

ORGANIZING FOR WHOLE CHILD EDUCATION: THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY  
EDUCATION COUNCILS IN THE MOVEMENT TOWARD URBAN EDUCATION  
REFORM

A Thesis  
Presented to the Faculty of the College of Architecture, Art, and Planning  
of Cornell University  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Bachelor of Science with Honors

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May 2023  
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## ABSTRACT

This research explores the role that community education councils have within the community schooling framework. Through conducting seven stakeholder interviews and archival data, I answer the following central research question: “How are community education councils influencing local civic and political participation within their service areas?” From this process, I find that (1) community leaders conceptualize whole-child education as contributing to initiatives that fall outside of traditional purviews of public education; (2) current and past initiatives from community education councils include supporting the improvement of low-income housing for tenants within the community, reducing food insecurity that was amplified by the Covid-19 pandemic, and building community power; and (3) community education council representatives leveraged community resources, built relationships, and tapped into their own power to organize these initiatives. These findings underscore both theoretical and practical movements toward whole-child education being spearheaded by local leadership despite decades-long political struggles around collaborative governance over NYC Public Schools. From this research, I deepen our understanding of how communities are leveraging community education councils as critical social infrastructure in the movement toward urban education reform.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Ayana Smith earned her Bachelor of Science in Urban and Regional Studies with a minor in Education from Cornell University. She was born in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, but also grew up living in Harlem, Manhattan and Woodstock, Bronx in NYC which drove her passion for learning about cities and schools. As a Rawlings Cornell Presidential Research Scholar and Cornell TRIO McNair Scholar, she is an experienced researcher. Her prior work includes researching the landscape of school integration activism in NYC pre- and during the Covid-19 pandemic through Yale University; the implications of the U.S. Promise Neighborhoods program on neighborhood and student outcomes at Cornell University; and youth-organizing against anti-CRT legislation in the U.S. through the University of Colorado at Boulder.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am first thankful for my home community located in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, NY which was integral to the development of this senior thesis. It was an honor to learn from local leaders dreaming of and building what will be the future of Black Brooklyn. It is also an honor to be able to contribute an artifact that tells a part of our story. I am also thankful for the Rawlings Cornell Presidential Research Scholars Program as well as TRIO McNair Scholars Program that prepared me to take on academic research; an additional thank you to my faculty mentor Dr. Jocelyn Poe whose mentorship was critical to blending scholarship with activism and ensuring this research nudges the literature toward healing racial injustice. This research would not have been possible if not for Cornell University's Department of City and Regional Planning for funding this research through the Kermit C. and Janice I. Parsons Scholarship which allowed me to compensate interviewees for their knowledge and time.

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## INTRODUCTION

Since the 1960s, communities in NYC have experienced a de-democratization of their public schools (Rogers 2008, Castillo 2013, Lewis 2013). Starting with the dissolution of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville community control experiment and continuing to follow trends in other major U.S. cities from this period into the 2000s, local and state leadership have stripped most democratic processes related to schooling: From absorbing the then Board of Education into NYC government, eliminating voting on the chancellor for the now NYC Department of Education, to removing traditional school boards and replacing them with community education councils, advisory bodies with no formal decision-making powers outside of determining school zones (Rogers 2008 and Lewis 2013). Despite this history, there have been movements toward re-integrating the community back into schools through the community schooling model. Hinged on the whole-child education framework which argues that children's needs outside of the classroom need to be met to improve their academic achievement and outcomes (Dryfoos 2002, Dryfoos and Maguire 2005, Capers and Shah 2015), community schools rely on partnerships with organizations and individual actors to provide resources essential to closing these out-of-class gaps (Warren 2005). In 2014, public education tipped back in the favor of communities when then-Mayor Bill de Blasio transitioned all schools within NYC Public Schools from the traditional schooling model to the community model.

In this research, I ask the following question: How are community education councils in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood (Brooklyn, NY) influencing local civic and political participation within their service areas? Through conducting seven stakeholder interviews and reviewing archival data, the theme of political disempowerment from local and state governments underpinned almost all of the responses. However, despite this disempowerment, themes of building power across public and private individuals and organizations and creating avenues to affect change in the absence of formal decision-making capacities were salient. The changes explored in this paper include the development of resolutions for various NYC agencies to improve low-income housing for tenants in their service area, the implementation of food pantries in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, and the supporting community power-building workshops; these changes were possible through strong social and political infrastructure serving the neighborhood, intentional relationship-building with constituencies and partners, and strong leadership in representative positions on community education councils.

Located in the Northern part of the borough, Bedford-Stuyvesant is part of a community-defined region known as Black Brooklyn: Home to the largest contiguous Black population in the United States with deep historical connections to the area—from several African Burial grounds; to Weeksville, a former township for freed African Americans; to some the largest and most impactful Civil Rights Movements (Chronopoulos 2020; Castillo, Debs, Makris, Rodriguez, Smith, Steuer Ingall 2022). This region is served by NYC Community School Districts 14, 16, and 17. Because of the cultural, social, and political context of the region demonstrated through the literature review and archival data, I root this research in this micro-region to underscore the social and political capitals that have informed—and continue to inform—the movement toward educational justice, entrenched in legacies of Black political struggles for liberation there (Chronopolous 2020).

I argue that historical and present struggles in the current movement toward whole-child education for NYC Community Education Councils serving Bedford-Stuyvesant can

be best understood through the collaborative governance framework. This model outlines where community education councils are exempt from democratic decision-making within NYC Public Schools and lens to understand how community education councils have operationalized these initiatives (Ansell and Gash 2007). Likewise, I argue that the model developed by Ansell and Gash (2007) can also serve as a critical framework for what collaborative governance *can* look like to reinstitute power back into communities through community education councils to propel the movement forward.

Given the limitations of the sample size, this research will serve as a precursor to a larger project investigating the role that community education councils have in the movement toward urban education reform in NYC Public Schools through the whole-child education pedagogy and praxis. The findings from this research contribute new knowledge on how community education councils serve as important social infrastructure within their communities. Applying the collaborative governance framework to the historical and present state of NYC Public Schools offers not just a throughline of historical and present struggles with political power and participation for Black and Brown communities, but demonstrates what organizers are organizing for and outlines a path forward.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### *Whole-Child Education and Community Schooling*

Hinged on the philosophy of John Dewey, who believed that schools should serve as both democratic and social centers for communities, the first community school was founded in 1889 by Jane Addams (Benson Harkavy, Johaneck, Puckett 2009). The mission of this school—Hull House in Chicago, IL— was to improve educational outcomes for a low-income and immigrant and migrant student population who were seeing lower academic achievement and poor academic outcomes because of environmental factors beyond the school walls such as pervasive poverty and racial inequality ((Benson Harkavy, Johaneck, Puckett 2009). Unlike traditional schools that relied on administrators servicing students, Addams’ Hull House reimaged the relationship between administrators, teachers, parents, students, and communities and the purpose of schooling ((Benson Harkavy, Johaneck, Puckett 2009). Through developing partnerships with community-based organizations and community members, Addams cultivated Hull House into a hub of resources for students and their families, offering kindergarten, visiting nurses, and even art exhibits as examples; the outcomes include higher academic achievement and democratic citizenship (Benson et. al 2009). As a result, students attending these schools see improvement in academic achievement and outcomes (Dryfoos 2002, Warren 2005). Radical for its time, Hull House became an application of what were, nearly a century later, coined as ecological systems theory and whole child education—two theories currently scaffolding the current community school movement.

Whole-child education refers to the idea that children are most successful in school when their needs outside of the classroom are met and is deeply connected to ecological systems theory which argues individuals should be framed within their environmental contexts (Bronfenbrenner 1979, Dryfoos 2002, Ishimaru 2019). In the context of NYC Public Schools, current research suggests that whole-child education has been conceptualized as a critical component of advancing racial justice by community organizers who were culpable in the widespread adoption of the community schooling framework in 2014 (Daniel, Kirkland, and Malone 2020). Emerging research investigating Black

imaginaries of community schooling also suggests that in addition to advancing racial justice, whole-child education is conceptualized to serve as a mechanism to advance equitable urban transformations, for example:

“Marissa, along with other students in the ninth and tenth grades worked on a project called ‘Redesigning the Bronx,’ where students envisioned their desired community and reasoned mathematically about redesigning the Sheridan Expressway. This curriculum was initiated by students involved in [the Community Justice Collective]. One student, Ahmed, came to Matt and explained that what he learned at [the Community Justice Collective] should spread to his peers. Matt and Ahmed worked with THS teachers to construct a unit where students discussed, researched, and wrote about the Sheridan Expressway. This form of clustered reciprocity was about tying school and academic success models to the concerns of the community; thus, how the school imagined student learning would be equally tied to how it understood student engagement with real community issues” (Daniel, Kirkland, and Malone 2020).

While whole-child education and community schooling are being used as a language to describe a more nuanced perspective of public education, community schooling as an approach to redress racial injustice and urban inequality for Black people is not new (Howard and Jackson 2014, Howard 2016). If we zoom into Black Brooklyn in the 1960s, we will see this through the Ocean Hill-Brownsville experiment in the 1960s.

#### *Community Schools in Action: Ocean Hill-Brownsville Experiment*

“The local governing board and staff have become an important community symbol. They represent in large measure a form of local government that is accessible. They are an indigenous government to which community people bring a wide range of problems” (Fantini and Gittell 1969).

One of the first documented practical applications of a community school model was the Ocean Hill-Brownsville experiment. Part of a national initiative in the late 1960s designed to decentralize governing power in urban centers, The City of New York created a school district composed of K-8 schools to service this region of Black Brooklyn in response to demand for community involvement in educational policy (Fantini and Gittell 1969, Green 1970, Lewis 2013). This demand was fueled by increasing dissatisfaction from Black parents, the predominant population in Ocean Hill-Brownsville, with the state of education in NYC Public Schools (Fantini and Gittell 1969, Green 1970). During this time, they believed that central governance over schools was ineffective and the leading two initiatives—school integration, which called for greater racial diversity within schools, and compensatory education, which called additional programs to supplement student learning—were not improving academic achievement and outcomes for their children (Fantini and Gittell 1969, Green 1970).

As a result of community control over public K-8 schools in Ocean Hill-Brownsville, the school district saw an increase in political participation, with voter turnout in school board elections superseding all other local elections (Fantini and Gittell 1969, Lewis 2013). Concurrently, the district saw an increase in Black political consciousness during this time with the growth in Black leadership stemming from the socioeconomic integration of low

and middle-income Black residents who now needed to collaborate toward common goals; the enlistment of a Black superintendent, diversified teaching staff, collaboration with out-of-school professionals to support what can be considered whole-child education; and changes to course curricula that emphasized teaching Black history (Fantini and Gittell 1969; Lewis 2013; and Daniel, Kirkland, and Malone 2020). This political consciousness and challenge to the status quo warranted pushback for the experiment and became a critical precursor to movements from teachers' unions, school administrators, and central government to end the experiment (Green 1970, Castillo 2013, Lewis 2013). In the end, these actors were able to successfully push for the dissolution of the Ocean-Hill Brownsville experiment, marking the first step in an eventual de-democratization of public education within NYC moving forward.

### *Codification of Community Education Councils in NYC*

After the Ocean-Hill Brownsville experiment, there were continued motions from teachers' unions, central administration, and other stakeholders to reduce public participation in public education in NYC (Castillo 2013). Operating under the pretense that school boards were ineffective at managing schools within their district, as well as persistent conflict between different stakeholders within school districts, 1996 marked an additional stride to an erosion of public participation for communities in their educational systems (Castillo 2013).

Community education councils are advisory bodies developed through a compromise between the United States government, which requires public participation in public education, and New York State government, which sought to limit this participation in NYC Public Schools (Castillo 2013). According to Castillo (2013): “State law encourages a collaborative rather than adversarial relationship with school system administrators, calling on [community education council] members to “establish a positive working relationship with the community superintendent and local instructional superintendents.” The [community education councils] are intended to gather community input on educational policy issues in the district and work with Department of Education officials to help ensure that such concerns are reflected in school policy and administration. The [community education councils] have the power to approve school zoning changes within the district and also play a role in evaluating the community superintendents and the local instructional superintendents.”

Despite having the power of school zoning changes within their district, the transition came with a dissolution of some of the formal governing powers previously held by school boards—now community education councils. These powers included hiring school district superintendents and hiring and firing school principals (Castillo 2013). It also expanded the powers of the chancellor of education to intervene in the affairs of community education councils (Castillo 2013). This also instituted new guidelines for who could participate in community education councils: (1) at least 9 of the 12 seats must be held by parents who had children enrolled in public schools; at least two members had to be appointed by the district's respective Borough President, and at least one member had to be a non-voting high school senior who lives within their community school district elected by their school (Castillo 2013). This would not be the last stride to disempower local communities when it came to their public schools.

### *Codification of Mayoral Control in NYC*

In 2002, an additional stride that eroded public participation in NYC Public Schools came through Mayor Michael Bloomberg. Assuming office during a period when there was little public confidence in NYC Public Schools, relationship-building with critical stakeholders such as the New York State Legislature, teachers' unions, and private sector leaders was critical to the establishment of mayoral control over public schools (Rogers 2009). Implemented in other urban centers across the country throughout the 1990s, mayoral control of public schools occurs when the city's mayor assumes significant or total governance over public schools (Castillo 2013). Under the Bloomberg administration, this looked like an expansion of his powers and an application of managerial governance to running public schools. Through this, he gained the power to convert the then Board of Education, independent from city agencies, into the Department of Education, a city agency; select the Chancellor of the NYC Department of Education in place of local elections; and implement—as well as override—educational policies affecting NYC Public Schools (Rogers 2009 and Castillo 2013). Bloomberg also dissolved the central board and replaced them with a thirteen-person advisory panel composed of eight representatives appointed by the mayor and five representatives appointed by each respective NYC Borough President (Rogers 2009).

From this, a significant portion of the current landscape of NYC Public Schools was created: An expansion of the number of schools—from closure and dissolution of larger institutions into smaller ones and expansion of charter schools—became the centerpiece for increased school choice (Rogers 2009). At the same time, standardization of ELA and mathematics curricula took place in response to varying curricula across the city as a result of decentralization (Castillo 2013). Since 2002, mayoral control has remained in effect under Mayor Bill de Blasio and current NYC Mayor Eric Adams.

### *Pushing the Needle Forward: Reinstitution of Community School Model in NYC*

Despite the dissolution of a traditional Board of Education and the disempowerment of traditional school boards in 2002, communities across NYC have continued to make strides aimed at re-integrating community involvement in NYC Public Schools. Transitioning out of the Bloomberg administration at the end of this term, organizers saw the 2014 mayoral election as an opportunity to accomplish this goal by advancing the community school model (Daniel 2020). Spearheaded by community-based organizations like the Coalition for Education Justice, this movement was rooted in a desire to advance racial justice within NYC Public Schools and framed around the idea that “those closest to the problem are closest to the solution” (Daniel 2020). The work done by these organizers was a factor in the election of Bill de Blasio in the 2014 mayoral elections and, in this same year, the transition of all NYC public schools from the traditional schooling model to the community schooling model (Capers and Shah 2015; Daniel, Kirkland, and Malone 2020). Although organizing groups experienced a victory through the widespread adoption of the community schooling model, the advancement of education-related movements in NYC Public Schools continues to be stifled as mayoral control remains in effect (Baldrige 2014; Madkins and de Royston 2019; Daniel, Kirkland, and Malone 2020; Castillo, Debs, Makris, Rodriguez, Smith, and Steuer Ingall 2022).

While there is a wealth of literature on community schooling, whole-child education, and organizing around educational justice, there are few studies that frame findings through

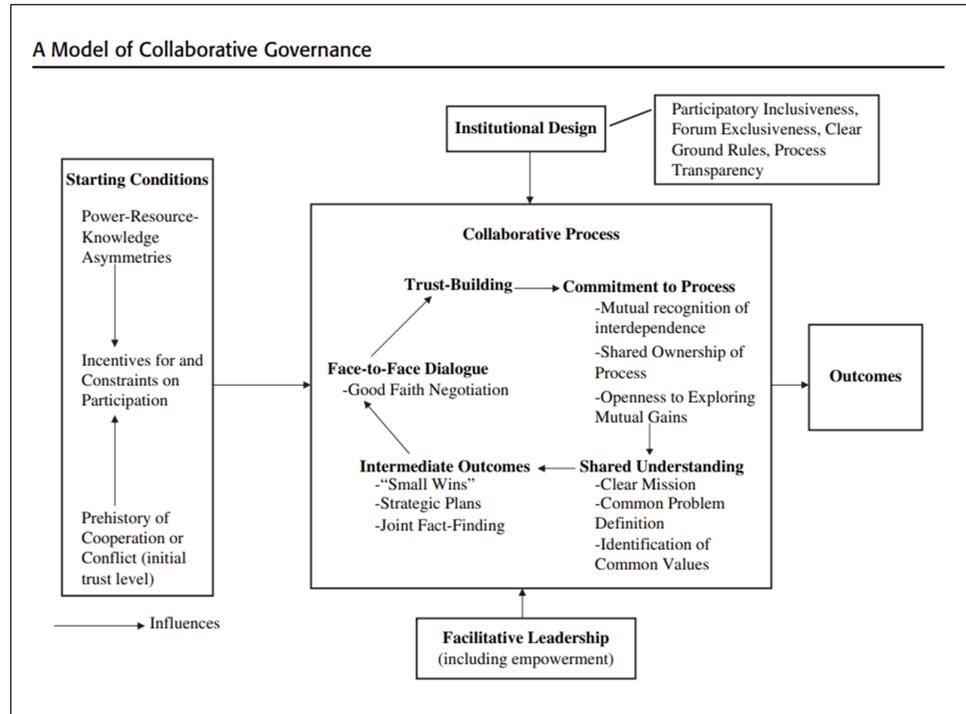
racialized and placed-based lenses. Often, researchers do not meaningfully engage individual and communal perceptions of education reform, which frame communities—a number being Black and Brown—as being deficient (Daniel 2020, McKinney de Royston and Madkins 2019). In this research, I combat this by first naming how these communities experienced intentional divestment from local and state governments; quoting how community leaders conceptualize community schooling within the context of NYC Public Schools; and utilizing relevant archival data that uplift the cultural, social, and political capitals available for accomplishing these goals. Reframing these communities as being proactive agents in the movement toward whole-child education instead of passive actors in greater political processes is core to this research. Thus, findings will contribute to growing literature on the nexus between urban education reform and urban planning as well as a shift in how we write about the experiences of Black and Brown communities through centering their imaginaries about urban education.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Analysis of the findings for the paper is rooted in the collaborative governance framework to understand histories of power and (dis)empowerment that community education councils have experienced through intentional motions from local and state. This framework will also help frame how community education councils are building power and operationalizing key initiatives to improve education for residents of Bedford-Stuyvesant. Defined as “regimes of laws, rules, judicial decisions, and administrative practices that constrain, prescribe, and enable the provision of publicly supported goods and services” (Lawrence, Heinrich, and Hill 2001), there are three prominent variations in approaches to governance—adversarial governance, managerial governance, and collaborative governance (Ansell and Gash 2007). In the context of NYC, transitions between these government styles are salient in the literature on the decentralization and eventual recentralization of power over NYC Public Schools—with mayoral control over public schools in 2002 being named as a codification of managerial style governance (Rogers 2008, Castillo 2013, Lewis 2013). This paper relies heavily on Ansell and Gash’s (2007) collaborative governance model (figure 1) to understand the processes utilized by community education councils and the vision of what the future of governance over NYC Public Schools could be (figure 1).

Theorizing what collaborative governance can be, the authors describe this model as “a governing arrangement where one or more public agencies directly engage non-state stakeholders in a collective decision-making process that is formal, consensus-oriented, and deliberative and that aims to make or implement public policy or manage public programs or assets” (Ansell and Gash 2007). This definition operates on four principles. The first principle is starting conditions, which argues that for stakeholders to engage in collaborative processes there needs to be neutralization of power imbalances, an addressing of histories of adversarial relationships between the state and the organization, and incentives that motivate stakeholders to participate (Ansell and Gash 2007). The second principle is facilitative leadership which names a need for a third party who may or may not be affiliated with a stakeholder group represented in the governance process to ensure participation is accessible to all stakeholders, guide group meetings, and mediate decision-making (Ansell and Gash 2007). The third principle is institutional design which outlines policies and procedures guiding collaboration between stakeholders (Ansell and Gash 2007). These three principles thus culminate into the final one, the collaborative process, which the

authors argue is a cyclical occurrence rather than a linear one as suggested in some literature built on shared commitment, shared understanding, and developing trust between stakeholders—key to these are consistent and repeated face-to-face interactions—in the process of getting an outcome (Gray 1989, Ansell and Gash 2007).



(Figure 1) Ansell and Gash 2007

Although the collaborative governance model was designed for interactions between state and non-state stakeholders in shared decision-making processes, and community education councils are a state entity, prevailing power asymmetries resulting from mayoral control do not allow for meaningful collaborative decision-making as outlined by Ansell and Gash (2007). Employing this framework between state entities adds to literature assessing power imbalances within the state because of some actors in representative positions being given symbolic power for the advancement of political agenda.

## METHODS

This research design was completed in collaboration with community members who either (1) live in Bedford-Stuyvesant, (2) have attended or are alumni of the community school districts serving Bedford-Stuyvesant, or (3) have children currently enrolled in one of the community school districts serving Bedford-Stuyvesant. During an initial meeting with five stakeholders, I presented the research question and interview protocol to (1) assess the relevance of this work, (2) ensure that the language being used was accessible to community members, and (3) gain additional insight into the historical and current educational landscape that could be informing the work that community education councils do. Determinations around the research question and interview protocol were finalized after a follow-up via email with these stakeholders to review the edits integrated into the new plan after an initial review. From there, the central research question framing this project, “How

are community education councils influencing civic and political participation within their service areas?” was developed.

Given the broad research question resulting from a lack of literature on community education councils and public understanding of local decision-making in NYC Public Schools, I engaged in an inductive learning process for the bulk of this research process. To accomplish this, I conducted seven 30 to 45-minute semi-structured stakeholder interviews over Zoom with community education council representatives, community organizers, parents, and residents of Bedford-Stuyvesant aged eighteen and over. All interviewees were given pseudonyms after their interview. Because Bedford-Stuyvesant is served by multiple school districts, interviewees were affiliated with community school districts 14, 16, and 17 over Zoom. A significant obstacle to completing these interviews was recruiting interviewees. Given that the election period for seats on community education councils had started at the time of this research, vacancies and limited staffing capacity made it tedious to contact representatives who were most knowledgeable about parent and community involvement. Similarly, individual council members' email addresses are not published online, requiring emails to go through administrative assistants who also had vacancies during this period. As a result of the small sample size, I included archival data to supplement the interviews. This data included public reports and oral history projects developed by community-based organizations.

Because of an inductive learning process associated with addressing a broad research question, this data was analyzed using an inductive coding process where codes were based on recurring themes within the interview and archival data transcripts. This process allowed ideas presented by interviewees to take precedence and paint a collective narrative about experiences with whole-child education, community schooling, and community education councils. However, one challenge associated with the analysis processes was the initiatives communicated in the findings, dually recognized in a source utilized for archival data (The Brooklyn Community Foundation, The Brooklyn Movement Center, and The Black Male Donor Collective 2013), was measuring the effectiveness of these initiatives and processes mentioned in the interviews. Attempts to cross-reference findings with public archives such as NYC Public Schools databases, NYC government databases, and media sources presented no results. The themes that were most salient across interviews, as well as ones that challenged traditional narratives in literature, were incorporated into the findings.

## **FINDINGS**

When *Nicole Lewis*, a native of the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood, found their son's school was closing they were contacted by the President of their Community Education Council. Having had minimal involvement in decision-making processes within their son's school district before, this was their first introduction to the Community Education Council. They had sent invitations to families to attend a series of meetings with representatives from the NYC Department of Education to determine the future of the school and what options were available to parents when relocating their children. Although there was initial frustration around the process—*Nicole* naming that she felt parent involvement in the process did not feel meaningful and that all her options weren't fully communicated—she kept her son enrolled through a school merger, which is when a different school in the

district absorbs a school set to close. Reflecting on this experience, she was happy with her decision:

“It was a shift. It was something that was different. But it was a positive shift and a positive change. The school that he was at had a principal there and she was very engaging with the students. She had back-to-school days in the summertime that was through the first week of school. They'll have like a big carnival in the schoolyard where they'll have inflatables and cotton candy and grilling. It was so inviting and so engaging, and it was fun. So, when that school was absorbed into the current school, she was able to come over as well, [and] they did. Dual “principal-ling,” however you want to phrase that, but they had both principals stay on for that full year. So, I guess that alleviated some of the stress by letting the parents get to know the new principal. Now they do a lot more community events, and I think that that was a beautiful thing that came from the merger.”

Part of a new school community that she described with great enthusiasm in her eyes. However, she was left with a prevailing question about her Community Education Councils: “Who’s making these determinations? [What decisions can they make]? How are they basing their decisions?” *Nicole’s* question speaks to that of other parents, organizers, and even the community education council representatives interviewed for this research who recognize little understanding of and engagement with these advisory bodies. So much so that parents living in Black Brooklyn have organized amongst themselves to further understand NYC Public Schools. This includes the now-defunct Bed-Stuy Parents Committee which was majority white and middle-income residents looking to understand NYC Public Schools and which schools to prioritize enrolling their children in, which clashed with Community Education Council 16 and residents native to Black Brooklyn (Freedman and Winston Griffith 2019).

### *Challenges Facing Community Education Councils*

*Nicole’s* experience with her Community Education Council underscores what these bodies are required to do, which is to advise the decision-making of the NYC Department of Education and their school district on explicit issues facing public education like school closures. While liaising and representing the interest of parents within their district—in addition to determining the boundaries of school zones—is central to fulfilling their responsibilities, the findings from this research also illuminate the capacity in which Community Education Councils serve as *organizing bodies* that build political power and mobilize constituents around issues that communities have defined as imperatives to the advancement of equitable and responsive education within their school district. Racial justice was named as an imperative informing organizing efforts for Community Education Councils in the 2010 NYC mayoral election, as this not traditionally associated with public education was prevalent in interviews.

In conversation with *Martin McKenzie*, a representative serving on the community education council, shared how their council has worked toward whole-child education and community schooling as an effort that needs to close gaps children are experiencing before entering the classroom:

“We have dealt with housing, we have dabbled in food insecurity, [and] Wi-Fi and those different things that are not considered education, but all of it takes it all affects when you're looking at the whole child, right? If a kid is hungry, they're not going to do very well in school. If a kid doesn't have internet, they're not going to do very well in school. [If a kid doesn't have a stable place to stay, they're not going to do well in school.]. So, all of those things come together. And they matter... To make sure that they have a proper education, we have to also make sure that those things are in place.”

From interviews with community education council members, community organizers, and community members I found that community education councils are influencing urban and political processes on these three issue areas in Bedford-Stuyvesant: low-income housing, food insecurity, and community power-building.

### *I. Low-Income Housing Initiative:*

The first initiative mentioned in several interviews was the forum held on housing justice. In 2022, representatives on the Community Education Councils in Brooklyn North—a larger region that encompasses Community School Districts within and outside of what would be considered Black Brooklyn (Community School Districts 13, 14, 15, 16, 19, and 32)—organized a conversation between 10 - 12 tenant’s associations representing both parents of students enrolled within their district, and broader community members; the NYC Public Advocate’s Office; and other representatives to discuss the state of low-income housing within their service areas. From *Tamara Brown*, a community education council representative who worked on this initiative with *Martin* and *Jamila Diaz*, another community education council representative:

“[We talked] about the realities of housing injustice, and particularly to NYCHA—which we know houses predominantly low-income Black, Brown, and immigrant families—and just the connection between housing and education. If my window is broken for three months, and my house is freezing, [and] I can't use the space heater because there might be a fire that's going to impact my ability to do my homework, get a good night's sleep, and get to school. If I have no heat; if I have no hot water; if there's mold in rats and roaches, right? My quality of life directly impacts my ability to learn. But [when] a child gets to school people don't see you that. They just see that they're sleepy and that their clothes are dirty. And then instead of supporting that child ask them what's going on and how they can help, families are getting ACS called on them because of their living conditions. So, we held a forum as a Brooklyn Community Education Council coalition [and] to have the folks actually impacted by the issues [to have] a platform [and] individuals who are already organizing their own communities—because you never want to parachute into an issue and present yourself as an expert, right? I'm not someone who lives in NYCHA, I'm not someone who's dealing with those conditions. But I can use my platform to give them a platform, uplift and amplify their work and then say, how can we help you?”

From hosting this forum, as well as additional data collection from NYCHA public records, the community education councils in Brooklyn North developed a series of

resolutions around NYCHA housing addressed to the NYC Public Advocate on how to improve their housing on a policy level. These resolutions also provided recommendations for which developments were in immediate need of attention.

## *II. Food Pantry Initiative:*

In addition to organizing around improving housing for students and families—and as a result, the broader community who lived in low-income housing and public housing projects—the community education councils also spearheaded an initiative aimed at reducing food insecurity within their district. Recognizing a need for accessible and affordable food during the Covid-19 pandemic, the community education council that *Jamila* and *Martin* serve was able to develop food pantries located within schools. What started as partnerships between the community education council and non-local organizations to deliver boxes of food to schools, which *Jamila* credited to her council’s commitment to building relationships with different stakeholders to achieve intended outcomes, became the development of food pantries within all their local public schools. What is more to *Jamila* was the reach of these pantries: “Even though it is in a school and it’s available to students and students’ families, if you live across the street but have no kids you still need food [you can access this through the school too]. All you have to do is inquire within the school and they will be able to help you.” What started as a pandemic response remains in effect today with *Nicole* recalling having seen other families and community members within her son’s school district visiting the pantry during pick-up hours.

## *III. Community Power Building:*

The previous examples demonstrate how community education councils have served as mediators between their constituencies, nonprofit organizations and community groups, and NYC government offices. Demonstrating significant individual and collective leadership in these advisory bodies, their work is not limited to just connecting students, parents, and communities to resources—it is also building bases for greater political participation in a movement toward urban education reform. Named as a critical underpinning of agitating and mobilizing for the advancement of education and schooling, building constituents’ political capacities through cross-collaboration with organizing groups is important in communities like Bedford-Stuyvesant where there is a significant low-income population (The Brooklyn Community Foundation, The Brooklyn Movement Center, and The Black Male Donors Collective; Map and Warren 2011; Warren 2011; and Warren 2014). Community education councils have worked in partnership with community-based organizations to raise the political consciousness and capacities of their constituencies to participate in a movement toward whole-child education through community schooling.

Organizers with The Brooklyn Movement Center and Coalition for Educational Justice designed a curriculum for a workshop series that trained parents in navigating NYC Public Schools in collaboration with Community Education Council 16. According to *Thomas Hardi*, a community organizer from Black Brooklyn who helped develop this initiative, this series was rooted in building individual and collective power and targeted increasing awareness of bureaucratic structures of the NYC Department of Education, understanding how local advisory bodies like community education councils and parent-teacher associations work, and developing broader skills in self and collective-advocacy. Although this initiative was designed for parents with children enrolled in Community

School District 16, the event was open to and engaged parents from other community school districts and community members who did not have children enrolled in public schools at all. In a reflection on their leadership in this initiative, as well as other projects that they have worked on around building parent power, *Thomas* believes that this work was vital to the current renaissance happening within NYC Public Schools located in Black Brooklyn. Specifically, in regard to those in Community School District 16, *Thomas* states: “I think we helped politicize people and we helped connect them to city-wide organizations. We also help them see themselves as changemakers and understand the power that they had.”

### *Challenges Associated with Organizing through Community Education Councils*

The findings thus far highlight how community education councils have created avenues to make meaningful contributions to the movement toward whole-child education through community schools in Bedford-Stuyvesant. However, this work did not come without limitations. In addition to struggling to increase parent participation, urban processes such as gentrification—or the movement of middle-income people into low-income neighborhoods; in the context of Bedford-Stuyvesant, these new residents are overwhelmingly white—have been attributed to some of the current issues that the district is facing such as under-enrollment and conflict over power and representation in local education (The Brooklyn Community Foundation, The Brooklyn Movement Center, The Black Male Donor Collective 2013; Freeman and Winston Griffith 2019).

Lacking control over the state of affordable housing in NYC and NYC Public Schools central office decision-making over school structure, an additional challenge named is the continued disenfranchisement and disempowerment of community education councils. *Johnny Hoffman*, a resident in Bedford-Stuyvesant who identified himself as a gentrifier, noted that a lack of decision-making power has stretched local leadership, who heavily rely on influencing decision-making, thin: “The [community education council] doesn’t have a lot of power, which is a problem... so [*Martin*] milks the CEC for whatever power it has. And that is mainly getting attention... You basically have to be annoying to the system and then they’ll respond to you. That’s a lot of work, you know, *a lot* of work.” Leaders on community education councils will also tell you this themselves. This was resonant for *Martin*, *Jamila*, and *Tamara* as well who all noted that while relationship-building and coalition-building horizontally across community education councils throughout NYC and vertically with different stakeholders from community organizers, community-based organizations, and offices in NYC government has significant value and is essential to their work, only so much that can be accomplished when there isn’t power beyond influence.

The present absence of power has not stopped these communities from dreaming of it. *Jessica*, who also believes that the limited power that community education councils have is a challenge, shared how she imagines collaborative governance over NYC Public schools and what education should value, like *Nicole’s* decision to select a school on more than test scores:

“I’ve always hated mayoral control, but also just hate it as an issue... I’ve recently started conversations around what is community control. And I am so invested in figuring out what community control can give us outside the purview of increased test scores and [academic] achievement. In my ideal world, we have some kind of joint control system but with more levers on the community side where communities

are making decisions around things like curriculum and their concerns, and their wants, and their desires outside of the gaze and purview of capitalism.

What I think community control could give us is the ending of the question to children ‘What do you want to be when you grow up?’ and replace it with the question? ‘Who do you want to be when you grow up?’ Which is actually the more important question. Because I don't know nobody who is doing the thing when they were five, and we all wanted to be unicorn cowboys in space.”

## **DISCUSSION**

Consistent with the available literature on Black imaginaries about community schooling (McKinney and de Royston 2019; Daniel, Kirkland, and Malone 2020), representatives on the NYC Community Education Councils serving Bedford-Stuyvesant—and Black Brooklyn broadly given cross-district collaboration on some of these initiatives—conceptualize whole-child education as being intertwined with urban processes. Through recognition of how housing and food insecurity affects students’ performance within classroom settings, these leaders have taken the initiative in addressing salient issues implicating rising urban inequality within NYC through community empowerment. Spearheading organized efforts that engage diverse stakeholders from tenants' unions, local and non-local food services, and NYC government offices and officials serving households that may not have children enrolled in NYC Public Schools demonstrate (1) an actualization of this conceptualization of whole-child education in the context of NYC Public Schools, (2) applications of facets explored in the collaborative governance framework, and (3) broad sweeping implications that community education councils have in advancing larger movements toward urban reform. The findings from this research on the NYC Community Education Councils in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood underscore that despite little governing and decision-making power as a result of a decades-long movement that disenfranchised communities in participating in democratic processes as it related to NYC Public Schools, representatives have tapped into their individual, collective, and communities’ power to create opportunities that advance whole-child education in partnership with diverse stakeholders. Some of the themes salient to this from the interviews and archival data were leveraging robust social and political infrastructures; building relationships with public and private actors and organizations; and having strong leaders at the helm of these bodies to connect households with and without children enrolled in NYC Public Schools to the right people and expand their access to essential resources through creating food pantries within public schools.

Analyzing these findings through the collaborative governance framework underscores that these community education councils are already engaging in processes associated with the collaborative governance model (Ansell and Gash 2007). The forum held by the Brooklyn North Community Education Councils highlighted considerations and applications of starting conditions by inviting relevant stakeholders into a shared space around a common issue area; facilitative leadership, through coordinating communication pre-and post the forum and hosting the forum; and the collaborative process, where these factors facilitate trust-building that allow for shared outcomes to be developed (Ansell and Gash 2007). In this instance, the culmination of recommendations influences the decision-making of representatives from NYC government offices. This underscored a critical

component missing from literature and applications of collaborative governance—centering stakeholders who are most affected by an issue and delegating the most decision-making power to them. As stated by *Tamara* when discussing her rationale for co-organizing a public housing forum: “You never want to parachute into an issue and present yourself as an expert, right? I'm not someone who lives in NYCHA, I'm not someone who's dealing with those conditions. But I can use my platform to give them a platform, uplift and amplify their work and then say, how can we help you?” A close reading of the literature and archival data presented in this paper demonstrates how this has been exempt within NYC Public Schools where those most affected by the state of public education have been disenfranchised and marginalized in democratic processes (Castillo 2013, Lewis 2013).

In addition to this, the collaborative governance framework also allows us to track the turbulent political histories that have led to the current state of disempowerment of communities within processes pertaining to NYC Public Schools. In the literature, there is a noted shift from collaborative governance over schools—which, for a long time in NYC Public Schools, had been fraught with a disproportionate amount of power being delegated to the stakeholders least affected by the public education system—to managerial governance over schools—a slow movement post the dissolution of the Ocean Hill Brownsville experiment in the 1960s that had been crystalized under NYC Mayor Michael Bloomberg implementing mayoral control in the 2000s (Ansell and Gash 2007). The gradual removal of communities from schools has limited local leadership's ability to affect the change that communities need despite organized efforts from individuals and coalitions of Community Education Councils. Therefore, to strengthen the movement toward whole-child education in NYC Public Schools, power over public schools needs to be delegated back to communities (Castillo 2013).

When considering the overwhelming recognition of limited decision-making power as being the biggest challenge for NYC Community Education Councils from interviewees and reflections on the Ocean Hill-Brownsville experiment from the archival data, the Ansell and Gash's (2007) collaborative governance model provides a framework for what governance over NYC Public Schools *could be* moving forward. It is eminent that these community education councils are leading initiatives that underpin a successful implementation of a community schooling model rooted in Black imaginaries of whole-child education and have the capacities to be strong leaders and partners in joint decision-making over NYC Public Schools. The most persistent challenge to institutionalizing these imaginaries, which are closest in alignment with what these communities need leveraging the resources and leadership available to them, and applying their knowledge and skillset is undemocratic processes surrounding public education. A commitment to limiting mayoral control over schools—or complete abolition of mayoral control over schools—is essential to remove this challenge. As demonstrated through the Ocean-Hill Brownville experiment, and as emphasized in the literature on whole-child education, local conditions matter (Dryfoos and Maguire 2002; Barkin, Dryfoos, and Quinn 2005; Baldrige 2014; Capers and Shah 2015; Madkins and de Royston 2019; Daniel, Kirkland, and Malone 2020). Local people are best equipped to resolve the issues facing their communities (Castillo 2013; Daniel, Kirkland, and Malone 2020).

## CONCLUSION

In the 1960s, NYC Public Schools was one of several urban school districts to participate in a national experiment that delegated local school boards control over the schools within their boundaries. At the heart of this was the newly created Ocean Hill-Brownsville experiment located within what is known as Black Brooklyn—a collection of neighborhoods within Brooklyn, NY accounting for the largest concentration of Black people in the United States—and one of the first codifications of a community school model within NYC Public Schools (Castillo 2013, Lewis 2013, Chronopolous 2020). Since the dissolution of this experiment, NYC Public Schools have experienced de-democratization and a recentralization of decision-making with the abolition of traditional school boards and implementation of mayoral control over schools during the Bloomberg administration; legislative decisions at the state and local level that resulted in the removal of traditional school boards; implementation of community education councils; and expansion of mayoral powers over public schools (Castillo 2013, Lewis 2013).

From interviews and archival data, I found that community leaders conceptualize whole-child education as contributing to initiatives that fall outside of traditional purviews of public education and into urban planning; current and past initiatives from community education councils include supporting the improvement of low-income housing for tenants within the community, reducing food insecurity that was amplified by the Covid-19 pandemic, and building community power; and community education council representatives leveraged community resources, built relationships, and tapped into their own power to organize these initiatives. These findings underscore both theoretical and practical movements toward whole-child education that is responsive to the needs of students, families, and broader communities being spearheaded by local leadership despite decades-long political struggles around community determination within NYC Public Schools. Collaborative governance—either through redistributing power back to community education councils or reinstating community control—was named as an imperative to the continued movement toward community schools in most interviews.

Given the limitation of the sample size, these findings serve as a precursor to a larger study on how community education councils are organizing for whole-child education and participating in a movement toward urban education reform. Likewise, because research on community education councils is still emergent, deeper investigation into these bodies will further our understanding of the implications of decentralization and recentralization of NYC Public Schools since the findings underscore communities are finding ways to circumvent a less collaborative governance structure to ensure their needs are met. This investigation will also deepen our understanding on how whole-child education through community schools is being conceptualized and operationalized within their local contexts. To move research on urban education forward, academics need to commit to developing literature that intentionally centers Black imaginaries in conversations about urban education reform and produce findings that also underscore communities' capitals rather than deficits and how these capitals are being applied to current organizing efforts (Warren 2011; Warren 2014; Daniel, Kirkland, and Malone 2020; Madkins and de Royston 2019).

Outside of the scope of theorizing urban education, local school districts and their constituencies need to be re-centered as experts in improving their schools and communities to make current community schools a truly participatory model. The first step toward this is implementing a new collaborative governance model within NYC that delegates decision-making power—with stakeholders most affected by the policies implemented—to

representative bodies like community education councils. This is because, as *Martin* put it: “It's important that we understand the power of community and we understand the power of parents and collaborating with our educators to make the most for our students. You can't do it alone. Parents can't do it alone. And educators can't do it alone. It's when we come together with our community and make those decisions around what's best for everybody.”

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