

The Moral Foundations of Objections to School Closure

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INTRODUCTION

In the past decade, closure has become an increasingly prevalent means of school reform in the United States, particularly in urban centers. With public school districts facing declining enrollments, budget shortfalls, and deteriorating facilities, among other things, closure is often cast as a means to improve educational resources and outcomes. Defending the closure of 47 of its public schools, the CEO of the Chicago school district made precisely this appeal: “For too long children in certain parts of Chicago have been cheated out of the resources they need to succeed in the classroom because they are in underutilized, under resourced schools. By consolidating these schools we can focus on transitioning every child into a better performing school close to their home.”¹ Likewise, when Boston school officials announced in the fall of 2012 that John Marshall Elementary School would be converted into a public charter school, they cited alarmingly low results on statewide achievement tests as evidence that Marshall Elementary was unable to meet the needs of the children who attended the school. Despite this framing, closure is rarely received favorably.

In nearly every urban area that has experienced school closures, including Chicago and Boston, community members have trenchantly opposed proposals to shutter public schools. Take the case of Marshall Elementary. Many parents — despite the new charter school’s offer of a longer school day, a partnership with a national nonprofit on school grounds, and an influx of resources— spoke out against the change. Some questioned whether Boston officials had the right to alter a neighborhood institution valued by the community. Others felt, in their own words, “betrayed” by a decision-making process that had ignored parent and community input. Parents demanded to be included in any subsequent steps of reform, to the extent that one father challenged the committee to put the entire proposal to a new vote by the parents — meant not as a litmus test for the decision, but as a legitimate process for deciding whether to convert Marshall.²

Such popular objections to closure appear to talk past the practical concerns schools face, emphasizing, on the face of it, quite different values. It is an open and interesting question, then, how we make sense of such objections — both on what grounds such objections rest and whether such grounds have any force as an objection to closure. Drawing from popular objections to school closure, I propose three possible grounds: parental rights, the existing value of schools, and the role of schools as democratic institutions.³ Though my analysis is admittedly preliminary in many respects, I argue that neither parental rights nor existing value generate a sustainable or useful objection to school closure. An account of schools as democratic institutions, however, suggests limitations on the use of school closure as reform policy. My hope is that this argument challenges commonplace thinking about school

closure and ultimately offers a place from which we can begin to think about this issue with improved clarity.

PARENTAL RIGHTS

One way in which we might understand popular objections to closure is to consider them as originating in an account of parental rights. At rallies against school closure, the call-and-response “Whose schools? Our schools! Whose children? Our children!” is commonplace. Even in its most basic, general form, the message that these are our children is provocative, calling on our attachment to the intimate relationship between parent and child. But what does it mean to assert a claim to “our children”? Conceptually, the parental rights objection is grounded in the idea that parents have a special claim to make educational choices in the interests of their children. But whether the claim that these are our children extends to an objection to closing a school is unclear.

Certainly, the foundation for the parental rights objection is intuitively compelling. The attractiveness stems, perhaps, from the value we place on the unique relationship between parent and child. As Eamonn Callan puts it, childrearing is “one of the central, meaning-giving tasks of our lives.”⁴ We may easily wax sentimental about this relationship — its success can be a source of great pride for individuals, while the failure of this relationship may prompt persistent feelings of remorse. But at some level, we have all, as a parent or as a child, experienced the importance of this relationship, whether in its fulfillment, failure, or its absence. Truly, the relationship between parent and child can be unlike any other relationship that exists — it can be intimate in a way that cannot be easily replicated. Thus, we have good reason to fundamentally protect this relationship.

Education, in a very broad sense, is often thought to be an inextricable part of the parent–child relationship. This is so for a number of reasons. On the one hand, from the perspective of parents, sharing their values, religion, or cultural heritage with their children may strengthen the parent–child bond. The fact that parents provide an education that allows their children to realize a conception of a good life — whatever that may be — may also be a meaningful and perhaps burdensome expression of parents’ concern for their children. On the other hand, from the perspective of children, education is also integral to their development and growth. Parents’ knowledge of their children may be helpful in advancing such educational aims. Surely, then, educational concerns constitute an important facet of the relationship between parents and their children.

We might first consider whether closure interferes with the parent–child relationship itself. If closure were to somehow inhibit parents from providing an education to their children, thereby possibly obstructing the realization of this valuable relationship, then the policy would likely be objectionable. Yet, the thrust of this objection is mistaken, as it would be quite unreasonable to conceive of a typical closure policy in this manner. The goal of school closure is neither to deny children an education nor to prohibit parents from providing an education to their children; rather, it is to preserve the public provision of education given certain real constraints. Moreover, if closure were to result in the denial of education to some children, the interests of

children, prior to the value of the parent–child relationship, would generate the real force of the objection.

The basic parental rights claim, “These are our children,” represents more than simply this relationship. Parental rights assert that parents have a fundamental right to authority over their children. Thus, rather than simply obstruct the realization of the parent–child relationship, closure interferes with legitimate parental authority. The crux of the parental rights objection rests on the idea that only parents have a right to make educational choices for their children. It proceeds as an extension of classic school choice arguments.⁵ Generally, such arguments hold that parents have an unconditional, fundamental right to make educational decisions for their children — namely where their children go to school and to what values and beliefs they are exposed. The unconditional nature of this right entails that parents, as opposed to the state, are largely responsible for molding and shaping schools, perhaps through a mechanism like school choice. Closure, then, could be understood as a decision about schools that inappropriately interferes with parents’ ability to make educational choices.

Though parental rights would appear to offer a strong objection to closure, the argument is based on a misconception. Simply put, parents do not have an unconditional right to make choices for their children. As Harry Brighouse points out, such a right can only be justified by an appeal to the interests of children, thus making the parental right secondary to the interests of children.⁶ On his account, no aspect of the parent–child relationship is able to confer such an absolute right on parents. We might think, however, that giving so much priority to children’s rights leaves parents subject to, as Callan puts it, “a state of open-ended subordination to the good of the child.”⁷ Yet, even if we were to argue, as Callan does, for the inclusion of parental interests in an account of parental authority over education, we still end up at the same place: the right is conditional. Just as the interests of children cannot entirely trump those of their parents, the reverse is also true.

Without an unconditional right to make educational decisions for their children, the objection to closure on parental rights grounds fails. For one thing, parents are not alone in having a right to make educational decisions for children. The state also has an obligation to children as future citizens to provide them with a fair and reasonable education. For another, children’s interests matter. We know that school officials most often designate schools that serve children poorly for closure. With that in mind, presuming that parental rights trumps closure for any reason may emphasize parental rights at the expense of children’s rights. If a school targeted for closure were underserving a child, then there could be no complaint on parental rights grounds against closing the school, for the child’s interests cannot generate a reason to keep the school open. In fact, as cases like Marshall Elementary suggest, closure may potentially improve children’s prospects. We should, then, look elsewhere for a sustainable objection to closure.

EXISTING VALUE

Another way we might approach an objection to school closure is to consider the value of schools themselves. Take, for example, Edward V. Bok Technical High

School in Philadelphia. In the spring of 2013, school officials announced that Bok Tech would be closed the following school year. Community members and Bok Tech alumni protested, arguing that the 75-year tradition of the school merited preservation. They pointed out that Bok Tech was built as part of the Works Progress Administration during the Great Depression. Indeed, the school resembles an Art Deco–styled cathedral more than a school and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Moreover, the appeals revealed the place that Bok Tech held in the hearts of many working-class Philadelphians, multiple generations of whom attended the school. The historical value of Bok Tech, as well as its continued importance to the community, seems to prompt a fairly strong reason to object to school closure, which we might articulate in terms of the concept of existing value.

The idea of existing value locates value in a particular object. In brief, we might propose that schools have some value that make them separate and valuable apart from each other — simply put, no two schools are exactly alike. Each school, on this account, could be conceived as a distinct entity valuable for reasons that cannot be transferred easily to another school. If it were true that schools have such distinct values, then closure would result in the loss of something important, perhaps irreplaceable. Clearly, such an account would support a strong objection to closure. Before we can accept this argument, there are two questions we must first address. How, if at all, might schools have distinct values? Further, what are the limitations or objections to this approach?

Things that exist, we often claim, have a particular value. On account of that value, we have reasons to want to preserve things that already exist in the world. As such a thing of value, a particular school might carry significance beyond the fact that it is an institution designed to educate children. A school might have value in a community because it is the way that it is. It may be a source of community identity or heritage, or serve as a touchstone that people can refer to in common. A school that has these qualities could be understood as a “valuable social creation,” to use the words of G. A. Cohen, which thus merits preservation. A “radical enough transformation” could possibly distort and deform the identity of the institution, changing our understanding of its value and, indeed, changing the value of the institution itself.⁸

There are two ways in which the existing value of a school may be manifest: (1) a school may have value in and of itself, or (2) its value may rest in the relationship people have with the school. Where value is located, I think, matters little for this argument. In either instance, the impact of closure is clear: some distinct value is lost, even if it is replaced by something else. Along these lines, Cohen draws an important distinction between “conservation of what has value” and “conservation of value.”⁹ He is after the idea that value is not interchangeable. That is, if all we care about is the preservation of value, then whatever is the bearer of value is of no consequence; as long as we maintain or increase value in the world, then we do not violate this principle. If, rather, what we care about is the preservation of particular things that have value, then we have stronger reasons to preserve actual objects or institutions. Intuitively, the conservation of existing value makes sense. One look at an art or history museum reveals the value we place in particular things as well as the

feeling of irreplaceability that some objects have. This might also play a role in why we want to conserve particular institutions or relationships as they are — because “as they are” has a value that we all should recognize.

For good reason, we may still be skeptical toward such a claim. Though it may well be possible that schools have some value worth preserving, how important that value is in comparison to other considerations remains unclear. For one thing, it is difficult to determine whether or how existing value preempts new value. Indeed, if the new value created by the destruction of an existing value is much greater, it may override any hold that existing value has on our judgment. This could be the case with schools that are targeted for closure. We do not need to be concerned with the existing value such schools may have, but simply point to the greater value of what would replace them. I would submit that it is altogether unclear both how we could measure existing value and what marks the threshold justifying change, but neither concern undermines the criticism. The value of existing value is not absolute.

Perhaps of even greater importance is the fact that an argument to preserve a school is entirely different from an argument to preserve a work of art. Briefly, preserving art may be thought, arguably, to be a matter of cultural heritage or of the importance of great examples of human talent. Schools, on the other hand, are institutions we often associate with basic concerns about justice. Indeed, the majority of the schools targeted for closure serve populations that face substantive economic deprivation and political alienation. The condition of schools in these communities may contribute to reproducing these unjust inequalities. In arguing for the conservation of schools in such a context, we may likewise find ourselves arguing for the conservation of injustice — whether we want to or not. This undermines the very principle of existing value; injustice, as Cohen points out, has no value worth preserving.¹⁰

Given these substantive concerns, existing value provides only a *pro tanto* reason to object to school closure. As in the case of schools like Bok Tech, we may rightly point to the value the school has historically or to community identity as something worth preserving. Such importance suggests that school officials should, at the least, treat the existing value of a school or the relationship between a community and its school as a meaningful consideration in instances of closure. Indeed, existing value might give us reason to object to closing a school because of financial concerns or desires to change the structure of a school system — for example, to create a portfolio district or “right size” a school district. Yet, an account of existing value offers little support when it comes to the vast majority of the schools targeted for closure. If these schools cannot serve the children that attend them well, then our reason to preserve them is considerably weakened. We ought not prioritize the preservation of existing value when doing so may also mean that we preserve injustice.

SCHOOLS AS DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS

The relationship between closure and existing value turns, in part, on the fact that public schools are matters of justice. But what does it mean to say that schools are a matter of justice? Moreover, for whom are schools a matter of justice? There is a tendency, I believe, to think too narrowly about why and to whom are schools important. A typical response is encapsulated in a phrase from Michael Johannek: a

school is “an educational service provider to its attending students.”¹¹ On this commonplace account, schools matter in how well they provide educational services, and they matter primarily to children. Yet Johaneck points out that public schools have historically meant much more than this; they have been used as community centers or civic forums and have taken on an “assertive role on behalf of the republic.”¹² Granted, Johaneck’s examples illustrate what public schools might have been and should not be confused with an argument for what schools ought to be. But toward that end, such historical differences do open our minds to the possibility that schools may relate to justice in more ways than Johaneck’s model of the educational provider suggests.

As one possibility, consider the common view that public schools are democratic institutions.¹³ What is meant by this idea is, I think, too often taken for granted and left unquestioned. Frustratingly, it frequently seems that the democratic view of schools is either confused with the idea that public schools are institutions open to all or reduced to the notion that schools are simply the subject of democratic legislation. Neither, however, captures the full weight of an account of schools as democratic institutions.

To begin to think about a broader account of democratic schools, consider a distinction Meira Levinson offers. Public schools, she claims, educate both for and within democracy.¹⁴ On the one hand, schools educate children for democracy by providing them with the knowledge and skills necessary for participation in democratic society. On the other hand, public schools function within a democratic context, meaning that they are subject to democratic control. This may mean legislation, of course, but it may also incorporate the work of local school councils or parent–teacher associations. In general, this prong of the distinction addresses the citizen control that is necessary to view public schools as legitimate institutions.

While this distinction may be conceptually clear, the difference between the two can blur in practice. For example, schools function as sites of civic engagement. Adults may join parent–teacher associations or local school councils and, in so doing, gain a voice in local decision making. When adults volunteer at schools, they engage in civic labor; they influence the experience of not only their own child, but of many children in the community. Thus, these actions encompass both education for and education within democracy — by engaging in democratic control of schools, adults also develop the ability to exercise their civic voice.

To conceive of public schools as democratic institutions in this way captures some of the intuitions that led us to consider parental rights and existing value as potential grounds for objecting to school closure. It explains why adults should have a voice in schools without requiring authority over children; rather, for public schools to be legitimate institutions, some degree of democratic control is necessary. Furthermore, this account suggests that citizens’ claims to be meaningfully included in decisions about schools should be taken seriously. Given the direct level of engagement with schools that citizens can often expect, it follows that they do have some legitimate claim to be part of the decision-making procedure. It also explains why the notion of existing value pulls at our intuition. The relationship that communities may have with their schools can be forged through democratic deliberation. Through their own

work and that of previous generations — even if they lack a direct connection to a particular school — individuals may rightfully feel as if they have some ownership of it. To end that relationship not only impacts the sense of value associated with the school, but also a community's sense of civic identity. These are both strong reasons to object to closure.

To understand the extent of the democratic objection to closure, we must reconsider what closing a democratic institution would mean. To do so, let us bracket the fact that we are talking about public schools and consider municipal governments. Imagine that a state government, after some deliberation, announces that they plan to do away with the local elected governments of a number of towns and cities, as these municipalities have continually failed to manage their respective budgets and thus their municipal structures are in shambles. Because the state, overburdened as it is, cannot take on the additional task of governing these towns and cities, it hands control of them to neighboring municipalities that have done a better job at managing their budgets. Assume that some of the receiving municipalities may also still be in the red, just less so. To ensure that the well-functioning, or just better-functioning, municipalities do not falter at their budget balancing genius, no additional seats in the decision-making bodies of the receiving municipalities are opened up to incorporate the dispersed municipality. Rather, boundaries are jiggered so that in the next election, all people will vote for representatives as usual. To give receiving municipalities time to prepare, the state decides that the changes will be effective in three months and closes the matter.

This generalized example of an actual practice, receivership, runs counter to a number of our strongly held beliefs about democratic government and legitimacy. That said, receivership is also a real possibility in the face of municipal governments gone utterly wrong. We should not, then, enter into this process lightly. This example may also be more similar to closure than we first expect. Like municipal governments, schools, as democratic institutions, are sites of civic participation. People invest themselves in building a shared community and engage in a political process. When a school is closed, this work is lost, and it may not be as easy as we think to re-engage with a brand new school across town. Moreover, the message decision-makers send to communities in closing a school may suggest that the communities are incapable of managing their own affairs. In no unimportant sense, the decision to close a school may, to some extent, compromise individuals' standing as free and equal citizens.

One might quickly counter that closing schools is completely unlike shutting down municipal government. People participate in municipal government and schools in different ways. This rebuttal misses the crux of my argument about schools as democratic institutions. Schools, like municipal governments, are also tasked with a number of duties critical to democracy; they provide an education necessary to prepare children for democratic living, as well as engage adult citizens in democratic deliberation, developing their civic acumen. In fact, given the scope of formal schooling, individuals may actually substantively engage as much or more with their schools than they do with their municipal government.

The modified receivership example also suggests the limitations of an objection to closure based on schools as democratic institutions. Suspending a municipal government is justified only in extreme cases. Consequently, if the receivership example is as analogous as I presume, then it sets a high threshold for the use of school closures, but it does not rule them out categorically. Recall that school closure is often a response to potential violations of educational opportunity for children — conditions at a school are so bad that children cannot possibly receive the type of education that the state is obligated to provide. In these instances, I think closure may actually be a just response to address a greater injustice perpetrated against children — but only if all other options have been exhausted. This implies that, because closing a school involves an intrusion into important democratic values, closure should not be a common policy lever. Thus, we must ultimately conclude that an objection to school closure may not be an objection to the practice itself, but rather to its overuse.

CODA

In closing, I want to consider one final objection to my argument. It may be suggested that I take far too optimistic a view of the schools that educational authorities often target for closure. While this a fair concern, I think what is more likely the case is that, as moral or political philosophers, we have not attended well to thinking about how we should account for schools that function in unjust contexts. This essay originated from hours spent scouring blogs and comment sections, watching video posts, reading newspaper articles, and, in some cases, talking to parents about closure. In a sense, these glimpses feel like sad shadows of actual experience, but they have nonetheless guided my inquiry. I take seriously the parent who describes the news that her children's school would be closed as a slap in the face, as well as the fact that some families have sent multiple generations of children to the same school. When parents asked why were "our" schools being closed, I wondered what they meant in claiming schools as theirs. What moral claims prompt these responses? How might they be justified? Does the unjust context shift what moral arguments we prioritize? These questions linger, and they shout out to be addressed.

1. Barbara Byrd-Bennett, "Letter from CEO Byrd-Bennett on New Investments and Student Supports," *Chicago Public Schools*, March 20, 2013, http://www.cps.edu/News/Announcements/Pages/3_20_2013_PR2.aspx.

2. Boston Public School Television, *Boston School Committee Meeting 11-07-12*, video, 03:48:19, November 7, 2012, http://www.cityofboston.gov/cable/video_library.asp?id=2863.

3. I acknowledge that there may be other avenues of inquiry to consider, such as status-based objections, but I do not address them in this essay.

4. Eamonn Callan, "The Great Sphere: Education Against Servility," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 31, no. 2 (1997): 222.

5. For a clear overview of accounts of parental rights that argue strongly for parental choice, see Harry Brighouse, *School Choice and Social Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 13–18, and 83–89.

6. *Ibid.*, 17.

7. Callan, "The Great Sphere," 225.

8. G. A. Cohen, "Rescuing Conservatism: A Defense of Existing Value," in *Finding Oneself in the Other*, ed. Michael Otsuka (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 147.

9. *Ibid.*, 152–157.

10. *Ibid.*, 172.

11. Michael C. Johanek, "Preparing Pluribus for Unum: Historical Perspectives on Civic Education," in *Making Civics Count: Citizenship Education for a New Generation*, ed. David E. Campbell, Meira Levinson, and Frederick M. Hess (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2012), 58.

12. *Ibid.*, 58.

13. For a seminal example, see Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987).

14. Meira Levinson, *No Citizen Left Behind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 324–325n.

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