

Repurposed or Unpurposed?

The Evolution of Chicago Public School Buildings Closed in 2013

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**Abstract**

In 2013, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) closed 50 schools, leaving 44 school buildings to be sold and repurposed for new uses across the city. This study investigates the process of repurposing school buildings in Chicago and the extent to which these 44 buildings are still serving their respective communities. Eighteen interviews were conducted with academics, journalists, CPS personnel, community members affected by closed schools, and buyers of school buildings. The findings of this study show that chief among the factors that influence the success of repurposing these school buildings are: (1) differences in the vested interests of stakeholders in the closings and repurposing process, (2) inadequate communication regarding the process of closing and repurposing, and (3) obstacles to successful sales and repurposing. This study concludes that the influence of these factors has prevented the majority of the 44 school buildings closed in 2013 from being successfully repurposed.

**Introduction**

Chicago Public Schools (CPS) is a district composed of 644 schools serving 361,314 students as of the beginning of the 2018-2019 school year (Chicago Public Schools, 2019). Nearly 20 years ago, the enrollment of students in CPS was over 435,000. Student enrollment has dropped by 16.9% over the past two decades. This trend of declining enrollment, which mirrors the declining population of the city of Chicago, is expected to continue into the near future (Emmanuel, 2019).

In 2013, Mayor Rahm Emanuel led a movement to close 50 Chicago schools with plans to eventually repurpose the buildings. The rationale behind these closures was an attempt to efficiently use the space of a school and combat the “utilization crisis” faced by the district. A school was deemed efficient if it was operating within the range of 20% above or below its ideal

enrollment, which was calculated by setting an ideal number of students in a fourth-grade classroom at 30 (Weber, Farmer, & Donoghue, 2018, p. 10). Using this rationale, 50 schools were closed in 2013, which began a grand *shakeup*, a series of closings and/or reorganization, of school buildings, students, faculty, and resources across the city. Some schools and their respective buildings were closed indefinitely, while other schools, including school faculty, students, and school identity, were kept intact but moved into another school building of higher quality. Simultaneously, students and staff from closed schools were redistributed to other schools across the city. Therefore, this study will distinguish clearly between *schools*, defined as the students and staff that make up a school community, and *school buildings*, defined as the physical space that houses a school community. The process of the 2013 school closures in Chicago impacted 133 schools serving 47,000 students (Weber et al., 2018, p. 10). After the closure of the 50 schools and the subsequent shakeup, the district was left with 44 buildings to repurpose. These 44 buildings, which are largely clustered on the South and West Sides of the city, are depicted in **Figure 1**. Although some researchers have empirically validated this rationale of underutilization for the wave of school closures Chicago experienced in 2013 (Weber et al., 2018, p. 28), other researchers and educators question the rationale of underutilization and the formula used by the district to quantify this underutilization. These researchers cite the history of racism in the management of the education system in Chicago as a main reason for school closures (Ewing, 2018; Kunichoff, 2019).



**Figure 1.** After the school closures of 2013, 44 school buildings were left to repurpose. *Image created using Google Maps*

The term *repurposing* refers to the process of recycling school buildings for uses other than which they were initially designed. Chicago is not new to building repurposing or adaptive reuse. The fall of industrialism in the mid-twentieth century left the city with a multitude of vacant manufacturing buildings. Many of these buildings have since been repurposed into apartments and condominiums, some of which now comprise a large proportion of the most desirable real estate in the city. These apartment and condominium buildings are marked by suspended, hanging balconies protruding from the buildings’ otherwise flat facades. The success of this repurposing shows that it is not only possible to repurpose other industrial buildings, particularly on the South Side, but also to repurpose vacant school buildings across the city.

This investigation explores the actions and interactions between communities, school building buyers, CPS personnel, and third-party researchers and journalists regarding school closings in an attempt to understand how the repurposing of these buildings has and will affect the pre-existing communities. The goal of this investigation is to contribute to the understanding of the importance and use of institutional school buildings within a community. The majority of these buildings will be repurposed for uses that are not classic school buildings. There is a potential for the buildings to serve communities in ways that are not solely focused on formal education.

In this research, I am studying the repurposing of Chicago Public School buildings to find out if and how these school buildings will continue to serve their communities in order to further understand the evolving role of institutional buildings within Chicago neighborhoods. By formally researching the topic of school repurposing, this study has the potential to improve and inspire the process of school repurposing of the remaining vacant school buildings from the series of Chicago school closings that began in 2002 (Vevea, 2018).

## **Literature Review**

### Academic Scholarship

Most academic scholarship pertaining to school closings has focused on the effect of school closings on the child and family unit. This research is evident in various reports from the UChicago Consortium on School Research (UCSR). One such report is called *School Closings in Chicago: Understanding Families' Choices and Constraints for New School Enrollment* (De La Torre, Gordon, Moore, & Cowhy, 2015). This report investigates the types of schools that children moved to after their original schools closed and the motivations families had for choosing those schools. This investigation found that 66% of students enrolled in their

designated welcoming school while the other 34% of students had other varied reasons for choosing another school (De La Torre, Gordon, Moore, & Cowhy, 2015). Paramount among these reasons deviating from their pre-prescribed welcoming school was proximity of new schools to families' homes and communities. Another report from the UCSR, titled *School Closings in Chicago: Staff and Student Experiences and Academic Outcomes*, found that the process of school closings, subsequent school movements, and the general transition process, or shakeup, was poorly executed (Gordon et al., 2018). The report also cited a period of mourning after school closures, which was caused by the severing of a "long-standing social connection" between families and schools (Gordon et al., 2018). This UCSR report begins to look at the broader effects of school closures on neighborhood communities, but remains largely student, staff, and family-centric. It is understandable that the effect of school closings on students and families has been the primary concern of researchers. The most apparent and essential function of a school building is to promote learning and academic success. However, the school closings of 2013 have had unexpected consequences across the city. A common expectation was that a decline in academic success of students would be the most detrimental consequence of the school closures, and this has indeed been the case for some students who enrolled in schools of lower quality than their previous school (De La Torre & Gwynne, 2009). However, there have been other broader consequences of the closings, chiefly the extended vacancy of school buildings across the South and West Sides of Chicago (Belsha, 2017).

Schools do not just affect students and families; they also play a larger role in the community. Various studies have shown that schools have relationships with their communities, often citing the connection between high or improved academic achievement and strong community ties. Reports such as the research synthesis by Anne Henderson and Karen Mapp

show that strong relationships between schools and families help families to better support the learning of children at school and offer access to social services and community agencies (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Researchers such as David Sobel have found that close ties between schools and the community improve community development, vitality, and environment (Sobel, 2008, p. 6). Researcher Karen Osterman found that students exhibit better behavior and experience more academic success if they feel like a true member of their school community (Osterman, 2000). Each of these pieces of research speaks to the important connection that schools have with their community. According to the most recent research report out of the UCSR, communities were damaged by the school closings, and CPS administration did not do enough to mitigate the damage (Gordon et al., 2018).

### Journalism and the News

Most information regarding the broader effects of the 2013 CPS school closings can be found in news articles and publications through social movements rather than academic scholarship. *The Chicago Reporter* has a more comprehensive inventory of schools closed, for sale, and sold than the CPS website (Belsha & Kiefer, 2017). *The Chicago Reporter* has a series of articles titled *Empty Schools, Empty Promises* that have chronicled the evolving process of school repurposing in Chicago. Some of the articles in this compilation include “Private schools, poised to grow in Illinois, move into closed Chicago public schools,” (Belsha, 2018), “Closed schools could remain vacant without public subsidy,” (Belsha, 2017c), “Behind sale of closed schools, a legacy of segregation,” (Belsha, 2017a), among others. Additionally, the *Chicago Tribune* has reported on the school sales, offering interviews with residents of the communities in which these schools are located (Perez, 2017; Perez, 2018). The *Tribune* has also been reporting extensively on Chicago’s upcoming school closures in Englewood and the

neighborhood's subsequent backlash (Perez, 2018). These reports have been supplemented by interactive maps created by both *The Chicago Tribune* and *The Chicago Reporter* (Epton, Richards, & Courtney, 2013; Belsha & Kiefer, 2017). Additionally, the Chicago-based radio station WBEZ, has conducted an in-depth analysis of shakeups caused by a "generation of school closings" beginning in 2002. WBEZ delved deeply into the data on school closures, concluding that approximately 200 schools and 70,160 students have been affected by the school shakeups (Lutton, Vevea, Karp, Cardona-Maguigad & McGee, 2018). Information on the state of Chicago schools closed in 2013 have also been compiled and publicized by social organizations and nonprofits such as Creative Grounds, which was founded by Paola Aguirre. This organization briefly repurposed a school called Overton Elementary as an art gallery in an attempt to bring attention to the state of and potential reuses for closed schools (Creative Grounds, 2017). CPS has failed to publish any account of the success stories of school repurposing or to create an online map of their properties.

### Urbanism

Some urbanism-focused literature including the work of Clarence Perry, Jane Jacobs, the *Charter of the New Urbanism*, and Sharon Haar focus on the purpose of schools within a neighborhood. According to Clarence Perry's seminal model of neighborhood design called *The Neighborhood Unit*, the elementary school should be the central feature of a neighborhood and should serve all residents within a half-mile radius (Perry, 1921). Perry also states that the elementary school should serve as a community center, offering services to all residents of the neighborhood. Perry explains that within a neighborhood containing a successful community center and thus elementary school a "vigorous local consciousness would be bound to arise and find expression in all sorts of agreeable and useful face-to-face associations," (Perry, 1921).

Perry believes that elementary schools foster community culture and involvement. Although this is a prescriptive account of what an elementary school should be, it offers insightful background information on the rationale behind the construction of elementary schools. In her seminal work, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs delves deeply into urban planning of the 1950s, criticizing it and proposing alternative theories of urbanism that she believes would result in healthier, more useful cities. In particular, Jacobs explores the presence of parks and sidewalks among other forms of public space within the city. She argues that thoughtful city planning could result in a more useful and welcoming city (Jacobs, 1961). Although this is not an empirically grounded piece of research, this theory could be applied to schools as physical spaces that should serve the community to the best of its abilities. In Chapter 16 of the *Charter of the New Urbanism*, Elizabeth Moule makes the argument that by centering a neighborhood around the school, families are better able work as a cohesive unit. If all spaces that serve our daily needs are centered around the children and schools, then commutes will be reduced and time for “caring for one another,” work, and personal growth will increase (as cited in Talen, 2013, p. 157). This argument relates very closely to that of Clarence Perry (1929). These theories will be applied to my investigation of modern neighborhood schools and assess to what extent they are truly the center of the neighborhood as prescribed. Other more recent work such as that of Sharon Haar has examined the role that school play within cities. Haar characterizes schools as “vital community anchors” (Haar, 2003, p. 8) that do not only provide students with education in the most conventional sense, but also “education for today’s students about neighborhood and community development” (Haar, 2003, p. 9). Haar’s (2003) work is focused on the construction of schools, but I contend that this understanding about the role of schools as community anchors should also be considered in the deconstruction, or closing and repurposing, of schools. These

urbanists provide a grounding for my research as I analyze schools as institutional buildings that should be serving their communities to the best of their abilities.

### School Closings and Repurposing

The most comprehensive analysis of the crucial role schools play in their communities is Eve Ewing's ethnographic research on the 2013 Chicago school closings in the Bronzeville community as conveyed in her book, *Ghosts in the Schoolyard*. In her book, Ewing (2018) focuses on the role racism played in the 2013 school closing. Although she does not focus greatly on the physical buildings themselves, Ewing (2018) explores the role that these buildings played in the community and the pain inflicted by the closings. Ewing (2018) focuses on the term "institutional mourning," which she defines as "the social and emotional experience undergone by individuals and communities facing the loss of a shared institution they are affiliated with... especially when those individuals or communities occupy a socially marginalized status that amplifies their reliance on the institution or its significance in their lives," (p. 127). In the conclusion of her book, Ewing (2018) explicitly questions the fate of the physical spaces of the school buildings closed in 2013, writing "What should we do with the vacant school buildings across the city that have yet to be repurposed?" (p. 161). With this research, I hope to address this question posed by Ewing. School repurposing should aim to heal some of the damage caused by the closures.

Research regarding the repurposing of school building is limited on a national level; however, some research has been conducted on mass school closings in Philadelphia. The Pew Charitable Trusts (2013) conducted a study on the factors impacting the sale of school buildings in Philadelphia. The study identified size and location, state and local policies, marketing, and public engagement as the foremost factors contributing to the repurposing and sale of former

school buildings (Dowdall & Warner, 2013). Architect Lilane Wong (2017) contributes to the discussion of adaptive reuses across sectors, asserting that past identities and experiences of the building, or “ghosts” as she calls them, will inevitably influence the repurposing process (p. 147). Ariel H. Bierbaum (2018) contributes to the study of school closing and repurposing in Philadelphia by analyzing the “divergent narratives of school closures and building dispositions” and connects these narratives to the “material stakes of urban change” (p. 11). Bierbaum (2018) identifies two groups of opposing narratives, one focused on quantification and business efficiency and the other focused on the relational meaning of school buildings, specifically on the “educational, social, and political infrastructure in neighborhoods,” (p. 11). These pieces of research contribute to our understanding of the role of schools and school buildings in cities across the United States.

At this juncture, the existence of academic research on school repurposing and sale processes in Chicago does not exist. When closing schools in 2013, Mayor Rahm Emanuel commissioned an Advisory Committee for School Repurposing and Community Development, which produced a framework for school repurposing (Advisory Committee for School Repurposing and Community Development, 2014). However, these guidelines have not been heeded. Community input was cited as one of the most important elements in the repurposing of these buildings, but negotiations have not been as transparent and community-focused as was once promised. Initially, city aldermen, local representatives across wards in Chicago, were tasked with hosting community meetings and soliciting bids on buildings within their wards. However, this aldermanic-driven process failed, and CPS took the responsibility out of the hands of aldermen at the beginning of 2017, nearly four years after the 2013 closures. Using a lens of

urbanism, this research intends to focus academic research and refocus citywide action regarding school repurposing on the communities of the CPS schools closed in 2013.

## Methods

From October 2018 to January 2019, 18 interviews were conducted with various stakeholders in the 2013 Chicago Public School closings. These stakeholders were classified into three distinct groups **A)** individuals with knowledge of the process of school closings and repurposing, including CPS personnel, academics, and journalists **B)** community members directly affected by the closures and **C)** buyers of the school buildings. Recorded interviews were conducted either in person or over the phone and lasted approximately 30 minutes. The format of these interviews was semi-structured. Guiding questions for each interview classification (**A, B & C**) can be found in **Figure 2**. Each interview followed a trajectory that began with the background and identification of each individual with the 2013 school closures, then moved on to their opinions and experiences throughout the closures and repurposing process and concluded with their thoughts on how the process of school closures and repurposing could be improved in the future.

### Guiding Questions for Class A Interviews: CPS Personnel, Academics, and Journalists

- How do you identify yourself in relation to the process of school closings and repurposing?
- Can you tell me a bit about your professional journey?
- Will you allow me to use your name and professional title in my research? If not, may I use your professional title and credentials? Otherwise you may choose to remain completely anonymous and I will employ a pseudonym.
- To what extent were school repurposing efforts included in the deliberation process of school closings in 2013? Should it be part of the conversation?
- What do you believe is preventing some buildings from being sold and repurposed?
- Do you anticipate more school closures now that the Moratorium is over?
- How could the process of school closings and repurposing be done differently or “better” in the future?

**Guiding Questions for Class B Interviews: Community Members Affected by Closures**

- How do you identify yourself in relation to the process of school closures and repurposing?
- Will you allow me to use your name and professional title in my research? If not, may I use your professional title and credentials? Otherwise you may choose to remain completely anonymous and I will employ a pseudonym.
- To what extent is the process of a school closure systematized (a predictable pattern was followed throughout)?
- To what extent was community input taken into consideration throughout the closing of your school? How about during the repurposing process?
- To what extent were school repurposing efforts included in the deliberation process of school closings in 2013?
- Were you able to make your voice heard during the process of school closures and the subsequent sales of the buildings? How?
- Do you agree or disagree with the closing of your school?
- How has the closing of your neighborhood school affected your community?
- What hopes do you have for the future of the building?
- What needs does your community have?
- Do you think the current identity of the school building serves any of these needs?
- Does the community at large have any access to school building? What are the general sentiments of the community about the repurposed building?
- What are your views on future school closings?
- How could the process of school closings and repurposing be done differently or “better” in the future?

**Guiding Questions for Class C Interviews: Buyers of School Buildings**

- How do you identify yourself in relation to the process of school closures and repurposing?
- Will you allow me to use your name and professional title in my research? If not, may I use your professional title and credentials? Otherwise you may choose to remain completely anonymous and I will employ a pseudonym.
- Can you walk me through the process you went through to purchase the building?
- Why did you purchase this building?
- To what extent did you engage with the community prior to purchasing this building?
- What has community’s reaction been to the repurposed building?
- What role does your building serve in the community?
- How does your school engage with the community?
- Who has access to this newly repurposed building?
- How does the building improve the neighborhood?

- How could the process of school closings and repurposing be done differently or “better” in the future?

**Figure 2.** Guiding questions for all classes of interviews

The objective of the interviews and the study at large was to understand the role the closed school buildings play within their neighborhoods. The interaction and communication between the stakeholders involved in the school closures and subsequent repurposing was of particular interest. These interactions and communication shed light on the agency of the stakeholders in the evolution of the school buildings and the way in which the building served or continues to serve its neighborhood.

In terms of sampling, the study began with convenience sampling and then progressed into snowball sampling. The first interviews were conducted with academics out of the UChicago Consortium on School Research and other connections made through the University of Chicago. These interviewees then provided introductions to education journalists and activists across the Chicagoland area who then provided connections to more school and neighborhood-specific interlocutors. This second wave of interviewees included education journalists and activists assisted in the selection of case study schools and neighborhoods. Case study schools were selected to be representative of all three sides of the city of Chicago: North, South, and West. Additionally, the case study schools were selected because—with the exception of one school that is currently under construction—they are buildings that have been successfully and completely repurposed. As evidenced by the WBEZ report, only five of the school buildings closed in 2013 that were sold to private entities have been successfully and completely repurposed (Lutton et al., 2018). Additionally, the case study school buildings were chosen such that each building is serving a different role within their neighborhood. The community areas and schools selected for the investigation are: Austin (Key Elementary & Leland Elementary),

Douglas (Drake Elementary), East Garfield Park (Dodge Elementary), and Uptown (Stewart Elementary). A full list of school buildings from the 2013 closures and their current use statuses can be found in **Figure 3** and a list of all 18 interlocutors and their relationship to the school closures is provided in **Figure 4**.

School	Address	Community Area	School Status	School Buyer
Armstrong, Louis	5345 W Congress Pkwy	Austin	vacant, sale did not close	Rivers of Living Waters Ministries
Attucks	5055 S State St	Grand Boulevard	vacant, transferred to city	KMIS Developers
Bontemps	1241 W 58th St	West Englewood	vacant, sale did not close	Illinois Facilities Fund (IFF)
Buckingham	9207 S Phillips Ave	Calumet Heights	vacant, for sale	
Burnham	1903 E 96th St	South Deering	vacant, for sale	
Calhoun	2833 W Adams St	East Garfield Park	vacant, sale pending	Heartland Housing
Canter	4959 S Blackstone Ave	Kenwood	repurposed by district	Kenwood Academy Academic Center
Courtenay	1726 W Berteau Ave	Lake View	sold	German School of Chicago
Dett	2306 W Maypole Ave	Near West Side	vacant, sale did not close	IFF
Dodge	2651 W Washington Blvd	East Garfield Park	repurposed by district	Chicago Public Schools Garfield Park Administrative Office
Drake	2722 S King Dr	Douglas	sold	Local 134 of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers
DuPrey/Von Humboldt	2620 W Hirsch St	West Town	vacant, sold	IFF Von Humbolt
Earle	6121 S	West Englewood	vacant, sale pending	Gorman & Company

REPURPOSED OR UNPURPOSED?

	Hermitage Ave			
Emmet	5500 W Madison St	Austin	vacant, sold	Westside Health Authority
Fiske	6145 S Ingleside Ave	Woodlawn	vacant, transferred to city	City of Chicago
Goldblatt	4257 W Adams St	West Garfield Park	vacant, for sale	
Henson	1326 S Avers Ave	North Lawndale	vacant, sale pending	Single Room Housing Assistance Corporation
Key	517 N Parkside Ave	Austin	under construction, sold	The Field School
King	740 S Campbell Ave	Near West Side	vacant, sold	Lex Polk LLC on behalf of Laura L. Llamedo
Kohn	10414 S State St	Roseland	vacant, for sale	
Lafayette	2714 W Augusta Blvd	West Town	repurposed by district	Chicago High School for the Arts
Leland	5221 W Congress Pkwy	Austin	sold	Kidz Express
Marconi	230 N Kolmar Ave	West Garfield Park	sold	United for Better Living, Camelot EXCEL Academy West Garfield Park
Mays	838 W Marquette Rd	Englewood	vacant, sold	Shepherd's Hope
Melody	412 S Keeler Ave	West Garfield Park	vacant, sale pending	Single Room Housing Assistance Corporation
Morgan	8407 S Kerfoot Ave	Auburn Gresham	vacant, sale pending	Amalgamated Transit Union Local 241
Near North	739 N Ada St	West Town	under construction, sold	Svigos Asset Management
Overton	221 E 49th St	Grand Boulevard	vacant, sold	Washington Park

REPURPOSED OR UNPURPOSED?

				Development Group
Owens	12450 S State St	West Pullman	repurposed by district	renamed Jesse Owens Elementary
Paderewski	2221 S Lawndale Ave	South Lawndale	vacant, sale did not close	MR Properties LLC
Parkman	245 W 51st St	Fuller Park	vacant, for sale	
Peabody	1444 W Augusta Blvd	West Town	vacant, sold	Svigos Asset Management
Pershing	3113 S Rhodes Ave	Douglas	repurposed by district	Pershing Magnet
Pope	1852 S Albany Ave	North Lawndale	under construction, repurposed	Chicago Housing Authority
Ross	6059 S Wabash Ave	Washington Park	vacant, transferred to city	City of Chicago
Songhai	11725 S Perry Ave	West Pullman	vacant, sale pending	Songhai, LLC on behalf of VLV Development & Financial Services Corp.
Stewart	4525 N Kenmore Ave	Uptown	repurposed	Morningside Equity Group--Stewart School Apartments
Trumbull	5200 N Ashland Ave	Edgewater	repurposed	Svigos Asset Management --> Chicago Waldorf School
Wadsworth	6420 S University Ave	Woodlawn	vacant, transferred to city	
Ward, Laura S.	410 N Monticello Ave	Humboldt Park	vacant, sold	Turnstone Development
Wentworth	6950 S Sangamon St	Englewood	vacant, sale did not close	MR Properties LLC
West Pullman	11941 S Parnell Ave	West Pullman	vacant, sold but now for sale through new entity	Cook County Land Bank on behalf of Celadon Holdings LLC

Woods	6206 S Racine Ave	West Englewood	vacant, sale did not close	Greater Southwest Development Corporation
Yale	7025 S Princeton Ave	Greater Grand Crossing	vacant, sale pending	Climate Leadership Innovation Center, LLC, on behalf of VLV Development & Financial Services Corp

**Figure 3.** School buildings closed in 2013

<b>Name</b>	<b>Relationship to School Buildings</b>	<b>Interview Classification</b>
Kalyn Belsha	Education Journalist at the Chicago Reporter	A
Eve Ewing	Education Researcher, Former CPS Teacher	A
Molly Gordon	Education Researcher, Urban Education Institute	A
Mary Smith*	Education Researcher, Urban Education Institute	A
Paola Aguirre	Founder of Creative Grounds, an initiative to open dialogue about the repurposing of Chicago schools closed in 2013	A
Shannon Jaax	Director of the Kansas City Public School Repurposing Initiative	A
Rachel Weber	Professor of Urban Planning and Policy at the University of Illinois at Chicago	A
Henry Bienen	CPS Board Member in 2013	A
Andrea Zopp	CPS Board Member in 2013	A
Mike Tomas	Executive Director of the Garfield Park Community Council	B
Analisa Trofimuk	Journalist at <i>Austin Talks</i>	B
Suzanne McBride	Found of Austin news outlet, <i>Austin Talks</i>	B
Dwayne Truss	Runner up for 29th Alderman, member of Austin Community Action Council	B

Anna Solomon*	Activist with Northside Action for Justice, CPS Teacher	B
Michael Neal	Pastor at Glorious Light Church, Volunteer at Drake Elementary	C
Jeremy Mann	Principal of The Field School, Buyer of Key Elementary	C
Alison Soloway	Marketing Director for Stewart School Lofts	C
Ted Fitzgibbons	President of the IBEW Local 134, Buyer of Drake Elementary	C

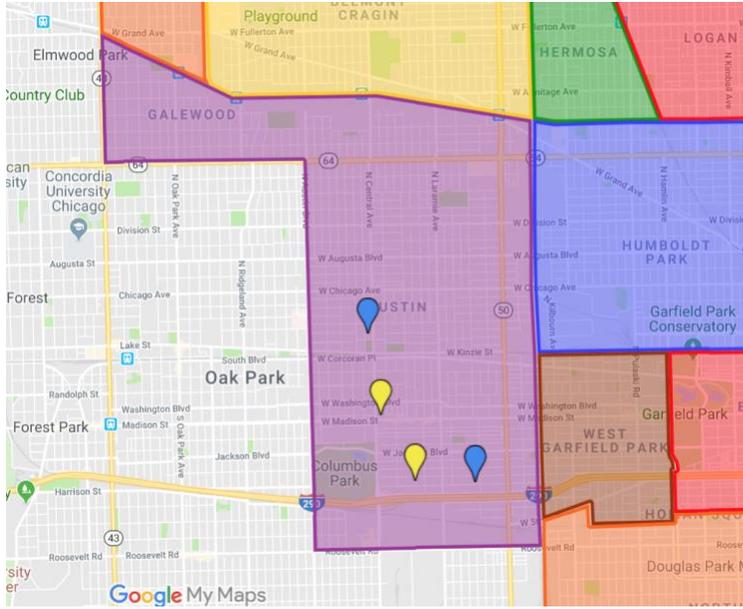
**Figure 4.** Interlocutors and their relationships to the process of school closures and repurposing  
 \*Indicates pseudonym

Following the conclusion of interviews, the electronic recordings of the interviews were transcribed using Temi Software and these transcriptions were then quality-checked and edited by hand. The analysis of data collected through the interviews was rooted in grounded theory, a theory developed by Glaser and Strauss in 1967, which aims to “generate theory from data” (Walter, 2013, p. 327) through an inductive process. Memos were written throughout the interview process and the coding process began with open coding by hand. This open coding was used to address the similarities, differences, and themes across interviews. The process of open coding was followed by axial coding, or “the process by which the codes that are developed are more vigorously specified and elaborated” (Walters, 2013, p. 328). The process of axial coding was followed by selective coding, or the process by which all categories identified during axial coding are unified into a core category to determine and organize the findings of the study (Walters, 2013, p. 328).

**Case Studies**

**Austin** is one of the largest community areas of Chicago and is the westernmost neighborhood of the city. The city of Chicago annexed Austin in 1899. Austin is composed of four

neighborhoods: Galewood, The Island, North Austin, and South Austin. Demographically, the Austin community was almost completely White until white flight ensued in the 1960s. Currently, Austin has a population of about 97,611 and is approximately 82% black. The median household income of Austin is approximately \$31,920. The Austin community has been greatly affected by the 2013 school closures. Four school buildings were closed in Austin, including Emmet Elementary, Key Elementary, Leland Elementary, and Louis Armstrong Elementary. Of these four buildings, only one has been completely and successfully repurposed. The former Leland Elementary school building has been repurposed as Kidz Express (**Figure 6**), an afterschool program associated with the Boys and Girls Club of America. Key Elementary (**Figure 7**) has been purchased by the Field School, a private Christian grade school, and is under construction. Both Emmet Elementary (**Figure 8**) and Louis Armstrong Elementary buildings remain vacant. The former Emmet Elementary school building was successfully sold to Westside Health Authority, but the nonprofit has yet to solidify its plan for the use of the building. The sale of the former Louis Armstrong Elementary school building to Rivers of Water Living Ministries did not close.



**Figure 5.** Of the four school buildings closed in Austin, two were spotlighted in this study: Leland Elementary (Southeastern blue marker) and Key Elementary (Northern blue marker). *Image created using Google Maps.*



**Figure 6.** Kidz Express, which has successfully repurposed the former Leland Elementary school building

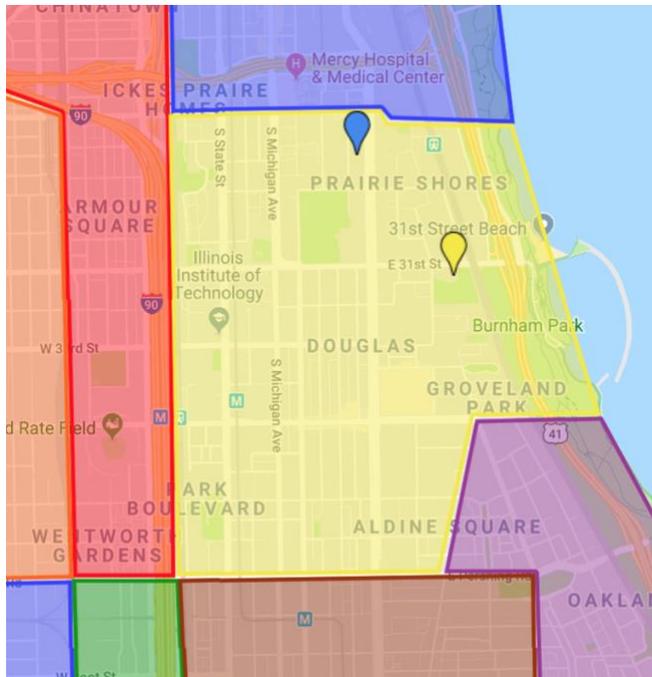


**Figure 7.** Key Elementary, which is under construction and will eventually house a private school called The Field School



**Figure 8.** Emmet Elementary school building, which was bought by Westside Health Authority, but remains vacant

**Douglas** is community area of Chicago located on the South Side of the city and encompasses three neighborhoods: Bronzeville, Groveland Park, and Prairie Shores. The community area is named for the Illinois politician, Stephen A. Douglas and experienced significant redevelopment in the early twentieth century. The current population of Douglas is 20,559 and is 70% Black. The median household income of the community area is \$29,398. As spotlighted in Eve Ewing's (2018) book, *Ghosts in the Schoolyard*, Bronzeville is a community that has been plagued by school closures and shakeups for over a decade. In the 2013 closings, Pershing and Drake Elementary school buildings were closed. The former Pershing Elementary building was repurposed as Pershing Magnet school and the former Drake Elementary school building has been repurposed as a union hall for the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 134 (**Figure 10**).



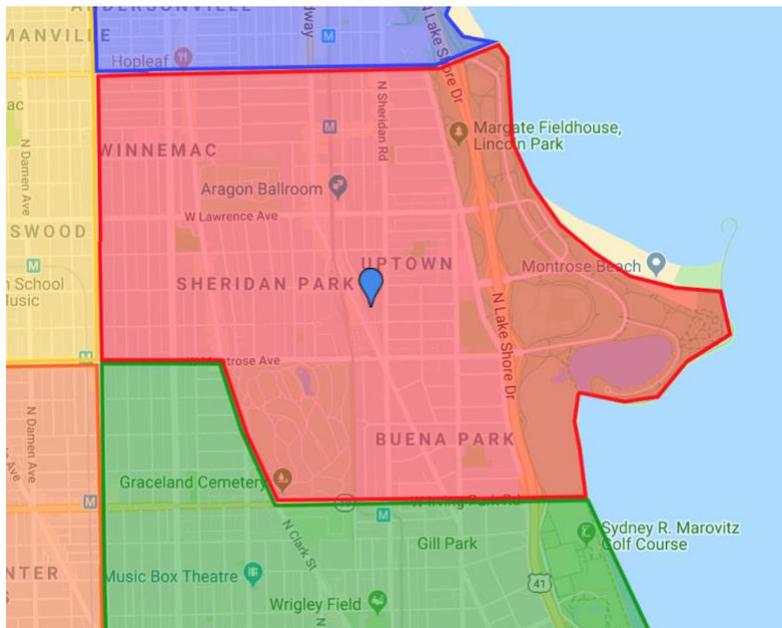
**Figure 9.** Of the two school buildings closed in Douglas, one was spotlighted in this study: Drake Elementary (blue marker). *Image created using Google Maps.*



**Figure 10.** IBEW Local 134, which has successfully repurposed the former Drake Elementary school building

**Uptown** is a neighborhood of Chicago located on the North Side of the city and encompasses the neighborhoods of Buena Park, Sheridan Park, Argyle Street, and Margate Park. The population of Uptown is 56,296 and the median income is \$45,644. Demographically, Uptown is racially diverse with 54% white residents. Uptown has historically been an entertainment center of Chicago. Over the last century, Uptown has been home to a number of immigrant groups but more recently has been experiencing gentrification. Uptown only had one school, Stewart Elementary, close in 2013. The building was quickly repurposed as Stewart School Lofts.

**(Figure 12).**

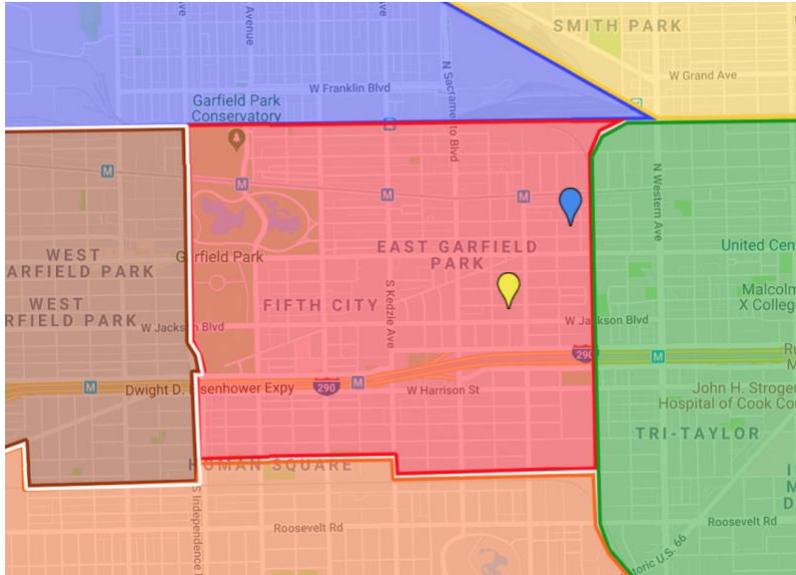


**Figure 11.** The sole school building closed in Uptown in 2013, Drake Elementary, was spotlighted in this study. *Image created using Google Maps.*



**Figure 12.** Stewart School Lofts, which repurposed the former Stewart Elementary school building

**East Garfield Park** is a community area located on the West Side of Chicago. The population of East Garfield Park is 20,225 and is 90% Black. The median household income of East Garfield Park is \$24,000. East Garfield Park is home to the Garfield Park Conservatory, one of the largest conservatories in the United States. Two school buildings were closed in this community area during the 2013 closings. Calhoun Elementary was closed and the sale of the building to Heartland Housing is pending, which means that the building is still vacant. Dodge Elementary was also closed and immediately repurposed as administrative offices for the school district (**Figure 14**).



**Figure 13.** Of the two school buildings closed in East Garfield Park in 2013, one was spotlighted in this study: Dodge Elementary (blue marker). *Image created using Google Maps.*



**Figure 14.** Garfield Park Offices of Chicago Public Schools, which repurposed the former Dodge Elementary school building.

*All data cited in the preceding case studies was taken from the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) from the year 2016, the most recent year from which data is available.*

**Findings**

Initially, the purpose of this study was to determine to what extent school buildings closed in 2013 were still serving their communities. This question is still relevant to a handful of successfully repurposed schools. However, 33 of these shuttered buildings remain vacant. The shuttered buildings remain vacant for a number of reasons. Some initial sales of the buildings did not close, and some sales are still pending. Some buildings are under construction because the majority of the buildings closed in 2013 were in grave disrepair. Other buildings were never sold in the first place. A handful of buildings were transferred to the city of Chicago and are not for sale but remain vacant. Additionally, a number of buildings have been successfully sold, but remain vacant for unknown reasons. The chart below summarizes the outcomes of these 33 vacant school buildings from the 2013 closings (**Figure 15**).

<b>Reason for Vacancy</b>	<b>Number of Buildings</b>
Building still for sale	6
Sale pending/did not close	13
Under construction	3
Building transferred to city	4
Sold, but vacant for unknown reason	7

**Figure 15.** Distribution of reasons for vacancy of the 33 school buildings from the 2013 school closures.

Due to the persistent issue of vacancy, this study also investigated the process of school sales and repurposing, specifically the obstacles present in these processes. Throughout the 18 interviews conducted, three main themes emerged: **(1)** differences in the vested interests of stakeholders in the closings and repurposing process, **(2)** inadequate communication regarding the process of closing and repurposing, and **(3)** obstacles to successful sales and repurposing.

(1) Differences in the interests of stakeholders

This report has identified a significant number of different stakeholders in the process of school closures and repurposing. These people have vested interests that differ greatly given their background and professional role. In some cases, these interests are in direct opposition to one another. Different groups of people have different goals and expectations for the process of school closures and repurposing; therefore, they evaluate the success of the repurposing differently. Overwhelmingly, school buyers and CPS personnel distance themselves from the closures, while community members still feel a great sense of closeness to the school itself as well as the school building that was left behind by the closures.

The stark contrast in the interests of stakeholders is evident in the opinions of interviewees such as Anna Solomon\*, an activist with Northside Action for Justice and CPS Teacher, and Henry Bienen, a former member of the Chicago School Board who served throughout the school closings in 2013. In her work with the Northside Action for Justice, Solomon\* works to prevent school closures all together. When asked how she thought the process of school closures and repurposing could be improved, she responded, stating, “That supposes that it is okay to close schools, so I can’t say that I would endorse that point of view.” Conversely, Henry Bienen’s interest throughout the school closings was cutting costs so that the district could operate more efficiently. In an attempt to address under enrollment and cut the extraneous costs caused by this under enrollment, Bienen said that “We should have closed another 30 [schools]” in addition to the 50 that were closed in 2013. With respect to the process of school sales and repurposing after the closings, Bienen stated, “We knew a lot of those buildings could not be easily sold,” and added that the district’s first strategy was to “Sell where you could.” For Solomon\*, her vested interest is keeping schools open. In contrast, the district

board's interest was in closing buildings to decrease the operating costs of the district. With respect to school repurposing, Solomon\* criticized the process for its lack of genuine community involvement, while Bienen was surprised that any of the school buildings had been repurposed. In these two cases, there is little to no overlap in the interests of different stakeholders.

In very few cases, some buyers of schools displayed overlapping interests with other stakeholders. In some cases, the interests of the school board and city, the community, and the building buyers converged, which resulted in a successful repurposing of the school building. One example of the convergence of interests is the repurposing of the Drake Elementary school building in Bronzeville. Ted Fitzgibbons, the President of the IBEW Local 134, explained the series of events that led to the successful repurposing of the school building. Fitzgibbons stated that Mayor Rahm Emanuel played an instrumental role in the repurposing by encouraging the Local 134 to move from the West Loop to the former Drake Elementary school building in Bronzeville. According to Fitzgibbons, Mayor Emanuel wanted SC Johnson to move its North American Regional Headquarters to Chicago, and Mayor Emanuel thought that the Local 134's former location in the West Loop would be a good location for SC Johnson. Mayor Emanuel then helped orchestrate the move of the Local 134 into a former school building. As Fitzgibbons stated, the move and sale of their former building and the purchase of the former Drake building were completed "through negotiations with his [Mayor Emanuel's] real estate team." The assistance and encouragement that the Local 134 received from the Mayor, and thus the city and school board, is evidence of a convergence of interests of different stakeholders in the process of school closings and repurposing. Additionally, Fitzgibbons explained the community's support for the Local 134, citing the shared space the Local 134 offers in their Terry Allen Community Center, which hosts community wide events such as senior mixers and soccer practice, as well as

the electrical program partnership the Local 134 has with nearby Dunbar High School. This partnership offers students the opportunity to take electrical classes for all four years of high school, which guarantees students a place in an electrical workers apprenticeship program upon graduation. The repurposing of the Drake Elementary school building is an excellent, but rare example of the convergence of interests of different stakeholders.

(2) Inadequate communication

The greatest complaint that community members, education researchers, journalists, and some school buyers had about the process of school closures and subsequent repurposing was the inadequate communication and overall lack of transparency of the school district. Many stakeholders cite lack of communication and community engagement as the reason for unsuccessful repurposing and the persistence of school vacancies across the city. For example, Dwyane Truss, the runner-up in the most recent election for alderman of the 29th Ward and member of the Austin Community Action Council, stated that the process of school repurposing went “poorly because CPS did not have the intention to work with the community. The buildings just sit empty and deteriorated.” Even in cases of successfully repurposed school buildings such as the repurposing of Leland into Kidz Express, Truss stressed the district’s lack of transparency and communication. In conclusion, Truss stated that, “The process should always be open and transparent,” and he believes that some of the sales of former school buildings in Austin were not conducted in this manner. Pastor Michael Neal, who leases a former school building from CPS and is familiar with school closures on the South Side, echoed Truss’s sentiments, explaining, “People can cherry pick which buildings they want to sell and which ones they don’t. From my understanding, it’s still not totally clear when or if they’re going to sell what.” Given that 33 of the 44 buildings put up for sale following the wave of school closures in 2013 remain vacant,

community members are calling for a clearer and more transparent process of school building sales and repurposing.

Education researchers and journalists agree with community members that the process of sales and repurposing remain unclear six years after the closures. In her criticism of the process of school closures in Chicago, education researcher Eve Ewing advocates for a “genuine inquiry-based process wherein people who are impacted by a proposed policy have the chance to think through, talk through, research, and debate all the potential implications of that policy.” This proposal could be extended from the process of school closures to the process of school building sales and repurposing. Ewing described the process of repurposing as a “mess” and that “it was never clear what the process was.” For a limited amount of time, the process of bid solicitation and repurposing was in the hands of the city alderman, but Ewing described the work of the alderman in actually hosting community meetings and actively soliciting bids as “inconsistent.” When asked about her experience and recollection of the creation of bid solicitation processes, former CPS Board member Andrea Zopp said that her greatest memory of the aftermath of the school closures was about “who would own the process.” Zopp stated that the issue was resolved after she left the board; however, to this day there is still a lack of clarity around the process of bid solicitation.

District personnel from other regions affected by mass school closures such as Shannon Jaax, the director of the Kansas City Public Schools (KCPS) Repurposing Initiative, offer alternative examples of successful communication on the part of the school district and a more straightforward process for school sales and repurposing. In Kansas City, Jaax spearheaded the repurposing process. She began by leading a three-month period of investigation in which she and a team of researchers learned all they could about the buildings to be put up for sale,

compiling information on the school buildings and the needs of respective communities. After this initial period of research, Jaax and her team focused on “pushing out,” or communicating, the information they collected by holding open houses for all of their 30 “surplus buildings.” Jaax stated that throughout the process, one of the foremost goals of her team is to “make sure we were very transparent informing the community.” In addition to engaging the community in the initial stages of the process of school sales and repurposing, Jaax and her team also had clear marketing strategies for sales and set clear expectations and deadlines for bid solicitation. KCPS also has a robust online inventory of its school buildings and the statuses of these buildings. CPS has no such online inventory. Districts such as KCPS demonstrate that clear communication and engagement between the district and the community is possible and ultimately successful.

### **(3) Obstacles to sales and repurposing**

Throughout this investigation, the existence of a number of obstacles to the sales and repurposing of school buildings emerged. These obstacles are both physical and structural. The physical obstacles include the state of buildings, the cost of renovating the buildings, and the scale of the closings. The main structural obstacle associated with the process of school building sales and repurposing are the politics surrounding education in Chicago.

The primary physical obstacles to the sale and repurposing of school buildings in Chicago are the scale of the closures, the location of buildings, the state of the buildings, and the cost of building repairs. It is important to remember that the district closed school buildings that were in the greatest state of disrepair, in some cases transferring the students and staff from a building in disrepair to a building in better condition. Many different types of stakeholders identified the same obstacles. For instance, Henry Bienen stated that “Many people underestimate the cost of repairing these buildings,” alluding to the deterioration of the buildings

at the time of purchase. Jeremy Mann, principal of the Field School and buyer of the former Key school building in Austin, Ted Fitzgibbons, who purchased Drake Elementary, and Paola Aguirre, an architect and school closure activist in Chicago, all noted the seriousness and expense of the repairs to their buildings. Mann estimates that the renovations to the Key building will cost approximately \$5-6 million and the renovation of the former Drake Elementary School building cost the IBEW Local 134 about \$25 million. The IBEW has completed its construction and the Field School is on track to stay within their budget for renovations. However, many school buyers across the city have not been as successful. Aguirre works closely with the buyer of Overton Elementary and said that progress on repurposing has been stalled due to a lack of funding. Other stakeholders have questioned the scale of the closing. Education report Kalyn Belsha stated, “The sheer number of buildings that there were [in the closings] made it more difficult to sell any one of them.” The administrative legwork required for closing and selling 50 schools and 44 school buildings is immense, and Belsha and other studies on the 2013 closings allude to the lack of preparation and planning they had undergone to prepare for the large scale of the closings (Gordon et al., 2018, p. 3).

In addition to these physical obstacles, there were also a number of structural obstacles to the sale and repurposing of school building after the 2013 wave of closings, many of which were tied to politics in Chicago. School buyer, Jeremy Mann, noted how “politically charged” the bidding process was, specifically referencing the tension in the room among the various bidding parties. Researcher Eve Ewing called the bidding process for school buildings an “arcane labyrinth,” which is difficult for many to navigate, especially for those without great social capital in the political world of Chicago. She noted that having a helping hand from the mayor throughout the bidding process, just as the Local 134 had in the process of purchasing Drake

Elementary, is immensely helpful, but also clearly an unfair advantage over other bidders. Not all eligible buyers or potentially successful repurposing plans have the backing and encouragement of political players in Chicago such as the mayor. The process and lack of clarity in the bidding process, which is often directly influenced by politicians, is a significant structural barrier to the sale of school buildings.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this investigation evolved from investigating how successfully repurposed school buildings serve their respective neighborhoods to include an investigation of how buildings are successfully repurposed in the first place. The evolution of the purpose of this study is significant because it was necessitated by the very limited number of successful school building repurposing efforts across the city. Of the 44 buildings closed in 2013, 33 of those buildings remain vacant six year after their closing. There is a great sense of urgency around understanding why these buildings remain vacant. Through a series of 18 interviews with various stakeholders in the process of school repurposing, three major themes in the process of school repurposing emerged: **(1)** differences in the interests of stakeholders in the process, **(2)** inadequate communication, and **(3)** physical and structural obstacles within the process. Further investigations into the process of school repurposing should include an even greater range of stakeholders, such as current CPS board members, city aldermen who have vacant buildings in their district, and a greater number of school community members.

This investigation is part of a series of contemporaneous investigations into school vacancies across the city of Chicago. As previously noted, the great majority of these investigations have been conducted by news outlets such as the *Chicago Reporter*, WBEZ, and the *Chicago Tribune*. This investigation is one of the first formal academic studies of the process

of school repurposing in Chicago. Although many education research organizations have focused on the impact school closings have on the academic outcomes of students affected by the closures, the community level impacts are also of great importance and should be investigated with similar rigor. This investigation begins to scratch the surface of the current process of school repurposing in Chicago, and it is unique in that it includes the perspectives of a wide range of stakeholders in the process of school repurposing. Future investigations should maintain the diversity of opinions and positions presented in this study but should be conducted at a greater scale and should cover all school buildings closed in 2013 instead of focusing on a specific selection of case studies.

### **Conclusion**

Overarchingly, vacant school buildings in Chicago impede city growth and progress. It is imperative that Chicago thinks critically about how to address these vacancies before it is faced with future school closures. This critical consideration and thought about the future of so many buildings across the city requires the convergence and collaboration of a large and diverse group of people including community members, CPS personnel, school buyers, city planners, and researchers, among others.

The findings of this study call for interventions to address factors impeding the repurposing of schools, especially in light of an impending change in the government and educational politics of Chicago with the election of a new mayor and the end of the Moratorium on school closings in 2018. For instance, the findings of this study suggest that the facilitation of a platform for interaction and conversation among the various stakeholders in the process of school closings—including community members, CPS personnel, school building buyers, among others—would be helpful in furthering the process of repurposing. Likewise, it is of vital

importance that CPS clarify their processes of school closing, building sales, and subsequent repurposing. For example, CPS could create a consistently updated online database or homepage with an inventory of their vacant properties and steps to be taken to purchase those buildings. This model is consistent with that of Kansas City Public Schools, a district which has undergone similar waves of mass school closings. Interventions such as these would likely mitigate some of the other physical and structural obstacles related to school repurposing efforts. If there is clear communication and transparent policies about school repurposing, then it is likely that buildings would be sold more quickly without becoming dilapidated. Likewise, politics and business acumen would likely not play as great a role in the process because there would be a clear set of steps that any potential buyer could easily navigate and follow. Additionally, we recommend that school closures should not come in such overwhelmingly large waves. A smaller scale of closings would allow the district to take greater care with the sale and repurposing of each individual building. Each of these recommendations is informed by the data and findings of this study with the aim of improving the process of school repurposing in the city of Chicago.

This research has shown that there are a great number of ways to successfully repurpose school buildings across the city, especially vacant school buildings within the case study community areas. Within the case studies addressed in this study, there remain three vacant school buildings that have great potential to serve their communities: Emmet Elementary (Austin), Louis Armstrong Elementary (Austin), and Calhoun Elementary (East Garfield Park). The commercial success of Stewart School Lofts has shown that housing is a viable option for school building repurposing, especially large buildings. Many of the neighborhoods most affected by school closures such as Austin or East Garfield Park would benefit from the presence of greater affordable housing options. The Emmet Elementary school building in Austin would

be particularly well-suited to affordable housing due to its large size; it has the potential to host many housing units. The Calhoun Elementary building could also serve its community well if converted to affordable housing units. The success of Leland's repurposing as Kidz Express has shown the potential that many buildings have to serve as locations for after school programs and community centers. Louis Armstrong Elementary, which is also located in Austin, has a very similar layout to Leland's building and could serve well as a community center due to its small size and location near a major park in Austin. These recommendations—both broader policy recommendations and building-specific recommendations—aim to improve and inspire the process of school repurposing and therefore facilitate the growth and progress of neighborhoods across Chicago. The process of school repurposing should be purposeful, well-communicated, and accessible rather than haphazard, unclear, and inaccessible.

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