

“It’s not about *the* community; it’s about *our* community.”
Gentrification, schooling and the ongoing legacy of disinvestment in inner N.E. Portland

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Submitted by Leanne C. Serbulo Ph.D.
Portland State University
Portland, OR, United States
serbulo@pdx.edu

Abstract:

Gentrification is an uneven process which results in widely varied lived experiences among residents. Most gentrification research focuses on the daily lives of the gentry in these areas and often regards long-term non-displaced residents solely in terms of their conflicts with the gentry, attitudes towards redevelopment or the effects of displacement on their community (Smith, 1996, Freeman, 2006, Slater, 2006, Watt, 2007). Yet, long-term residents who have managed to resist displacement continue work, live, play and raise their children in these neighborhoods, often participating in institutions and networks that are completely separate from the gentry. Schools are one such institution. The gentry use multiple strategies to avoid sending their children to the public schools in their neighborhoods, however, there is little written about the schooling experiences of long-term residents who remain in gentrified communities (De Sena, 2006, Stillman, 2012) residents, whose descendants comprise a significant portion of students attending neighborhood public schools in gentrified inner North/Northeast Portland neighborhoods. Through participant observation, an examination of school district archival data, and informal interviews, I trace the recent history of schools in this community. When speaking about these neighborhood public schools, parents note the “long history of disinvestment by the [Portland Public Schools] district.” Over the past decade, inner North/Northeast Portland schools have been characterized by low capture rates of neighborhood children (more than half of all neighborhood students transfer out, a process facilitated by the school district), repeated school closures and reconfigurations, below average test scores, and a reputation as “problem institutions.” These schools remain sites of ongoing institutional disinvestment seemingly unaffected by the wave of revitalization engulfing the neighborhoods in which they exist. For the children and families who attend these neighborhood schools, their educational lived experiences echo the pre-gentrification community life, calling into question the assumption that the arrival of white, middle class newcomers signals an expansion of the opportunities for all residents living within a particular neighborhood. Although, the school district, and *the* neighborhood—the gentrified community—fail to invest in these schools, nevertheless, they remain an important institution in lives of many long-term residents providing a strong sense of neighborhood identity and a means to maintain important community networks and bonds.

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By Leanne Serbulo

Last year, my son’s math teacher announced that his two sixth-grade classes would have a homework competition. Each class would come-up with a team name and get points for the number of homework assignments they turned-in. The winners would earn a pizza party. One night, my son came home and excitedly announced that his class had voted on their team name. “What did you choose?” I asked.

“D.G.K.” he smiled.

“What does that stand for?”

“Dirty ghetto kids.” This name had been the class’s overwhelming favorite. Although disturbed on many levels, I was left puzzled by the fact that kids chose this name despite the recent changes that had occurred in our neighborhood. It had once been Portland’s ghetto, but gentrification had begun in the 1990s and accelerated after 2000. Over the past ten years, home values have risen to surpass city averages, and in 2008, Business Week proclaimed that neighborhood real estate was a good investment:

Alberta Street in Northeast Portland has developed during the past decade into a neighborhood of thriving stores, coffeehouses and artist studios. It’s a funky place with a co-op grocery store and bicycles parked outside the stores and restaurants. Home prices aren’t cheap here, but they’re lower than in Portland’s swanky neighborhoods (Genovese, 2008)

How could students attending schools in neighborhood on par with other “swanky” areas call themselves ghetto? When I was growing-up, a ghetto was a place. When did ghetto start being used as an adjective? In their study of the discursive redlining in San Francisco’s Fillmore District, Jones and Jackson (2012, 107) observed that the use of the word ghetto shifted “from a type of place to a quality of people” as middle and upper income housing began to be developed

in low-income areas. Could our neighborhood be swanky but our schools ghetto? What does this mean for my children and others who attend them?

This study focuses on the experiences of the families and children who attend inner Northeast Portland schools (known within Portland Public Schools as the Jefferson cluster). These schools are predominately populated by low-income, African-American and longtime resident families, groups whose experiences of gentrification are often overlooked in the literature. Most gentrification research has focused on the characteristics and daily lives of the gentry and only examined longtime non-displaced residents in relationship to their conflicts with the gentry or attitudes towards redevelopment (Smith, 1996, Freeman, 2006, Slater, 2006, Watt, 2008). Examining the history of these schools during the acceleration of gentrification within the neighborhood will shed light on the everyday lives of longtime residents in gentrified areas.

Gentrification and Schools

Schools have received little attention in the gentrification literature. Initial research found that young, childless singles and couples led the first-wave of gentrification in many neighborhoods, causing LeGates and Hartman (1986) to conclude that the poor reputations of inner city schools would prompt these initial gentrifiers to leave the city once they began having children. This theory proved wrong. In their study of three London neighborhoods, Butler and Robson (2001) discovered that a local elementary school had become the social hub for gentry families in one community in the advanced stages of redevelopment.

A small literature, sparked by the rise of HOPE VI mixed-income developments many of which included new school facilities, emerged around questions of how schools contribute to revitalization. Pauline Lipman (Lipman & Haines, 2007, 2008, 2011) has written extensively

about Chicago's Renaissance 2010 plan which calls for a large number of the city's schools mainly in low-income, African-American communities to be closed and redeveloped as mixed-income institutions. Lipman sees this plan as part of a larger overall strategy of gentrification. Joseph and Feldman (2009) take a less critical view of a mixed-income school creation, but nevertheless conclude that although the establishment of a high performing mixed-income school may initially benefit low-income children within a community, over the long-term, it could end-up displacing them as more middle class families are drawn to the community because of its school.

While these studies look at the role schools play in gentrification, a parallel body of work examines the consumption side of the argument focusing on the educational choices gentry parents make. Schools in gentrifying neighborhoods, when mentioned at all in the literature, are usually characterized as dangerous, problematic places where "nobody sends their kids." (Martin, 2008, Billingham, McDonough Kinelberg, 2013, p. 99). Gentry parents, put-off by neighborhood schools that predominately serve lower-income and often African American or Latino residents, use a number of strategies to game school choice systems to find whiter, more middle-class educational settings for their children often located outside of their neighborhood. DeSena (2006) identifies the methods used by gentry parents in Brooklyn to enroll their children in other neighborhood schools, gifted and talented, language immersion or alternative programs. In some revitalized communities, a particular neighborhood school, often one which houses a special program, becomes a destination school for gentry parents and their children. Butler, Hammet and Ramsden (2013) discuss how gentry parents in an East London neighborhood fight to ensure spots for their children in a neighborhood school that became desirable after it was rebuilt. Similar experiences were observed in Boston where parents in a neighborhood in

advanced stages of gentrification congregate in a chosen neighborhood school (Billingham, McDonough, & Kinelberg, 2013). Jennifer Burns Stillman's (2012) book about gentrification and schools in New York City examines how groups of gentry parents "tip-in" to neighborhood schools. She describes a process much like gentrification itself where "innovators" enroll their children in a neighborhood school then reach-out to recruit a critical mass of gentry parents. Stillman (2012, 150), shockingly uncritical of this process, encourages districts to take promote tipping-in "despite the risk that improved schools might accelerate the gentrification process" and hurt longtime residents who she claims are the "intended beneficiaries" of gentry school take-overs.

In this vein of literature, gentry parents are characterized as activists in their children's education spending time volunteering, fund-raising and organizing other gentry parents within their schools (DeSena, 2006, Stillman, 2012, Billingham, McDonough Kinelberg, 2013). These parents shape schools to reflect their tastes and preferences making schools desirable to other gentry and in the process, displacing lower-income neighborhood children (Butler, Hammet and Ramsden, 2013). While these studies acknowledge how non-gentry families are threatened with displacement when the gentry take over their schools, there has been almost no examination of the educational experiences of longtime residents in gentrifying neighborhoods, especially in schools where gentry parents have opted-out. Cahill's (2007) participatory research project with young women of color on the Lower East Side of New York revealed the disinvestments and displacements these women experienced in their schools, housing, work and neighborhoods. While housing and culture were examined on a neighborhood level, the young women spoke of disinvestments in education on a more general scale in terms of budget cuts and declining state funding. No study has examined the schools where "nobody sends their kids" which are

populated by working-class, low-income, longtime, often African-American and Latino residents in gentrifying communities.

This study examines the recent history of Jefferson cluster schools located in the rapidly gentrifying neighborhoods of inner Northeast Portland. I tell the story of these schools starting from 1998 when displacement from gentrification started to become a concern through early 2013. This case study was constructed by examining school board meeting minutes, district enrollment data and planning documents and newspaper accounts, as well as through participant observation in public meetings and protests. It is also informed by my own lived experiences as a parent of two children who attend Jefferson cluster schools and my informal day-to-day interactions with other parents, students and teachers in these schools from 2003 until 2013.

I begin with a brief introduction to the neighborhoods of inner Northeast Portland, the Portland Public School system and Jefferson cluster schools. I then recount the recent history of Jefferson cluster schools beginning with the reconstitution of Humboldt Elementary in 1998 and ending with the Enrollment Balancing process in 2013. I go on to analyze how district policies towards these schools and families' experiences within them are a form of ongoing disinvestment despite the revitalization of the neighborhoods around them. I conclude with an examination of the implications the story of Jefferson cluster families has on our understanding of the gentrification process and how longtime residents experience it.

Neighborhood Context

Oregon's original constitution contained an exclusion clause, not overturned until 1926, that made it illegal for blacks to settle in the state and for those already here to own property (Gibson, 2007). Consequently, Oregon and Portland, its largest city, have always been

predominately white places. In the early twentieth century, a small community of black residents called Portland home; many employed as train porters initially settled near the railroad station downtown then later were steered across the river by real estate interests to the working-class inner Northeast neighborhoods. As blacks moved into these neighborhoods, whites fled; this process accelerating as the city's African-American population boomed with World War II shipyard production.

As happened in black neighborhoods throughout the United States, inner northeast Portland was redlined by banks resulting in low homeownership rates and the emergence of predatory home lending practices (Gibson, 2007). Disinvestment by banks, real estate agents, slumlords and the city led to housing decline and abandonment. During 1986, banks made only four loans to the King neighborhood, home to more than 5900 people (Gibson & Serbulo, 2007). By 1988, King and the adjacent Boise neighborhood contained over 300 abandoned homes, representing 26% of the city's boarded-up housing on just 1% of its land. By 1990, homes in inner Northeast Portland were worth just 67% of the city median.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the city launched a series of programs targeting inner northeast Portland including a vacant and abandoned housing task force, code enforcement, community policing, non-profit housing development, and an anti-drug initiative (Gibson & Serbulo, 2007). The city's sudden interest in the problem of disinvestment and housing decline sent a signal to private sector investors.

By the mid 1990s, signs of gentrification were visible, and its impacts were already being felt by longtime residents. Between 1990 and 1995, the taxable value of property within inner Northeast Portland doubled, leaving some homeowners stressed by larger tax bills (Barnett & Suo, 1996, Mayer, 1996). From the mid 1980s until the mid 1990s, the city invested \$145

million in the programming aimed at developing jobs and housing in the area, signaling a tremendous growth in private investment. Between 1990 and 1995, total property values in inner Northeast neighborhoods doubled. By the end of the decade, Starbucks had opened its first coffee shop and forty-five percent of renters reported that their rents had increased (Oliver, 2001).

By 2000, property values rose to 87% of the city median, and blacks living in inner northeast neighborhoods owned 36% fewer homes (Gibson, 2007). Throughout the 2000s, gentrification took off completely transforming the neighborhoods' commercial areas, housing stock and demographics. In 2010, just 22% of the residents of inner Northeast neighborhoods were black; twenty years earlier these communities had been 60-70% black (Gibson, 2007, Census 2010). Property values were now 110% of the city average.

Even though neighborhood demographics had shifted dramatically, the population within the community's schools stayed remarkably the same. In 1998, Jefferson High School was 62% black and 18% white (PPS Enrollment Summaries, 1998). By 2012, despite the high rates of racial turnover and displacement that had occurred within inner northeast neighborhoods, Jefferson High Schools remained 59% black and 17% white (PPS Enrollment Summaries, 2012). In 2001, 65% of the high school's students were low-income; by 2011, that percentage had grown to 76% (PPS Free and Reduced Price Meal Counts, 2001, PPS Enrollment Summaries, 2011).

Portland Public Schools

In Portland Public Schools, as in many large, urban districts, students are assigned to schools based upon their address, but they are allowed to transfer to other neighborhood schools,

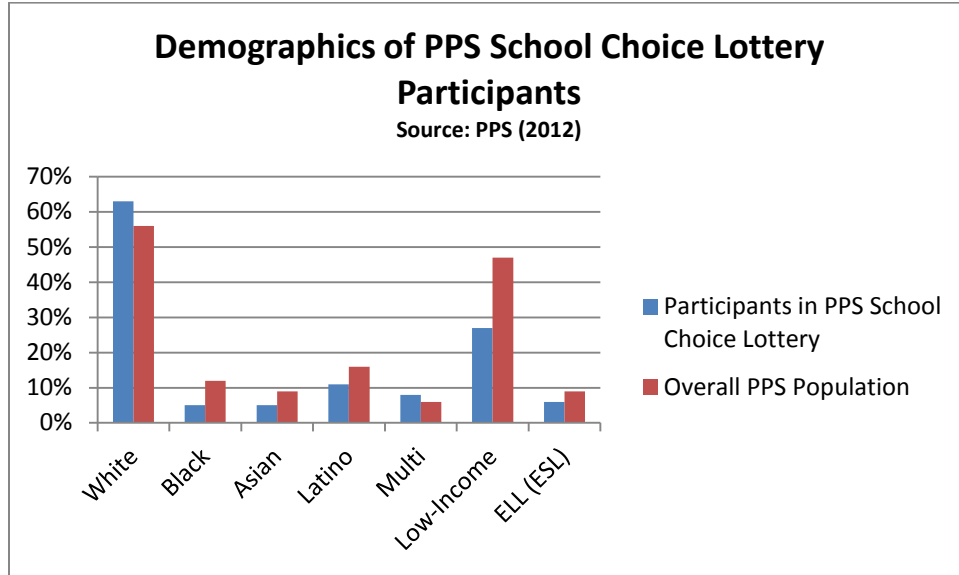
focus-option (magnet programs), alternative, or charter schools. The district serves over 47,000 students; 63% attend their assigned neighborhood school, 16% transfer to another neighborhood school, 14% attend a focus-option/alternative program, 3% attend a charter school and the remainder receives special services or is enrolled in a community-based alternative program (PPS Enrollment Summaries, 2011).

While the district has become more racially diverse over the past decade, schools, like the city's neighborhoods, remain highly segregated. At King K-8 School in inner Northeast Portland, 51% of students are African-American, while only 1% of the student body is black at Alameda Elementary school located in a wealthy enclave less than two miles away (PPS Enrollment Summaries, 2011). District-wide, 46% of students are enrolled in the Free and Reduced lunch program, which is considered a proxy measure for poverty. Schools range from having 90% of students on the free and reduced lunch program to just 3%.

Compared to other urban school districts, Portland has a relatively high capture rate with 83.9% of the city's school-age children attending public schools (Population and Research Center, 2012). The district's high capture rate is often attributed its de facto school segregation and transfer policies: "[School] Choice made it safe for young families to buy house wherever they could afford one, then shop for the right school when they were ready" (Neilson, 2007).

The School Choice program allows families to transfer out of their assigned school to other neighborhood schools, focus-option, or charter school programs and conducts an annual lottery to assign transfer slots. White, higher-income and English-speaking students are more likely to access the school choice program, while students of color, lower-income and English Language Learners are underrepresented in it (See Figure 1.).

Figure 1.



Jefferson Cluster

The district is divided-up into eight clusters--attendance zones for a neighborhood's high school. All of the elementary, K-8 and middle schools located within a cluster feed into its high school. The Jefferson cluster, which encompasses the historically black neighborhoods of inner Northeast Portland, is the fourth most populous cluster in the district behind three others which recently absorbed students from the Marshall cluster after its high school was shut down. In 1998, the Jefferson cluster was the most populous in the district with 8,825 students (Population Research Center, 2009). The population of school-aged students in the neighborhood fell by 36% over the past decade.

Despite still housing large numbers of students, the cluster's school enrollment has declined even more sharply. Although 5,609 students live in the Jefferson neighborhood, only 45% of these students attend their assigned schools (PPS Enrollment Summaries, 2011). Capture

rates within neighborhood schools fall far below the 63% district-wide average with Jefferson High School capturing only 22% of potential students.

The numbers of students attending their neighborhood schools in the Jefferson cluster varies widely by race/ethnicity. As one teacher noted:

I am fortunate to teach a fine group of students at Vernon...This year, I teach sixth and seventh graders. In a neighborhood where 72% of the population is white, 90% of my students this year are of color. Despite the increasing affluence of my neighborhood, most of my students are living in poverty. Where are all the white kids? Apparently, they have transferred elsewhere, like so many others who live in the cluster (Thiel, 2013).

Jefferson cluster schools have a troubled reputation. The Oregonian newspaper used the word “beleaguered” to describe Jefferson High School six times between 1991 and 2005 while never once applying this term to any other Portland public school (Slovic, 2006). Despite these perceptions, many cluster families, especially those who are low-income and African-American, still choose to attend Jefferson cluster schools. Neighborhood school attendees in school choice districts are often assumed to be unaware of their choices or characterized as “low-information parents,” yet many families make a conscious choice to attend neighborhood schools (DeSena, 2006, Enrollment Balancing Meeting ACCESS Academy, 2013). Parents choose these schools for any number of reasons including location, ease of transportation, access to programs like free breakfast, after school care and enrichments, and/or a personal history/connection with the school. The racial make-up of the school also matters. Jefferson High School is the only majority black high school in the entire state of Oregon and enrolling in the school can be a source of cultural connection and pride.

Jefferson Cluster Schools 1998-2013:

From 1998 until 2013 as gentrification in inner Northeast neighborhoods rapidly progressed, schools in the Jefferson cluster were radically restructured. During this fifteen year time frame, the cluster endured an ever-shifting landscape of grade configurations and programming leading to student displacement, school closures and the abandonment of neighborhood schools by some longtime residents and most gentry families. District decisions about school closures and programming amounted to a “thousand little decisions that led up to a big old bleed” of students and resources from Jefferson cluster schools (Dungca, 2013).

The wave of school closures and reconfigurations that impacted Jefferson cluster schools was part of the district’s larger effort to adapt to a loss of revenue and a climate of constant funding and budgetary crisis. In the late 1990s, the district was facing budget constraints and declining revenues due to statewide property tax limitation measures passed in the early 1990s and shrinking student enrollment numbers, so the board commissioned a comprehensive performance audit of its operations. Among over 200 recommendations for cost-cutting and efficiency improvements, auditors found that the biggest costs savings could come from closing schools and administrative sites:

PPS operates 90 schools and 24 support facilities. This is virtually the same number of schools and support facilities it operated during the 1960s and 1970s when its enrollment peaked at 70,000 students. (KPMG, 1998, p. ES-1)

The report recommended that additional revenue could be raised by selling or leasing these properties. Shortly after the audit was released, inner Northeast education activists protested school closures, even though the district had yet to announce any plans for shutting down buildings: “When the ax comes, we know that wealthy neighborhoods will be spared, and our schools will be hit” (Ottey, 1998a, p. E3). Activists were particularly concerned because the

district had already taken unprecedented action against two cluster schools. In 1997 and 1998, Humboldt Elementary and Jefferson High School were reconstituted—all of the staff were fired and forced to reapply for their jobs, and the schools were completely reorganized.

Whitaker Middle School, whose students fed into Jefferson and Madison high schools, was the first casualty of the district's budget crisis; its doors were shut in 2001 (Ottey, 2001b). As budget woes continued to plague the district, things grew so dire that nationally-syndicated cartoonist Gary Trudeau lampooned Portland Public Schools in his *Doonesbury* comic strip for its 2003 budget proposal which would have shortened the school year by five weeks (Learn, 2003). As the school board searched for ways to balance the budget, Jefferson Cluster Schools repeatedly took hits, facing closures, mergers, program reorganizations and grade reconfigurations (See Figure 2.) Although schools were closed and reconfigured throughout the district, the Jefferson bore the brunt of the district's austerity measures. Meanwhile wealthier, predominately white clusters on the west side of town saw little change to the structures of their schools (League of Women Voters, 2011).

In a fifteen year time span, the Jefferson cluster was transformed from a neighborhood with fourteen schools—one comprehensive high school, three middle schools and ten elementary schools- to an area with eight schools—seven K-8 programs and one focus-option high school. Out of eight clusters in the district, it is one of two which has no middle school program and the only one where students have dual high school assignment, meaning they can attend Jefferson or one of three neighboring comprehensive high schools depending upon where in the cluster they live. It is the only cluster to ever experience school reconstitution--firing all teachers and administrators in a building and bringing in new staff and programming--undergoing this process

twice. From 1998-2012, ten schools closed in the area, representing half of all school closures that occurred within PPS during that time (League of Women Voters, 2011).

Figure 2. Changes to Jefferson Cluster Schools 1998-2013
 Source: PPS Board Meeting Minutes 1998-2013

Reconstitutions (2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Humboldt Elementary, 1997 • Jefferson High School, 1998
Closures (10)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whitaker Middle School, 2001 • Kenton Elementary, 2005 • Applegate Elementary, 2005 • Whitaker @ Rice, 2005 • Ockley Green Middle School, 2005 • Tubman Middle School, 2006 • Young Men’s 7-12 Academy, 2008 • Tubman Young Women’s Academy, 2012 • Humboldt Elementary, 2012 • Ockley Green K-5 Focus Option, 2013
Mergers or Consolidations (6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meek Elementary students merge into Vernon Elementary, 2003 • Applegate Elementary students merge into Woodlawn Elementary, 2005 • Kenton Elementary Students merge into Chief Joseph Elementary, 2005 • Whitaker and Ockley Green Middle School students consolidate and merge into Tubman Middle School, 2005 • Humboldt K-8 students merge into Boise-Eliot K-8, 2012 • Ockley Green K-8 and Chief Joseph K-5 consolidated into dual campus K-8 program, 2013
Program Redesign or Reconfigurations (6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jefferson High School organized into 9th/10th grade and 11th/12th grade academies, 2004 • Ockley Green Middle School becomes K-8 Arts and Technology Focus Option, 2005 • Jefferson cluster elementary schools expand to K-6 grade configuration, 2005-2006 • Jefferson High School reorganization into Young Women and Young Men’s 7th-12th grade academies and 9th-12th grade program containing two smaller academies within it, 2006 • Jefferson cluster elementary schools expand to K-8 grade configuration, 2006 • Jefferson High School becomes Middle College Focus Option High School, 2010
Demolitions (1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whitaker Middle School, 2005

Analysis

The processes of gentrification and disinvestment are as intertwined as ancient puzzle rings; you cannot pull apart one from the seemingly opposite other. After all, neighborhood decline drives the push for revitalization by creating a potential to derive large profits from undervalued real estate if the neighborhood's fortunes change (Smith, 1986). In 1986, Peter Marcuse observed that gentrification and abandonment were happening simultaneously in New York City, both causing displacement. Although these processes sometimes occurred in adjacent areas, they never took place in the same neighborhood at the same time.

In Northeast Portland, gentrification and disinvestment/abandonment are occurring within the same community, albeit in different institutional spaces within that community. While housing prices are rising, and business areas revitalizing, public schools in inner Northeast Portland remain sites of disinvestment and decline. Parents, students and educational advocates in the community have frequently referred to the district's "redlining" of or "disinvestment" in Jefferson cluster schools (Parker, 2005, Thomas, 2010).

Disinvestment is the "withdrawal of investment and capital from an area" and can be used to describe the process of redlining or the decisions by businesses, homeowners, investors or government not to sink funds into particular areas (Urban/Suburban Investment Study Group, 1977). In the 1970s, cities across the United States were experiencing population loss and an exodus of businesses to the suburbs which resulted in declining tax revenues. Some cities responded to these challenges by instituting "urban triage" policies which also became known as "planned shrinkage" or "planned abandonment" (Schmidt, 2011). Urban triage is "based upon the notion that some neighborhoods are in advanced stages of deterioration" and restoring them "with marginal changes is wasteful" (Bryce, 1979, 90). Under triage policies, federal and local

money is funneled out of the worst areas and instead put into communities that are deemed still worth saving. Neighborhoods in the worst states of decline are essentially abandoned by municipalities, saving money by shrinking the city's footprint and service responsibilities.

Disinvestment takes a slightly different form in the public school system than it does in neighborhoods. Districts allocate money to schools on a per student basis and cannot simply eliminate funding to a particular school or neighborhood. Even though Jefferson cluster schools were being disinvested in by Portland Public Schools, many schools within the cluster actually received higher than average student allocations. For example, King K-8 School, which currently has a three year federal turnaround grant, has one of the highest per student funding rates in the district (PPS School Profiles & Enrollment Data, 2012). Having a high per capita funding rate, however, still does not ensure that a school will have adequate staffing, especially when its enrollment numbers are low. Schools, particularly those serving a wide range of grade levels (all cluster schools are K-8) need a high staffing baseline to ensure adequate programming. For example, both a 250 and a 500 student school will need to employ teachers for each grade level, principals, a secretary, librarian, P.E. teacher and so on, but the smaller school receives lower total revenues which translates into less money to spend on staffing. To further complicate matters, Jefferson cluster schools serve many high-need populations that often require additional supports or services. Vernon school has the highest percentage of kids in foster care in the district, but the school, despite having a slightly higher than average amount of per student funding, can only afford a half-time counselor (Enrollment Balancing Meeting Vernon K-8, 2013)

Since money follows students, one of the primary ways Jefferson cluster schools are disinvested in is through the district's School Choice program which allows families to transfer

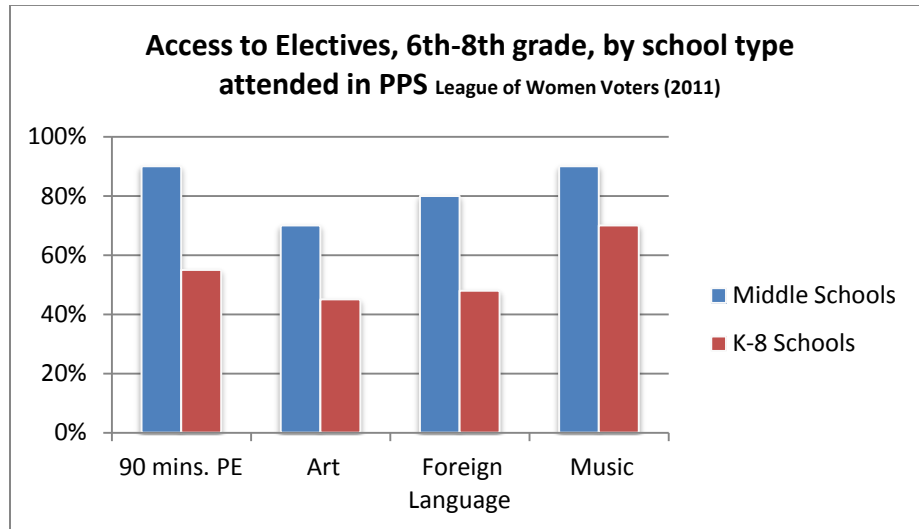
out of their neighborhood schools. The cluster's school age population is large enough to not only fill the schools that remain open but to also support some of those that were closed, yet the Jefferson area schools have the lowest enrollment of all clusters. There are 1410 high school aged students living in the Jefferson attendance zone, but the school currently has just 441 students (PPS School Profiles & Enrollment Data, 2012). The neighborhood's designation as the only "dual assignment" area, meaning students can choose to attend Jeff or another assigned neighborhood comprehensive high school, coupled with the district's transfer policy undermine Jefferson's ability to capture more students.

As students opt-out of cluster schools, funding follows them often to focus-option schools. While Jefferson cluster schools were being steadily disinvested, there was a large growth in the number of focus-option and charter schools. In 1998, there were just five focus-option schools and no language immersion programs. Today, there are ten language immersion programs, eight focus-option schools, and seven charter schools, five times as many programs as there were fifteen years earlier (PPS Enrollment Summaries, 2012). Eighteen percent of kindergarteners through eighth graders outside of the Jefferson cluster attend a focus option or charter school (Jefferson Cluster Transfer Patterns, 2013). Twenty-six percent of all K-8 Jefferson cluster students attend these schools, and 36% of white cluster students do.

Growing focus-option and charter school programs at the expense of neighborhood schools within the Jefferson cluster is a form of urban triage. While cluster schools were being shut down, the district was investing student dollars into new and existing focus-option, language immersion and charter school programs. Ten Jefferson cluster schools and programs closed within a fifteen year period. There are nine focus-option or charter schools where Jefferson cluster students comprise higher than expected percentages of the student population. The

cluster contains 12% of Portland Public School students, but Jefferson cluster students make-up 23% of transfers into the Buckman K-5 arts program, 29% of the population at Metropolitan Learning Center alternative school, 31% of Benson High School, 35% of the Portland Village Charter School and 48% of Trillium Charter (PPS Enrollment Summaries, 2012).

Figure 3.



Low enrollment in cluster schools directly leads to a lack of programming. In 2007, all Jefferson cluster middle schools were closed, and elementary schools were reconfigured to a K-8 grade model. In Portland, 6th-8th grade students attending K-8s are much less likely those attending traditional middle school to have access to foreign language, art, music and physical education classes (See Figure 3.). Because enrollment determines staffing and therefore programming at district schools, the Jefferson cluster's relatively small K-8 schools which have very low enrollment in the middle grades (6th-8th) are especially deficient in providing student enrichments. Similar problems exist on the high school level. In 2008, Jefferson High School students organized a walk-out protesting the lack of offerings at the school (Loving, 2008). At the time, the school had no Advanced Placement (high school classes that can be taken for college credit) courses, and students struggled to get adequate credits to graduate high school

because curriculum and staff had been cut so far back. This problem did not exist at other Portland high schools. One student commented: “We don’t have the same opportunity.”

While the decision about where to send your child to school is an individual one, this choice is influenced by a variety of factors including the signals and messages parents get from the district. Similarly in declining neighborhoods, individual landowners’ choices about whether or not to invest in or maintain their buildings are influenced by the wider economic and political factors. In his study of tenement landlords, George Sternlieb (1966) learned that building owners in disinvested neighborhoods allowed their properties to deteriorate, even in areas where mortgage financing was available, because they believed that banks would not lend to potential buyers for their property. Despite the challenges facing Jefferson cluster schools, some of them were thriving during this time period. Having been identified as a potential prospect for reconstitution in the late 1990s, Vernon school was making great strides by 2005 with ninety percent of its students meeting or exceeding state benchmarks in reading and math (Hutchins, 2005). Yet, neighborhood families were still choosing to opt-out of the school. An instructional specialist commented that the biggest challenge the school faced was “getting the community to take a look at us.”

The district does little to dissuade parents from opting-out of Jefferson cluster schools. Through its triage policies, the district repeatedly sends the message that Jefferson cluster schools are so problematic that they need to be closed, reconfigured or fixed through other drastic measures. The triage of Jefferson cluster schools began with the reconstitution of Humboldt Elementary. Reconstitution hurts a school the way urban renewal harms a neighborhood. The entire staff, administration and institutional memory are bulldozed and replaced with something new. Students may have entered the same building in the fall, but their

community had completely changed. Staff no longer knew their names, the teacher who taught a sibling or parent had disappeared and familiar rules and policies had been replaced. With the reconstitutions of Humboldt and Jefferson, the district sent the message that your schools have reached the final stage of neighborhood decline. Our only option now is to raze them.

School closures sent a similar message. Because school closures in the early 1980s had caused so much controversy in the district, it took three years from the time of the initial KPMG audit recommendations to close schools for the board to take action (Learn, 2006). In its first attempt to close Whitaker Middle School, board members pointed to social conditions at the school--low achievement rates, poor attendance, and discipline issues—to justify the closure. Reaction was so swift and negative, that the closure line item was removed from the budget the following day, and no school board member would admit to having proposed it (Ottey, 2001a). Board members quickly learned that using social conditions to justify a closure would not work, yet when they characterized the need for closure in purely physical terms, the public was much more receptive. One month after the closure was first proposed, documents about long-ignored radon and air quality issues at Whitaker were leaked to the press, and the district responded with an emergency shut-down of the school. Upon its reopening, only two-thirds of students returned, an unplanned yet dramatic shrinkage (Ottey, 2001b).

The lesson the board learned from the Whitaker closure--it is not politically feasible to use social conditions to justify a school closure, but if those aims are couched in purely physical or numerical terms, the public would be much less skeptical--is similar to some of the justifications used to support urban triage policies. Urban triage policies are based upon the assumption that all neighborhoods go through “natural” stages of growth and decline (Metzger, 2000). This concept, known as Neighborhood Life Cycle theory, originated in the 1920s.

According to this theory, as neighborhoods age, their housing stock declines and they become occupied by increasingly lower-income and less secure tenants. The theory associates the process of housing decline with lower-income and minority populations who move into areas as they become more affordable, ignoring the racist federal policies (redlining) and real estate practices (restrictive covenants, steering, block busting, etc.) that played a significant role in determining who lives where. In Neighborhood Life Cycle theory, decline is characterized in both social and physical terms. For example, neighborhoods in the most serious stages of decline are described in as having “high vacancy rates, abandonment, dilapidation, neglect of maintenance, shrinkage, and population loss” as well as “undesirable populations, low-income and minority tenants, and social problems” (Metzger, 2000, p. 9).

Shortly after the permanent Whitaker closure was rationalized by the presence of toxic mold and radon, the district proposed more school closures, this time using low enrollment as a justification. The closures were again couched in non-controversial physical terms. A school board member insisted Meek needed to be closed because the district was “on a downward trend. We can’t continue to maintain all our buildings” (Chestnut, 2003). The Oregonian newspaper editorial board supported the closure of Meek, touting how “comfortably” its students could fit into nearby Vernon School which had a “lovely historic building” (Don’t Close Schools for Nothing, 2003). While narratives of physical decline were used to publicly rationalize school closures, behind closed doors, social conditions drove the process. In 2004, the district’s primary criteria for determining school closure were enrollment trends and neighborhood capture rates; facility conditions were secondary (Carter, 2004).

In 2012, the district’s Long Range Facilities Plan used a school utilization model, which basically divided the number of students enrolled in a building by its capacity, to generate a “list

of schools with projected enrollment significantly greater or less than school capacity” (PPS, 2012, p. V-5). Schools on the list would have their populations adjusted by limiting transfers, changing boundaries, expanding or decreasing the number of grades, adding facility capacity or closing schools. The plan described the challenges faced by schools that had experienced increased enrollments then declared:

At the same time, some schools continue to see declining enrollment, or are operating in such small capacity buildings that they will never reach enrollment targets for educational programs. Schools in these categories would also be considered for the types of changes listed above [changing boundaries, closing schools] (PPS, 2012, p. V-5)

The Long Range Facilities Planning process identified 33% of all elementary, middle and K-8 schools as having school utilization numbers that were above or below capacity, but just fourteen schools were prioritized for board action (Brennan, 2011). Of the fourteen priority schools listed, eight were located in the Jefferson cluster—all of its K-8 schools. No other cluster had more than one or two schools listed, and their issues were addressed by shifting attendance boundaries. In the Jefferson cluster, the district launched a cluster-wide enrollment balancing effort that proposed multiple school closures and reconfigurations.

Two Enrollment Balancing scenarios were released in mid January, 2013. Depending upon which scenario the board chose, Woodlawn, Vernon, King, and/or Ockley Green schools could potentially close. This process was going on as Kindergarten Round-Up orientation meetings were being held at these schools. Although ultimately the process resulted in a merger of Chief Joseph and Ockley Green schools with both buildings remaining open, the message sent by the district to incoming parents was clear: the district is unwilling to make a long-term commitment to schools in this cluster. Why would a parent enroll their child in a school that was destined to close? While it is too early to tell how this effort will impact kindergarten

enrollment, when Jefferson High School was being considered for closure, the school saw a drop in enrollment the following fall (Hammond, 2010). Merely planning for urban triage can have an impact on a community, even if actions are never taken.

Ironically, all of the schools being targeted for action had at one point been affected by earlier triage decisions, either losing or receiving students when neighboring schools closed. At one Enrollment Balancing public hearing, a frustrated parent commented, “To hear you say that families choose not to come is blaming us when you created this problem” (Enrollment Balancing meeting Woodlawn K-8, 2013). Low enrollments in cluster schools were, in part, a result of previous school closures and reconfigurations. In 1998, Ockley Green was a middle school with 519 students. After two of its feeder schools shut-down, enrollment fell to 318 students and in 2006, it was transformed into a K-8 focus option program. By 2012, enrollment had fallen to 243 students and the focus option portion was closed.

A teacher observed, “It’s like it’s okay to move our kids around to fix it, but then we never fix it” (Enrollment Balancing meeting King K-8, 2013). The new programs and configurations introduced in the cluster to address its perceived and actual problems, also suffered from disinvestment. The district systematically failed to provide the support that was needed to make these programs a success. The short-lived Young Men’s Academy was run by three different administrators during its two years of existence. The first principal, who had been recruited from out of state to get the school up and running quit because he realized that “resources were so limited. The school [he] envisioned wasn’t going to happen” (Melton, 2008, C1). The second administrator made plans to grow the program and was transferred by the district to another school, and the third principal served simultaneously as the Young Men’s Academy administrator, Jefferson High School athletic director and discipline specialist.

Ockley Green which was converted from a middle school to an arts and technology focus-option program in 2005 also had a series of principals. When the school started, it had a three-year grant that was used to support its arts and technology programming (Anderson, 2013). After the grant ran-out, the district failed to provide replacement funding, and Ockley Green was forced to lay-off its art teacher. It became an arts focused school with no art program. The current principal, hired to turn the school around, has been sharply criticized by parents for his lack of leadership (Enrollment Balancing meeting Jefferson High School, 2013). The year after he took over the school, half of the teachers left (Anderson, 2013).

There has been a revolving door of leadership in many of the area schools. In the ten years following reconstitution, Jefferson High School had eight principals and twenty seven different administrators (PTA High School System Design meeting Jefferson High School, 2010). Reconstitution left the school with few experienced teachers. Only one-third of Jefferson teachers reapplied for their jobs, and when the school reopened, all of the teachers in core subject areas were new (Ottey, 1998). When the Young Men's Academy first opened, the school did not get a certified math teacher until the middle of the year (Melton, 2008). By assigning inexperienced administrators to cluster schools and failing to ensure adequate staffing, the district disinvested in the education of Jefferson cluster students.

District disinvestment in neighborhood schools led to a climate of instability and frequent displacements of neighborhood school children. One mother complained that if the most recent proposed school closures had gone through, her son would have attended three different schools in three years (Enrollment Balancing Meeting Vernon K-8, 2013). "If you keep shifting our kids around," another parent warned, "they are going to become invisible" (Enrollment

Balancing Meeting Woodlawn K-8, 2013). The threat of the disappearance of black students from neighborhood schools recalls a painful chapter in the community's history:

During the 70s...they took schools in this community that were K-8 and got rid of all the upper grades, got rid of them. And the children who were in those upper grades were scattered and bused out all over this city. There's no other community in Portland who had children who were mandatorily bused...no other children had to get on a bus and go miles away to another school. And not only bused but they were scattered. (Loving, 2010)

The mandatory busing of black students out of northeast Portland schools was the district's desegregation policy up until the 1980s when community boycotts of schools forced the board to rewrite its policies (Johnson and Williams, 2010)

As one parent recalled, "I was bused out, and I didn't bond with the other students. I didn't become socially connected to those kids. You need to put money into *our* schools" (Enrollment Balancing Meeting Woodlawn K-8, 2013). Many neighborhood residents have deep ties to cluster schools and feel a sense of ownership over them, despite the repeated disinvestments they have suffered from the district. Schools, like neighborhoods, are more than just buildings, they are communities. Just as disinvested neighborhoods are valued by their residents, so too are disinvested schools. At a rally against closing schools, a Jefferson high school student described how he had transferred back to Jeff from his dual assignment comprehensive high school, "Something was missing at my school. When I came to Jeff, I realized what that was. It was family" (Social Equity Educators rally, 2013). Cluster schools are often talked about in these terms. "King School is a family," declared a parent at a recent public hearing (Enrollment Balancing Meeting King K-8, 2013). "When my son moved to Vernon, it was like coming home. I went to Vernon, my cousins did too" (Enrollment Balancing Meeting Vernon K-8, 2013).

As inner Northeast neighborhoods have gentrified, the black community has lost its gathering places and local institutions. Schools are one of the few remaining place where the community retains a sense of social and cultural connection. “Jefferson has always been an anchor of the black community,” remarked an alumni and onetime school board member, “it is the anchor for that which was Northeast Portland” (Nielsen, 2006). Community members support their schools, showing-up for sporting events, parent/teacher conferences, concerts, annual talent shows in large numbers. It is one of the last remaining places in the neighborhood where the community can come together. “We’ve lost black-owned businesses, we’re losing churches, the loss of Jefferson [would make] it final” (Nielsen, 2006). To lose cluster schools, would be like “ripping the heart out of black people across the city” (Thomas, 2010).

District disinvestment threatens the heart of this community. Between 1998 and 2013, the Jefferson cluster lost almost half of its schools and enrollment declined by 40%. This loss of students was a direct result of the district’s systematic disinvestment in the neighborhood’s schools. Policies of urban triage-- neglecting cluster schools in favor of investing in focus-option ones, the constant instability in programming and structure of neighborhood schools, and the lack of consistent support and leadership from the district---fueled the full-scale abandonment of the neighborhood’s schools by some longtime residents and most gentry families. While the rest of the neighborhood saw rising home values, thriving business areas, the rehabilitation of abandoned and poorly maintained buildings, schools in inner Northeast Portland continued to experience disinvestment and decline. Despite the district’s neglect of community schools, these institutions still retain value to the students and families who attend them holding together a community that has experienced a devastating loss of place.

Conclusions

For many non-gentry families living in rapidly revitalizing neighborhoods, the benefits of redevelopment have failed to materialize. Instead they have continued to experience the disinvestment and decline that plagued their community prior to gentrification. The experiences of the students and families attending Jefferson cluster schools necessitate a rethinking of the ways in which we conceptualize gentrification. While research shows that longtime residents who are able to remain in gentrifying neighborhoods may benefit from a rise in home values or enjoy the new stores and services (Freeman, 2006, Glick, 2008), the story of Jefferson cluster schools indicates that in some realms, longtime residents feel no benefit of gentrification at all, instead they experience ongoing disinvestment. This disinvestment is particularly hard to swallow when the surrounding neighborhood is on the upswing:

To think that we could revitalize and change the collective perception of N. Alberta Street, N. Mississippi Ave. and Unthank Park...and not give the only high school that sits in the middle of the community the same opportunity to come back would be about as racist as it gets. Could it be that the people who made so much money revitalizing the neighborhood have a different plan for Jefferson? (Hopson, 2010)

In 1986, Marcuse noted that “far from being a cure for abandonment, gentrification worsens it.” If schools in the Jefferson cluster continue to suffer from district disinvestment and declining enrollments, then families face more closures, cuts to programming and potential displacement. Conversely if these schools were to gentrify and become popular options for white, middle class families in the cluster, programming might improve and the threat of closure would subside, but longtime residents would still be threatened with displacement. Analyses of gentrifying schools in East London, Boston, and New York all indicate that gentry families remake schools in the same ways that they remake neighborhoods by imposing their own tastes,

values and culture (Joseph and Feldman, 2009, Stillman, 2012, Billingham, McDonough Kinelberg, 2013, Butler, et al. 2013). As schools and programs become more desirable to gentry families, longtime and lower-income residents inevitably get pushed aside.

The “cure” for disinvestment in Jefferson cluster schools is not to make them attractive to gentry families. As gentrification has progressed, these schools have become critical sites of African-American community survival in Northeast Portland, and any proposed solution needs to protect not only against literal displacement but also against cultural dissolution. Marcuse (1986, p. 174) argued that neighborhoods at risk of being abandoned as well as those threatened by gentrification needed to “be given control of their own destinies” and “resources...adequate for that purpose.”

Like the young women in Cahill’s (2007) participatory research project on Manhattan’s Lower East Side, Jefferson cluster students and families have also experienced disinvestment and displacement as inner Northeast Portland has shifted from “gritty” to “glamorous.” It is often assumed that some of gentrification’s glamour will rub-off on longtime residents who have been able to resist displacement and remain in their revitalizing neighborhoods, however, in inner Northeast Portland, living in a gentrified neighborhood hasn’t resulted in children receiving a revitalized education. From 1990-2010, the percentage of white residents in inner Northeast who held a bachelor’s degree more than doubled from 25% to 56%, meanwhile college attainment rates for blacks in the community remained stagnant with just 8% completing a four-year degree (Gibson, 2011). The failure to invest in the neighborhood’s schools is a failure to invest in a specific part of the community—primarily black, longtime resident families—sending a clear message about who is considered the future of this community.

Finally, the story of Jefferson cluster schools demonstrates that disinvestment is more than just a precondition for gentrification; it is an integral part of the revitalization strategy. Gentrification is not merely a spatial process that aims to remake a place for the benefit of all who are living there; rather it is the remaking of a place for the distinct purpose of empowering a particular class or race of people. My son's sixth grade class understood this instinctively. Not only is it possible to be ghetto in a swanky neighborhood, but the neighborhood turns swanky by making the people who've always lived there ghetto.

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