


# “Turnaround” as Shock Therapy: Race, Neoliberalism, and School Reform

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## Abstract

“Turnaround” strategies of educational reform promise that school closure, reconstitution, privatizing, and reopening them will bring miraculous results. Questioning the implications, this article situates “turnaround” strategies locally, following the closure of a predominantly minority high school in 2008, in Austin, Texas. The neoliberal reforms, intending to “clean the slate” and privatize school management, constituted “shock therapy.” The school’s closure also reflected an increasingly punitive approach to state-based support systems. Furthermore, although the state articulated the closure as a benefit to students, the community experienced closure as a type of social and civic death.

## Keywords

racism, school reform, urban education

As a country, we’re going to have to be willing to experience a little pain and discomfort. That’s the only way we’re going to get there. Our children deserve it.

Arne Duncan

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In an interview on *NOW on PBS*, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan described his approach for reforming public schools based on his experience as CEO of Chicago Public Schools (Brancaccio, 2009). For him, fixing schools labeled as *failing* necessitated a “little pain and discomfort,” by imposing the drastic measure of closing schools and firing entire faculty and staff. Deeming the approach as the “turnaround strategy,” Duncan, as Secretary of Education, has sought to expand his “turnaround strategies” from Chicago to the rest of the country through various means, including the “Race to the Top” competition between states that required certain conditions of reform for reward of stimulus funds. George Schmidt (2009), editor of the Chicago-based *Substance News*, commented that “turnaround” is simply a new name for the old strategy of “reconstitution,” or the strategy of firing and replacing a large amount of school faculty and staff—even in some cases, as in Chicago, the custodial and cafeteria staff. What perhaps differentiates “turnaround” from reconstitution, both part of a plethora of strategies seeking drastic and miraculous school reform in “troubled” or “failing” schools, is the added element of closing schools and reopening them as institutions, often charter schools, managed by private entities.

This article seeks to situate “turnaround” strategies at the local level. Specifically, I focus on the closure of a predominantly minority high school in 2008, in Austin, Texas, where I lived and conducted ethnographic research for many years. After leaving the “field,” I followed the situation of Austin schools in the local media, conducting a media review once I heard about the closure. The school reforms implemented in Austin were more than simply modeled on business in form and discourse, but the interventions, intended to “clean the slate” and paired with the privatization of school management, constituted “shock therapy” (Klein, 2007). As in Chicago, reforms in Austin meant to quickly turn schools around focused on closure, and the very Austin schools targeted for closure were those serving predominantly students of color. In particular, the history and materiality of segregation predisposed the school to meeting the definitions of “failure.” The school’s closure also reflected an increasingly punitive approach to state-based (public) support systems. Exposing communities to the “little pain and discomfort” that accompanies school closure is not simply “a way to get there,” as the Education Secretary projects. Rather, the experience of closure as a type of social and civic death for the community makes the approach an instance of benign “state racism” (Foucault, 2003).

## Conceptual Framework: Shock Therapy

The discourse and strategy of the “turnaround” are borrowed from a business model of quickly turning around corporations in danger of going into

bankruptcy or “organizational decline,” largely by focusing on personnel changes, budgetary and programmatic cuts, as well as evaluation-based strategic planning (Walshe, Harvey, Hyde, & Pandit, 2004). Applying corporate turnaround discourse and strategy to educational policy follows what Bartlett, Frederick, Gulbrandsen, and Murillo (2002) describe as the “marketization of education,” or neoliberal reforms characterized by the intensification of standardized testing and tracking, investment in charter schools or schools of choice, and privatization of partial or entire public school operations. Accompanying these policies is a “cultural change in the perception of school’s purpose” from a democratic perception to an economic one, laced with market metaphors and enhanced by the racialization of poverty and failure (p. 6). According to Bartlett et al., this movement for the marketization of public schools, becoming known as the “accountability movement,” obtained its hegemony from the coalescing of neoliberals, neo-conservatives, authoritarian populists, and the managerial and professional middle class into the “New Right” (see also Apple, 2001). In the midst of economic downturn, the alignment of the New Right was hastened by opposition to desegregation policies and federal expenditures for such reform (Saltman, 2000). To these writings, Naomi Klein’s (2007) *The Shock Doctrine* and Michel Foucault’s (2008) 1978-1979 lectures on the genealogy of neoliberalism add insights into the imposition of neoliberal reforms as a type of “shock therapy” and into the ethics and distinctiveness of American neoliberalism.

The “marketizing” educational reforms of standardized testing and tracking, charter schools, vouchers, and privatization are part of a broader context of neoliberal economic reforms that involve deregulation, privatizing public services, and defunding and dismantling social welfare, creating a so-called smaller government. Klein (2007) brings our attention to the implementation of these reforms as envisioned by their major proponents, particularly Milton Friedman, who argued that these reforms should be imposed by means of “shock therapy.” Such a method involved exploiting crises to rapidly bring about economic change, removing regulations that inhibited profits, selling publicly owned assets that may be profitable to corporations, and dramatically defunding social programs (pp. 68-69). For Klein, “shock therapy” constitutes more than a metaphor used by Friedman and his students; rather, there are continuities between individual electric shock therapy and the economic version (pp. 20, 60). The Montreal psychiatrist, Dr. Ewan Cameron, who was paid by the CIA to conduct experiments in electroshock therapy, conceptualized the treatment as one needing to make the patient’s mind a “blank slate” (p. 37), to use “deep disorientation” to regress the patient to an infantile state. According to Klein, the “massive loss of recollections” and

regression especially appealed to the CIA, who used the results in their handbook called the *Kubark Counterintelligence Interrogation* (p. 48). Similarly, Friedmanite neoliberals viewed economic shock therapy as a “purification,” as “the dream of the blank slate” (p. 302), allowing for sweeping changes that reduced publicly owned wealth, consequently disrupting extant democratic political processes (pp. 64, 126-127). Following the trajectory of neoliberal shock therapy in several countries, Klein emphasizes how the embodied trauma of individual shock therapy parallels the collective trauma of economic shock therapy. The elements of shock therapy—extreme interventions envisioned to provide a “clean slate,” the exploitation of crisis to impose “marketizing” reforms, the reduction of public and democratic control over resources and assets, and the collective trauma left behind by interventions—are applicable to drastic reforms sought in public schools.

As Klein’s work provides insight on the implementation of neoliberal reforms, Foucault’s (2008) lectures on the genealogy of neoliberalism provide insight into the “ethics” of neoliberalism and the distinctiveness of American neoliberalism. Distinguishing liberalism from neoliberalism, Foucault traces a shift in the conceptualization of the market from a site of free *exchange* to a stage for free *competition*, accompanied by a shift in the focus on the “state protection of private property” in the former to enterprise in the latter (p. 118). The moral and ethical framework envisioned by neoliberals for engaging in social policy eschews both the standpoint of letting be or “laissez-faire” and also social security, or providing the social and institutional networks to secure against the effects of markets and competition, and instead directs governmental intervention toward breaking down all impediments to free competition (pp. 147, 160). According to Foucault, American neoliberalism more radically than other variants applies the market and economy as a framework for understanding and interpreting social and noneconomic realms (p. 243). Exemplifying this framework is the American concept of “human capital theory,” which views society as made up of individuals who are “entrepreneurs of [themselves]” (pp. 225-226). In addition, American neoliberalism is distinctive in its application of the market as a means for evaluating and challenging state authority, veracity, and effectiveness.

Perhaps there is no better illustration of the applicability of Foucault’s theses (about the “social ethic of enterprise” and American neoliberalism) to public educational policy in the United States than a 1990 paper delivered before the American Educational Research Association by Erling Boe of the University of Pennsylvania. In the article, Boe (1990) described the “entrepreneurial restructuring” of public education, of which the “essence” is “the opportunity to compete for gains based upon successful performance, while

being at risk for losses in the event of failure” (p. 1). For Boe, great potential rested in the attempt to “infuse public education with the dynamism characteristic of aggressive and profitable business enterprises” (p. 5) and with the “discipline of free market forces” (p. 11). Different from the factory model of organizing public education, current “entrepreneurial principles,” focused on incentivizing outputs through a system that depends on rewards and “sanctions” (p. 4).<sup>1</sup>

## **Historical Context: Contradictions of Desegregation**

In the summer of 2008, the newly appointed Texas State Commissioner of Education Robert Scott first exercised powers granted by the Texas State legislature to close high schools for poor accountability rankings under the Texas Education Code. The first high school closed by Scott was one in his home town, J High School in Austin, Texas. His decision came down in a letter to the superintendent of the district, which read:

As you know, state law requires certain sanctions for multiple years of failure to meet performance standards, including closure or alternative management of a campus that fails to meet those standards for five consecutive years. I am therefore ordering the closure of [J] High School effective with the 2008-2009 school year. (Scott, 2008)

With these words, the commissioner declared the death of a high school only 2 years from its fiftieth anniversary. The letter officially deemed J High School as a school with “troubling, broad-based patterns of poor and declining performance,” and a “long history of performance deficiencies” since it “earned an AU [academically unacceptable] or low-performing rating for eight out of the past nine years for which campus performance ratings have been issued.” However, the history constructed in the letter belies a deeper story of the connection between “failing” schools and segregation in Austin in particular, and in the United States in general. Behind the “failure” of J High School lie the traces of the contradictions of segregation and desegregation policy, the imprint of tactics made to evade equity orders, as well as the retranslation of the goals of educational policy in Texas from the 1960s to 2009, from redress to punishment.

J High School opened in 1960 with a 78% Mexican American student body, as it was constructed in the predominantly Mexican American section of the Eastside of Austin—following the city’s pattern of using new school

construction as a form of de facto segregation (Davis, 1975). Since its inception, the school developed a reputation for its vocational education focus. During the course of 1970s court proceedings over the desegregation plans in Austin, the testimony of a class president from the Eastside high school revealed a “curriculum as one heavily oriented toward vocational education,” as well as a situation in which “fewer than eight percent of . . . graduating seniors continued their education after high school” and in which there was “continuing pressure on students to avoid speaking Spanish at school” (Davis, 1975, p. 122). Even 25 years later, a 1995 graduate of the high school described the school as one that “was always perceived as ‘the trades high school.’ All the students, interested or not, were pushed into career and vocational programs, often at the expense of academics” (Reeves, 2007). During the 1970s, the high school served as a site for the district’s attempt to shelter White students from desegregation, as the district justified bussing Black students to the school as achieving racial balance. However, the courts mandated that Austin address its segregation as tripartite in 1979, forcing it to desegregate Mexican American students along with Black and White students.

In the wake of the desegregation order, the city established magnet schools to attract White students to predominantly minority schools, creating the liberal arts magnet at J High School in 1988 (Martinez, 2002). However, across Austin, the magnets barely met the expectations of parents in the racially segregated communities of the Eastside schools where the magnets were placed; instead, within-school segregation produced tensions between the home schools and the magnets. For the parents of the “regular” or host schools, their students received no better education, as resources were focused on the magnets. Furthermore, Black and Latino students were severely underrepresented in the magnets (Arriola, 1998). Magnet parents expressed desires for even more resources. For example, one magnet parent wrote to the *Austin Chronicle*: “All the magnet students, teachers, parents, and community want is their home—home for a sixth grade, a middle school, and a combined high school program and the freedom to teach to our students’ needs. . . . For God’s sake, let us have our home, too, and free us! Free us at last!” (Smith, 2001). Exacerbating the tensions was the state’s accountability system, which rated schools based on state-mandate standardized tests and other measures, a system established as a result of court battles over interdistrict finance equity.

In 1999, J High received its first “low-performing” accountability rating and was unable to escape the rating for 3 additional consecutive years. The low rating initiated a wave of departure of teachers, exacerbating the

already-present problem of high principal turnover. In fact, between 1993 and 2005, 11 different principals served at the school (Hill & Banta, 2008). As a result, tensions between host and magnet parents increased. The former claimed that joint accountability ratings hid the problems in the predominantly minority host school, whereas the latter, along with other magnet parents in the city, fought for the establishment of accountability ratings for the magnets separate from the host schools. Consequently, the district removed the magnet from the school in 2001. However, host parents hardly benefitted from the departure. With the implementation of stricter accountability demands by the state and federal governments, including the implementation of a new tougher high-stakes testing system in 2003, the school maintained the state rating of “academically unacceptable” from 2003 through 2008. The ratings produced a “descending” narrative<sup>2</sup> about the school, in the form of comparative charts, rankings, and progress reports, supplanting the “old” histories marked by the yearbooks, logos and school colors, trophy cases, generational lineages, and game-time celebrations. In the local papers, the name of J High school “became synonymous with failure” (Phillips, 2008) and metaphors of decline haunted the school, such as “downward spiral” (Kurtz, 2000), “plagued,” and “like a train that has been derailed” (Hill, 2005).

The J High community constructed an alternative discourse, arguing that J High was the victim of neglect. The area superintendent, whose district included J High, suggested in 2000 that “the school has been allowed to go to hell in a hand basket” (Kurtz, 2000). One of the school’s former principals between 2001 and 2002 reported, “What I discovered when I started was a school that had suffered a lot of neglect” (as cited in Dexheimer, 2006b). In 2007, the J High School PTA president said, “It’s like they decided they would give up on [J High]. . . . How can our students continue to learn when you have too many substitutes in the classroom? How can you expect the school to survive when you have so many principals? Now the school board’s coming down and blaming the parents, blaming the students? Why let this go on at [J High] for four years before really doing something about it?” (as cited in Reeves, 2007).

Against the perception of neglect and under pressure from the federal and state accountability systems, the school administration and district under Superintendent Pat Forgione began aggressive intervention to turn the school around in 2005. The interventions consisted of “reconstitution of most of the school’s teaching corps and leadership” and a major restructuring of the high school into three “smaller learning communities” or academies: global enterprise and information technology, scientific inquiry and design, and arts and humanities (Reeves, 2007; see also Cuban, 2008, p. 44; Hill, 2005). The

restructuring efforts, however, did not improve the school's rating, and by 2009, the commissioner declared that the school should close. The commissioner did provide the district the option to "repurpose" the campus, and the Austin Independent School District proposed opening a new high school at the J High location affiliated with the New Tech Network. The Napa-based organization, founded in 1996 as the New Technology Foundation, sponsors high school reforms that focus on project-based learning and incorporating web-based learning technologies in the classroom. In Austin, the new high school would consist of two "tech" academies (or schools-within-the-school). The commissioner approved the opening of the new high school at the former J High campus, which began operation in the fall of 2009.

### **"Clean Slate"**

As shock therapy constitutes extreme interventions envisioned to provide a "clean slate," the closure of J High was the ultimate "clean slate" policy. Although on one hand the erasure of the cultural memory of J High fueled the hopes of state officials and others in Austin who viewed the school as plagued with failure, it also fed the sorrow of the high school community, who viewed J High as a multigenerational collective family, embodying a "shared sense of personal struggle" (Hill, 2007). The passion-filled rallies held in the school's cafeteria to keep the school open, which brought together students, faculty, parents, legislators, and local business owners, could not halt the process of closure. Even the option to "repurpose" the school, according to the Texas Education Commissioner, meant that the building had to "house a completely different instructional program and bear a new name" (Scott, 2008). One seasoned reporter for the *Austin American-Statesman*, who wrote often on issues of race and education in the city, opined that the district's choice of a new name would be "a fresh start," significant enough to succeed in "breaking the culture of failure" at the high school (Phillips, 2008), as if a new name and new "culture" could counterweigh the historically rooted, deeply embedded race and class segregation that formed the school's context.

The closure also occurred after the implementation of previous interventions at the school that sought a "clean slate": reconstitution and restructuring. Commenting on those reforms, Superintendent Forgione described J High as "my most challenged school. . . . We've tried to put good leaders in there and give incentives. We need a new start" (Hill, 2005). The Texas state government imagined reconstitution as a "clean slate" approach to schools like J High School in a document entitled, "Challenging the Status Quo:



Toward Smaller, Smarter Government” published in 1999 by Texas Comptroller Carole Keeton Rylander. In the section on education, the subsection entitled “Clean the Slate at Substandard Schools” described the proposal for implementing reconstitution as follows:

Many Texas children are trapped in low-performing schools that have failed to improve despite pressures from the Texas Public School Accountability System. A number of states as well as some Texas school districts have experimented with a powerful remedy: reconstitution.

Reconstitution calls for at least some, if not all of a school’s staff to resign and reapply for their jobs. The proposal is to give the staff a probationary period to improve before cleaning the slate and give the school’s staff a final chance to meet their responsibilities to students. Several San Antonio districts experimented with reconstitution and reported dramatic improvements in test scores . . .

Action: Chronically low-performing schools should be required to reconstitute their staffs if they fail to improve after a probationary period. A school should be given a reasonable opportunity to improve student performance before its staff and administrators are reassigned. (Rylander, 1999)

One aspect ignored by the idealistic views of “clean slate” and “fresh start” is that reconstitution deconstructs the working infrastructure and complex social networks of a school, and in the context of constant media scrutiny and stigma in addition to lack of proper resources, such deconstruction can produce a “strained and demoralized workforce” and student body (Rice & Malen, 2003, p. 656). As San Francisco teacher union president Kent Mitchell remarked, reconstitution is “the Clint Eastwood approach to reforming schools. . . . You just pull out a gun and blow them away” (Hendrie, 1998).

In their study of restructuring efforts involving academies and school closure in a Northeastern U.S. city, Galletta and Ayala (2008) found that even when parents welcome school closure, “a fresh start” can be illusory (p. 1981). Rather, *erasure* is a complex process that often involves residual dueling conceptions of failure as rooted either in a community’s assumed cultural pathology or in a state’s bureaucratic ineffectiveness, neglect, and top-down approach that undermines local control. In the case of J High, the assumptions about the students and community as the root of failure did persist after closure, as evident in an *Austin American-Statesman* editorial (“Rearranging,” 2008), which remarked, “Those same problem students who wrecked [J High] will shift to other schools, where they might again cause

dropout statistics to rise and test scores to fall.” The critique of the state’s ineffectiveness to bring about quality education for the J High community merged with neoliberal critiques of the state and opened the space for privatizing school functions and exploiting failure for profit.

## Exploitation of Crisis

According to Klein (2007), “shock therapy” could be summarized by Milton Friedman’s theory that “only a crisis—real or perceived—produces real change. . . . [O]ur basic function [is to] develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes the politically inevitable” (as cited on p. 176). In Austin, the crisis of public school failure allowed for the acceptability of two neoliberal philosophies: that failure is profitable and that public school reform should involve conceding local control to private entities. Companies emerging in the context of accountability reform viewed the failure and impending state action at J High as financial opportunities. As Dexheimer (2006a) reported, “Schools like [J High] are bombarded by representatives from private companies insisting that their products can pump up test scores.” In the J High community, members “speculated that Southwest Key” [a nonprofit involved in establishing charter schools in central Texas] was “simply waiting for the school to fail in order to secure the campus” (Reeves, 2007). Although Southwest Key was passed over by the district in favor of New Tech Network, it still proposed 2 years after the “repurposing” to take over part of the new school as one of its charters.

In 2002, the Austin school board rejected a proposal to invite private takeover of Eastside schools by KIPP academy, concluding that reforms should be locally governed. However, in 2005 in the context of stricter accountability demands at the state and federal levels, the district agreed to radically restructure J High and other high schools according to the mandates of the public-private partnership that sponsored the reform. The partnership called the Texas High School Project included the Texas Education Agency and philanthropic foundations such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation. The grants provided the foundations a tremendous amount of control over school operations. Although philanthropic intervention in public schooling dates back to the very foundations of mass public schooling (see Bowles & Gintis, 1976), the involvement of foundations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation in school redesign reflects the trend over the past 30 to 40 years in educational policy to increasingly contract out school management functions (Bartlett et al., 2002; Richards, Shore, & Sawicky, 1996).

The seeking of private partnerships as the major mechanism for reforming public education has been supported by state and federal laws, particularly the No Child Left Behind Act, which mandate opportunities for private “alternative management” and provision of “supplemental services” for schools deemed as failing. The Texas Education Code (§ 39.1324), for example, gives reconstituted schools that fail to reach a particular rating a choice between closure and “alternative management,” reflecting the logic by which the private sector and the market provide the means for evaluating schools’ conditions and needs for improvement as well as the means to rescue an incompetent and ineffective public sector (see Foucault, 2008, pp. 30, 116-118). In Texas, particularly since 1984, testing and publishing corporations and business lobbies have dominated educational policy making (Salinas & Reidel, 2007) along with philanthropic agencies, whereas teachers and principals have been figured as incompetent and expendable (McNeil, 2000).

Responding to the climate of fear of closures, one Texas assistant superintendent remarked, “There is no magic anything that can make meaningful change in something as complicated as a school district [yet]. . . . If we had the perfect answer, we could go out on the road and make millions” (Dexheimer, 2006a). As this comment reveals, despite the complexity of public schools, particularly those with entrenched inequities, there is a market and demand for “turnaround” strategies that can quickly and magically turn around districts. Such an attribution is linked to the increased speculative nature of capital in neoliberalism and the notion that you can “accrue wealth from nothing” (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2000, p. 313). As Walshe and colleagues (2004) warn,

There is a risk that politicians, government officials and others, newly enamored of the language of failure and turnaround and inadequately informed of the empirical evidence and practical experience in the for-profit sector, will resort too readily to deeming schools, local authorities, hospitals and other organizations to be “failing,” and will have unrealistic expectations of the transformative power of the turnaround process. (p. 207)

## The Ethics of Shock

“Shock therapy” not only results in the privatization of school functions and opportunities to profit from failure but also in cultural and ethical changes. In a 2007 rally of the J High community to prevent closure, a state senator told the crowd, “We can and we will succeed, if each of us and all of us are dedicated. . . . You must merit staying open. . . . The stakes couldn’t be

higher” (Reeves, 2007). The senator’s comment reflects a cultural and moral shift in the conception of public schools. Even when J High was constructed to maintain segregation in the city, its purpose was to accommodate a growing population of Mexican Americans on the Eastside. Thus, the school merged two contradictory approaches by local government to the community: segregation on the one hand, yet social security and welfare, on the other. In the case of the impending closure, however, having to “merit staying open,” the school had to compete to prove its worthiness to simply exist. This shift in social policy from providing the social and institutional networks necessary to secure against the effects of markets and competition, to a concentration on breaking down all impediments to free competition, constitutes the “social ethic of enterprise” (Foucault, 2008, p. 160).

The notion of “having to merit staying open” places the responsibility for the school’s continued existence squarely on the shoulders of the students, absolving policy makers and private partners from responsibility for the consequences of defining and structuring failure. Requiring that schools with differential histories of racial and class segregation be measured and compared by the same standardized tests, which are generally known to reflect socioeconomic status and parental educational level, means that there is some degree of predictability to “failure.” The expectation that schools “beat the odds” and overcome entrenched inequities without real or substantial social transformation amounts to contextual, historical, and moral “reductionism” that works in concert with neoliberalism (Wrigley, 2004, pp. 236-238). The J High closure allowed the state to absolve itself from confronting the fundamental, structural inequalities in a community in which the average household income was US\$9,000, necessitating that high-school students work to support their families (Reeves, 2007). Facilitating the silencing of the structural inequalities was the reduction of reform to a matter of human capital rather than provision of material resources. As Rice and Malen (2003) assert, the underlying philosophy of reconstitution is “the presumption that reconstitution will improve the stock of human capital available in the schools and thereby stimulate and sustain major and meaningful improvements in organizational programs and practices” (p. 644). At J High, reconstitution took place alongside “restructuring,” which itself placed emphasis on “applications, personal attention and guidance and high expectations” and “rigor, relevance, and relationships,” rather than material structural change (Texas High School Project, [http://www.thsp.org/initiatives/high\\_school\\_redesign/index.htm](http://www.thsp.org/initiatives/high_school_redesign/index.htm)). The inability of the drastic reconstitution and restructuring reforms to bring about desired changes in standardized test scores at J High resulted in the attribution of failure to a problem inherent in the school itself. In accordance

with the entrepreneurial social ethic, rather than the public-private partnership, the school, its students, faculty, and staff carried the “risk for losses in the event of failure” and thus became a target of sanctions for “poor performance” (Boe, 1990, pp. 1, 4).

## School Closures as Punishment

The development of school sanctions in Texas has occurred in a broader policy context in the United States, characterized by the retranslation of state support into the stigmatization of need, increased supervision, and expansion of punishment at the expense of social justice initiatives underlying the support (Roberts, 1997; Sudbury, 2005). Cuts in the social safety net, promoted by economic shock therapy, are in many ways “resolved” through various means of punishment and imprisonment (Davis, 1998). The sanctions delivered upon Texas schools after the development of the accountability system became more punitive from 1994 to 2009. As quoted above, the 1999 Comptroller’s document “Challenging the status quo” proposed that public pressure as a punishment did not go far enough for schools deemed as failing, necessitating the more “powerful remedy” of reconstitution. By 2003, in the wake of the No Child Left Behind Act, reconstitution became more than a proposed remedy, but a required sanction of campuses rated “low-performing” for 2 consecutive years (SB 618 Shapleigh [D]). In 2006, the legislature established section § 39.1324, entitled “Mandatory Sanctions,” which added onto the reconstitution, stating that

If a campus is considered academically unacceptable for two consecutive school years after the campus is reconstituted [under Subsection (a),] the commissioner shall order closure of the campus or pursue alternative management under Section 39.1327.

These mandatory sanctions reflect the increasing attachment of a system of punishment to Keynesian state interventions, which Wacquant (2008) describes as the “*carceral-assistential continuum*” (pp. 28-29, author’s emphasis). At the federal level, the Bush administration through the No Child Left Behind Act used the structure of Title I aid to impoverished schools, established as part of Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty, to enact controls and punishments on “failing schools.” At the state level, the Texas accountability system was attached as a component to court-mandated finance equity between districts (see Farr & Trachtenberg, 1999). More recent challenges by richer districts to the school finance system in *West Orange-Cove*

*Consolidated School District v. Neeley* forced the state to again revise financing. While reducing the mechanism for equalizing interdistrict funding, the massive bill drafted in response contained the “mandatory sanctions” provision of the Texas Education Code that strengthened the commissioner’s role in disciplining “unacceptable” campuses by compelling reconstitution and school closure. As McNeil (2000) predicted, although equity components of the accountability system disappear, the systems of control remain in place and become strengthened.

Interestingly, earlier versions of the bill in the first and second special sessions (79[1]HB2 [Grusendorf] and 79[2] SB 8 [Shapiro]) contained the language “may order closure.” By the third special session, “shall order closure” appeared in both the Senate and House versions: 79(3) SB 1 (Shapiro) and 79(3) HB 55 (Eissler). Then Chair of the Senate Education Committee, Representative Florence Shapiro, explained, “Schools that repeatedly fall short should face consequences” (Stutz, 2008). The deliberate addition of “mandatory” to the sanctions established by the accountability system echoes (and is perhaps even borrowed from) the language and practice of mandatory minimum sentencing. The premise is very similar: establishing an arbitrary offense and sentence, and refusing to allow consideration of mitigating circumstances in the punishment. The policy removes decision making from the local authority, from the judge or the school board, and instead, requires localities to submit to an arbitrary standard. That standard, whether in mandatory minimum sentencing or in the “mandatory sanctions,” is established for political reasons: to present an approach of “getting tough.” While Shirley Neeley, the Commissioner of Education in 2006, exercised more restraint regarding the closure of schools,<sup>3</sup> her successor Robert Scott exercised closure power in his first year as commissioner in 2008 and even after a bill passed in 2009 to provide schools more time.

## **The Trauma of Shock: Race and Social Death**

As with economic shock therapy, the closure of J High involved collective trauma. School closure, as embedded in the Texas Education Code, is the maximum penalty for failure, the death sentence for a school. Not only did metaphors of death run thematically throughout articles on J High School in titles containing words such as “pass or perish,” “slow dying,” “struggling to survive,” and “funeral,” but students and alumnae experienced the closure the school as a traumatic loss. For example, one article reported that “Several alumni said turning their back on a school with so much history—so much of their family’s own history—is unthinkable. Students were reared knowing

that when the time came, they, too, would be J Rams” (Hill, 2007). In a rally to save J High, one alumnus even proclaimed “I would die for [J High] School,” (Reeves, 2007).

Losing a school is equivalent to experiencing a “social” and “civic death,” characterized by the loss of natality and history, a center for community development and advocacy, as well as the social and economic benefits of a nearby public school. According to Patterson (1982) “social death” imposes a type of “liminality,” a “margin[ality] between community and chaos, life and death . . .” (p. 51). For Wacquant (2002), “civic death” entails a state of being disenfranchised, locked out of social redistribution, and deprived of cultural capital (pp. 57-58). In Austin, the historic symbol of such loss as civic and social death is the 1971 closure of Anderson High School, the all-Black Eastside high school. As Austin Chronicle reporter, Richard Whittaker (2008) wrote, “There’s a mantra often heard within Austin ISD circles: ‘J High won’t become another Anderson.’” The Austin Independent School District closed Anderson in its attempt to comply with court-ordered desegregation, justifying the decision as ridding the district of racially identifiable schools. The district also closed two other long-standing Black schools and instituted “one-way busing” of Black students to White schools (Davis, 1975, p. 102). Constructed in 1889, Anderson survived by way of community-based financial support or “double-taxation.”<sup>4</sup> Nurtured as a community center, the school bore the name of its beloved principal (Wilson & Segall, 2001). According to Jackson (1979), the fact that there would be “no secondary school with a Black heritage” meant that the “cost of desegregation [was] too high in the Black community” (pp. 94, 97). Commenting on the decomunalizing impact of the school closure and the accompanying busing of only Black children, Wilson and Segall remark:

Closing the Black school accomplished two goals: The overt symbol of a dual system of education no longer existed, and, though few realized it, the covert symbol of exclusion was further entrenched in Austin society. (p. 107)

As shown in the documentary *Crossover and Parallel Lives: Remembrances of Austin* by Rosalee Martin (2001), the dispersing of Anderson students and teachers without a sense of community or safety imposed the loss of social and political capital. Even Pat Forgione, the Superintendent at the time of J High’s closure in 2008, remarked on the memory of Anderson, “Not just the building got closed, but the neighborhood got dissolved. . . . I can tell you, the black community has never forgiven the district for that” (Whittaker, 2008).

Reminiscent of the closure of Anderson in the name of desegregation, the closure of J High in the name of accountability wrought fear for the future of other Eastside schools. After the closure of J High, the targeting of Eastside middle schools for closures struck fears of a “domino effect” in the Eastside, prompting community leader Allen Weeks to comment, “The disrespect to the community is really hard to stomach” (Whittaker, 2009). As Lipman (2011) suggests, school closures and “turnarounds” must be viewed in the context of racialized neoliberal urbanism and gentrification. Even before No Child Left Behind, one of the Eastside high schools with the highest percentage of Black students in the district had been under constant threat of closure. Its central location at the intersection of three major highways made it a prime target for district officials, who with each closure proposal suggested moving administrative offices to the location. In Austin, proposals for school closures coexist with the gentrification of the Eastside, due to further expansion of the university east of Interstate 35—which is often referred to as “the color line” in Austin—as well as increases in property taxes that push out long-standing and low-income residents, and the construction of expensive new condominiums (Flynn, 2007; Taboada, 2007). A city demographer, Ryan Robinson, described the predominantly Eastside Mexican American neighborhood surrounding J High school as “a ‘historically undervalued barrio that’s gentrifying. It’s the last part of the urban core that’s affordable,’” according to a *Wall Street Journal Online* article entitled “Never Mind the Bullets: Upsides to Living in Low-Rent Areas” (Meehan, 2007).

## **Conceptualizing Cleaning the Slate as “State Racism”**

Reforming schools by closure and “cleaning the slate,” particularly when coupled with gentrification is a spatial or geopolitical manifestation of what Foucault (2003) calls “state racism.” For Foucault, state racism involves the deployment of death or the elimination of a racialized subpopulation as a means of improving life for and health of the general population (pp. 254-257). Such death can be direct or “indirect,” the latter of which means “exposing someone to death, increasing the risk of death for some people, or quite simply political death, expulsion, rejection, and so on” (p. 256). Historically, the state racism exercised in the United States has been geopolitical and spatial in its dimensions in the forms of reservations and “removal,” de facto and de jure segregation, internment camps, immigration restriction, ghettoization/“barrioization,” and incarceration. Such procedures are based on the disposability of racial bodies, upon which direct and indirect modes of death are deployed in order to improve life for the “greater” public.



In the case of J High school, the Texas Education Commissioner's letter ordering its closure reveals the ways in which the school was subject to state racism. The description of J High as having "troubling, broad-based patterns of poor and declining performance" and "long history of performance deficiencies" (Scott, 2008) invokes the racializing discourse of degeneracy (Foucault, 2003, pp. 252, 255). The reality of the school as a segregated, predominantly Mexican American school on the East side facilitates that racialization. The letter detaches J High from its historical context and from the complex realities that link the fates of Austin's high schools, for example, high rates of student mobility due to increased transfer policies. The tendency to link testing and educational "failure" with race has itself a long history (Gould, 1996; Johnson & Bond, 1934). The very conception that schools could indeed have a quantifiable level of overall performance is itself perhaps a relatively new concept. According to James Coleman, the "Equality of Educational Opportunity" Report (or the Coleman Report) of 1966 constituted a major shift in educational policy because of its initiating the practice of "using achievement outputs to judge the quality of schools" and of using outputs as a basis for evaluating the distribution of educational opportunity (as cited in Wong & Nicotera, 2004, p. 129). In a critique of the Coleman Report's use of standardized testing results as "outputs" to evaluate desegregation in particular, Asbury (1978) remarked, citing "the problems of test abuse and the improper use of tests [which] have been well documented":

Why are we measuring the effects of desegregation with achievement tests? . . . [U]nless there is another point one wishes to make; and, that is that "no matter what you do by the way of educational provisions for Blacks, they won't improve very much anyway because Black people aren't as smart as white people." . . . Carried further, this reasoning leads one to espouse that if whites are smarter than Blacks it must be because Nature (or God) preordained it this way, and that in the natural order of things, whites are supposed to be in charge. . . . The marriage of convenience between "scholarship" and racism has existed throughout our history. (p. 70)

Asbury's critique indicates how race is present even when it is unsaid, a quality of postmodern racism as a "racism without the races" (Balibar, 1991), but also when embedded in apparently benevolent state actions.

With the framing of the school as a subpopulation in degeneracy, the commissioner's letter framed the closure, a type of social and civic death, as necessary for the good of the general population: "The closure of [J] High School will be a challenge for the community that it serves, but my greatest

concern is for each student's education. State law requires that the students assigned to [J High School] be provided a more effective learning environment." In other words, for the good of the students, J High must close, no matter the cost to the community. That the closure was meant as a type of death to a population is also evident in the letter's instructions for "repurposing," which required that "at least fifty percent of the students formerly served being reassigned to other campuses, as well as removal of the campus administrator and reassignment of at least seventy-five percent of the instructional staff" (Scott, 2008). Here, the disposal and breakup of the school community are seen as the major elements that will improve achievement. Those students and faculty removed from the school carry with them the responsibility for the school's death and the liminality of failure, as evident in the *Austin American-Statesman* editorial ("Rearranging," 2008) mentioned earlier, which remarked, "Those same problem students who wrecked [J High] will shift to other schools, where they might again cause dropout statistics to rise and test scores to fall."

## Implications

The closure of J High School in Austin, though framed as an action by the benevolent state seeking the best educational experiences for all students, constituted an example of neoliberal shock therapy and benign state racism. As the first school targeted for closure, J High carried the weight of being constructed to maintain racial and class segregation. The school and its community experienced the contradictions of desegregation, caused by the tactics by state and local governments to evade desegregation, and the creation of within-school segregation by the magnet initiatives. At the Texas state level, the implementation of the accountability system as one attached to state funding established an institutional link between aid and punishment. The forms of punishment became more stringent with federal mandates under No Child Left Behind, going from public humiliation to the "mandatory sanctions" of reconstitution and closure. The closure of J High School, shuffled between neglect and extreme modes of intervention, imposed a familiar social and civic death upon a community being eyed for gentrification. Reconstitution, restructuring, and closure were forms of "shock therapy," whereby crises and extreme interventions intended to "clean the slate" provided opportunities for privatization of school management and erasure of cultural memory. In the 2 years following the "repurposing" of J High, one of the academies at the new high school was back under threat of sanctions for not reaching the target set as minimum acceptable standardized test

scores. More important, the burden of the failure of the “turnaround” experiments of reconstitution, restructuring, and repurposing was not carried by philanthropists like the Gates Foundation (Lipman, 2011, p. 112), private management companies like New Tech Network, or state legislators such as Rep. Shapiro; rather, it was carried by students, parents, faculty, staff, and school communities.

Given that federal educational policy makers under the Obama administration, particularly Education Secretary Arne Duncan, have adopted the approach of the “turnaround” as a national strategy for reforming schools, the story of J High has meaning beyond the bounds of its city and state. In Duncan’s own former district in Chicago, school closures not only brought trauma to the communities they served but tragedy too in their wake. The closure and subsequent merger of schools into charters did not account for the social boundaries of the city, particularly social gangs, and tensions and fights between opposing groups led to the death of one student. For a different school marked for closure, tearful students and teachers had barely time to say good-bye when principals from other schools began claiming their schools’ objects. According to a teacher at the school, “They let the Area 10 principals into the building to take and claim whatever they could get their hands on . . . while teachers were trying to close up for the year and with students present! I even had a principal reach over my head while I was typing to put a sticker on my classroom computer to claim it as her own. WHILE I WAS TYPING” (Schmidt, 2009). In addition, African American teachers, who were victim to the firing in the turnaround efforts, filed a lawsuit claiming that school closures constituted racial discrimination.

The “Save Our Schools” rally in Washington in the summer of 2011 spoke to the reality that communities across the country fear for the loss of their schools and oppose the strategies of punishment and “turnaround.” It also pointed to one aspect of “shock therapy” not mentioned above. As Klein (2007) suggests, “shock” is a “temporary state.” Against the usurping of public accountability and against erasure of cultural memory, those who experience shock therapy resist by “demanding more democracy” (p. 565), “learning how to build shock absorbers” (p. 573), and engaging in “reconstruction” and “recollections” (pp. 585-586). The J High community kept its memory alive by establishing an online community, organizing, for example, homecoming events at the new school, even though there was no longer a football team. In addition, in 2011, it proposed to the district that the repurposed high school be given back the old name of the campus in which it was housed. The desire for the community to hold onto and transform a school that many in Austin viewed as unsalvageable indicates a disjuncture between social justice

imaginaries within the school community and the neoliberal reform policies employed by the district, state, private partners, and even the school administration. Although they may appropriate the language of social justice movements, “instrumentalist and technocratic” reforms tend to ignore the historical, material, experiential, and embodied dimensions of racially segregated schools, as well as the social and cultural capital invested by students and communities in their schools (Alonso, Anderson, Su, & Theoharis, 2009, pp. 194-195; Niesz, 2010; Yosso, 2006). The kinds of internal and structural changes desired by school communities, such as administrative stability, teacher retention, improved facilities, more advanced curricula, and respect of student dignity, can be at odds with accountability demands and unaccounted for in private interventions. Secretary Duncan suggests, “As a country, we’re going to have to be willing to experience a little pain and discomfort. That’s the only way we’re going to get there. Our children deserve it.” Although students, teachers, and communities do survive, resist, and become resilient after the social death of school closure, is the trauma of shock therapy, without the kind of true social transformation that can bring educational equity, really what children deserve?

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### **Notes**

1. In fact, this document was one of the earliest documents listed on a search through the free ERIC database in which the keyword “sanctions” referred to an action applied to schools and districts by a state. In entries dated before 1989, sanctions referred to union actions against schools and teacher-members (often accompanied by the keyword *teacher militancy*), codes of conduct and disciplinary actions toward students, censorship and banned books, and mental health services in which sanctions were used in the positive meaning “to allow.”
2. Foucault (1978/1995) writes, “In a disciplinary regime, on the other hand, individualization is ‘descending’: as power becomes more anonymous and more functional, those on whom it is exercised tend to be more strongly individualized; it is exercised by surveillance rather than ceremonies, by observation rather than commemorative accounts, by comparative measures that have the ‘norm’ as reference

rather than genealogies giving ancestors as points of reference; by ‘gaps’ rather than by deeds” (p. 193).

3. See, for example, a report from Houston ISD, “The superintendent also said that Commissioner Shirley Neeley has told him she is pleased with the progress at all three schools and that even though state law gives her the authority to shut down the schools if they are rated as unacceptable again this year, she will not do that.” Retrieved from <http://www.hisd.org/HISDConnectDS/v/index.jsp?vgnextoid=015ac2eadd3c2110VgnVCM10000028147fa6RCRD&vgnextchannel=f6d4ced1cc65e010VgnVCM10000028147fa6RCRD>]
4. “Double-taxation” is a system in which Black community members, in order to support their own schools, would pay a second set of taxes on top of the required taxes for public schools (Anderson, 1988, p. 156).

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