Understanding Community Connections

A Qualitative Analysis Examining
School Communities' Experiences with
School Closures and Combinations

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Executive Summary

Baltimore City Public Schools' (City Schools) Office of New Initiatives (ONI) partnered with the Center for Social Organization of Schools (CSOS) at Johns Hopkins University's (JHU) School of Education to conduct a qualitative research study to understand the experiences of four school communities that combined during the 2019-2020 through 2021-2022 school years. This report summarizes the findings from 51 semi-structured empathy interviews with participants from Park Heights Academy (PHA), Mary Ann Winterling Elementary School (MAW), Pimlico Elementary School (Pimlico) and Sandtown Winchester Achievement Academy (SWAA) who attended Martin Luther King Elementary/Middle School (MLK), Gilmor Elementary School (Gilmor) or Lockerman Bundy Elementary School (Lockerman Bundy). The study explored how different members of school communities experienced closures and transitions, and it identifies key implications for school combination efforts.   The interviews took place during the 2024-25 school year.

The data collected was analyzed through both inductive and deductive coding approaches. Participants included students from Grades 4-8, parents and caregivers, educators and staff across different grade levels and specialties and school leaders with 4 to 14 years of experience.

Across interviews, participants expressed strong emotional connections to their former schools. Students, families and staff described their closed schools as deeply rooted in relationship-based culture, community identity and care-centered leadership. Even years after the closures, these attachments remained central to their identities.

Participants also emphasized the complexity of the transition process. Combining distinct school communities requires more than logistical coordination; it calls for intentional integration of school identity, inclusive decision-making and visible efforts to preserve what matters most. Incorporating symbolic elements from closed schools (e.g., naming school spaces, maintaining traditions) and building shared goals were seen as instrumental in helping communities reestablish trust and belonging. The timing of these transitions (i.e., during the COVID-19 pandemic) added significant strain. Participants' experiences highlight the importance of creating structured opportunities for closure, transition support and human-to-human interactions during these processes.

Strong school leadership emerged as a critical success factor. Participants pointed to principals as a primary driver of whether the new school community felt cohesive and supportive. Leaders who prioritized empathy, consistent communication and a shared vision were consistently credited with helping to build unified school communities.

Despite early challenges, many participants described signs of adjustment and gradual rebuilding in the years following the school transitions. From the student and family perspective, most reported maintaining or gaining access to instructional resources and expanded extracurricular opportunities. Several students noted that increased access to enrichment programs and educator support contributed to renewed engagement in school. Some families appreciated the continuity of relationships when trusted educators from their closed schools transitioned with them to the new school setting. Educators highlighted that the changes allowed for stronger collaboration among grade-level teams and more comprehensive student support structures. Several staff members described new career opportunities that emerged during transition periods, including leadership and coaching roles.

Overall, the findings suggest that while many school communities have adapted over time, this adjustment was largely driven by the ongoing efforts of school leaders, students, families and educators to build trusting relationships, honor elements and practices from both school communities and establish shared goals and visions for their combined school. The experiences shared in this study also point to several areas where intentional planning is needed: ensuring leadership training, creating space for emotional supports and maintaining clear and consistent communication. A comprehensive approach to school transitions will require attending not only to logistical planning but also to the social and emotional dimensions that influence long-term stability of the schools.

Background

To better understand how school closures and the combining of school communities were experienced the Office of New Initiatives (ONI) at Baltimore City Public Schools (City Schools) partnered with the Center for Social Organization of Schools (CSOS) at Johns Hopkins University's (JHU) School of Education to conduct a qualitative research study examining the experiences of school communities affected by closures and consolidations between 2019 and 2022.

Students, educators/staff, school leaders and parents/caregivers from Park Heights Academy (PHA), Mary Ann Winterling Elementary School (MAW), Pimlico Elementary School (Pimlico) and Sandtown Winchester Achievement Academy (SWAA) who attended Martin Luther King Elementary/Middle School (MLK), Gilmor Elementary School (Gilmor) or Lockerman Bundy Elementary School (Lockerman Bundy) at the time of the school closures were recruited to participate in this study. This report provides an overview of the study, presents findings from 51 empathy interviews with participants from closed and combined schools who merged into four combined schools and highlights key takeaways/considerations. The qualitative data was collected from November 2024 through April 2025.

Study Overview

In this section, we provide an overview of the research study, including research questions, study design, participants and setting.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

JHU researchers conducted several information-gathering meetings with the ONI to gain an in-depth understanding of the history and goals of the Annual Review process, the processes involved with closing and combining schools and the benefits and challenges of combining school communities. Additionally, JHU researchers conducted document analysis of relevant reports and articles, such as the Annual Review process on the Baltimore City Public Schools website, the annual Comprehensive Educational Facilities Master Plan (CEFMP), the 21st Century Schools website and Building a Portfolio of Schools Review and Recommendations from 2018-19 – 2023-24 to better contextualize the process of school closures and the combining of school communities. ONI and JHU collaboratively defined the scope of the project, designing guiding research questions and narrowing the site selection to schools and combined with other schools between 2019 and 2022 to meet the scope of the study.

The research questions guiding this study are:

1. How do school communities (i.e., students, teachers, staff, school leaders, families) describe the impacts of school closures on their resources, learning and social environments?

2. In what ways do school communities talk about the process of transitioning to a combined school?

3. How do school communities describe their experiences at their current and combined schools?

DATA COLLECTION

To address the research questions, the JHU research team conducted semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Four separate interview protocols were created for teachers/staff, school leaders, students and parents/caregivers. ONI and JHU collaboratively revised and finalized the Johns Hopkins University Internal Review Board (IRB) approved protocols. The protocols were designed to understand participants' memories and experiences from their school communities prior to the school transition,

the process of transitioning to combined schools, if/how commutes were impacted by combining and participants' experiences related to academics, resources, opportunities and relationships at their current school. The research team conducted a total of 51 in-person and virtual empathy interviews with teachers/staff, school leaders, students and parents/caregivers that lasted on average between 20-30 minutes. In compliance with Johns Hopkins University's IRB, all students submitted signed parent permission and student assent forms, and adults completed informed consent forms or provided oral consent prior to participating in this study. To ensure accessibility for all participants, virtual and in-person interviews were offered. In-person interviews were conducted at participating school buildings and virtual interviews were conducted via Zoom.

DATA ANALYSIS

Interview data were organized and coded by the research team through several phases of inductive and deductive qualitative analysis. In-person and virtual interviews were recorded and transcribed using Zoom transcription. The research team listened to the audio version of the interviews and simultaneously read and edited the Zoom-generated transcripts to ensure accuracy of the data. While editing, the research team did a preliminary round of data analysis identifying and documenting broad themes.

A codebook was created by the research team based on the study's guiding research questions, relevant literature on school closures and combining of school communities and initial themes from the preliminary round of data analysis. To guide the inductive and deductive thematic analysis, the research team organized codes into four overarching domains: school closure, transition, current school experiences and recommendations. Researchers identified broad themes based on initial codes, which were refined as the thematic analysis of the data progressed. Codes related to school closure captured participants' memories, emotions and reflections on their experiences in closed schools, including relationships, academic learning, school connectedness and reasons for closure. The transition domain included codes that reflected how participants navigated the process of combining into new schools, including experiences with COVID-related changes, school leadership during transition and perceptions of "us vs. them."

The domain of current school experiences focused on participants' adjustment to and perceptions of their current educational environments. This included themes such as school leadership, connectedness, relationships, academics, resources and commutes to school. Finally, the recommendations domain captured participants' forward-looking suggestions for improving future school closures and consolidations.

Next, the transcripts were uploaded and analyzed using Dedoose, a qualitative software program. Before formal coding began, members of the research team participated in a training session to establish shared understanding and consistency in code application. Inter-rater reliability (IRR) was assessed by having two coders independently code a subset of transcripts. The research team performed several rounds of data analysis to establish 80-85% inter-rater reliability between the researchers. This iterative process aimed to build in-depth understanding of school

Once the agreement was reached, each researcher independently coded the transcripts by applying the code categories and met weekly to discuss the codes. These weekly conversations bolstered our analysis of the data by capturing dialogues between researchers and highlighting points of alignment. Excerpts were extracted by code and compiled into organized sets corresponding to the analytic domains for theme extractions and synthesis.

RECRUITMENT

To get a well-rounded and comprehensive understanding of the impact of school closures on school communities and how school communities are now, we sought a range of perspectives. Students, educators/staff, school leaders and parents/caregivers from Park Heights Academy, Mary Ann Winterling, Pimlico, Sandtown Winchester Achievement Academy who attended MLK, Gilmor or Lockerman Bundy and whose school closed between 2018 and 2021 were recruited to participate in this study. To recruit participants for study, ONI emailed school leaders from Park Heights Elementary, Mary Ann Winterling Elementary, Sandtown Winchester Achievement Academy and Pimlico Elementary/ Middle School to introduce the study and invite them to attend a virtual session with the JHU and ONI teams. During the session, school leaders met with the JHU researchers, learned about the study's goals and reviewed what to expect throughout the research process at their schools.

Next, ONI emailed principals of closing schools and principals of designated receiving schools, educators, staff and parents/caregivers to participate in the study. To ensure a wide range of perspectives were included, ONI contacted teachers/staff and school leaders who experienced the school closures at one of the above three schools even if they were not employed at the four participating schools. For example, although most of the staff, educators and school leaders in this study were employed at one of the participating combined schools, some participants were part of the school closure but took positions in other schools or at the district office.

Students and parents were invited through a letter and email sent to families, as well as through recommendations from school leaders and teachers. Researchers also conducted follow-up phone calls for families who did not respond to the initial letters/emails. Outreach included both students who attended the designated receiving
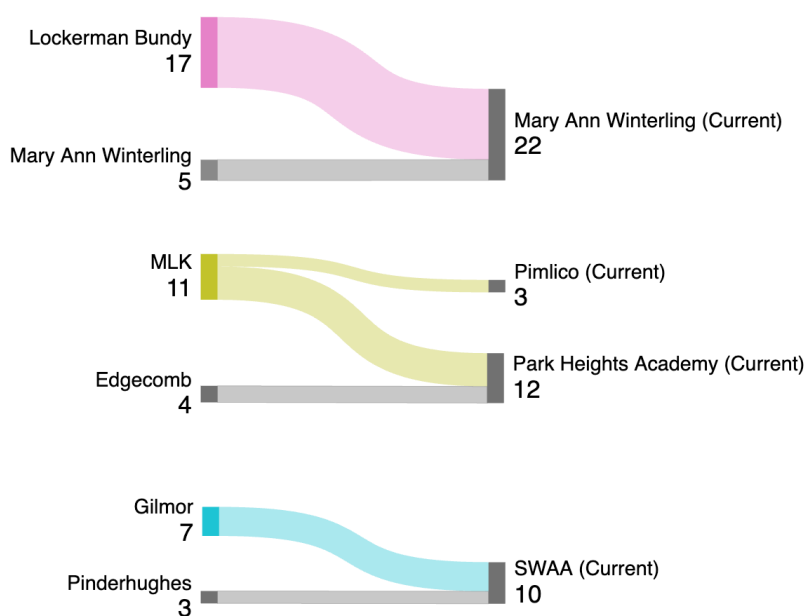
school (and their parents) and those who did not (and their parents). Additionally, parents who participated in the Transition Committee as part of the closure process were contacted directly by ONI staff via phone and email. Educators and staff who worked in schools that closed between 2018 and 2021 and were part of the designated receiving school were recruited to participate in the study. Educators and staff were invited by email and through recommendations from school leaders and teachers.

STUDY PARTICIPANTS

A total of 51 participants were included in the study. Of those, 47 participants are represented in the following Sankey diagram (See Figure 1), which visualizes the transitions from their previous schools before the merger to the designated receiving schools. The widths of each flow represent the scale of the movement from one school to another.

Specifically, 22 participants are currently at Mary Ann Winterling (17 from Lockerman Bundy and 5 who were already at Mary Ann Winterling); 12 at Park Heights Academy (8 from MLK and 4 from Edgecombe who remained at the same buildings under the school's new name); 3 at Pimlico (from MLK); and 10 at SWAA (7 from Gilmor and 3 from Pinderhughes who remained at the same buildings under the school's new name).

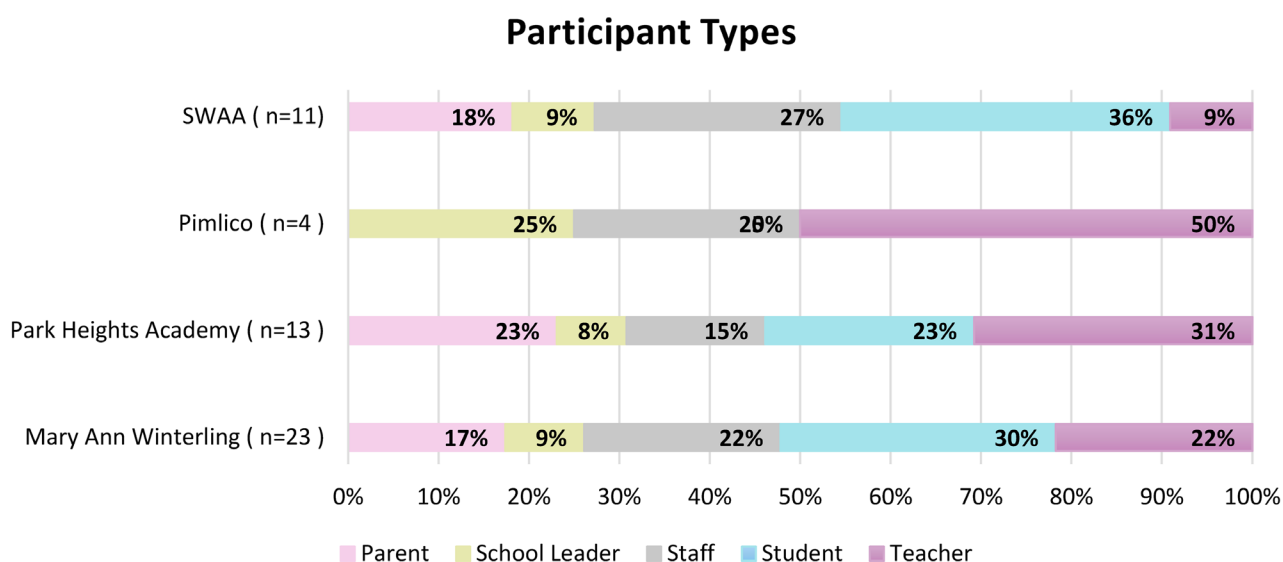**Figure 1. Student Transitions from Previous Schools to Designated Receiving Schools**

Notes: Four participants were not included in the chart: one school leader and one staff member in SWAA (Current) were not in either Gilmor or Pinderhughes; one school leader in Pimlico (Current) was not in either MLK or Edgecombe; and one school leader who previously worked at Mary Ann Winterling is now working at the Central Office.

The distribution of participant types varied across schools (See Figure 2). Mary Ann Winterling had the broadest participation across roles, with particularly strong representation from students and teachers. Staff and parent participation were also relatively high at this site. Park Heights Academy showed similarly balanced representation, though with slightly lower totals. At SWAA, representation skewed toward students and staff, while parent and teacher voices were more limited. Pimlico had more limited participation, involving only school leaders, staff and teachers, with no student or parent voices included. However, because both Pimlico and Park Heights Academy were receiving schools for students from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Elementary/Middle School, the perspectives of stakeholders from this school were represented in the interviews that occurred at both schools.

Figure 2. Distribution of Participant Roles by School Site

Participant Types

School Site	Parent	School Leader	Staff	Student	Teacher
SWAA (n=11)	18%	9%	27%	36%	9%
Pimlico (n=4)		25%	2|0%		50%
Park Heights Academy (n=13)	23%	8%	15%	23%	31%
Mary Ann Winterling (n=23)	17%	9%	22%	30%	22%

Legend: ■ Parent ■ School Leader ■ Staff ■ Student ■ Teacher

STUDENTS

Researchers enrolled 14 student participants in Grades 4 through 8 across three receiving schools: Mary Ann Winterling, Park Heights Academy and SWAA. The largest group was in Grade 5, followed by Grade 4 and Grade 7, and one student each in Grades 6 and 8. Many of these students were in lower primary grades (e.g., Grade 2) at the time of the school transition, and progressed two to three grade levels. Most participants are currently in upper elementary, with a few now in middle school. Most of the students transitioned directly into the designated school after their original schools closed. At the time of data collection, only two students transferred to other schools before or after the transition.

SCHOOL LEADERS

Five school leaders, with a wide range of experience and representing all receiving schools, participated in this study. Their years of experience as a school principal ranged from 4 to 14 years. Two principals transitioned from their roles as principals in the closed schools to principals in the designated receiving schools. Two school leaders were principals at the receiving school during the transition, and one principal elected to leave their position as a principal at a designated receiving school for a district-level opportunity.

PARENTS

Researchers interviewed a total of nine parents/caregivers, including eight parents and one grandmother from three receiving schools (Mary Ann Winterling, Park Heights Academy and SWAA). Approximately half of the participants had children who experienced school changes due to the combining, the remaining participants had children who stayed in the same school setting.

STAFF

We interviewed 11 school staff members across all receiving schools, representing instructional, support and administrative roles. Most had experienced a school closure and transitioned to a receiving school, while a few either remained in the same building under a new school identity or joined the school after the transition.

TEACHERS

We interviewed 12 teachers serving students across pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, first grade, third grade, fourth grade and seventh grade. Participants represented a range of instructional roles across grade levels and specialized functions, including early childhood education, special education, content-specific instruction and intervention lead.

Key Findings

The findings from this study fell into three phases of the school combination process. Participants described their memories prior to the school closures, the transition process of combining school communities and their experiences at their current schools.

In summary, we found the following:

1. School community members from closed and receiving schools hold vivid and cherished memories of their schools prior to the school closures and combining with another school community.

2. Preserving and incorporating visible, symbolic and cultural elements of closed schools within receiving schools and establishing shared goals contributes to building unified school communities.

3. Students, educators, school leaders and parents value closure and opportunities for human-to-human interactions when closing and combining schools.

4. Empathetic and visionary school leaders play a critical role in the school transition process.

5. In general, after a school transition, most school communities report feeling more like a family, having more opportunities for grade-level collaboration and career growth for educators and staff and gaining increased access to resources.

MEMORIES OF CLOSED SCHOOLS

Finding One captures the experiences and memories of students, school leaders, parents/caregivers and teachers from Gilmor, MLK and Lockerman Bundy. Some participants share recollections of cherished memories from their schools before the transition and how they felt when they learned their schools were going to close.

Finding 1: School community members from closed and receiving schools hold vivid and cherished memories of their schools prior to the school closures and combining with other school communities.

Despite the passage of time, students, school leaders, parents/caregivers and teachers from closed and receiving school communities hold fond memories from their previous schools. In this section, various participant groups recall different types of memories.

STUDENTS: REMEMBERING SCHOOL LIFE AND CHERISHED RELATIONSHIPS

Despite the students in this study being in kindergarten, first or second grade when their schools closed, many remember their physical school buildings and talked about the friendships and relationships they built with their peers, teachers and staff.

ATTACHMENT TO PHYSICAL SPACES AS MEMORY ANCHORS

Several students described specific physical spaces that held deep emotional meaning. For many students, the closed school was the first and only school they had ever attended up to that point. When asked to describe the building, students from various closed schools vaguely described their school buildings as "really big," "easy to get around" or as having "a really long hallway."

However, many students recalled vivid and specific memories of the physical buildings, describing the decorations in the hallways and location of their classrooms. A 5th-grader, who was a 2nd grader at Lockerman Bundy, was one of those students. She elaborately described the colorful blue and purple stairs she used to enter at Lockerman Bundy during her final year as a 2nd-grader, and mapped out the cafeteria, nurses' office, various classrooms and stairs to the second floor.

When students described the school building, they often recalled specific memories. A former MLK student described playful times she had with her peers on the playground and noted how she continued visiting the park next to MLK after the school closed to "bring back her memories." After describing the cafeteria, a former Lockerman Bundy student elaborated on a Donuts with Dad event she attended in the cafeteria. Overall, the students described the school building as more than just a place of learning: it also held unforgettable memories they shared with friends, teachers and their families.

SUPPORTIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH ADULTS FOSTERING PERSONAL GROWTH

As students thought back to their experiences at Gilmor, MLK and Lockerman Bundy, some recalled memorable interactions with their friends, teachers, staff and school leaders. Many students described adults at school not only as protective figures but also as mentors who supported their emotional growth. They created safe spaces, modeled care and encouraged students' development. A former Gilmor student, who was in 7th grade during the time of the study, recalled how a teacher at Gilmor uplifted her when she was having a bad morning. She explained, "*Gilmor gave me joy and happiness. I'd be having a bad morning, and I'd go in there, and I'd just start smiling. I could trust the school.*" The former Gilmor student attributed the joy she felt to an important relationship she established with one of her teachers. She shared, "*She was like a mother or aunt to me. Every time I used to have a bad day, they would send me to her because they knew we had a good connection.*" She went on to describe a conversation she had with her teacher that stuck with her. She explained she tended to blame a lot of things on herself, and her teacher reminded her, "*Sometimes you are wrong, but sometimes you are right.*" The student smiled as she reflected on this memory and shared that she continues to repeat this reminder to herself nightly before she goes to bed. Overall, many students described feeling a sense of comfort knowing adults in their school cared for them.

Students cited a range of reasons why they believe their schools closed including over-enrollment, under-enrollment and pandemic-related challenges. Students described feeling sad, angry and confused when they learned they would not return to their school. Some (but not all) of the students expressed feeling less connected to the closed school since they were only there for a short time.

SCHOOL LEADERS: SUPPORTED AND CONNECTED

A former principal of 14 years at one of the designated receiving schools in this study referred to her school community as a family, recalling her favorite aspect of being a principal as connecting with families, educators and staff.

She elaborates:

> I enjoyed getting to know the families and being able to support them. What I pride myself on was being able to empower them to advocate for themselves and being able to get resources themselves, not just picking a handout, but more so how they can advocate and get resources for themselves. And just being able to connect with the staff. We were a small school, and we were a family.

All principals described feeling supported and connected with parents, students and staff at their previous schools. Principals generally felt able to meet most of their students' and families' needs. When asked if she was able to provide her school community with the resources and opportunities they needed, a five-year principal described a sentiment most principals from closed schools in this study shared, replying, "*Yes, I feel we did. And when we couldn't, we did a great job with leveraging our partnerships to ensure our students got what they needed.*" Importantly, while many of the principals agreed they didn't always have the resources they needed, they emphasized working closely with their community school liaisons and utilizing external partnerships to ensure they were able to provide for their students and families as much as possible.

PARENTS & CAREGIVERS: MEMORIES OF BUILDING A SCHOOL COMMUNITY

Of the parents who participated in the study, five had students who attended the closing schools, either MLK or Lockerman Bundy. This section captures the experiences of these five parents. Parents shared positive memories of school-wide events, highlighted their relationships with the school community and recalled some of the resources and opportunities their school provided. Parents also shared why they think their schools closed and how they felt when they first found out.

Parents described how elements such as school-wide events and supportive and collaborative relationships contributed to their ability to build their school community. When asked to share memories from their closed school, parents often described end-of-year celebrations, Muffins with Mom, Donuts with Dad, holiday performances, cultural experiences, opportunities for their children to participate in after-school programs, counseling and tutoring. Parents shared memorable moments that captured not just the events but the ways their interactions with school staff and other families made them feel supported and part of a collaborative community.

One parent recalled an unforgettable moment during her child's pre-kindergarten graduation explaining how the teachers took a moment during graduation to recognize parents. She described this experience as "*refreshing*" and "*a memory that will always stay with her.*"

Parents also described the relationships they established with other families as contributing to building a collaborative school environment. Some parents in this study often described the closed school as more than a place they brought their children to learn, it was a place where families came together to "*help each other, no matter what needed to be done.*" One parent reflected on what she valued most about Lockerman Bundy, noting, "*I think it's the collaboration of everyone, and how much effort they put into helping each and every child, no matter what needed to be done.*" Parents described long-standing relationships with fellow parents that had developed over time enabling them to build a collaborative and trusting school community.

Although some parents shared that their children did not participate, all parents noted the range of extracurricular activities the closed and receiving schools offered for students. Of those highlighted, some include orchestra, basketball and dance. One parent who was a part of the Lockerman Bundy school community for nearly 15 years shared, "*They did a lot of musicals. Children played the violin, and there were children learning to play the piano. Even though that was a really hard thing, they still tried.*"

Most parents described the reasons for school closures as related to low student enrollment and the need for improved school buildings. Parents described feeling "*kinda mad,*" "*upset*" and "*confused*" when they learned their schools were closing.

TEACHERS AND STAFF: REFLECTIONS ON CAREER MILESTONES AND CULTIVATED RELATIONSHIPS

Many of the teachers and staff recalled having both good and challenging experiences. When asked to share specific memories, teachers and some staff recalled career milestones, often emphasizing the support and closeness they felt through their relationships with families, students and their principals within their school community. Teachers and staff highlighted the relationships they established at their schools, noting their school communities felt like a family. Many teachers noted they keep in touch with families, students and principals from their closed schools. Some teachers shared moments of joy when their students returned to visit them at their new schools. Upon reflecting on their experiences at Gilmor, MLK and Lockerman Bundy, teachers and staff recalled career highlights. For example, a teacher from Lockerman

Bundy reflected on a time when he co-taught an English language arts class. He shared, "*That was my year. The class was great. We rocked the entire year. Everyone was disciplined, the kids did great work.*" Similarly, a kindergarten teacher described a time when her students and parents had a Thanksgiving dinner in their classroom. She recalled the experience as a memorable moment with her school family. The idea of a school family was a consistent theme among many of the participants, especially teachers who began their careers at the closed schools--some of whom taught there over ten years. However, newer teachers also described feeling like a part of the family. Despite being at Lockerman Bundy for only one year before the school closed, a first-grade teacher explained, "*We were a family. I really enjoyed the atmosphere, the area, the kids and my coworkers. We really bonded together, and I felt that way, especially since I was the newbie coming in.*"

Importantly, it should be noted that not all participants expressed having positive relationships in their closed schools. One educator described their closed schools as "*cliquish.*" When asked if they felt supported at their closed school, another educator stated, "*That's a tough question, so I would say yes and no.*" The teacher went on to share how despite feeling supported by the principal, they felt lonely in their departmentalized grade-level teams.

Some educators and school leaders described the school closures as pushing them to take on leadership roles they may not have pursued otherwise. Several educators noted they would still be at their closed school if it wasn't for their school being closed.

TRANSITIONING TO ONE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

Throughout the process of transitioning to combined schools, City Schools provide students, families, educators, staff and school leaders with the support needed to build unified communities. The transition process broadly includes assisting the combining school communities with creating a shared identity; creating opportunities for community building between the school communities; resolving concerns; making improvements to receiving school facilities; and identifying potential partnerships and other resources to support school improvement. Key components of each transition process include establishing a transition committee composed of staff, parents, partners and students from both the closing and receiving schools; supporting staff, families and students by understanding their needs and hopes throughout the transition process; and assisting schools with creating a combined school culture and identity, including implementing the process to rename spaces in the combined school when there is opportunity and it is appropriate.

When asked to discuss the early stages of combining two schools, principals, educators and staff described the differences and variability between schools as a hurdle they had to work through to form unified school communities. A social worker described the closed and receiving schools as vastly different despite being right down the street from each other. The social worker explained, "*Although the schools were just a couple of blocks apart, it felt like we were merging Philadelphia schools with Baltimore schools. It was very different, and I think we did the best that we could.*" Participants also expressed difficulty with building trusting relationships during the transition process of combining schools with distinct cultures, norms and routines. One participant compared the process of combining schools to combining two different families stating, "*It's like two families moving in together. But nobody sat down to talk about how it should go or how the rules should be.*"

Members from closed schools experience a sense of loss when their schools close; however, less often realized is the fact that members from receiving school communities may experience a mourning period as well. Researchers interviewed members from receiving school communities at two of the four designated receiving schools; many experienced a mourning period during the early stages of the transition. Educators and staff from one school described feeling a sense of loss when their school combined with another school. They tended to hold on deeply to their old school identity, culture, norms and routines. Despite their schools not being closed, receiving school participants from one school noted various changes that accompanied the school merger, including a new school leader, new expectations, systems and routines and, of course, the process of building relationships with new colleagues, students and families.

Despite these early challenges, many participants reported ultimately developing a strong sense of community at their new school. In Findings 2, 3 and 4, participants describe key elements related to building a unified school community, offer important considerations to ensure school community members' needs are met during the closure and merger process and discuss the crucial role of school leaders.

Finding 2: Preserving and incorporating visible, symbolic and cultural elements of closed schools within receiving schools contributes to building unified school communities.

One of the most meaningful ways schools supported communities during the transition was by structurally incorporating visible, symbolic and cultural elements from the closed schools, which helped students, teachers, families and school leaders preserve their sense of identity and continuity. Naming school spaces after the closed school served as an emotional anchor for many students, allowing them to reclaim a part of what was lost.

A former Lockerman Bundy student recalled with deep emotion

> Finally, I have something that I can call Lockerman Bundy. It's actually named Lockerman Bundy,

Visual design features such as colors and architectural details also contributed to a sense of familiarity, with students drawing direct sensory connections between their past and present environments. The student was referring to a new space in the school building, highlighting how this act of naming transformed a physical space into a vessel of memory.

The student described this vividly:

> It's like walking up those purple and blue steps… those steps are transporting into these steps… I'm like, wait, hold up! Am I going into Lockerman Bundy or Mary Ann Winterling?

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A school leader from a designated receiving school discussed the importance of ensuring parts of the closed school were embedded into the current school.

She shares, "

> We did the MLK cafe in honor of the MLK closing. So that was one of the things that was a big concern around the closure was that a lot of schools with African-American names were being closed. Community members cited, Langston Hughes, Malcolm X, just a host of schools. So, a part of our commitment was we would name parts of our building after those closed schools. So, we have the MLK cafe, the Malcolm X Gymnatorium and we are supposed to have a Langston Hughes Library.

"

Incorporating elements of the closed schools contributed to making incoming students, teachers, staff and families feel welcome and part of a new school community. A paraeducator who once taught at MLK explained the renaming of the cafeteria showed students they are not outsiders, but they are part of the family. He shared how honoring the legacy of the MLK school also contributed to his sense of belonging as an educator. Incorporating elements from both school communities was important for all participant groups; however, keeping some school community members together was especially important for students. Students reported feeling more connected to their new school environments when they transitioned to their new school with educators and peers from their closed schools. For many students, seeing known faces in the classrooms and hallways, whether classmates or teachers, made the combining feel less intimidating. One student expressed joy upon seeing a former classmate from Lockerman Bundy: "*That was my first ever friend in Lockerman Bundy...when I saw her coming here, I was like my best.*" The student continued, explaining that the presence of multiple friends from the old school made her feel like she didn't have to "restart [her] friendships," but instead could "*continue ones that [she] already had.*" Another student shared that having friends who grew up in the same neighborhood and attended schools together made the transition feel like they were family because they remained together even though they changed school environments. Students also valued the familiarity of seeing teachers from their former schools. When describing reasons she enjoyed her newly assigned school, a former Gilmor student explained, "*I love it cause my old teacher is here, and every time I see her, I feel that same energy as it was in Gilmor.*"

Similarly, a staff member noticed how parents also communicated the importance of having teachers from the closed school at the designated receiving school. While parents were still building trusting relationships with members from the new school community, parents often depended on teachers and staff from former schools to care for and look after their children in the new school environments.

A teacher explained, " There are two other teachers who transitioned here with me, and I think that contributed to helping families feel connected to the new school knowing that even if we weren't their kids' teacher, we were here, and they have access to people who they know and trust. "

Aligned with this statement, a parent explained one reason she enrolled her children at the new school was because she knew the secretary from the closed school would also be moving to the receiving school. Another parent described how critical her trust in the original principal had been to her decision to enroll and stay in the school. "*If she hadn't stayed, my children wouldn't have been in the school,*" she explained. "*I had grown to trust our principal…I could not trust anybody else with my kids.*" That sense of trust and stability was difficult to rebuild in a new setting, especially when the closure itself felt sudden. Overall, participants valued the continuity of relationships during the merger process but also uplifted the importance of building supportive relationships in new schools.

Finding 3: Students, educators, school leaders and parents value closure and opportunities for human-to-human interactions when closing and combining school communities.

Participants' experiences with school closures during the COVID pandemic offer invaluable insights into aspects that school community members prioritize and, when taken into consideration, may contribute to a smoother transition. When schools shifted to virtual learning in Spring 2020, many participants in this study left their schools not knowing if they would ever return to that school building or be in community with their colleagues, students and peers. Educators and school-based staff described feeling sad that they were unable to give their students a traditional end of the year send-off and remorseful that their last time together ended so abruptly. All members, in different ways, expressed having to deal with the lack of closure. A mother from Lockerman Bundy explained her children's experience attending a new school once schools re-opened after the pandemic.

She stated, "

> These kids went home one day and then never returned to school. And then, when you tell them that they can return to school, it's a whole new school.

"

Students described feeling frustrated when their parents provided ambiguous responses regarding the school closure and parents, teachers and school leaders felt disappointed that they were unable to formally say farewell to each other, their school community and the school building. Their experiences highlight the importance of ensuring opportunities for school communities to have a sense of finality through closing and end-of-year ceremonies and opportunities for formal and informal goodbyes between friends and colleagues.

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Many of the participants shared the challenges they faced attempting to build school community in hybrid and virtual learning environments and amid social distancing rules. Participants explained that the inability to have human-to-human contact during the pandemic - at a time when many people were experiencing an increased sense of loneliness and a reduced sense of social and emotional support - exacerbated the emotional and social strains of the transition process.

Educators described the difficult process of trying to build relationships in their new school communities once they moved to virtual and hybrid learning in fall of the 2020-21 school year. An educational associate, who started her teaching career at MLK in 2009 and remained until the school closed in Spring 2020, described the initial process of combining into her new school community after having developed such deep relationships at MLK as "*weird* " and "*odd*."

She stated, "

It was weird because being online doesn't give you that same sense of community. So leaving the only kind of school home that I've ever known to go to a place and not really see people, and only see people online and sometimes not see their face at all was definitely odd.

"

These educators' sentiments highlight the importance of human-to-human contact during the transition process. When school communities are disrupted and uprooted, members experience a sense of loss and disconnectedness and often seek out interpersonal interactions with peers, colleagues and families to rebuild a sense of connectedness and belonging. The social conditions that arose from the COVID pandemic made the process of rebuilding relationships and school communities challenging; however, their experiences offer invaluable lessons on the importance of creating face-to-face opportunities for school community members to be in community together.

Finding 4: Empathetic and visionary school leaders play a critical role in the school transition process.

Principals played a critical role in cultivating a unified school. School leaders in this study didn't shy away from the important part they played during the school closure and transition process. They acknowledged how their ability to empathize, build relationships, communicate and establish shared goals was essential to the success of the transition process. Educators and parents often decided whether to join or not join a school community based on the school leadership. Educators expressed the importance of having a school leader who was empathetic and played an active role in the community-building process. They valued a school leader who took the time to understand the sentimentality of the transition process and the emotional ties they had to their former school. Participants valued school leaders who actively integrated elements from both schools to build a unified learning environment. Some school leaders explained the importance of not minimizing teachers, families and students' sense of loss, explaining that increased resources and better buildings didn't minimize their pain. School leaders openly expressed the importance of honoring traditions and routines from both school communities while establishing new structures and routines to best align with the goals of the new school community. One school leader described bringing traditions from her previous school, such as an annual book parade, while also ensuring elements from the receiving school were not lost.

Educators and staff often attributed their job satisfaction and their willingness to go above and beyond—to pursue shared goals and build a unified community—to the leadership of their school leaders. Three to four years after the initial transition, educators and staff describe the value of having a school leader who sets clear and shared goals and expectations as contributing to their ability to move from a divided school to a more unified school community. School leaders and educators acknowledged that the success of establishing shared goals only worked when there was buy-in from educators and staff. An early childhood educator from a designated receiving school explained, "*Our awesome principal made it so that we were one factory, one working machine in this building. And I think it's better. The teachers themselves had to take on a positive outlook to make this merger work, and being that the teachers were on board, they took a stake in our building.*"

Parents' sense of connectedness to the school was shaped by their relationships with school leaders and office staff.

One parent noted, ❝ We are at this school because of our principal! She is energetic, always willing to help, and she still has some of the staff that carried over that carries that same support."
Another parent shared, "I had grown to trust my principal. I had seen her go out of her way for so many of these children that I could not trust anybody else with my kids. ❞

Even for families already at the receiving schools before the merger, strong leadership helped them navigate the uncertainty of combining communities. One caregiver remembered meeting the new principal during summer school and being struck by her kindness and humility.

The caregiver remembered: ❝ We spoke every day, and she was so friendly, and it would seem like she was just one of the girls, like all of us. And it was a good feeling to know that. Wow! That's actually my principal. ❞

The caregiver went on to describe how the school leader's relatability contributed to her decision to stay at the school.

HOW ARE SCHOOL COMMUNITIES NOW?

Although each school community has a unique trajectory, overall, most school communities have increased resources and are feeling more like a family in their combined school communities.

Finding 5: In general, most school communities report feeling more like a family, have more opportunities for grade level collaboration and career growth for educators and staff and have increased access to resources.

In general, most of the stakeholders from the combined school communities that participated in this study report feeling more like a family, being better resourced and equipped to educate and care for students. Educators and staff have increased opportunities to collaborate and support students' learning and well-being, and some report the mergers had a positive impact on their career trajectories.

Despite their early challenges, several participants from closed and receiving school communities described their new school community as a family. When asked if she felt connected to her school, a teacher who was part of the designated receiving school during the transition stated, "*It's like a full-fledged family. People work together, and we are not cliquish.*" Additionally, three to four years after the merger, a staff member from a closed school described the combined school community as having a family environment, explaining, "*When you talk about a family environment, that's really true. We really look out for each other and each other's students.*"

Despite uniting different school communities and experiencing a range of emotions associated with school closures and combining school communities, most participants feel deeply connected and have a strong sense of belonging at their current schools. Educators in some schools describe feeling more like "*one school instead of two schools that merged.*"

INCREASED ACCESS TO RESOURCES AND EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

Three and four years after the school merger, school leaders report they are able to provide increased resources for their school communities, including more fine arts classes, after-school activities, parent education classes and resources for families in need. Educators, parents/caregivers and students describe having increased access to resources and extracurricular activities. Some educators also explained they have more opportunities for career advancement since the merger.

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A school leader shared, "

> Well, I think we gained more resources. We were able to expand and have more resource classes. It first started off with music, art and gym here. But now we have dance, theater and technology. We also have a keyboard class. So, we actually expanded our fine arts. We now have more money to spend on resources for the teachers and also for the parents as well.

"

An educator from a closed school explained, "*I don't have to worry about going to Target to buy my own pencils because we order pencils here. Teachers don't have to spend as much of their own money.*" School leaders and educators underscore how having access to a wealth of resources allows them to prioritize student well-being and expose their students to more creative opportunities to learn.

SCHOOL-WIDE COLLABORATION TO IMPROVE STUDENT LEARNING AND WELL-BEING

In general, most participants described student academics and learning as "*not changing*" or "*remaining consistent*" across closed and combined school communities and attributed this consistency to the district-wide curriculum. Some educators and student support staff agreed that there appeared to be more focused attention on student learning at their new school. All educators agreed that the increased opportunities for educators to collaborate with other grade- level teachers and support staff and students' increased access to learning materials, resources and activities improved students' overall learning and well-being.

A literacy coach described how having more teachers per grade level created more opportunities for collaboration, ensuring teachers and staff members didn't feel like they were in a "*bubble.*" A student wholeness specialist also valued working on a team in collaboration with other specialists at the merged school. He explained he was the only one at his previous school and often felt that he wasn't able to meet the needs of all of his students. At his current school, there are multiple specialists, enabling them to better meet their students' academic and social and emotional needs.

Students' reflections on learning resources before and after the school transitions reveal a mix of continuity and change, with most reporting that core offerings like gym, music and art were retained, and new offerings were made available.

A former MLK student remembered, ❝

We had art, music and gym…I believe I had gym like twice a day, art once a day and music twice a day." **After moving to their receiving school, she described a structured weekly schedule:** "Monday we have STEM, Tuesday we have art, Wednesday we have music, Thursday again we have music…Gym and library next week."

❞

Similarly, a former Lockerman Bundy student described "*instruments and singing… I played trumpet,*" and "*We had gym, art, music every day.*" At the new school, she confirmed, "*I still play [trumpet]… and we have gym, art… We went to art today.*" From the students' perspective, though the frequency may be different, some resources remained consistent, and new ones were added such as dance, bucket band, cheer and robotics.

SCHOOL TRANSITION IMPACTS ON CAREER TRAJECTORIES: "A BLESSING IN DISGUISE" FOR SOME

Several participants described the ways the school closures impacted their career trajectories. Some participants described feeling sad when their previous school closed, but they acknowledged the career opportunities that opened up for them when the schools combined. One participant shared that he was promoted three times and expressed gratitude to the school leader who believed in him and trusted him by putting him into leadership positions. Similarly, two participants described the transition as propelling them into roles they otherwise would not have felt prepared for.

Importantly, the school transitions did not have the same impact on all participants' career trajectories, however. Some participants expressed feeling dissatisfaction in their work and overworked in their positions. Others expressed how the school closures left them considering new careers. Another educator explained as a result of her experience with her school being closed, she would do additional research before moving schools again to try to avoid having to experience another school closure.

Conclusion

Overall, the findings from this study reveal that students, school leaders, teachers, parents/caregivers and staff from closing and receiving schools established identities and deeply rooted connections to their school communities and experienced a sense of loss when their schools combined. Importantly, participants from designated receiving schools also expressed a sense of mourning during the transition process. The student perspectives in this study included students who were in kindergarten, first or second grade when their school closed. Some (but not all) of the students and parents of younger children expressed feeling less connected to the closed school since they were only there for a short time.

Continuity and intentional efforts to honor and respect both school communities contributed to participants' feeling a sense of belonging and connectedness in their new school environments. All participants groups, but especially students and teachers, valued seeing familiar faces from their closed schools. Participants felt less of a sense of loss and more part of a unified school culture when visual, structural and symbolic elements from both school communities were incorporated into the new learning environment. Naming school spaces after the closed school often served as emotional anchors for many participants. Understanding this perspective of participants' experiences may offer important insights into the ways that districts assign educators, staff and students to schools and reiterate the value of actively integrating elements from both school communities into the new buildings. This insight also underscores the need for school leaders who are part of the transition process, and who seek to build unified school communities, to be aware of and honor the sentimentality of the transition process for all stakeholders.

Participants' challenges experiencing school closures and transitions during the COVID pandemic provide us with critical insights into what school communities value most during the transition process: closure and human-to-human interactions. Teachers, families, students and school leaders need formal and informal opportunities for closure, including saying farewell to school community members and the physical school building. Participants' experiences with navigating social distancing and hybrid learning during the merger process reveal how school communities truly value face-to-face interactions when building trusting relationships at their new school communities. Additionally, the ambiguity that arose during the pandemic exacerbated their feelings of uncertainty, highlighting the need for districts to prioritize transparency and clarity throughout the merger process. School district leaders must continue to honor

stakeholder needs and provide ongoing opportunities for closure and human-to-human interactions during the transition process.

Strong school leadership emerged as a critical success factor. Participants pointed to principals as a primary driver of whether the new school community felt cohesive and supportive. Leaders who prioritized empathy, consistent communication and shared vision were consistently cited as critical to building unified school communities.

Overall, most of the combined school communities describe feeling like their once divided school communities have grown to be more unified overtime. Many teachers and staff describe how increased resources and opportunities to collaborate have enabled them to better support students' learning and well-being. Importantly, some school-based staff share how the school transitions had a positive impact on their career trajectories.