

#54 Closing Time: In a Gentrifying City, Are Some Students Expendable?

[Student testimony at Boston School Committee Hearing] Entire testimony available here:
<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=GtfgcNJ08qs&feature=youtu.be>

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

Jack Schneider: And I'm Jack Schneider.

Berkshire: And you just heard a student at the McCormack Middle School in Boston making an impassioned appeal to the Boston School Committee to keep her school open. The Boston Public Schools recently announced that there are a number of schools that are going to be closing and Jack, it's interesting, they're not using the language of school closing that we've heard in, say, Chicago, right? Instead they're talking about renovations. The campaign is called Build BPS. It's about, you know, freshening things, but at the end of the day that school is no longer going to exist.

Schneider: Yeah, I think BPS has learned the lessons of many other school closure efforts in urban school districts, but they don't have an answer to the problem that many urban districts often face, which is that they don't have the resources that they might wish to have in terms of keeping all of their schools open and there are policy priorities that lead them to make particular kinds of decisions vis a vis school closures, and that often means that schools that are attended by the most vulnerable are the ones that are shut down. That, of course, you know, is a kind of correlation that really stokes resentment in historically marginalized communities where they're saying, you know, you're never shutting schools down in privileged communities.

Berkshire: Jack, this episode is actually sort of informed and inspired by a new book by a young sociologist named Eve Ewing. The book is called *Ghosts in the Schoolyard* and she looks at the schools that closed in Chicago a few years ago and she's really trying to ask the question that you just raised. Why do people fight so hard to keep open institutions that a lot of the rest of the world regards as failing and the answers that she comes up with are complicated and they are historical, and I don't know if you remember, but I wrote to you a few months ago and I said, "Jack..."

Schneider: "Jennifer: I keep all of your emails in a special file."

Berkshire: Well, if you open that email up, you would see it would said something like this: "Hi Jack!"

Schneider: I'm not sure it would have started that friendly. It would've started with a command.

Berkshire: “There's a new book out that I think is great and would make a great episode for our show.” And do you remember what your response was?

Schneider: Something like, well, I don't remember at all, but knowing myself and knowing this kind of interaction it was your telling me ‘you need to read this book and me saying something like, I'm too busy. I'm not going to do that.’

Berkshire: Well also you said something like, can I do my Jack voice? “Now Jennifer, we don't want to repeat ourselves” Meaning that we have already...

Schneider: That was so good. You should go on the road. It's a shame that Vaudeville isn't around anymore.

Berkshire: You were merely pointing out that we had already done an episode about school closings in Chicago and their political fallout.

Schneider: I was only trying to get myself out of doing the required reading that continues to pile up around my house as a result of your ambitions.

Berkshire: Well, in the meantime, Eve Ewing's book came out and it really is so relevant. It sheds such light on what's happening in Boston that I thought it would be really interesting to go to one of the schools that's now on the chopping block to hear from teachers and also some of the students there and to really keep an ear out for some of the themes that Eve Ewing chronicles in *Ghosts in the Schoolyard*.

Schneider: I think that that's a really interesting idea. And you know, I'm particularly drawn to a word that you used there, which is “hear,” right? Because you can't hear anything about a school if you are just relying on the information that actually ends up being used as the justification for shutting a school. Whether that information is budget related, whether it's related to that school's performance on standardized tests. There is a lot that is left out of the information that we generally have access to. And the best way to actually learn about a school is to see it and to hear it. And so, you know, I'm on board with this episode.

Berkshire: Is this where I blurred out that I invited you to accompany me and you said no?

Schneider: That is going to be edited out of this episode. So listeners, you know, retroactive earmuffs on that one.

Music

Berkshire: This is an episode about proposed school closings in Boston. It was inspired by a new book about school closures in Chicago. The book is called *Ghosts in the Schoolyard: Race and School Closings on Chicago's South Side*. And as soon as you're done listening to this

podcast, I want you to go and buy it because it really is that good. The author, Eve Ewing, grew up in Chicago. She went to school there, and she even taught at one of the schools in Bronzeville that the city closed because it was quote unquote underutilized. But her story of how race, history and power played into what was happening in her hometown is relevant to anywhere that schools are being shuttered. Take Boston where officials recently announced that two high schools and a middle school will be closing.

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Neema Avashia: There wasn't a really good plan for our students at all. Sending students to a turnaround school that's already trying to figure out how to support the students who are there doesn't seem like a very good plan. Middle schoolers are their own people. They require a very skilled set of teachers to support them. You need to know how to work with adolescents. Excel High School doesn't have programming for our English language learners. We have students with emotional impairments. We want to be thoughtful about how we transition them, and there was no thoughtful transition plan or no sense that, that anyone in central office had actually thought about the children in the building or the people in the building. It really felt like we need, and this is the language they use: 'We need to unlock this space so that we can unlock other spaces so that we can renovate everything,' but it all felt like it was about real estate and property and buildings and not actually about human beings.

Berkshire: A little bit of context on who goes to school here. The McCormack serves some of the highest needs students in the city. And many of them have already experienced some form of school turmoil. The elementary school next door, known as the Dever, has been the subject of one turnaround experiment after another.

Avashia: There's that, which is like you have a group of kids who have repeatedly experienced their school transitioning or changing and the adults in that building changing. We have close to 60 percent of our students come from families of immigrants. We have about 100 students in our school who are English language learners, in the beginning stages. We have 36 students with emotional impairments, which are pretty significant. We have students with learning disabilities. We have students who are experiencing homelessness or are in housing transitions, and our kids come from Dorchester, Roxbury and Mattapan which are experiencing in Boston the highest percentage of violence in our city. So the need is real.

Berkshire: But the McCormack also has some of the most innovative programming in the city to reach students who need the most help. There's a closet in the school for kids who need to borrow clothes or toiletries--no questions asked. There's an extensive counseling program including a partnership with the Trinity Foundation that places skilled therapists in the school to work with kids who are dealing with extreme levels of trauma.

Avashia: We sort of are very aware of who our student population is and working really hard to meet the needs of that student population, and it feels like BPS has no awareness of who our

student population is. And when you read the Build BPS letter that they sent out, they make these claims, oh, we're trying to spread the most vulnerable students across a wider set of schools. We're trying to give students access to greater equity. There are all these claims they are making in their plan that don't apply to the plan for my students.

And so the question that comes up then is is like, is this plan just for future students somewhere down the road? Because sending my existing students to a turnaround school does not give them greater access to equity. Sending all of our ELLs and all of our students with special needs to a school that already has a high percentage of students who are ELL students and who have special needs, does not distribute that need across the city. It concentrates it. The short term plan flies in the face of their long-term plan and that is very confusing and it's hard not to feel like the underlying message there is that, well, the students now are expendable.

Berkshire: The question that's really at the heart of Eve Ewing's book *Ghosts in the Schoolyard* is why people fight so hard to save schools that are struggling or even failing. But when you talk to the teachers at the McCormack, the answer is obvious. They believe that they're succeeding in supporting students who often face incredible odds, and that instead of disbanding their community, the city should be learning from it. Take the McCormack's experiment with restorative justice, now in its fifth year. Here's Adina Davidson, the clinical manager of restorative practice, part of the partnership between the McCormack and the Trinity Foundation.

Adina Davidson: The kids come here and they bring the struggles that they have in their lives with them. This is a place where they can feel understood, and that there are lots of reasons why they might be struggling with each other and with learning, and given them feeling supported in those ways. It becomes a place where people feel connected to each other. Another aspect of the restorative work is that the teachers are part of it. It's not a technique that we're using with the children. It's something that we're all, we're all involved with as human beings, that, as much as possible, the circle process and the ways that we deal with harm compel us to talk a little bit about what's underneath, what we're doing to each other, both the young people and the adults and how we're affected by those things in and what we want to do to make it right.

So the teachers are part of this and just the experience of lowering the threat between us so that young people can talk honestly about their experience as well as the teachers can talk about how they experience things and just respect on all sides. It allows for a kind of, I don't know, an understanding of each other's shared humanity. That is something that is rare in this country, maybe in this world. And the fact that we're doing it here is something that I think is really--it's not magic, it's just a foundational principle.

Berkshire: One of the things that Eve Ewing observed about school closings in Chicago was that the people whose schools were being closed and the officials in charge of doing the closing used completely different language. Listen closely and you'll hear the same division in Boston.

Staff and students at the McCormack talk about community and family, while school district officials are talking about buildings, facilities, planning and renovation. But behind those relatively innocuous sounding words is a more complicated story. Here's Neema Avashia again.

Avashia: This renovation word is like a really a tricky word, right? So they're renovating the McCormick projects in South Boston, the Mary Ellen McCormack projects, and when it's renovated, it will not have as many units that are affordable as it does now. So when they renovate it is sort of a subtle way of pushing out another group of families. And I think renovation as a word is this tricky word that's being used in our city to make it sound like we're fixing things or making things nice. But underneath that there is this undercurrent of like replacing, so replace the existing families and the existing community with a new group of folks. I mean, I think we're definitely seeing reverse White flight happen.

So all of these affluent families that had left the city during busing, by and large, are now are kind of coming back in. They're buying single family houses, you have a lot of young people moving into the city for the tech industry who are moving into these apartments all around the neighborhood that are popping up. And you know, when those people start to partner up and they start to think about having kids, if this is a pretty school and it's a fancy school, then they are a lot more likely to think about buying in the neighborhood than they are about leaving the city. And so it feels pretty insidious. Like you have to map it. You have to be able to think seven steps down the line. But I think we see that trajectory, as the ultimate goal of something like Build BPS, that it's not just about renovating schools, it's about creating a different kind of Boston.

Berkshire: Once it's been renovated, the building that housed the McCormack will be a school again. But the looming question is 'a school for whom?' Student Josiana Colon put one version of that question to school committee members.

Josiana Colon: My question is, if Boston Arts Academy can go into Community Health and Science High School and keep their community through renovation, why can't the McCormack staff and students go to another school together until renovation is over? Why is it that we have to split up a community when we know that we don't have to do that? If we're trying so hard to compete with charter schools and save money, it would be a terrible waste if we have the future mother and fathers in this room right now being told that BPS is going to abandon them. Why would they ever want to send their own kids to bps? This isn't how you beat the charter schools. This is how you beat your own students. Thank you.

Berkshire: Boston is gentrifying like crazy these days, and the part of the city where the McCormack is located definitely has the feel of the next hot neighborhood. Haven Jones is a clinical social worker with the Trinity at McCormack Program and she's also the unofficial school expert on the history of this part of Boston.

Haven Jones: So the McCormack is in a section of Dorchester, a little peninsula that formerly was known as Columbia Point and there's this new revival where it's being called Harbor Point. Historically the school was opened in 1967 prior to the early sixties. There was actually a prisoner of war camp across the street, which is now a housing project, for Italian prisoners of war during World War II. So they converted the prisoner of war camp into public housing, which sends an interesting message to the people living there--that you're living in what used to be a prison--and then the school opened. UMass Boston is down the street, so they have slowly expanded. And the JFK Memorial Museum and library is down the street as well. And we're right on the harbor, hence the Harbor Point name. So from this building you can walk five, six minutes and hit the ocean.

Berkshire: Jones says that students at the McCormack, many of whom live in the housing project directly across the street, are keenly aware of the transformation of their neighborhood. She oversees an after-school student running club, and told me about how one day the students noticed that a brand new private swimming pool for new residents had just opened. In other words, it wasn't for them.

Jones: As that real estate has become more and more noticeable, that we're really in this beautiful part of the city--you can see the skyline, you can see the planes taking off and landing from Logan... There has been this move to switch the housing project across the street to a mixed income housing project. And now there are some luxury apartments, there's fancy pools. There's kind of a whole setup of the haves and the have nots living in the same space. And UMass Boston has also been slowly growing and trying to move up in their rankings and expanding their facilities. And so they are also looking at 'how can we maximize the use of the harbor land?' At one point there was a talk, I think last year, about selling off some of the McCormack's field space to UMass Boston.

So there's a whole conversation around 'this is now very desirable, and how can we make the most profit off of it?' Which puts our school in an interesting place as just a public school that was built to serve the neighborhood across the street, the low income housing project. Now we're in the middle of this resurgence, in this affluence boom. And it kind of poses the question: how do we fit in and if we don't fit in, how can they make us, it feels like, how can we get out of the way so that whatever's happening at UMass and across the street can expand?

Berkshire: This part of the story could be ripped from *Ghosts in the Schoolyard*. As Eve Ewing points out, many of the schools that Chicago closed had been built as part of housing projects. And when Chicago got rid of its housing projects, the students disappeared, leaving the schools, quote unquote, underutilized. Boston isn't blowing up its housing projects like you saw in Chicago, but rapidly rising rents are pushing students and their families out of their homes. Sophia Brion-Meisels directs the Trinity at McCormack Program and says that these are the kids that she worries most about.

Sophia Brion-Meisels: I also think that the McCormack Middle School is one of the few middle schools that accept students without any application process and without any criteria. And so we have a lot of students who, due to gentrification and the increase in housing prices and rents in Boston, have become homeless or have housing instability. And we can continue to support those kids and be a stable place for them to come to as their housing situation is not stable and often changing and they are forced out of the city and then potentially brought back in.

There are not a lot of public middle schools left in Boston that serve every kid, who welcome every kid, and then having a school that you get to go to that's stable, where the, you know, the adults care about you, who you're going to see everyday, is really important to young people as the rest of their lives sort of feel chaotic.

Berkshire: This is a story about school closings and the fight by teachers and students at one school to keep their community together. But when you listen to Brion-Meisels and her colleagues talk, it's hard to miss that this is also a story about housing and who gets to live in Boston.

Brion-Meisels: I think it's another message to our young people as we talk about this school closing that they aren't worth what other families are worth. And I think that some of the renovations or redevelopment of housing, if you look at the new houses that are built, that are market rate and you look at the low income housing that's supposed to be mixed, it's very clear who has money and who doesn't. And it's very clear who we believe should live in a certain standard of housing and who sort of society doesn't think deserves that.

And I feel like for a lot of our kids, they name that when they come into school. They see it and they name it and they want to talk about why the apartment building next door that used to be a part of their housing project now looks different and has different people in it. And it's just another message to them about what we really believe they can accomplish in their life. And I feel like at this school we are actively helping to push back on that narrative and help young people believe in all the multiple things that they're able to become as they grow up.

Axel Gonzalez: McCormack really built a home for me, one that I still go back to. What I understand is that BPS wants to create more opportunities and equal opportunities and better environments for our students, especially with those that don't speak English. But I think it's not clear yet is that teachers are what creates the environment, not a building. I go to BLA now, I'm a junior there. BLA is a really, has a really old building and let's not even talk about BLS. I don't see any of those schools moving anytime soon. I would end my testimony with one question. Are you going to actually think about it or have you already made up your mind and every person in this room just wasted our time?

Berkshire: That was Axel Gonzalez, a graduate of the McCormack Middle School, and a current student at Boston Latin Academy, urging members of the Boston School Committee not to disband the McCormack. And Jack and I will be right back to wrap things up.

Music

Berkshire: So Jack, Eve Ewing has this great line in her book about how she wishes that the school districts could be judged on their success as far as how they handle the most vulnerable. And I thought about that a lot when I went to the McCormack Middle School and heard from all of those teachers who felt so strongly that they have actually figured out some pretty amazing ways to reach students who so often fall through the cracks.

And as I went there and I heard them, I thought about some of the work that you're doing on what you call public-facing accountability. That somehow something is getting lost in terms of the way we value schools, when you can have people looking at the same school and seeing it so differently. And so you have these teachers saying, 'you know this restorative justice stuff that you guys are having such a hard time with? We've spent five years and we figured a lot of things out.' Or you know, like 'Here we've got these students who are really the most vulnerable in the city. We've got a program just for survivors of homicide related trauma. You should really be learning from us.' And I thought, well, this is a great, this would be a great time to bring Jack in and have him talk about himself.

Schneider: What else am I an expert in? So I think a couple things are really worth pointing out here. One is what you said, that you could get a couple different people looking at the school and they would come up with different conclusions and I think it's really important to point out that in so many cases it's not people and it's not looking. That neither of those things is true, right? That systems are seeing schools--and I'm putting the words, seeing in air quotes here right now--and they are doing so by using quantitative measures of school performance, right? That is very different from a person actually seeing a school, walking through a school, listening to people inside of a school, getting to know a school. Now that's by design, right?

There's this great Borges story that I'm thinking of where the cartographers of a mythical country are asked repeatedly to go back and remake their maps until nothing has been excluded. And eventually the maps are the same size as the empire and are completely worthless. And, you know, the empire ends up being sort of lost in the sands of time as a result of this myopic approach. It's an approach that is very different from the standard state approach, which is to exclude most things from the map.

In this case, we're not talking about maps, we're talking about measurement systems, but there's not much of a difference. The point is that you need to leave most things out in order to produce something that is actionable and so if you look at our maps, for instance, we leave most things out other than the roads. We don't see trees, we don't see people, we don't see...right. And in state measurement systems designed to measure school performance, most of what we would sense if we were to walk through a school has been left out. That turns out to be a really big problem because all of human judgment has been excised from this process and in fact in most states it's not just that most information has been left out, but it's also the ability to

sort through that information because most of these systems have automatic triggers, so a kind of cut off point for performance then yields particular kinds of consequences for a school.

This is an even more problematic removal of human judgment. And so some of the work that I've been engaged in recently has been in trying to imagine a different future in which we are not just simply assuming that people will spend the time they need to spend inside schools to learn about those schools. We're not simply assuming that people will hold their own schools accountable with no structures in place to encourage that kind of behavior, but trying to find a kind of middle ground where we can gather as much information as possible to then seed a conversation, that's "s-e-e-d," that actual human beings with an actual interest in a school can have where they actually engage in the work of judgment, engage in the actual process of sorting through this messy question of what a school's performance is like. And this is even more complicated with schools than in many other spheres.

Berkshire: Well Jack, we have reached that special time again. This is where I try to lure people to support our podcast by holding out the prospect of one of our best benefits, the reading lists that you help put together each time. And I would imagine since I got you to talk a little bit about public-facing accountability, that this will be another robust reading list.

Schneider: Your use of me, Jennifer, as the pinata for your paywall party, that you're dangling for people in an effort to lure them in, is troubling for a number of reasons, but since I've chosen the metaphor of a pinata, perhaps I'll worry most about what's going to happen to me if they come to this party.

Berkshire: Well Jack, I have even more exciting news. As our regular listeners know, at the end of every episode, we do a special extended play version that we like to call "in the weeds." If you go to [Patreon.com](https://www.patreon.com) and search for [Have You Heard](#) you can join the fun. And this time I need your help with something. I've been asked to speak on a panel, and the topic is: "is education reform dead?" And frankly, I'm not sure what I'm going to say. So I thought that if I lured you into the extended play episode, I could take feverish notes and then repackage your thoughts as my own.

Schneider: Jennifer, this is like my favorite kind of question to answer. So despite my hesitation about being stuffed full of candy and then being subject to the swings of our listeners, I will be the pinata and I will, I will join you.

Berkshire: This just keeps getting better and better. Until next time. I'm Jennifer Berkshire.

Schneider: And I'm Jack Schneider.

Berkshire: This is Have You Heard.