

NEOLIBERALISM, POLITICS, AND THE ECONOMY: A CASE STUDY EXAMINING THE
SCHOOL CLOSURE PROCESS IN AN URBAN DISTRICT

by

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(Under the Direction of Sheneka Williams)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this case study is to examine the decision making process of board members in an urban district when faced with closing urban schools. The study analyzed the information that board members used to select schools for closure as well as their perceptions on the decision making process. A neoliberal framework was used to frame the study because many urban districts throughout the country struggle to remain afloat based on the impact of charter schools, gentrification, and privatization of services that are generally reserved for public schools. It was found that board members relied heavily on enrollment and economic factors to aid their decisions. In addition, the role of local community politics impacted the selection process and influenced how schools were selected for closure. Overall, board members felt that the conditions of many schools should have resulted in more schools being targeted for closure.

INDEX WORDS: Neoliberalism, Urban School Closings, Economics, Enrollment, Charter
 Schools

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DEDICATION

This is for my first teachers, Eclan Sr. and Petronella David, my father and mother. You grew up poor and didn't have a fraction of what I have now, yet you both sacrificed so much to ensure that I would have the education that you never had.

This is also for Eres and Tripp, to let you see that it can be done. Never let anyone tell you what you can't do. The world is yours.

Finally, this is for Victoria: the better half of me, my best friend. Every person deserves to have a champion like you in their corner. You make me want to be great. We did it!

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Beginning in 2001, over 40 public schools in Chicago closed due to low academic achievement or underutilization (de la Torre & Gwynne, 2009). Since 2003, Georgia school systems have seen over \$5 billion of state funds cut from their budgets, which has seriously impacted their ability to effectively operate schools (Education, 2012). Parents representing school districts from around the country in New York City, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C. have voiced their outrage as they fight the imminent closing of urban schools.

These cuts began as an effort to offset the effects of the declining economy. The loss of state support left school districts struggling to generate more funds or face the reduction or elimination of programs, positions and/or services previously funded by state dollars. This has forced many school districts to become creative in balancing financial losses. In 2010, a demographic study of the Southland School District (SSD) examined the potential growth over time of its student population (Southland School District, 2010). The school system commissioned a number of high-profile agencies to conduct the study: McKibben Demographic Research, LLC; Cropper GIS Consulting, LLC; and the Bleakly Advisory Group.

The groups compiled data for the study by analyzing various maps and tables to identify trends and patterns that indicated areas of growth, decline, and migration throughout the school system (SSD, 2010). The data were retrieved from the Southland School District's enrollment database, the Internal Revenue Service, the U.S. Census Bureau, the Southland Regional Commission, and the city of Southland. An executive summary presented to the SSD reported:

Due to factors cited in this report, total system enrollment is expected to grow modestly over the next five years and then slowly trend downward after 2015. Enrollment changes will not be uniform among grade levels, attendance areas, or SRTs. Volatile economic and housing market conditions create added uncertainties which could impact these forecasts, particularly in the short term. (SSD, 2010, part 2, p. 5)

In addition to analyzing data specific to SSD students, the commissioned groups also used comparative data from the surrounding metro counties and examined the enrollment of private schools that drew students who were residents of Southland. In the context of the economic crisis confronting school systems around the country, the SSD leadership felt the need to make difficult decisions that would eventually have major implications for students throughout the system. In May 2011, the groups that conducted the study gave a public presentation to a community group to share their findings and present a timeline of next steps in looking at facilities planning and capacity for the school system. These steps included holding a series of focus groups comprised of various parents, community members, and other stakeholders.

John Pascoe began his tenure as interim superintendent of SSD in July 1, 2011. By this time, the problems facing the school system were clearly defined, and Davis was responsible for outlining a plan based on the study's results. To address the concerns, Davis created a rank-ordered listing of three distinct priorities. Priority one included creating boundaries that would be functional for the next 10 years. Priority two included implementing measures such as retaining newer facilities. Priority three included looking at schools with viable, functioning partnership relationships.

On March 5, 2012, interim superintendent Davis unveiled an initial plan that called for closing 10 SSD schools (Sarrio, 2012). This proposal was met with a public outcry and tremendous resistance as many parents and community members fought to retain these community schools. According to data provided by the Governor's Office of Student Achievement (2011), the schools slated for closure had predominantly black populations reaching upwards of 90 percent, with similar rates of students eligible for free and reduced lunch. Cries for equity and fairness ensued because schools in the predominantly white and affluent areas of North Southland remained untouched (Sarrio, 2012).

In a 1998 study, Clotfelter (1998) found that the largest disparities occurred not among schools within the same district, but rather between urban and suburban schools, as white families fled urban areas to settle in rapidly growing suburban districts. Tarasawa (2012) described migratory patterns that created disparities between white and minority families.

The greater discrepancy between neighborhoods and catchment zones exist in Southland and the inner suburbs for all racial groups. On average Whites in Southland and the inner public high schools are underrepresented but overrepresented in the outer northern and southern suburbs. In contrast, Blacks are overrepresented in and inner-suburb schools but are slightly underrepresented in the outer suburbs. (Tarasawa, 2012, p. 662)

When Pascoe posted his final recommendations for closure on March 31, 2012 he defined the problems as low enrollment due to the perception of low academic rigor and minimal support, which resulted in families moving. He noted that schools in the North end of the district already faced overcrowding. "By addressing under enrollment, as well as overcrowding, we can ensure educational equity across the district" (SSD, 2010).

Dean (1981) noted that school closings are often viewed as an attack on and affront to the way of life for the people in a neighborhood. Issues of equity are raised as families are forced to make choices based on their economic and political prowess. McUsic (2004) observed that one of the central tenets of *Brown v. Board of Education* was that students will only achieve true equality of education through integration. Yet even as attempts were made to address school inequities, the unintended consequences of *Brown* perpetuated entire districts that failed to effectively educate their students. “Beginning in the 1990s, the Supreme Court began dismantling desegregation in the South by limiting district courts’ ability to counter the effects of residential segregation and offering local districts an easy route out of court supervision and desegregation programs” (McUsic, 2004, p. 1340).

Statement of the Problem

Valencia (1984) observed, “Based on a small number of case studies, there is ample evidence that economically advantaged white students and their parents have been the clear winners while minority and working class students and their parents have been the clear losers as a result of closure decisions” (p. 12). Valencia found that decisions regarding the closing of schools frequently targeted the lowest performing schools. With plans to eliminate five SSD schools for the 2012-2013 school year and two additional schools for 2013-2014, concerns continued to surface regarding the effectiveness of the remaining schools, which would now have to contend with an additional student population, many of whom have unique needs due to their high poverty level (21st Century School Fund, 1997).

The symptoms that plagued this school system are also evident in many other urban school systems around the country. These include urban flight resulting in low enrollment, as well as the feelings of neglect for the community (Dean, 1977). Moreover, once students move to

new schools, these new schools generally display similar patterns of weak academic reputations (de la Torre & Gwynne, 2009). This consequence belies the argument made by various policymakers that closing schools is an effective strategy for improving academic performance (Engberg, Gill, Zamarro, & Zimmer, 2012).

Some opponents contend that school closings deprive students of the right to receive a free and appropriate education. Shakeshaft and Gardner (1983) argued that changes in schooling result in anxiety for elementary age children, as well as causing high dropout rates among high school students. They conclude, “Therefore, school closing can be challenged as acts of unjustifiable harm to those involved” (p. 493), noting that closings also result in overcrowding in the schools designated to receive displaced students.

Hunter and Donahoo (2003) identify the following characteristics of urban school settings:

- Poor and minority students make up a vast majority of the population in urban schools
- Students in urban settings are more likely to have teachers with 0-2 years of experience
- Differences in culture cause high frustration levels for both groups

Existing research on school closures has rarely examined the steps taken by policymakers to address the academic and fiscal concerns of schools that are eventually targeted for closure. In weighing the decision to close schools against the overall cost saving, there is little evidence from school districts to suggest that closing schools is a worthwhile financial endeavor (Shakeshaft & Gardner, 1983). “Most districts, even those that have closed schools, are unable to document how much money is saved by this action” (Shakeshaft & Gardner, 1983, p. 494).

Lerman (1984) contends that a series of negative economic outcomes follows school closures, including a decline in property values, adjustments to taxes, and an eventual change in living locations for many families. Colwell and Guntermann (1984) argued that neighborhood elementary schools see a significant loss in enrollment from closings that correlates with property values. Yet little research has explored whether and how community needs and concerns are addressed once the local school has closed.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the decisionmaking process of board members in an urban district when faced with closing schools. Much of the existing literature on school closings has revealed the negative impact of school closings on students and their families, as well as on the school systems facing the decision to close schools. The literature identifies multiple issues and concerns, including the effect on property values and the neighborhood itself; the lack of evidence supporting actual cost savings for school districts; and the disproportionate number of minority students affected by school closures in urban districts.

I will use a single case study method to examine an urban school district in the southeastern United States after school closing decisions have been made. This study will address the following research questions:

1. How do district school board members decide which schools to target for closure in an urban school district?
2. How do district policymakers perceive the school closure process in an urban school district?

Significance of the Study

Previous studies have sought to address a variety of issues related to school closures and their impact on students and local communities. A number of studies have established board members' and administrators' doubts about parents' ability to mobilize (Gold, Henig, & Simon, 2011; Quinn & Carl, 2013). Other research has explored the relationship between economics and the cost of repurposing empty buildings (Warner & Dowdall, 2013).

Some researchers have noted that from the implementation of *Brown* to the present, re-segregation has created bleak conditions in many urban school districts, and their work documents how these districts arrived at this state (Clotfelter, 1998; Farley & Frey, 1994; Hunter & Donahoo, 2003; McUsic, 2004). Some studies that explore the effects of school closings on students argue for integrating schools as a strategy to support minority students in urban areas (Engberg et al., 2012; Esposito, 1999). However, few studies have examined the role of board members and other district policymakers.

The present study sought to identify and explain how district policymakers can effectively address closing urban schools. This focus is significant because district policymakers, including board members, are primarily responsible for enacting policies that affect the entire district. In addition, given the characteristics of urban minority families, the possibility of having an answer to this enigma is quite impactful. This study will contribute to the existing literature examining how board members choose which schools to close by examining the role of politics in this process.

The perspective of the board members is a learning tool for other school boards as this process is being replicated throughout the country, with school districts nationwide facing similar decisions. The study illuminated the decision making process of the district's elected

policymakers, the factors that should have been considered but did not receive much attention, and the areas that were strongly criticized by parents and the community. To date no other studies have focused on politics from this perspective. As more and more districts around the country continue to close schools in an effort to ease budgetary shortfalls, this study will cause them to create a true environment of community voice, one that exhausts all all possibilities when making decisions that can affect entire communities.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This chapter will provide an in-depth examination of the scholarly literature relevant to the problem of school closures in urban districts. The chapter begins by presenting the framework of neoliberalism in education, providing a historical perspective on neoliberalist views and describing their contemporary application in urban schools. Next, it outlines historical understandings of school closings and consolidation in the U.S. to provide a context for the study. The chapter continues with an explanation of the role of school boards as well as their decision-making process. Next, because segregation is a common theme in urban districts, the chapter explores the impact of segregation on the quality of education students receive, then examines the impact of school closings on student achievement. The review concludes with a discussion of the impact of school closings on the local community, examining in particular how closed facilities are utilized and whether school closures result in true cost savings.

Neoliberalism and Urban Schools

Pauline Lipman (2011) defines *neoliberalism* as “an ensemble of economic and social policies, forms of governance, and discourses and ideologies that promote self-interest, unrestricted flows of capital, deep reductions in the cost of labor, and sharp retrenchment of the public sphere” (p. 6). Watkins (2012) explains further that “neoliberalism demands that the government abandon social welfarism in favor of privatization” (p. 14). Hankins and Martin (2006) highlight the impact of political, social, and economic ideologies in defining neoliberalism and note its reputation as a strategy to allow local schools to have more control.

An overarching tenet of neoliberalism is a reduction of social services for the poor coinciding with an increase in the privatization of services such as education, without regard for possible negative outcomes (Lipman, 2011). This form of privatization is directly aligned with much of the literature on the effects of closing schools. Neoliberalism, as discussed in the work of Lipman and other scholars, presents a framework through which to examine the phenomenon of school closures. Neoliberalism in schools has led to a drastic increase in the practices that define urban districts today—venture philanthropy, high-stakes testing, school reform, school choice—all with the intention of recreating the market competition nature of the corporate world (Lipman, 2004, 2011; Saltman, 2012).

The rise of neoliberalism in the United States can be indirectly traced to the nation's efforts to rebuild immediately following World War II (Lipman, *The New Political Economy of Urban Education: Neoliberalism, Race, and the Right to the City*, 2011). This period also saw an increase in the amount of taxes paid by the wealthy for various social service programs that eventually began to decline during the 1960s (Anyon, *Radical Possibilities*, 2005). The creation of welfare programs along with rapidly increasing government spending defined much of the pre-1960s era. This time period produced tremendous economic growth, which eventually erupted in the 1960s as women, minorities, and the economically disadvantaged began to challenge the systemic discrimination they faced and demand equal rights.

By the late 1960s the Civil Rights Movement, which initially sought to gain equal rights for African Americans, now included economic demands (Lipman, 2011). At the same time, governments in the U.S. as well as Western Europe sought ways to curtail government spending while creating a means to demonstrate racial equality and allow corporations to benefit economically (Lipman, 2011). Within this framework, Lipman explains:

The role of government is to remove restrictions on trade and corporate investment, reduce corporate taxes and eliminate regulations of industry, limit the power of unions, turn public services and infrastructure over to the market, and withdraw from provision of social welfare. (Lipman, 2011, p. 8)

The struggle for civil liberties in the 1960s was met with backlash in the 1970s from conservative leaders, who sought to preserve the free market system they felt was threatened by a liberal agenda (deMarrais, 2006). deMarrais (2006) identifies four conservative foundations that used their influence to advance this agenda of free market enterprise, paving the way for neoliberalist initiatives. Anyon (1997) notes that between 1980 and 1992, 60% of federal funds initially earmarked for education were cut in an effort to match inflation, forcing local governments to make up the difference. The budget cuts were a sign of the political times, in which Republicans pushed to eliminate the Department of Education and shift control of schools from federal to local authorities (Jennings, 1998).

As elected officials, the school board members had the power to make decisions affecting the school districts with little need to consult with the districts themselves (Lipman, 2011; Watkins, 2012). Gold, Henig, and Simon (2013) affirm that the rise in government involvement in education was triggered by the need for an economic strategy, a concern that eventually led to increasing privatization in education. They note that privatization led to a surge in both for-profit and nonprofit companies attempting to take over failing schools, provide training for teachers and school leaders, prepare students for standardized tests, and publish tests.

Lipman (2004) argued that the governance structure in education is primarily to blame for what has happened to urban schools. She argues that the problem with the neoliberal perspective lies with who has the power to create and enact policy. In fact, the push for global cities led to the

drive for more highly specialized schools to create workers who could compete in the international market and eventually contribute to a free market economy (Lipman, 2004).

Districts around the country saw corporate and business leaders partnering with states and the federal government to advance agendas that demanded more accountability and created a highly trained workforce. Such partnerships influenced policies such as the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 (Jennings, 1998).

The effects of gentrification on urban districts has been documented as a result of this kind of impact in urban districts by closing schools (Anyon, 1997, 2005; Lipman, 2004, 2011). Lipman (2011) describes gentrification as a strategy to enforce who belongs in specific neighborhoods by relegating the poor and minorities to some areas while creating wealthy neighborhoods for others. Such stratification impacts the type of schools that students attend. “Neoliberalism reframes how we think about the city—who has a right to live there, what constitutes a good neighborhood, and what kinds of economic development are possible and necessary” (p. 33).

Fueled by federal programs such as HOPE VI, which led to demolishing many urban neighborhoods and replacing them with mixed-income housing, gentrification has continuously changed the landscape of urban neighborhoods and schools (Lipman, 2011). HOPE VI was created by Congress in 1992 to address the needs of poor families living in housing projects considered to be in a severe state of disrepair (Popkin et al., 2004). As Katz and Rose (2013) observe:

Accidents of geography remain powerful determinants of school quality and undermine the common school ideal at the core of American public education by effectively segregating by income and race. Today schools are resegregating by race, while in old cities gentrification results in new patterns of inequality and post-secondary education

floats increasingly beyond the reach of low-income students. (p. 226)

Parents in these original neighborhoods were offered very little choice and, in many cases, were forced out of their newly gentrified neighborhoods. Housing vouchers offered by the government did very little to improve the living situation for these families, and in many cases children were sent to live with relatives (Lipman, 2004).

Popkin et al. (2004) argue that there were two sides of the HOPE VI policy. Supporters insisted that the public housing that was initially targeted for demolition was not fit for occupancy. However, an opposing viewpoint also emerged:

The opposing view argues that the original stock of public housing represented a critical resource for meeting very low-income needs, and that the federal government was obligated to restore all of these units to a decent standard occupancy. From this perspective, the HOPE VI program may have permanently reduced the availability of deeply subsidized rental assistance, sacrificing the interests of poor families in favor of other priorities. In fact, some advocates argue that so-called “soft replacement” with vouchers is unsatisfactory, because vouchers are not as secure as hard units and require recipients to find and sustain housing in the private market. (Popkin et al., 2004, p. 51)

Lipman (2011) observes that “Hope VI has not shown a deconcentration in poverty; instead, it simply moved poverty to another area” (p. 98). This outcome directly reflects on the patterns of school closure in urban districts. Lipman identifies the lack of investment as well as skyrocketing home prices in many urban neighborhoods as primary reasons for the low enrollment in many urban schools. Emphasizing the ill-effects of neoliberalism, Lipman (2004) notes:

Areas that were home to low-income communities of color are foci of public-private partnerships, gentrification complexes, privatization, and de-democratization through mayoral takeovers of public institutions and corporate-led governance bodies. This context defines the stakes involved in closing schools in urban core areas and creating new schools to market new mixed-income developments to the middle class. (p. 37)

Anyon (2005) argued that creating areas with high concentrations of poverty only continues to support failing, high poverty schools.

Lipman (2015) argued that venture philanthropy capitalizes on neighborhood and community disinvestment in public schools by creating reform initiatives.

The neoliberal rollback of the social state in the 1980s and 1990s laid the groundwork for private philanthropies to gain influence over public education.. This was particularly so in cities where cuts in federal funding and managerial governance and public-private partnerships opened the door for private interests to influence urban social policy in areas such as health, education, and housing. (Lipman, 2015, p. 245)

As a result of the venture philanthropy that is an outgrowth of neoliberalism, more and more districts are being run by former CEOs with strong ties to their former businesses and corporations, who frequently employ managerial practices gleaned from their previous workplaces (Lipman, 2015). “In the culture of ‘new public management,’ the state draws on the managerial discourses and methods of the private sector to run public schools, with funding from corporate philanthropies jump starting the process” (Lipman, 2015, p. 246). Lipman (2015b) notes that the ushering in of the Obama administration signified a major change in how U.S. schools operated, based on the new administration’s education policies as well as Arne Duncan’s appointment as Secretary of Education. Race to the Top (RTTT) funding was a major part of the

Obama administration's entry into neoliberalism. Not only was RTTT created in conjunction with venture philanthropic giant the Gates Foundation, it also forced states and local school districts to compete for funds at a time when districts were trying to supplement funding after being devastated by a failed economy (Lipman, 2015b). "Although RTTT is not an explicit urban policy, the primary impact of these mandates is on urban school districts /with majorities of low-income students of color" (Lipman, 2015b).

Charter schools are a prime example of neoliberalism in urban education. In addition to directly competing with public schools for "clients," they siphon public dollars to support private interests that may not meet the needs of all students. "The process of closing public schools and reopening them as quasi-market public-private ventures is integral to the neoliberal urban project" (Lipman, 2012, p. 38). Buras (2012) poignantly observes that the privatization of education through charter schools focuses less on the primary role of schools in educating students and more on viewing schools primarily as businesses. Hankins and Martin (2006) examined the *Southland City Paper's* (SCP's) use of pro-neoliberal language to describe charter schools as a means of advancing charter schools' neoliberal agenda. A table depicting their findings can be found in Chapter 4.

Hankins and Martin (2006) framed charter schools through the lens of competition, which is embedded in neoliberalism and market economies. They note:

Charter schools are able to target students as future workers in ways that are explicitly separated from the traditional public education regime and connected to or representative of localized, private business needs and interests. It is in this way that they are explicitly neoliberal, and that flexibility is particularly evident in their ability to experiment with their curricula and management structure. Charter schools differentiate educational

outcomes by tailoring their course offerings to train students with specific job skills. In particular, courses can be taught by teachers who are associated with private industry and who do not have traditional teaching credentials. (Hankins & Martin, 2006, p. 540)

Hankins and Martin (2006) concluded that part of the reason for the *SCP*'s "advocacy work" on behalf of charter schools, which consisted of articles published over a period of time that made a case for establishing charter schools in the metro Southland area, was to push for Georgia to create a more globally competitive workforce.

Katz (2013) and Erickson (2013) point to the failure of charter schools to integrate students, perpetuating a tradition of segregation in which White students attend affluent schools and Black students attend schools with little money and few resources. The implications of such segregation are twofold. First, it continues to perpetuate many of the negative effects of neoliberalism on education; second, it interjects the structures of the corporate world as governance models for schools.

Katz's (2013) discussion of dependence, or a welfare state in public schools, summarizes many of the concerns that arise from the neoliberalism movement:

In the educational division of the public welfare state, test results play the role taken on elsewhere by employment. They are gatekeepers to the benefits of first-class citizenship. The danger is that high stakes and stiffer graduation requirements will further stratify citizenship among the young, with kids failing tests joining nonworking mothers and out-of-work black men as the undeserving poor. In this way, public education complements the rest of the welfare state as a mechanism for reproducing—as well as mitigating—inequality in America. (p. 101)

In an effort to exercise some semblance of power in the face of neoliberalism in education, Lipman (2004) focuses on the power structures of affluent communities and neighborhoods that usually incorporate well-run, organized schools; highly capable teachers; and powerful parent organizations. Race and class are integral elements in such settings, usually seen in predominantly White settings, while the opposite is common in less affluent, predominantly Black communities. As a final indictment of the impact of neoliberalism, Lipman (2015b) adds:

The Obama administration has expanded neoliberal restructuring of urban education.

This contributes to disinvestment and destabilization of low-income communities of color and facilitates appropriation of black urban space, in particular, for capital accumulation.

Despite the DOE's emphasis on evidence-based reform, these policies find little support in education research. They do, however, further political agendas to expand education markets and privatization of public goods in line with broader neoliberal urban restructuring. (Lipman, 2015b, p. 60)

Neoliberalism as a framework connects the literature reviewed in this chapter by carefully painting a picture of urban schools in distress and their relationship with school closings: segregation due to gentrification, the impact of closings on communities, the effects of charter schools on public school districts, and the overall impact of closings on the students. I drew heavily on Lipman's work on neoliberalism throughout this literature review because she has conducted extensive research in this area and studied its impact in the context of urban school districts. It is clear that urban districts are disproportionately affected based on race and socioeconomic status. What is less clear is the process that district policymakers, mainly board members, use to select schools for closure. An effectively executed case study can add to the

literature that helps to define this process for urban districts, as well as informing future districts on whether closing schools is an effective strategy to save money during budget shortfalls.

Historical Perspective on School Closings and Consolidation

Howley, Johnson, and Petrie (2011) define *school consolidation* as the combining of districts or schools to achieve school reform, create larger schools, or provide economic stability. The earliest documented case of school consolidation occurred in the mid-1800s in New England. Horace Mann, secretary of the Board of Education in Massachusetts, and Horace Eaton, state superintendent of Vermont, worked together to designate the township as the base of educational power in an effort to eliminate smaller districts (Strang, 1987). What makes this early case so significant is that it foreshadowed many of the issues that eventually led to future school consolidation. “Their arguments anticipated those made a century later, referring to the fiscal inefficiencies, unprofessional leadership, unequally distributed resources, and backwards educational practice of small districts” (Strang, 1987, p. 355).

The modern school consolidation movement can be traced to the early twentieth century (Berry, 2003, 2006). The initial push for consolidation was based on the goal of creating schools that were specialized and had more efficient forms of administration. Berry (2006) argued that this early movement had a major impact on the quality of education students received:

In particular, by dramatically cutting the number of schools and districts, consolidation reduced an important source of between-school and between-district variation in education quality. Within-school and within-district variation in education quality may have risen as schools and districts became larger and instruction more specialized. (Berry, 2006, p. 49)

Berry (2006) suggested school consolidation provided better facilities at a lower cost. Similarly, Cox and Cox (2010) observed that “beginning in the early part of the 20th century, the idea that bigger results in lower costs fueled the consolidation effort” (p. 83).

Despite signs of success in urban districts (Strang, 1987), the early consolidation movement did not achieve much success in rural areas until the 1930s and 1940s. Foster (1975) noted that there was significant opposition from the rural districts, known as “common districts,” in comparison to the independent or more urban districts. The common districts were not willing participants in any form of change, despite the shortcomings of their educational system:

The common districts were a relic of the horse and buggy days and could not meet the demands for present educational services. In addition, they claimed the existence of an extremely large number of small districts led to inefficiency and the inability to raise the capital necessary for new construction, and provided no method to even out the inequities in the property tax base.

A shift in urban politics during the early 20th century saw political power move from politically-based governance structures to school superintendents and formal school organizations (Tyack, 1974, cited in Strang, 1987). Berry (2006) contends that there was a strong correlation between consolidating schools and consolidating districts. He notes that education reformers in the first half of the 20th century believed there should be an average of one consolidated school for every five to seven schools closed. Berry and West (2008) describe the impact of school consolidation on local communities as early as the first half of the twentieth century, identifying key concerns regarding diversity:

The loss of the local school could therefore threaten a community’s social cohesion and even its economic vitality. Diversity also appears to have been a significant barrier to the

consolidation of local school districts. For the period after 1950, Alesina et al. (2004) find that less consolidation took place in counties that were more racially, ethnically, and religiously diverse. (p. 3)

Berry and West (2008) noted that few communities were able to withstand the financial and political pressure from state governments to consolidate. It is interesting to note how much political pressure was exerted, even in these early years. As a result of the consolidation process, schools and districts saw tremendous changes in enrollment sizes (Berry & West, 2008; Howley, Johnson, & Petrie, 2011). “Tens of thousands of dispersed one-teacher schools (and one-school districts) were systematically closed between 1930 and 1960” (Howley, Johnson, & Petrie, 2011, p. 9).

Berry (2006) reported that almost a third of the nation’s public schools were closed during this period, paving the way for what public schools look like today. The changes in school and district size due to consolidation also led to another development in public education: the increased influence of the state government (Berry, 2003) as a result of increases in state funding, first between 1930 and 1950 and again in the late 1970s. Major changes also occurred as local dollars, which in the 1920s accounted for 80% of school funding, dropped to less than 50% by the 1970s, while federal funding increased slightly but never amounted to more than 10% of school funding (Berry, 2003).

Berry (2003) challenges the changes that occurred during the consolidation period amounted to overall education reform. He noted that “during the same period of 1930 to 1970 the school term grew longer, class sizes grew smaller, and teachers became better paid. The overall effect of these related reforms was to transform the small, informal, community-controlled

schools of the nineteenth century into centralized, professional run educational bureaucracies” (p. 5).

Kenney (1981) found that students attending larger high schools learned more than students in their smaller counterparts, noting that the increased cost of adding more students is offset by the decrease in instructional costs. Salman (1976) worked with the Kansas City School District to establish criteria and procedures regarding school consolidation. Based on his study, the district created the following rank-ordered list of criteria employed to select schools for consolidation or closure:

1. Achievement levels
2. Facility cost per pupil
3. Space per pupil
4. Teacher load
5. Racial or minority balance
6. Age and general condition of the buildings
7. Auxiliary facilities
8. Commuting distance
9. Number of pupils
10. Fuel requirements

Salman (1976) explained that these items were not to be used in isolation, but rather in concert with each other to make the best possible decision. He also identified four nonquantitative factors that should be used in the decision making process:

1. Community impact
2. Psychological and cultural impact on affected students

3. Safety and security
4. Ability to relate to physical environment

Church and Murray (1993) identified declining enrollment in conjunction with building utilization as major factors in making the decision to close schools, noting:

It is also important to prevent schools from being assigned too few students. If the utilization rate of a school is low, it is possible that a small number of students, distributed over the various grades, would yield smaller than average class sizes. This means that the cost for instructors at underutilized schools would be higher per pupil than at schools operating closer to the planned class size. (p. 28)

In a study analyzing the long-term effects of consolidating the Hamilton County and Chattanooga City Schools, Cox and Cox (2010) found that consolidation yielded no positive impact on education and actually increased expenditures. “With pressure on school districts to cut costs and raise student achievement, consolidation is likely to remain on the educational agenda as a cost-saving strategem and a tool for school improvement and reform. This study shows that consolidation in an urban district did not lower costs or deliver better educated students” (p. 90).

While the literature reviewed in this section illuminates a number of trends regarding school size, closings, and consolidation, it does not describe what these schools or districts looked like once the process was complete. That is, while this literature identifies various strategies and formulas, it does not examine to what degree these approaches were followed or describe what the actual consolidation process entails. To understand the process we must look to the decision makers themselves, the school board members, to analyze how they make decisions and the role they play in this process. The following section thus explores how board members make

decisions, the conditions for an ideal decision making process, and some possible influences of the decisions they make.

School Boards and Decision Making

Grissom (2009) observes that “although board members play key roles in setting policies, monitoring performance, and formulating organizational strategy, how well their members function together as a governing unit can have significant implications for the management of the organization and for the organization’s ability to meet its goals” (p. 601). School boards trace their history back to the New England colonies, where citizens were first entrusted with the governance of selected schools (Rosenberger, 1997). Citizens selected for these committees worked together to oversee schools. Walser (2009) identifies a Massachusetts citizens’ group in Dorchester in 1645 in which “able bodied men” were selected to fulfill various governance tasks for the local schools.

“The South and West eventually were added to the expansion of local groups across the country, and as they grew in size and became more diversified, the need to establish actual school boards to facilitate the day-to-day operations of local school districts paved the way for present-day boards” (Howell, 2005). “Originally, these committees had complete and total control: they levied and collected taxes, hired and supervised teachers, provided school buildings, examined pupils and teachers, and certified progress. As the responsibilities grew, the need for special attention became evident and boards began to appoint superintendents in the 1830s” (Rosenberger, 1997, p. 9).

Iannaccone and Lutz (1995) identified major changes in school governance structures between the 1890s and the 1920s. “A primary function was to effectively separate school policy making from the poorer neighborhoods and school governance from general-purpose governance”

(Iannaccone & Lutz, 1995, p. 44). By the 1920s, Iannaccone and Lutz (1995) reported, the reform movement had produced four key changes in the governance of urban schools:

1. School boards were smaller, and their members were either appointed or elected through at-large positions
2. Class and ethnic control of schools
3. Politics and bureaucracy would now become a part of school board culture
4. The early stages of continuous large-scale educational bureaucracy emerged, and with them a shift to a more centralized system of educational policymaking and governance.

This reform movement also had unintended consequences that changed not only the size but also the purpose of school boards:

Regardless of the criteria used, e.g., teacher/pupil ratio, courses offered, availability of specializations, or cost of materials, the policy premise was that increasing the size of the district would produce more efficient schools and save money. In state after state, the number of school districts declined, their size increased, and the span between their school boards and their citizens became greater. It would, however, take a naïve politics of education researcher not to see that larger districts also meant job enhancement and increased salaries for administrators and support staff. Consolidation reflected two forces: (1) organized professional demands and (2) demographic mobility toward urbanization of the whole society. (Iannaccone & Lutz, 1995, p. 45)

Kelly (1969) adds, “the reforms which swept local and state governments near the turn of the century as a result of the Progressive movement hastened the trend toward the

“professionalization of school administration, a trend which itself reflects the separation of the executive and legislative functions” (p. 137).

During the 1960s, communities again reiterated the need to wield more influence over the governance of local school districts. Cities such as New York saw changes to their governance structure as the large board was divided into smaller local boards throughout the city in an attempt to provide local control in the communities, with unsatisfactory results (Iannaccone & Lutz, 1995). Chicago replicated this idea in the 1990s; however, their change was founded on the lack of public confidence and the need for more oversight and accountability (Iannaccone & Lutz, 1995).

Adding to this change was the need to supply a work force that demanded skilled workers to meet the needs of a rapidly changing society (Howell, 2005). Howell (2005) identifies another significant change in the governance duties of school boards as a result of their reliance on state and federal funding, which led to conflict with state and federal agencies as the boards sought greater autonomy in making decisions for their schools. Briffault (2005) describes the local boards’ struggle for autonomy from state and federal control through a series of court cases, with the following results:

First, eight state supreme courts agreed with the U.S. Supreme Court that the value of local control justifies relying on the local property tax-based system of school financing, notwithstanding the resulting inter-district spending inequalities. Second, even many of the state courts that have held that their state constitution requires schools to meet a statewide standard of educational adequacy have also ruled that individual local districts are free to raise and spend above the basic level. Finally, one state supreme court has

looked to school district autonomy to invalidate a state plan that would have redistributed locally raised funds from affluent districts to poorer districts (Briffault, 2005, p. 48).

Wong (1995) highlights the view of educational inequality with origins in isolation in central cities. This view stems from a shift from state-directed to market-directed economies that the former Soviet Union sought to replicate. Wong (1995) draws on the work of Chubb and Moe to paint a harsh view of school governance as “an open system where political interests have successfully expanded the bureaucracy and proliferated programmatic rules to protect their gains” (p. 28). Chubb and Moe’s research showed that politics and the bureaucracy had little effect on student achievement, demonstrating that school boards had very little influence on schools’ primary reason for existence.

McAdams (2006) posits that before school boards can begin to address the work at hand, they must have in place core beliefs and commitments to guide their process:

To be effective change agents, board members must have at least the following core beliefs and make the following commitments. They must believe that the 95% or so of children who do not have severe learning disabilities can perform at grade level and graduate from high school with an academic diploma. They must believe that the school effect is significant and that school districts can become high performing organizations. And they must commit themselves to grade-level performance for all children and the elimination of the achievement gap. (McAdams, 2006, p. 15)

Rosenberger (1997) identifies the following specific functions and duties of school boards:

- District policy
- Recruiting, hiring, and evaluating the superintendent of schools
- Planning and goal setting

- Financial resources
- School facilities
- Instruction
- Public relations
- Adjudication and investigation
- Retaining an attorney or law firm
- Setting strategy and coordinating litigation efforts
- Working with various officials and agencies

McAdams (2006) asserts:

[H]owever we govern our schools, three points are clear: governance springs directly or indirectly from the people; governance is always shared; and governance must control management. This is because our democracy has been designed to reflect the will of the majority, protect the rights of the minority, and check the exercise of power. (p. 9)

The political nature of school boards is evident in the democratic process of elections. The structure of the school board significantly affects the quality of the members who comprise the board. Meir and Gonzales Juenke (2005) reported contradictory findings about the physical characteristics of board members and other political types. They stated that their initial findings revealed that African Americans held socioeconomic status and other electoral factors in high regard.

Meir and Gonzales Juenke (2005) warn that “before comparing the evidence for and against substantive representation trade-offs, it is important to explore why voters might use race as a shortcut in deciding how to vote and in predicting substantive policy gains from election results. The idea of substantive representation rests on the assumption that voters are polarized by

race and use it as a cue to select representatives” (p. 201). Hess and Leal (2005) found that little research exists to inform the decision-making process of school board members. Instead, such decisions are steeped in the influence of other agencies. Hess and Leal (2005) note that “Other recent work has focused less on school board elections than on the broader question of how local pressures affect the outcomes of school board policies, whether through elections or other dynamics” (p. 231).

An early study by Kelly (1969) on decisions regarding school budgets identified three types of factors—legal, traditional, and socioeconomic—that influence the budget decision-making process. In regard to the board members’ actual decision-making process, Newton and Sackney (2005) suggest that communication plays a major role. Diem, Frankenberg, and Cleary (2015) identify social and political influences as key factors as well:

School board policy making, as our case studies illustrate, can be highly influenced by the social and political contexts in which school districts are situated. School boards face the difficult task of navigating the politics of their communities and the competing interests surrounding diversity and deciding on policies that accommodate and appease their constituents. The results brought forward in this article illustrate how the stability of school boards can play a major factor in much of districts’ policy-making efforts. The instability of school boards can result in superintendent transition, policy change, and community backlash against the policy change. Specifically, our findings reveal how school board stability contributes directly to school board-superintendent relationships, the politicization of school boards, efforts to engage the community around student assignment policies, and school boards’ abilities to remain vigilant about diversity within their districts. (p. 741)

Rosenberger (1997) describes the group decision-making process as a set of skills boards must have to be successful. Rosenberger observes further that groups may change based on new members' ability to either assimilate or be accommodating towards the group's current culture or identity. A school board may be considered successful when new members are easily able to assimilate into the group (Rosenberger, 1997). Moreover, Rosenberger observes:

Rebellion may occur when one member (or more) rejects the values and norms of the group. Sometimes a "renegade" has a personal ax to grind. Other times, the trustee may be thrust into rebelliousness by persons who share similar beliefs such as opposition to sex education or a tax hike. (p. 63).

Finally, Grissom (2009) notes that the literature on the school board decision-making process is very limited, but suggests that "this work on school board decision making and effectiveness fits into a broader and better developed literature on the impact of governing boards and board characteristics on organizational performance" (p. 604).

The Impact of Segregation on School Quality in Urban Areas

The literature on school closings in urban districts depicts schools that are plagued by a number of ailments. Examining the conditions of urban schools from a historical perspective provides a broader context in which to understand the evolution of these schools. The fate of public education in urban school districts was forever changed with the passage of the landmark 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling (Hunter & Donahoo, 2003; McUsic, 2004). Major urban districts such as Chicago, Detroit, and Atlanta subsequently experienced great losses of White students due to the phenomenon known as "White flight" (Hunter & Donahoo, 2003). What makes this particularly damaging is that Black students attending predominantly Black

schools tend to underperform in comparison to their counterparts who attend schools with higher percentages of White students (Goldsmith, 2011).

Acknowledging the importance of the *Brown v. Board* decision, Hunter and Donahoo (2003) nevertheless observe:

despite its noble intent, the remedy of all deliberate speed attached to Brown failed to truly end segregated schooling because the mere adoption of this approach only further politicized public education. Indeed, much of the modern-day politics of urban schooling delineates from the complete Brown decision, its structure, and its failure. (p. 5)

Hunter and Donahoo cite a significant loss of interest in desegregating schools since the stream of landmark court cases stemming from *Brown v. Board* ended in the 1970s.

Other researchers have attempted to identify a positive correlation between desegregation and school dropout rates. In a 1977 study on school desegregation, Felice and Richardson reported the following findings:

- Minority students were more successful when attending schools whose students had a higher socioeconomic status and whose teachers had higher expectations for students.
- Students had access to high quality teachers and more non-classroom resources, such as counselors and social workers, than students attending predominantly black, lower socioeconomic status schools.
- Students in high socioeconomic areas served by teachers with high expectations experienced lower dropout rates.

The “White flight” phenomenon affected housing prices in the urban areas they left behind, leading to sharp decreases in property values. This is significant because property taxes play a critical role in funding schools at the local level (Clotfelter C. T., 1975). “Regression using

school enrollment and census data from Atlanta for 1960 and 1970 shows that housing prices fell during the decade in tracts where high schools experienced greater desegregation relative to tracts where desegregation took place” (Clotfelter, 1975, p. 450). As far back as the 1960s various reports described many urban, central cities as poor and Black, while suburban areas were characterized as White and affluent (Farley & Frey, 1994). “Since white households appeared to prefer segregated public schools, the policy of limiting desegregation efforts to central cities has probably increased the rate of white suburbanization and exacerbated segregation in metropolitan areas” (Clotfelter, 1975, p. 451).

A particularly disheartening outcome of desegregation for Black students was that equalization strategies often required them to make the greatest sacrifices. For example, many Black students endured extended daily bus rides to attend desegregated schools far from their homes (Martin, 1972). Valencia (1984) observed:

Given the nature and structure of education in the United States, it should not at all be surprising that the residents of working class and minority neighborhoods have been forced to carry the disproportionate or exclusive burdens resulting from the transition of students from closed to receiving schools. (p. 8)

Sugrue (2012) reflects although many Blacks support school integration, its potential will never be achieved because of the lingering resentment of Whites toward Blacks as well as the systemic racism that has existed in education for so many years.

As far back as the 1940s and 1950s, Black parents began to exercise their political organizational skills, yielding initial success in integrating schools (Hunter & Donahoo, 2003). However, opponents soon found means of blocking such efforts:

In those districts where the courts could find little direct proof (other than the homogeneity of schools and their surrounding neighborhoods) of overt, intentional racial discrimination on the part of school boards, superintendents, or principals, courts were less willing to require the closing of inferior all-black schools or the busing of black and white students to achieve integration. At the same time, even small scale efforts to desegregate schools met with intense opposition from white parents, and large scale efforts to desegregate schools by busing met with massive white resistance. (Sugrue, 2012, p. 15)

Although patterns of segregation took form during earlier periods of history, they persist even today in many of the large urban centers that are experiencing school closure. This process is perpetuated by a housing market that builds homes whose cost is out of reach for all but affluent families, ensuring that their neighborhood schools maintain a comfortable level of segregation (Orfield & Frankenberg, 2012). In fact, housing costs have peaked to the point that today large urban districts tend to have the highest levels of segregation, while White students are safely “isolated” in suburban districts, immune to many of the hardships that have taken hold of predominantly Black schools (Clotfelter, 1998).

Understanding the history of school segregation is vital to the discussion of school closures, as it illuminates how contemporary urban school districts came to serve primarily low socioeconomic status Black students. This history also calls into question why a school board or other governing body would continue making decisions that further disadvantage these urban schools. A study that examines the decision-making process of school board members must consider whether segregation plays a role in that process.

Impact on Student Achievement

Students who transition from a closed facility to a new location will inevitably be affected by this change. Engberg et al. (2012) suggest that even if students relocate to higher performing schools they will experience some level of discomfort. Their research indicates, however, that “school closures can be implemented in ways that not only save money, but minimize the adverse effects on students” (p. 190). They found an increased absenteeism rate of 13% for students who relocate from a closed school, although this percentage eventually drops (Engberg et al., 2012).

The distance required to transport students from lower achieving areas to new schools with records of higher student achievement may not be in line with the district’s plans for realignment (Ouazad & Ranciere, 2011). Shakeshaft and Gardner (1983) argue that changing schools creates anxiety for elementary age students and increases dropout rates among high school students, concluding, “Therefore, school closings can be challenged as acts of unjustifiable harm to those involved” (Shakeshaft & Gardner, 1983, p. 493).

Shakeshaft and Gardner (1983) note that closings also result in overcrowding in the schools that receive displaced students. Compounding these concerns is the literature on the effects of racial disparities on students in urban settings. Hunter and Donahoo (2003) report that the following findings are consistent in urban schools:

- Poor and minority students make up the vast majority of the urban school population
- Students in urban settings are more likely to have teachers with 0-2 years of experience
- Differences in culture cause high frustration levels.

Table 1 presents demographic information for the schools closed in Southland School District (GOSA, 2014).

Table 1

Demographic Data of Closed Schools

School	% of Black students	% of students eligible for free and reduced lunch
Blue Elementary	97	94
Douglass Elementary	94	99
Southland Elementary	98	88
Ford Elementary	97	98
King Middle	100	95
Dotson Middle	97	94
McIntosh Elementary	98	96

These numbers reflect what Lleras (2008) has identified as the prototypical setting for many of today’s urban schools. She asserts that “the racial gap in achievement may be due to different learning processes within low and high minority schools” (p. 892). Compounding the issue of closures is the already challenging task of ensuring that urban schools have quality teachers. There is a shortage of qualified teachers across all districts in critical fields such as math and science, but negative perceptions of urban schools magnify the difficulty of hiring qualified teachers in urban districts (Jacob, 2007).

Teachers applying to urban districts frequently show interest in only the highest performing schools within the district (Jacob, 2007). Even when teachers are successfully recruited, there is no guarantee they will remain in urban school settings:

Clearly teachers in urban schools are less qualified than those in many affluent areas, at least along many easily observable dimensions. But is the lower quality of urban teachers

primarily a result of problems in recruitment or retention? It could be that highly qualified teachers are equally likely to start out at urban and suburban schools, but that high-quality urban teachers are more likely to change schools or leave the profession. (Jacob, 2007, 136)

Esposito (1999) found that much of the negative perception of urban schools comes from parents' views of school climate and its impact on student performance. The lives of urban parents are already burdened by the need to cope with the realities of their current settings (Paulle, 2013). "Countless parents as well as siblings and other family members are worried sick about the young people closest to them stuck year after year in schools that—as they know full well in many cases—would have middle class parents of any so-called ethnic or racial 'group' up in arms if their children were forced into them for more than a few hours" (Paulle, 2013, p. 200).

In a 2002 study, Thompson found that coupled with socioeconomic factors, neighborhood barriers that are historically found in high crime, high poverty areas had a significant influence on student achievement. Thompson (2002) added that understanding students' neighborhoods might lead to policies that can positively impact student achievement. "The best examples come to mind when school attendance zones and school busing plans are discussed" (p. 290). Although closing a school may remove many of the tangible, physical attributes of a school building, the negative perception has already been established.

Shakeshaft and Gardner (1983) identify increased class size as one of the negative effects of closing schools. They contend that students who relocate to new schools are faced with learning in overcrowded classrooms, noting:

A number of researchers have suggested that an inverse relationship exists between class size and student achievement. Teachers whose classes have increased in size report that

they have cut back on homework, essay questions, tests, and one-to-one contact with students—activities that many researchers deem important to academic achievement. (p. 494)

Research on the effects of school closings in urban districts is limited at best. While there is a body of work that refers to students in urban settings, it falls short of fully examining the effects of school closures on these students. A case study by Philipsen (1999) focused on the effects of school closings in a rural setting, identifying the negative impact of busing and the academic losses that occurred as a result of students having to adjust to a new setting. However, it is unclear whether these findings apply to those in urban school districts. The literature is skewed more toward describing the current state of urban schools and less toward examining the effects of school closures on students. One goal of the present study is to identify the extent to which board members considered the effects of school closings on students in their decision-making process.

The Effects of School Closings on the Local Community

As urban areas continue to see the rapid decline of their communities, many children are left without access to the services and resources their parents and previous generations enjoyed (Montgomery, 2011). Families that were once anchors of their communities may flee, relocating to schools and neighborhoods that can provide a better education and further decreasing enrollment in urban schools (Montgomery, 2011). Although little research has examined the relationship between property values and schools, existing literature has established a relationship between school expenditures, race, and property values. Clotfelter (1975) found a decrease in home prices in 1960 and 1970 in Southland when desegregation took effect, and he predicted that

this trend would continue in metropolitan areas for many years. Based on current demographic studies of Southland, those predictions proved to be accurate.

A demographic study conducted in the Southland School District in 2010 showed a decline in home prices in neighborhoods where schools were targeted for closure (Southland School District, 2010). Policies implemented by school districts to assist with desegregation efforts only expedite these trends (Clotfelter, 1975; Vitullo-Martin, 1980), as schools attract specific types of families and families pay close attention to such changes (Vitullo-Martin, 1980). Vitullo-Martin (1980) observes that families residing in a school community have the ability to affect the social structure that is developed for a political purpose:

Schools seem to have the ability to encourage the development of the social rules, the growth of formal organizations, the political voice, and the sense of self-identity and pride that a neighborhood needs in order to make use of the capital investment designed to save it. To an extent, schools may deliberately direct their efforts at community improvements. But schools may not intend many of the community building effects they have. It is a common political phenomenon that organizations born for a single issue, or a limited purpose, often continue after the organizing issue is passed—and often take on objectives only remotely related to the initial organizing purpose. (p. 4)

Recent studies of community responses to urban school closures have found that the effective mobilization of resources by community leaders has led to schools remaining open as well the reopening of closed schools. Green (2017) advocates for coalition building in communities as a strategy to fight school closures. He recommends specific strategies such as identifying strong and competent leaders, having ideal conditions to shape the culture, eliciting commitment from core groups to the goal, and accumulating resources such as money and power.

It can be difficult to separate the social and economic impact of school closings on neighborhoods, as the vast majority of school closures occur in neighborhoods that are predominantly Black and in advanced stages of decline (Amlung, 1980; Burdick-Will, Keels, & Schuble, 2013; Farmer-Hinton, 2002). Burdick-Will et al. (2013) found that the chances of a school closing are much higher if it is in a neighborhood that has historically been viewed as poor, and which has very little chance of mobilizing or organizing in response to the situation.

The vast majority of the closed schools were traditional neighborhood schools that served the students in the neighborhood surrounding the school. This means that a policy aimed at closing the lowest-performing schools will end up closing schools that are predominantly located in highly disadvantaged, minority segregated neighborhoods. The result is that it may appear as though the school district is singling out schools in the most disenfranchised neighborhoods. (Burdick-Will et al., 2013, p. 77)

The literature on the effects of school closures on communities discovered that families' inability to reverse their current situation, coupled with a lack of resources, made school closings inevitable. The economic downturn of 2008 added another twist. With declining enrollment cited as a key influence on school closures, high mobility rates and transience among schools within a district can lead to school closings, as families move to areas where the chance of finding employment is higher (de la Torre & Gwynne, *Changing schools: a look at student mobility trends in Chicago public schools since 1985.*, 2009).

In addition, as various communities continue to “price out” the underclass from purchasing homes near schools that provide higher quality education, there is little or no improvement in the low-income housing that is the only option for many lower-income or impoverished families (de la Torre & Gwynne, *Changing schools: a look at student mobility*

trends in Chicago public schools since 1985., 2009). Various studies have proven that Black students who have the opportunity to learn in fully integrated settings tend to display higher levels of achievement (Goldsmith, 2011). However, the economy's steady impact in maintaining segregation in neighborhoods (Ouazad & Ranciere, 2011) has all but ensured that many Black students will never have an opportunity to experience this level of success (McUsic, 2004).

Efforts to Utilize Closed Schools

Warner and Dowdall (2013) identify the difficulties associated with seeking economic gain from the sale of empty school buildings, and note that it is easier to sell recently closed buildings than facilities that have been vacant for an extended period of time. Figure 1 summarizes the number of buildings that have been vacant for 10 years or longer in various school districts across the country. It should be noted that “these statistics do not include several dozen closed facilities that a number of districts have chosen to hold onto, a practice known as mothballing. This provides the flexibility to deal with future enrollment growth and to meet space needs that may arise, for instance, when an active school is being renovated” (Warner & Dowdall, 2013, p. 4).

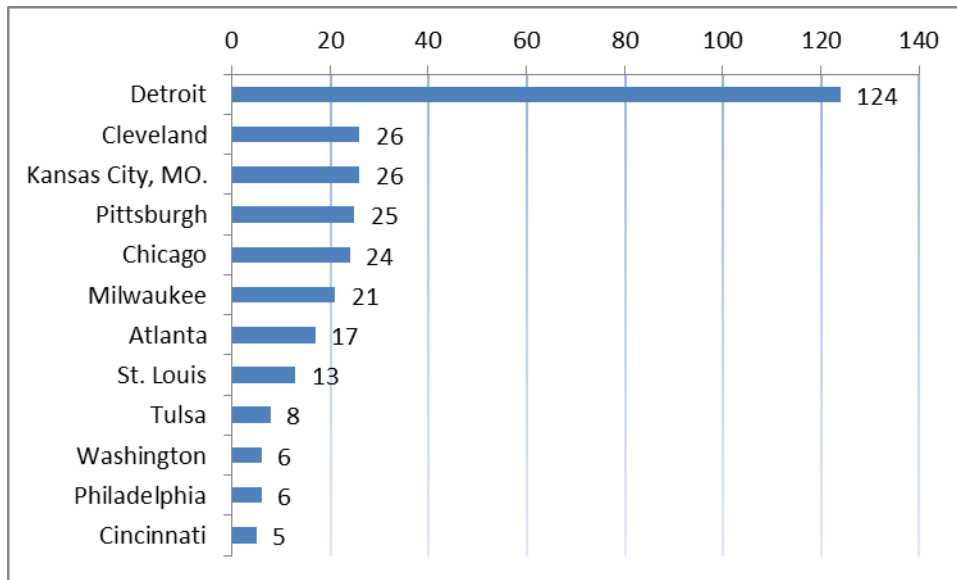


Figure 1. School district properties on the market: End of 2012

One of the common ways school buildings are reused, through transformation into “new” housing developments, further compounds issues of inequity and inadequacy (Warner & Dowdall, 2013). Converting vacant schools into low-income housing is especially desirable and easy for builders because these buildings “do not require zoning adjustments that might slow or limit redevelopment. Also, a lot of residential projects qualify for tax credits, including those for low-income housing and historic preservation” (Warner & Dowdall, 2013, p. 14).

Amlung (1980) identified a number of difficulties associated with the reuse of closed urban schools. These include an inconsistent, poorly communicated plan for reuse between district and local government agencies; goals for using the vacated buildings that do not align with those of the local government; and a lack of immediate, established plans that detail exactly how these buildings will be used in the future. “Because no single agency is responsible for planning and managing the disposition of surplus school buildings, the lag between closing a school and developing reuse ranges from months to years” (Amlung, 1980, p. 10). The present

study contributes to this literature by examining how board members communicate their specific intentions to parents and the community as part of the school closure process.

Cost Saving Analysis

The existing literature on the potential cost saving of closing schools appears to be very limited (Valencia, 1984). “One can infer from the literature that closing schools reduces per-pupil costs very little, if at all. Thus, it appears that the strategy of closing schools to save money is largely symbolic” (Valencia, 1984, p. 10). Much of the savings associated with closing schools has typically come from eliminating administrative, teaching, and clerical positions (McMilin, 2010). However, preliminary data on school closing cost savings reveal only minimal savings, which are even less significant in larger districts that require hundreds of millions of dollars to operate (Warner & Dowdall, 2013). The data that is reported is often inaccurate because districts fail to account for the costs of modifications to schools receiving affected students (Lytton, 2011).

Dean (1981) suggests that before districts let schools advance to stages of closure, they should already have contingency plans in place, similar to what is found in various businesses when danger is imminent. If funding equity across districts is ever seen as a problem, this area also has very limited research to support this claim and has revealed mixed results (Baker, 2009). A closer examination of the effect of new charter schools may be valuable, since declining enrollment as a result of more students attending charter schools is a major factor that has led to school closures (Jack & Sludden, 2013). This study will explore the effect of charter schools on urban districts and illuminate how much the school board considered the effects of charter schools during the decision-making process. The study will also examine the cost saving analysis the board used to determine whether closing schools would be an effective strategy for reducing

costs. There is no existing literature on cost saving analysis or on how remaining schools fare financially after closures.

Summary

This chapter provides a framework for the present study by first defining neoliberalism and explaining its role in urban districts. Much of the existing literature on neoliberalism's influence on education is based on the work of Pauline Lipman and her extensive study of its effects on the Chicago Public Schools. Historical perspectives on school closings and consolidation have considered early school closings and consolidation in the U.S. and identified factors districts use when considering closure, but have not explained the actual process used when closing schools.

The chapter then focused on school boards and their governance structure and offered a brief explanation of their decision-making process. It examined the impact of segregation on school quality in urban areas and the effects of neoliberalism on urban schools and student achievement. However, as noted in the chapter, the available literature on this topic is limited at best. Moreover, there is a lack of relevant, current studies investigating the effects of school closings on local communities, information that would add another layer in understanding the impact of closing or consolidating schools. Similarly, literature on efforts to utilize closed schools as well as research analyzing the cost savings of school closures are both extremely limited. The present study seeks to fill this gap in the research by examining these topics. Chapter 3 begins the process of addressing these areas by identifying the methodology and process used to conduct the research study.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to determine the steps school board members used to close seven schools in an urban school district over a three-year period. A single case study methodology was employed, using the lens of neoliberalism. As the tenets of neoliberalism continue to shape and reshape urban communities (Lipman, 2011), understanding district school board members' decision-making practices and their operational links to schools and communities will aid in policy development and implementation.

Three research questions guided this study: (1) How do district school board members decide which schools to target for closure in an urban school district? (2) How do district school board members decide which schools to target for closure in an urban school district? (3) How is neoliberalism addressed in the school closure process in urban school districts?

Two qualitative data collection methods, interviews and document analysis, were used to address this study's research questions. The following sections outline the study's design, sample selection, and data collection and analysis methods, including discussions of reliability and validity. The section outlines are followed by a consideration of the study's limitations and a statement of the researcher's positionality and subjectivity.

Conceptual Framework

Miles and Huberman (1994) explain that a conceptual framework, whether visual or narrative in form, serves three purposes: (1) to identify who will and will not be included in the study; (2) to describe what relationships may be present based on logic, theory, and/or

experiential prompts; and (3) to provide the researcher with the opportunity to gather general constructs into intellectual “bins” for examination. Bins derive from “theory and experience and (often) from the general objectives of the study envisioned” (p. 18). Researchers commonly know which bins are likely to apply to the study and what will be contained in them. The authors noted that frameworks can be rudimentary or elaborate, theory-driven or commonsensical, descriptive or casual explanations of the main things or constructs to be studied. For this study the constructs are: school closings, school board members, urban districts, education policy, and neoliberalism. The linear conceptual framework developed for this study is displayed in Figure 2.

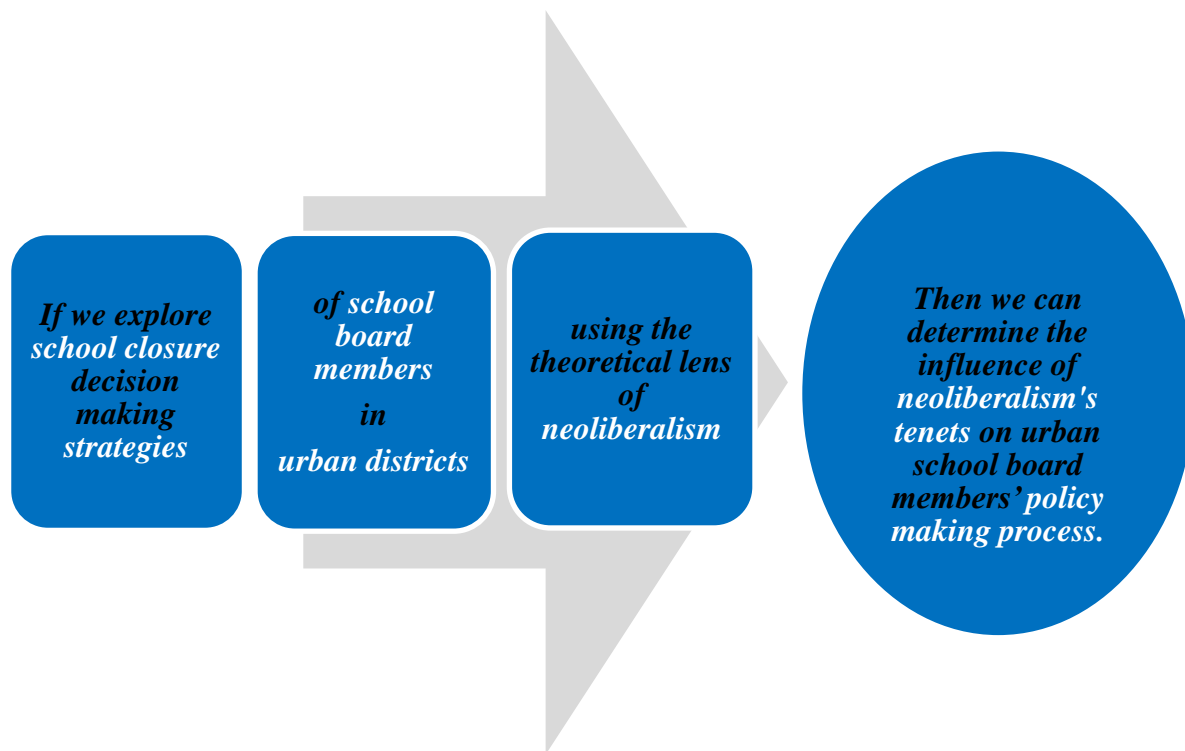


Figure 2. Depiction of the conceptual framework guiding the study, including the study’s purpose statement (adapted from David, 2013).

Study Design

With approval from the University of Georgia’s Institutional Review Board, this qualitative case study examined district school board members’ decision-making process for closing schools

in an urban school district. District school board members are responsible for enacting school policies that can deeply impact communities. The aim of this study is to understand their mode of decision making and their perception of the charge to lead the policy implementation. Semi-structured interviews and document reviews were the primary methods of data collection. I selected a qualitative approach as the methodology that would most effectively address the study's purpose and answer its research questions.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research methodologies enable researchers to understand why and how a phenomenon occurs (Merriam, 2009). Merriam (2009) notes that qualitative research methods are most appropriate when there is little existing knowledge about a phenomenon. Researchers conducting a qualitative research study should be interested in (1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences (Merriam, 2009).

Qualitative research examines the “whys” and “hows” of experiences, rather than seeking to prove or disprove a research hypothesis. The researcher looks for patterns and themes that emerge from the data. Instead of hypothesis-testing, qualitative research “is hypothesis-generating” (Merriam, 1988, p. 3). Exploring the factors affecting the participants' lived experiences and stories helps to identify why and how things work in their respective contexts. Examining why school board members make school closing decisions, the meaning they make of the process, and its effectiveness can aid in generating new knowledge to inform policymaking strategies and existing policy.

Case Study

A qualitative single case study design was used to inform this study. According to Yin (2009), “the case study is used in many situations, to contribute to our knowledge of individual, group, organizational, social, political, and related phenomena” (p. 4). This method was selected for a number of reasons. First, it allowed me to research an ongoing phenomenon in education in an attempt to analyze a real-world case or issue (Yin, 2009). This is important because school closings are an ongoing and highly controversial issue. Second, it allowed me to build my knowledge base and expertise in the area of policy while examining how board members arrived at the decision to close schools.

Finally, case studies are designed to “investigate contemporary cases for purposes of illuminating and understanding” (Hays, 2004, p. 218). Although there is existing information about school closings, an in-depth, carefully planned study provides a means through which to identify and address concerns before they morph into systemic problems that cannot be corrected. Based on the contemporary nature of this issue, a case study is ideal for analyzing the closings of schools. In this study, the primary sources of data included participants who served as school board members during the time frame of the case, school closing focus group reports, and demographic reports.

Specifically, this study examined the case of the Southland School District from 2011 to 2014, and the role of its school board members in identifying closing seven schools during the 2012-2013 school year. The best way to develop focused questions for a case study is to start with a long, general list, then revise the list to drive the study (Hays, 2004). This study’s research questions—(1) How do district school board members decide which schools to target for closure in an urban school district? (2) How do district school board members perceive the school

closure process in an urban school district?—allowed me to closely analyze the process of closing urban schools to illuminate the thought processes of policymakers faced with this type of decision.

Yin (2009) advises, “The more a case study contains specific questions and propositions, the more it will stay within feasible limits” (p. 29). My initial goal was to find answers that would address the problem of school closings in urban areas. In addition, an added benefit would be to formulate solutions and alternatives to foster academic success for students and help communities more effectively meet the needs of students outside the school setting.

Sample Selection

The site chosen for the case study was the Southland School District (SSD) district in the southeastern region of the United States. The site was selected due to the high-profile state investigation in 2011 into systematic cheating on standardized tests in the SSD, involving 44 schools and 178 teachers and principals. City of Southland Mayor Matthew Revis stated that the cheating “showed a complete failure of leadership that hurt thousands of children who might have been promoted to the next grade without meeting basic academic standards” (Severson, 2011).

The cheating scandal is relevant because studies of the Chicago Public School (CPS) closings of 2013 suggested that school closure was based on low test scores and underutilization of school buildings. A 2014 report released by the Chicago Teachers Union reported that of the 50 schools closed in 2013, 90% had a majority African American demographic and 71% had a majority African American staff of teachers. The report suggested that students were no better off academically after than before the closings. As Davey and Bowman (2015) reported, “only 21 percent of displaced students attended schools that had a top rating under a now-retired CPS

assessment model . . . slightly lower than what would have resulted if all students enrolled in their designated school in fall 2013.”

The high profile of the SSD district following the cheating scandal, and the highly controversial decision to close seven schools over three years, were the catalysts for this study. In addition, the SSD has closed schools in the past and is currently beginning the preliminary process of selecting schools for future closure. Given the system’s high profile as a well-known urban district, this study could inform other districts that may face similar decisions. The number of schools closed throughout the targeted school year also made this an ideal site for study, as “The researcher’s purpose in case study research is not to study everything going on in the site, but to focus on specific issues, problems, or programs” (Hays, 2004, p. 225). Figure 3 shows the location of the seven SSD schools closed starting in the 2012-13 school year.

The study employed strategic sampling techniques to accurately address the research questions:

A strategic relationship between sample and wider universe can take a variety of forms. The aim is to produce, through sampling, a relevant range of contexts or phenomena, which will enable you to make strategic and possibly cross-contextual comparisons, and hence build a well-founded argument. (Mason, 2002, p.

124)

Strategic sampling was employed for both selecting study participants and selecting documents for analysis. Random sample selection was not used in the study. Key individuals directly involved in the closure process were chosen for participation.

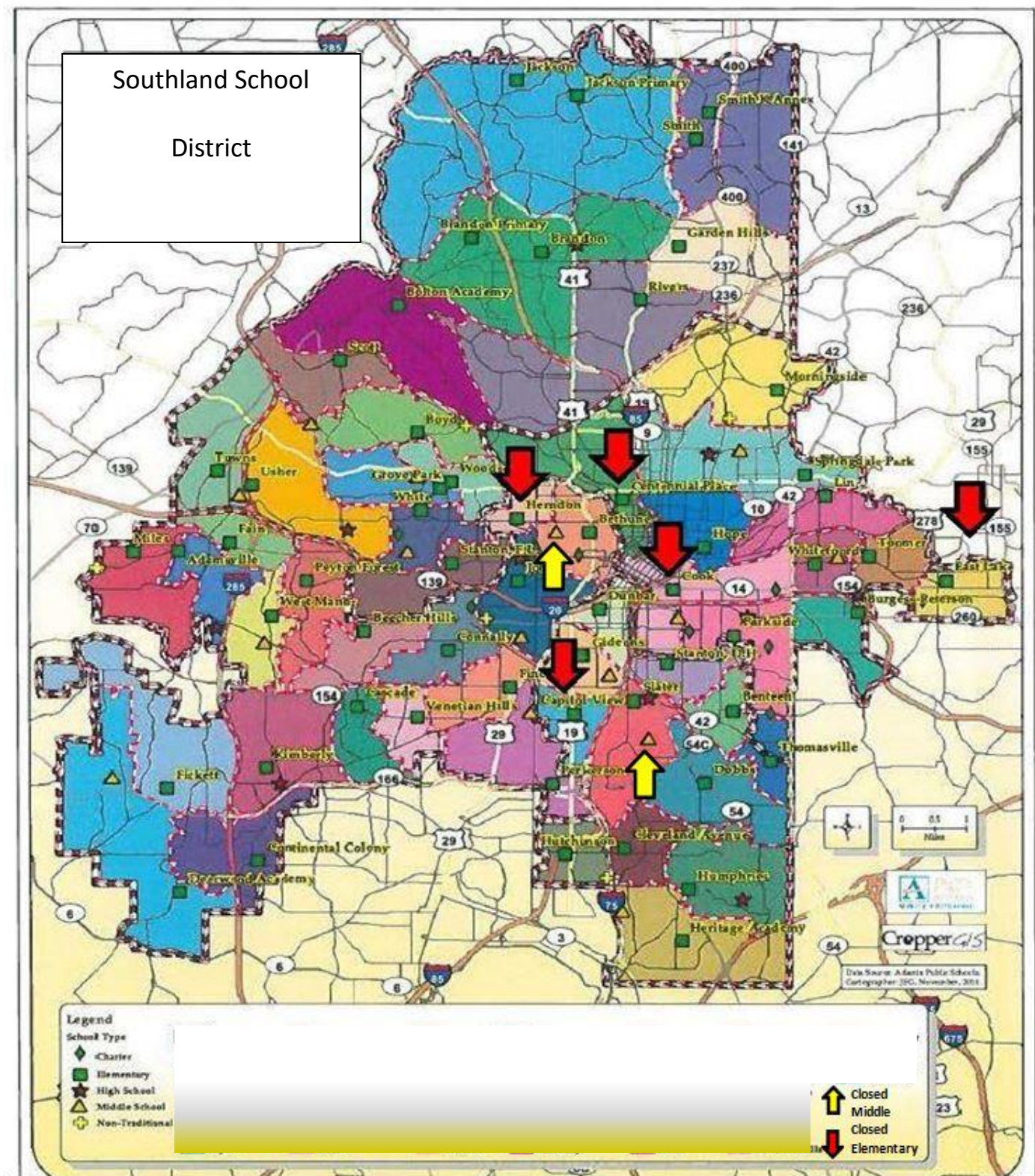


Figure 3. Location of elementary and middle schools closed in SSD during the 2012-13 school year.

Participant Selection

The phenomenon at the center of this study, the identification of schools for closure, occurred among elected board members in the SSD over a three-year period. Six of the nine SSD individuals serving on the district's school board participated in the study. The school board members were selected via purposeful sampling due to their closeness to the study topic and their ability to approve policy.

First, because the names and contact information for the school board members were made available by the SSD district, I emailed each of the nine school board members explaining the study and sharing the interview script. If I did not get an email response, I followed up the initial email with a phone call. In the event that I was unable to reach the board member with the follow-up call, I sent a second email explaining the study and requesting a time to meet for an interview. After confirming the individual's interest in participating in the study, I called each participant to set a date, time, and location for the interview. Over a period of six weeks, I interviewed six of the nine school board members responsible for selecting the schools to be closed during the 2012-2013 school year. The remaining three board members never responded to any of my requests.

Southland School District board member profiles. Board members who served at the time of the closures and were directly involved in the school closure process were selected for the study. Five former school board members and one current member participated in the single case study. Participants represented a variety of professional backgrounds and community interests. Three of the participants were female and three were male. Five participants (two female, three male) identified their race as Black or African heritage, while the remaining board member identified as White.

The participants' careers vary widely. One is in the construction industry, while another is a leader in the finance industry. A third member works in the non-profit arena while a fourth is a community education outreach leader. The remaining two members work in government agencies, one in state and one in city government. Table 2 summarizes the board members' demographics, including their years of service on the board.

Table 2

SSD Board Member Profiles

Member* (*pseudonym)	Years on school board	Industry	Gender	Race
Y. Gaines	8	Education	Female	White
M. Brown	13	Non-Profit	Female	Black
L. Manning	16	State Program Leader	Male	Black
J. Peterson	4	Finance	Male	Black
T. Frederick	3	Construction	Male	Black
C. Green	8	City Government	Female	Black

Board members were selected because of their roles in policy development and enactment. In school systems, once policies are drafted, revisions are made to the policies. After the initial policy formulation and revision stages, the board members vote during an open board meeting on whether the policy will be enacted in the school system. If a majority vote in favor of the policy, the new policy is immediately incorporated into the school system's policy manual.

Because board members are elected officials working for the school district, their decisions may be influenced by public perception. Thus public opinion has the ability to affect policy. In the case of the SSD, a public outcry played a role in how the new policy regarding

school closings was enacted. The initial number of schools targeted for closure was 13, which was eventually reduced to seven (Sarrio, 2012).

Data Collection

Yin (2003) identifies at least major six sources of data in qualitative studies: physical artifacts, archival records, interviews, documentation, direct observation, and participant-observation. Yin (2003) notes that a “major strength of case study data collection is the opportunity to use many different sources of evidence” (p. 114). Data in this study were collected from in-depth interviews with six board members and from analysis of selected documents.

Interviews

The participant interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed, using a pseudonym for each participant. Through these focused interviews with board members, I generated data to illustrate how they made sense of the established timeline and what the trends from the SSD Demographic Study, which each of them mentioned in their interview, meant to them. Focused interviews yield valuable data because questions “may still remain open-ended and assume a conversational manner, but you are more likely to be following a certain set of questions derived from the case study protocol” (Yin, 2009, p. 107).

The following questions were asked in the board members’ interviews:

1. What led to the board deciding to close schools?
2. How did you arrive at the final decision to close the seven specific schools?
3. What kind of information did the board study to determine if closing schools would be a successful strategy?
4. What concerns did you have regarding how the closing of schools would affect your specific district area? Other areas?

5. Were there other factors outside of economics that played a part in deciding which schools needed to be closed?
6. Was there outside pressure to keep schools open? How did you respond?
7. Were there any plans or strategies that were discussed and implemented to support students and families of the closed schools?
8. Did city government officials and local businesses play a role in the decision-making process? Were there any other outside groups that played a role? (If so, what was that role?)
9. Were any measures taken to ensure that parents had an equitable voice in the process?
10. Based on what you know now about the outcome, would you have done anything differently?
11. Now that three years have passed since the decision was finalized, how do you think it has affected the families and students of the closed schools?
12. Is there any additional information you would like to add at this time?

During the interviews, I made notes referencing areas that needed clarification and comments that would require engaging the interviewees to gain a deeper understanding of their response. Following the interviews, these field notes provided me with an opportunity to reflect on the data and record any insights that emerged as I “tuned in” to the participant data (Ruona, 2005, p. 241). The aim of the interview questions was to determine how board members understood their role in relations to the closings, and whether they had viable alternatives to closing the schools.

Documents

In qualitative research, the researcher is expected to seek convergence and corroboration through the use of multiple data sources and methods (Yin, 2009). To corroborate and augment the interview data, I reviewed the following documents related to the case:

- **The 2010 SSD Demographic Study:** The Demographic Study provided census, economic, geographic, and fiscal data, including projected enrollments for school district, over 10 years.
- **School Reform Team (SRT) focus group report summaries:** The SSD was divided into four geographical areas managed by School Reform Teams (SRT). SRTs held focus groups with parents, concerned citizens, and community leaders, facilitated by an outside consulting firm. Using strength, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis, a report was produced analyzing data from the focus groups held in each area.
- *Southland City Paper* articles
- **Field notes** taken during and following the interview sessions
- **SSD Superintendent's Final Redistricting and Closure Recommendations**

Report 2012

Much of the data that would help identify trends related to school closings in the SSD were gleaned from reviewing these documents.

Data Analysis

Ruona (2005) described qualitative data as words describing meaning mediated primarily through language and action captured to represent participants' perceptions "*through and in their own words*" (p. 234). Ruona's definition suggests that qualitative data analysis relies on both

inductive and deductive processes. Analysis of the qualitative data collected in this study thus drew on both inductive and deductive reasoning, building concepts and hypotheses (inductive) and using tentative categories and hypotheses (deductive) to yield the study's findings (Merriam, 1998).

Interviews

Upon completing the interviews, I used the study's conceptual framework to organize and manage the interview data. I used the deductive method of identifying key variables from the literature on neoliberalism theory to guide the development of a master list of categories. I initially identified five broad categories and assigned each a highlighter color. The categories included community politics, enrollment, economics, waste of resources, and unintended results regarding closings.

Next, I created a table in Microsoft Word, labeling the columns with each of the five categories. I highlighted words and phrases in the interview transcripts that corresponded to the five categories. I then cut and pasted the highlighted text into the appropriate column. These data became the initial level codes.

I then reviewed the data in my Microsoft Word table multiple times, grouping together similar or different categories and chunking large sections of data relevant to the research questions. I coded the transcripts multiple times to capture all relevant data that addressed the study's research questions. After grouping board members' descriptions of strategies for (RQ1) and perceptions of (RQ2) the school closure process using a neoliberalism lens (RQ3), I reviewed the data in each category and identified subcategories emerging from the data. This was considered the initial coding schematic using Ruona's (2005) constant comparative method.

The value of data provided by narratives, as in the present case study, is that they help us understand the world around us (Merriam, 2009). In this study, the knowledge generated from the case provides insight into the process of school closings and the perceptions of participating board members. Table 3 identifies the categories and subcategories that emerged from analysis of the participants’ narratives, as well as emerging themes that were not included among the broad categories or subcategories.

Table 3

Interview Coding Framework

Category	Research Question	Subcategory
Community Politics	1/3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organized citizens • External organization support
Enrollment	1/3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Private/charter schools • Aging communities
Economics	1/3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recession • Housing market • Race/Class: Hope VI
More closures	1/3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More schools should have closed
Wasted Resources	1/3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Underperformance • Dilapidated/vacant school properties • Community blight
Emerging theme:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Board member politics <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Favors 	

Reliability and Validity

Triangulation is “probably the most well-known strategy to shore up the internal validity of a study” and involves the use of multiple methods, multiple sources of data, multiple investigators, or multiple theories to confirm emerging findings” (Merriam, 2009, p. 215). To ensure trustworthiness, this study used a variety of sources of evidence—including interview

transcripts, community focus group meeting reports, documents related to the school closures, and field note—to provide multiple measures of the same phenomenon (Yin, 2003).

As suggested by Ruona (2005), I incorporated additional trustworthiness tactics to mitigate any possible validity threats. I frequently reviewed my personal subjectivity statement to prevent my personal beliefs and assumptions from biasing data analysis. I kept notes (i.e., an audit trail) of my data collection process, including dates of initial participant contact, dates and times of interviews, field notes during interview meetings, and document discovery and analysis. I also had a peer check the meanings I assigned to categories and themes during data analysis. These additional measures helped to ensure a valid, rigorous research process.

Limitations

There are limitations of this study. Many of the urban districts in the U.S. that have experienced school closures are located in the Northeast or Midwest, and findings from the present study may not be applicable to other geographic regions of the country. The research on school closures in the Southeast has been extremely limited, and many of the closures in this region have occurred in rural school districts. The distinct demographics of such districts suggest that the threats and challenges presented by school closures may also differ. Another limitation may be the response of board members during the interviews. Because their input has the potential to inform decisions in similar situations, considering the history and culture of the district when developing interview questions is necessary to capture a holistic view of the case under study.

Chapter Summary

This research study used a qualitative research design to provide deep, rich understanding of a vital contemporary issue in the field of education. A single case study design was ideal in

allowing me to study this ongoing and vexing problem. Neoliberalism provided a useful theoretical lens through which to examine board members' decisions and perceptions, given the array of issues associated with the closing of urban schools. In-depth interviews and document analysis yielded the necessary data to closely study the problem. Limitations of the study were also considered in this chapter.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study is to examine the steps that school district board members used to close seven schools in an urban district. On March 5, 2012, SSD superintendent John Pascoe revealed an initial plan that called for closing 10 of the district's schools (Sarrio, 2012). This decision was met with tremendous public outcry and resistance as many parents and community members fought to see these community schools remain intact. According to data provided by the Georgia Governor's Office of Student Achievement (2011), the schools that were identified for closure had predominantly black populations ranging upwards of 90 percent and additionally they had free and reduced lunch rates of similar numbers. Compounding the issue were the cries for equity and fairness because the schools in the predominantly white and affluent areas of the North Southland community remained untouched (Sarrio, 2012). The research questions guiding this study were:

1. How do district school board members decide which schools to target for closure in an urban school district?
2. How do district policymakers perceive the school closure process in an urban school district?

This chapter presents findings from face-to-face interviews, focus group document reviews, and demographic studies. It includes an introduction to the study participants, presenting demographic data and the number of years each has served as a board member. The chapter then presents the study's findings, organized into categories and subcategories based on

the theory of neoliberalism and emerging themes from each research question. The chapter concludes by discussing the board members' thoughts about the process of closing schools and the factors they identified as influencing their decisions, as well as data from community focus groups.

Overview of Findings

In the introduction to a chapter entitled “Chicago School Reform and Its Political, Economic, and Cultural Context” in her book *High Stakes Education: Inequity, Globalization, and Urban School Reform*, Pauline Lipman (2004) quotes Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells to capture the complex process of school closings and their lasting impact on communities. Castells (1989) explained:

As the process of uneven development sees both high-growth activities and downgraded labor concentrated in the largest metropolitan areas, these areas become the spatial expression of the contrasting social conditions into which the effects of the restructuring process are ultimately translated. (p. 203, cited in Lipman, 2004)

This study draws on the fundamental tenets of neoliberalism, as identified in Lipman's framework, to examine the phenomenon of school closures from the perspective of board members' experience managing the process in the Southland School District. Table 4 shows the study's research questions and the emerging themes related to the tenets, separated into categories and subcategories.

Table 4

Overview of Findings

Research Question	Category	Subcategories
1. How do district school board members decide which schools to target for closure in an urban school district?	Community politics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organized citizens • External organization support • Board members
	Enrollment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Case demographics • Community population transformation • Demographic study
	Economics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recession during case timeline • Housing market • Race • Class • HOPE VI: eradication of severely distressed public housing
2. How do district policymakers perceive the school closure process in an urban school district?	Unintended results regarding closures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Board member (in)decision • Community unrest
	Waste of resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Underperformance • Dilapidated/vacant schools • Community blight

Finding 1: Research Question 1. How do district school board members decide which schools to target for closure in an urban school district?

Table 5

Research Question 1: Community Politics

Research Question	Category	Subcategories
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1. How do district school board members decide which schools to target for closure in an urban school district?	Community politics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organized citizens • External organization support • Board members
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With a plan to close five schools for the 2012-2013 school year and two additional schools for 2013-2014, concerns continued to surface regarding the effectiveness of the schools designated to absorb the displaced student populations, especially given that the new students might have unique needs due to a high poverty level (21st Century School Fund, 1997). The symptoms that plagued this school system are also evident in many other urban school systems around the country. Based on the findings, community politics revealed itself as a central theme throughout the school closure process. The board members' actions, along with support from external organizations and citizens, had a significant impact on the communities.

The findings below offer significant details on the role played by community politics in the closure process. Various concerns have been cited that depict low enrollment accompanied by flight as well as the feelings of neglect for the community (Dean, 1977). Another issue mentioned is that when students move to new schools, the new schools tend to have weak academic reputations, similar to the students' former schools (de la Torre & Gwynne, 2009). Such findings cast doubt on the assumption made by various policymakers that closing schools is an effective strategy for improving academic performance (Engberg et al., 2012).

The first research question explores broadly how school board members decide to target specific schools for closure within their district. Because board members have the primary responsibility of enacting policies that affect the entire district, it is vital to understand the factors that contribute to their decisions. Eliciting the board members' perspectives provides an

important learning tool, as school districts across the country are facing similar decisions and the school closure process is being replicated nationwide.

In their interviews, board members were asked a series of questions about the factors that influenced their decisions about the school closures. The board members' responses fell into three broad categories: community politics, enrollment, and economics. Community politics, which refers to the non-governmental politics that impact local issues, was the most frequently discussed of the three categories.

In discussing the participation of school staff and the school community in decision making, Green reflected that keeping the focus on the children was most important, because school staff attending community meetings tended to "take over meetings" with concerns about their jobs. Green observed that expressing the needs of staff (including teachers) often "muddled parents' needs," noting that while staff were allowed and "encouraged to come to community meetings, we want to make sure the focus was on what is meant for children." This response illuminates the depth and breadth of the community impact of closing schools. While most would agree that the focus of school closure discussions should be on the impact to children, participation in these discussions by potentially displaced employees sheds light on the impact for the community's working class as well.

When asked about outside influences or pressures to keep schools open in her district, Green replied, "I don't know if I can say the same for other communities, but for mine, it was more about what parents and the people who lived in that community felt that they needed for the school." Asked how the school board reached its final decision to close seven schools, Green shared her observations about the role the collective concerns of one community played in the final decision to close schools.

We had lots of, you know, meetings about that. But that night we were having another one in the community. So like, the worker's town, the community came out and shared information that we really haven't heard yet. You know, that were just ways that were literally, you know, as we were going through this thing changing by the minute in terms of kind of trying to get a good gauge on the school involvement, involvement of the community and the growing—you know, whether that community truly was growing and there were going to be more kids coming into that community.

So that one, like, was on the list and we took it off the list that night. And you know, you always wonder . . . we happened to hear from some very well spoken, passionate people that knew a lot about, you know, things, like I said, you know, things that were changing by the minute in that community and then, you know, you think it's not everybody could come to meetings. . . . You feel a little bit like, well, there could be things that we're not hearing about other, you know, schools also makes it, you know. It was very hard, I think.

I can't remember which school it was. I know it was one of his that was on the list that night we took off, and because he knew a lot of it. You know what I mean? You know, and I think, so I think the original projection that we started, original proposal which we started that night was 10 schools. We ended up doing seven that night, where they keep a watch on every one of them.

Green noted how, in relation to a middle school closing, the community got involved and effected change with the closing:

What happened was the Chadwick community came out in full force and fought that. And there was this wonderful just, you know, and I went to a lot of meetings and just to say to

people if this really heartfelt. Do you really think this will mean that the people will use Chadwick as a middle school? It was just too important to the community and won't be good for the community to lose the middle school. So Chadwick was never—it wasn't on the 10 but made it to that, but before then it had been taken off. The administration, you know, heard loud and clear that people wanted—that was very important to keep Chadwick. It was important to have the middle school in that area.

This board member also mentioned:

So there were outcries from, you know, from Dobbs Park. There were outcries from Linwood that they didn't want that to happen. Not everybody. I mean, I'm not saying—there was people that said we should consider this now but and then I think the receiving schools hear that as, you don't like our school. It's seen as a racial thing; it's seen as a socioeconomic thing. We have a different, you know, just the makeup of the school already. So it can be interpreted as that. I don't think it's not—and it could be some of that. You know, there could be that in there. I don't think it's necessarily that.

Well, I think Chadwick had a lot of outside community involvement. They had something called the Emory Community Partnership. . . . It's an office in Emory University that does community partnerships. So they have this place-based initiative going on at—had already started it at Chadwick with Emory. So, you know, I don't know if you mean that kind of, but yes, they were very outspoken and saying what this—it was a great thing. I don't know if it was a graduate of Goizueta Business School had money to contribute to Emory and said, what he'd really like is to be going, you know, let them decide, but some community program. And they chose Chadwick and it was this

partnership with Emory. So there was as a coming in on the Demographic Study as a, you know, like a full force outside pressure.

Green’s response illustrates the key finding that low rates of closure occurred in areas that had a high degree of community participation. Frederick also referenced the role of outside influence, noting that “the companies and all of the partnerships that went into some of our schools were able to apply that political pressure to get our board to move things their way.”

However, not all efforts from outside influences were effective, as Manning observed:

You had ministers come in and talk, you know, and a lot of time the questions they had were bogus. They didn’t know what they were talking about, and some ministers, I went and personally told him. You know, you are out here raising all this, and you don’t know what the real issue is.

Enrollment

School underutilization, resulting from policies that forced working class people out of their neighborhoods, furnished a rationale to close schools, further pushing indigenous community members out (Lipman, 2011). This phenomenon emerged as a factor that contributed to board members’ decision to close schools. Table 6 lists the category of enrollment and the subcategories that emerged from the participants’ narratives.

Table 6

Research Question 1: Enrollment

Research Question	Category	Subcategories
1. How do district school board members decide which schools to target for closure in an urban school district?	Enrollment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Private/charter schools • Aging out of communities • Demographic study

The 2010 Demographic Study conducted by SSD revealed that since the beginning of the 2005-2006 school year, private school enrollment in the SSD had increased annually by at least 8%. In fact, the study adds, the district has the fifth largest private school enrollment in the state. The study identifies a reliance on home sales to attract new families as one of the key factors influencing elementary school enrollment.

The Demographic Study continues by showing the current and projected enrollment for the seven targeted schools. All of the schools that were closed had over 90% African American students enrolled, with over 90% of students identified as economically disadvantaged. Table 7 below shows the enrollment data.

Table 7

Enrollment Data of Schools Targeted for Closure

School	2009 Enrollment	2014 Enrollment
McIntosh ES	278	236
Douglass ES	356	340
Southland ES	234	177
Ford ES	256	231
Blue ES	307	235
Dotson MS	315	279
King MS	471	493

The schools follow the same attendance zone patterns in terms of closure. One explanation for the increase in enrollment at Parks Middle School is the larger cohorts at the feeder elementary schools. However, once those cohorts leave the middle school it will not enroll another class that large again. Much of the discussion about which school to close revolved around how factors such as enrollment impacted growth in the targeted schools. Many of the board members referenced the low enrollment and the unintended consequences.

Schools in the SSD and around the state receive funding from three primary sources:

1. local funds, which are based on property taxes
2. Title I funds—the smallest of the funding sources and the most restrictive in terms of allocation and uses—which are provided by the federal government and based on the percentage of students in the school receiving free and reduced lunch
3. state funds, which are based on student enrollment. Schools with low enrollment receive a smaller allocation of state funds to use towards school operations.

In addition, there is a major difference between the impact of charter schools and that of private schools. While both add to the problem of low enrollment, the state portion of per pupil dollars must follow the student who enrolls in a charter school. For example, a particular school district may require \$9,000 to educate each student. The state's allocation, based on the funding formula, may be \$6,000 of the original \$9,000. If a student leaves and enrolls in a charter school, the state portion follows them to the new school and becomes a part of their funding source. Conversely, if the student decides to transfer back to the original public school the funds remain with the charter school.

Discussing school enrollment as a contributing factor to school closings, Frederick explained:

A lot of our schools were not getting state funding because they did not meet that maximum number, that minimum number of kids in the building. There's one school and so that was one piece, the other piece of schools we closed was suffering from low enrollment simply because of the educational opportunities that we was [sic] offering.

Similarly, Y. Gaines stated:

Well, a number of different factors can lead to that. Mainly, you know, the primary factor being just the drop in enrollment. And, you know, so we went through, while I was on the

board we went through some just single, you know, schools closing just, you know, kind of looking into schools individually.

When asked how they arrived at the final decision to close the seven specific schools, Manning responded, “The seven specific schools were based on a number of things. I think it was based on the enrollment.” Peterson agreed. “And so when our administration started looking at the number of schools we had and some of the smaller schools we had, we recognized that we probably had too many schools for the students.”

Gaine’s explanation echoes those of her fellow board members:

Well, it changed [laughs] a lot. So the schools, the seven that we closed that, you know, that we made the final decision, really, honestly, changed even during that [laughs] meeting. But for the most part, they were made looking at enrollment projections, facility.

So there were some schools that, you know, there were schools that were near to each other and it was deciding, like, I think initially been a recommendation, you know, to close one and not the other. Relooking again, what would it mean for this community to, you know, transportation issues, facility issues. What was going on in the various communities where you’re going to . . . continue to be more about vibrant community and so on. So it was really looking at the recommendation as it came from the superintendent. I think was just looking, you know, mostly at enrollment, one with the smallest schools in it.

Regarding the decline in enrollment and its effect on school closings, Gaines added, “some of that had been going on already and we’ve seen big drops in enrollment in some of those schools and just haven’t done anything about it yet.” She continued,

You'd hear, well, they're going to come back, we're building up and people just didn't come back. You know, I don't—so that was probably one of the biggest reasons for or main reasons for the drop in student enrollment and SSD was that. Now, you had at the same time as the demographic, or, you know, the few years' previous Demographic Study; also, we're having more charter schools, you know, come on the scene. And that isn't number-wise as big for the system in terms of for individual schools and that's easily, that's a lot of what went on in Cypress. It was already a small school and then, you know, you had Drew and then initially Drew did not pull from Cypress too much. I mean, of course it pulled from Cypress. We try and just keep it that, you know, better abreast of where population shifts might be happening, so you know which schools are going to be over capacity and that kind of thing.

Peterson identified the private school tax as another factor impacting enrollment in the public schools:

The business community definitely played a role in it, especially in the city of Southland. We need to create a better education system. You know, it's this conversation we hold about private and private school tax. And most people never hear about private school taxes. The private school tax that we talk about is Fortune 500 companies that move into Southland who have school-age kids. To have to pay for their children to go to a private school or another school outside the city of Southland because the education is not up to par, not up to the standard they would want. So they have begun to call that the private school tax of Southland. And we're working hard every day to end that tax because, like I say, choice should never be about the quality of education.

The state's Private School Tax Credit Law was a factor in creating the fear that students would take advantage of this benefit to enroll in private schools, thus adding to the decline in enrollment in the local schools. Private citizens and corporations received tax credits for contributing to a number of scholarships that were used to offset tuition at private schools. Brown described the responses of many Fortune 500 company employees to the private school tax:

Why should I pay taxes and send my child to private school? Oh, no, we're going to make this thing work. So that was—they came back. And when they got back, they realized classroom sizes were large, there were some things, you know, things—teaching aids, and teachers, and everything else that they needed to bring up to another standard. So they looked at all of these things, and they started flexing their muscles, you know, and their rights as parents and taxpayers. And then one of the things they looked at, some things weren't working. Why? Because the classes were overcrowded. Well, they were like, "But we don't have all these kids in our neighborhood, so why are the classes overcrowded?"

Brown reinforced her fellow school board members' view that "ultimately when you look at school closures, you look at—before you make the decision to close schools you have to look at first of all the need, and then—well, enrollment." She continued:

And I want to tell you, at the end of the day when it all boils down, what has impacted not only schools in Southland but I'm sure in a lot of other urban areas, is that we have this—we have so many charter schools now. And these charter schools are pulling the enrollment from these schools. . . . When I moved to Southeast Southland, it was one of the—it wasn't the poorest neighborhood, but it was one of those neighborhoods that a lot

of people—there was a lot of White flight, a lot of White flight. Now, I mean, when I moved there you could get a house for \$15,000, \$25,000. Now you can't find anything under \$100,000 [or] \$200,000. I mean, we're talking about a box. And so that tells you, you know, what has happened with that community. But a lot of people, they move back to the community. But they weren't satisfied with the school. So they started their own schools. And as a result, it pulled the enrollment from the traditional public schools.

The schools targeted for closure shared a number of similarities. They were all located in the same feeder patterns aligning elementary schools to middle schools. The schools were typically found in areas that experienced a sharp decline in home ownership and saw many families leaving the neighborhoods. Students attending the schools were predominantly black and were also considered to be economically disadvantaged. Many of the surrounding housing project communities experienced a steady decline in population going back to the 1990s. Especially after the recession of 2008 the population decline saw a rapid increase. Not only were the schools impacted by their shrinking communities, but they also continued to see a trend of low school performance. The targeted schools historically demonstrated low performance based on the results of the state's achievement tests. Based on their level of poverty, or free and reduced lunch, the schools received additional funding from the federal government through Title I.

Brown continued:

So they started charters. So that definitely happened in the Inman Park area. And that was started by families. That was not a private one. And then later another huge one popped up and which was private. You know, they wanted the school so bad because they couldn't get in the neighborhood charter. So they started this other one. You just—you

know, it's not big enough for you to build there. Why, and then you're not going to last, you know, under—you're under a private firm, and they charge you—they're going to charge you so much money, which they did. They were spending almost a million dollars a year that they had to raise to—in addition to the money they were getting from the—I mean they had to get the money they were getting, plus they had to raise this other money.

It was—and so they had to end up leaving that building. It's a big pink elephant in the middle of the community now. And the—but they're doing a great job in the school, and it's a good school. And it—they moved to one of our schools that we had just renovated, which, you know, a lot of folks in that area had plans for these schools if they closed down. A lot of charters have plans for the schools that would be closed.

Hankins and Martin (2006) compiled excerpts from newspaper articles published in the *Southland City Paper (SCP)* over a six-year period that supported charter schools. The *SCP* is widely circulated throughout metro Southland and is an important source of information about charter schools for Southland families. The earlier articles describe much of the support that is needed for charter schools to be successful, from parental to legislative support, as well as identifying potential barriers. Other articles highlight charter schools' ability to better serve students by providing alternatives to failing or underperforming public schools. Hankins and Martin's summary, reproduced in Table 8, demonstrates the *SCP's* role in advocating for the necessity of charter schools, even going so far as to argue that charter schools support the principal of democracy by offering more choices.

Table 8

Headlines and excerpts from selected representational editorials in the SCP, 1998–2004

Data and source	Article Title	Excerpt
29 December 2004 (<i>SCP</i>)	Charter schools fail to break mold	Too few charter schools have taken advantage of the flexibility from regulation given to them under the law . . . While charters have less money (to educate children) than public schools, they have more freedom. More of them ought to seize that freedom to rewrite manuals on public education in America and become learning laboratories.
20 August 2004 (<i>SCP</i>)	In children's interest, look past numbers . . . Charter schools may not be performing miracles, but they're offering parents educational choices	The charter school movement is still young and the growing pains are inevitable. That charter schools haven't worked miracles doesn't mean they don't work at all.
24 December 2003 (<i>SCP</i>)	Our opinions: it's dumb to snub charter schools	If school boards in Georgia made students their top priority, they wouldn't regard charter schools as competition. They'd see them as inspiration.
7 August 2003 (<i>SCP</i>)	Our opinions: adjust system's attitude towards charter schools	The Superintendent has to make her staffers understand that their first responsibility is not preserving the school system. It's educating children, whether they sit in a traditional classroom or a charter school.
4 October 2001 (<i>Southland City</i>)	Our opinions: allow charter schools to provide competition	At work is the basic American principle of competition. Threatened by the charter movement on one side and vouchers on the other, public schools are recognizing that they have to give their customers more of what they want. And parents clearly want

		a range of education options for their children.
2 November 2001 (<i>Southland City</i>)	An editorial: prescription for public schools	Our belief is that what public education needs is a dramatic, market-oriented change.
5 December 2000 (<i>Southland City</i>)	Charter schools stifled if hurdles are too high	Certainly, no charter school should be approved that's destined to fail. Nor should the bar be set so high that grass-roots charters are doomed by the application process itself.
13 September 2000 (<i>Southland City</i>)	Charter law needs revision again	We really do wish the state Legislature would embrace charter schools in a bold way. Georgia should follow progressive states, such as California, Arizona, Michigan, and Minnesota, that allow more than the local school board to issue charters.
6 September 1999 (<i>Southland City</i>)	Charter schools stifled in state: with power-conscious local boards deciding fate of proposals, innovative education ideas stand no chance	In many cases, parents, community activists, and even universities have been discouraged from attempting to start a charter school because of the ridiculous number of hoops they are forced to jump through. Add to that resistance a set of guidelines issued by the Georgia School Boards Association
21 June 1999 (<i>Southland City</i>)	Charter schools deserve a chance	There are other examples of roadblocks being put up by local school boards is adequate.
21 August 1998 (<i>Southland City</i>)	Give parents in Southland option of charter schools	What Southland needs is new, start-up charter schools built with community and parental support. An important change in the state's charter school law that went into effect on July 1 makes that possible... Throughout the country, charter schools started from scratch often do wonders for the inner city.

15 May 1998 (<i>Southland City</i>)	Parental involvement helps charter schools	Many educators are nervous about a profound change in the law that takes effect in July. It will require formal parental involvement in the running of the charter school. That may be some of the most exciting news to come out of the charter school concept. . . . Skeptics say parents don't have a clue as to what's involved in running a school. Hogwash...Under this changed charter school law, charter school parents will have even more say-so than parents at traditional public schools could ever imagine. Another reason to celebrate.
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Economics

Table 9

Research Question 1: Economics

Research Question	Category	Subcategories
1. How do district school board members decide which schools to target for closure in an urban school district?	Economics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recession • Housing market • Charter schools • Socioeconomic factors

The theme of economics that emerged from the narratives demonstrates the influence of the recession on school closings. *Economics* is a broad category used to encompass the various financial dynamics that contributed to the school closings. The 2008 recession severely impacted the school district's ability to adequately support its schools. Combined with the housing market and socioeconomic factors, the economic factors could not be easily divided into subcategories

that would stand independently. They were all interdependent and equally influential in the process of selecting schools for closure.

The role of foreclosures was critical to school closings, because schools must generate a major part of their funding from local taxes, including property taxes. With innumerable homeowners defaulting on their mortgages and losing their homes, one of the school district's primary funding sources for salaries and other operational expenditures was severely depleted. As Green explained, "foreclosure went on the rise and the housing market took a huge dive in Southland; that had an impact on the property taxes that were coming from general fund dollars."

Moreover, in addition to relying on local funding, schools also rely on funds from the state. When the state initially cut funding for education in 2001, it created a strain on school districts, forcing them to use more local funding to bridge the gap. Thus the recession deeply impacted the school district's ability to provide relief from tight financial constraints.

Communities in the northwest region of the district that typically sent their children to private schools were now beginning to send them to public schools. The northwest was widely known as the most affluent area of the district. While schools in this area experienced an increase in enrollment, however, schools in the southern and western zones, which historically served students from a lower socioeconomic status, witnessed a decline in enrollment. Green noted, "a portion of the northwest took a huge dip as related to foreclosure, but it was mostly the south and the west." Families in these lower-income areas dealt with the recession by moving to areas that offered more affordable housing, which usually meant homes supported by government subsidies or cheaper, lower-rent apartments that were not in the safest areas.

In addition to the foreclosures that decimated both property tax revenue and school enrollments, the recession had other economic consequences that impacted schools as well, as Peterson emphasized:

First, it was a budget issue. As we kind of all know, we came through a period of time where housing prices were dropping, tax roll was dropping, income and revenue was dropping, and the cost of educating children was going up. And so we weren't the only school system in the country facing a real budget challenge, budget crisis.

Manning echoed these thoughts:

You know, the biggest part was economics, because you need to worry about, if you're going to keep a school open that's underserviced, we don't get the money from it to pay for it. We have to raise taxes. When I would meet with the members, I would say, If you want to keep the school, are you willing to pay some more taxes, so we can keep the school open?

Similarly, Brown noted:

And then you have to look at your budget. You know, I mean, you can't afford to have schools where, you know, you've got 100 kids. I mean, it costs a lot, you know, to run a school. And if you don't have the number of children there, where are you getting the funds to offset that cost, it just doesn't make sense. It doesn't make sense for the school system, but it certainly doesn't make sense for the taxpayers, because you can take that money and put it in public places that will be more effective for the children.

Describing the impact of a shift in the economy, Brown explained:

Well, when the economy hit—this recession hit, a lot of people had to bring their kids back into the public schools. And I think traffic and a lot of that had a lot to do with

people who had traditionally not used the public school system were coming back. You know, you can walk. “It’s in my neighborhood.”

Regarding socioeconomics, Frederick noted:

A lot plays in the socioeconomic conditions. We have a community that the economics of that community allows the one parent to stay at home and do nothing but organize for the school all day versus a socioeconomic challenged community when there’s [an] only parent.

Green also highlighted socioeconomic factors when she stated:

What I experienced for the first time was [that] the people who live in the million dollar homes did not want their children going to school with people who lived in a \$500,000 home. And the people who lived in the \$500,000 home, they did not want their kids go to school with kids who live in \$250,000 homes. So, we begin to see in the northside people fighting to stay in their school even if they’re—I’m going to start complaining that my school is overcrowded, well just build me a bigger school because I don’t want to be moved in order to have to co-mingle with those people. Not necessarily Black versus White; more so socioeconomic pieces [is] what I saw.

Green identified one of the unintended consequences of the economic impact, which was that schools in the northwest region experienced an increase in enrollment, which led to school board conversations about building a new high school to serve the northwest zone. At no time was there any discussion of reallocating students to the northwest area.

The findings of the study based on economics were too important for board members to ignore, because the funding source used to support local schools was deeply impacted. Without the property tax base from homes as well as local businesses, the board felt that it could not

operate a school district with a reduced funding source. The increased enrollment in the northwest zone required additional expenditures to support additional students. Meanwhile, the south and west zones could not justify operating ever-shrinking schools on a reduced budget.

Table 10

Research Question 2: Emerging Results of the School Closing Process

Research Question	Category	Subcategories
2. How do district school board members decide which schools to target for closure in an urban school district?	Emerging results of the school closing process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Board member decision/ indecision • Need for additional closings

Impact of Board Member Politics

In Research Question 2, board members were asked to share their perceptions of the school closure process. A key finding of the study was that board members participated in their own brand of politics, which led to various outcomes that affected the decision-making process. They used their roles and influence to make decisions that went beyond simply determining which schools would remain open. Although they all emphasized that their intention was to closely examine all factors before making their decisions, the findings revealed that their deal-making and relationships played an equal role in the process.

In fact, some of these deals resulted in particular schools remaining open. Conversely, in some instances, a board member's inability to skillfully participate in politics led to the closing of some schools. This finding revealed that much of the decision-making process was based on individual board members' ability to advocate for their respective schools.

In addition, the study found that due to the condition of the schools, board members felt that more schools should have been closed. They realized that the targeted schools were vastly

underperforming and should have been closed as a turnaround measure to support students attending the schools. Board members identified neighborhood conditions as well as academic performance as factors in their decision-making process, but there was also a sense of regret for not following through with this approach to close more schools. Within this framework, they also believed the initial decision to build small neighborhood schools contributed to the downfall of these schools once they began to experience a decrease in enrollment. The participants' responses fell into two main categories.

Board Member Politics

Much of the political maneuvering the board members experienced involved making promises to, and sometimes deals with, other members to leverage resources and amass support or votes to keep schools open and satisfy community concerns. Board member politics is a key component in the school closure process. Green describes a time when she needed votes, stating:

And it takes work. It takes, you know, when I came to the point of where I thought I [votes] with my community, I then had to go and make sure I had four people with me, who didn't represent the community but who had respected me enough to know how I felt and what my community needed. So, at that point, you're talking about playing politics. I'm lobbying now for the board members so that I can say to my community that not only . . . this is where I think we should be, but I'm going to go and get four more votes because without the votes, it doesn't happen.

Green went on to discuss the exchanges in which board members engage to get the support they need, even if it means making some sacrifices. She notes, "And so in the process, you know, you give and take a little bit because you know, [Henry] is trying to get what he needs

from me. He's trying to get what he needs for North Southland, I'm trying to get what I need over here. And Debra is trying to get what she needs over here."

Board member politics seems to be common and well established as a way to gain votes in a process that should focus primarily on the best way to support the community, its children, and its families. Green explained the politics further, stating:

and so we're all, you know, it's checkers, not chess this time, you know? We're all trying figure this thing out. You know. . . . how can I support you? But I need you to support me! And it took . . . a lot of work behind and we took more breaks, you know, to go behind the scenes and chitchat and work our deals in order to make it work. And you know, some people are stronger negotiators than others. So there were many of us who got our parts and a couple people who didn't because they just weren't—they thought they were stronger.

That's how I got our vote. Listen, I'll never send my child over there, but if that's what you all want, you all want a high school with 2200 kids, I'd go for it. It would never work in southwest Southland . . . But if that's what you all want, I will go for that. I mean you want a support, you know, keeping the schools open.

Regarding board member politics, Manning stated:

There were too many schools. You see what happened, you know, when you build schools in areas that made absolutely no sense, you know, you got expressways blocking them off, you know, why are you building the school here? You know, then people say, we want smaller schools. Well, smaller schools are expensive. Because what you do, is you want all these different subjects. But in order to have it right, you got to have enough students, so that you can have a pool to have a viable class of, you know, different types

of math or reading, or history like that, and I think a lot of people didn't understand that. Part of the problem with the situation is the parents' lack of understanding. I'm sorry, some board members played politics with this. I don't know if you know, but it's been my experience, and that's one of the reasons I got involved with public education.

Manning insinuates that the politics indicate a lack of genuine concern among some board members when he reflects, "Many chose to use the school board as a stepping stone to something else." Similarly, Frederick believes that the same kinds of attitudes and political maneuvering can be found among school administrators. Speaking about the intentions of school administrators in his district, Frederick stated:

Of course, hindsight is always better. I truly believe that one of our schools was strategically closed down to have something put in it in which the administration [had planned] and we're not even going to implement that in that closed school now. So I have a closed building. So [in the future I should be] looking a little harder to hope that I see the things that I now see and head them off from happening.

Regarding pressure on administrators not to close schools, Brown stated:

But there may have been pressure that was put on administration not to [close schools]. And so, you know, it's a lot of politics involved. A lot of politics involved, and it—and it's not just about closing the school, it's about, "Okay, if I close—if you all close this school, then it means that our children will have to end up with these children. Oh no, you keep this school—this school needs to stay open, or then you need to redraw your lines so that our children will go over here." So it—all of that plays into it.

Green described the long and arduous nature of the meetings to discuss school closings:

So as a result, board members who participated in their community meetings, we all kind of came to the table and I'll never forget, I think we met at 2:00 in the morning, this particular meeting. It was a very, very challenging meeting as we were going through—and we allowed each board member to really talk about what they felt and heard in their community and how they felt about it. And by the time we got to the seven, it really was input that was received from board members who really, really felt strongly about where they thought their community needed to be.

When asked whether, looking back, they believed the board should have done anything differently, one member responded:

I don't think so. I must admit, I probably would have supported [the proposed closings] more had I known what was going to happen to the buildings. If there was something concrete, I probably would have supported it more. . . . So, I think I would have definitely supported it had there been a little bit firmer decision around what those vacant buildings would have looked like and what it would have meant for those communities.

Brown responded:

Honestly, I to this day question the necessity of [school closings] . . . We just went around and around and around, and we spent a lot of money. We knew we had to close more schools than were closed; a lot more, based on conversations. None of that happened. The consolidation, I don't know, maybe two or three schools were consolidated. It was just a lot of angry people—a lot of angry people. It created a lot of anger, confusion, distrust, because people started turning against each other, these communities, neighborhood people. I just—no, I don't think I would have done it, closed the recommended schools, then, and—or I don't like the outcome. If we were going to—

we set out to do it, then we should have done what we said we were going to do. And that didn't happen. There was too much pressure. People bow to pressure.

Need to Close Additional Schools

When asked whether he would have done anything differently, Manning stated, "I would have closed more schools. I definitely think more schools should have been closed at the time. And then what you do, you regroup, and then look at the demographics, and see what it's going to be like in the future."

Peterson felt the same way regarding closing schools, stating:

And it is sad to see people make the decision, "I'd rather have convenience than good schools." But a lot of parents don't know any better [inaudible] to know what the difference is. But convenience and safety are often all they have to go by. They don't really understand what the educational impact is. And so those were probably the hardest conversations, to say to some parent, "I understand that your kid is closer to X School, but he's getting a really poor education. And if you consolidate these schools to give him the fuller resources that would be at hand, they would get a better education even though it would be less convenient for you." And that's a hard thing for some parents to appreciate.

So in my perspective, it was really challenging to say, "You tell me what the horrible-performing schools are and let's eliminate those schools and consolidate them into better-performing schools and give those students a chance to go to a really high-performing school." And those are hard conversations.

Focus Group Findings

The Southland School District's Superintendent's Final Redistricting and Closure Recommendations (Appendix B) emerged in a demographics and redistricting study lasting for 11 months, beginning in mid-2011 (Southland School District, 2012). The district is divided into four geographical areas managed by organizations referred to as School Reform Teams (SRT). Focus groups conducted by an outside consulting firm with SRT 1, 2, 3 and 4, along with community meetings and demographic studies, were included in the 2011 Capacity Study and Facilities Plan, which followed the following process:

Phase I: Data Collection/Modeling

Phase II: Alternatives Analysis

Phase III: Implementation Strategies

Submittal: Report submitted to Superintendent and brief school board on findings

Post Completion: Superintendent considers findings and makes recommendations to the Southland School District Board.

SRT focus groups conducted during the school closing process yielded additional data used to validate data collected from board member interviews. Four focus groups, representing each SRT area or "zone" facing closings within the SSD, were conducted using strength, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis. Leigh and Pershing (2006) define SWOT analysis as:

an approach to considering the inhibitors and enhancers to performance that an organization encounters in both its internal and external environments. Strengths are enhancers to desired performance while weaknesses are inhibitors to desired performance, with both being within the control of an organization. Opportunities are

enhancers and threats are inhibitors to desired performance, though these are considered outside of an organization's control.

Lipman (2011) asserts that in organizations like Southland's SRTs, "decisions about zoning, community economic development, public housing, schools, and transportation are made behind closed doors by appointed commissions and unelected public-private bodies, validated by performances of public participation, and justified by the need to improve the city's competitive advantage." Despite public input during community meetings, she believes the decision-making practice "justifies policy decisions by their contribution to the city's 'revitalization' and 'good business climate,'" as occurred in Chicago.

Tables 11, 12, 13, and 14 show the themes that emerged from the board member interviews alongside the emerging themes identified in the focus group summary documents. Data from the documents were coded based on each research question, as detailed in Chapter 3. Table 11 focuses on the perspectives expressed by the Zone 1 focus group, comprised mainly of parents in that attendance area. Members of the focus group identified barriers that would make it difficult for the community political process to take place. They also argued that the role of the schools in their respective communities was the central point, as opposed to businesses or other community organizations.

Parents in this community believed redistricting would help to prevent their schools from closing, rather than having the schools reopen as charter schools. So although they were in favor of some form of redrawing the attendance zones, they were not in favor of charter schools. Parents in Zone 2 expressed concerns about families with limited access to community politics and resources that would afford them the opportunity to better advocate for their children. They

were also concerned about the impact of charter schools on enrollment and were not in favor of them as an option.

Members of the focus groups in Zones 1, 2, and 3 all highlighted the impact of the housing market on school enrollment. In Zone 4, in contrast, members maintained that their home values had remained stable and their enrollment increased. In fact, parents in this focus group spoke about schools that were already overcrowded.

Zones 3 and 4 differed from the other zones in that they had stronger community partnerships in place. In fact, based on a university partnership that was previously established with one of the identified middle schools, that school was removed from the list. A central theme that emerged from the focus group for Zone 4 was the key role of economics and socioeconomic status in the thought process of these parents. Parents feared they would have to send their children to schools whose academic performance did not meet their standards. However, as in the other zones, these parents strongly objected to the idea of opening charter schools.

Table 11

Zone 1 Focus Group Meeting Notes

Research Question	Themes	Focus Group Notes
1. How do district school board members decide which schools to target for closure in an urban school district?	Community politics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is an imbalance in the overall quality of facilities throughout the zone. • Dissemination of information is more difficult in some parts of the zone where parents lack resources and access to computers. Less informed parents make it more difficult to mobilize a unified “voice” to advocate for the zone. • The pending closure and demolition of the “Overlook Southland” apartment complex could impact roughly 40 students at Iverson ES. Community leaders are attempting to convince the developer to delay evictions until the end of the school year.

	Enrollment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Redistricting could help to better align school attendance areas with the zone's elected representation. Currently, many attendance zones are split, so residents have one school board representative for elementary schools and another for middle/high schools. • Closing schools only to have them reopen as charter schools won't solve the problem of underutilized facilities, and may cause traditional enrollment to decline at a faster rate. Beecher and West Manor have large K-3 enrollments but very small 4th and 5th grades because of the nearby charter school. • Charter schools can also be a threat because they are diverting financial resources away from traditional SSD schools.
	Economics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Academic rigor" is not uniform among all schools in the zone. There is a significant difference between underperforming and high-performing schools. • SSD policies have traditionally focused on buildings, not academics. It was recommended that SSD adopt a policy that allocates a minimum of 50% of capital cost savings achieved by closing schools to improving academic programming in the affected areas. Such a policy could reduce potential local opposition to school consolidations. • Concern was expressed that cost savings from consolidation and closure of some under-enrolled schools won't result in more resources for educational programs on the South side of the city. SSD resources are going to overcrowded schools, not to schools that are under-enrolled or have no capacity issues.
2. How do district policymakers perceive the school closure process in an urban school district?	Unintended results regarding closures	
	Waste of resources	Several Zone 1 schools are the "centers" of their respective communities and neighborhoods. It would be detrimental to those neighborhoods if those schools were to close.

Table 12

Zone 2 Focus Group Meeting Notes

Research Question	Themes	Focus Group Notes
1. How do district school board members decide which schools to target for closure in an urban school district?	Community politics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some Zone 2 schools lack access to community, business, and institutional partnerships/resources.
	Enrollment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Previous redistricting of attendance zones in Zone 2 removed some neighborhoods that were within walking distance of some schools (i.e., Carls, Dowers, and Ryder) and assigned those children to schools that were further away. Charters and “open choice” schools can also be a threat if they continue to draw financial resources away from traditional SSD schools.
	Economics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Under-enrolled schools are typically located in areas where public housing sites have recently been demolished and/or in areas with high rental vacancy rates. High housing vacancy rates in some parts of the zone, particularly in apartment complexes, have caused enrollment to decline. The demolition of public housing sites in the area has created “holes” in some school attendance areas. High apartment vacancies are a major threat to the zone. It was noted that the Fielding Apartments are in the process of being closed and will result in further enrollment losses at the elementary level. SSD should not cut capacity so far that it would not be able to accommodate increased enrollment if/when vacancy rates return to more normal levels. Intermediate and long-term opportunities exist to revitalize parts of Zone 2 that have been hard hit by foreclosures. 106 homes in Vine City are owned by a single individual and could be redeveloped in the future. Other redevelopment opportunities exist to attract more families to Zone 2.

Table 13

Zone 3 Focus Group Meeting Notes

Research Question	Themes	Focus Group Notes
1. How do district school board members decide which schools to target for closure in an urban school district?	Community politics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong community and institutional partnerships benefit some schools in the SRT. Centennial benefits from supportive institutional and corporate partners. Neighborhood associations tend to support the schools.
	Enrollment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some under-enrolled schools are also actively being used for other community purposes (i.e., clinics). “Excess” space does not necessarily equate to vacant space. • Charter schools are drawing students away from traditional SSD schools in some neighborhoods. • SSD has an opportunity to attract/keep more families in Midtown if it can address overcrowding issues in a positive way. • Forcing parents to transfer children from top to lower-performing schools will result in flight to charter and private schools and more families moving out of the area. The result could make current imbalances worse rather than better. • Overcrowding at Washington HS must be solved, starting with stronger address verification and a reduction in allowed administrative transfers.
	Economics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Fear of change” is prevalent in some areas. Perceptions of resulting property value losses from neighborhoods being zoned to poorer performing schools will cause opposition among many residents, even in households without children in SSD.

Table 14

Zone 4 Focus Group Meeting Notes

Research Question	Themes	Focus Group Notes
1. How do district school board members decide which schools	Community politics	

to target for closure in an urban school district?		
	Enrollment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most Zone 4 schools are already over capacity • Zone 4 has a large percentage of school-aged children attending private schools. This population has the potential to further increase enrollment if those students re-enter public schools. At the same time, Zone 4 parents have numerous options and could leave the system if overcrowding is not addressed or redistricting solutions are perceived to be detrimental to student achievement. • Single-gender academies are impacting more traditional schools, particularly BEST Academy, and complicate transportation and potential redistricting options. • Parents have options with charter schools, private schools, and the single-gender academies. The environment is very competitive. If changes do not improve resources for students or are perceived to result in a less equitable distribution of resources among schools, SSD will lose more students.
	Economics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Class issues” complicate redistricting. If two middle school attendance zones are created, should the zones be drawn with the objective of making them demographically diverse (internally) or different from each other? (Opinions are mixed on that point.) In an area where parents have ample private school choice, SSD runs the risk of setting up some schools for failure.
2. How do district policymakers perceive the school closure process in an urban school district?	Unintended results regarding closures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perceptions of academic inequality/poor performance levels in some schools are worse than the reality. Perceptions will have to be fought to achieve solutions that benefit the Zone as a whole.
	Waste of resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating more vacant/underutilized buildings will be a further drag on the community. • Closing/mothballing buildings or making them available to more charter schools will make the situation worse.

Demographic Study Findings

The Southland School District hired an advisory firm, a demographic research group, and a geographic information systems (GIS) group to manage the demographic study of the District in 2010. According to the document's executive summary (Appendix B), the goal of the study was to maximize the data and use it to plan, not simply to project the past into the future (SSD Demographic Study, 2010). Data used in the forecasts were derived from enrollments by grade in the SSD, birth and death data, migration reports from the Internal Revenue Service, and data from the U.S. Census Bureau, 1995-2000 (SSD, 2010). For the present study, a document review was conducted and data correlating with the enrollment themes from the board member interviews and focus group summaries were collected.

The SSD 2010 Demographic Study projected the total system enrollment (all grade levels) to grow modestly between 2000 and 2015 with a slow downturn predicted to occur after 2015. Enrollment changes were expected not to be uniform among grade levels, attendance areas, or zones. Volatile economic and housing market conditions added uncertainties that impacted these forecasts, particularly in the short term.

Total SSD enrollment was forecasted in the 2010 study to increase by 1,270 students, or 2.8%, between the 2009-10 and 2014-15 school years. The study also reported:

Total enrollment is expected to decline by 397 students, or 0.8%, from 2014-15 to 2019-2020. Changes in year-to-year enrollment (particularly between 2011 and 2015) was largely due to smaller cohorts entering and moving through the system in conjunction with larger cohorts moving through and leaving the system. As in-migration of young adults continued and larger grade cohorts entered the school system, total enrollment is expected to grow in the short term. However, after 2016 total enrollment will begin to

decline. After 2011 the district's elementary enrollment will begin a slow decline as the larger cohorts enter middle school. High school enrollment should continue to increase and plateau by 2019.

Detailed forecasts for zones, school attendance areas, and individual schools are presented in the full report in Appendix C.

Key findings supporting the enrollment forecasts include the following data from an SSD report entitled, *Population and Housing Market Trends Influencing SSD Enrollment from the 2010 Demographic Study*:

1. From 2005 to 2010, Southland's total population is estimated to have increased by 60,050, or 12.6%, to 537,760. From 2010 to 2015, the population is forecasted to continue to increase by an additional 33,510 persons, or 6.2%. While during this entire 10-year period all of the elementary attendance areas are forecasted to increase in total population, the rate of growth for all parts of the city is expected to slow (by half) after 2010.

2. "Delayed demographic reaction" is a key issue when attempting to ascertain the impact of new housing on school enrollment, as the full impact of new home construction is not seen immediately in elementary enrollment. Southland is currently absorbing the effects of the 2001-2006 housing boom that has ended and will be replaced by dramatically slower rates of new housing construction over the next 10 years. The City of Southland experienced an average of over 8,000 new housing units constructed per year from 2001 to 2006. From 2007 to 2009 the average rate of new construction dropped to 2,500 units per year. This SSD enrollment forecast anticipates that the city will experience slower

housing construction in the future, averaging 1,000 new units per year through 2014 and only 750 per year from 2015 through 2019.

3. Southland population and housing forecasts are based on modest expectations for recovery and growth of the local and regional economy over the next decade. The city of Southland is working on several economic development initiatives that could result in a higher rate of future economic growth. The redevelopment of Ft. Carter, the Southland BeltLine, and other projects could potentially generate more housing demand and new construction in some parts of the city than are incorporated into this forecast. However, even if successful, the timing and demographic effects of city economic development initiatives would not begin to influence Southland enrollment until the out years of the forecast at the earliest. Impacts could be more significant after 2020.

4. More than 54% of Southland's estimated 232,200 housing units are multi-family, and nearly 83,500 city households (49.1%) are renters. Roughly 78% of the 45,000 new housing units added to the city over the past decade were multi-family, and a significant portion of those were also rental units. Because of the recent real estate downturn and foreclosure crisis [referring to 2008], Southland now has a substantial inventory of vacant housing, estimated by some sources to be in the 20% range.

5. As the district continues to have less new home construction, the rate and magnitude of existing home sales will become the increasingly dominant factor affecting the amount of population and enrollment change in owner occupied housing. In most cases, it takes 20 to 30 years before all original (or first time) owner occupants of a housing area move out and are replaced by new, young families with children. As a result of the "empty nest" syndrome, the attendance areas in the Southland School District will see a steady rise in

the median age of their populations, even while the district as a whole continues to attract some new young families (SSD, 2010, pg. iv).

Analysis included in the SSD 2010 Demographic Study also found that in many parts of the city, student yields from multi-family housing are higher than from single family homes, which suggests that the majority of SSD students live in rental housing. In addition, a large number of public housing units in Southland have been closed and demolished; those residents have relocated to rental housing located elsewhere in the city or the region. The temporary effects of the movement of those households may still be impacting some attendance areas and individual schools. The combination of rental market volatility, more frequent movement of renter households, higher student yields in multi-family housing, and current abnormally high vacancy rates adds complexity to making SSD enrollment forecasts. Changes in rental market conditions could influence SSD enrollment in some attendance areas in the short term, particularly those with high concentrations of multi-family housing (SSD Demographic Study, 2010).

Chapter 4 identified several major findings in the study. It showed that the theme of economics played a central role in the process, beginning with the decision-making of the board members. Board members relied heavily on the Demographic Study as a part of the process. Three subthemes emerged related to the broad theme of economics: socioeconomic factors, the recession, and the housing market. Economics influenced the decision-making process and the subthemes were interdependent rather than distinct from one another. Economics provided the school board with a simple selection tool to use in identifying schools for closure.

A second finding was low enrollment. School enrollments were impacted by the opening of charter schools as well as by the movement of families out of particular neighborhoods.

However, a second finding proved to be more disturbing. Political maneuvering among school board members resulted in the closing of some schools and kept others open. Although the board was able to use economics as a simple identification tool, they had difficulty adhering strictly to this process because of the political process. This process was usually a direct result of what they did as well as in some cases how community organizations were able to advocate for their schools.

A fourth finding was that board members generally believed more schools should have been closed. Although they failed to close more schools, board members felt that due to low enrollment, poor academic performance, and the conditions of the neighborhoods in which the schools were located, more schools should have been designated for closure.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The purpose of this case study was to examine the steps that district school board members used in selecting schools for closure in an urban school district. The following research questions were addressed in the study:

1. How do district school board members decide which schools to target for closure in an urban school district?
2. How do district policymakers perceive the school closure process in an urban school district?

The questions guiding this study prompted an analysis of the school closure process in the SSD, beginning with the initial stages and concluding with the actual identification of schools that would be closed. The process incorporated interviews with six board members charged with making the final decision, the analysis of minutes from focus group meetings in which participants were school and community stakeholders throughout the district, and a document review of a demographic study conducted by the SSD.

As described in Chapter 4, the key findings are as follows:

1. Economic issues and low enrollment were primary factors used to select schools for closure.
2. The political process affected how board members made decisions.
3. Board members believed more schools should have been targeted for closure.

In this chapter, I discuss these findings as well as the study's contribution to the existing literature. I conclude the chapter by reflecting on implications for further research, policy, and practice.

Community politics helped shape the SSD board members' decision-making process; however, how that political process plays out depends largely on the power of the community participants. Some opponents of school closure, such as local clergy, were unable to make a significant impact on the process due to their lack of actual, as opposed to perceived, power. In contrast, the participation of a major university ultimately led to the removal of a school from the list.

Board members with a clear understanding of the political process were able to impact the group's decision-making in a manner that benefitted the constituents they served. Parental groups such as PTAs had varying levels of success based on their respective neighborhoods. Schools located in neighborhoods in which residents had a higher socioeconomic status remained untouched. In fact, some of these schools had to contend with the unintended consequence of overcrowding as a result of school closings. However, because parents and community advocates for these schools did not want to see their schools consolidated or the student population redistributed, many of these schools remained overcrowded.

One community grew to the point of having to build an additional elementary school, which quickly became overcrowded. The growth, coupled with students returning to the local public schools from private schools after the economic downturn, led to a situation they were not prepared to handle. This finding exposed a critical issue for school boards whose members represent a specific district or area. At various times, members may make decisions that positively impact their own districts, while other areas of the district are forced to contend with

what they have. The study revealed board members bartering for votes, which led to one zone building a high school for upwards of \$50 million, while another zone received the necessary votes to remain open regardless of its enrollment size. Board members remarked that they were playing “chess, not checkers,” referring to their ability to fight for what their constituents needed. This statement and its meaning demonstrate the power or influence of the board members’ perspectives on the outcome of the process.

The impact of school enrollments was another major finding of the study. Enrollment was one of the overwhelmingly convincing factors in the process, and all board members emphasized that they could not justify allowing under-enrolled schools to remain open. Based on their responses, as well as the trajectory indicated by the demographic study, this factor weighed heavily in the decision-making process.

Various factors influenced the dwindling enrollment in many areas, just as multiple influences resulted in overcrowded conditions in other areas. The opening of charter schools adversely impacted student growth in Southland. Board members had negative views about the influence of charter schools on student enrollment, but they could not deny that enrollment weighed heavily on their decision to close schools. Data from the demographic study added to the enrollment concerns that factored into the decision-making process, as the study did not anticipate revitalization of the targeted schools’ neighborhoods in the foreseeable future. Instead, it highlighted a trend of continuous enrollment decline.

Notes from the various zone focus groups indicated that parents were more concerned about the history of failure in the schools and the convenience of neighborhood schools than about the schools’ ability to effectively serve students in the community. Redistricting was proposed as a solution to under-enrollment, but this only affected schools and communities in

areas of lower socioeconomic status. Even with the overcrowding in affluent areas, conversations about realignment in those communities were immediately rebuffed by parents in those areas. Ultimately, declines in student enrollment weighed too heavily for board members not to consider this factor in their closure decisions.

Economics was an overarching theme that affected every aspect of the case study. The subcategory of socioeconomic status may represent the most impactful area, as it was referenced in all discussions on closure. Economics highlighted the underperformance of many schools, which influenced board members to consider closing schools based on performance.

All of the schools that were ultimately closed were located in neighborhoods that were severely affected by the recession and did not indicate signs of growth in the demographic study. Homes that were foreclosed on due to the recession were found in affluent neighborhoods as well as those considered to be working class or impoverished. Economics also was a factor in schools that were underperforming. Socioeconomic factors that impacted the closure decisions related both to race and class. Even within affluent neighborhoods, attitudes toward those of different income levels and those with homes in lower price ranges revealed that no one was immune to classism.

From a budgetary standpoint, many board members identified the impact of losing a steady tax base as a factor in their decision to close schools, juxtaposing the decreased enrollment with the true cost of operating the school. They consistently emphasized that it did not make sense to keep a large facility open for such a small number of students. The drastic reduction in property tax income due to the large number of foreclosures exacerbated this issue, preventing schools from generating the necessary income to cover their operating costs.

Board members' perspectives on school closures represent another essential finding of the study. The board members' role was critical in the process based on their decision-making abilities. Interestingly, many board members believed that more closures should have occurred. Although the findings supported the board members' assertions that the decrease in enrollment along with economic factors were the primary reasons for the school closures, board members felt strongly that more schools should have been closed due to a history of underperformance. They believed that students should have access to the best facilities and opportunities, yet many community groups ignored this as a factor in the decision-making process.

Another finding was the lack of any definitive plan for the closed buildings. The study identified concerns about previous school closures that led to buildings remaining vacant. There was conversation about charter schools taking over some of these closed facilities, but this outcome never quite materialized. Parents and other community members were concerned about charter schools using the vacant school buildings to continue their growth at the expense of existing schools, continuing to negatively impact school enrollment. One board member stated that she knew there had been serious consideration of closing one school in order to use the facility as a charter school. Another member stated that he would have been more supportive of the process had he known the district's intentions for the facilities. Such a strong point of view helps to further define the board members' role in this process and their ability to influence the outcome.

This study identified enrollment, community politics, economics, board member considerations, and concerns about wasted resources as key factors in the decision to close urban schools. Strong themes of neoliberalism were represented by the threat of charter schools. Charter schools represented the impact of enrollment of schools as well as the changing faces of

some neighborhoods for families who did not want to enroll their children in the local schools, and chose charter schools as an alternative.

Much previous literature has highlighted the waste of resources associated with closed schools that are not repurposed, becoming dilapidated buildings. The findings of this study support this prior research, as board members voiced concerns about the absence of a plan for utilizing the closed school buildings. As in previous studies, the present case study found that many closed schools continued to stand empty, without any plans for further use.

The most consistent finding of this study that aligned with neoliberalism was the impact of charter schools on enrollment in established public schools. Neoliberalism views charter schools as a means of privatizing education, and this study clearly identified the problems charter schools create for existing schools through their impact on enrollment. In addition, many of this study's findings regarding race and socioeconomic status are also central themes in the neoliberalist literature. School closures disproportionately impact impoverished communities, which are rarely able to keep schools open once they are initially targeted for closure. The unique nature of Southland's zones, which incorporated affluent and even more highly affluent areas at odds with one another, is not found in the existing literature. This brings to light the theme of class as an area that may require further exploration.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this study have three major implications for future school closings: community politics playing an increased role in the closure process, the impact of board member perspectives on the selection of the schools, and additional closures based on the results of the demographic study.

Community Politics and the School Closure Process

A noteworthy area for policy development should focus on creating a higher level of accountability for school board members due to their role in the policy process. Board members' ability to impact the selection process is too important for them not to address the level of influence they have on the decision-making process. This need for accountability affects community organizations as well. The degree of influence some community organizations can exert was evident through the partnership one middle school had established with a local university, which allowed it to remain open despite being an initial target. As more districts begin to examine their own practices regarding school closures, they would be wise to examine how the local political process may play a key role in driving these decisions.

Parent groups in affluent areas are likely to continue to see decisions being made in their favor. As noted in the study, community politics in the form of strong parent groups led to schools in some areas remaining open rather than repopulating students, at the expense of students who were forced to continue attending overcrowded schools. The danger of organizations wielding such significant power in this process is that the outcome may fail to truly serve the students attending the schools. This was evidenced in the zone noted in the study that fought to keep its targeted schools open. School with the "right" partnerships can create problems for board members and policymakers who have clearly identified the need for schools to close, but confront political opposition from the local community. Meeting the needs of those who want to keep specific schools open for convenience or having neighborhood-school relationships may divert resources that could have been used more efficiently at other schools; in such cases, it is students who suffer the consequences.

Board Member Perspectives on Additional Closings

Board members' perceptions are an important part of the school closure decision-making process. The study extrapolated from the interview data to identify several key findings regarding their views and feelings about this complex process. First, some board members are willing to make deals and bargain to ensure that their own communities are omitted from the closure process, but at what cost? The data indicated that board members wanted to see more schools closed due to underperformance as well as low enrollment. However, many schools were allowed to remain open without any changes implemented to address these concerns. The possibility that some board members may care more about personal gain, whether to secure future votes or for another personal agenda, than about the fidelity of the school closure process is a troubling prospect.

In addition, the combative nature of the process created a level of apprehension for many board members. Confronted with the difficulty of making these decisions, the study showed they made the safe choice to close the minimum possible number of schools. Such reluctance to move forward with the process can potentially create financial hardships for school districts. Regardless of how difficult these decisions might be, as elected officials it is the board members' responsibility to act in the best interest of their constituents in light of the available information. The board members consistently emphasized that they valued the data that was provided to make their decisions, which should have made the process easier. However, although the data indicated that more schools should have been closed, ultimately many schools were allowed to continue in their current state.

Additional Closures Based on the Demographic Study

The demographic study identified a significant number of schools whose enrollment is projected to decrease steadily over time. Board members consistently identified the demographic study as the primary source of data for their decision-making process. The case study revealed that the entire process was, in fact, centered around the demographic study.

Members of the focus groups for the various zones often referenced trends identified in the demographic study as evidence for their perspectives. However, basing decisions solely on this information risks disregarding other significant factors that could allow schools to remain open. In addition, although the projections are based on research data, they ignore other factors such as possible neighborhood revitalization/gentrification that such a study cannot take into account.

Implications

This case study identified economics and the impact of a national financial downturn as the primary reasons an urban district decided to close seven of its schools. The decision to close schools affects the lives of many individuals: students, parents, school employees, and owners and employees of neighboring businesses. Yet to date, no study has quantified the actual cost savings for any given school closures. Given the community unrest and turmoil this process evokes, expanding the literature and enhancing the knowledge base regarding the school closure process will better inform policymakers, helping them to ask the right questions.

Many districts are currently facing the process of closure and consolidation and thus have much to gain from continued contributions to this research. The explanation that low enrollment leads to inefficiency is a common rationale for school closures, along with reference to the

expenses of building operations. Yet without data such justifications amount to little more than speculation.

The literature consistently referenced underperforming schools as the sites most often targeted for closure, noting that students were usually moved to other schools in similar settings. Very little consideration is given to what happens to those students once they have relocated to their new school. Throughout the study board members speculated that students moved to new school settings were in much better situations than those they had left; however, such conclusions are not based on research or data. Extending the literature in this area would provide another source of data to be used in the decision-making process. School closing policy recommendations would probably pay particularly close attention to school performance given board members perspectives on the underperformance of not only targeted schools, but non targeted schools as well. In fact, given their views additional schools may be selected in the future. Southland School District faces continued opposition based on the decision to close schools. The demographic study projects a steady decline in student enrollment in a number of schools, which means that the political process will continue. The gentrification movement continues in Southland, revealing that more white families are moving into neighborhoods that were once predominantly black. This has the potential to incur cries of racism as black families continue to be “priced out” of communities that are becoming increasingly white.

Conclusion

The decision to close schools will always be interwoven with elements of the political process. This study found that despite such political influences, the individuals responsible for making these decisions gave careful consideration to factors such as economics and enrollment. As neoliberalist thought suggests, there will always be those with ulterior motives who are not

motivated by the primary mission of public schools—providing a quality education for all. However, the study found that school boards can act independently of such influences in their decision-making process. In fact, the board members' concern that they might not have closed enough failing schools demonstrates an understanding of their role in removing barriers to student achievement.

It has been almost 10 years since this process started in the Southland School District to close schools. The decision to close schools did not end during the 2012-2013 school year. In fact, the second round of closures added another criteria to low enrollment and economics that was previously mentioned by the board members: academic performance. The 2015-2016 school year saw the closing of one school while there were mergers involving four others. The 2017-2018 school year saw an additional school targeted for closure, while two others were merged. The district's new superintendent cited schools that were less than half capacity, and that they would do students a disservice by allowing schools in this condition to remain open. What is different is the addition of the word turnaround as a part of the decision making process. This term is used to describe school improvement strategies of a failing school.

What cannot be controlled are the political agendas that are prevalent throughout the study. Politics will be used to either help keep schools open or, based on the inability to effectively advocate, allow schools to close. In addition, the influence of hidden agendas and motives will continue to be part of the process, as groups with political power use their influence to get what they want. It is therefore vital that policy makers continue to collect the necessary data and information to enable them to make decisions that serve the needs not only of their constituencies, but of the entire school district.

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