

TRANSCRIPT OF “WE LIVE HERE”

A neighborhood school used to be the center of a everything. You sent your kids there, you had community meetings there, you went to vote there.

CHASTITY PRATT-DAWSEY: Especially high schools, right, and now people say where’d you go to high school, and you’re talking about a school that no longer exists. I went to Cooley, doesn’t exist. Murray Wright, doesn’t exist. Chadsey, what? Not there.

Districts around the country closed an unprecedented number of schools since 2000, but no city closed more schools in that time than Detroit.

JUDY CROSS: It bothered me because like I said I thought it was a good school, and that’s one of the reasons we moved right here where we did was because of the school being here.

What would be the best case scenario for you?

JUDY: For them to put another school there. I think the neighborhood needs a school.

I’m Jennifer Guerra. All this hour we’re going to look at how school closures affects students and neighborhoods. That’s coming up on WE LIVE HERE, a State of Opportunity documentary on Michigan Radio. First, the news.

PART ONE:

Once upon a time, you’d turn on the news and this is what you’d hear:

<<VOX OF SCHOOL CLOSING ANNOUNCEMENTS>>

Chicago, Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, Detroit. For a while there, some of America’s biggest cities were closing ten, twenty, fifty schools at a time. A large part of it had to do with No Child Left Behind, the federal education policy that pushed school closure as a means to raise student achievement.

The law went into effect in 2002...and every year since then [more than a thousand schools](#) across the country have gotten the axe.

A couple years it was as high as 21-hundred schools a year.

The district that closed the most schools during that time period: Detroit.

Over the last decade and a half, Detroit has closed 195 traditional public schools.

195 neighborhood schools.

Chastity Pratt Dawsey is a reporter with Bridge Magazine. Back when the school closure crisis was ramping up, she was working for The Detroit Free Press. She watched as school after school closed and students were shuffled around in what some described as a city-sized game of musical chairs.

CHASTITY: I grew up in Detroit and the school was the community center, you went there after school for community meetings, of course your parents vote there. Especially the high schools, right? The high schools are the center of your neighborhood, and now people say where'd you go to high school, and you're talking about a school that no longer exists. I went to Cooley, doesn't exist. Murray Wright, doesn't exist. Chadsey, what? Not there. Uh, so, it destabilizes the neighborhoods.

This hour, we're going to talk about schools...and what happens to a neighborhood after a school closes.

I'm Jennifer Guerra, this is WE LIVE HERE, a special State of Opportunity documentary.

The Littlefield neighborhood on Detroit's west side is pretty quiet.

A lot of vacant houses -- some boarded up, some completely gutted by scrappers.

[The Detroit Land Bank Authority](#) owns more property here than people do.

Despite that grim picture, people do live here. Families...with kids, and the majority of them go to this school: Noble Elementary-Middle

Noble was built in 1921...we're talking boom time years for Detroit. The city's population was growing like crazy and schools were popping up all over the city. These are true neighborhood schools, built smack dab in the middle of the neighborhood so kids can easily walk there.

Noble was built to hold more than one thousand kids. There are only about 600 kids there now.

TAKIERA WILLIAMS: It's friendly, it's like home.

Takiera is 13 years old. She and her twin sister have been going to Noble since fourth grade. This is my first day at Noble, and the principal – LaToyia Webb-Harris – lets me just hang out in the hall and talk to students there.

I didn't have to search too hard for someone to interview. The minute these students saw the mic, they ran over to talk. And they talked a lot.

About their principal:

The way our principal treats us, she's really forgiving. She knows that kids makes mistakes and she forgives you. // Ms Webb-Harris considers all of us her children, and she will love to see us grow up and be what we're supposed to be. // She be like, 'hey daughter!' she just called me daughter, and she been calling me that since like the first year she came.

About the benefits of having a school in their neighborhood:

First of all, it's easy to get here. Second of all, you know that when you grow up you can come back to your old neighborhood and say there go the school. // You barely miss school and stuff, and you can just like walk home.

And...opinions about the schools itself:

Helpful and encouraging, I got good friends and most of the teachers nice, but some of them, I don't know. // When I first came here, it was horrible! Because they didn't have paint, they barely had stuff like books, when we used to learn they didn't have like books, we had to share books and all that. // Can I rephrase something for him? When he said the school was horrible, it wasn't horrible...it just needed more work to put into it. Now we got that since we have new staff and the teachers here. // How does it make you feel when you walk into the school? Happy...happy!

Not too bad, right?

But here's the catch. Noble is considered a failing school.

Michigan's Department of Education calls the the lowest achieving schools in the state "priority" schools, and Noble has the dubious distinction of making the state's "priority list" not once, but twice.

The non-profit [Excellence Schools Detroit](#) gives out grades to all the schools in the city every year. Noble got an F.

Noble's principal – LaToyia Webb-Harris – doesn't sugarcoat how poorly the kids are doing on their assessment tests. She tells them. In front of me. At a school-wide assembly.

Before I play the tape – a quick note. You'll hear her talk about blue bars and orange diamonds. She's talking about some graphs she's got up on the projector – the blue bars show how well the kids did on a state test...and the orange diamonds is where the kids should've have scored.

Ok, here's the tape:

LATOYIA WEBB-HARRIS: We have a reporter here in the school. She's here for a reason: because of our data. Some people in the state of Michigan think they should close Noble bc we're not doing well on our map or mstep. They don't think the teachers are teaching because our blue bars arent over the orange diamonds. And in January they'll release a list of

schools whose blue bars are not over those diamonds and they might want to close Noble. If that happens, what school will we go to?

Let's pause right there for a minute. She asks: what school will you go to if Noble closes?

Remember, Noble got an F from Excellent Schools Detroit.

Six other schools share the same zip code as Noble – one is a DPS school, the other five are charters. [Here's how Excellent Schools Detroit](#) graded them: D+, D, D, D+, C, D.

That is the educational landscape around Noble.

Ok, back to the assembly:

WEBB-HARRIS: I thought that we liked Noble. Do we like Noble boys and girls? So we have to do better on our test, correct? You have to come to school every day ready to learn. You have to come to school and follow the directions and the expectations. <<begin FADE DOWN>>

Webb-Harris has been with DPS her entire career. She started out as a special ed teacher, and came to Noble three years ago. This is her second year as principal here.

She was born and raised in Detroit, went to Cass Tech – one of the city's premier high schools.

She lives in the suburbs, sends her own kids to school in the suburbs, but she's never wanted to work in the suburbs.

WEBB-HARRIS: It was not a second thought, I was going to Detroit public schools, this is where my heart is. It's personal to me. I needed to be with the children of Detroit.

Webb Harris did not create a failing school, let's be clear. She inherited it. Now she's trying her best to improve it. How much longer she'll have to do that is unclear:

WEBB-HARRIS: Now we're kind of in limbo waiting to see our scores have increased, but we have nowhere to go but up because we were looking at zero percent proficient, based on our M-STEP results.

M-STEP is the new state assessment. It was [rolled out two years ago](#). By all accounts, it's much harder than the old test.

WEBB-HARRIS: And so now we have doubled to two percent and, you know, we're moving inching up [Laughter.] You're laughing, so obviously you know that those aren't great test scores. I mean that's an overst- Not at all, not at all. But like I said, if you're already at the bottom, you have no other way but to go is up, and that's what we have been going is up. Even with our quarterly assessment, each assessment we have more and more students meeting their targeted growth and eventually those same students will begin meeting their grade level and we will see some impact.

Noble is considered a chronically failing school.

Michigan's governor put more than one-hundred schools like Noble on notice last year when he yanked the state's School Reform Office away from the department of education (where he has very little control) and put it in a department that he runs. Basically saying: 'hey, failing schools, I've got my eye on you and now I can do something about it.'

So when Webb-Harris says she's in "limbo" waiting to find out what's going to happen to Noble, that's what she's talking about.

Even the local block club members are talking about it. I dropped by one of their meetings back in November.

Carol Pickens is one of the founders of the [Littlefield Community Association](#). She's leading the meeting. The person you hear after her is another resident, David Harris. Let's listen in:

CAROL PICKENS: So umm...we just do what we've been doing, what we do is we get on the phone, we go downtown, we do what we need to do to give support and love to our local school. We need Noble.

Yes, David...

DAVID HARRIS: All the schools that I have, I'm a retired principal, I was a teacher for 17 years, all the schools that I taught at, all the schools that I was the administrator at, closed. All those neighborhoods where those schools existed are demolished. They have systematically destroyed our neighborhood school which has in effect really destroyed our community. So I'm just gonna let you know if Noble closes, that will affect our area around here. That's about the stablest thing we have going right now besides our park with our community.

CAROL: So we'll talk about that because we have looked at this before. This is not anything that's going to throw us. We have looked at the possibility of Noble closing and what would do. So if that school becomes empty, we look at how it we can turn it into a multi-use building. But we're NOT going to have a building sitting in our community, decaying, because we're developing our community. We have our park.

Ah the park. I can't tell you how many people in this area talk about the park.

It's huge. I don't mean size wise – although it is big. I mean symbolically huge.

I went to the park on a crisp, sunny fall day. Carol and Sandra Pickens from the block club agreed to meet me there.

The park is adjacent to the school, right in the middle of the neighborhood. And like so many public parks around Detroit, this one had fallen on hard times. The playground was all rusted out, there was garbage everywhere. It wasn't safe.

But that all changed in 2008 when the Pickens sisters and a couple others decided to bring the park back to life. The very park they used to play on as kids in the 60s:

CAROL: It had a little house where you could go in and check out your equipment – your basketball, your baseball...and they had, you could play checkers, a sandbox. We were always over here and you had the softball field, and we always had gloves and a baseball cap and a ball, always always, a game would break out at any time.

Carol moved out west in the 80s and didn't come back to Littlefield until 2000. When she did, she was devastated to see how far her neighborhood had fallen.

The city of Detroit had its own crushing problems to deal with at the time, and the sisters knew their little park wasn't going to be anybody's priority at city hall.

But they were adamant: the only way this neighborhood's going survive and thrive is if there's a good school and a good, safe park for kids to play on.

So they got to work.

They applied for grants, drew up a site plan...pitched it the city and it was approved. They got money from the city and county to help bring their childhood park back to life. The play structure alone cost 50-thousand dollars.

They put in a walking path for seniors, a picnic shelter and grills for families to use. Neighbors planted trees. Kids helped pick up trash. They wanted people who live here to feel like they had a stake in the park.

CAROL: We could have brought in an org that could beautify the place years ago, but we understand if you don't change the people's heart, it's gonna revert back, and so our goal is that it stays, so you have to bring the people along with you.

While we're talking, the gym door at the back of the school opens up and students run outside. They use the walking path around the park as a track.

One of the boys in the class walks out and is kind of acting up, he's got a phone in his hand, his shoes aren't on right... Sandra Pickens calls him out:

SANDRA: Tie your shoe up so you don't fall!

CAROL: She cares, she really cares...see, she's gonna teach him how to tie his shoe. But that's what you do, you get involved, you don't just sit back and turn your head, you get involved. Look at how she's talking to her. Here, sit here.

Ok, hold on. Is that better?

They keep on coming loose, too.

I'm gonna double tie it for you. Alright? Ok.

Alright, there you go, catch up with your buddies. See you later, have a nice day.

Wait up!

In its own very sweet and specific way, it is one of the most neighborhood-y moments I've ever seen.

For the Pickens sisters, there is no line between the school and the neighborhood. They both need each other. A strong school and welcoming park are key to their grand plans for revitalization.

And the Pickens sisters don't even have school-aged kids. The way they see it – all the kids in the neighborhood are their kids.

To that end – they're in the process of buying one of the vacant houses across from Noble. They want to turn it into a homework house so kids can go there after school for tutoring.

That's their plan.

They're not waiting for the city or some big philanthropic organization to swoop in and save their neighborhood. The folks who live there are trying to bring it back on their own. One park at a time, one block club meeting at a time, one fixed up house as a time.

HARRIS: I've spent a lot of money in my house. I redid it, I redid the whole home: new windows, new roof, new garage, I redid the whole house. It's very comfortable.

David Harris grew up in the neighborhood, right across from the park...and just like the Pickens sisters, he remembers playing there all the time in the sixties.

Like he said, he's put a lot of love and care into his house. He says he put that same kind of love and care into all the Detroit Public Schools he used to work at. And he's worked at a lot of schools in DPS.

So let's do a rundown of the schools that you, um, worked at:

HARRIS: I've worked at Winterhalter, Jamieson, and then my last school was Jemison, and I was at Wilkins, too, on the east side.

Ok, so let's do a little check list. So Winterhalter. Still open, still around?

No, I believe it's a charter school now.

Jamieson?

Jamieson's closed.

Jimmeson?

Jimmeson is closed. I believe it's been bought by a church.

And Wilkins?

It's closed. It's on the east side. It's closed.

You do not lead a good trail behind you...

What can I say, I do the best I can [laugh]

The school he talks about most fondly is Jamieson. He was principal there, and he had student art work up on the walls, he planted a garden there, his teachers once threw a super fun Halloween party in the gym, which he still likes to talk about.

HARRIS: My school was like a mecca of hope in that area, and when it closed it was like...Vietnam after the war. It's just devastating. I don't even think any children live over there anymore, I think all the children have moved. Vacant houses, vacant lots, dilapidated buildings. It's just a real sad situation.

[Jamieson closed](#) in 2010, along with roughly 30 other schools in the district. There just weren't enough kids there to justify keeping it open, plus the test scores weren't great.

So they were shuttled over to Thirkell Elementary. At the time it was a higher achieving school. Now it's one of the worst in the state and is [slated for possible closure](#). Bad news for the kids and bad news for the neighborhood they left behind.

Harris is adamant: that cannot happen to his neighborhood. So many people have already left.

The land bank owns more houses than anybody here.

But they built that park...and that park...that park is everything.

HARRIS: That park is a stabilizing force in the neighborhood.

You are like lighting up when you talk about this park and you've got this fist going, I mean there is passion around this park.

HARRIS: We don't have that, in our city, we don't have that. You do not have that, that's why I live there. People are asking me: why are you still living there? You could move anywhere! But I love that area, I love it, I love it.

You're crying.

[pause]

HARRIS: I've always been for the underdog and our neighborhood is the underdog, and we're going to make it work, yeah, yeah.

Coming up:

When a school closes, [property values go down](#), crime often goes up, and families move out.

The Detroit Public school district has closed nearly 200 of its schools since 2000. Drive around some of those neighborhoods and you see a lot of...emptiness.

How did we get to this point?

CHASTITY: My my my. Seems storied and complex, circuitous route but it's actually really very simple.

The answer coming up in ten minutes.

You're listening to WE LIVE HERE, a State of Opportunity special on Michigan Radio.

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PART TWO:

This is WE LIVE HERE, a State of Opportunity documentary about schools and neighborhoods. I'm Jennifer Guerra.

Before the break we spent time in a neighborhood right on the edge. It's trying for a comeback, but so much depends upon whether the school stays open...or closes.

Now let's visit a neighborhood that's past that point. Most of the DPS schools in the Brightmoor neighborhood are long gone -- abandoned, torn down or replaced by charters.

Things are pretty desolate.

Especially at night. The one bright spot is the Brightmoor Artisans Co-op on Fenkell Street, one of the few remaining public spaces in the neighborhood.

Inside, it kind of looks like the set of an Alice in Wonderland movie -- bright yellow walls and black and white checkerboard floor.

Nadia Dolphus is 8 years old and she's here with her friend, Morgan:

MORGAN: I'm 8 and about to be 9.

They're here for a weekly book club. Tonight's book is Charlie and the Chocolate Factory. For a book about sweets, these two girls talk a lot about vegetables...

MORGAN: i plant tomatoes, potatoes, carrots, strawberries blueberries...lot of berries! Wow. So many people have moved out of Brightmoor over the past few decades that vast swatches of the neighborhood look like the country. So gardening's big here. There are [more vacant lots and green spaces](#) here than occupied houses.

There used to be six D-P-S elementary schools in Brightmoor, now there's just one and it's slated for possible closure at the end of the school year. The two closest charters aren't doing much better

Morgan goes to a charter school one neighborhood over.

Nadia's grandma drives Nadia fifteen minutes away to a school outside of Detroit, in Livonia. Even though there's a public elementary school right across the street from where she lives.

She has a perfect view of it when she jumps up on the couch and looks out the front window of her house.

The school is Hubert Elementary.

NADIA: 2048 my mom used to go there when she was little, my aunt, my grandma was a teacher there, but the school closed.

Do they ever talk about it?

NADIA: Not a lot. My grandma lost her diamond ring in there once. It was really shiny. I think she said that it fell off her finger because it was too big.

NADIA: It looked burned on the inside of the school...

MORGAN: It did?

NADIA: Yeah, cause it was really dark...because we went through the school onto the back where behind the school is where we fly our kites every year 'cause sometimes we would walk through it or we'd go around it.

You mean, when the school was closed, you could still get into the school?

NADIA: Because there wasn't cardboard over the door.

So you were just able to walk through it. What did you see?

NADIA: Well I did see there was a lot of glass on the ground, but not where the door was, and I seen a lot of leaves, like bushes of leaves in the back.

JUDY They didn't board it up.

This is Judy Cross, Nadia's grandmother. I went over to her house a few days after book club to get the full story on Hubert Elementary. The school [closed in 2005](#) because of low enrollment. D-P-S tried to secure it with big wooden boards over the windows and doors. But, yeah, it didn't really do much.

JUDY: The kids started going in there, they set it on fire a couple times. We'd have to call all the time, they were breaking all the windows and stuff like that. They left a lot of stuff in there. You mean DPS left a lot of stuff in there?...Like desks and books and a lot of materials and stuff.

Judy lives with her daughter and grandkids in a wooden bungalow – a house style that was popular back in the day for the area's working class residents.

When I walk up the driveway, first person I see is Nadia. She's playing in the snow by herself -- making snow angels. The big abandoned school across the street is a constant presence.

NADIA: Want to come with me? Play in the snow...

Her grandma – Judy - is eager to tell me how different things used to be when her own girls were growing up here.

JUDY I was thinking about... when my girls went to school there, there were all kinds of kids, that lived here. They had lots of friends, they'd always be out there playing, we'd have big birthday parties. My husband used to take the grill over there and grill for them for field day.

Now that the school across the street is closed, she drives her grandkids out to school in the suburbs.

JUDY: Now with them going to a school in the suburbs, they have no friends right here because there's no kids. So it's a big difference from when my girls were younger.

Judy loved her time at the school across the street. She was a teacher's aide for a few years, then worked in the cafeteria. She says some of the teachers even used to use her front porch for smoke breaks.

But enrollment had dropped down to 350 kids from a high of around 500. Plus test scores weren't great. So the district closed Hubert in 2005.

JUDY It bothered me because like I said I thought it was a good school, and that's one of the reasons we moved right here where we did was because of the school being here. You mean back in the 80s? Yeah.

What would be the best case scenario for you?

JUDY: For them to put a school there. I think the neighborhood needs a school.

When a school closes, property values go down, crime often goes up and families move out. Everything looks...empty.

Drive through Brightmoor you'll see exactly what I mean.

And the death of the neighborhood school is by no means unique to Brightmoor. Nearly 200 D-P-S schools around the city have closed since 2000.

So how did we get to this point?

CHASTITY: My my my. Seems storied and complex, circuitous route but it's actually really very simple.

We'll get to her answer in a minute, but first, some context.

Chastity Pratt-Dawsey is a reporter for Bridge Magazine...but back in 2001, when the closures were ramping up, Dawsey was an education reporter for Detroit Free Press and had a front row seat to what was going on in the district:

CHASTITY: It was crazy because, you know, the first year that it really hit home that this going to be big and probably not good was 2005. You had 30 school closures and you also had the archdiocese closed 17 schools in Detroit. That was just like a watershed moment being in the trenches as a reporter, thinking wow, this is gonna get bad bad bad and nobody could have known it was going to get this intense.

Schools were closing like rapid-fire, and students and families left in droves. By 2006, the district was losing 10-thousand students a year.

CHASTITY: 2005-6-7-8, these were like hot and just crazy time for the school district, and I remember it was almost a story a day. And again I don't think any of us...reporters, parents, school folks...would have thought that all of that would lead us to a place where there there's only 48-thousand kids in Detroit public schools.

48 thousand kids in Detroit public schools. That's a 71 percent decline since 2000 alone. More kids in Detroit now go to charter schools than traditional public schools.

So back to our question: how did we get here?

CHASTITY: The state of Michigan in professing to want to improve Detroit schools essentially destabilized the system through a succession of policy changes and reform efforts essentially being school choice.

Ah yes, the elephant in the room.

School choice.

So let's talk about it.

The state passed two laws in the 1990s that were supposed to give parents more options for where to send their kids to school.

Under the new laws: parents could now send their kids to schools outside of their district, and charters were allowed to open up...with very little oversight. Pretty much anyone who has the money can open a charter.

On the surface, these two things might not seem like a big deal. But in reality they completely changed the academic landscape in Detroit.

Test scores in the district weren't great when all this was happening. They weren't the worst either. But still. Detroit parents were fed up, they wanted better for their kids and now they had...choices. So they start to pull their kids out of D-P-S and put them in charters or leave the district entirely.

Each time a kid leaves, their state funding goes with them.

So now DPS is losing millions and millions of dollars a year. State funding is flat. And then Detroit voters go and pass a billion-and-a-half dollar construction bond to fix the schools.

Here's where things take a turn.

Chastity Pratt Dawsey says the school board kind of sits on the money for a while, doesn't spend it...and that's when Republican Governor John Engler steps in:

CHASTITY: Engler says the [test scores are down](#), you haven't spent this billion dollars, we're going to remove your school board, put in this reform board that's appointed, and we're going to fix this school district.

That was 1999, and up until this month, the state's been in charge of Detroit public schools pretty much ever since, save for a few years.

That was supposed to make things better. But during that time:

DPS continues to lose students by the thousands.

The district pours millions of dollars into building and fixing schools only to have those schools close or sold to charters a few years later.

District schools continue to close, while more charter schools open.
Test scores plummet to the worst in the nation.

And by 2015, the district's deficit is at a whopping 515 million dollars.

CHASTITY: It was the perfect confluence of craziness. For years I would sit and listen to the teachers marching and the parents complaining, and they're all saying our school district is being dismantled, and I sat there and say, 'yeah but that's not the problem.' When you have something that doesn't work, like Massachusetts had, you need to dismantle it. They dismantled their school system.

When [Massachusetts kids were](#) struggling, they put in a slew of reforms including more money for low-income schools, tougher standards for all kids, and strict oversight for charters.

CHASTITY: Here in Michigan when you dismantle it and put it back together in a way that doesn't work, now you've destabilized it. You know, if something doesn't work I expect you to take it apart, inspect it and make it better. We didn't make it better here.

Parents, like Dawn Wilson, would argue the state takeover and all the reforms made it worse. I think you'd be hard-pressed to find a parent in Detroit who wouldn't agree with her. Most of the schools in Brightmoor, where Wilson lives, are either closed or very low-performing. But she's one of the lucky ones – she has a car. So every week she drives her four kids to a mix of public, private and charter schools in and around Detroit to try to get her kids the best education she can. At one point she was driving 160 miles a week.

DAWN: I shouldn't have to drive 160 miles to get my kids a good education.

Meanwhile the educational landscape continues to shift. Schools open, schools close, leadership changes, promises are made and not kept. So her kids have to move schools.

DAWN: My children have been to 27 schools.

When she sat down and actually the schools – it wasn't 27. It was 22. I'm going to list them off so you can really understand the scope of what we're talking about here.

Detroit Leadership Academy

Ralph Bunch

Noble Elementary-Middle

Mission City

Cornerstone

Detroit Innovation Academy

David Ellis Academy

Allen Academy

Langston Hughes Academy

Westside Christian Academy

McKinney Day Treatment Center

Loyola High School

University Yes Academy

Henry Ford Academy

Keidan Special Education Center

Shrine

Detroit Leadership Academy Middle School

Oak Park High School

Eisntein Elementary

And two other schools in Southfield whose names she can't remember and are closed now.

Twenty two schools.

How many schools did you go to growing up?

There's choice in Detroit, but if your kids have to change schools 22 times because they're not getting what they need: is that good choice?

Coming up:

There are more than a hundred low-performing schools across the state. Sometimes we close failing schools, and sometimes we try to turn them around.

LE FLOCH: Being a chronically low-performing school is not a life sentence. Schools can improve. However that improvement is extremely fragile.

We'll look at what the research says about failing schools and what's best for students. That's in ten minutes.

This is WE LIVE HERE, a State of Opportunity special about neighborhood schools on Michigan Radio.

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PART THREE

Welcome back. If you're just joining us, this is WE LIVE HERE, a State of Opportunity special on Michigan Radio. I'm Jennifer Guerra.

We've spent a lot of time this hour talking about neighborhoods and schools and how the fates of the two are often intertwined. Especially in high-poverty areas.

So...how do we make sense of what's happening...not just in Detroit, but in cities all across country. Why do America's inner city schools continue to struggle?

To find out, let's go back to Noble Elementary-Middle School on Detroit's west side and ask some of the students there what they think.

STUDENTS: Jayden Williams, I'm 12 years old and I'm in 7th grade. My name Darnelle and I'm in 7th grade and I'm 12.

Darnelle's been at Noble since second grade, Jayden since preschool.

We set up shop in the gym on a Tuesday morning to talk about their school and how things have changed over the years.

Like many schools in high-poverty areas, Noble's had a lot of staff turnover. Jayden, Darnelle and Kyiah have cycled through three different principals: Mister Ellis, Miss Broden and Miss Webb-Harris.

So I ask Jayden:

Do you even notice if you have a new principal?

JAYDEN: Yes, because things start running differently, and new things come in, new things happen and stuff like that.

DARNELLE: Like principals, they got different rules, different minds and all that.

This is Darnelle

DARNELLE: They want to have their school like how they have it run, and stuff.

JAYDEN: Once, when Mister Ellis was here, our gym floor was dark, dark brown and all the wax been pulled off. And then since Miss Broden came, she had fixed that with new fresh wax and painted it all over and got us some new rims in the gym, and then when Ms Webb-Harris came, she had hired a new gym coach and the gym coach had sprayed our logo on the walls.

I love that gym metaphor. It is spot on.

High poverty, low-performing schools see this kind of churn every couple of years.

A new principal comes in, puts their own systems in place and the kids have to learn a completely new set of rules and expectations. The gym goes through it, too.

That's not stability. And this is not breaking news: kids need stability in order to thrive. They also need a safe place to live. Here's Jayden.

JAYDEN: If your neighborhood is very good, then you're gonna have a nice school. And for us, you use, we got all these burnt down houses, we got all these thugs, other stuff, people racing up and down the street...

He says all of that stuff makes it hard to learn.

There are so negative many thing competing for their attention.

The kind of neighborhood Jayden's describing disproportionately affects poor black and brown kids across the country. And people expect schools to be able to overcome generations of poverty and racism...and teach at the same time. It's a heavy, heavy lift.

NOGUERRA: We've completely overlooked the ways in which poverty affects learning and why it is that so many of the schools serving poor children are struggling.

Pedro Noguerra is an expert on urban education, and teaches at U-C-L-A's graduate school of education. He has spent a lot of time researching and thinking deeply about the role of poverty in education and he shared some of his thoughts with us via Skype:

NOGUERRA: We're one of the few countries that [consistently spends less money](#) to educate poor children than we do to educate affluent children, and that means the teachers...are

frequently required or expected to take on roles that go beyond traditional teaching. They're functioning as **Contributes to high attrition, stress and school failure.**

Noguerra says if we continue to ignore poverty, we'll continue to leave millions of children behind.

NOGUERA: And again, we have to keep in mind: if we can change the conditions, we can change the outcomes. Because poverty is not a learning disability, there's absolutely no evidence that poor kids can't learn that they can't achieve under the right conditions.

Things like small class sizes, highly trained teachers, social, emotional and behavioral supports, stable housing and access to high quality early education.

That's the ideal scenario.

The reality on the ground looks a lot different.

Take class size at Noble, for example. Here's the principal, LaToyia Webb-Harris:

HARRIS: My kindergartners each have 31 students, my first graders have two classrooms and they both have about 32 students, second grade is also very large with 31 kids. So then you have K through two which is also our age group that struggle the most academically and those are my largest classroom sizes.

So I just want to be clear, you just have a teacher per each class, the teacher doesn't have a parapro or a teacher's assistant?

No, no, no, nope, they don't.

Big class sizes are incredibly common in high-poverty urban schools like Noble. White, wealthier districts on average have smaller class sizes and more staff to help.

Webb-Harris does have two school service assistants who spend an hour a day in each K through 2nd grade class. She had money in the budget for two more of those S-S-A positions...

HARRIS: however, that salary of a SSA is horrible, and what we ask of them is unfair, so until those salary adjustments are made, it's going to be diff to attract good staff members to do the work that's needed in priority schools. HR couldn't find anyone to fill those positions, unfortunately.

She's also got three full time teaching vacancies at her school in large part because she says the pay isn't competitive.

Detroit also has the WORST student chronic absenteeism rate in the country. Webb-Harris says until that's dealt with, you're not going to see any real improvement in student achievement. Can't teach kids if they're not at school.

So that's the bad news.

But despite all that – student achievement is inching up. Webb-Harris says that's due in part to a huge influx of cash she got from the U.S. Department of Education called SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT GRANTS...or SIG.

President Barack Obama's administration doled out seven billion dollars in SIG money to try to try to turn around more than 18-hundred schools across the country.

Noble got the maximum amount a school can get: six million dollars spread out over three years. In exchange, the school underwent a major turnaround three years ago: new principal, new staff...and a lot of investment in things like ipad carts, after school activities for students and parents, and a data coach to keep track of student achievement. It seems to be working.

WEBB HARRIS: Over the past 3 years, we have gone up...it's been small increases, but they're increases. We need to make larger impacts, which is our goal, because the increases have been so small, but when you start at zero percent proficient and now you may have two percent or three percent, it's a small number but it is climbing.

KERSTIN LEFLOCH: Being a chronically low-performing school is not a life sentence. Schools can improve. However that improvement is extremely fragile.

This is Kerstin LeFloch. She's with the American Institutes of Research and has studied school turnaround efforts for a decade and SIG specifically.

LeFloch travelled across the country to study some of the schools that got the federal grants. And she found that more often than not the grants served as a kind of catalyst for the staff...helped galvanize people and re-focus the school. But the SIG money goes away after three years. And therein lies the problem.

LEFLOCH: A lot of schools were not really well positioned to sustain some of the building blocks that they had put in place under SIG, and that's really one of the saddest parts of SIG is that sustainability, even in schools that appeared to be on the right track so to speak, it was going to be hard to stay on that track.

When I talked to LeFloch in December, she told me a new study was coming out in January that would definitively say whether the SIG grants helped boost student achievement.

Well, I just got my hands on a copy of the report. Did those seven billion dollars help boost student achievement? The answer is: [NO, it didnt work](#).

The U.S. government spent billions nationwide trying to turn around failing schools. And, I'm quoting here, "Overall, across all grades, we found that implementing any SIG-funded model had no significant impacts on math or reading test scores, high school graduation, or college enrollment."

We started this hour talking about school closures, and how it impacts neighborhoods. People don't want their schools to close. There's an entire genre of youtube videos protesting closures. School closures are personal and political.

But does it help kids?

<<hello!>>

[James Kemple](#) set out to answer that question. He's the Executive Director of the Research Alliance for New York City Schools and a research professor at New York University.

New York City's closed its fair share of schools, including 29 chronically failing high schools. Rather than shut them down all at once, the district phased out the schools...not letting new students enroll after a certain point.

Here's what Kemple found:

The phase out had no impact positive or negative on the students already at the school. But on the students who would've gone to one of those closed schools...it had a big, positive impact:

KEMPLE: We found that students who had to pick other options did end up in better schools in terms of things like graduation rates, attendance rates and test scores.

He says students at their new high schools did better...but not great. Graduation rates for those students were still far below the citywide average. A study in Chicago had a similar finding.

Chicago closed a bunch of failing schools all at once, and the study found that the [majority of displaced kids](#) moved on to better schools. Better schools, but not great schools.

And that's the catch.

Only the kids who went to SIGNIFICANTLY better schools improved academically, according to the data. The latest study out of Chicago shows that only one in five kids was able to snag a seat in one of those top tier schools.

A study in Michigan also saw some improvements for displaced students who went to better schools...but it also found that kids at those better schools did worse with the influx of new kids.

One more thing -- and this is specific to Detroit.

Every time Detroit closes one of its schools, the district loses money and students. One district official told me they close a school they lose – on average – 30 percent of the students. They move on to charters or leave the city altogether.

One third of the kids leave.

So...where do we go from here?

It's a good question.

And it seems like this woman will have a big say in what happens next.

BAKER: Good morning, I'm Natasha Baker and I'm the state school reform officer.

Baker grew up in poverty in California. She now lives in Detroit and is in charge of figuring out what to do with the state's lowest-performing schools...and the students who go there.

BAKER: So in the entire state of Michigan there are about 100-thousand kids in priority schools right now and this is across 76 different districts.

Baker says she can appreciate the passion and emotion folks have for their schools, but she says she also knows the only way she was able to climb out of poverty is because she got a good education. That's what made the difference.

There are currently 186 "priority schools" in Michigan --schools like Noble that are in the bottom five percent and trying to turn things around. The vast majority of these schools serve poor, black and brown kids who live in poor neighborhoods.

Natasha Baker knows that life all too well:

BAKER This is something that I've prayed about for a long time as a child, that if i made it out i would serve my entire, spend my entire life, helping other children get out so they can return. It's the only way to change the world. So I'm excited about it. I understand the poverty conditions, I've lived that life, I have family members still living that life, but my goal is to make sure every kid especially those born in poverty have access to quality schools and that's what the work is about.

Baker's office just came out with a list of the worst schools in the state. Schools that continuously fail to show student improvements. [Thirty eight schools are on the list](#) and are slated for possible closure.

By law, Baker is allowed to close those schools, but a Republican state lawmaker wants to repeal that law...so....it's unclear at this point whether those closures will actually happen.

Noble Elementary-Middle School is safe...for now. It's got one more year to bring up those test scores.

And what if they don't?

We now know closing a school and shipping kids off to another school doesn't automatically improve outcomes for those kids. And school turnaround by itself doesn't seem to work either. LaToyia Webb-Harris, Noble's principal, says poverty doesn't just go away because you change the staff or close a school.

WEBB-HARRIS: Because then you have the same conditions, the same learning obstacles, the same challenges that then go to that school.

The thing all of these failing schools have in common...is poverty. The vast majority of kids in the lowest performing schools in the state are poor. We're essentially asking schools to solve poverty.

And if that's what we want them to do, we know what tools to give those schools.

It's not a mystery. Other places have done it.

But here in Michigan, we're not doing those things. And until we decide to change that, we will continue to fail our kids.

Detroit, in particular, is teetering on the edge of what many believe and hope to be a real renaissance for the city. But...

HARRIS: ...the city will not be able to do what they want to do if they don't have schools for the new and upcoming Detroit families to send their children to. So what they decide to do with those low-achieving, community schools...we will have to wait and see.

You've been listening to WE LIVE HERE, a STATE OF OPPORTUNITY documentary on Michigan Radio.

A very special thank you to producer April Van Buren for pulling everything together. She also produced an interactive map of all the schools at risk of closure in Detroit...you'll definitely want to check it out. A big thanks to Sy Doan for his work on the maps, too.

You can find the maps, audio for this story and all the other stories we've done for State of Opportunity on : [State of Opportunity dot michigan radio dot org](http://StateofOpportunity.org)

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The State of Opportunity team is Dustin Dwyer, Paulette Parker and April Van Buren.

Vincent Duffy edited the show, with help from Sarah Hulett. Zoe Clark is the executive producer of State of Opportunity.

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I'm Jennifer Guerra.