A Political Analysis of Community Influence over School Closure

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Abstract This study seeks to understand community member participation in and influence over an urban school district's school closure process. Data from interviews with School Board members, district administrators, and community members, as well as district documents and newspaper articles suggest that district administrators limited participation through committee membership and public hearing procedures. In addition, the development of an "objective" process served to legitimize the decision. Finally, higher income community members influenced the closure process through formal and informal mechanisms, while low-income community members exerted power through alliances with external (powerful) groups.

Keywords Politics · Political participation · School closure · Urban districts

Formed as a mechanism for democratic governance of schools, School Boards play a significant role as the representative body for local control of education (Callahan 1975). School Boards are comprised of officials who set district policy relating to personnel, budget, facilities, and curriculum. Within these varied responsibilities, School Boards engage in a dynamic relationship with their communities since any decision involves a balance of power among the administration, Board, and community members which fluctuates according to the issue under consideration (Boyd and Wheaton 1983). Unfortunately, many citizens believe they have little

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voice in political decisions and those least likely to participate are often most disadvantaged.

The purpose of this study was to better understand community member participation in and influence over School Board decisions through a case study of one urban school district's school closure process. No issue is more politically or emotionally charged than the decision to close schools (Weatherly et al. 1983). In fact, tensions have developed in many communities across the country as urban school districts have dealt with the challenge of school failure in an era of tight budgets. In the last few years, Denver, Washington, DC, Detroit, St. Louis, Seattle, and San Antonio have all proposed closing schools to deal with budget deficits and declining enrollments (Meyer 2007; Dion Haynes 2008; Eggert 2009; Taylor 2009; Blanchard 2008; De la Rosa 2008).

The study examined which community members were involved in the decision to close schools and through what mechanisms. In addition, the study focused on the extent to which Board members were influenced by community members. Through interviews, as well as a review of documents, including meeting minutes and newspaper articles, the analysis examined whether community members with more resources altered the decisions in ways that did not represent the less powerful members of the community. This article seeks to contribute to the literature relating to the mechanisms by which individuals participate in public school decision-making, as well as the political dynamics of participatory processes.

Political Participation and Power

This study is grounded in theories relating to political participation and power. Political participation, or any activity that aims to influence governmental decisions (Verba et al. 1995), is fundamental to the governance of public schools. Institutional structures provide the formal systems for communicating with School Board members through such means as meetings, forums, and committees. However, informal communication also occurs as community members and special interest groups share their views through public or private conversations, letters to the newspaper, e-mail, or phone calls. Over time, a community develops a culture of participation (or non-participation) which the School Board must navigate as it makes important decisions.

While political participation may appear on the surface as equally available to all citizens, research has found that communities offer varying degrees of opportunity for participation (ibid). Furthermore, several studies indicate that higher income citizens have greater access to School Boards and increased opportunities for input into decisions (Hess and Leal 2001; Stone 1982; Verba and Nie 1972). Some research has noted that this is linked to the fact that those with higher education levels have important resources to draw upon, including the necessary time, money, and civic skills to engage in political activities (Stone 1982; Verba et al. 1995). Furthermore, Stone notes that the larger stratified system in which public officials operate "predisposes" them to upper strata individuals, particularly the members of the business community (Stone 1980). As a result, certain groups enjoy advantages

at the expense of other groups and this is manifested through the behaviors of these public officials, as well as a bias that limits both who participates and the terms on which they participate (Stone 1980, 1986). Institutional barriers also restrict participation as customs and procedures discourage some community members from participating (Fowler 2000). For example, a citizen must know (or know how to find out) where public officials meet, when they have open meetings, what topics they are discussing, etc.

Power is important to political theories relating to participation in public decision making. Power is considered the capacity to take action (Barnes 1988) referring to the resources that one might exploit to influence another's behavior (Dahl 1969; Wagner 1969) as well as the leadership to mobilize these resources effectively (Polsby 1969). While power has been defined in many ways in the literature, Stone's conceptualization of "preemptive power" is important to this study, as he highlights the importance of the joining together of coalitions that shape community responses (Stone 1989). The interrelationship of power in the community, or a community's power structure, often involves a small group of influential citizens or interest groups competing for a role in policy development (Nunnery and Kimbrough 1971). Variation in the use of resources results from differences in access to these resources, differences in one's confidence in the ability to alter the course of action, differences in alternative options, and differences in the value placed on the outcome (Dahl 1961).

The Case of Union

Union School District (USD), a pseudonym, is a mid-size urban district serving approximately 35,000 students of whom approximately 85% are students of color (primarily African American) and nearly 90% are eligible for free or reduced price lunches. Poverty, crime, and health issues are just a few of the significant problems facing this urban area. USD's Board of Education is comprised of seven members who are elected to 4-year terms through an at-large voting process across the district. The case study is based upon 26 semi-structured interviews with School Board members, district administrators, and community members. In addition, Board meeting and subcommittee minutes, minutes and agendas from community input sessions, newspaper articles, and district newsletters between 2003 and 2005 were systematically compiled and analyzed.

A number of events that happened during 2003–2004 provide important contextual details to this study because they determined the course of events that followed. In 2003, the Superintendent announced that an internal study had been conducted to assess the utilization of schools and declining enrollment patterns and notified the community that at least one elementary school would close. In January 2004, the Superintendent announced that as many as four schools should close and a few months later identified Washington Elementary School (pseudonyms are used throughout) for closure based upon "enrollment trends, building conditions, and academic performance." To the surprise of district administrators, an immediate and passionate plea erupted from this school community, involving phone calls, letter

writing, and protests coordinated by the PTO president, as well as public support from external groups, including a high-level higher education administrator and the director of an activist neighborhood organization. District administrators did not expect this response because this community was not one that tended to engage in decision making. The demographics speak to some of the challenges facing this neighborhood: 32% of families in this community live below the poverty level, 51% are in the labor force, and the median income is $28,478. Two Board members publicly broke ranks, complaining about the criteria used to identify this school for closure. The Board and Superintendent ultimately retracted the decision (based on a 6 to 1 vote) and the Superintendent stated that a new closure process would occur that would "involve the community." This formal process, described in the following pages, is the focus of this examination. According to the Superintendent, the public would not be "surprised" this time because they would be included from the beginning. The ways in which community members participated in this process and influenced this decision demonstrates the political dynamics of community involvement in educational decision making.

School Closure and Public Participation

The end result of the 2004–2005 closure process (the focus of this study) was the decision to close Lincoln Elementary School. The Superintendent also recommended and School Board approved moving students out of two leased facilities and relocating students from one building to another. While the study focuses on the closure of an entire school—Lincoln—the closure decision overall (these multiple decisions in combination) reportedly saved the district approximately $1 million. The pages that follow include the study's key findings relating to the pressure from city leaders that led to closure, the ways in which the district formally included the community, the use of numbers to legitimize the closure process, the limited value of public voice, and the ways in which district administrators constrained community input.

Pressure from City Leaders

Declining enrollment and underutilized facilities were two considerations by School Board members as they attempted to close a potential budget gap of $50 million. City officials and members of the business community had long complained that the district was not appropriately adapting to the loss of 20% of its students in recent years. In addition, they criticized district leaders for not managing the budget and for operating 'in the red'. Although the city has no oversight authority over the district, the district is fiscally dependent.

As a neighboring urban district concluded a school closure process, elected officials, business leaders, and a local think tank exerted pressure on the USD to initiate a similar process. These outside groups wanted the district to become fiscally prudent. At the same time, the state was offering an incentive to modernize facilities. One business leader noted that the business community was "very

instrumental in pushing the USD to go through this process." She added "We knew we needed to kick start the process and make sure that we didn't lose the opportunity to have access to some of [state] funds." Consequently, there was private and public sector support for the USD to re-enter the school closure process after the unsuccessful 2003–2004 attempt. According to a city official, city council members raised this issue every year around budget time, "We would say, 'Alright, here's the number of students you have. Here's the number you lost this year. When are you going to start closing some schools? You're spending more money per student and yet you're keeping the same number of buildings open. You have to have a staggering number of empty seats.'"

Several Board members acknowledged this external pressure. However, they also contended that city council would stand to gain from school closure because it would put some of these buildings back on the city's tax roll. In other words, they argued that the city had a vested interest in having these buildings close, as they would gain from the shift of these buildings back to the city.

The local media also played a role in exerting pressure on the district to focus on closure as a solution to budgetary problems. The local newspaper coverage noted that a coalition of business leaders had issued a report stating that USD needs to be "more aggressive" in closing schools and quoted the Mayor as saying, "The community has got to understand …some schools have got to close. It's inescapable." Closing schools would serve primarily as a symbolic attempt to take charge of this financial situation, however, since the $1 million saved from this decision was far from the $50 million needed to close the budget gap.

A Formal Attempt to Involve the Community in School Closure

The primary mechanism for involving community members was through the development of two ad hoc committees. The Facilities Committee was an eight-person group comprised of district, city, business, and labor officials. These members were *appointed* by the mayor, Superintendent, and a prominent business leader. The Facilities Committee was charged with studying the relative condition and the potential for modernization of the 39 elementary schools in USD, indicating a direct link to the state incentive funds for building modernization. The Facilities Committee collected data regarding the infrastructure, age, site adequacy, and general conditions of each of these elementary buildings.

In addition, a School Community Committee (SCC) was formed to address the need for community input. Members of this committee were *invited* by school district officials and included community members who were familiar to district administrators based on previous experience on committees, work in the district, or community affiliation. The 31 individuals selected for this committee included: school district central office administrators, union members, members of community agencies, city officials, parents, and members of the faith-based community. According to meeting minutes, School Board members asked that "the responsibility of announcing building closures [be placed] on the School Community Committee—not entirely on the District and unconnected to the School Board."

This effort to have the SCC be the responsible party runs counter to the official capacity of the Board in making these types of decisions and served to locate the decision within the community rather than with the Board or Superintendent. The SCC took much of the information compiled by the Facilities Committee and used it, along with other measures that they had developed themselves, to create a prioritized list of potential schools to close. They then provided this list to the Superintendent and School Board, thereby shaping the decision in many ways. While the announcement of potential schools to close did occur through the media by the SCC, the Superintendent was involved in the final decision to only close one school (not the five the SCC had recommended) and Board was ultimately responsible for approving this decision.

Most Board members and committee members described these two committees as an important way to ensure participation and protect the integrity of the process. For example, as one Board member stated, "I asked [district officials] that regardless of what they come up with or whatever they do, that they have public input and that the public's involved from the beginning to the end. Otherwise, [the community's] going to disclaim this whole process." One SCC member recalled the Superintendent saying, "The second process will be done as openly as possible, as factual as possible, and once we get to the end of the process, we'll use the committee's recommendations and that's what the community's going to end up with." However, several committee members questioned whether these groups were purely symbolic. According to one member, "It was just a matter of being able to say by the Superintendent, the Board and the staff that we had a process. We had key people. They did a little name dropping. They did a little signifying in various communities to say that we had African American involvement, we had Latino involvement, and we had European involvement, and we had key government officials and the district. So this report is authentic, but when you look around it wasn't." Another community member was skeptical of the committee's role, saying "I wasn't there under the illusion that we were really going to make a difference. I was under the impression that we would give the District two things: the first, so-called 'community input' and to develop a process that everyone can be treated fairly…and the second thing was a guide in terms of recommendations."

Furthermore, several committee members discussed the perseverance needed to work through the "dense" materials that the committee received and noted that only about half of the committee members persisted throughout the process. As one SCC member pointed out, "It took a lot of time and energy… the conversation became very sophisticated, very philosophical at times, very academic and people, some people may have felt left out. It was a heavy, heavy conversation." Another community member pointed out that limited English readers, non-English speakers, or people with low literacy levels would have difficulty participating. Instead, he pointed out that "there were mostly professionals around the table." As a result of the fact that all of the committee members were hand-picked (either appointed or invited by district and city leaders), as well as this attrition given the time commitment and work involved, the members of the committee were clearly not representative of the broader community.

The Use of Numbers to Legitimize the Closure Process

The SCC's first charge was to develop criteria to rate elementary schools. By many accounts this was a cumbersome process that involved identifying both overarching areas and subareas that would be used to evaluate the schools. The final criteria developed by the SCC included five broad areas:

- Overall state of buildings and site
- Place in neighborhood
- Financial considerations
- Student enrollment and population trends
- Economic reuse

The decision to include "place in the neighborhood" reflected a direct influence of those who protested the 2003–2004 closure decision since this was their primary argument about why Washington School should not close. On the other hand, "economic reuse" was pushed heavily by city council representatives because of the benefit this would have to the city. Once the criteria were agreed upon, the SCC debated how to weigh these different criteria although there was never any official weighting or summary score calculated across these areas. The SCC members discussed the back-and-forth negotiations they had about which criteria to include as a way to make the process "objective."

Under each broad area the SCC identified several subcategories as a way of operationalizing, or defining, these (See "Appendix" for details). There was a common view that these criteria would make the decision fair to all involved. According to one School Board member, "When you quantify your criteria as [the SCC] did in this case…and the fact that the Superintendent himself stood behind the process of weighting the values…is really what was decisive to me."

Using the numbers to categorize schools resulted in a more transparent process that garnered public support. However, the sub-areas that comprise these broad categories uncover the very subjective nature of these criteria. For example, "place in the neighborhood," involved the school's importance in the community, as well as the level of support that might be anticipated in the event the school was slated for closure. The SCC included information regarding the percentage of students in the neighborhood who attended the home school by choice, as well as the extent of community and district use. A school benefited from having partnerships with other community agencies, having a recreation center or health center attached to the school, conducting preschool or after school programs. The schools on the list averaged eight connections with Lincoln, the school that ultimately closed, having just one.

Even more subjective was the point system which, in essence, weighted the various subcategories within each category. Each overall component had a total value of 100 points.

For example, "place in neighborhood" included each of the following areas (and points) determined by the SCC:

- percent of home school students attending out of the local student body (0–25 points),
- percent of home school students attending out of the total student body (0–20 points),
- percent who selected it as their first choice for kindergarten (0–15 points),
- average hours of permit use by community groups (0–5 points),
- number of connections in terms of volunteers and partnerships (0–5 points),
- existence of a preschool program (0–5 points), afterschool programs (0–10 points), health service provider (0–10 points), and
- whether the school was not in close proximity to another elementary school (0–5 points).

Each school received a summary score and was rank ordered from lowest to highest under each criteria based upon these scores. For example, the range of total scores for Place in Neighborhood was from 22 points to 71 points (out of 100) and schools were rank ordered based upon these summary scores.

One of the most controversial actions of the SCC was to publicly list in the newspaper 16 of the elementary schools that were considered potential closures. Table 1 shows these schools (all are pseudonyms) with their ranking under each area. For example, Clinton was ranked 1st under place in the neighborhood, meaning it was the top ranked school to close because it had the lowest score on this criteria. While the SCC never summarized these data in this format, they illustrate

Table 1 Rank list of 16 potential schools based on closure criteria

Schools	Enrollment trends	Financial consideration	Place in neighborhood	State of buildings	Economic reuse	Total
Clinton[a]	**8**	**6**	**1**	**8**	**14**	**37**
Jackson[a]	6	25	4	5	2	42
Monroe	4	8	2	19	16	49
Jefferson	9	2	23	4	16	54
Harrison[a]	13	14	9	13	9	58
Lincoln[a]	**12**	**19**	**13**	**3**	**11**	**58**
Grant[a]	7	37	5	6	3	58
Polk	1	11	20	12	16	60
Adams	28	1	25	1	16	71
Taylor	5	5	24	22	16	72
Kennedy	19	4	27	16	7	73
Cleveland	21	15	15	30	5	86
Fillmore	11	33	8	32	10	94
Madison	36	35	7	15	1	94
Pierce	37	12	33	9	4	95
Tyler	23	28	17	28	6	102

Bold indicates schools slated for closure or non-renewal of lease

[a] Indicates the top 5 candidates for closure by the SCC

Table 2 Actual scores of 16 potential schools based on closure criteria

	Enrollment trends	Financial consideration	Place in neighborhood	State of buildings	Economic reuse	Total
Jackson[a]	37	55	30	51	25	198
Clinton[a]	38	39	22	52	60	211
Grant[a]	37	76	34	51	25	223
Lincoln[a]	43	51	43	40	55	232
Harrison[a]	44	47	39	58	55	243
Kennedy	52	37	56	61	45	251
Monroe	23	41	24	64	100	252
Cleveland	57	48	47	72	30	254
Polk	9	44	50	58	100	261
Madison	81	65	38	60	25	269
Fillmore	42	60	38	74	55	269
Pierce	85	44	62	52	30	273
Jefferson	40	35	52	49	100	276
Taylor	23	38	53	65	100	279
Adams	64	28	54	34	100	280
Tyler	60	56	48	71	45	280

Bold indicates schools slated for closure or non-renewal of lease

[a] Indicates the top 5 candidates for closure by the SCC

that six schools ranked as high, or higher, than the Lincoln School in their composite rankings—meaning that overall they had lower rankings and therefore would have been likely to close. That is, if school closings were based only (and equally) on the criteria of enrollment trends, financial consideration, place in the neighborhood, state of the buildings, and economic reuse, then six other schools would have closed ahead of Lincoln.

That the five schools recommended for closure by the SCC and the school that ultimately closed do not clearly fit the rank ordering of the committee calls into question the "objective" nature of this process. Table 2 shows the actual scores for each of the potential schools with the five schools recommended for closure listed as the lowest scoring schools overall.

One key criterion that was not included in the SCC's criteria was student achievement. The Superintendent and others argued that this would be brought into the process *after* schools were ranked. To the chagrin of many, including the head of the teachers' union, the SCC argued that they were to evaluate the buildings only, not the programs within them. Community members representing the higher performing schools in the district implored district administrators and the School Board to take academics into account. Although they did not explicitly include these criteria, one SCC member said, "if it comes down to two schools that are scored the same then we'd throw the academic piece onto it." The interjection of a school's academic performance into the decision-making process introduced another degree of subjectivity that may be indicative of the inherent power of the community's

Table 3 Rank listing of potential school closures with academic performance

	Summary score closure rankings	Academic performance[a]	Math	Language arts	Closure decision
Clinton[b]	**37**	**In good standing**	**NA**	**NA**	**Relocate**
Jackson[b]	42	In good standing	40%	67%	
Monroe	49	In good standing	52%	75%	
Jefferson	54	In need of improvement	34%	65%	
Harrison[b]	58	In good standing	70%	82%	
Lincoln[b]	**58**	**In good standing**	**33%**	**54%**	**Close**
Grant[b]	58	In good standing	53%	89%	
Polk	60	In good standing	39%	55%	
Adams	71	In need of improvement	35%	52%	End lease
Taylor	72	In good standing	71%	84%	
Kennedy	73	In need of improvement	56%	80%	
Cleveland	86	In good standing	60%	66%	
Fillmore	94	In good standing	46%	83%	
Madison	94	In good standing	37%	70%	
Pierce	95	In good standing	39%	65%	
Tyler	102	In good standing	49%	55%	

Bold indicates schools slated for closure or non-renewal of lease

[a] Represents satisfactory progress toward the goal of proficiency for all students under NCLB

[b] Indicates the top 5 candidates for closure by the SCC

ability to influence the decision. As one Board member explained, "The problem of it is if you look at the list and then you see that they do meet the criteria, you can't argue about it being on the list… but how many schools are we going to close and how do we pick which ones we close on this list? On that list, they have it by one through fifteen in the order and this is the number one, it meets all the criteria and then some… Now, the argument is how do you get number twelve to close and leave one through twelve?"

Additional data included in this analysis were statewide test scores and whether the school was "in good standing" or not under NCLB. Table 3 lists the schools slated for possible closure along with the academic performance. As the table indicates, Jefferson was lower than Lincoln on the closure rankings. In addition, it had lower academic performance as shown by the designation of "In Need of Improvement." Consequently, one would conclude that Jefferson would be more likely to close than Lincoln. That this recommendation was not made is further evidence that certain factors weighed more heavily in the process. A critical part of this story is that compared with Washington, the school that did not close in 2003–2004, Lincoln's community was potentially much more likely to have power and participate based on its demographics, as seen in Table 4. However, the Washington community influenced the closure decision as a result of key individuals and external linkages, while Lincoln did not.

Table 4 Washington and Lincoln demographics

	Percent students of color	Percent persons of color in community	Percent students on free/ reduced price lunches	Vacant housing units	Percent families below poverty level	Percent speak language other than english at home	Percent owner-occupied housing	Median income	Percent in labor force
Washington	95	80	94	17	32	26	44	28,478	51
Lincoln	95	70	69	7	13	10	63	43,354	74

The Limited Value of Public Voice: Letters, Hearings, and Angry Mobs

In addition to committee membership, opportunities for community involvement existed through informational sessions, PTO meetings, Board meetings, and ad hoc building-based meetings. However, the SCC held four public information sessions from October to November that few community members attended. A district spokesperson reported changing radio advertisements from a focus on facilities to using actual language about potential school closings as a way to potentially increase attendance after the low turnout from the first two meetings. Yet few people attended the next two meetings to discuss closure issues—in fact no more than a dozen community members were reported to be present at any of these public hearings.

In January, the SCC published the list of potential schools in the newspaper— 40% of the elementary schools—which altered the public response dramatically. One of the schools, Harrison School, was on the list yet one of the highest performing schools in the district. The PTO president speculated that they were included "to equalize things and not just put failing schools or schools in bad neighborhoods on the list." Three public hearings occurred once this list was published and the attendance at each was around 300 community members. The number of speakers grew from 40 at the first meeting to 100 at the third.

The SCC completed its charge in January, 2005, submitting its recommendations for closure, which included five schools. When the Board voted in late February, a handful of community members protested the decision vehemently at the School Board meeting and police were called to restore order.

Some groups were more organized and articulate in voicing their concerns than others. Placards, colorful t-shirts, letter writing campaigns, and signed petitions were used to express the community's disapproval of the recommendation. Public hearings allowed community members a 'voice' yet certain procedures limited speaking at a public hearing. For example, citizens were required to call a phone number to sign up to speak at the meetings. In addition, childcare was provided but only for children age three and older. Interestingly, as the process went on, the procedures changed, with community members required to call the district by noon on the day of the hearing to be able to speak (previously there was not this time constraint). This change in procedure was not widely publicized and the data

suggests that many parents were turned away when they showed up at the meeting with the intention of speaking because they did not follow (and likely did not know about) these procedures.

While several Board members stated the importance of public hearings to enable participation, their reactions suggested that these were somewhat symbolic efforts to include the public in this controversial decision. One Board member expressed annoyance about the hearings, "It's real hard to be swayed by formal statements… because the angry mob you're talking about might sign 36 people up all on the same topic. How many of those people do you think we're ultimately listening to when you're hearing over and over again, 'Don't cut this. Don't close that.'" Another Board member said, "I appreciate and I listen to community input, but I also take it with a grain of salt because I know, in many instances, it's a matter of getting bodies before the Board as opposed to the substance. After a certain number of speakers there is a tendency for the listening ability to go down unless you're hearing something different." From another Board member, "I didn't let anyone sway me … I did take into consideration everything everyone said to me, took copious notes and I did think some people had it right when they were talking about the academic piece." Finally, one Board member considered, "Am I hearing something other than a scripted bit of comments?" While Board members were reluctant to acknowledge being influenced by community members, several commented on certain groups' ability to clearly communicate their messages. As one Board member explained, "What you have to do is listen carefully and sometimes you're swayed by a parent group. The most effective swaying in that respect was from [School] because they were able to make the case." The Board members wanted new information or perspectives on the issue at hand and disregarded comments that became repetitive, self-serving, or were superficial responses, pointing out the more complicated nature of participation through public hearings.

Certain individuals and groups played an active role in trying to keep their schools open. In some schools, PTO presidents organized and rallied parents, putting public pressure on Board members. This organization and facilitation was especially necessary for school communities that did not have the technology or the capacity (communication skills, time, or financial means) to participate regularly in this type of decision-making process. Whether from wealthier or more impoverished neighborhoods, some PTO presidents were steadfast that their schools must remain open and tried to mobilize parents to garner support. However, the PTO president from Lincoln's response suggested either she did not know or believe that she could alter the course of events, saying "Once I saw that Lincoln School was one of the schools that was on that list, right away I thought they were going to close it … There really wasn't a lot that was going on at Lincoln." She noted that it was difficult to get more than one or two parents to the PTO meetings—without a core group to draw upon this school was unable to mobilize.

Community members who participated in the hearings had mixed reactions regarding their influence on the decision. A belief that certain schools in USD would not be closed due to higher socioeconomic composition and academic performance was shared by several committee members and Board members. One committee member pointed out, "You've got the residents of the area who usually come from a

different socioeconomic background. A lot of them have the pipeline into those who pull the strings and have major influence. They get things done when they want them done." Similarly, another Board member commented, "people in more politically aware areas tend to be far more subtle at getting their way." Finally, perhaps foreshadowing the ultimate decision, a Board member shared, "It's a lot easier to close a school that's not politically involved. What I mean by that is you've got certain neighborhoods that are very organized or very vocal and some very rich."

While they were critical or wary of the community's comments at times, Board members, committee members, and the PTO president indicated that closing Lincoln was necessary because of a lack of participation and community involvement. The Board member who served as the liaison to Lincoln said, "During the entire period, once it went on the list to be closed, I didn't get a single contact [from Lincoln]. The principal never called me, staff never called me, parent advocates never called me....I wasn't invited to nothing." The SCC Co-chair reiterated this lack of participation: "If you ever wanted to get really good information about how people feel about their schools, go through a school closure process. They were out there en masse, but Lincoln School was not. Lincoln School we did not hear from." Lincoln's PTO president was disappointed that parents did not voice concerns before the final decision was made but did not serve in the same role of organizing them toward this ends.

"Political involvement", "political savvy", and "political strength" are phrases that reflect a belief in the ability to mobilize a group to participate in and influence a decision. By conceding that there is a political element that enters the process, there is also recognition that someone or some groups can influence the decision more than others. One Board member commented, "One or two loud voices won't persuade anybody. Three or four loud voices won't persuade anybody. But if you see a community turn out en masse over this concern, you're talking about something that means more to that community than bricks and mortar … What you're seeing may be a sense of how much life is there and that is something you don't want to take away."

Many of the same mechanisms that were successful in saving Washington the previous year were employed by key members of schools that were not closed in 2004–2005. In fact, the Washington PTO president commented that Lincoln's mistake was not getting its message across about why the school should stay open. A city official who also served on the Facilities Committee agreed that what saved Washington was "community advocacy—the community standing up and speaking." Despite the Board members' awareness of variability of speakers and their message, in the end, it was acknowledged that it was easiest to close a school that lacked community support.

This "power in numbers" provides public officials with important information as they gauge public support or opposition to a given policy and can be especially influential when political leaders have misjudged public reactions (Adams 2004). However, public hearings are not equally accessible to all and some people know how to effectively navigate these types of systems more than others. Many parents did not know the "rules of the game," leading parents to be told that they could not

speak at the meeting because they did not follow the protocol. For low-income families that may not read the newspaper, listen to the radio, or have internet access it is not clear how they would have become aware of these procedures. In addition, several community members noted how intimidated they were to speak in front of the School Board.

Time, family structure, income, and literacy level were cited by Board members and committee members as factors that enabled community members to participate while also impeding others. One Board member said, "We always have a problem with whole sets of our constituency, the underserved in our community … I will always be disappointed that we don't have a mechanism into that population." Community members who participated in the process acknowledged these factors as limiting participation by some members of the community. A member of the SCC said, "Even in this day and time, you still have people who don't have computers or phones or transportation….depending on the bus and cabs and rides. So even in your best attempt to want to be effective, we are still in the horse and buggy age in some of the things for families that are inflicted by so many things [and] are trapped in the system." One Board member discussed the "digital divide" that exists among her constituents who are computer literate and have accessibility to computers, and thus can email Board members, and those who do not.

The Importance of External Linkages and 'Behind the Scenes' Politicking

While the socio-economic composition of a particular school, alone, was not the deciding factor regarding its potential for closure, other related factors such as time, communication, and the extent of community involvement affected the decision-making process. In this regard, the ability of a school or community to organize itself through an active PTO, vibrant neighborhood organization, or a key supporter was integral to successfully influencing the process.

Several Board members acknowledged that it was easier to close a school that had not mobilized. As one pointed out, "Organized parents, organized groups had their elected officials who were behind them and organized raising chaos. It was easier for them to come back … where there was no organization there was no political strength." This was similar to a comment by another Board member who stated, "If you look at a certain area, people actually go and look back and see if people in that area actually come out and vote…. It's that kind of political insight that people have for areas and they know where the majority of the votes come out."

Neighborhood organizations also played a role by representing community members who might otherwise have been non-participants. One committee member explained, "There are people who are paid to represent those interests that work in the neighborhood community center. So they should be on the pulse of what's going on in their community and be able to articulate their issues for them in their absence and that's what their job is supposed to do." In fact, six community agencies had representation on the SCC.

Formal mechanisms such as informational hearings, PTO meetings, and Board meetings allowed community members to show their support for a school through a public display of signs, applause, or simply appearing "in numbers" before the

Board. Communication through these means did not require the level of education or time that was needed to participate on the committees.

Informal methods were critical, however. As one Board member noted, "Because they yell at you at Board meetings…the press assumes that that's where the protest is coming from when, in fact, what's happened is that the effective protest has already occurred, and it's over." Community members who were "politically more aware" and would call up or arrange personal meetings were found to be the most influential. Another Board member concurred, "It seems to offend participatory democracy. It is vastly more behind the scenes than it is anything else."

Finally, linkages between schools and neighborhood organizations can build social capital and relational power and can be a positive way to connect school-level change with broader social and economic issues in the community (Banfield 1961). However, more than strength in numbers, *who* was involved mattered. As Verba et al. (1995) point out, "when public officials interpret what they hear, it matters who is speaking." Sustainable reforms within urban districts require the proactive collaboration and cooperation of various constituents across the community (Henig et al. 1999). In contrast, these data indicate a *reactive* response of neighborhoods but the pressure on the Board was evident as these smaller groups mobilized to oppose the closing of their schools.

One instrument of power is the ability to control the topics or range of discourse, limiting both participation and perspectives in public debate and systematically benefiting some citizens over others (Speer and Hughey 1995; Stone 1982). Several groups tried to shape the debate around school closure. Community members who influenced this process spent time and energy, and communicated a clear, convincing message. Members of the SCC committee, particularly those from city government, attempted to control the debate around school closures by persuading their colleagues to weigh more heavily the criteria relating to building reuse. This, in fact, became a critical factor in the school rankings as schools that were higher on the list scored higher on reuse compared with some of the other factors. However, the "power school" families, as the more affluent parents were referred to, were effective in moving the debate away from buildings and toward programs, pushing the Superintendent until he ultimately made the decision to close schools using student performance, which was not one of the SCC's criteria. The highly organized, politically savvy, and involved community members influenced this process through their mobilization and broader influence in this community.

District Leaders: Controlling the Process and Taking Action

Ultimately, the decision to close Lincoln helped lessen the financial demands placed upon the school system and perhaps more importantly was a symbolic sign to the city and business leaders that USD was taking action. The Superintendent decided to involve the public more fully after the failed attempt to close Washington. The mechanisms that the Board and central office leaders used to gain community input occurred through formal and informal means. By inviting various individuals to serve on the two ad hoc committees, they satisfied the requirement to include community participation in the process. In addition, public hearings, PTO meetings,

and School Board meetings created other formal opportunities for community members to provide input, at least in theory. Informal communication between community members and Board members occurred via letters, e-mail, petitions, the media (print and electronic), and telephone calls. However, USD relied on participatory mechanisms that privileged some groups over others by constraining or channeling the participation of certain groups, thereby limiting the ability of the less powerful to raise issues or promote their own interests (Culley and Hughey 2007). While the formal committees were formed to ensure participation, community members were invited to serve on these committees thereby altering the terms of participation for various groups. By hand-picking individuals to serve on the two community committees, the Board utilized "intermediaries" or "civic leaders" to make the closure case to the media, community organizations, the general public, and these school communities (Banfield 1961). The intermediaries, in essence, gave legitimacy to the process of developing criteria and identifying schools to close. While they both controlled the process and delivered the messages to the community, the Superintendent retained control over the final decision, calling their work only the "starting point" and interjecting student performance into the process after the committee work was completed. According to Banfield, "the political head is likely to have his mind already made up or, at least, to make it up on grounds other than those supplied by the 'civic leaders (ibid, 267).'" These leaders were used to facilitate communication with certain groups, legitimize the decision, and draw pressure or criticism away from the political heads, in this case the Superintendent and School Board.

Conclusion

This study identified procedures that limited participation in and influence over the decision-making process. While School Board members recognized that certain community members were disenfranchised, little was done to enlist their involvement. To move beyond symbolic attempts at political participation, districts like USD may need to find additional ways of seeking input and making the 'rules of the game' transparent. Distrust and detachment from schools will persist until all community members perceive that their voices will be heard.

Many of the factors that appeared influential in Washington School's successful effort were used by the schools during the closure process including: an active PTO President, direct contact with Board members and district officials, meetings with large numbers of parents in attendance, letter writing and email campaigns, and contact with elected officials. The ability to influence the decision was a function of the inherent power of these individuals or groups, resulting from the formal role individuals or groups had within the community (i.e. PTO President, prestigious business organization, established think tank, neighborhood association, etc.) or the resources they could generate. Community members invited to serve on district committees were known to district officials through their work in other capacities or prominence in the community. Politically savvy parents may find their interests better represented if they utilize networks and develop alliances to mobilize and

acquire strength in numbers. Schools and community members without these types of alliances will have difficulty generating the necessary power to influence any School Board decisions, particularly those involving school closure, given community power dynamics as illustrated by this case study.

Appendix: SCC Rubrics

Overall State of Buildings and Site

- Facilities condition
- Classroom adequacy
- Site adequacy
- Site vehicular and pedestrian traffic
- Support adequacy (offices, etc.)
- Site recreational issues
- Building circulation issues
- Internal environmental conditions
- External environmental compatibility
- Custodial issues
- Mechanical/electrical systems
- Technology issues

Place in neighborhood

- % of home school students attending out of local student body
- % of home school students attending home school out of total student body
- 1st choice from kindergarten students within home school neighborhood
- Extent of community and district use as evidenced by average hours n permit use request sheets 2000–2004
- Number of connections in terms of partnerships/volunteers
- Preschool program
- Partners with agencies to offer after school programs
- Health service provider
- Not within close proximity to another elementary school

Financial Considerations

- Construction cost per square foot (total investment in facilities in past 18 years)
- Savings of all funds and utilities
- Percentage of remaining repairs relative to total cost allowance for each school (construction and transportables)
- Per pupil savings 2004–2005

Student enrollment and population trends

- % of additional seats available
- % of additional seats available excluding transportables and including "other use" rooms
- Fewer than 49 seats available from conversion of other rooms
- Increase/decrease student enrollment 2002–2003 to 2004–2005

Economic Reuse

- Tax revenue potential for redevelopment
- Compatibility of reuse option with zoning and neighborhood

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