

Shuttering Schools in Chicago

Scholar links closings to city's history of discrimination

As reviewed by
PAUL E. PETERSON

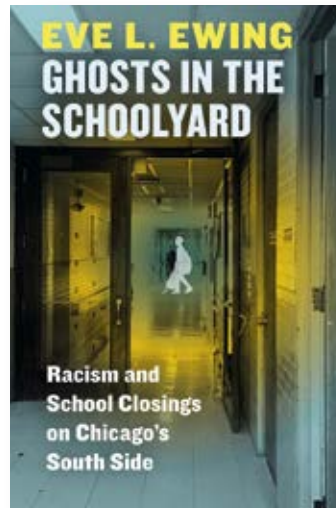
CLOSING SCHOOLS IS AS AMERICAN as the 19th-century homesteading land rush. Indeed, it's the flip side of desperate sprints for land, silver, or gold. When people race for distant treasure, they leave the rest behind.

From its beginning, the United States has been a low-density, highly mobile country, a nation where young men and women sought opportunity in the West, and a place where former slaves hopped on trains bound for factory jobs available near Chicago's South Side.

When people move, they abandon their friends, neighbors, and institutions. Stay-at-home farmers—the descendants of the homesteaders—were the first to face the loss. When fewer families were needed to till the soil, thriving communities turned into ghost towns. The bell atop the little red schoolhouse became a museum piece.

Efficiency experts like Stanford's first School of Education dean Ellwood Cubberley accelerated the change. "The [school] district unit is entirely too small an area to provide modern educational facilities," he said. The "system is expensive, inefficient, inconsistent, short-sighted, unprogressive and penurious; it leads to a great and unnecessary multiplication of small and inefficient schools." The efficiency argument proved influential. Some 120,000 school districts in operation in 1940 were consolidated into fewer than 15,000 today. Enrollment at the average school climbed from 85 pupils in 1930 to 300 students in 1960. Whatever efficiencies were realized came at the expense of community institutions. When high schools merged, towns lost their own Friday-night football, high-school band, and senior play.

While towns were dying, big-city neighborhoods were swarming with newcomers. Eve Ewing's account of life in Bronzeville on the South Side evokes the buzzing action at 45th and South Park in the 1940s. Jazz clubs were abundant: Count Basie and Sarah Vaughan were performing at the Parkway Ballroom. The neighborhoods were giving birth to luminaries like Ida B. Wells and Mahalia Jackson. The beloved Walter Dyett, a classical violinist of African (*continued on page 77*)



**Ghosts in the Schoolyard:
Racism and School
Closings on
Chicago's South Side**
by Eve L. Ewing

University of Chicago Press,
2018, \$22.50; 240 pages.

As reviewed by
MARILYN ANDERSON RHAMES

HAVE YOU EVER WONDERED why some black parents have staged vigorous protests—and even gone on hunger strikes—to save their children's "failing" public schools from being closed? Want to peek behind what W. E. B. Du Bois dubbed "the Veil" to unpack the often misunderstood intricacies of the segregated black life? Ready to hear a 100-year backstory of hatred, housing redlining, and educational isolation that led up to the Chicago Public Schools closing of 49 mostly black schools in the summer of 2013?

It's all there in Eve Ewing's book, *Ghosts in the Schoolyard*. Ewing, an assistant professor at the University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration, makes it clear from the jump that she is not impartial on the topic. As a black woman who grew up in Chicago and taught in the city's schools, Ewing views the closures—the largest mass

school closings in American history—as yet another racist assault on the black community, which has never been allowed to fully integrate into the fabric of white Chicago. Even with her unapologetic bias, Ewing draws on an abundance of one-on-one interviews, observations, transcripts from school closing hearings, and statistics on race, housing, and education to produce a compelling academic case study.

As much as I enjoyed learning from the book, I do wish that Ewing had offered readers a more thorough, point-by-point takedown of Chicago Public Schools' reasons for the school closings. That would have provided a more balanced argument for those who were genuinely undecided about what to make of the situation. It also might have quelled the criticism that Ewing's book is little more than 200-plus pages of identity politics and that it doesn't address the thorny issue of what to do with schools that are under-enrolled and have poor student achievement.

The book focuses on the four schools in the city's Bronzeville community that were slated to close and how one of them, Walter H. Dyett High School, narrowly managed to escape.

Ewing challenges the narrative that Barbara Byrd-Bennett, then CEO of the Chicago Public Schools (who, incidentally,

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is now in federal prison for bribery), gave to justify closing the schools. Byrd-Bennett had insisted that the schools were “underutilized” and “under-resourced.” “How,” Ewing asks, “could the person charged with doling out resources condemn an institution for not having enough resources?”

While Byrd-Bennett and Mayor Rahm Emanuel (who appoints the schools chief and board members) tried to justify the closing of nearly 50 schools because they were “chronically failing,” Ewing argues that residents saw these actions as an affront to their democratic right to decide on the best way to provide a high-quality education for their children. She writes:

We see that this community’s choice to resist a school’s being characterized as “failing” is in fact about much more than the school itself: it is about citizenship and participation, about justice and injustice, and about resisting people in power who want to transform a community at the expense of the people who live there.

Bronzeville, the three-square-mile neighborhood on Chicago’s South Side where some 30,000 black migrants fleeing the Jim Crow South had settled by 1900, grew to 109,000 people by 1920, expanding at a rate that was more than double what the rest of the city underwent. This corridor between 22nd and 51st Streets was once called the “Black Belt” or “Black Ghetto” or worse, “Blackie Town,” but it was ultimately dubbed “Bronzeville” by James Gentry, theater critic and editor for the black newspaper the *Chicago Bee*. This black metropolis was once home to cultural icons like Ida B. Wells, Richard Wright, Gwendolyn Brooks, Sam Cooke, Nat King Cole, and Mahalia Jackson, among many others.

Bronzeville’s population was bursting at the seams by the late 1940s, and while it was graced with a high concentration of black talent and ingenuity, the community had to struggle with social isolation, violence, and abject poverty. Ewing details how Bronzeville was surrounded by white communities where property owners had signed restrictive covenants agreeing not to sell homes or office space to black people—and how the enforcers of those covenants firebombed nearly 60 homes and businesses of black people who managed to move into those communities anyway. With multiple families living in single “kitchenettes”—tiny, poorly equipped apartments carved from larger rental units—the housing crisis in Bronzeville became untenable. The city’s leaders, most

notably Mayor Richard J. Daley and his schools chief Benjamin Willis, refused to promote integration, which led to the construction of low- and high-rise public-housing projects for Bronzeville residents from the 1950s through the 1970s. That activity was paired with the rapid building of new schools so that black families would stop demanding that their children be allowed to fill the thousands of vacant seats in nearby white schools.

Ewing takes the reader through one racist public policy after another, culminating, she asserts, in 2013, when the school system shuttered 49 schools, 90 percent of which served all-black student populations. These closings followed a drastic drop in student enrollment in neighborhood schools in Bronzeville and other black communities on Chicago’s South and West Sides. The enrollment decline was itself an upshot of a misguided urban “renewal” policy: after the Ida B. Wells, Robert Taylor, Harold L. Ickes, and Stateway Gardens housing projects—which were constructed to contain black people within the boundaries of Bronzeville—were demolished in the late 1990s and early 2000s, thousands of black residents were pushed out of the neighborhood to find housing. (In the past decade, the black population has declined throughout Chicago, a phenomenon dubbed “black flight,” spurred by street violence and a lack of economic opportunity.)

Ewing gives voice to community members who are still grieving the death of their schools as one might lament the loss of a loved one. Indeed, she devotes an entire section of the book to this sense of mourning. She writes:

In the public narrative about closed schools, there are stories we rarely hear. Using words like love in a conversation about education policy feels almost taboo, or somehow in poor taste. . . . Instead, closing schools are presented as uniformly valueless, without worth, and characterized by

criteria that are as far as you can get from something as base and as messy as human emotion. How many students can the building hold? How much will it cost to repair it? What test scores did it have last year? But to those closest to these schools, these questions swim beneath the surface of something much more important: love.

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book reviews

H. Dyett High School, a so-called “failing” school. They will discover why Ewing describes this school named after a local music teacher as “a testimony to the history of black education in Bronzeville, to a hero and the geniuses under his care, to an institution that successfully educated black children to be great in an era when expectation for their lives were meager. With this understanding, an attack on the legendary Dyett name was an attack on history and identity.”

After reading this book, readers might think twice before labeling yet another segregated, under-resourced, all-black school as “failing.”

If all the pain and trauma of the mass school closings produced positive results for the students involved, they might be forgiven by history. Unfortunately, a comprehensive five-year study from the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research showed that the 12,000 students displaced by the closure saw their standardized test scores decline, even as their

attendance and GPAs held steady.

As I was reading Ewing’s book on a plane, my seatmate, a white woman in her 40s, asked me about it. She has lived in downtown Chicago for more than a decade and had not heard that nearly 50 schools in Chicago’s black neighborhoods had closed. It was a sad reminder to me that, even today, some white residents remain wholly unaware that their city leaders shut down some 50 schools in black neighborhoods, angering and traumatizing communities. Ewing’s book, though, makes it clear that it’s the city leadership that has “failed” the schools, not the other way around.

Marilyn Anderson Rhames is an education writer and the founder and CEO of the nonprofit Teachers Who Pray. Born and raised on Chicago’s South Side by parents and grandparents who joined the Great Migration from Mississippi in the 1950s and ’60s, Rhames taught in the city’s public schools for nearly 15 years.

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American descent, conducted the DuSable High School band.

All that action contained a healthy bundle of graft, corruption, and machine-style politics. Then, in 1947, Chicago’s schools were “reformed.” In the following decades, even Mayor Richard J. Daley, himself a homegrown machine-politics guy, allowed the school superintendent, Benjamin Willis, full discretion over personnel and procurement. Many years ago I wrote in *School Politics, Chicago Style* that schools and politics in Chicago had become sharply separated. The procedures of the school board reinforced

its isolation from external political forces. The public could attend board meetings, but virtually no provision for audience participation existed. . . . Hearings were held after the “tentative” budget had already been prepared by staff members. . . . The very layout of the boardroom accentuated the separation of the board from the outside world. Board members sat in a semi-circle with their backs to the audience.

Still, Willis, by taking much of the boodle out of building, was able to erect vast numbers of new elementary schools to accommodate both baby boomers and African American migrants. By 1970, 596,375 students attended a Chicago public school.

The efficiency principle was applied to housing policy as well, Ewing tells us. At the height of the New Deal, the federal government encouraged cities to raze “slums” and build high-rise public housing with modern kitchens and bathrooms. The Chicago Housing Authority, with the best of intentions, constructed a massive but deeply flawed low-income public housing complex along a substantial swath of the South Side’s waterfront. By 1970,

half the residents of Bronzeville were living in these units.

Unfortunately, the buildings were too tall, the elevators too few, the units too one-dimensional (accommodating large families only), and the complex too segregated. Crime, gangs, property destruction, mismanagement, and chaos were all but inevitable.

In 1999, the housing authority demolished the high-rises, and local schools lost thousands of students. Fourteen years later the school administration announced that several of Bronzeville’s schools would be included in a citywide plan to close about 50 schools on the grounds that the number of students “is below the enrollment efficiency range, and thus the school is underutilized.”

It was not just Bronzeville that was losing students. By 2018 enrollment in district-operated schools in Chicago numbered little more than 300,000. Half of Chicago’s children were gone—57,000 to charter schools and many more to suburbs, private schools, and places unknown. Meanwhile, revenues were not keeping pace with expenditures, and school-district debt was rising.

Ewing barely acknowledges these basic facts in her book. Instead, her case studies rely upon her experiences as a Bronzeville teacher, transcripts of public hearings on the closings, and interviews with no more than 13 teachers and students, all of which arm her with the conclusion that “it is impossible to get around the fact that the school closure process . . . was racist.” Employing what is identified as “critical discourse analysis,” the author takes at face value the charges of racism made by community activists at closure hearings.

At the same time, she refuses to believe Chicago’s superintendent of schools, a black woman, when she denies that

charge vehemently at a public hearing Ewing attended: “What I cannot understand, and will not accept, is that the proposals I am offering are racist. That is an affront to me as a woman of color. . . . Underutilized schools in these areas are the result of demographic changes and not race.”

Walter H. Dyett High School, named for Bronzeville’s illustrious band teacher, is the book’s centerpiece. By 2011, its enrollment had slipped to two-thirds its 2004 level. The administration decided to close Dyett on the grounds that its “graduation rate . . . is far below that of other schools in its area and [it] is among the lowest academic scoring schools in the district.” All existing students could remain at the school for the next four years, but no new students would be admitted.

Whether or not Chicago’s administrators were racist, they were surely inept. They gave inadequate advance notice of the time and place of meetings, placed strict time limits on speakers, did not respond to questions, and precluded anyone from speaking who had not registered before the meeting began. But if their intention was to march blithely toward their goal, they made a serious misstep: by permitting Dyett to stay open for four more years, they handed over to activists the time needed to form the “Coalition to Revitalize Dyett,” mount a prolonged protest, and propose a revitalized neighborhood school devoted to “global leadership and green technology.” A hunger strike captured newspaper headlines.

In the end, the administration buckled under relentless charges of racism. Dyett was given \$15 million for new facilities, and in 2016 was re-launched in a new South Side location as the Walter H. Dyett High School for the Arts.

To some, the story might appear to be a brilliant display of

black power. But for the activists—and for Ewing—it represents another racist abuse of bureaucratic power. “The members of the Coalition did not see their plan for Dyett come to fruition.” Instead of a neighborhood school focused on leadership and green technology, the new school would be devoted to the arts and open its doors to students from across the city. Ewing says the whole story is a “troubling history of racism.”

That conclusion requires better documentation. Ewing says a disproportionately large number of the schools selected for closing had student bodies that were majority African American. But only 9 percent of Chicago’s enrollment was white in 2009, when the closing movement had yet to begin. The main alternative to an African American student in Chicago is a Hispanic one or a student from another minority group.

Nor are we provided with any information on the background of those who opposed the closings or how well they represented the local community. One has to wonder whether the activists really spoke for the neighborhood when 81 percent of the students in the area were choosing to go to a high school other than Dyett, and African American parents were more likely than others to place their children in charter schools.

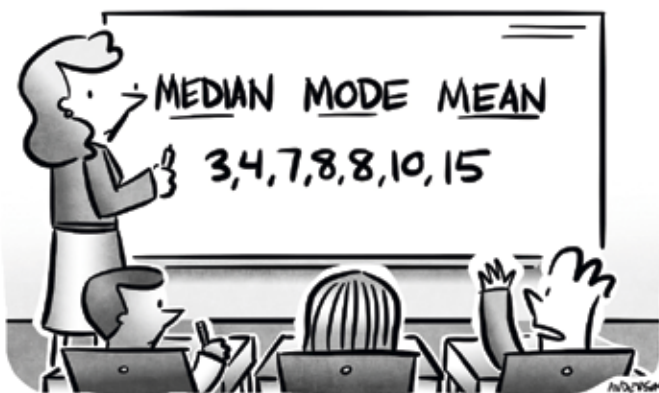
Ewing also neglects to tell us how much financial and logistical support the activists received from the Chicago Teachers Union, whose then president was adamantly opposed to charter schools and labeled Mayor Rahm Emanuel (formerly chief of staff to Barack Obama) the “murder mayor.” Would the protests have been as effective had they not had unqualified union support?

The author bases her charge of racism largely on the lack of school administrator interest in the testimony presented by activists at public hearings. But such practices are deeply ingrained in the Chicago board’s insular decisionmaking style. The plan to close schools was less likely to be racist and more likely to be driven by fiscal considerations that Ewing chooses to virtually ignore.

Ewing is at her best when she captures the heartache that attends any school closing. Her mourning for lost institutions will resonate with those from small-town USA, who see ghosts of marching bands and teeter-tottering children on vacant lots where schools once stood. Beneath her critical discourse analysis, one finds a melancholy tale that is quintessentially American.

Paul E. Peterson, a professor at Harvard University, is director of its Program on Education Policy and Governance and senior editor of Education Next.

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“I know they’re all subtly different, but I have to say, the alliteration doesn’t help.”

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