

## How Closing Schools Undermines Democracy

In this episode, Have You Heard talks to Sally Nuamah, [who studies the long-term impact of the school closures](#). One impact is a decline in voter participation and support for Democrats. Why would shuttering schools cause a drop in political engagement? And why would local residents fight so hard to keep open schools that, according to many metrics, were failing? Well, you'll just have to listen and find out!

Jennifer Welcome to Have You Heard. I'm Jennifer Berkshire.

Jack And I'm Jack Schneider.

Jennifer Our topic today is school closures.

Jack, you and I live in Massachusetts—obviously, not together—we happen to be in a part of the country that has a lot of very old schools. I drove by one on my way here today. I'm guessing it was probably built in the 30's; I could see the cornerstone.

Jack Back when they were modeling everything after factories.

Jennifer That would be the very day.

It got me thinking about how permanent schools seem, like they were intended to be...

Jack At least relative to other kinds of public institutions.

Jennifer Well, you're an education historian. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about that. We're at a time now where closing schools is seen as an effective policy instrument, that if you just close the bad schools and replace them with good schools, pretty soon, all the kids will be in high-performing seats.

Jack It's an interesting question.

I think that if you were to travel back in time, via time machine or just imagination, the thought of a school ever closing would be unthinkable to the people who had worked so hard to establish it and to keep it functioning.

Even [school consolidation, which happened primarily in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, as one-room school houses and other very small schools were consolidated into larger schools, primarily in rural communities](#), even school consolidation elicited really tremendous pushback from communities, which felt attached to the schools that they themselves had attended. [They also felt attached to schools because they were] public squares that schools continue to function as in our present lives.

From the Somerville podcast studio we can look across the street at a school where there are community meetings held, where there's a pool in the basement where most of the children in the community end up learning how to swim. Where basketball gets played in the evening. Where local skateboarders...

Jack And, someday, if Somerville ever de-paves, we may even have a patch of greenspace where people can go and have a picnic or just spread out and enjoy a beautiful New England fall day.

Schools historically have served two purposes. One of them is educating young people in a community. Of course, having moved through those schools, people become attached to them, and if they stay in the community, continue to think of those schools as an important community resource.

Also, the way that we use schools, at least public schools, at least neighborhood public schools, as broader public resources beyond serving a function in terms of educating students ages 5 through 18, as places where the community can gather. [This second purpose of schools is important] particularly as we have fewer and fewer public spaces, a truly public space, where you really don't have to ask anybody other than your fellow citizens for permission.

Jennifer I can imagine that some people listening to this might accuse you of having an overly romantic notion of public schools as community gathering spots, and hubs of local democracy. But, our special guest this episode discovered that part of what makes school closures so wrenching is that local residents see the loss of their school as being about so much more than just losing a building.

We are joined now by [Sally Nuamah](#). Sally studies the political fallout from closing schools and the relationship between school closures and democracy. She started studying school closures while she was in Chicago working on her PhD at Northwestern. Then she went to [Princeton for a postdoc](#). She's about to start at Duke. Welcome, Sally.

Sally Thank you. I'm really excited to chat with you all today about this important topic.

Jennifer Sally, I want you to go back—several years now—to where this story starts.

So, you're back in Chicago, [you've graduated from George Washington University](#) and you've just started grad school. You happened to drop by a community meeting in the neighborhood where you grew up on Chicago's Near North Side, and residents there are discussing the city's plans to close a local school, just one of many schools that was on the chopping block back in 2013. What did you hear [at the meeting]?

Sally As I attended the meeting, I saw how parents and neighborhood community members spoke about the potential of the closure as something that really seemed like life or death. People were really screaming at the top of their lungs about the closings, the effects it potentially had. Or, they were frustrated by the fact that it wasn't clear that the persons who were making that decision didn't see it quite that way, in the way they saw it, that they were really losing a community institution, which it was unclear they wouldn't get back or even be replaced by anything that was similarly viable.

I sat there and thought about what I was studying, I thought about where I was at and the tools I had learned, and I realized that this was something that not only were people not studying that needed to be studied, [but also] the stories of what people are going through needed to be highlighted and understood.

Sally Really part of understanding. How to give voices to people who are being affected by these policies every day and view these things as serious matters. And yet, so many people didn't seem to know about it.

I decided then that it was something that I would want to focus on for my work. Not only as a person who grew up in Chicago, born and raised in a low-income, African American community, but also as someone who cared about equality, injustice, and democracy.

Jennifer Talk a little bit more about why residents of a neighborhood would see the closing of a school as a "life or death issue", as you describe it.

Sally When I heard people say [a school closing] was a life or death matter, [I wondered] "*Why do people view it this way? Why are people protecting institutions that someone else might interpret as failing?*" So that [question] drove the entire project.

As I engaged in the research and actually spoke to people who are affected by these policies, and looked at my community and how it was changing, I started to notice the connections people were making simply by listening to what they were saying. People would constantly refer to the fact that if this community's institutions close down, it would affect their ability to have healthcare, it would affect their ability to have employment. It would affect their ability to live in a neighborhood that is safe, because right now, the closed-down structure is acting as an eyesore.

I would hear people specifically say that people would think that they failed. Their kids would think that they failed, because the institutions that their kids attended were being closed down and they couldn't protect it. So, [school closings] have to do not just with social and economic issues but also in terms of what people are modeling, what their teaching to their younger people. What they're able to protect for the next generation to come, they were leaving assets that were passed down to them from prior generations, especially because schools have always been at the center of Civil Rights and the fight for equality.

It was very clear, just from talking to people, and being engaged at these meetings, that people themselves would express further consequences, the larger consequences of what the closure of the school means, what it symbolizes, and the direct resources it takes from a community.

The absence of that institution, the question became "*What else do people have?*" The alternative also wasn't clear to them, not from previous experience, and not in the way it was proposed currently. It became a question of how people would to engage in the pursuit of equality, the pursuit of happiness, a flourishing life, when they don't have a mechanism, or *the* mechanism that was so central to their mobility and to the longevity of the community up until this point, and in many cases represents the last institution to do this work.

Jennifer Whenever you see a big battle over closing schools, like the one in Chicago back in 2013, inevitably, you'll hear people ask "*Why would people fight so hard to save a failing school?*" But as you found out in your research, that question really misses something fundamental about how residents in these neighborhoods see public schools and the role that they play.

Sally        What you find is, almost always, communities, when they are opposed to closure, it's not that they want to go to bad schools—they're rational human beings—it has more to do with the larger historical, social, and community-based roles that schools have played. I want to speak specifically about that, because I think it gets stated a lot, but we don't actually know what that means.

In African American communities in particular, public schools had long history of being the first public institutions in which African Americans got access. That led to mayoral positions, and other kinds of political positions thereafter. But not just that: schools historically have been a main social mechanism for the black middle class. A lot of people end up in black middle class status after the industrialization, through jobs in the education sector [there is generalized relationship between the spread of industry and advent of mass public schooling].

The same applies for black businesses. After there becomes a black mayor in D.C., he starts to give contracts to lunch services, to janitorial services, to black businesses. Then schools become...and then in the 60s and 70s and thereafter, they also become central hubs or engines for organizing, for political participation, and developing civic skills, outside of school hours. They become a home base for that.

All those acts I mentioned actually aren't related directly to achievement, but play an important social, economic, and political role in these communities, especially after industrialization. That is in part why a school and education policy has always had a central role and narrative around Civil Rights, and the social mobility of minority, especially black, populations.

When you think about public schools and you measure their success, based on, like you said, more narrow measures such as performance, and your replacements [school choice, charter schools, virtual schools] don't account for these larger social, economic, and political roles schools have always played in these communities—and continue to—then it actually undermines why these people think that these institutions are important, and why they're something that we are still fighting for.

It [school closures] actually forces them to look as if they are not being rational in trying to protect that "school", because those larger civic functions aren't being accounted for.

Jack        Sally, that makes me think of one of the policy consequences that you write about in your work and that is the way that school closure can end up undermining public faith in public institutions.

Sally        Mm-hmm.

Jack        I'm wondering if you could talk through that a little bit, particularly why it matters that people would have faith in public institutions, and why the schools would have such a critical role to play in particular communities, with regard to giving people a positive experience with public institutions.

Sally Mm-hmm. Yeah, that's a really great question, because as a social scientist, part of the reason why I study education is because I actually believe that people get some of their first experiences with politics through their experiences in education.

There's almost no institution that people interact more with in daily life and over time than schools. Their experiences in school largely shape their larger critical attitudes about and engagement with politics. That's important, because when we think about representation and policy response, we need people to be engaged, especially in some of the most marginalized communities. You know, to solicit popular response, so their opinions can be represented.

So, when you take something that can be perceived as a blunt instrument, like school closures, and you bring that into a community, it becomes a microcosm for democracy. They go to these community meetings, the central mechanism for being able to voice one's opinion on public schools, because the school district wants to be perceived as collecting community input, that becomes a microcosm for democracy.

When people engage in that experience, they get cues and lessons about how much their representatives value them, how much their opinion matters, if their opinion is actually going to shape the outcome of this. When those experiences are negative, one would expect that actually has larger consequences on their ultimate perceptions of politics, their perception of their status as citizens. Their perception of how government and politics values them. Their trust in political institutions. Ultimately, that shapes their desire to participate. They may not think that it's a viable way to be represented, or for their opinions to shape actually policy decisions.

Jack It seems to me there's a particularly dark consequence here, which is not only when you are closing a neighborhood school down are you giving people a negative interaction with a public institution, but you are also then disempowering them in some way.

You are failing to bring them into the fold, and in so doing you are ensuring that an unrepresentative form of government continues, which just makes it even more likely that future policy decisions will be made that do not align with community interests.

You can see this feeding back on itself over time, where people don't feel attached to public institutions and public life, are less represented, and as a consequence, end up being less attached to public institutions and public life.

Jennifer Sally, what's so fascinating about your research is that you've actually been trying to measure the political fallout from school closures in these neighborhoods. Tell us a little about what you've been finding so far.

Sally We're basically finding support among the African American community for the Democratic Party, specifically in areas where closures occurred, it decreased support in a really substantial way. People initially participate—so this is similar to what Jack was saying—they initially participate, and then they stop participating.

In the election following the closures, which is 2015, people came out, but then you don't see them come to the local elections after the general elections.

Sally This is consistent with what we find qualitatively, that there's this initial [feeling] "*We have to do something about this.*" Then people consistently have negative experiences, so in the long-term they don't participate as much.

It's back to where I started: in term of the implications for outcomes 3-4 years down the lines, you actually see lower levels of participation, higher levels of negative attitudes toward people who are in the same parties in which most of these people identify, which is the Democratic Party.

Beyond that, you actually see these communities are actually further losing population. There's less will, or less faith, in the traditional public school system across this population, because they are afraid they're going to be betrayed again, they're going to have to move schools again, and that's very volatile. [Uncertainty] also shapes their relationship to schools.

This [having to move schools] is not directly related to politics, but it's related to the economic piece that I mentioned before, that is playing a big role. You see that the percent of African American teachers in Chicago has declined by 40%, but we see that 4 years down the line, outcomes are affected in terms of politics, economic outcomes are affected in terms of job and participation rates, and attitudes toward the political system, specifically policy makers, continues to decline.

Jennifer Sally, you started out this episode by talking about returning to the neighborhood where you grew up on Chicago's Near North Side for a community meeting. There were meetings like that all over the city in the lead-up to the school closures. One of the most fascinating findings of your research deals with that brief window of intense activism and its aftermath. Tell us more.

Sally There becomes this interesting period of about 3 months when there's a lot of resources pushed into communities that typically wouldn't have them, to participate. They want people in the community to engage, so they are given buses. Their school officials are brought to them; typically, you'd have to come downtown, but they're actually brought to the community.

Community institutions are given resources to facilitate these community meetings. And people are engaging or benefitting from these resources during this short period of time, and they develop these interesting civics skills, despite feelings about politics or government thereafter, they actually develop these skills that they can use and fight, and some do use.

Look at a place like Philadelphia, where [Helen Gym becomes an activist for parents during closures](#), and [then becomes elected as a local representative afterwards](#), because of the proficiency that she built during that time.

Or, you see how resources that organizations use for all kinds of other things end up being, for a short period of time, concentrated to fight the closures. So new members of the community are lifted up, and trained, and turned into activists, and they go on to take-on other policies even after closures end. There might be parents against closures, and once closures become a done deal, that organization evolves to become the organization electing the school board.

Sally Some of what that alludes to is if resources are more consistently provided to these communities to engage, that even if it's not at the ballot box, people in the community will engage in actions that have to do with their everyday lives. \*\*

What the strange experience of fighting for something that you're being told is gone or that is going to be gone, what that did is provide a way to see what will happen when these communities have resources to actually participate and have access to those who make these decisions.

[\\*\\*see research-based examination of modes of engagement from the perspective of citizens outside of the dominant social order, after school closures in Indianapolis](#)

Jennifer That was Sally Nuamah describing her research on the political fallout from school closures.

Sally has a PhD in political science from Northwestern University. She's currently a [postdoctoral fellow at Princeton](#). Next year, she'll join the faculty at Duke. You can read all about her work on school closures on [her website](#), sallynuamah—that's n-u-a-m-a-h dot com.

Jack and I will be right back with a few final thoughts. [podcast theme song plays]

Jennifer So, this whole episode has been about school closures and politics. As we often note in this program, there are now pretty stark political differences in terms of the kinds of school reform initiatives that are being pushed. Vouchers are a beloved response on the Right, but school closures really represent a Democratic approach.

This model that I discussed at the very beginning where you have schools opening and closing all the time, that's really a way of looking at schools and what they do that's much more identified with education reformers who identify as Democrats, even Progressive.

I wonder if when they hear this [podcast or Sally Nuamah's findings], they might take a little pause at the political implications and fallout that could imperil their guys down the road.

Jack You know, one of things that struck me here is people constantly lambast identity politics, but there is a real truth there, which is it is really hard to separate your politics out from your identity and your own experience.

One of the things that Sally's research shows is if you have no experiences with government operating in a way that feels colonial to you—where government institutions and political institutions feel like they do not represent your best interests, and your voice is not being heard, or it is being heard, but only in a pro forma way—you are much more likely, I would imagine, to have faith in processes like school closure, as opposed to if your experience differs from that.

Even if your school hasn't been closed down, but you've had negative interactions with public institutions, or if you have felt not included because of some factor of your identity that would lead to that being systemic across larger sections of the population, that's going to impact how you feel about a variety of things. That, ultimately, is going to play out politically.

Jennifer In her research, Sally identifies a whole set of reasons why people of color in these communities would view public institutions, public schools, as a really key component of democracy.

The interesting thing about the things [reasons for lack of faith and participation in politics and government] she identifies is they are really the same ingredients reformers identify when they talk about the need to maybe shut down school boards or root-out unions: That there's too much self-interest embedded in the system. *"Until people are willing to rip off the band aid, and take the hard steps, you can't drive-up student achievement"* as they would say it.

I think what she [Sally] turns-up is how connected all those things are. You can't just shut down a school board and shutter schools without it affecting the larger democratic system schools are part of.

Jack Ultimately, it's [school closure] also going to affect student achievement, because you can image that a student who looks around and feels like his or her larger community has been decimated—that there's been divestment, that public institutions are no longer serving their best interests—you better believe this student is going to come into school less motivated and less invested in the process of education. [They're] less likely to believe that this is a process that's going to end up serving him or her well.

If there are no further effects, even if it [school closings and their consequences] doesn't affect democracy, there's kind of irony in that.

*\*other perspectives on the consequences of Chicago school closures [1](#) [2](#) [3](#) [4](#)*

Jennifer Is it just me, or do almost all of our episodes tend to end on a really bleak note?

Jack I like to think it's not that we're making things bleak, it's that we're making things more complicated.

Jennifer That could be our new motto.

Jack On that note...

Jennifer You go first.

Jack I'm Jack Schneider.

Jennifer And I'm Jennifer Berkshire.

Thank you for listening to Have You Heard.

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Jack Or wherever else you get your podcasts.