

“THE COMPLETE DISREGARD FOR OUR CHILDREN’S LIVES, THE
TARGETING OF A COMMUNITY THAT CAN’T FIGHT BACK:”
FAMILIES’ TESTIMONIOS ON RESISTING SCHOOL
CLOSURES ON THE U.S.-MEXICO BORDER

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Dedication

Le dedico este trabajo a Familias Unidas del Chamizal.

Gracias por confiar en mi para contar sus historias.

PREVIEW

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by

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DISSERTATION

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Abstract

Through the use of Latinx Critical Race Theory (LatCrit), with testimonios as a method of inquiry, this study analyzed families' experiences that led them to resist school closures. This study also chronicled families' experiences with the transition to new schools, after the school closures. Once schools closed, families described their transition to new schools. LatCrit was applied to interpret school closures through a social justice lens and understand how families experienced interconnected oppression related to their race/ethnicity, class, culture, immigration status, socioeconomic status, language, environment, and gender. The testimonialistas in this study were all members of Familias Unidas del Chamizal, a group that organized around various issues that had impacted Barrio Chamizal, located in South Central El Paso, Texas for many years. Participants stated that the El Paso Independent School District (EPISD) ignored family concerns and had no consideration for the impact that school closures would have on families and their children. Participants felt that EPISD devalued Chamizal families for not speaking English and being poor, Immigrants of Color. The testimonialistas shared that the school district targeted a community that could not fight back against a system of power and politics. This study raises implications for research and practice.

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PREVIEW

Chapter 1: Introduction

School closures are disruptive to communities. Since the onset of high-stakes accountability in education, many communities have experienced school closures because of educational reforms derived from No Child Left Behind and Every Student Succeeds Act laws (Berry & Herrington, 2011; Mathis & Trujillo, 2016; Meyers, 2012; Sunderman et al., 2017). School boards across the country often have to close schools because they have to increase efficiency by reducing their financial losses (Lee & Lubienski, 2017). This policy matter affected rural schools in the 20th century and has most recently impacted schools in large urban areas. Over the last years, school closures jolted EPISD, the largest school district in El Paso County, Texas (El Paso Independent School District, 2021a). EPISD, one of 12 independent school districts within Region 19, served students in El Paso and Hudspeth Counties in Texas (Education Service Center–Region 19, 2020). The school district was one of four that served students within the city limits of El Paso. EPISD spanned from the West El Paso, the affluent area of the city, to the beginning of the East El Paso. The heart of the district was in the northeast, central, and south-central El Paso, all low-income areas – especially the latter.

EPISD served 54,000 students in 84 schools (El Paso Independent School District, 2021b). The majority of students (83.7 percent) were Hispanic, nine percent were White, three percent were Black/African American, and one percent were classified as another ethnicity. Sixty-five percent of students were economically disadvantaged, 26 percent were English Language Learners, and 10 percent had special needs. The demographics of the district were important to understand in relation to the school closures that were announced in 2018 and occurred at the beginning of 2019.

Case Study Background

On May 31, 2018, the EPISD Board of Trustees President, Trent Hatch,¹ along with El Paso American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President, Ross Moore, and El Paso Teachers Association President, Norma De La Rosa, held a press conference at EPISD headquarters. The 21-minute press conference was held a day before the last day of the 2017-2018 school year, and streamed online, via Facebook, by the El Paso Times. Hatch began the conference with a written statement that said EPISD was considering multiple ways to balance the upcoming 2018-2019 budget and they had determined campus closures were necessary because of a slew of reasons (Hatch, Moore, & De La Rosa, 2018). The district had a seven-million-dollar deficit due to declining enrollment, an aging population, urban sprawl, and lower birthrates within the district boundaries. The district had lost 30 million dollars from 2013-2018. The projections showed that the district would lose 60 million dollars in the next decade. Hatch also stated that in the past five years, EPISD had provided 50 million dollars in raises, six million dollars in healthcare benefits, and that no jobs would be lost for those affected by campus closures. He mentioned that in the previous budget, they cut 10 million dollars from the central office budget. This introduction set up the reasoning for the district beginning the process to close schools.

The school closures at EPISD came at a critical time because, according to Hatch, past boards and administrations had ignored the issue and left this board to find a solution (Hatch et al., 2018). In his capacity as school board president, Hatch believed the district could not continue to sustain schools that were under capacity because it was fiscally irresponsible, and students were affected by the loss of resources. Each closure would save the district one million

¹ Trent Hatch resigned from the EPISD Board of Trustees on February 16, 2019, less than a month after voting to close South Central El Paso schools (Sanchez, 2019d). He no longer lived in District 6, the West El Paso seat he represented on the board.

dollars. Hatch went on to say that the savings from school closures could be put toward employee compensation, state-of-the-art technology, and programming for students. Hatch ended his prepared remarks with an argument to close schools to have a better district for current and future students of EPISD.

We realize and understand that the timing is not ideal. However, we can no longer kick the can down the road any further. We have let emotions lead these decisions far too long. We must take the emotion out of this and do what we know is right. As stewards of the tax dollars, we as a board are entrusted to do what is fiscally necessary. In the long run, this will create a much healthier and stable district in which we can focus on our core mission – that is to prepare our students for the future with a 21st century education. Our focus is not only on our current students, but also on the future students of EPISD and families. To the families that will be impacted, we know this may be difficult. We will work to ensure that any transition is smooth and coordinated with all families, teachers, and staff. Any decision will be made in the best interest of your children and the future children of EPISD. We ask for your help and understanding as we proceed with this difficult process. We must remember that we are all here with the same purpose and goal – to serve children of EPISD. (Hatch et al., 2018)

This press conference was held a few weeks before the June 21, 2018 vote on the 2018-2019 budget. Hatch said the district spent the most on salaries and facilities and it became apparent, 45 days prior to the press conference, that more savings were needed in the form of school closures (Hatch et al., 2018; Sanchez, 2018a). Hatch did not elaborate on why the board did not make an announcement as soon as they found out of the shortfalls (Sanchez, 2018a). He also said that holding the press conference a day before the end of the school year should not be read into as a

conspiracy theory that the district waited for everyone to go home and have a bad summer (Hatch et al., 2018). It was a financial decision that had to be taken and the press conference was held to be transparent with the public after looking at all options to save the district money. EPISD Superintendent, Juan Cabrera,² was not present at the conference. He issued a statement, where he praised work on increasing student enrollment and wanting EPISD to be financially stable for many years (Sanchez, 2018a).

Both Moore and De La Rosa supported the closures. Moore said the issue should have been handled in 2010 or 2011 (Hatch et al., 2018). He added that if the issue was not addressed, EPISD would go into an economic death spiral. De La Rosa appreciated being part of the discussion because it was important for the employees to understand that they would not lose their job and that she was committed to making sure students had the best teachers in the area. She also said the district had exhausted all ways of recuperating dollars lost because of attendance and the loss of students. Moore placed an emphasis on the district to handle the closure process in an adequate manner for the district to improve its trust and reputation with the community. To him, three factors were essential for the process to be successful. First, communication with employees was important. Second, the community had to be brought into the process. Third, the district had to be completely transparent and hold open discussions and meetings in open session to prevent any backroom deals on the closures. Moore also said that the

² On November 5, 2020, Juan Cabrera resigned from his charge as superintendent of EPISD (Smith, 2020a). Because of accrued leave time, his resignation became effective on February 1, 2021. The EPISD Board of Trustees agreed to a settlement of \$558,917.54. Cabrera submitted his resignation three weeks after it was revealed that he was implicated in a civil lawsuit alleging that he defrauded investors out of five million dollars in an online school he started with former EPISD Board President, Dori Fenenbock.

closed schools should not be sold to charter companies because it would exacerbate the attendance issues at EPISD.

Susie Byrd,³ EPISD Board Trustee for District 3, told Sanchez (2018a) that this was a critical decision that was brought to the board at the last minute, with insufficient information. She felt the decision to hold the conference a day before school ended was disrespectful to the public because they did not have an adequate notification or a chance to engage, especially for individuals in schools that could be closed. This decision would erode public trust that the board worked to gain back after the State of Texas implemented a Board of Managers a few years prior. She said if the closures moved forward in this way, two classes of students would be created. The first class of students would have their schools closed after a long public process and would transition to a brand-new school or a school in better condition than the one they left. The second class of students would have their schools “closed in the dark of night with very little chance for public input and moved to schools that are in just as bad a condition as the school that was closed” (Sanchez, 2018a).

Hatch said that once the 2018-2019 budget was approved, on June 21, 2018, the board would go into the community and hold community meetings. He promised all schools within the district would be analyzed, and emphasized transparency, when talking to families throughout the community (Hatch et al., 2018; Sanchez, 2018a). The schools considered for closure would be those under 65 percent capacity. Jacobs (2015) conducted a *State of School Facilities Report* for EPISD. One of the main findings was that several EPISD schools were over capacity. The

³ On January 2, 2019, Susie Byrd resigned from the EPISD Board of Trustees (Sanchez, 2018c). She vacated her Central El Paso District 3 seat to work for newly elected Congresswoman Veronica Escobar. Her resignation came 20 days before the EPISD Board of Trustees voted to close schools in South Central El Paso.

utilization of a school was determined by dividing enrollment by the capacity of a school. Schools under 85 percent were considered underutilized, schools over 100 percent were overutilized, and schools over 120 percent were significantly overcrowded. The report projected that by 2019, 33 EPISD schools would be at or fall below 70 percent capacity, with 16 of those schools under 60 percent capacity. For district officials, it meant that EPISD would inefficiently continue to pay for maintenance and utilities on underused facilities. Twenty-seven schools considered for closure were under 65 percent capacity – 19 elementary schools, six middle schools, and two high schools (Sanchez, 2018a). Of these 27 schools, five middle schools and three elementary schools were slated for closure and consolidation under the 2016 EPISD Bond (El Paso ISD Board of Trustees, 2018).

The district held two community meetings on June 18-19, 2018 at a facility across the street from the central office (Sanchez, 2018b). Then, the board held a workshop on December 6, 2018 (El Paso Independent School District, 2019). Throughout the month of December 2018, EPISD held five community meetings, with staff, at schools that would potentially close. They also held one meeting at Douglass Elementary School, with members of the community. By January 2019, the school district proposed five elementary schools for closure. These five schools had the following capacities: Alta Vista Elementary (54 percent), Beall Elementary (51 percent capacity), Burleson Elementary (42 percent), Douglass Elementary (51 percent), and Zavala Elementary (43 percent) (Sanchez, 2018a). One option included Alta Vista, Beall, Burleson, and Schuster, while the second option swapped Beall for Douglass. The district held eight community meetings at the schools throughout January, with the final meeting taking place on January 16, 2019 – six days before the vote on closures (Sanchez, 2019a). Between 30 and 100 people attended each of these community meetings (El Paso Independent School District, 2019).

On January 22, 2019, the EPISD Board of Trustees held their regular monthly board meeting, with the discussion on school closures placed at the end of the meeting (El Paso ISD Board of Trustees, 2019). The superintendent's Chief of Staff, Jose Lopez,⁴ led a presentation titled "Rightsizing for the Future," in which he discussed why the school district needed to make the decision to close schools, mainly based on low enrollment (El Paso Independent School District, 2019). There were three main community trends that impacted the enrollment of EPISD schools. First, the population within EPISD boundaries was aging and birth rates were low. Second, urban sprawl continued to happen, and more families opted to move east, out of the district boundaries, where there was potential for growth. Third, charter schools were rapidly expanding in the area. There were ten factors that the district considered for schools to close, based on being able to sustain operations over the next five, 10, or 15 years. The 10 factors included capacity and size, enrollment, surrounding campuses, transportation, personnel, location, major roadways, academics programs, cost savings, and disposition of surplus property. Lopez said this criterion was discussed at community meetings held on school closures.

Families from Beall and Burleson filled the board room, asking trustees not to close their schools (El Paso ISD Board of Trustees, 2019; Sanchez, 2019b). Many people signed up to speak during public comment, in English and Spanish, against the closures (El Paso ISD Board of Trustees, 2019). The district did not provide interpretation equipment for non-English speakers to understand the meeting. Most of the speakers were from Familias Unidas del Chamizal, a group of families that live in the area where these closures took place. These families were

⁴ On December 14, 2021, Jose Lopez resigned from EPISD (Smith, 2020c). This was about a month after his former boss, Juan Cabrera, had submitted his resignation. Lopez's resignation became effective on February 16, 2021. Lopez was also involved in the online school, eSchool Prep, Cabrera started with former EPISD Board President, Dori Fenenbock (Smith, 2020b; Smith, 2020c).

wearing a red shirt, with a white heart, that read “La Escuela Bell,” above a building resembling the school. When the families addressed the board, they were mainly concerned with environmental, transportation, and after school programmatic issues. One parent, Hilda Villegas (2019), advocated for Beall Elementary School to remain open, over Douglass Elementary School, because of its centered location within the community. Villegas felt district staff had been dismissive of legitimate concerns from Beall Elementary over its potential closure. Another parent, Cemelli de Aztlan (2019) addressed the board, and used maps of the area to discuss environmental issues around the schools, mainly a recycling plant adjacent to Douglass Elementary.

On this picture, you could see it’s right behind Douglass Elementary School, which it recycles and processes metals, batteries, and other contaminating products. We also have a train behind Douglass and a lot of semitrucks passing through, which scientists highly advise to keep children away from, as they emit exhaust particles and dust that is detrimental to their health. Also, the playground that we commissioned a study at Douglass, we found it was contaminated with lead and according to the CDC no amount of lead is safe for our children. Given the close proximity that Douglass is to the recycling facility and the train. Both are not going away, we’ve tried. Dealing with contamination will be a constant and long-term issue. Neither the City or EPISD have control over the growth of silver recycling as it’s grandfathered in and the industrial zoning isn’t changing any time soon. Overall, the concentration of industry is of concern. In contrast, Beall Elementary School is dominantly surrounded by residential homes, families, and residential zoning. Given that most Chamizal children are low-income, vehicles are a luxury many families cannot afford. The walking distance for families, if

transferred to Douglass, is much farther, longer, and more dangerous, and surrounded by industry. If Beall stays open, the walking distance for all Chamizal families is safer and shorter, and that makes a difference for children and elders walking to school. (de Aztlan, 2019)

In the end, the board unanimously voted to close four schools in low-income areas of El Paso, Texas – Alta Vista Elementary School, Beall Elementary School, Burleson Elementary School, and Schuster Elementary School (El Paso ISD Board of Trustees, 2019; Sanchez Sanchez, 2019b). Up until the vote, Beall and Burleson families had raised concerns about the school board not including their voices in the closure process and committed to fighting the board's decision (Sanchez, 2019c). Families organized meetings, cited environmental concerns, and held a one-week hunger strike (Borunda, 2019; Smith, 2019). On June 15, 2020, the families took legal action against EPISD, in federal court, for “systemic discrimination against poor, Hispanic, and Mexican-American students” (Martinez, 2020). EPISD excluded the voices of families in the school closure process, made families feel devalued, and did not consider the impact the closures would have on children.

Purpose of Study

Several studies have focused on the commonalities found in numerous school closures that have taken place over the past decades, such as underperformance and financial issues (Freelon, 2018; Nuamah, 2020), low enrollment (Garnett, 2014; Kirshner, Gaertner, & Pozzoboni, 2010; Sunderman et al., 2017), and school reform policies (Jorgensen & Hoffmann, 2003; Mathis & Trujillo, 2016; Picower & Mayorga, 2015; Sunderman et al., 2017). While these studies address important factors that lead to closures, they lack the perspectives of affected families and the critical occurrences that families face when their schools are closed. School

closures impact families of students that transition to new schools after a closure. The literature needs more of these experiences because the focus is on why schools close and not on the effects of closures on families. In view of these considerations, the purpose of this study is to address the social problem of school closures in a disadvantaged community of immigrants of Color, in El Paso, Texas. Through families' personal accounts of school closures, this study seeks to center families' experiences through the school closure process and the aftermath of closures - in particular, what happened to children who transitioned to a new school. Hence, this study aims to answer the following two questions:

1. What are families' experiences that lead them to resist school closures?
2. After school closures occur, how do families describe their transition to the new school?

The first research question sets out to understand the factors that led families to resist school closures in their community. The second research question informs the first question, in detailing the ramifications sustained from the school closures in the transition phase. Together, these questions play a key role in addressing what happened before and after the school closures at EPISD.

Significance of Study

As EPISD moved to close these four schools, I realized that the EPISD Board of Trustees had failed the families in my community. I started thinking of the best way I could get involved to make sure that future board members reflected the values of the communities they represented. Through this reflection, a seat on the EPISD Board of Trustees became vacant, and I made the decision to run for the position. My platform consisted of four main points – transparency, accountability, competitive compensation for all employees, and the inclusion of

the community in decisions. I knocked on community members' doors and realized, through conversations with voters, that many people had lost trust in the district and raised concerns about the closures. The area I was running to represent included Alta Vista, one of the four schools that closed. It was a challenging race, but I won the election. I was elected to the EPISD Board of Trustees on June 15, 2019 and was sworn in on July 17, 2019. At my first regular board meeting, on August 20, 2019, I tried reversing the January 22, 2019 decision to close four schools. The board was made up of seven members, and four remained from the prior board that voted in favor of closing the schools. The motion to reopen the four schools failed five to two votes.

I am in a unique position as a member of the EPISD Board of Trustees. It is rare for a researcher to be in a position as a policymaker and inform policy initiatives. This study aims to help the school board and administrators at EPISD make more informed decisions on school closures and include community perspectives in the process. It is important to better understand how these closures impacted families. Families' experiences contribute to the need for a better understanding of school closures. EPISD may continue to close schools in the future, but still lacks a transparent and inclusive closure plan. I would like to address it as a board member and researcher.

Organization of Dissertation

This study consists of five chapters. In this first chapter, I explained the background of the issue by outlining the research problem, purpose, significance, and questions guiding my study. The second chapter is the review of literature, which analyzes how school closures have been cited in the literature in five major ways. I also define the theoretical framework that will be used for the study, along with my method of inquiry. The third chapter presents the full detail of

my methodology. The fourth chapter describes the findings derived from the data. The fifth chapter discusses the findings and provides implications for future research and policy initiatives.

PREVIEW

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

In this chapter, I review the literature on the causes and effects of school closures. There are five key themes: reasons for school closures, school reform policies, the expansion of charter schools, school closure process, and the impact of school closures on low-income families. This study focuses on the impact of school closures on Latinx families and their resistance to school closures that occurred in a community of Spanish-speaking Immigrants of Color. First, I provide an overview of the common reasons discussed in the literature on why schools closed. Next, I explore how school reform policies have impacted school closures in the past two decades. Then, I discuss how charter schools benefit from public schools closing. After, I include the school closure process found in the research and highlight the need for more research in this area. Finally, I end the review of literature with a look at how school closures impact families in low-income communities and parent perspectives – both areas that are a gap in the literature. The chapter closes with the theoretical framework that will guide my study, Latinx Critical Race Theory, to delve into the consequences of school closures on EPISD families.

Reasons for School Closures

School closures have been covered in the literature in various ways, including three main causes. First, public schools must compete with school choice and demographics in urban areas that are rapidly changing, so school closures are inevitable, and they must be accepted as a new normal (Syed, 2019). Next, school closures are data-driven, and they will provide better schools for all students. Finally, school closures are determined by unbiased metrics, politically neutral, and are not targeted at certain communities and populations.

There are five interconnected reasons, cited in the literature on school closures, that describe why public schools close – underutilization, low enrollment, financial losses,

consolidation, and low academic performance (Bierbaum, 2018; de la Torre, et al., 2015; Deeds & Pattillo, 2015; Engberg et al., 2011; Freelon, 2018; Garnett, 2014; Green, 2017; Kirshner, et al., 2010; Lee & Lubienski, 2017; Nuamah, 2020; Sunderman & Payne, 2009; Sunderman et al., 2017). Schools are deemed underutilized when enrollments drop (Sunderman & Payne, 2009). This leads to financial losses, which prompts the closure or consolidation of schools (Sunderman & Payne, 2009; Sunderman et al., 2017). The criteria for determining capacity, that leads to underutilization, varies by district (Freelon, 2018). Many school closures are derived from financial deficits or a shift in the population that causes declining enrollment (Engberg et al., 2012; Wright-Costello & Phillippo, 2020;). Since the beginning of the 21st century, urban school districts have encountered declining enrollment because the population is trending toward having less school-aged children (Sunderman & Payne, 2009). Underutilized schools may be housed in buildings in poor condition and are expensive to operate, so districts consider closures as a way to save money (Sunderman & Payne, 2009). Most of the research on school closures is on the financial implications of keeping a school open with low enrollment (Lee & Lubienski, 2017). I will critically analyze the literature on school closures.

The decision to close schools and consolidate other campuses is to curb lost revenue on district finances (Lee & Lubienski, 2017; Sunderman et al., 2017). In Texas, 50 percent of funding for public schools comes from local property taxes, 40 percent from the state government, and 10 percent from the federal government (Staudt, 2020). Most of the money spent by school districts is for staffing. The closure of schools allows districts to better use their resources and limit financial losses (Lee & Lubienski, 2017). The low enrollment of schools contributes to financial losses because schools receive money based on how many students are enrolled. Each student provides \$11,392 in funding for Texas schools (Staudt, 2020). This means

that school districts must continue to operate facilities with less money derived from spending per-pupil (Sunderman et al., 2017). The literature shows that the savings from consolidating schools is low (Cohn, 1968; Dowdall, 2011), and the closure of schools in the urban districts have not addressed the deficiencies of these school districts (Lee & Lubienski, 2017, p. 56). The attempt to limit financial losses through school closures can have unintended consequences and increase socioeconomic inequality in accessing education. This can have a critical effect on a particular community with disadvantaged students.

In 2013, Chicago Public Schools considered 129 schools for closure (de la Torre et al., 2015). Eighteen of them were underutilized, or at less than 80 percent capacity. Many of the underutilized schools served vulnerable populations. When Chicago first closed schools, they based their decision on academic failure (Nuamah, 2020). By 2013, they reframed their narrative around losing money because of the underutilization of half-empty buildings that are expensive to maintain. This shifting message made it difficult for community members to understand the reasoning behind the need for school closures. Most of the students affected by closures came from low-income backgrounds, received special education, were on reduced or free lunch, performed poorly on the state math exam, lived in an unstable home, and were in a grade level that was inappropriate for their age (de la Torre, et al., 2015; Freelon, 2018). These students also lived in neighborhoods where the crime rate was double than that of the average Chicago Public Schools student (de la Torre et al., 2015). African American students were most affected by the closures in Chicago (de la Torre et al., 2015; Freelon, 2018).

Another common explanation that districts provide on closing schools is low academic performance (Engberg et al., 2011; Garnett, 2014; Green, 2017; Kirshner, et al., 2010; Sunderman et al., 2017). The reasoning behind closing a school with low academic performance