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Organizational "Failure" and Institutional Pluralism: A Case Study of an Urban School Closure

Vontrese Deeds[1] and Mary Pattillo[1]

Abstract
We use the framework of institutional pluralism to provide new insights into a controversial process of market-based reform—school closures. School closure is a shock that highlights the dynamics and definitions of failure and surfaces values and meanings that might otherwise be hidden from consideration. Using qualitative data from a closing urban school, we disaggregate stakeholders' competing conceptions of legitimacy and argue that failure is an interpretive process. We find that this school was closed based on the evaluative criteria of district administrators, occasioning disruptions for teachers, parents, and students that ultimately run counter to some goals of district administration.

Keywords
urban, social, school reform, urban education, ethnography, subjects, adolescent

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Introduction

The "failing" urban school, school choice, and school closures have become powerful notions in the popular discourse on urban education. Contemporary debates about the governance and management of public schools focus on accountability metrics as a means of judging and comparing organizational performance, primarily via scores on standardized state tests. The combination of these metrics with school choice, which allows families to enroll their children in schools outside their geographically zoned area, has created what some term an urban educational marketplace (Cucchiara, 2013; Henig, 1994), in which schools face competition for students and funding and are forced to improve performance or risk closure. Assuming families choose high-performing over low-performing schools, the educational market should select out those schools that fail to improve. This assumption, however, obscures the reality of how school closures disrupt the lives of individuals and school communities, ignoring the ways closures may in fact undermine student outcomes that administrators and policy makers value.

In this article, we view schools as organizations consisting of multiple stakeholders that simultaneously hold competing views of a school's value, meaning, and use. In other words, schools are embedded in pluralistic environments—or what Enomoto (1997) has called "nested communities"—replete with multiple meanings that represent a diversity of goals and values that vary by stakeholder group (Kraatz & Block, 2008). Although schools are certainly places of learning for students, they are also places of employment for teachers and noninstructional personnel; physical plants that districts must manage and maintain; public organizations supported by local, state, and federal funds; and places that parents use for child care. Given this context, it should come as no surprise that schools are subjected to more than one evaluative criterion to determine value and success. We argue that in such pluralistic environments, failure is an interpretive process that varies widely across constituents. A school may be designated as "failing" by district leaders due to underperformance on test scores, whereas families may regard the same school as an important community resource that has successfully served their children. Our analysis shows that using a single stakeholder groups' evaluative criteria to deem a school a "failure" ignores other forms of meaning and value that the organization holds, occasioning disruptions for these groups. Furthermore, we find that, because stakeholders draw upon different perspectives when evaluating schools, closure is alternatively understood as either a successful reform or an unnecessary disruption.

By emphasizing the reactions of multiple stakeholder groups during a school closure, our study addresses both an empirical and a theoretical gap in

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organizational and educational research. Organizational scholarship has often conceptualized failure as an outcome, rather than emphasizing the contested *process* of evaluating performance among diverse organizational stakeholders. In addition, although school closings are currently intensely controversial and receive considerable press by local media, scholars have been slow to look at closures empirically. We address this gap by studying the complex effects of a school closure on those living through the reform—administrators, teachers, parents, and students—via an in-depth, qualitative study of a district school closure in Newark, New Jersey. We pose the following questions: How might multiple meaning systems in a pluralistic institutional environment lead to conflicting evaluations of an organization and, specifically, if and when it is failing? What practices, perspectives, and values are exposed in reaction to closure? We use institutional theory in answering these questions. Although institutional theory has long been explored in an educational context (e.g., Meyer & Rowan, 1977), recent advances in institutional pluralism provide leverage in thinking about how organizational actions such as closure may have a differential set of effects on actors in complex environments (Greenwood et al., 2011; Kraatz & Block, 2008).

We begin this article by reviewing research on institutional pluralism and school closures. We then analyze data from Newark district administrators as well as teachers, students, and parents at the particular school under study. We consider a school closure to be a time of shock and radical change that highlights the dynamics of failure that might otherwise be hidden from consideration (Hartman & Squires, 2006; Klinenberg, 2002; Vaughan, 2004). In our analysis, the school closure allows us to uncover the different criteria by which stakeholders value and legitimate the school. In similar research, Johnson (2013) offers a powerful critique of the closure and turnaround of a predominately Mexican American school in Austin, Texas, using the trope of "shock therapy" to show how the process destroyed social networks and familial histories to achieve a "clean slate" for neoliberal reforms. Although her data mostly come from the state and district levels, our findings for parents, teachers, and students significantly concur with this sense of loss and trauma. We conclude with a discussion of practical implications for contemporary education reform.

Literature Review

Institutional Pluralism and Organizational Failure

Recent work on institutional pluralism provides a framework for a better understanding of the simultaneous, multiple relationships within a school and

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unpacking how different subgroups both within and outside the school respond to organizational events. Organizations reside in an institutionally plural environment when they are at the center of multiple institutional spheres. Kraatz and Block (2008) argue that pluralistic organizations have multiple identities provided by multiple stakeholders, are legitimated by a range of ideologies, and are places where very different beliefs and evaluative criteria can be taken for granted simultaneously. They use the American university as an exemplar of institutional pluralism, arguing that the university is "so many different things to so many different people that it must, of necessity, be partially at war with itself" (Kerr, 1963, p. 8 reprinted in Kraatz & Block, 2008, p. 243). Kraatz and Block account for the existence and consequences of pluralism in three organizational domains—*legitimacy, governance*, and *change*. In this article, we add a fourth, previously neglected domain—*failure*. As with legitimacy, there is no consensus around organizational failure, although disproportionate power of one stakeholder can mean that its definition of failure will result in the organization's closure altogether. We briefly review these three domains before theorizing failure and closure under pluralism.

Legitimacy involves symbolic conformity with cultural norms and understandings such that an organization is seen as proper or appropriate (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). In pluralistic environments, organizations may or may not be able to compartmentalize multiple legitimacy criteria or effectively make commitments to all constituency groups. Stakeholders may navigate pluralism by deploying "first order" and "second order" legitimacy (Kraatz & Block, 2008). For example, a school's performance on state tests could be a first-order criterion for those who manage the school district, but a second-order criterion for families who instead legitimate the school based on its proximity to their homes.

Institutional accounts of *governance* suggest that state and other field-level entities influence organization control (Scott, 2001), and that governance depends on cultural logics, beliefs, and material practices by which individuals and organizations organize activity (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999; Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012). Pluralism connotes the existence of multiple logics, such that no one belief system determines how an organization is ruled. Pluralistic governance must validate and make room for disparate identities and purposes that come with multiple beliefs.

Finally, institutions are often considered to promote stability and constrain *change* (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, 1991). Although scholars have theorized what leads to change (e.g., Clemens & Cook, 1999), change is typically considered to occur slowly over time or, alternatively, very quickly and radically before settling again (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996). Because pluralism is

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marked by divergent interests and competing demands, it creates situations where organizational change is both more frequent and less radical than most institutional theory predicts.

Although research has detailed strategies for organizational survival in plural environments (Greenwood et al., 2011; Oliver, 1991), we focus on closure in such environments. Organizational scholars typically regard closure as the final negative outcome of failure (for exceptions, see Hardy, 1985; Meyer & Zucker, 1989; Sutton, 1987). However, using the framework of institutional pluralism, we show that the process of failure is not uniformly experienced among stakeholder groups but is determined by how stakeholders legitimate the organization. Because sources of legitimacy vary, an organization may be designated as a failure by one stakeholder while a different stakeholder may view the same organization as a success. Thus we argue that under pluralism, failure is an interpretive process rather than an outcome. In fact, one stakeholder group may not be aware that other stakeholder groups view the organization as a failure until the organization is slated for closure.

In ideal circumstances, stakeholders work to build consensus and integrate their different ideas of legitimacy, success, and failure into organizational practices and goals. In the absence of consensus, powerful actors are better able to enforce their institutional expectations and shape organizational activity (Pache & Santos, 2010), especially when those actors are positioned to make decisions or generate solutions (Heimer, 1999). We argue that when a pluralistic organization is closed based on one constituency's definition of failure, alternate forms of organizational meaning and value, especially those incongruent with the more powerful stakeholders, are undermined and the stakeholders attached to these alternate values experience disruptions. In so doing, we advance institutional theory to consider the multiple perspectives of failure within pluralistic organizations, especially how these perspectives become particularly apparent when failure leads to closure.

Research on School Closures

Although school closings are an expected consequence of declining populations of school-aged children, we focus on reforms that prioritize school closings as a strategy to improve educational outcomes. The Obama Administration has made turning around failing schools a top priority for improving the nation's education system. Its signature initiative is the Race to the Top federal competition, which overhauls low-performing schools through curriculum changes, staff restructuring, and, when other improvement measures fail, school closures. Prior to the Obama Administration, urban districts had already begun overhauling and closing their low-performing schools, partly

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in response to reform measures in the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). A 2011 report on school closings (Pew Charitable Trusts) found that between 2001 and 2010, six major U.S. cities closed 197 district schools. This included 44 schools in Chicago, 59 in Detroit, 29 in Kansas City, Missouri, 20 in Milwaukee, 22 in Pittsburgh, and 22 in Washington, D.C. The report detailed factors that prompted closure including enrollment declines, pressures to decrease spending, deteriorating buildings, poor academic performance, and the rise of charter schools and other alternatives that lowered the demand for traditional public schools.

Given that urban school districts have undergone serious changes and closed numerous schools in the last decade, there are surprisingly few studies that empirically explore the closure process. Several studies investigate *protests* of school closures (Basu, 2007; Bondi, 1987; Lipman, 2011), but we do not discuss these findings due to their limited relevance to our case. Studies on *student outcomes* after school closures have produce mixed results. Engberg, Gill, Zamarro, and Zimmer (2012) found that students relocated after a closure experienced adverse effects in test scores and absenteeism, but these effects diminished after the first year of transfer. They also found that students who moved to high-performing schools experienced improvements in scores and attendance. Tracking students from 18 different school closures in Chicago, de la Torre and Gwynne (2009) found that only 6% of students transferred to schools that had test scores in the top quartile of the district, meaning the closure policy failed to place students in substantially better schools. After the closing of their high school, Kirshner, Gaertner, and Pozzoboni (2010) and Kirshner and Pozzoboni (2011) found that students felt their voices were shut out from the decision process and that students experienced a drop in academic performance and a weaker relationship with new-school adults and classmates. Taken together, these studies indicate that students may experience adverse academic and social effects, particularly when they transfer to schools of low quality.

Scholars have also explored *parent experiences* of school closure. In an early case study, Valencia (1984) found that a year after a school closure, both parents and students experienced burdens including psychological maladjustment, student academic decline, parental involvement decline, and transportation difficulties. Witten, Kearns, Lewis, Coster, and McCreanor (2003) present similar evidence, finding that low-income parents lost not only the physical and educational resources of their local school but also the emotional and informational support. Their interviews with parents of a New Zealand city school suggested the school was a community institution and a potential site of community building. Using data from the same case, Witten, McCreanor, Kearns, and Ramasubramanian (2001) discovered that families

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who previously felt welcomed by a school that understood the needs of low-income communities felt socially excluded after the school closure, and experienced socioeconomic hardships paying for new school supplies and transportation.

Some scholars take a highly critical stance on school closure, contending that school closures and turnaround policies do not actually improve the conditions for low-income populations most often affected. Smith and Stovall (2008) argue that school closures and community displacement play a key role in a larger gentrification project as communities become marketable to potential buyers. Lipman (2011) and Lipman and Haines (2007) reach similar conclusions, arguing that turnaround plans and school closures rarely help the students of failing schools, but instead serve as a means for creating new, upper-middle class urban neighborhoods that further facilitate the displacement and containment of poor people of color. Finally, a recent special issue of *Perspectives in Urban Education* takes a "politically active and engaged posture toward scholarship" (LeBlanc, 2013, p. 4) by presenting reflections and research by academics as well as actors on the front lines of fighting against school closures in Philadelphia.

Our study extends research on school closings by gathering qualitative data from parents and students while adding two key stakeholder groups: teachers and administrators. To explore variations in how stakeholders define failure and react to closure, we conducted interviews with teachers, parents, and students, and collected the public statements of district administrative leaders. Our analysis highlights the pluralistic nature of schools and helps us understand how and why stakeholders hold disparate conceptions of failure and experience different disruptions during closure.

Methods and Setting

This article chronicles the closure of an elementary school in Newark, New Jersey. Like many urban school districts, Newark faced budget deficits and struggles to repair deteriorating school buildings. Newark also experienced a recent decrease in the number of school-aged children and has seen the growth of new schools in the "choice" sector, including charters and magnet schools. A recent report (Advocates for Children of New Jersey, 2011) showed that Newark's student population declined from 44,043 students in 2006 to 39,670 students in 2011 (see Table 1). During these years, Newark's traditional "district" public schools saw a 20% decline in student enrollment, whereas the city's charter schools saw a 130% increase over the same period. The remarkable growth in the charter sector, however, did not make up for an overall decline in student enrollment.

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Table 1. K-12 Public School Enrollment, Newark.

	2006-2007	2007-2008	2008-2009	2009-2010	2010-2011	% Change 2007-2011
Newark district (noncharter)	41,266	40,507	39,992	39,440	33,279	−19
Newark charter schools	2,777	4,049	4,544	5,391	6,400	130
Newark total	44,043	44,556	44,536	44,831	39,679	−10

In accordance with their strategic plan, Newark's educational leaders have focused on expanding school choice options and restructuring and/or closing underenrolled and low-performing traditional public schools. In February 2012, Superintendent Cami Anderson announced the closure of seven district schools due to underutilized space and low performance. We examine the closing process at one of those schools, Franklin Street School.[1]

For over 100 years, Franklin served students enrolled in prekindergarten to eighth grade. At the time of its closing, Franklin was nearly 100% Black and Latino, with more than 90% of the student body eligible for free and reduced lunch.[2] Like many urban schools around the country, Franklin experienced considerable instability and change in the prior decade. It was twice labeled a failing school by NCLB. As a result of the volatility of the district budget, Franklin saw its after-school programming taken away, reintroduced, and then taken away again. Enrollment declined sharply when the nearby housing was demolished and rumors spread about potential closure. That same year, the student population got a boost from the closing of a nearby district school, which sent its children to Franklin and helped the school remain open. Shortly after falling into the "failing school" category for the second time, Franklin entered a community-based reform initiative managed by a local university. After achieving small improvements in student test scores in 2011, Franklin earned "safe-harbor" status. At the same time, the district required Franklin to share its building with a charter school to increase building utilization. After years of uncertainty and reform interventions, Newark's superintendent announced Franklin's closure in February 2012. The school would remain open until the end of the 2011-2012 academic year, but would not reopen the following fall. In the months that followed the announcement, teachers found new jobs and children enrolled in different schools.

The present study began with the announcement of Franklin Street School's closure, a school to which Deeds had previous connections. For

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nearly 3 years, Deeds served as a director of a small community-based non-profit in Newark, during which time she met with teachers at a variety of Newark schools and developed a good, working rapport with them. Her work focused on giving students additional resources to improve their school performance and teachers generally welcomed her participation and extra support. Although she was not in contact with any Franklin teachers after her departure from Newark, teachers recalled working with her in years past. This personal history allowed access to the school at a time when teachers and parents had extra responsibilities and their futures were uncertain. Initiating contact with three teachers through email, Deeds asked if she could follow their transition experience, with these teachers leading her to more teacher contacts. Using this snowball sampling method, we followed 13 teachers, comprising half of the teaching staff employed at Franklin. The teacher sample included teachers of first through eighth grade with 1 to 30 years of teaching experience. This sample contained 11 females and 2 males, one Latina teacher, five White teachers, and seven Black teachers.

Three teachers served as brokers between Deeds and the families, allowing her to contact every sixth- and seventh-grade family and invite them to participate. Sixth and seventh graders were chosen for three reasons: first, students in these grades had additional years of elementary school remaining (they were not leaving for high school); second, they were of an adolescent age where peer issues are particularly salient; and third, they tend to be more articulate and reflective than younger students. We began with a list of 35 families with sixth- and seventh-grade students, dropping eight families due to disconnected phone numbers. An additional two families were dropped because they transferred schools before the closure was announced. Of the remaining 25 families, 18 parents participated in interviews, comprising slightly over half (18 of 35) of all the families with sixth- and seventh-grade students. After each parent interview, we asked to interview their children, leading to 18 children respondents. Because siblings were invited to interview, the children ranged from second grade (7 years old) to seventh grade (14 years old). Interviews with students lasted from 10 to 30 min, while those with parents and teachers lasted between 40 and 90 min.

We followed teachers and families from the time the closure was announced until they transitioned to their new locations, summing to a period of roughly 8 months. The semistructured interviews focused on connections to Franklin: how information about the closure was received; how routines were affected; what resistance was mounted, if any; and respondents' future plans. Although interviews were the primary method of data collection, the study also included ethnographic fieldwork. Deeds shadowed two families as they prepared for the new school year by picking up transcripts and purchasing new uniforms.

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She also joined the end-of-year field trip celebration at Franklin. Before and after four teacher interviews, Deeds assisted teachers as they packed up their classrooms for storage centers. While the larger study included both observations and interviews, this article relies heavily on the interview data as informed by those observations.

Deeds also attended Newark's school board meetings leading up to the closure, which served as a data point to understand the point of view of the district administration. We obtained data on the perspectives and framings of the district administrators through the handouts provided at board meetings, quotes in newspaper articles, blogs, online community forums, and documents on the Newark Public Schools' website. Although we did not conduct interviews with administrators, their public pronouncements at board meetings, in the press, and on visits to Franklin provided a relatively unchanging narrative about the decision to close the school. We use these data to interpret their assessments of value and legitimacy.

Our analytical strategy followed a role-order display (Miles & Huberman, 1994), in which we separated respondents according to their role as students, parents, teachers, and administrators. This allowed us to easily compare groups and discover variation in which aspects of the closure stood out as salient, their understanding of the reasons for closure, and how the closure affected their connection to the school. We then analyzed the variation in stakeholder responses using both inductive and deductive coding techniques. That is, we developed codes a priori based on the limited literature about closings that highlighted decreased social connections—representative codes include "worry," "information flow," and "relationships"—but we also generated new codes through the analysis of our data. We found this to be an especially important undertaking, given the wide space for theory building in this nascent area of research. In evaluating these codes, it became clear that a salient theme across our sample was that of "disruption." Students lamented the disruption of their friendships, teachers commented on the disruption in their careers, parents experienced disruption in their routines, and administrators expressed their intent to disrupt what they saw as a cycle of failure. For example, specific codes in line with disruption for parents covered themes, such as "school familiarity," "safety," "transportation," and "housing stability." As we developed, applied, and interpreted these codes, we began to understand them as indicative of what members of these groups valued about the school. That is, what was disrupted at the time of closure served as an indicator of what the respondent valued about Franklin before closure. These values were made especially apparent during this shock.

Our analysis examines the consequences of institutional pluralism at the level of organizational stakeholders. Much organizational research has failed

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to view actors and institutions concurrently, though recent research on inhabited institutions and institutional work conceptualizes institutions as places where actors interact and make meaning (Hallett, 2010; Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). We draw on this work, as well as research that details how actors make sense of organizational events (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005), as we analyze the consequences of school closure in an institutionally plural environment.

Findings: Organizational Failure in a Plural Environment

School District Administration

Using the data sources discussed above, we find that administrator narratives consistently placed value on state test scores, building utilization levels, and cost. They used these three commonly invoked criteria to determine a school's "fit" for closure (see Dean, 1982, for similar rhetoric in New York City). When justifying the plan for seven school closures at district board meetings, Superintendent Anderson frequently referenced the district's strategic plan. The plan (Newark Public Schools, 2012) outlined that closure could be a "good option" for schools with the following characteristics: (a) 70% or more of students reading below grade level, (b) little growth in student achievement, (c) underenrollment or poor building conditions, and (d) a high operating cost per pupil. As indicated by the plan, performance on state test scores was not the only criteria that determined closure. This troubled some Franklin teachers, who had grown accustomed to the district evaluating schools primarily on test performance and believed that Franklin's "safe-harbor" status should have prevented its closure. At one meeting, when asked why schools meeting safe-harbor standards would close whereas schools that consistently failed state tests would remain open, the superintendent explained that the state test scores were not the only and certainly not the best means of determining a school's worth, citing a "recipe" for a successful school as outlined in the district school closing plans. As explained in the plan and detailed at board meetings, cost and number of students were also important evaluative factors for district administrators. During an invited visit to a special-education classroom at Franklin, the superintendent explained that Franklin was closing because it "has low test scores and low enrollment" and "it costs half a million dollars just to turn on the lights in this building," reiterating an emphasis on cost, utilization, and performance in determining Franklin's value.

The administrators planned the closure without significant input from the other stakeholders at Franklin. During interviews, teachers and parents

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repeatedly reported that they had not spoken with district officials about the closure, and that they were not involved in planning the transition. In fact, before administrators visited Franklin, school staff, teachers, and parents only received information through hearsay, and they were often unsure how to distinguish fact from fiction. Teachers reported not being able to answer families' questions about closure, as they themselves felt left in the dark. Third-grade teacher Ms. Balinger recounted, "The couple days after [the principal] had our staff meeting the kids found out and they're like, 'Ms. Balinger, Our school's closing?' And I'm like . . ." Her voice trailed off into silence, illustrating what little information she had to share with children. "What do I say to that?" she continued, "I'm the teacher. I'm always supposed to have an answer."

Teachers learned about the closure in early February during an after-school meeting with the principal, who was told to keep the information quiet by his superiors and instructed the teachers to do the same. That evening, news of seven proposed school closures leaked through the press, and by the next morning many parents and children heard of the pending closure. Because information traveled via word of mouth, some parents thought the closure was a rumor. This continued until March, when the assistant superintendent visited the school to explain that Franklin would be closed. Teacher Mr. Stevens recalled the meeting as follows:

> So when the question was asked, well, why are you closing these seven schools? His response, which was clearly out of line, he said, "The real question is why shouldn't we be closing more schools? Because there are 50 schools in our district that meet the criteria for closing. So really the question we all should be asking isn't why are these seven schools being closed, but why are these 43 staying open?"

Similar to the superintendent's reasoning at board meetings, the assistant superintendent's response indicates that school closings were understood as an acceptable strategy for dealing with costly, low performing, and underutilized schools. His words also reveal the district's recognition of the multiple stakeholders involved in schools. Apparently, if the district were operating completely unilaterally, it would have closed dozens more schools in addition to the proposed seven. Although closing even one school might seem radical to the families in that school, in this case the district was actually taking a more gradual approach in light of diverse measures of value and legitimacy. As predicted by the theory, organizational change is often *less* radical in plural environments because of divergent interests and competing demands. The assistant superintendent proceeded to explain that Franklin families would be

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able to choose which among four schools their children would attend. These schools would serve Franklin students much better, he argued, since the schools were not "failing."[3]

For district administrators, Franklin was a failing organization because of its high building costs, low numbers of students, and mediocre performance on state tests. With the aim of disrupting this downward trend, closing Franklin was seen as a step in the right direction for the school and the district overall. While their rhetoric presented the closing of Franklin as "bold" and "aggressive," their reticence to close other such schools illustrates the constraints placed on stakeholders in institutionally plural environments. Despite constraints, the district wielded disproportionate power—due to its legislative, fiduciary, and administrative role—in realizing its definitions of organizational legitimacy, privileging its measures of value, and making the determination about failure. In making these evaluations, administrators emphasized their own interests: cost, efficiency, and standardized test scores. Administrators approached the school closures from their position as overseers of the district, and their position included little of the personal attachment to the school that other stakeholders felt. Ultimately, the evaluation metrics used to determine Franklin's failure and closure matched closely with the evaluations of district administrative staff and their definitions of organizational success in the school realm.

Teachers

While the administration viewed Franklin's closure as responding to organizational failure, closure came as a surprise for others who gave meaning to Franklin not as one school among many in a district, but as the organization they worked for every day. Teachers at Franklin Street School, who had previously thought Franklin was showing steady improvement, now feared losing their job as well as their community of pedagogical and social support systems.

As predicted by research on job security, a major theme that arose from teacher interviews was their experience of the closure as professionally demoralizing, disrupting their sense of job security and self-worth (Greenhalgh & Rosenblatt, 1984). Teachers at closing schools throughout the city were asked to upload a resume and reapply for teaching positions via an online platform. The district invited them to attend resume writing workshops and two small job fairs. Teachers who did not secure their own positions were placed in an "excess pool" to be later placed or used as long-term substitute teachers. Many at Franklin were senior teachers, some with more than 20 years of experience in the district, and they felt belittled by

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the reapplication process. One teacher felt so disrespected that she left the teaching profession, but all other interviewed teachers secured teaching positions, with some being called out of the excess pool days before school began. Junior high teacher Ms. Jeffries had the following opinion:

> You know, first off, sometimes it's not what you do but how you do it. How it was done was just totally wrong . . . and disturbing in the case of teachers. They *are* employees but it's not what you do, it's how you do it. They have no respect for us. I have to hear that my school is closing on the news. The fact that you create a job fair where we gotta find somebody that's gonna take us in is demoralizing and demeaning. And only 12 out of the 75 schools are [at the job fair] and most of the teachers are getting positions through who they know or what they can do for the principal. I just find that, you know, that isn't gonna work. But it's probably easier to blame us than try to fix something that's going on in the community.

Ms. Jeffries felt the process blamed and disrespected teachers. Many teachers shared the sentiment about being asked to reapply in what they felt was a demeaning manner. Some wanted to opt out of the reapplication process, but even those who secured jobs through their contacts had to go through the online system. When asked why he initially refused to reapply via the online system, Mr. Stevens shared:

> I felt like it was a demeaning, dehumanizing process to ask someone who, you know, has spent 20 years in the district and has only distinguished evaluations to show for it, to go sort of feeling like hat in hand asking for a position in another school. I mean I feel that way for all of my colleagues.

Mr. Stevens considered himself a highly rated professional who, along with fellow teachers, was mistreated in the closure. Like Ms. Jeffries, the closing process undermined his sense of value as a teacher.

Ms. Webber, a librarian, reacted to how the process labeled teachers at closing schools as "bad." She suggested how they were framing teachers "had more to do with politics than reality," going on to say:

> Nobody talks about all the good teachers in the district; they all talk about the few bad ones. If you have a bunch of kids, and one of your kids was acting up, are you going to be like, "Oh, all you kids are horrible, I can't take you anywhere"? No, you don't do that. You look at the child not behaving properly and ask them to change so everyone can be happy. You don't condemn all your children for what you perceive to be a problem with one. How many teachers do you think are bad? What number? As an administrator give me a number.

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> You've looked at data. You are making this decision based on facts and not on a feeling or on politics. So how many teachers are bad?

In her commentary, Ms. Webber asks for the district to make their values explicit. The official rationales for closing Franklin—cost, building utilization and test scores—do not implicate specific stakeholders in the schools, but teachers are implicated in the performance of their students and thus included in the district's determination of the organization's failure; in essence they are punished for the school's performance (Johnson, 2013). Ms. Webber clearly disagreed with this determination and rhetorically demanded specificity in place of the school district's abstractions, asking precisely by what measures the teachers in the school were failing. At the time of the interview, Ms. Webber had not been hired and was placed in the excess pool. She described the emotionally painful situation she found herself in as a result of this:

> It's frustrating as a teacher when you are doing your best and nobody is listening to you. Look what I did today. Look what I got this kid to do. Too bad, we are shutting you down. We are going to put you in a pool with everyone else and maybe they'll hire you, and maybe not. Thank God my car is paid off. Mortgage. I couldn't imagine. What does September mean for us? When do they tell you "You have a job?" Three days before school starts? Do they leave you suffering the whole summer? Nobody's picked you yet.

Ms. Webber was unnerved by the uncertainty and the lack of information provided to teachers. She wasn't sure when or if she would obtain a job. Like Ms. Jeffries, Mr. Stevens, and the majority of their colleagues, she felt disrespected and professionally devalued. She also felt like the grounds for closure disregarded the unique collective work of her colleagues. By her metrics, teachers at Franklin were performing beyond expectations, but the way in which the closure was handled made it clear that district officials disregarded these forms of success.

Another major theme that arose from teacher interviews was the loss of informal pedagogical practices that teachers had developed as a community that uniquely supported students. Throughout the years of getting to know each other as staff and learning their students' personalities, strengths, and weaknesses, teachers devised unconventional systems of support that depended on an interactive community. For example, because the teachers had close ties to one another, they could send an eighth-grade student especially below grade level in reading to a fourth-grade classroom to read to the younger students. By doing so, they acknowledged the reading deficiency of the older student, but provided a unique opportunity for him or her to feel

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more competent and confident with reading. These relationships and another unconventional, safety strategy were conveyed by Ms. Norton, who said:

> It's like a dysfunctional family rapport. One of our kids got jumped walking home from school the other day. He came to me like, "Ms. Norton I don't wanna ride the bus, I don't feel safe." So, I put him in my car and drove him home. It was Jeff and a new kid, and Jeff got jumped, like got the crap beat out of him, like didn't come to school for 2 days. And he's like "Ms. Norton, everyday these kids are going to be waiting for me now." So as a team of teachers in middle school between me, Ms. Popper, and Mr. Harris, we all transfer days for taking them home.

Teachers had an informal mentoring network for students. When a student faced a challenge at home or at school, they could turn to their teacher of choice for support. Fieldwork at the school documented these mentoring systems, as students frequently stayed in classrooms after school hours to talk to teachers about what was going on in their lives. Ms. Norton explained their system:

> Because we all have such different personalities as a staff, we all have different kids who flock to us. The ones who flock to me may not flock to her, and vice versa. And even with the older kids, some of mine go to Ms. Jeffries, some go to Ms. Poppers, some go to the basketball coach, some go to the gym teacher, some go to me. We all have our unstated mentoring.

Ms. Norton was not alone in the value she put on these relationships. Ms. Balinger agreed, "There's always some teacher in that building that the kids can go to, regardless." With the school closure, teachers lost their ability to rely on a mostly familiar group of students and staff to accomplish unconventional mentoring and academic support. Dee, Henkin, and Singleton (2006) found that such team-based and autonomous efforts by teachers and parents increased teachers' commitment to schools. Furthermore, the child-centered nature of the pedagogical and mentoring practices described above have been shown to be a central component of successful educational models for low-income and Black and Latino students (Lee, 1999; Morris, 1999; Scheurich, 1998). In this case, teachers' practical knowledge and provision of social support to students was disregarded when the district closed the school without input from the teachers.

In summary, like district leaders, teachers wanted students to perform well on state tests, but they also legitimated Franklin on its ability to foster a community among staff, provide mentorship to students, and uphold the professionalism of its employees. In this regard, teachers did not consider Franklin to be a failure at all. In fact, because Franklin earned "safe-harbor" status

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from modest growth on state test scores and served a particularly transient community from the local homeless shelters, they were quite proud of what they were able to accomplish inside the school and stunned to learn that the district had concluded otherwise. Teachers engaged in a meaning-making process much different than the administrators. They were not concerned with the financial solvency of the school, nor with the efficiency of running it, whereas those domains loomed large in how the district measured success (or, in this case, failure). As a result, the teachers perceived the closure process to be disrespectful and disruptive to their staff and student community. Moreover, the criteria that teachers deemed legitimate for evaluating success—student mentoring, innovative pedagogical techniques, and professional autonomy and recognition—were not captured in the data that the school district collected and reported. Therefore, we see a clear discordance in the interpretive process used to determine failure within this pluralistic context. Later, we will highlight how the district's disregard for what other stakeholders deem legitimate organizational functions might undermine the district's own goals for success.

Students

There is very little literature that presents the voices that are at the center of urban school reform policies—those of students. When asked how they felt about their school closing, children were worried about not being able to see or stay in touch with their friends and teachers. This most common response is illustrated in the selection of quotes below by some very expressive young people. We present these quotes as a group and without our interruption to capitalize on the power of repetition and the strength of this finding that young people experienced this school closure as a palpable loss.

> I hate transferring schools 'cause I thought if I have to transfer I have to make new friends so I'm like ah! I have a real trouble with meeting people sometimes. I been there [Franklin] for like . . . 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th, 5 years. I'm gonna be separated from a lot of my friends. So, yeah, I guess that would bother me, kinda get broken a little bit. 'Cause I'm not really gonna have anybody there to actually be like a real close-close connection with. It makes me feel like really sad because you have to like leave your friends. And some of the teachers that you knew for a couple of years, you won't see any more probably. Well, it's complicated. (Jeralyn, 13 years old, sixth grade).

> I was sad 'cause I knew that I would miss my friends and my teachers and I wasn't gonna see them again, so I was sad. Um, I don't know what to say . . . You start to like the school, but then it's like heart breaking to hear that the

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> school is shutting down because you're like "Oh! But I wanted to go to this school next year." It's the start of the year and you have no friends. And it's like heartbreaking. It's like having somebody leaving you for like the rest of your life. (Ashley, 13 years old, seventh grade)

> I feel weird 'cause I don't know nobody [at my new school] and I'm in a new area. So how it felt for me? Bad. I've been there [Franklin] forever, since second [grade]. I didn't want it to close because I've been there. So, and I had good things there and stuff. I wanted the school to stay 'cause I've been there forever and I don't want . . . I coulda, I woulda, I woulda stayed in Franklin. (Devon, 13 years old, sixth grade)

Nearly all of the students interviewed conveyed similar sentiments of loss, confusion, and uncertainty. Johnson (2013) explores school closures as a perverse "punishment" for schools and their staffs, but these quotes illustrate that students also experienced the closing as a kind of personal punishment. Children were concerned about breaking connections to those they had known for years as well as meeting new friends and teachers. They described how they wanted to remain at Franklin and how it would be difficult to start the next school year without a close friend. Their responses illustrate the emphasis that children placed on relationships, both to peers and to teachers, when valuing schools. For them, schools gained legitimacy if they were places that fostered positive relationships over time.

Student mobility, or transfers between schools, is often the result of residential mobility. Yet school closures bring school mobility without a change in residence for families. Indeed, many students had transferred to Franklin after their first school closed and were experiencing their second school closure without ever changing home addresses. Scholars have documented that switching schools results in declines in student performance and classroom participation (Gruman, Harachi, Abbott, Catalano, & Fleming, 2008), and leads to smaller and denser peer networks (South & Haynie, 2004; South, Haynie, & Bose, 2007). Schools that have a transitory population have to take extra measures to build community (Nakagawa, Stafford, Fisher, & Matthews, 2002). Many children who change schools have backgrounds with additional risk factors, such as behavioral or academic problems, though controlling for these factors does not eliminate the correlation between changing schools and dropping out (Gasper, DeLuca, & Estacion, 2011). These research findings suggest that concerns students felt over losing close relationships are warranted, as disrupting these relationships can have an important impact on their futures.

In a system of "neighborhood schools," children typically know their local schools and can imagine themselves progressing through elementary, junior

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high, and high school with their friends. Given the amount of instability in the lives of low-income urban youth, schools are a theoretically stable environment in which youth spend a large portion of their time. Although it might be convenient to assume that the politics of school closures is an adults-only matter, Mr. Stevens narrates what he witnessed at a community meeting and how he came to realize that children are unwitting participants.

> This fourth grader came on stage and said "I was going to Walnut Street School and Walnut Street closed and now you're closing Franklin. Are you going to close my next school, too?" [He said this] in a voice and in a manner that was sweet . . . and horrible. And this kid, you know, is just being snapped back and forth and then you don't have that stability. You know, you grow up knowing that this is the school that I go to, and then this is the next school that I go to. Then, all of a sudden, I'm being swept away. And I think these kids have enough instability in their lives as it is. Then you add what should be the most stabilizing variable in their lives, their public school, and you're going to sweep that away too. I think it's horrible.

Many teachers and parents shared Mr. Stevens' concern about creating more instability in the children's lives. Later in an interview, Michael, the fourth grader referenced above, recounted the question he had asked at the meeting:

> I asked him one of the questions and he never answered it. I asked does he want Franklin to close down? That's when he said all these different stuff I didn't understand so I never knew the answer. He said he doesn't know because there are a lot of schools closing down like Chester and Sampson and, that's it . . . I wanted to know if he wanted Franklin to close down. I wanted to know if he was going to try harder for it to close down or try to stop it.

Michael is going through his second school closure before entering fifth grade. Having heard from the assistant superintendent that 50 schools could close, he logically surmised that his future school may close too and questioned whether the superintendent's staff was trying to stop the school closures or was promoting them. Tellingly, 10-year-old Michael did not comprehend the logic of plural institutional environments, where various stakeholders can have divergent views regarding the organizations' legitimacy, its governance, procedures for change, and the determination of failure. Instead, Michael assumed that as leaders of the school system, the district administrators shared his values in stability and clarity about his future. When it seemed otherwise, he was perplexed and asked for clarification, but did not get an answer that he could understand.

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The general topic of uncertainty was omnipresent with students. “My friends are mad because they don’t know where they are going,” said 8-year-old John, continuing, “I’m mad about the school closing. I just want to know where I’m going.” Sixth-grader Marcus echoed John’s remarks. “It’s not good to have a school that’s closing that you went to for 5 or 6 years,” he says. “And, I want people to go to a school that they know the school will be not closing, and be open for a long time. Not one that has to close.” These students wanted a plan and school stability, they were upset with the uncertainty the closure brought.

For students, then, the school closure brought disruptions such as a loss of close friends and familiar teachers, the adjustments of meeting new peers and teachers, and a lower level of stability of in their educational path. In valuing relationships and knowing their educational future was stable, students legitimated the school based on social connections, familiarity, and stability. Because Franklin provided students this type of environment, they did not consider it to be a “bad” or failing school. “I don’t want to go to a bad school,” says Marcus, “I just want to go to a school where people are polite with me.” In other words, while children are cognizant at some level that schools are educational institutions, they put more value on their school’s broader function as an emotional environment (as represented by friends) where people are “polite.” For students, failure was not an outcome they agreed on or a conclusion they came to on their own. Rather, the labeling of Franklin as a failure was a process controlled by more powerful stakeholders, the district administrators, who did not emphasize relationship-based legitimacy when deciding to close the school. As such, students interpreted the failure as both an unnecessary event and an unwanted disruption.

Parents

Similar to their children, parents legitimated Franklin Street School based on stability, familiarity, and relationships, and they additionally valued the school for transportation convenience and safety. In their reaction to Franklin’s closure, parents worried about the added disruptions the closure would cause for their daily routines. Having children attend the same school year after year provided stability for families whose lives otherwise involved large-scale changes such as being relocated because of the closure of their public housing complex. After relocating, some families purposely kept their children enrolled in Franklin to make sure their children’s school lives maintained continuity (for a similar finding, see DeLuca & Rosenblatt, 2010).

Consider Ms. Reed, whose seventh grader, Kayla, attended Franklin Street since kindergarten. Ms. Reed was active in Franklin, attending field trips and

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stopping by the office daily to greet staff. In describing her attachment to Franklin, Ms. Reed talked about the closing of the housing project where she lived and how her family was happy to keep Kayla at Franklin through their housing relocation. Ms. Reed reported that after they moved they "didn't want to move schools because we didn't like change, especially with the kids." Maintaining enrollment in Franklin provided stability for the Reeds. While they moved to a new home they could maintain relationships with other families and teachers at Franklin. The Reeds were not the only family relocated from public housing with this arrangement. Ms. Reed described how other moved-away families would transport their children on buses to keep them at Franklin, and how the school closing was disrupting these attempts at continuity. In regards to the closing, she said, "I guess they figured it wasn't a community no more because the projects closed. You're figuring there's none, but [there's] still community there!" Ms. Reed's statement wrongly assumes that the district deemed "community" to be a legitimate measure of a school's performance. Nothing in the district's rhetoric or plan suggests that it values the affective bonds that families have for schools. While Ms. Reed partially understood that others could not see the community that existed at Franklin, she could not fathom that community was not at all a measure of value among school district leadership. As with Michael—the fourth-grade student in the previous section—Ms. Reed did not recognize the multiple meanings at play in plural institutional environments.

The situation was more upsetting for Ms. Garcia, a mother of three children at Franklin who put particular emphasis on the familiarity the school provided her. Like Ms. Reed, Ms. Garcia and her family previously lived in the housing complex next to the school where Ms. Garcia herself grew up. Ms. Garcia graduated from Franklin and despite having moved to a town outside of Newark, she drove her children to and from Franklin each day. She explained her level of comfort with the school:

> Franklin wasn't the best school, and I understand that they're closing and they have poor test scores, but it was a community school. It was a second home to us. It was there. But now that it's closing I don't want them to go to Newark. That's the way I feel. I was familiar with everyone there, I graduated from Franklin in '94, and I knew half the teachers there, and I felt comfortable because they knew me and my kids. Now I don't feel comfortable going someplace else that I don't know.

Ms. Garcia described a strong sense of community and familiarity with the school. Like the district officials, she recognized the school's poor performance on state test scores. Yet, she found comfort in her multigenerational

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familiarity with the building, teachers, and staff members. In her study of the school closure in Austin, Johnson similarly describes how narratives of failure "supplant[ed] the 'old' histories marked by the yearbooks, logos and school colors, trophy cases, generational lineages, and game-time celebrations" (2013, p. 238).

Ms. Garcia had very few ties to parents outside the school. However, she held quite strong ties to parents and teachers at Franklin. She frequented the field trips and volunteered in the school library, earning her the Franklin's 2012 parent community service award. When she heard the school was closing, Ms. Garcia was unsure where to enroll her children, debating between moving and taking a chance with a different Newark school. Because Ms. Garcia did not officially select a new school before the last day of school, the transcripts of her three elementary-aged children were automatically sent to two different Newark schools. Ultimately, her three children missed 6 weeks of the next school year as she figured out how to switch them into their appropriate local schools.

The closure also brought critical safety concerns for parents that surfaced through their considerations of new transportation routes. With the closure, children were no longer offered a school bus to and from school. New travel routes were particularly salient for parents who lived close enough to Franklin to walk and parents whose children were previously bussed. Ms. Baker, for example, did not want her three young children to walk across a large city street or walk near a highway. She explained, "I'm just concerned about them crossing the street. It's a big wide street. That's probably my only worry, going over there and crossing the street like that." As each of the schools offered to the Bakers involved such a walk, she planned to take the city bus with them to school each day. She says, "I'm gonna take them over on the bus and I'll walk back and then take my daughter to school over here. Better to be safe than sorry." Hence, transportation to the new schools affected the schedules of parents with young children. Ms. Darnoll, a mother of a seventh grader and two preschoolers, reluctantly enrolled her children in the only school within walking distance even though she perceived the school to have high levels of violence. She said, "I just am not understanding how my kids supposed to walk in and out of there. I don't want to send them there, but . . . I guess that's the last option." When asked where she would rather send them, she described a school 20 minutes away by public bus. She decided against this, reasoning, "I would be worried every day until they get there, if they got off the bus safely and all of that stuff so I didn't wanna do that." New transportation routes, then, restricted which schools parents sent their children to, as they attempted to avoid options perceived to be unsafe.

Working parents shared concerns that new routes to school would affect their ability to get to work. Ms. Greene explains, "You got like, myself and

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other people with young kids and single parent homes, we can't keep traveling. I can't take them someplace far to go to school and then make it to my job on time. It's awful." Ms. Greene's comments indicate that not only did the school closure disrupt travel patterns that were considered safe and known but also raised new concerns about getting to work on time.

Parents and teachers expressed an additional safety concern: crossing gang boundaries. Many Franklin families lived around gangs and in neighborhoods with high rates of violence, but many felt they knew how to navigate their areas (for a similar finding, see Rosenblatt & DeLuca, 2012). Moving children to schools further away, however, could require students to cross gang boundary lines, potentially causing turf-based fights. In Chicago, Hagan, Hirschfield, and Shedd (2002) traced the roots of a school shooting in one Chicago public school partially to the fact of drawing the school population from neighborhoods with different gangs. Parents in our study expressed concern that new tensions would arise as students crisscrossed historical gang boundaries, and that students from different territories would be mixed in the same school. A mother of a third grader and sixth grader, Ms. Browning, reasoned that the school closure and transfer would create unsafe conditions. As a former gang member, she knew that Franklin was in Crips territory and that the new school options were primarily in Bloods territory. Ms. Browning explained:

> There is high gang activities around where they might be going to school. The Bloods. Very high gang activity. The area where they are now, it's Crips. High gang activity. If my daughter, she wasn't going to school there last year but she is this year, now I have to worry about my daughter, even though she has nothing to do with gangs. I have to worry about her, and my own safety, when I pick her. She doesn't belong over there. I don't want her to go through that. I'm not saying it'll be a war, but it'll be confusing because there's always been tension. Even though we are blocks away from each other. You can't be on that side by yourself without getting jumped or somebody trying to rob you or somebody trying to shoot you. Even though she's not in a gang, it don't matter if you are bangin' or not, if you live in the area you are from that area and you are labeled. If they see you somewhere, they are like, she's from such and such, watch her.

Ms. Browning pointed out that crossing gang boundaries is unsafe both for children and for adults, regardless of whether they have any gang affiliation themselves. She worried that her past gang membership and current residence would affect how people treated her daughters.

In summary, stability, familiarity, and safety were first-order sources of legitimacy for parents, and Franklin had not failed them in these regards. With their concerns over travel distance and gang turfs, parents offer a unique,

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place-based interpretation of where school meaning and value originates. Place-based concerns were not salient considerations for other stakeholders, demonstrating that within plural environments interpretations of failure range from economic, to social, to place-based. When considering parents' perspectives, we again see the disparate ways of legitimizing schools and determining "good schools." While failure may have been an agreed upon outcome for administrators and enough to warrant closure, we see that parents disagreed with this conclusion.

Discussion and Conclusion

In disaggregating reactions to failure, we find that failure is not simply an organizational outcome, but an interpretive process that varies depending on the position of the evaluator. Through our analysis, we discovered that divergent responses to Franklin Street School's closure stem from the different legitimacies used to evaluate the school as "failing." We use pluralism to better understand how stakeholders vary in the types of legitimacy they afford Franklin. In this case, administrators framed the school closure as a reform that would cut costs, reduce inefficiencies in building utilization, and disrupt a cycle of low performance, all criteria that Dean (1982) similarly found as salient in the district-level discourse around school closings in New York City. While administrators determined Franklin had failed and should be closed, teachers, students, and parents did not reach the same conclusion. Teachers legitimated Franklin for supporting the education and mentoring of their students as well as validating their professional careers, children valued relationships and predictability, and parents thought schools should be a stable, safe, and convenient space for their family. Through our exploration of stakeholder disruptions, we learn that in plural environments, organizational failure is not an irrefutable outcome but rather a complex process that brings disruptions for stakeholders who disagree on the designation of failure. As Johnson (2013) found in Austin, for teachers and families, Franklin's closing represented "shock therapy" that felt like punishment, erased local histories, and disrupted their valued connections to the school.

We conclude that plural organizations do not clearly "fail" or "succeed." Rather, organizations become constructed by some stakeholders as failing. This is an especially important consideration when the criteria for organizational closure align with a more powerful constituency's conception of failure but not with less powerful groups. In our case, the district administrators held the power to set organizational legitimacy and therefore also the power to determine failure. Their management of the closure marginalized the voices and values of less powerful teachers, students, and parents whose valuations

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of the school were undermined. The district also effectively narrowed the organizational purposes of schools to focus on producing high test scores at low cost. When the closing process invalidates less powerful groups, closure can occasion unintended and potentially harmful disruptions.

Our analysis contributes to education research on both theoretical and empirical grounds. Empirically, this article explores a controversial yet understudied consequence of current education reform: school closures. As school failure and subsequent closure are events that have the potential to shape the lives of the school members both in the short and long term, it is crucial that we analyze how these events play out on the ground. This article does so, while bringing recent theoretical advances in organizational theory, those of institutional plurality, as a novel framework through which to examine the failure process. Pluralism affords an in-depth understanding as to how school events, like failure or closure, are experienced differently by school-related stakeholders. Drawing on the pluralism framework allows for school events to be interpreted differently by its constituents and advances the conceptualization of schools as consisting of multiple stakeholder groups with complex relationships between and among groups.

This analysis also has implications for organizational theory. The article improves our understanding of how institutional pluralism leads to a variety of interpretations around organizational failure. This is quite different from the way organizational theorists approach failure, which is typically conceived of as a discrete and ultimate event or outcome. This analysis, however, shows failure to be a contested evaluative process with variability in how people interpret failure depending on both the point of view of a particular stakeholder and how the event affects their personal life. This suggests that in the future, organizational scholars ought to look more carefully at variation among stakeholders, both within and outside organizations, as this variation can lead to different reactions to organizational events and multifaceted conceptions of failure. We argue that the concept of failure is not readily evident, and that we must explore the positions and meaning-making of organizational stakeholders.

These findings have additional implications for how scholars analyze school closures. For example, there are multiple ironies and contradictions in the effects of school closures that, if better recognized, might lead to different outcomes. One such contradiction surrounds student mobility. School districts report statistics on school mobility—or the percentage of students who stay in the same school from year to year—as a measure of performance, assuming that schools with stable school populations provide a better educational experience and that children who move less learn more. These assumptions are generally supported in the research, as we discussed earlier. However, school closures cause complete student mobility. Our interviews

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with both students and teachers highlight some of the precise ways student mobility undermines both student performance and school effectiveness—namely, the loss of peer connections, children's decreased trust and confidence in their school futures, and the dismantling of informal but tailored pedagogical strategies. Hence, investigating the experiences of less powerful stakeholders offers information to decision makers that shows that school closure as a method to manage fiscal constraints actually *runs contrary* to their own goal of reducing student mobility for the purpose of raising student and school performance. Another contradiction is that while there is wide agreement that parental involvement improves student outcomes, school closures decrease parental involvement by reducing familiarity with the teaching staff and increasing transportation costs and time. Yet another contradiction is that administrators know that high-quality professional teachers lead to positive student outcomes, yet it was clear in our interviews with teachers that there professional credentials and experience were severely devalued by district administrators. Demoralizing current or potential high-performing teachers is clearly not a way to further the goal of increasing their numbers in urban schools. Our findings offer information that can improve decision making by the more powerful of this plural organization's constituents, by clarifying how their own interests are undermined by not recognizing other processes, meanings, and evaluative criteria in schools.

Finally, if we assume that school closures will continue simply because of pronounced population decline—although this is an assumption that could be rejected by rejecting school closings as an unjust, market-based shock therapy (Fine, 2013; Johnson, 2013)—the narratives here present a compelling argument for greater consideration of unintended disruptions due to the school closing process. The nontransparent manner in which this school closure process was governed was more disruptive and potentially harmful than if all stakeholders, especially those who relied on the organization frequently, had been informed and included in the plans. Although not explored in this article, teachers and parents offered many ideas for a better school closing process. For example, participants suggested providing earlier and more detailed information that they could use to make plans. Teachers suggested that the district should have dispatched a dedicated representative to Franklin to provide individualized career placement support. A few parents offered the idea of a field trip to visit the potential receiving schools, meet the principals, and learn the uniform colors. Others suggested a summer transition program to help the families adjust to the staff and environments at their new schools.

To conclude, the current market-place approach to urban education reform signals a profound pessimism about the hope for a public educational system that demands excellence of every school. As plural organizations, schools are

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not driven by a clear and singular profit motive and beholden primarily to stockholders. In addition to being educational institutions, they are workplaces, emotional environments, social networks, nodes within families' transportation routes, and gang territories. The new model that emphasizes competition, choice, flexibility, and accountability—all within tight budgets—puts the onus on parents and students to choose their way into the best school options and on teachers and school administrators to conform to the always changing performance metrics or face closure. A main tenet of this market approach to public goods is that competition will eventually lead to the total failure of some schools, just as some commercial ventures are run out of business by competition from better firms. Commercial ventures, however, largely do not reside in pluralistic institutional environments and are not typically comprised of low-income, minority children. In the end, this competitive weeding out process is supposed to lead to improvement in the array of available schools. In their discussion of the future of cities in general, Grogan and Proscio take the philosophy to its Darwinian extreme, writing, "And finally, of course, it offers extinction to anyone unwilling to compete" (Grogan & Proscio, 2000, p. 215). The political and ethical question is if we are prepared to slate some children—most likely poor and minority ones—and the schools that educate them, like Franklin Street School, for extinction.

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Notes

1. All names are pseudonyms.
2. The citation for these data is omitted because it would allow for the specific identification of the school, which would violate human subjects' protection.
3. Despite this claim by the assistant superintendent, in the year before Franklin's closing (the most recent data that the district had available), three of the four receiving schools did not make Adequate Yearly Progress as defined by the federal No Child Left Behind guidelines and the fourth was barely over the threshold.

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