within low-income communities there is often a sense of hopelessness and a pessimistic view of life; such desperation may be manifested in violent or aggressive behavior in low-income youth. While the redistricting plan sought to combine Brown and Kennedy, they did not take into account as one informant told me, the fact that both schools serve low-income communities and that there may be tension between the neighborhoods of West End where Brown is located and Vine City where Kennedy is located. Brown has a 100% Black student population which also includes 93% of students who are considered economically disadvantaged (greatschools.org). While the two neighborhoods may be ethnically and socioeconomically similar, students at Brown may perceive Kennedy students as infringing on their turf while Kennedy students may feel unwelcomed and defensive and all of these aggregate issues may lead to disagreements. All of my informants felt that merging the two schools was not a wise decision.

As was the case with D. H. Stanton, those associated with Kennedy Middle School were also shocked when they made the superintendent’s proposed list of school closures. A school administrator told me:

Kennedy was not on the list, it was King Middle School and other middle schools, Parks or Price, it was them and maybe there was two weeks or maybe a month's time and Kennedy was on the list and they were going to keep King open and that's when everybody rallied together trying to have you know, town hall meetings and meetings with the superintendent. We had staff speaking, parents speaking, students speaking, community people speaking, different ones to speak on behalf of keeping Kennedy open in this particular neighborhood.

In my initial general gathering stage, I searched local newspapers, websites and blogs for any sign of organizing by the Kennedy Middle School community and I could not find any. This led me to believe that there was a strong possibility that the Kennedy community just did not care about saving the school. I became aware of the different perceptions surrounding the Kennedy community. I spoke with two community members, one a local Vine City resident and the other a teacher at a high school in the area who both said that there was no mobilization in the Kennedy community. The teacher, when asked what efforts the Kennedy community took to save their school, said:

What efforts?! We failed ourselves tremendously and this is a dangerous trend that is going to put our community in a dangerous place. I define a dangerous place in this sense: as a self-deflating environment that does not promote growth spiritually or educationally.

However, those intimately involved in the Kennedy Middle School community such as administrators and parents told me of the challenges they faced in organizing due in large part to the failure of the APS board and superintendent to notify the school in a suitable amount of time:

The whole Vine City community came in, it was more so the community than the parents, notifications didn't come out in time, the superintendent failed to notify us [of meetings on closing Kennedy]. We got the messages the day before and it was never advertised like we're going to close Kennedy. The day before they called all the parents saying we're going to have a meeting tomorrow, they're going to close Kennedy, so it was a late notice. In order to get people to participate you've got to give people at least a two week notice so they can take off from work to support the school. We would have had more supporters if they had told us in advance. The school tried to get it to us as quick as they could, you could tell it was late because some of the stuff was coming at night and people were picking up their kids so we were like: are you serious? You're flagging down cars trying to get them the information, you had teachers and staff staying in the afternoon to make sure every parent got a letter which was ridiculous. I feel if the superintendent

knew a month in advance he should have prepared us a month in advance and at least given us a chance to fight. We didn't have a chance to fight. There was no room to fight for your school. –**Kennedy Parent**

I made flyers, we had teachers that actually walked to different apartment complexes in our vicinity and to different houses to give out flyers and then what email addresses I had, I sent them out there. We also sent flyers home with the students, trying to get parents to come out, letting them know, well certain meetings are going to be at Kennedy at this time, on this day, go out and be heard, voice your opinion and things of that nature. I think some people put flyers in some stores, so the word got out. It was a nice turnout, but I wish it could have been better. We also have a lot of elderly people over here, so it was hard to get a lot of them here. –**Kennedy Middle School Administrator**

Barbara Simpson, an APS Watchdog and community activist and Nate Dyer, founder of the Trump Tight organization both agreed that people did turn out to support Kennedy, but that parents often felt disenfranchised and powerless. They saw APS as a school system that had failed them and rarely listened to their concerns. Simpson stated that parents did not feel welcomed or valued within APS. Young (in Harvey 1993:56) suggests that there are “five faces of oppression” that stand in opposition to social justice; they are: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence. I would argue that parents at Kennedy Middle School have most likely experienced all of these. Parents and school administrators told me they did feel powerless to fight against “downtown,” a name used to describe APS headquarters, and that they felt manipulated by the APS board and superintendent. Parents felt they did not have the chance to fight to save their school.

Pauline Lipman (2004:65-66), who has done extensive research on restructuring in the Chicago Public Schools, found that Mayor Richard Daley and other political power players in the city saw school improvement and mixed-income housing as essential to making Chicago a global city. Lipman (Ibid.) concluded that the argument being made in Chicago was that mixed-income, middle-class schools and housing equaled success but that there was no such thing as good working-class schools or good working-class neighborhoods. Was a similar argument being

made in the case of Kennedy Middle School? I asked people in the Kennedy community why they believed the school was targeted for closure and why their efforts to save the school were unsuccessful:

Karen: Why do think particular schools were chosen to close as a part of the redistricting plan?

Kennedy Middle School Administrator: At first I was trying to figure out why the majority of the schools were on the Black side of town and not on the White side and I didn't want to make it a Black and White issue but when you really look at the schools that were closing, that's what it really boiled down to. They were building newer schools on the north side. What are you going to do for us over on this side? We have a lot of charter schools coming in also, it was like when our schools close they don't stay closed for good and when they reopen it's like: bam, they're a charter school.

Karen: Why was Kennedy still kept on that list at that final board meeting? Why did they ultimately vote to close Kennedy?

Kennedy Middle School Administrator: That's the \$64,000 question, because they may tell us one thing and eventually it may be something else we find out. They wanted to eventually make Kennedy a career academy. I was talking to one teacher last year, she was saying that she thought it was going to be good for this community and I said: well why do you think that and she said: with a lot of our kids dropping out of school, not going to high school, she said this may be a nice technical career academy that they can attend.

A teacher at Washington High School, the cluster high school for Kennedy Middle, sees politics and money attached to the closure of Kennedy Middle School. He told me that he pays close attention to the business side of how the school district is being run. In his opinion, what's important here is not just the school population and neighborhood involvement but also what the school district can gain from a school closure. He recognizes that APS has had financial problems and suggests that money is often involved in various school district decisions. He believes that ultimately the move to close Kennedy is saving money for the school district. I found his perspective interesting, especially since at a recent town hall meeting held at Washington High School, Superintendent Davis stated that \$10 million dollars will be spent to improve Brown

Middle School; the hope is the improvements will alleviate the overcrowding. One parent asked: why not just keep Kennedy open? She also questioned why some of the money being put into Brown could not be used to improve Kennedy as well. Here again may be another argument for keeping students at Kennedy Middle School--the money. This argument may not stand however if city officials and developers, as Kennedy parents and administrators believe, see land in Vine City as more valuable for other uses such as parking that would support the new Falcons stadium.

The people at the heart of the closure debate are the students, and I was told countless times by Kennedy parents and administrators how hurt the children were that their neighborhood school was closing. What also became clear was that parents and children felt that losing Kennedy would change family dynamics and lessen the sense of security these children had come to expect from their school and community:

They were hurt, first of all because they live in that community, they walk to school every day, there's a difference between walking to school every day and then you have to depend on catching the school bus. So you have to catch the bus and if you miss your bus, you'll probably miss school for the day because your parents are at work. A lot of children already knew that this change was going to affect the whole family; a lot of them were hurt. **–Kennedy Parent**

If they want to shut this school down, what are the kids going to do? They're going to send our kids to Brown and they were saying, once our kids miss the school bus then what? At least in this community most of our kids could walk and it was near the train station. It's closer to the feeder high school also [Washington High School]. **–Kennedy Middle School Administrator**

While many Kennedy students were deeply affected by the news that their community school would close, Kennedy students were also actively involved in helping to save the school:

The children were speaking out too, more than their own parents: why are we moving, we have so much opportunity here and we're just getting a new principal that knows what she's doing. They didn't want to leave their community and you could tell that they were angry. **–Kennedy Parent**

Some of the kids came to the meetings and they got on the microphone and addressed the panel. They were real upset, some of them just broke down and cried, they were really upset but they came out. We had pros and cons from the kids. –**Kennedy Middle School Administrator**

One parent told me that she will continue to fight to keep Kennedy open. She said that there was too much at stake for her daughter, whom she describes as a leader and a mentor at Bethune Elementary School, which is just a few blocks from Kennedy and serves as their feeder elementary school. She spoke of how disappointed her daughter was that Kennedy was closing and that she does not want her child to attend Brown Middle School due to the overcrowding and combative environment at Brown.

One local educator and forthcoming Atlanta Public School Board candidate told me the following when I asked why she thought Kennedy Middle School was being closed:

Kennedy, in that area of Vine City towards English Avenue, that was high crime area. Kennedy has, for the past 20 years if you look at the data, Kennedy has been a truly failing school and so the community was basically tired of a failing school, failing the kids, they weren't getting the education; it was a never ending cycle of just a lack of education. I think you tapped on to part of the biggest issues that really, kept D.H. Stanton open was the fact that the community believed in the potential of the school to be great and the same thing happened with Coan and the same thing happened with the other schools that were moved off the [redistricting] list because the communities believed that our schools can be great, we just need the resources to get them great.

I suggested to her that those associated with Stanton and Coan had a certain amount of cultural, educational and financial capital that the Kennedy community may not have had. Emory University was actively involved in keeping Coan Middle School open with Provost Earl Lewis writing a letter to Dr. Davis on Coan's behalf (*East Atlanta Patch* 2012). She spoke of other all or mostly Black communities such as the one in the district where she is running and the fact that parents and community members there were involved with their neighborhoods and schools. She seems to have felt that members of the Kennedy community were not involved or engaged in an effort to save the school. Notably, the colleges and universities such as those in the Atlanta University

Center, are just blocks away from Kennedy Middle, including Spelman, Morehouse and Clark-Atlanta. However, they did not lend their support to the effort to save Kennedy in comparison to the support given to Coan or Stanton. Universities can bring a voice, prestige and capital to any cause, especially one centered on local, public education. I asked why she was running for the school board and this was her response:

Atlanta schools are just in bad shape, Karen, there are a lot of decisions being made that have a complete disregard for our children and our children aren't our top priority anymore. We need to get to back on the trajectory of having the high quality education system that Atlanta once had and that our children deserve.

3.1.3 Drew Charter and Kennedy Middle School: A Not So Happy Family

I spoke with a teacher from Charles Drew Charter School about her thoughts on sharing space with Kennedy Middle next year and the APS redistricting plan in general. She has been at Drew for only a year but has been an APS teacher for six years. Under the redistricting plan, she saw more students moving to schools on the north side while schools on the south side became more and more under enrolled. She felt that this was a purposeful move by the school board. She also felt that being at Kennedy for one year was doable and likened it to “camping,” saying that it “stinks but you can do it because you know it will be over in a year.” Drew is in Eastlake, an area of town that she describes as one of the worst in the city; but she has been told that Vine City is even worse. Parents seemed to be concerned about the commute, wondering why they would have to drive their children out of their neighborhood to downtown Atlanta where Kennedy is located. She said that teachers did not have an issue with going to Kennedy but she raised concerns about being in a large school building that would be fairly empty next year; I assume the concern was safety. She also noted that she had heard that the Kennedy school community was not happy about Drew students sharing space at the school saying:

I think it's interesting that APS put us all the way over there when there's other sites closer to us that might have been less controversial. I think Kennedy folks were very up-

set about it based on what was said at Drew.

It seems that the hope within the APS board is that there will be a smooth transition with Drew students moving in and more Kennedy students moving out, but with the Kennedy community feeling they are left in state of limbo and Drew working out the logistics of navigating a new school, only time will tell.

It has been argued that within the realm of gentrification and displacement, low-income people are not suffering from a lack of capital but instead they suffer from a lack of power and control within the spaces and places they call home (DeFilippis in Slater, 2009:307). I would suggest that often low-income neighborhoods lack various forms of capital that would provide them power and control over their lives and communities. The Peoplestown community where D.H. Stanton is located houses people from every socioeconomic background, but the middle-class, educated community members were the people who fought, marched, rallied, wrote letters and stood up for the school. Kennedy seemed to be on their own as a school community, with little to no help from the churches and universities in the area. Kennedy has always had a fight on their hands, whether it was dealing with housing displacement that contributed to low school enrollment or a communication breakdown with the APS superintendent and APS board. However, my research has shown that this community has tried to rally to save their neighborhood school and continues to fight to keep their school open.

4 CONCLUSION

4.1 The Way Forward For D.H. Stanton-Progress

According to William Teasley, Reverend Jones, Feroza Syed and others, Stanton has made great progress this past school year. Teasley has helped to roll out a “Leader in Me” program at the school and he hopes that eventually Stanton will become a school of choice in Atlanta. He also checks in with teachers and the administration on a regular basis and reminds them that the community “took the heat” for Stanton to stay open. Teasley lists many people and organizations that helped in the fight to save Stanton including the Casey Foundation and faith-based Emmaus House, through Reverend Jones. It was a community effort for a community school and the Peopletown community did not work so hard to save D.H. Stanton to just leave it idling. Teasley notes that there is still much work to do.

As for the way forward for D.H. Stanton, Jones is excited over the continuing energy surrounding the school. Partnerships have been started with different corporations such as AT&T, which are bringing new and valued resources into the school. This past Christmas, AT&T provided bicycles for every third grader and various businesses sponsored other grades as well. Finally, Stanton is working on an early learning initiative that would fulfill a long term interest in having a center in the neighborhood that would help working parents by providing daycare from infancy through pre-K. Syed told me of the great progress that the school has made just this year:

It really is amazing, not only did we stay open but there’s actual, visible growth, I mean, you could go back and look at pictures of the back of the school or the playground or inside the school, I mean we’re talking a new playground for the kids and you name it, the dual immersion. I mean every major item in our proposal [that was sent to the APS board] was hit in the first year and we’re working on our early learning center now. Also this year, Dr. Taylor just told me that we beat the whole district as far as 5th grade reading. I think we’re at 88% [on end of year tests], so the school is definitely changing, the Leader in Me program, the 7 habits, new staff, new playground, I mean everything is different, a whole new school, a whole new community and it’s exciting, it really is. I’m looking forward to doing more next year, seeing what we can do.

The school is also working towards acquiring the Annie E. Casey Atlanta civic site, and hoping to bring in Sheltering Arms to do the early learning center. Jones feels that the center will have a huge and positive impact on the neighborhood. Of the mobilization process that proved successful for Stanton Reverend Jones simply says:

What I thought was very wonderful was that [this process] brought people in the neighborhood from very different backgrounds together and it was a success. I mean that to me was fabulous for the neighborhood not just for the school children but for the neighborhood and it was one of those things like: we really did it!

Syed and Reverend Jones both felt that a process that began by trying to solve a problem was revamped into opportunities for positive transformation within the community. Both celebrated the diverse group of people who rallied around D.H. Stanton and whose actions ultimately led to a successful outcome for the school and the community.

4.2 The Way Forward: A Brand New Day for Kennedy?

In a surprising decision, District 2 APS board member Byron Amos, who originally voted to close Kennedy Middle School, proposed to keep the school open at the May school board meeting (LIVE BLOG: May 6, 2013 Board of Education Meeting). Amos' move has brought new life to the fight to save Kennedy Middle School. Community education activist Nate Dyer said at a recent town hall meeting that it was a new day in the Washington High School cluster. I asked a Kennedy parent if she believed that the school would stay open and she told me:

Well I mean if enough parents continue to fight for their community I believe it would stay open but for them to go ahead and start their career center, it's already in progress to me but I think if enough people fight it could be reopened. I'll just say that.

This parent was strong in her belief that parental involvement in this fight is essential. She has also seen improvements at Kennedy this year, telling me that the acting principal is outstanding and has things in order at the school. However, she does believe that if Drew Charter was not being housed in Kennedy next school year, the school would have definitely been closed this

year. APS Watchdog Simpson is cautious, telling me that if Kennedy does stay open, APS may have to deal with all the other schools that have closed now asking to be reopened, as well. Simpson does not feel that the move is realistic but she is hopeful.

I attended an APS board meeting on Monday, June 10 believing that the board would be voting on the motion to keep Kennedy Middle School open. Nate Dyer, Barbara Simpson and other community advocates were there to lend their support to the school. Audience members who wanted to make comments were allowed two minutes to speak directly to the board. Some in attendance gave their two minutes to other speakers. When Dyer was at the podium, he immediately thanked the board members for putting the motion to keep the school open on their working agenda. He said that the decision on the motion was unanimous and that now Kennedy needed one more unanimous decision, to keep the school open. Dyer suggested that the board had a unique opportunity to “breathe new life into a dismal situation that our kids are facing,” recounting how the school is trying to move forward from the fallout of the CRCT cheating scandal which he called one of the worst in history. He mentioned that the merging of Brown and Kennedy had created an environment that was not conducive to learning with daily fights, suspensions at will and a general lack of support and resources. Dyer said that Superintendent Davis was now charged with making a recommendation to the board on whether Kennedy should be allowed to stay open. He was confident that the board would make the “right” decision and keep the middle school open. He ended by saying that “John Fitzgerald Kennedy cannot become a charter school” and that “this is not about keeping a building open, it’s not about bricks and mortar, it’s about making a school of excellence.” When Dyer and other people spoke, community members in the audience held up signs that said “No Drew, Save Kennedy” and “Kids First!” I was surprised when the board soon adjourned the meeting after a few more comments. Apparently the board would not vote on the Kennedy motion that evening. I was told by an APS head-

quarters employee that an issue such as reopening a school after it has been slated for closure, and the matter has been voted on and approved by the board, will take some time to decide. So as it stands, the APS board has yet to vote on the matter, leaving the Kennedy Middle School community in limbo, as one informant suggested.

4.3 Atlanta Public Schools Redistricting: A Race and Class Issue?

I went into this research project assuming that issues of race and class would be central to the APS redistricting debate. I saw race and class at the heart of everything involving the redistricting plan, from the schools chosen for closure that served low-income minority communities to housing displacement in urban areas to the gentrification of downtown Atlanta in anticipation of the new Falcons stadium. I approached the question of school redistricting from a Critical Race Theory (CRT) perspective, which in part focuses on the effects of racism within a larger context of dominant White society. CRT also assumes that because of the history of racial discrimination in our country racism is ever present and often embedded in social and economic processes. I did feel that schools in predominantly African-American, low-income neighborhoods were being targeted for closure. No schools on the north side of town were selected to close and those schools have mostly White, middle-class student demographics; they are also in wealthier neighborhoods which have capital, resources and access that lower income neighborhoods just may not have. This fact, coupled with a history of segregation in Atlanta and APS, convinced me that redistricting was about race and class. I felt that Black schools were being closed on the south and west sides of town while a school like North Atlanta located in the arguably upscale Buckhead area of town was receiving a new campus, complete with \$70 million dollars in renovations.

However, my informants did not see the same issues that I did. I am also unsure if some of my informants knew which schools were chosen for closure; in other words, they may not have been aware that all the schools identified to close served mostly Black student populations. Both the Vine City and Peoplestown neighborhoods felt that their communities were fighting against various forces, which they tended to discuss in the language of economics and neighborhoods' changing circumstances more than of race per se. Low student enrollment was a key factor in the Superintendent's suggestions on which schools to close. In Peoplestown, the Stanton school community found themselves clashing with neighboring communities like Summerhill, who did not want their children attending Stanton; Summerhill community members were ultimately successful in having their neighborhood rezoned to another elementary school which contributed to low student enrollment at Stanton. In Vine City, housing displacement and the gentrification of downtown Atlanta contributed to low enrollment at Kennedy Middle School. Informants saw bigger issues surrounding housing displacement in the community beginning with the elimination of public housing in the area and concluding with the closing of neighborhood schools – push the poor people out of downtown Atlanta; my informants also cited a possible need for land in the areas surrounding the soon to be built Atlanta Falcons open air stadium. Vine City residents seemed to be aware of the economic forces that are aligned against their neighborhood and that seek to change the socioeconomic and possibly racial demographics of their downtown community.

4.4 The Power of Community...and Capital

Through my research I was able to observe members of the Vine City and Peoplestown community refuting the culture of poverty theory. My informants cared about education and community life. They sought to create a better learning environment for the children in each of

their neighborhoods. The false assumption that people in low-income areas are responsible for their own socioeconomic status and that they do not value education did not apply to the school communities I studied. Members of the Peoplestown neighborhood did identify some class issues surrounding redistricting stating that Stanton seemed like an easy target, with APS leaders assuming that the community would not fight to save the school; this could be an example of a culture of poverty theory presumption being attached to the neighborhood, on the part of the school board and Superintendent. However, it was a false assumption. Informants like Teasley recounted Stanton being vilified by parents in neighboring communities and Stanton also received no support from educational groups such as SEACS. The community members that stepped in to help save Stanton saw the necessity of having a neighborhood school and became subsequent partners with D.H. Stanton to help improve the school.

Ultimately both communities in my study mobilized to help save their neighborhood schools but with different results. Peoplestown neighbors were able to bring various forms of capital: economic, social, cultural and educational, to the table which in turn resulted in D.H. Stanton being saved from closure. Bourdieu (1985:197) viewed having these forms of capital as advantage in life. People with more dominant forms of capital or capital that is widely recognized and deemed acceptable are often able to achieve successful outcomes in education, business and lifestyle. To Bourdieu, these forms of capital are distinct in their uses and usefulness but in the long-term tend to translate into one another; for example, economic capital is linked with social and cultural capital. The income levels are different in Vine City than in Peoplestown, and to some degree those income levels can be expected to come along with corresponding forms of cultural and social capital. There are more homeowners in the Peoplestown community which suggests that the neighborhood has stakeholders with different agendas than those in Vine City;

it literally pays for a school like D.H. Stanton to remain open as the neighborhood and various stakeholders all benefit from the school surviving and subsequently thriving. The value of different forms of capital may be difficult to assess in a quantitative way, however, my ethnographic study has helped show how multiple forms of capital came into play in shaping outcomes of the redistricting debate.

My research revealed that ultimately, having the right skills, connections, networks and access makes all the difference when it comes to success in education and in life. The majority of the Peoplestown community members that mobilized to save Stanton were not parents at the school but were middle-class, professional, concerned neighbors who believed in improving the community and the school. These ethnically diverse Peoplestown community members possessed valuable capital that was used to help D.H. Stanton. Vine City residents also held a desire to see their neighborhood school remain open, but possessed less access to various forms of capital. The Kennedy Middle School community seemed to be at a disadvantage as far as avenues to help them in their struggle to keep the school open. Parents were not quoted in local media sources and the school did not have anyone writing Superintendent Davis on their behalf, but I suggest that their fight was just as strong as Stanton's, simply with a different outcome. As Lipman (2009:232) argues: "low-income is not synonymous with low-achievement."

4.5 Future Research

I recognize that not all neighborhood schools can or should remain open, especially when they are plagued with issues of decaying facades, low test scores and dwindling student enrollment. However, I do believe that if schools can be improved, they should be given the chance to survive or at the very least, communities affected by a school closure should be consulted. With communities being altered due to larger issues of housing displacement and gentrification, un-

doubtedly public schools will continue to be changed in the process. The addition of charter schools as the new face of school choice adds another layer to the debate. Future research on the subject of school restructuring and redistricting could be centered on exactly how schools are identified for closure, which groups of people are consulted when a plan such as the one in Atlanta is undertaken and an examination of the unintended consequences of such a proposal. My Kennedy Middle School informants spoke of the children being hurt the most in the process of losing their neighborhood school. The kids are being bussed to an unfamiliar community and tensions have mounted as two schools in different areas of town have been merged. It seems as though the powers that be on the APS board did not consider what might not work in the redistricting plan. Schools are at the heart of communities and when they are closed, social ties are often broken and children can lose their sense of security as they leave their familiar neighborhoods and are merged into possible rival schools. Lipman (2009:228) suggests that the “choice” to move neighborhoods or to “uproot oneself” from one community to another is reserved for the economically and racially privileged; she argues that “choice” should also include “the right the stay put.” When choice is taken away from families and communities, inequality persists and deepens.

If I had not been saddled with time constraints, I would have liked to interview more parents from each of the schools I studied. I am also curious to know why two other APS schools were successful in their efforts to be removed from the closure list. Did those communities rally around their neighborhood schools as Peoplestown did for D.H. Stanton? What resources did the school communities use? What kind of capital did these schools have, if any and did it play a role in saving the schools? I would also have liked to speak with APS board members on their understanding of why and how particular schools were identified for closure. Why did the Super-

intendent and other board members feel that a redistricting plan such as this one was necessary? I firmly believe that school board members should either be current or former teachers who can bring a certain perspective to the discourse of school restructuring; teachers who interact with children everyday and can provide an overview of what neighborhood schools mean to the children they teach and how closing the schools affects them. Again, there are no easy answers on making schools equitable for all children but I still believe that schools are central to social and economic development within neighborhoods. When schools are closed, communities suffer.

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