

## Foreword

*Compete or Close* is a rich, nuanced portrayal of a neighborhood high school's struggles to survive in what can only be described as a hostile environment. Decades of underfunding, entrenched racial and economic segregation, and the growing influence of private sector strategies and actors have left Philadelphia's public school system—like Chicago's, Baltimore's, and those of other large cities—staggering from one crisis to another. The rapid growth in charter school enrollment (in many districts, more than one-quarter of the students now attends a charter) has drained resources and enrollees from the public schools, exacerbating financial shortfalls and leading to multiple waves of school closings. In 2013 alone, Chicago closed forty-nine schools, New York City closed twenty-two, Washington, DC, closed fifteen, and Philadelphia closed twenty-four.

Such developments are tied to recent shifts in education policy and practice that have essentially redrawn the urban education landscape. Over the past two decades, policy makers at local and national levels have turned to privatization, choice, and other reforms, assuming that an infusion of market forces would spur improvements in struggling schools and districts. While researchers have begun to explore the impact of charter schools, voucher programs, school closings, and related policies, our understanding

remains incomplete, especially when it comes to the experiences of people most directly affected. In *Compete or Close*, Julia McWilliams uses the story of Johnson High (a pseudonym) to shed light on a part of the education landscape that has received too little attention: the plight of neighborhood high schools. The growth in the charter sector, and the embrace of market models of school improvement more broadly, represents an existential threat to neighborhood schools. And, as McWilliams shows so poignantly, the costs to students, families, and educators are profound.

Johnson High School faced this existential threat. Enrollment was down as students left for charter schools or other options. Declining enrollment meant reduced resources, and if the school did not attract more students it would be closed. Theories of school choice might treat these developments as necessary by-products of healthy competition and of families' efforts to escape low performing schools. McWilliams, however, tells a much more complex tale, exposing the inequities built into the system and the human toll they take. Unlike charter schools, public schools receive little to no private funding, have no money for marketing or recruitment, must accept students at any time, and cannot easily remove students. In fact, neighborhood schools must serve students expelled from charter schools for various reasons, an obligation that results in a steady stream of new enrollees and significant disruption throughout the school year. In other words, the competition is neither fair nor healthy: the very publicness of traditional public schools—with their obligation to serve all, no matter what—renders them unfit competitors in a marketized environment.

As I will describe, this book brings multiple new insights to our understanding of the consequences of market-oriented education policies. With its focus on marketization in Philadelphia, this work is in direct conversation with my own book, *Marketing Schools, Marketing Cities*, which showed how Philadelphia's ef-

forts to promote urban revitalization by marketing public schools to middle- and upper-class families intensified race and class inequalities, positioning affluent families as valued customers and marginalizing poor and working-class families. Yet, whereas my study focused on a relatively advantaged school and population, in *Compete or Close* McWilliams makes a unique and important contribution by calling attention to conditions at the other end of the spectrum. She shows that patterns related to marketing, resource scarcity, and inequality, which were troubling in my data, are disastrous in the far more challenged Johnson High context. In addition, she vividly describes the psychic costs to students and educators of policies that treat them, their communities, and their institutions as disposable.

*Compete or Close* makes several key contributions. First, while research has documented the cost of school closings to students and communities, McWilliams shows that the mere *threat* of closure has a profound impact even on schools that remain open. Fearing that declining enrollment would lead to closure, administrators struggled to “rebrand” Johnson High as a haven for Asian immigrants. This rebranding was thoroughly racialized, playing as it did on “model minority” stereotypes of Asians and deficit assumptions about African American students. McWilliams’s analysis shows clearly that efforts to market schools invariably involve distinguishing between groups, marking some potential students as desirable and others as dangerous.

Second, rather than treating the educators involved as heroes or villains, McWilliams vividly portrays the nature of the dilemmas they face. The teachers and administrators at Johnson High were in a near-impossible situation. Resources were scarce, closure seemed imminent, students’ needs were extreme, and racial politics were often toxic. Educators were forced to pursue two goals—remaining true to the school’s mission of serving all students equitably, and

marketing the school to increase enrollment and stave off closing—that often seemed mutually exclusive. Readers may not agree with the decisions educators made as they navigated this perilous terrain. However, it is a testament to the sensitivity of McWilliams’s descriptions that they will likely see these educators as well meaning and, hopefully, empathize with their predicament.

Third, *Compete or Close* does what many school ethnographies do not, which is present a highly contextualized understanding of educational processes. Too often, ethnographic work on education treats schools as independent, even isolated, entities, paying little attention to the social, political, and economic contexts that shape school policy and practices. *Compete or Close* portrays Johnson High and its challenges as impacted by factors well beyond the school itself: economic shifts, demographic changes, racial politics, contemporary assumptions about how to fix schools, and city and district leadership. Some of these are unique to Philadelphia and Johnson High’s neighborhood, but others can be found in cities across the country and are important to a full understanding of dynamics within and around urban schools.

Fourth, this work is striking in the richness of its data. McWilliams spent years in the Johnson High community and knows it extremely well. She developed authentic relationships with educators, students, and parents and often just happened to be there when teachers or administrators needed to vent their frustration. Her ability to lend a sympathetic ear helped her both build relationships and hear from her participants in an especially unguarded way. For example, one day she was conducting observations in a classroom when the principal, feeling especially demoralized, walked in and sat next to her. He shared the following:

They create the conditions for us to fail and then punish us when it happens. You devalue the work we do with the toughest kids, the ones that are hardest to get to, the ones that nobody

is looking out for. . . . What's happening is we're dismantling public education piece by piece. We've made it into a commodity and the irony of it all is that the kids at the bottom don't have any choice, even though we're supposedly all about "choice." Screw the people that are committed to running good schools for them.

Exchanges like this convey participants' experiences and perceptions in a way that is possible only when people spend time together and come to know each other well. McWilliams's deep knowledge of the field allows her to discuss local politics around race and immigration, educational privatization, and the role of public-private partnerships in an unusually nuanced way, exploring multiple perspectives and interrogating easy assumptions. With its rich data and subtle analysis, her book exemplifies the strengths of extended, immersive ethnography.

I enjoyed reading *Compete or Close* because the story McWilliams tells is a compelling one. But it was also a painful experience, as her data reveal such scarcity and distress, much of which feels avoidable. As we consider how best to serve urban youth and urban communities, we need more research like this that illuminates the costs of policies that treat schools, students, and communities as unworthy or expendable. *Compete or Close* will take its place on my shelf alongside other books, like Jonathan Kozol's *Savage Inequalities*, Diane Ravitch's *Reign of Error*, Michael Fabricant and Michelle Fine's *Charter Schools and the Corporate Makeover of Public Education*, and Eve Ewing's *Ghosts in the Schoolyard*, that have shown the ways in which scarcity, disinvestment, institutional racism, and marketization have undermined institutions of public education, especially in cities.

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