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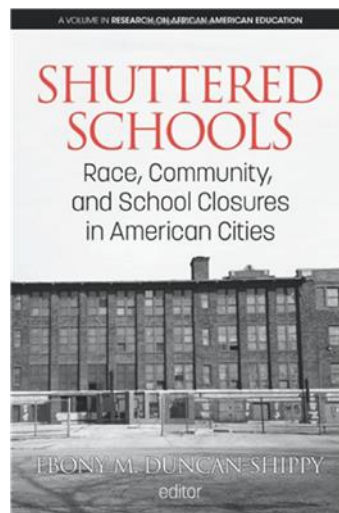
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Shuttered Schools: Another Injustice for Students of Color

In some ways, *Shuttered Schools: Race, Community, and Schools Closures in American Cities* resembles an obituary column, announcing the demise of public elementary and secondary schools across much of the United States. The book's cover presents readers with a static black and white photograph of a substantial four-story brick school that alludes to a past in which the school played a significant role in the lives of students, families, and the surrounding community. Search as you may, the image includes no signs of life. Rather, a portentous shadow of a tree branch reaches out to the present-day school, a building surrounded by a chain-linked fence and pockmarked with graffiti and broken windows.



The publisher does not identify the school on the cover, but readers will quickly learn that this anonymity is sadly inconsequential. *Shuttered Schools* provides detailed descriptions and analyses of the closure of a litany of public schools in Chicago, Illinois; Washington, DC; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Atlanta, Georgia; Detroit, Michigan; Cleveland, Ohio; and Little Rock, Arkansas. In isolation, each account contributes to the chronology of unprecedented numbers of urban public school closures in recent decades. Together, they shed light on much more.

In this collection, editor Ebony M. Duncan-Shippy and contributing authors reveal patterns that are disturbing although not surprising for those familiar with the history of American schools and educational policies.

Duncan-Shippy skillfully draws together scholars whose research and analysis advance the discussion of school closures to an audience beyond educational historians. Chapter authors, with expertise in the fields of education, leadership, public policy, and sociology, provide a nuanced scholarly analysis of recent school closures. Many draw heavily from data provided by the National Center for Educational Statistics, Common Core, census records, and individual school districts. The book should be a must-read for academics interested in urban studies and educational leadership and policy.

Shuttered Schools also offers insight to federal, state, and local policymakers wanting to more fully understand the process and impact of school closures. The book contextualizes school closures in a manner that leads the reader to look beyond the commonly cited reasons for school closures. Certainly, the school districts featured in *Shuttered Schools* were impacted by a combination of what has become to be the expected causes of school closures: 1) white flight from urban cores due to school desegregation efforts, 2) declining enrollment resulting from population shifts following deindustrialization and changing economies of urban areas, 3) perceived academic underperformance in the age of school accountability, 4) the introduction and impact of charter schools and other school choice options, 5) financial hardships faced by underfunded school districts, and 6) scandals. Beyond those factors, as challenging as they may be, lies another factor firmly amalgamated into American education – systemic racism.

School closures, difficult in any community, are concentrated in already “strained communities in ways that reproduce educational inequities – harming students who are already living and learning in the margins of collective life” (p. 48) such as students of color, students from poor families, immigrants, and students for whom English is not their native language. Of these, race looms large. According to the 14 contributing authors, closures have disproportionately impacted African American students and the neighborhoods in which they live. Across the United States, one in four students impacted by school closures in rural, suburban, and urban areas are African Americans. The disproportion intensifies in urban areas, where African Americans represent approximately half of the students impacted by school closures. Even when school leaders in Little Rock identified equity as a cornerstone of decision-making related to school closures, it was “more likely that poor, African American neighborhoods were impacted” (p. 214). This assertion of *Shuttered Schools* supports other recent research on school closures in some of the same locations featured in the book (Lee & Lubienski, 2017) as well as research conducted on other locations (Agard et al., 2019; Glass & Stoudt, 2019).

Like past scholars (Connor & Monahan, 2016; Walker Johnson, 2013), authors in *Shuttered Schools* place the onus of school closures on governance changes resulting from a “gradual erosion of traditional structures and the rise of a neoliberal restructuring agenda” (p. 94). Built on bipartisan support across presidential administrations and changes in educational decision-

making and school management approaches, the reform agenda inflicts costs far exceeding the tangible expense of physically closing and demolition buildings and relocating displaced students and teachers. Other costs, such as the emotional toll on a neighborhood or community, are more intangible. However, according to Duncan-Shippy and colleagues, the far greatest costs of school closures include 1) the breach of public trust, 2) the subsequent threat to democracy, and 3) the continuation and reinforcement of racial and social class divisions. Posturing the closure of an elementary or secondary school as a threat to democracy may seem exaggerated, but others have made similar claims (Kretchmar, 2014; Vaughan & Gutierrez, 2017).

The closing of an individual school is frequently part of a much more sweeping plan based upon ideological frameworks of school improvement, transformation, or even the pursuit of racial equity. Despite the lofty aspirations espoused by a district or city, the authors outline a much different reality for the individual schools that are closed. For example, in Little Rock, an empty lot occupied the area where Meadow Park Elementary School once stood and plans to open an early childhood learning center in Redwood Elementary School fell through and the building was sold. In the case of these two schools and many other urban schools, closures often result in the historical erasure of spaces important to local communities. Because more students of color are impacted by these closures, the erasures exacerbate the effects of other marginalizing forces experienced by students of color. Many districts that propose school closings offer the opportunity for community input before final decisions are made; however, these efforts cannot escape the influence of systemic racism and classism. For example, when constituents in Washington, DC were allowed to propose school improvement plans to ward off a school closing, the process and criteria established by the school system leaders privileged middle-class parents who, because of the undeniable convergence of race and socioeconomic status in the United States, were much more likely to be White than parents of color. For example, when parents promised increased commitment and involvement in a school, officials responded favorably and were more likely to reverse previous closure decisions. Parents who questioned the district's policies, such as the elimination of attractive programs that may have maintained stronger enrollment or repairs on upgrades that would make the building more appealing, had much less success and were more likely to see their neighborhood school close.

While most of the book's content focuses on describing and analyzing the process of school closures in specific cities, the editor includes several chapters on the implications of school closures. It seems common knowledge that a school closure would impact the property value of homes in the surrounding neighborhood. That claim is substantiated and, as readers will come to expect, the data on property values show "school closures have greater negative effects in neighborhoods with large percentages of Black residents" (p. 251). As noted earlier, school closures pose a threat to democracy because they perpetuate racial and social inequities. An analysis of

closures in Chicago Public School supports this claim with findings that show citizens developed a “general suspicion, and ultimately distrust” (p. 261) of the public officials after encountering repeated policy changes related to school closures. On a more hopeful note, school closures can increase the political savvy and activism of teachers, as noted in Chapter 10, which featured teachers in Chicago and Philadelphia. In both cities, teachers with little previous political experience organized activist groups and formed social justice caucuses in response to school closures.

Shuttered Schools would be more compelling and more likely to appeal to readers outside of academia if it incorporated more personal accounts related to school closures. Quantitative and qualitative data analyses tell an important part of the story of school closures in American cities. However, the personal narratives of students, teachers, families, and communities are equally important and necessary to appeal to the broader audience needed to effectively push back on the racialized practices and policies that influence many educational decisions including school closures. The book also lacks research from any city in western portions of the United States. For example, readers may wonder how school closures in Houston, Texas; Oakland, California; or Las Vegas, Nevada differ from those in the eastern states.

Like the shadow of the tree on the book’s cover, the long cast of racism and its implications within U.S. public education seem inescapable. The consistent and academic writing style of the contributors in conjunction with Duncan-Shippy’s sequencing of the chapters methodically and convincingly support two central premises. The first is that contemporary school closures offer yet another narrative of the far-reaching impact of systemic racism. Second, and perhaps even more disheartening and disturbing, is that public education is the pawn of powerful political forces and is being used to perpetuate racial inequities in America.

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About the Reviewer

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