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“THE COMPLETE DISREGARD FOR OUR CHILDREN’S LIVES, THE
TARGETING OF A COMMUNITY THAT CAN’T FIGHT BACK:”
FAMILIES’ TESTIMONIOS ON RESISTING SCHOOL
CLOSURES ON THE U.S.-MEXICO BORDER

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Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership and Administration

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Dedication

Le dedico este trabajo a Familias Unidas del Chamizal.

Gracias por confiar en mi para contar sus historias.
“THE COMPLETE DISREGARD FOR OUR CHILDREN’S LIVES, THE TARGETING OF A COMMUNITY THAT CAN’T FIGHT BACK:”

FAMILIES’ TESTIMONIOS ON RESISTING SCHOOL CLOSURES ON THE U.S.-MEXICO BORDER

by

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DISSERTATION

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Abstract

Through the use of Latinx Critical Race Theory (LatCrit), with testimonios as a method of inquiry, this study analyzed families’ experiences that led them to resist school closures. This study also chronicled families’ experiences with the transition to new schools, after the school closures. Once schools closed, families described their transition to new schools. LatCrit was applied to interpret school closures through a social justice lens and understand how families experienced interconnected oppression related to their race/ethnicity, class, culture, immigration status, socioeconomic status, language, environment, and gender. The testimonialistas in this study were all members of Familias Unidas del Chamizal, a group that organized around various issues that had impacted Barrio Chamizal, located in South Central El Paso, Texas for many years. Participants stated that the El Paso Independent School District (EPISD) ignored family concerns and had no consideration for the impact that school closures would have on families and their children. Participants felt that EPISD devalued Chamizal families for not speaking English and being poor, Immigrants of Color. The testimonialistas shared that the school district targeted a community that could not fight back against a system of power and politics. This study raises implications for research and practice.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

School closures are disruptive to communities. Since the onset of high-stakes accountability in education, many communities have experienced school closures because of educational reforms derived from No Child Left Behind and Every Student Succeeds Act laws (Berry & Herrington, 2011; Mathis & Trujillo, 2016; Meyers, 2012; Sunderman et al., 2017). School boards across the country often have to close schools because they have to increase efficiency by reducing their financial losses (Lee & Lubienski, 2017). This policy matter affected rural schools in the 20th century and has most recently impacted schools in large urban areas. Over the last years, school closures jolted EPISD, the largest school district in El Paso County, Texas (El Paso Independent School District, 2021a). EPISD, one of 12 independent school districts within Region 19, served students in El Paso and Hudspeth Counties in Texas (Education Service Center–Region 19, 2020). The school district was one of four that served students within the city limits of El Paso. EPISD spanned from the West El Paso, the affluent area of the city, to the beginning of the East El Paso. The heart of the district was in the northeast, central, and south-central El Paso, all low-income areas – especially the latter.

EPISD served 54,000 students in 84 schools (El Paso Independent School District, 2021b). The majority of students (83.7 percent) were Hispanic, nine percent were White, three percent were Black/African American, and one percent were classified as another ethnicity. Sixty-five percent of students were economically disadvantaged, 26 percent were English Language Learners, and 10 percent had special needs. The demographics of the district were important to understand in relation to the school closures that were announced in 2018 and occurred at the beginning of 2019.
Case Study Background

On May 31, 2018, the EPISD Board of Trustees President, Trent Hatch, along with El Paso American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President, Ross Moore, and El Paso Teachers Association President, Norma De La Rosa, held a press conference at EPISD headquarters. The 21-minute press conference was held a day before the last day of the 2017-2018 school year, and streamed online, via Facebook, by the El Paso Times. Hatch began the conference with a written statement that said EPISD was considering multiple ways to balance the upcoming 2018-2019 budget and they had determined campus closures were necessary because of a slew of reasons (Hatch, Moore, & De La Rosa, 2018). The district had a seven-million-dollar deficit due to declining enrollment, an aging population, urban sprawl, and lower birthrates within the district boundaries. The district had lost 30 million dollars from 2013-2018. The projections showed that the district would lose 60 million dollars in the next decade. Hatch also stated that in the past five years, EPISD had provided 50 million dollars in raises, six million dollars in healthcare benefits, and that no jobs would be lost for those affected by campus closures. He mentioned that in the previous budget, they cut 10 million dollars from the central office budget. This introduction set up the reasoning for the district beginning the process to close schools.

The school closures at EPISD came at a critical time because, according to Hatch, past boards and administrations had ignored the issue and left this board to find a solution (Hatch et al., 2018). In his capacity as school board president, Hatch believed the district could not continue to sustain schools that were under capacity because it was fiscally irresponsible, and students were affected by the loss of resources. Each closure would save the district one million

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1 Trent Hatch resigned from the EPISD Board of Trustees on February 16, 2019, less than a month after voting to close South Central El Paso schools (Sanchez, 2019d). He no longer lived in District 6, the West El Paso seat he represented on the board.
dollars. Hatch went on to say that the savings from school closures could be put toward employee compensation, state-of-the-art technology, and programming for students. Hatch ended his prepared remarks with an argument to close schools to have a better district for current and future students of EPISD.

We realize and understand that the timing is not ideal. However, we can no longer kick the can down the road any further. We have let emotions lead these decisions far too long. We must take the emotion out of this and do what we know is right. As stewards of the tax dollars, we as a board are entrusted to do what is fiscally necessary. In the long run, this will create a much healthier and stable district in which we can focus on our core mission – that is to prepare our students for the future with a 21st century education. Our focus is not only on our current students, but also on the future students of EPISD and families. To the families that will be impacted, we know this may be difficult. We will work to ensure that any transition is smooth and coordinated with all families, teachers, and staff. Any decision will be made in the best interest of your children and the future children of EPISD. We ask for your help and understanding as we proceed with this difficult process. We must remember that we are all here with the same purpose and goal – to serve children of EPISD. (Hatch et al., 2018)

This press conference was held a few weeks before the June 21, 2018 vote on the 2018-2019 budget. Hatch said the district spent the most on salaries and facilities and it became apparent, 45 days prior to the press conference, that more savings were needed in the form of school closures (Hatch et al., 2018; Sanchez, 2018a). Hatch did not elaborate on why the board did not make an announcement as soon as they found out of the shortfalls (Sanchez, 2018a). He also said that holding the press conference a day before the end of the school year should not be read into as a
conspiracy theory that the district waited for everyone to go home and have a bad summer (Hatch et al., 2018). It was a financial decision that had to be taken and the press conference was held to be transparent with the public after looking at all options to save the district money. EPISD Superintendent, Juan Cabrera,² was not present at the conference. He issued a statement, where he praised work on increasing student enrollment and wanting EPISD to be financially stable for many years (Sanchez, 2018a).

Both Moore and De La Rosa supported the closures. Moore said the issue should have been handled in 2010 or 2011 (Hatch et al., 2018). He added that if the issue was not addressed, EPISD would go into an economic death spiral. De La Rosa appreciated being part of the discussion because it was important for the employees to understand that they would not lose their job and that she was committed to making sure students had the best teachers in the area. She also said the district had exhausted all ways of recuperating dollars lost because of attendance and the loss of students. Moore placed an emphasis on the district to handle the closure process in an adequate manner for the district to improve its trust and reputation with the community. To him, three factors were essential for the process to be successful. First, communication with employees was important. Second, the community had to be brought into the process. Third, the district had to be completely transparent and hold open discussions and meetings in open session to prevent any backroom deals on the closures. Moore also said that the

² On November 5, 2020, Juan Cabrera resigned from his charge as superintendent of EPISD (Smith, 2020a). Because of accrued leave time, his resignation became effective on February 1, 2021. The EPISD Board of Trustees agreed to a settlement of $558,917.54. Cabrera submitted his resignation three weeks after it was revealed that he was implicated in a civil lawsuit alleging that he defrauded investors out of five million dollars in an online school he started with former EPISD Board President, Dori Fenenbock.
closed schools should not be sold to charter companies because it would exacerbate the attendance issues at EPISD.

Susie Byrd,3 EPISD Board Trustee for District 3, told Sanchez (2018a) that this was a critical decision that was brought to the board at the last minute, with insufficient information. She felt the decision to hold the conference a day before school ended was disrespectful to the public because they did not have an adequate notification or a chance to engage, especially for individuals in schools that could be closed. This decision would erode public trust that the board worked to gain back after the State of Texas implemented a Board of Managers a few years prior. She said if the closures moved forward in this way, two classes of students would be created. The first class of students would have their schools closed after a long public process and would transition to a brand-new school or a school in better condition than the one they left. The second class of students would have their schools “closed in the dark of night with very little chance for public input and moved to schools that are in just as bad a condition as the school that was closed” (Sanchez, 2018a).

Hatch said that once the 2018-2019 budget was approved, on June 21, 2018, the board would go into the community and hold community meetings. He promised all schools within the district would be analyzed, and emphasized transparency, when talking to families throughout the community (Hatch et al., 2018; Sanchez, 2018a). The schools considered for closure would be those under 65 percent capacity. Jacobs (2015) conducted a State of School Facilities Report for EPISD. One of the main findings was that several EPISD schools were over capacity. The

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3 On January 2, 2019, Susie Byrd resigned from the EPISD Board of Trustees (Sanchez, 2018c). She vacated her Central El Paso District 3 seat to work for newly elected Congresswoman Veronica Escobar. Her resignation came 20 days before the EPISD Board of Trustees voted to close schools in South Central El Paso.
utilization of a school was determined by dividing enrollment by the capacity of a school. Schools under 85 percent were considered underutilized, schools over 100 percent were overutilized, and schools over 120 percent were significantly overcrowded. The report projected that by 2019, 33 EPISD schools would be at or fall below 70 percent capacity, with 16 of those schools under 60 percent capacity. For district officials, it meant that EPISD would inefficiently continue to pay for maintenance and utilities on underused facilities. Twenty-seven schools considered for closure were under 65 percent capacity – 19 elementary schools, six middle schools, and two high schools (Sanchez, 2018a). Of these 27 schools, five middle schools and three elementary schools were slated for closure and consolidation under the 2016 EPISD Bond (El Paso ISD Board of Trustees, 2018).

The district held two community meetings on June 18-19, 2018 at a facility across the street from the central office (Sanchez, 2018b). Then, the board held a workshop on December 6, 2018 (El Paso Independent School District, 2019). Throughout the month of December 2018, EPISD held five community meetings, with staff, at schools that would potentially close. They also held one meeting at Douglass Elementary School, with members of the community. By January 2019, the school district proposed five elementary schools for closure. These five school had the following capacities: Alta Vista Elementary (54 percent), Beall Elementary (51 percent capacity), Burleson Elementary (42 percent), Douglass Elementary (51 percent), and Zavala Elementary (43 percent) (Sanchez, 2018a). One option included Alta Vista, Beall, Burleson, and Schuster, while the second option swapped Beall for Douglass. The district held eight community meetings at the schools throughout January, with the final meeting taking place on January 16, 2019 – six days before the vote on closures (Sanchez, 2019a). Between 30 and 100 people attended each of these community meetings (El Paso Independent School District, 2019).
On January 22, 2019, the EPISD Board of Trustees held their regular monthly board meeting, with the discussion on school closures placed at the end of the meeting (El Paso ISD Board of Trustees, 2019). The superintendent’s Chief of Staff, Jose Lopez, led a presentation titled “Rightsizing for the Future,” in which he discussed why the school district needed to make the decision to close schools, mainly based on low enrollment (El Paso Independent School District, 2019). There were three main community trends that impacted the enrollment of EPISD schools. First, the population within EPISD boundaries was aging and birth rates were low. Second, urban sprawl continued to happen, and more families opted to move east, out of the district boundaries, where there was potential for growth. Third, charter schools were rapidly expanding in the area. There were ten factors that the district considered for schools to close, based on being able to sustain operations over the next five, 10, or 15 years. The factors included capacity and size, enrollment, surrounding campuses, transportation, personnel, location, major roadways, academics programs, cost savings, and disposition of surplus property. Lopez said this criterion was discussed at community meetings held on school closures.

Families from Beall and Burleson filled the board room, asking trustees not to close their schools (El Paso ISD Board of Trustees, 2019; Sanchez, 2019b). Many people signed up to speak during public comment, in English and Spanish, against the closures (El Paso ISD Board of Trustees, 2019). The district did not provide interpretation equipment for non-English speakers to understand the meeting. Most of the speakers were from Familias Unidas del Chamizal, a group of families that live in the area where these closures took place. These families were

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4 On December 14, 2021, Jose Lopez resigned from EPISD (Smith, 2020c). This was about a month after his former boss, Juan Cabrera, had submitted his resignation. Lopez’s resignation became effective on February 16, 2021. Lopez was also involved in the online school, eSchool Prep, Cabrera started with former EPISD Board President, Dori Fenenbock (Smith, 2020b; Smith, 2020c).
wearing a red shirt, with a white heart, that read “La Escuela Bell,” above a building resembling the school. When the families addressed the board, they were mainly concerned with environmental, transportation, and after school programmatic issues. One parent, Hilda Villegas (2019), advocated for Beall Elementary School to remain open, over Douglass Elementary School, because of its centered location within the community. Villegas felt district staff had been dismissive of legitimate concerns from Beall Elementary over its potential closure. Another parent, Cemelli de Aztlan (2019) addressed the board, and used maps of the area to discuss environmental issues around the schools, mainly a recycling plant adjacent to Douglass Elementary.

On this picture, you could see it’s right behind Douglass Elementary School, which it recycles and processes metals, batteries, and other contaminating products. We also have a train behind Douglass and a lot of semitrucks passing through, which scientists highly advise to keep children away from, as they emit exhaust particles and dust that is detrimental to their health. Also, the playground that we commissioned a study at Douglass, we found it was contaminated with lead and according to the CDC no amount of lead is safe for our children. Given the close proximity that Douglass is to the recycling facility and the train. Both are not going away, we’ve tried. Dealing with contamination will be a constant and long-term issue. Neither the City or EPISD have control over the growth of silver recycling as it’s grandfathered in and the industrial zoning isn’t changing any time soon. Overall, the concentration of industry is of concern.

In contrast, Beall Elementary School is dominantly surrounded by residential homes, families, and residential zoning. Given that most Chamizal children are low-income, vehicles are a luxury many families cannot afford. The walking distance for families, if
transferred to Douglass, is much farther, longer, and more dangerous, and surrounded by industry. If Beall stays open, the walking distance for all Chamizal families is safer and shorter, and that makes a difference for children and elders walking to school. (de Aztlan, 2019)

In the end, the board unanimously voted to close four schools in low-income areas of El Paso, Texas—Alta Vista Elementary School, Beall Elementary School, Burleson Elementary School, and Schuster Elementary School (El Paso ISD Board of Trustees, 2019; Sanchez Sanchez, 2019b). Up until the vote, Beall and Burleson families had raised concerns about the school board not including their voices in the closure process and committed to fighting the board’s decision (Sanchez, 2019c). Families organized meetings, cited environmental concerns, and held a one-week hunger strike (Borunda, 2019; Smith, 2019). On June 15, 2020, the families took legal action against EPISD, in federal court, for “systemic discrimination against poor, Hispanic, and Mexican-American students” (Martinez, 2020). EPISD excluded the voices of families in the school closure process, made families feel devalued, and did not consider the impact the closures would have on children.

Purpose of Study

Several studies have focused on the commonalities found in numerous school closures that have taken place over the past decades, such as underperformance and financial issues (Freelon, 2018; Nuamah, 2020), low enrollment (Garnett, 2014; Kirshner, Gaertner, & Pozzoboni, 2010; Sunderman et al., 2017), and school reform policies (Jorgensen & Hoffmann, 2003; Mathis & Trujillo, 2016; Picower & Mayorga, 2015; Sunderman et al., 2017). While these studies address important factors that lead to closures, they lack the perspectives of affected families and the critical occurrences that families face when their schools are closed. School
closures impact families of students that transition to new schools after a closure. The literature needs more of these experiences because the focus is on why schools close and not on the effects of closures on families. In view of these considerations, the purpose of this study is to address the social problem of school closures in a disadvantaged community of immigrants of Color, in El Paso, Texas. Through families’ personal accounts of school closures, this study seeks to center families’ experiences through the school closure process and the aftermath of closures - in particular, what happened to children who transitioned to a new school. Hence, this study aims to answer the following two questions:

1. What are families’ experiences that lead them to resist school closures?
2. After school closures occur, how do families describe their transition to the new school?

The first research question sets out to understand the factors that led families to resist school closures in their community. The second research question informs the first question, in detailing the ramifications sustained from the school closures in the transition phase. Together, these questions play a key role in addressing what happened before and after the school closures at EPISD.

**Significance of Study**

As EPISD moved to close these four schools, I realized that the EPISD Board of Trustees had failed the families in my community. I started thinking of the best way I could get involved to make sure that future board members reflected the values of the communities they represented. Through this reflection, a seat on the EPISD Board of Trustees became vacant, and I made the decision to run for the position. My platform consisted of four main points – transparency, accountability, competitive compensation for all employees, and the inclusion of
the community in decisions. I knocked on community members’ doors and realized, through conversations with voters, that many people had lost trust in the district and raised concerns about the closures. The area I was running to represent included Alta Vista, one of the four schools that closed. It was a challenging race, but I won the election. I was elected to the EPISD Board of Trustees on June 15, 2019 and was sworn in on July 17, 2019. At my first regular board meeting, on August 20, 2019, I tried reversing the January 22, 2019 decision to close four schools. The board was made up of seven members, and four remained from the prior board that voted in favor of closing the schools. The motion to reopen the four schools failed five to two votes.

I am in a unique position as a member of the EPISD Board of Trustees. It is rare for a researcher to be in a position as a policymaker and inform policy initiatives. This study aims to help the school board and administrators at EPISD make more informed decisions on school closures and include community perspectives in the process. It is important to better understand how these closures impacted families. Families’ experiences contribute to the need for a better understanding of school closures. EPISD may continue to close schools in the future, but still lacks a transparent and inclusive closure plan. I would like to address it as a board member and researcher.

**Organization of Dissertation**

This study consists of five chapters. In this first chapter, I explained the background of the issue by outlining the research problem, purpose, significance, and questions guiding my study. The second chapter is the review of literature, which analyzes how school closures have been cited in the literature in five major ways. I also define the theoretical framework that will be used for the study, along with my method of inquiry. The third chapter presents the full detail of
my methodology. The fourth chapter describes the findings derived from the data. The fifth chapter discusses the findings and provides implications for future research and policy initiatives.
Chapter 2: Review of Literature

In this chapter, I review the literature on the causes and effects of school closures. There are five key themes: reasons for school closures, school reform policies, the expansion of charter schools, school closure process, and the impact of school closures on low-income families. This study focuses on the impact of school closures on Latinx families and their resistance to school closures that occurred in a community of Spanish-speaking Immigrants of Color. First, I provide an overview of the common reasons discussed in the literature on why schools closed. Next, I explore how school reform policies have impacted school closures in the past two decades. Then, I discuss how charter schools benefit from public schools closing. After, I include the school closure process found in the research and highlight the need for more research in this area. Finally, I end the review of literature with a look at how school closures impact families in low-income communities and parent perspectives – both areas that are a gap in the literature. The chapter closes with the theoretical framework that will guide my study, Latinx Critical Race Theory, to delve into the consequences of school closures on EPISD families.

Reasons for School Closures

School closures have been covered in the literature in various ways, including three main causes. First, public schools must compete with school choice and demographics in urban areas that are rapidly changing, so school closures are inevitable, and they must be accepted as a new normal (Syeed, 2019). Next, school closures are data-driven, and they will provide better schools for all students. Finally, school closures are determined by unbiased metrics, politically neutral, and are not targeted at certain communities and populations.

There are five interconnected reasons, cited in the literature on school closures, that describe why public schools close – underutilization, low enrollment, financial losses,
consolidation, and low academic performance (Bierbaum, 2018; de la Torre, et al., 2015; Deeds & Pattillo, 2015; Engberg et al., 2011; Freelon, 2018; Garnett, 2014; Green, 2017; Kirshner, et al., 2010; Lee & Lubienski, 2017; Nuamah, 2020; Sunderman & Payne, 2009; Sunderman et al., 2017). Schools are deemed underutilized when enrollments drop (Sunderman & Payne, 2009). This leads to financial losses, which prompts the closure or consolidation of schools (Sunderman & Payne, 2009; Sunderman et al., 2017). The criteria for determining capacity, that leads to underutilization, varies by district (Freelon, 2018). Many school closures are derived from financial deficits or a shift in the population that causes declining enrollment (Engberg et al., 2012; Wright-Costello & Phillippo, 2020;). Since the beginning of the 21st century, urban school districts have encountered declining enrollment because the population is trending toward having less school-aged children (Sunderman & Payne, 2009). Underutilized schools may be housed in buildings in poor condition and are expensive to operate, so districts consider closures as a way to save money (Sunderman & Payne, 2009). Most of the research on school closures is on the financial implications of keeping a school open with low enrollment (Lee & Lubienski, 2017). I will critically analyze the literature on school closures.

The decision to close schools and consolidate other campuses is to curb lost revenue on district finances (Lee & Lubienski, 2017; Sunderman et al., 2017). In Texas, 50 percent of funding for public schools comes from local property taxes, 40 percent from the state government, and 10 percent from the federal government (Staudt, 2020). Most of the money spent by school districts is for staffing. The closure of schools allows districts to better use their resources and limit financial losses (Lee & Lubienski, 2017). The low enrollment of schools contributes to financial losses because schools receive money based on how many students are enrolled. Each student provides $11,392 in funding for Texas schools (Staudt, 2020). This means
that school districts must continue to operate facilities with less money derived from spending per-pupil (Sunderman et al., 2017). The literature shows that the savings from consolidating schools is low (Cohn, 1968; Dowdall, 2011), and the closure of schools in the urban districts have not addressed the deficiencies of these school districts (Lee & Lubienski, 2017, p. 56). The attempt to limit financial losses through school closures can have unintended consequences and increase socioeconomic inequality in accessing education. This can have a critical effect on a particular community with disadvantaged students.

In 2013, Chicago Public Schools considered 129 schools for closure (de la Torre et al., 2015). Eighteen of them were underutilized, or at less than 80 percent capacity. Many of the underutilized schools served vulnerable populations. When Chicago first closed schools, they based their decision on academic failure (Nuamah, 2020). By 2013, they reframed their narrative around losing money because of the underutilization of half-empty buildings that are expensive to maintain. This shifting message made it difficult for community members to understand the reasoning behind the need for school closures. Most of the students affected by closures came from low-income backgrounds, received special education, were on reduced or free lunch, performed poorly on the state math exam, lived in an unstable home, and were in a grade level that was inappropriate for their age (de la Torre, et al., 2015; Freelon, 2018). These students also lived in neighborhoods where the crime rate was double than that of the average Chicago Public Schools student (de la Torre et al., 2015). African American students were most affected by the closures in Chicago (de la Torre et al., 2015; Freelon, 2018).

Another common explanation that districts provide on closing schools is low academic performance (Engberg et al., 2011; Garnett, 2014; Green, 2017; Kirshner, et al., 2010; Sunderman et al., 2017). The reasoning behind closing a school with low academic performance
is to better serve students at a higher performing school (Sunderman & Payne, 2009). Several assumptions make up the idea of improving student achievement. It puts the blame on the employees of the closed school, with the thought that new employees will help improve performance. It does not take into consideration socioeconomic conditions and the ethnic or racial composure of the school. If a school has a complete redesign, then the performance will have a positive uptick. If schools are closed for low academic performance alone, a school district’s problem can worsen because they will be left with more properties in surplus that still need to be managed (Sunderman et al., 2017). In the literature, if a school district must make a decision based off of capacity or budget shortfalls, it is in the best interest to close the school and move students to a higher performing school (Engberg et al., 2012). Closing a school to increase student outcomes is not supported because it would mean students would have to move to schools that are very high achieving. This explanation is not sufficient for the parents and students that are directly impacted by the closure of their neighborhood school, if they are not offered this option.

The use of standardized testing for school performance has limitations for students, especially for Latinx students that are English Language Learners (ELL) (Davila & Aviles de Bradley, 2010). In most U.S. schools, English is the accepted and dominant language used. Students take assessments for accountability purposes, but it sets students up for failure because it can exclude them from accessing important academic options. The educational future of students is also dependent on assessments. ELL students may not have the opportunity to be placed in gifted programs, they may be retained, and placed in special education classes. In other words, language can be oppressive. Students that do not master the dominant language, English, are deficient because of the social norms instilled by White people, which includes testing.
Latinx student performance on these tests may be poor, but it does not mean they are behind academically. Instead, they are still adapting to U.S. standards. This is a consideration to reimagine standardized testing and make it equitable, if it continues to be the only path toward providing accountability in schools.

**School Closure Used as a School Reform Policy**

School closures are an educational policy for school reform (Freelon, 2018). In 2001, school closure policy was included in federal education policy for the first time through No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (Sunderman et al., 2017). No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was implemented for every K-12 student in the United States to achieve a high performance in school through assessments (Jorgensen & Hoffmann, 2003). This law made a critical shift in the country’s educational landscape and forced school districts to focus on testing, by tying funding to these performance expectations. If they did not perform, then options, such as closure, were provided (Garnett, 2014; Jorgensen & Hoffmann, 2003). If underperforming schools did not close, critical federal funding was withheld from school districts (Garnett, 2014). The idea behind NCLB was to make sure students of all backgrounds were learning, succeeding, and were not left behind (Jorgensen & Hoffmann, 2003). The states had a responsibility to make sure each student would succeed by having adequate resources.

Accountability measures put in place by NCLB allow for school closures because of underperformance (Chiu, Joh, & Khoo, 2016). NCLB created a School Improvement Grant (SIG) that focused on accountability and gave money to underperforming schools and districts that enforced one of the four strategies to turnaround schools – transformation, turnaround, restart, and school closure (Berry & Herrington, 2011; Mathis & Trujillo, 2016; Meyers, 2012; Sunderman et al., 2017). The “transformation” strategy included mores strict performance
guidelines for administrators and teachers (Sunderman et al., 2017). The “turnaround” strategy reconfigured school faculty and leadership at campuses across the nation. The “restart” strategy would temporarily close public schools and convert them into charter schools. Under “school closure,” students would be transferred to other nearby schools after their school was closed. This last strategy was the least used when schools or district applied for the SIG. In the three years of the SIG, only 21 schools, or two percent of all grants awarded, used this strategy to qualify for the financial incentives of the grant.

Scholars have noted that it is a dangerous practice to close a school because of low performance, since it has the potential to place a stigma on the students that are moved to a higher performing school (Kirshner et al., 2010). There are few studies in the literature, specific to performance, that have shown declining test scores in the year when it was announced a school would close. After the transfer to a new school, the test scores stabilized. School districts may place a priority on saving money first, then worry about performance after the closure is in place. The displacement of students, because of a school closure, creates more academic challenges. When a school closes, students are more prone to dropout and graduation rates may decline (Kirshner et al., 2010). Scholars have argued that school closures are not an effective solution for students at underperforming schools because it does not improve student achievement (Kirshner et al., 2010; Sunderman & Payne, 2009). This is why it is important to develop criteria for school closures that will move students to a school that is higher preforming and relatively close to their neighborhood (Kirshner et al., 2010).

The Obama administration created NCLB waivers for states in 2011 and transitioned SIG into “Priority Schools,” which placed five percent of state schools in an underperformance category (Bonilla & Dee, 2017). They also implemented a new measure called “Focus Schools,”
which placed ten percent of state schools that produced high achievement gaps into a category. Priority Schools had to adhere to the four federal guidelines mentioned above to turnaround schools, while Focus Schools were given autonomy to implement strategies that would reduce gaps in achievement. This priority continues today, and it allows the “good” schools to use research to inform their reform strategies, while the “bad” schools must continue to use reform strategies that are inconsistent with closing achievement gaps, especially when schools are closed.

NCLB put a school choice mandate in place to force school districts to allow students to transfer to a higher-performing school if they attend a failing school (Garnett, 2014). If students transfer out of an underperforming school, enrollment declines, and the probability of closure increases. Some of the most underperforming schools are in the largest cities in the country: Chicago, New York, Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, and Detroit. These cities have been aggressive toward closing schools as a way to address underperformance. Struggling schools in urban areas have lost students because of weak academic performance and families have moved to the suburbs, where schools are strong performers. If there is a threat for a state government to take over a school district, districts close schools more aggressively to address underperformance. Underperformance in schools is almost always a cause that influences the final outcome of any school closure.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was supposed to bring the school reform that NCLB failed to accomplish. Instead, it was implemented as a rebranded NCLB with accountability measures that relied on standardized testing (Mathis & Trujillo, 2016). ESSA is the second reauthorization of Lyndon Johnson’s Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which was put in place to serve historically underserved students by enhancing schools
in low-income areas. The composition of ESSA includes school closures as a way of reforming education (Sunderman et al., 2017). ESSA, like NCLB, punishes schools for underperformance and in many cases, schools are closed (Mathis & Trujillo, 2016). ESSA includes a mandate for states to intervene in underperforming schools that have a continuous history of poor results (Sunderman et al., 2017). It also gives states authority to implement their own accountability measures to provide oversight over student and school performance. This decision, based on performance, gives states immense power and the ability to nullify decisions made by local school boards. The literature is split on the effectiveness of school closures used as a means for school reform (Mathis & Trujillo, 2016). Some scholars say school closures hurt student achievement and others find a minimal effect on standardized test scores. Seen either way, school closures used as a policy tool to reform schools (Bierbaum, 2018) are not effective because students are not improving their performance.

The available data, composed of school years from 2003-2017, on school closures, shows a steady number of school closings in the first decade of the 21st century (U.S. Department of Education & National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). At the end of the 2000-2001 school year, 1,193 schools had closed, and 72 of those were charter schools. Data was not provided for the 2001-02 and 2002-03 school years. This is when NCLB was passed and implemented into law. Table 1, below, shows the year-to-year school closures in the United States for the first decade of the 21st century.
Table 1

Public and Charter School Closures, 2003 - 2010

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public Schools</td>
<td>2,094</td>
<td>1,742</td>
<td>1,347</td>
<td>1,610</td>
<td>1,987</td>
<td>1,354</td>
<td>1,633</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charter Schools</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>267</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Schools</td>
<td>2,168</td>
<td>1,913</td>
<td>1,553</td>
<td>1,877</td>
<td>2,120</td>
<td>1,515</td>
<td>1,822</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Until 2010, there were about 2,000 schools closing each year, except at the end of 2005-06 and 2008-09 school years, when about 1,500 schools closed. Throughout this first decade, about 150-200 of the total schools closed each year were charter schools. Table 2, below, shows the year-to-year school closures in the United States for the second decade of the 21st century.

Table 2

Public and Charter School Closures, 2010 - 2017

<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public Schools</td>
<td>1,713</td>
<td>1,638</td>
<td>1,310</td>
<td>1,453</td>
<td>1,265</td>
<td>880</td>
<td>917</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charter Schools</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>284</td>
<td>308</td>
<td>280</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Schools</td>
<td>1,929</td>
<td>1,840</td>
<td>1,493</td>
<td>1,737</td>
<td>1,573</td>
<td>1,160</td>
<td>1,098</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These numbers illustrate a large contrast from the first decade, when many more schools closed across the United States. Charter schools have remained mostly steady throughout the two decades. Fewer public schools are closing, seen by lower numbers in the last two school years provided.

Picower and Mayorga (2015) documented how school closures have been a part of a larger neoliberal reform movement that advances racism. These neoliberal reforms encourage
competition, privatize education, and students carry the blame if they succeed or fail – instead of inequitable school systems (Picower & Mayorga, 2015). Scholars argue that school closure reforms, enacted by NCLB and ESSA, concealed the Whiteness of neoliberal school reforms by depicting them as measures of equity that are race neutral (Bierbaum, 2018; Picower & Mayorga, 2015; Sunderman et al., 2017). However, research indicates that the impacts of neoliberal education reforms are not equitable. Whiteness is embedded within the system to maintain White Supremacy in a material and symbolic way (Picower & Mayorga, 2015). Bush (2004) explained that White people that benefit from various social and institutional arrangements do not connect this privilege to their race being White.

School closures have displaced Communities of Color and students have been sent to schools outside their neighborhoods, underperforming schools, and charter schools (Picower & Mayorga, 2015). These policies have been enacted for years because they are described in a way that places the focus on the individual educational needs of students. In reality, these reforms benefit White families, while Communities of Color are left behind in educational systems that were created by White people, for White people (Picower & Mayorga, 2015). These neoliberal reforms are racist because they maintain economic and racial hierarchies.

**Charter Schools Movement**

Charter schools have been a primary focus of education policy reform since the 1980s (Fowler, 2013). The children of the uneducated and poor are the most affected population by the push for more charter schools across the country. Charter schools are in an ideal position to benefit from public schools shutting their doors. The rise of school choice has made enrollment decline at public schools, leading to school closures and the expansion of charter schools in communities across the United States (Garnett, 2014; Good, 2017). As new options for parents
exist, enrollment declines, which is equal to less money per student each year. The growth of charter schools in Philadelphia increased from 16,000 to 50,000 students in a period of ten years (Good, 2017). After years of low performance, school districts have resorted to converting some of their schools into charter schools, instead of making the choice to close the schools (Garnett, 2014). The conversion of schools to charters has increased with “parent trigger” laws passed in states that allow parents to intervene and request their public school be converted into a charter school.

ESSA allows states to convert public schools into charter schools, as an improvement strategy (Sunderman et al., 2017). A considerable number of states have indicated that they will continue to use charter conversion or school closure to improve schools in future accountability plans. The school districts that close their schools are left with buildings and sell them to be used for educational purposes (Garnett, 2014). Other districts are resistant to sell these properties because charter schools can easily be opened in them and compete with the district for students. In Texas, state law requires school districts, with vacant property, to offer charter schools located in or near the district, to buy, lease, or use any district facility that is available for sale, lease, or use (Simnick, 2015). The district’s school board has the authority to accept or decline the offer. EPISD offered the schools it voted to close, in January 2019, to local charter schools that have made progress in expanding their footprint across the district.

Charter schools make public schools more inequitable and enhance segregation (Vergari, 2007). The student that transfers to a charter school leaves the students behind at public schools to pay the price because the money follows the pupil. It means less money for the students at public schools, which cripples the public education system. Charter schools are funded with taxpayer money and governed by private entities that operate under a charter and are less
regulated (Vergari, 2007; Wahlberg & Bast, 2003). They have full autonomy on who is admitted into schools using class size, funding, and staffing as excuses to not admit students of certain backgrounds (Nelson, Muir, & Down, 2000). Proponents of charters argue that the money does not belong to school districts (Vergari, 2007). Instead, they believe that it is public money available for families to educate their children. As school closures continue to happen across the United States, charter schools have opportunities to further disrupt the public education system.

The Process of Closing Schools

Engberg et al. (2012) examined how a school district handled closures by making performance its first priority in considering closure. They determined four criteria to operationalize performance in their restructuring plan. First, high-performing schools would be kept open and only close if they created a severe inequality of resource use. Second, if a school closed, students would be placed in an equally performing school or better. Third, the schools with value-added results (e.g., achievement levels and gains) that placed students in a low classification would be closed or shifted toward a comprehensive Whole School Reform model, extended school hours, and intensified professional development. Fourth, if middle schools were slated for closure, they would be consolidated with elementary schools and expanded to K-8. Engberg et al. (2012) observed that student achievement in grades 5-8 was more positive in the K-8 school than the 6-8 middle schools. The district made it a priority to place students in higher performing schools when closures happened in order to improve student outcomes (Engberg et al., 2012). At the same time, they reduced operational costs by closing schools.

There is not an adequate amount of literature on the process of closing schools, especially in the United States. In Canada, the Ontario Ministry of Education created policy on school closures in 2005 (Irwin & Seasons, 2012). Knowing that closures could be controversial and
contested, the Ontario government made school boards involve the community in the process of making school closure decisions (as cited in Irwin & Seasons, 2012). In March 2006, Nova Scotia formed a School Closure Process Review Committee to review the Canadian Education Act (Kennedy & MacDougall, 2007). In August 2006, a discussion paper was released on the information compiled in March. This allowed the public and school boards to give any last input on the plan. While Canada is different from the United States, there are common issues around the closure of schools in any country. It is interesting that Canada took a federal approach for school closures, while these considerations have been left to local school boards in the United States.

Kennedy and MacDougall (2007) constructed a report with eight key findings derived from speaking to school board members, school board staff, and the public on creating a school closure process. The first finding was a need for common criteria to ensure consistency when identifying schools for possible closure. The second finding was a suggestion to expand school closure criteria to include the significance of a school to the community, as well as the impact of transportation on families. The third finding made a recommendation around timing issues when reviewing school closures. The timeline for school closures needed to be outlined and include an adequate time frame to review information. Closures should not take place during a bad time of year (i.e., holidays), and a limit needed to be placed on how many times a school could be reviewed for closure. The fourth finding proposed a third party should be involved to add transparency to the process. The fifth finding advised the name of the process should be changed to reflect different outcomes that may not be a closure. The sixth finding encouraged the membership of the study committee to be made up of administrators, teachers, and politicians. School board members serving on the committee were viewed as having a conflict of interest.
The seventh finding revised the role of the school boards to provide the committee with clarity on why a school should be reviewed, as well as all necessary information, especially data, needed to make better informed decisions. The eighth finding was based on the consolidation process to analyze if consolidations should be treated the same as closures. If a consolidation were to take place, public input would be considered. If a closure were to take place, that decision would be made with municipal infrastructure planning and capital construction. These eight key findings construct a framework for some of the most important factors that should be considered in a school closure process (Kennedy & MacDougall, 2007).

The literature suggests school districts should consider focusing on the decision-making process behind school closures (Sunderman & Payne, 2009). Districts need to provide support and resources for students that transfer, as well as enough time between a closure and transition to a new school. This helps receiving schools be better equipped to address the academic and social needs of new students. Students should experience a welcoming environment, with enough support for students that may be nervous about their transition. It is critical for a school closure process to be transparent, fair, and involve the community. Districts should provide adequate information about the decision to close schools, including the criteria used to close schools. This helps minimize the emotional and political impact of closing a school. If the community is involved in the process to close schools, they can provide another perspective that may have been overlooked or discounted by district administration.

**The Effects of School Closures on Low-Income Families**

It is normal for school closures to be mired in political conflict after a board votes to close schools (Sunderman et al., 2017). School closures in almost every urban setting have been met with opposition from community members (Fay, 2014). The literature shows that high-
income citizens are able to have influence over big policy decisions, such as school closures, using informal and formal structures (Finnigan & Lavner, 2012). If a school district uses the rationale of closing a school because of finances, the logic is invalidated if business or influential stakeholders with money, put pressure on school board members. These types of citizens are more likely to have the time and knowledge to advocate for a school closure, if it will benefit them in the long run, such as valuable land and location. Low-income families that are impacted by closure are often left out of the process, even though they must live through the outcome of the decision. These families may not have the knowledge needed to access information on public meetings, such as a stable internet connection, newspaper, or radio (Finnigan & Lavner, 2012). They also may not understand or know certain public meeting protocols to effectively participate.

The literature also finds a link between Latinx parents increasing their educational involvement, by organizing and increasing the achievement of their children (Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2004). Organizing is key to making a change, especially when parents do it for the education of their children. In Northern California, Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis (2004; 2012) collected testimonios from various Latinx parents, that had a low-income and primarily spoke Spanish, to understand their role as emergent participant-activists in La Familia Initiative at a large middle school. The testimonialistas indicated that they shared a sense of purpose strengthened and unified by their collective action (Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2012). Their lives and schooling were affected by participating in community organizing activities. The parents found more motivation in their activism when their opinions and views became validated and respected. It allowed them to find their voice and feel like the school was listening to them. It was difficult to achieve because many of the parents made sacrifices to be engaged, such as family time, cultural and
gender-based expectations, and sleep. *La Familia Initiative* worked tirelessly to improve their children’s achievement by mobilizing families at the school to create a relationship with employees at the school, promote cultural pride, enhance school safety, and boost family engagement on school matters (Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2005; Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2012). The group’s organizing led to parents from other schools to follow suit and establish engagement with their respective schools. While there has been research on Latinx parents resisting against schools for better educational attainment for their children, the literature has not examined how Latinx families have come together to resist school closures.

School closures affect communities of Color, usually politically disempowered, in a distinct way (Sunderman et al., 2017). Researchers from the Urban Institute (2017) found that school closures affect poor and Black students in urban and suburban areas in a disproportionate way. In urban areas, 30.5 percent of Black students attend schools that stay open, compared to 60.8 percent that attend schools that close. For Hispanic students in urban areas, 39.5 percent attend schools that stay open compared to 26.4 percent that attend schools that close. For White students in urban areas, 19.4 percent attend schools that stay open and 7.4 percent attend schools that close. Students in poverty account for 68.4 percent of students in urban schools that remain in open schools, while 80.3 percent attend urban schools that close.

In suburban areas, 13.9 percent of Black students attend schools that stay open, compared to 29.4 percent that attend schools that close (Urban Institute, 2017). For Hispanic students in suburban areas, 22.9 percent attend schools that stay open compared to 19.7 percent that attend schools that close. For White students in suburban areas, 54.4 percent attend schools that stay open and 44.3 percent attend schools that close. Students in poverty account for 48.8 percent of students in suburban schools that remain in open schools, while 53.1 percent attend urban
schools that close. When examined across race and poverty rate, students of Color and in poverty are being affected more by school closures in areas where most of the country’s population lives.

The perspectives of parents are important in understanding school closures because they experience the aftermath of transitioning their children to a new school. Affected parents feel that school closures transition citizens to consumers in an educational marketplace, cripple democracy in education, and inflict damage to communities, families, and students (Vaughan & Gutierrez, 2017). When Chicago closed 47 schools in 2013 (Fay, 2014; Freelon, 2018), parents did not trust Chicago Public Schools to be transparent, they felt the decisions were predetermined, and their voices were not heard (Vaughan & Gutierrez, 2017). Parents experience district barriers that do not allow for discourse on closures and do not take parental concerns into consideration (Freelon, 2018). The official school board meeting minutes that school districts publish online are difficult to understand (Staudt, 2020). School board meetings are attended by few members of the public and usually only administrators, teacher associations, and individuals from the business community that may have a financial stake in a particular meeting. The most ignored voices in making decisions about school closures are Latinx and African American communities (Kretchmar, 2014).

As a researcher and school board member, I believe that the parents and students are the most affected by closures and they should have the most power in making such a life-altering decision. When a school closes in a Latinx community, parental participation can decline (Valencia, 1980). Parents are also impacted by transportation issues when closures occur. The literature on parent perspectives is thin, especially from Latinx parents. Valencia’s (1980) article is four decades old and while some of the issues raised exist today, a large part is outdated. The perspectives in this study will be vital to seeing school closures from the lens of Latinx parents.
There is insufficient research on parent engagement and school closures in urban areas (Freelon, 2018), which may explain the limited literature on parent perspectives.

The literature on school closures has focused on reasons for school closures, school reform policies, the expansion of charter schools, school closure process, and the impact of school closures on low-income families. The perspectives of families impacted by school closures remains a gap in the literature. Particularly, these experiences have not been considered within border communities, such as the El Paso, Texas region on the U.S.-Mexico border.

**Theoretical Framework**

To understand family experiences through the school closure process and the aftermath of their transition to new schools, I draw from Latinx Critical Race Theory as a theoretical framework to guide my methodology, which includes testimonios as my method of inquiry.

*Latinx Critical Race Theory (LatCrit)*

Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Latinx Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) are both derived from critical theory (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). Matsuda (1991) defines critical theory as the pursuit of progressive legal scholars of Color to reimagine a legal system that recognizes the role that racism plays in the U.S. and works toward eradicating racism, as part of a greater goal of defeating any manifestation of subordination. CRT is complemented by interest convergence, defined as achieving racial equality for People of Color only when it converges

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5 Instead of labeling this framework as Latina/Latino Critical Race Theory, I define it as Latinx Critical Race Theory. There is not enough literature to determine the origin of the term Latinx (Salinas Jr. & Lozano, 2019). Through data collection and analysis in a higher education setting, Salinas Jr. & Lozano (2019) concluded that Latinx poses a challenge to ideologies that include language, gender, and culture to acknowledge how these social identities intersect. The term is more commonly used in academia (Salinas Jr., 2020). This has created several identity constructs derived from conflict between activists and academics. It is a term that is caught between the Spanish and English languages, ethnicity, gender, and sexual identity. In this research, I use the term as a way of being inclusive of all individuals of Latin America descent.
with the interests of White people (Bell, 1980; Gomez & Cisneros, 2020). In this study, the convergence occurs between poor immigrant families of Color and a system that is designed to benefit individuals with power and privilege. It is imperative to define CRT to understand LatCrit. CRT can be used to develop conceptual, theoretical, pedagogical, and methodological strategies to study race and racism in United States graduate education (Solorzano & Yasso, 2001). The goal is to dismantle racism, while fighting to defeat forms of subordination that include sexual orientation, gender, and class. CRT has been used in educational research as a theoretical framework for more than two decades (Pérez Huber, 2009).

There are five key themes that comprise CRT in education (Solorzano & Yasso, 2001). First, CRT focuses on how race and racism intersect with other forms of oppression to seek social justice and legitimize the experiences of People of Color (Pérez Huber, 2009; Solorzano & Yasso, 2001). Second, CRT is a direct challenge toward the dominant ideology in education that alleges that educational institutions and systems are objective, color-blind, meritocratic, race neutral, and provide an equal opportunity for all (Solorzano & Yasso, 2001). Third, CRT commits to social justice education by working toward eliminating racism, poverty, and sexism, as well as empowering minority populations. Fourth, CRT acknowledges that the lived experiences and observations of Students of Color are critical, legitimate, and appropriate to analyze, interpret, and teach racial subordination in the educational field. Fifth, CRT uses transdisciplinary knowledge based on ethnic studies, sociology, women’s studies, law, and history to explain racism, classism, and sexism in education. With the knowledge of CRT in education, I explain how LatCrit intersects with CRT in the next paragraph.

LatCrit addresses how racism, classism, sexism, and other types of oppression interconnect (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). LatCrit furthers the efforts of CRT to relate
how Latinx individuals experience class, race, sexuality, and gender, recognizing experiences with issues of language, culture, ethnicity, and immigration status (Pérez Huber, 2009). LatCrit links theory with practice, academy with community, and scholarship with teaching, using a social justice lens. There is a consensus among CRT and LatCrit theorists that the processes, structures, and discourses in education function in contradictory ways because they enable oppression and marginalization, instead of emancipation and empowerment (Delgado Bernal, 2002). LatCrit works in conjunction with CRT to enhance the understanding of Latinx issues that include language, identity, immigration status, culture, ethnicity, and phenotype (Pérez Huber, 2009).

Most of the literature on the origins of LatCrit was published in the late 20th and early 21st centuries (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Pérez Huber, 2009; Solorzano & Yasso, 2001). LatCrit fits within the five themes of CRT by expanding them to include issues that are specific to Latinx individuals in education (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). First, race and class oppression intersect with oppression found within LatCrit that includes immigration status, language, and gender. Second, LatCrit expands the dominant ideology in education by including the educational inequality of Chicanas and Chicanos. Third, LatCrit also has a strong commitment to social justice, which leads to transformational resistance. Fourth, LatCrit furthers the lived experiences of Students of Color by utilizing methods such as testimonios, consejos, cuentos, storytelling, parables, family history, biographies, narratives, chronicles, and scenarios, (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Solorzano & Yosso, 2000; Villenas & Deyhle, 1999; Yosso et al., 2001). Fifth, LatCrit, like CRT, is transdisciplinary and is composed of progressive scholarship to analyze forms of oppression. LatCrit is not antagonistic toward CRT (Valdes, 1996). Instead, it complements and supplements CRT. It expands CRT to explore Latinx pan-
ethnicity, which is a lens to understand the similarities and differences in discourse for Latinx individuals.

There is room to expand upon LatCrit by including political power as a sixth theme. The common approach to Latinx politics is that they should unite because of their racial and/or ethnic homogeneity (Armbruster-Sandoval, 2013), but policies only change when there is political participation. For years, the Latinx population has not had a significant increase in participation (Staudt, 2020). Instead, Latinx individuals should be empowered to rally around common issues that other People of Color face and resist against all forms of oppression, together (Armbruster-Sandoval, 2013). When Latinx populations organize in solidarity with other People of Color, they can offset factors that disadvantage them.

In the literature, testimonios have been used as a method of inquiry to inform LatCrit as a theoretical framework (Pérez Huber, 2009). In the following section, I explain the origin, purpose, and goals of the testimonio method and how it enhances this study.

**Testimonio.** Testimonio is a useful method of inquiry in LatCrit research for various reasons. The participant and researcher work hand-in-hand to recount their lived experiences, memories, and knowledge (Pérez Huber, 2009). The participant plays a critical role in determining how their story will be told throughout the research process. LatCrit is a strong framework for school closures because it enables the researcher to have a better understanding of the experiences of Latinx individuals by placing a strong focus on the oppression in their communities (Pérez Huber, 2008). The testimonio is grounded in the experiences of a person, holds a powerful indication of truth, but the same indication of truth holds the possibility that someone’s recounting of their experience could be false (Burgos, 2008). A testimonio relies on the memory of individuals that construct their narrative (Blackmer Reyes & Curry Rodríguez,
Testimonio opponents dispute that the nature of reconstructing memories of experiences may skew the truth. In contrast to this sentiment, a testimonio offers an opportunity for redemption by having an opportunity for a person to tell their stories, reflect on their experiences, and find freedom. A testimonio becomes more powerful when there are several accounts around the same event. Each testimonio is a representation of many voices that have been impacted by a particular social event that includes displacement, violence from war, or other types of social provocations on human beings.

Testimonio is a form of narrative that is spoken in the first person by individuals that are witnesses or protagonists to events they recount (Beverley, 2008; Blackmer Reyes & Curry Rodriguez, 2012). The narrator of a testimonio can present an experience that produces a political awareness and is liberating when recounted (Blackmer Reyes & Curry Rodriguez, 2012). A testimonio may be narrated by a person that is not a professional writer and may be illiterate or literate (Beverley, 2008). Thus, it is practical to record the oral account and transcribe it. A testimonio is not an oral history. It is an opportunity for the narrator to reach an audience, usually their broad community, that they would not have accessed because of their socioeconomical position in society. Issues of poverty, repression, exploitation, marginality, and simple survival are prevalent in the narratives expressed in testimonios.

Testimonio originated as a literary mode in the 1970s because of movements against imperialism in developing nations throughout Central and South America (Blackmer Reyes & Curry Rodriguez, 2012). These movements generated a powerful testimonio from Rigoberta Menchú, an indigenous woman from Guatemala. At the age of 23, Menchú was exiled from Guatemala for taking part in anti-establishment activities (Brittin, 1995). She went to Mexico, the first time she had ever left Guatemala, and had only learned Spanish three years prior to
leaving her country. At a meeting with Catholic bishops, she recounted the oppression she and others experienced because of the Guatemalan military. Shortly after, Menchú traveled to Paris, where she was introduced to Elisabeth Burgos, a professional ethnographer from Venezuela. Burgos agreed to listen to Menchú’s story, after some hesitation and pressure from friends. Burgos (1983) published Rigoberta’s chronicle as *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nací la conciencia*. In the literature, it became a staple of the testimonio method of inquiry. Rigoberta’s testimonio propelled her into being the “voice” for the disenfranchised and poor people of Latin America. She won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992 (Stoll, 2018).

Rigoberta Menchú’s story has been challenged in the literature by David Stoll (1999; 2008; 2018). Stoll does not argue against Menchú’s assertion that the Guatemalan government killed many indigenous people, many of whom were close members of her family. He also agrees that she fled to Mexico and joined a political movement. However, after conducting various interviews with survivors of political violence, he challenged Rigoberta’s account of her family’s situation and the village in which she lived because of the accounts of others that lived through similar oppression. Stoll asserts that Menchú made severe revisions to her personal experiences in her village before the war, to fit the needs of the revolutionary organization she joined. He wrote *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* to challenge Rigoberta’s credibility because he believes she told her story well enough that it created inaccurate narratives around why the violence took place.

In 2008, Elizabeth Burgos, the ethnographer that chronicled Rigoberta’s story, agreed to write a foreword for Stoll’s second edition of *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*. This occurred many years after Menchú caught Burgos by surprise and claimed that Burgos was not the author of her story (Burgos, 2008). Instead, Menchú said that she wrote
the story herself, with the help of close friends, and Burgos was nearby when the interviews occurred. She also claimed Burgos interviewed many indigenous people and synthesized those stories into Rigoberta’s story. These accusations came right before her Nobel Peace Prize win and after working amicably with Burgos on a French documentary about her story. When Stoll wrote against her story, Menchú denounced Burgos’ book, claiming that Burgos did not give her the right to opine whether the writing pleased her or not. Burgos defends her authorship and strongly states that Rigoberta Menchú’s statements against her writing sounded exactly like the right-wing critics of her story that claimed “her 1982 testimony is simply the projection of a Partisan feminist ([her]self) into an indigenous rag doll” (Burgos, 2008, pp. xiv). While scholars may disagree on the narrative of an indigenous woman’s recounting of oppression, testimonios offer a look at the experiences of members belonging to a collective group (Blackmer Reyes & Curry Rodriguez, 2012). This alone, makes testimonio a rich tool to use in understanding victims of oppression.

Latin American testimonios are similar to North American memoirs used to reclaim knowledge production and to understand the struggles that People of Color have had for educational rights (Blackmer Reyes & Curry Rodriguez, 2012). The dispossessed, muted, and marginalized have used personal testimony as an act of cultural resistance (Atkinson & Delamont, 2006). There are various forms of testimonies that include spoken word, corridos, speeches, short forms of writing, or newsletter columns (Blackmer Reyes & Curry Rodriguez, 2012). The goal of a testimonio is to dismantle oppression derived from institutionalized marginalization, classism, racism, genocide, or xenophobia. A testimonio can be powerful when there are active listeners or readers that will help the speakers find a resolution of redemption and justice. A testimonio can be used as a method of inquiry in a LatCrit framework in educational
research to understand structural marginalization. Oral histories, documents, and memories help reshape policies and cast educational failure as a problem that does not stem from people. Instead, it is oppression derived from systemic institutionalized practices.

Pérez Huber (2008) termed critical race testimonio when four central tenets emerged in her research. The first tenet validates and honors the lived experiences and knowledge of oppressed individuals, or groups, when they become part of the research process. The second tenet challenges dominant research paradigms that influence conventional academic research practices, such as methodological and epistemological viewpoints. The third tenet operates within a collective memory that goes beyond a sole experience to one of an entire community or communities. The fourth tenet is driven by racial and social justice to make the voices and stories of People of Color heard and visible within academia. Critical Race Testimonio complements the CRT theoretical framework by validating, documenting, and analyzing the lived experiences of People of Color, with the researcher, to destroy a system of segregation that stems from White supremacy that enables oppression throughout and outside of academia.

As Pérez Huber (2009) conducted more research, she realized testimonio could stand alone and away from critical race testimonio (Pérez Huber, 2008), especially when it is placed within critical race-gendered epistemology. Elements of LatCrit and testimonios align in five ways. First, injustices caused by oppression, on People of Color, are described in many of the narratives derived from testimonios. LatCrit shows how structural conditions cause oppression in Latinx communities. Second, a LatCrit framework and the use of testimonio challenge dominant knowledge that exists in the literature. Third, like a major component of LatCrit, the experiences of People of Color are validated through the testimonio by theorizing and documenting oppression. Fourth, both LatCrit and testimonio acknowledge the freedom that individuals
experience when they reveal oppression through their lived experiences. Fifth, LatCrit and the testimonio are committed to racial and social justice. When oppression is exposed, People of Color move to transform and dismantle it to end injustice. These five similarities demonstrate that the testimonio is critical in informing LatCrit research. It is influenced by a social justice and an anti-racist agenda.

Testimonios fit well within this case study. They give families an opportunity to recount their story after being displaced by school closures. Testimonios should not be lauded as political “truths” (Atkinson & Delamont, 2006). I expect to use testimonios as a tool to understand the experiences of marginalized stakeholders that were impacted by school closures. Family testimonios, especially those of Latinx families in a low-income community, will be a significant contribution to the literature. Additionally, there is extensive literature on the reasoning behind school closures, but more research is needed on what happens to families after schools close. This dissertation addresses that gap.
Chapter 3: Methodology

This study examined the experiences of families with school closures, bounded by Barrio Chamizal, in El Paso, using a case study approach. This qualitative approach was an in-depth study of a case where an integrated system was bounded and the researcher defined what would and would not be studied (Glesne, 2011). This was an instrumental case study that provided an understanding of school closures (Stake, 2000). Researchers that use a case study approach can gather data by conducting in-depth interviews (Glesne, 2011), in this case, testimonios (Pérez Huber, 2009).

Site and Participant Relevance

The study was conducted with families that lived in Barrio Chamizal, located in South Central El Paso, Texas. The neighborhood was adjacent to the border between Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, Mexico and El Paso, Texas. The Bridge of the Americas port of entry sat next to the Chamizal National Memorial in El Paso, a park that spanned into Ciudad Juárez, separated only by the Rio Grande and a large border fence. El Paso had a median household income of $46,871 and an individual income of $21,683 (United States Census Bureau, 2021). Affluent residents resided in West El Paso, while many of the poor residents lived throughout Central, South Central, Downtown, and Northeast El Paso. These school closures happened at the El Paso Independent School District (EPISD), a district with about 54,000 students and the 12th largest district in Texas and the 61st largest district in the U.S. (El Paso Independent School District, 2020).

The EPISD Board of Trustees was comprised of seven single-member districts. The Chamizal neighborhood was located in District One (see Appendix E for a map of this district). This district was comprised of Mission Hills, Kern Place, Rim Area Conservation District, and
Sunset Heights – all affluent areas that surrounded The University of Texas at El Paso and were located north of Interstate 10. The rest of the District One was contrasted by poor neighborhoods that span through Central El Paso, dissected by Interstate 10, into South Central El Paso and Downtown – Barrio Chamizal, Segundo Barrio, and Chihuahuita. District One’s boundaries were institutionally designed to be racist and couple the most vulnerable population, with some of the most prosperous population within the school district.

The schools that closed were located in South Central El Paso, where many low-income families lived. Public housing spanned throughout this area, as well as commercial properties close to the housing and schools. The students from Burleson were transferred to Zavala and the students from Beall were transferred to Douglass. For the purpose of this study, I focused on the closures of Beall and Burleson because families resisted against the closures of these two schools.

The data consisted of 10 testimonios with 11 testimonialistas. The participants were members of Familias Unidas del Chamizal and had children enrolled at Beall and Burleson when they closed. The membership of Familias Unidas del Chamizal was made up of residents in the Chamizal neighborhood. Familias Unidas del Chamizal officially incorporated as an organization in 2012, but members had been organizing around the name since 2007, through their nonprofit work at La Mujer Obrera. Since its inception in 1981, the organization had had three different locations within the Chamizal neighborhood. The group had organized events around the environment, quality of life projects, and education. This group was an ideal sample because families’ membership in this organization showed a heightened level of involvement in the education of their children.
I employed purposeful sampling when I selected Familias Unidas del Chamizal to participate in this study because they had an in-depth understanding and wealth of knowledge on the school closures at EPISD (Yilmaz, 2013). These families had been directly impacted by the district’s decision to close schools. I became familiar with some of the members of Familias Unidas del Chamizal from interacting with them at school board meetings. I had contact information for one of the main organizers. I reached out to them, via phone and email, asked them to participate in this study. At first, they did not agree to participate. My positionality as a member of the EPISD Board of Trustees and a pending federal lawsuit against EPISD, over the school closures, presented difficulties. I talked to the leadership of Familias Unidas del Chamizal, over the phone and Zoom, to explain the scope of this study. They consulted with their attorneys and after several days, they were cleared to participate.

Once I overcame these barriers, I built trust and rapport with participants. One of the main organizers from Familias Unidas del Chamizal provided a list of contact information for members that agreed to participate. I reached out to participants by phone and email to set up meeting times to take their testimonios. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, UTEP’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) prohibited any in-person data collection, so all participant testimonios were conducted via Zoom. This was a community of Immigrants of Color and many only spoke Spanish. My ability to speak, read, and write Spanish allowed me to effectively communicate with these community members.

**Participant Profiles**

The testimonialistas included seven mothers and one father of children that attended Beall Elementary School or Burleson Elementary School. There were also two grandmothers who recounted their experiences with the closures, since they were very involved in their
grandchildren’s education. One man, a longtime resident and activist in the Chamizal, told his story about providing his expertise to members of Familias Unidas del Chamizal that were directly impacted by the school closures. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity and confidentiality of all the participants in this study. Testimonialistas had strong connections to Mexico. Some had lived in Barrio Chamizal for generations, while others had immigrated from Ciudad Juárez in past years. A close sense of community, based on shared struggles as working-class people, brought members of Familias Unidas del Chamizal together.

Alejandro moved to El Paso in 1973 and considered himself to be Mexican American. He had been a longtime resident of Barrio Chamizal and had organized with Familias Unidas del Chamizal since 2010. His health and education background provided families with insightful expertise. He had volunteered on various advocacy projects that included housing, environmental health, and a forthcoming Chamizal Community Center and Library.

Sandra described her ethnic and racial identity as Mexicana. She was born in the U.S. and her mother immigrated from Ciudad Juárez when she was five years old. She explained that her mother was undocumented and crossed the border often to provide for her family. She married Hilda’s father, a U.S. resident, and permanently settled in Barrio Chamizal. brought stability to her life. Her mother liked living in the Chamizal because she enjoyed the convenience of living near Ciudad Juárez, a hospital, and downtown, where she could spend time while Sandra’s father worked long hours. Sandra had three children. When her two oldest daughters were school-aged, they lived and attended school in Canutillo. Her youngest daughter finished her schooling at Beall. Her son was impacted by the school closures as a second grader at Beall.

Zaira was born and raised in El Paso. She described her ethnic and racial identity as indigenous native Mexica. She had lived in many places throughout El Paso, but none made her
feel at home like the Chamizal. She described experiencing hardships such as houselessness and teen pregnancy. She was a single mother, and her daughter had been educated by programs available in the Chamizal because it was where Zaira had worked for most of her adult life. Her daughter transitioned to Mesita Elementary School when she was in first grade. At the end of the year, she was held back. Around that time, Zaira moved near Douglass, but sent her daughter to Beall because friends suggested it was a good school. Her daughter had a great educational experience at Beall and was impacted by its closure.

Maria and Ramon identified themselves as Hispanic parents. They were born and raised in El Paso. Maria grew up in East El Paso and Ramon in South Central El Paso. Ramon attended Burleson when he was school-aged, and his mom still lived in the area. They both lived in East El Paso and sent their three children to Burleson because Ramon’s mother still lived in that area and provided childcare while they worked. Similar to Ramon’s mother, Helena provided childcare for her grandchild while her daughter worked. Helena immigrated to El Paso from Ciudad Juárez. All her children were born in the United States. About ten years ago, she made the decision to live in El Paso when one of her sons helped her and her husband apply for permanent residency. Her granddaughter was in third grade when Burleson closed.

Veronica immigrated from Chihuahua, Chihuahua. In the past 20 years, she had lived throughout the United States. She was a mother of three children. About four years ago, she was vacationing in Ciudad Juárez and decided to move to Barrio Chamizal and enrolled her kids at Beall. When Beall closed, her oldest transitioned to middle school and her two youngest transitioned to Douglass. She had always lived her life between the United States and Mexico. In the future, she wanted to live throughout Mexico because she had never traveled through the
country. She had put off the decision for a while because her children had always lived in the United States and it would be a difficult transition.

Yadhira was born in Ciudad Juárez but has always lived on both sides of the border. She permanently moved to El Paso around 2011, to escape escalating violence in Ciudad Juárez. She had attended church with her children and when they were leaving, she jumped on top of her kids to shield them from a shooting happening outside the church. This event caused her to leave Ciudad Juárez. When she first arrived in El Paso, she and her three children lived with her brother in West El Paso. After a while, she ended up settling in Barrio Chamizal because she could not afford housing in West El Paso. When Beall closed, her youngest daughter was impacted by the closure.

Adela described her identity as Hispana and Mexicana. She also made a sudden decision to leave her life in Ciudad Juárez, in 2011, because of the uptick in violence. She was a journalist and left her career to protect her children and start over in El Paso. She settled in public housing in Barrio Chamizal. Adela had four children and they all attended Beall. In 2018, her husband was murdered in Ciudad Juárez. The next year, her high school-aged son was kidnapped in Ciudad Juárez and was still missing. Her two youngest daughters were in second and fifth grade when Beall closed.

Estela immigrated to El Paso from Ciudad Juárez. She identified as a permanent resident of the United States and had lived in the Chamizal for over 30 years. Her two daughters completed their schooling at Beall. Her daughter, Leticia, similarly had two children who attended Beall before it closed. Estela was a grandmother invested in her grandchild’s education because she provided childcare for Leticia.
Data Collection

Case study was the best approach for school closures because it allowed for the implementation of an essential method of inquiry to understand this phenomenon, testimonios (Glesne, 2011; Pérez Huber, 2009). Testimonios were vital in understanding the school closures at EPISD. Testimonial is the process of giving testimony, where untold or silenced experiences unfold into a narrative that exposes personal, social, and political realities (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012). I acted as an interlocutor in this process, or one that was an ally and/or outside activist that recorded, transcribed, and prepared a document for publication - in this case, a dissertation. I worked closely with 11 testimonialistas, or individuals that gives testimony, to focus on their experiences with school closures in the barrio.

I conducted semistructured interviews with members of Familias Unidas del Chamizal and audio recorded each interview (Glesne, 2011; Pérez Huber, 2009). I prepared an interview protocol, in English and Spanish, with carefully structured questions (Glesne, 2011). Some questions emerged while each testimonio took place that added to or replaced the questions I developed before the interview. The protocol was split into three parts: two questions related to the background of participants, seven questions related to family experiences with school closures, and seven questions related to the transition, after the school closures. Some of the questions included sub questions (see Appendix A for full informed consent and interview protocol in English, and Appendix B for full informed consent and interview protocol in Spanish). Each participant was interviewed once. The testimonios lasted between an hour and three hours. Each of the interviews were transcribed. Six of the testimonios were conducted in Spanish, two in English, and two in Spanglish. District documents and recordings of past school board meetings were also analyzed to verify dates and participant accounts.
Data Analysis

I set up Zoom meetings with participants to hear their testimonios. I recorded the interview using Apple’s Voice Memos application. After each interview, I transcribed the audio recordings. For the few English testimonios, I used Otter, a speech dictation application, to help with the transcriptions. The testimonios that were collected in Spanish were transcribed by hand. The 10 testimonios, with 11 testimonialistas, produced 264 single-spaced transcription pages that were transcribed from 18 hours and 35 minutes of testimonio recordings.

Qualitative studies allow for data collection and analysis to be conducted at the same time to shape and focus the study (Glesne, 2011). The transcriptions were imported and analyzed through MAXQDA, an application for qualitative data analysis. A rudimentary coding scheme was adopted to sort data into analytic files (Glesne, 2011). Data was mined for patterns, topics, phrases, and words, coding categories, to describe the topics and patterns that emerged (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The color-coding functionality in MAXQDA organized key words or phrases that emerged from the data. Categories were created and populated as data was located and named. Code names were developed from LatCrit constructs, such as immigration status, socioeconomic status, language, class, race/ethnicity, culture, environment, and gender.

The coding process was guided by the breakdown of the interview protocol. The first part detailed the background of participants, which gave me an understanding of their identity. The second part, related factors that led families to resist school closures. Finally, the third part, was about the elements that made up the transition to a new school, post-closure. Taken together, the transcribed testimonios helped me understand participant experiences and organize their narratives. The coding gave meaning to these narratives and organized them into broad categories that included: factors that led to resistance, transition, racism and discrimination,
power and politics, symbolic borders, organizing, and identity. The analysis used a theory-driven and data-driven approach to code (Decuir-Gunby, Marshall, & McCulloch, 2011). Theory-driven was deductive and took ideas from the literature to analyze the data. Data-driven was inductive and analyzed the data to find patterns that emerged. Both of these techniques provided a clear understanding of school closures.

**Trustworthiness**

The descriptive validity of a qualitative study is crucial to eliminate a concern with the factual accuracy of data, where a respondent does not make up an account of what they may have seen or heard (Maxwell, 1992). Primary descriptive validity is what is reported by the researcher and what they may have seen, heard, touched, or smelled. Secondary descriptive validity encompasses what the researcher must infer from other data. In this case, families had a stake in not losing their beloved schools, so it was vital to conduct interviews and code them into categories that produced themes that emerged in the findings. Respondent validity, or member checks, were important to conduct because it ruled out the possibility of misinterpreting what a participant may have said, so it is a good practice to solicit feedback when findings begin to emerge from the interviews that were conducted (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). It gave me a measure to go back to some of the participants in the preliminary analysis and ask them if my interpretation was true to their experience. The goal was for participants to understand my interpretation of their experiences, solicit feedback, and if needed, adjust my writing to better depict their perspectives. I did this throughout the study and checked for understanding by repeating what they stated during the interview and checking for understanding. After the interview, I sent participants a copy of their transcripts and allowed them the opportunity to edit
Subjectivity and Ethical Considerations

On July 17, 2019, I was sworn in as a member of the EPISD Board of Trustees. I inherited this school closure issue and was inclined to influence change on this board. I made a clear distinction between my role as a trustee and as a researcher, with participants, in this study. I assured them that their data would not be shared with anyone, including past, present, and future district officials.

The data collected from testimonios was analyzed with a careful approach to understand the experiences of testimonialistas. As a member of the EPISD Board of Trustees, I had an insider positionality that could affect the research process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In contrast, I also had an outsider positionality because I did not have children and was not directly impacted by the school closures. As I was preparing this study, my positionality as a member of the EPISD Board of Trustees presented a challenge. On October 20, 2020, I consulted with EPISD’s legal counsel and outside legal counsel, about my research around school closures and role as a trustee. We agreed that the best decision was to excuse myself from executive session meetings when the lawsuit was discussed with the EPISD Board of Trustees. I still had the ability to vote on any actions related to the lawsuit in open session meetings, but I would likely abstain from voting through the duration of my research. This was an ethical approach that allowed me to conduct my research and kept me from receiving privileged information about the lawsuit that could have influenced this study.

My subjectivities must be addressed. I am a third-generation Latino that has always lived in El Paso, Texas and a first-generation college student. Before being elected to the board, the
way school closures were handled at EPISD motivated me to run for this position. I felt family concerns about the school closures were ignored by the school board. During my campaign, I promised to be inclusive of the community in decisions. I have always been politically engaged at the local, state, and federal level. I am interested in social justice issues that have motivated my work in education.

I realized that my biases could not be diminished. I was honest with participants about my role and attempted to assure them that what they told me would not be used as a political tool against them. I maintained my personal thoughts on school closures at EPISD away from the testimonios that were collected, analyzed, and reproduced. This was important because my political sentiments had the potential to tarnish the testimonios and not allow me to do a full analysis of the social “facts” derived from these narratives. It was for my own learning and research to better understand the issue of school closures in my community.

**Limitations**

There were limitations in this study. I was a member of the EPISD Board of Trustees and could use findings in this study as an implication for practice at the school district. It was crucial for me to build rapport with the families in this study and gain their trust by making sure they understood their testimonios would be confidential and separate from my role as a trustee. I only interviewed families that were members of an organization that resisted school closures at EPISD. This was limiting because it did not include families outside of the organization, families that did not resist, and other community stakeholders with different views or experiences. It was also limiting to conduct all testimonios via Zoom. This made participants discuss sensitive topics in a digital format and confidentiality was not guaranteed. Another potential limitation was the timeline for this study. I missed the opportunity to observe resistance to school closures in real
time. I collected data two years after the closures occurred, and over a year since the students transitioned to new schools. This could have influenced the type of data I collected from participants because certain details about their experiences were forgotten.
Chapter 4: Findings

In this chapter, I present the findings from conducting 10 interviews with 11 members of Familias Unidas del Chamizal. At the onset, my understanding was that this organization formed because of the imminent school closures at EPISD. Through the data collection, I learned from participants that Familias Unidas del Chamizal had been in existence for years prior to the school closures and the membership was comprised of a majority of families with school-aged children, and other residents of the Chamizal community. Most of the testimonios were narrated in Spanish. The language spoken in the testimonios was preserved because it was a reflection of this community of immigrants. Most felt comfortable speaking in Spanish, while others spoke Spanglish. This showcased the biculturalism and pride that the participants had for being from this region, specifically from Barrio Chamizal.

Zaira, a member of Familias Unidas del Chamizal, captured family sentiments on school closures that happened at the El Paso Independent School District (EPISD).

Talk about exploiting a community. A community could be supported, but also, talk about the power of organizing. Even when EPISD was making these decisions, I was always surprised that they listened to Schlesinger because I thought they were just incapable of listening to community. I guess Schlesinger isn’t community either. He's a powerhouse in himself. Familias Unidas was talking to the … metropolitan planning, the City, the County, TxDOT, you know, all the stuff they had going on as far as planning in the barrio. Getting a community center built, the libraries, a splashpad, getting the trucks out, getting community gardens. I mean even before that, all the good things that Familias was doing, all in this direction, for EPISD to just go directly against that, you know? It felt like a second, was it because they speak Spanish? Is it because they're
immigrants? Is it because they're women? Is it because they have plans of their own? The success and the work of a community, as vulnerable and poor as they might be, when united and organized together, are powerful. I've been able to see the beautiful, amazing work that they do as a collective, for the community as a whole … EPISD disregarded that, you know?

In this perspective, Zaira captured the essence of the testimonios in this study. Testimonialistas shared that EPISD ignored family concerns and had no consideration for the impact that school closures would have on the families and their children. Participants felt that the district devalued Chamizal families for not speaking English and being poor, immigrants of Color. Participants also stated that EPISD targeted a community that could not fight back against a system of power and politics.

This chapter is organized into three sections and informed by two research questions.

1. What are families’ experiences that lead them to resist school closures?
2. After school closures occur, how do families describe their transition to the new school?

In the following section, I provide an overview of Familias Unidas del Chamizal derived from participants’ testimonios. This provides sufficient context on families’ views of Barrio Chamizal and its borders to better answer the two research questions in this study. In the second section, I depict family testimonios and their experiences with school closures that mobilized them to resist. The final section recounts the testimonios of families and their children’s transition to a new school post-closure.

**Section 1: The Organizing behind Familias Unidas del Chamizal**

There were two main background themes that emerged from the data in relation to Familias Unidas del Chamizal and their place in the Chamizal neighborhood: a history of
organizing and symbolic borders. This section provides an understanding of how families captured the essence of their barrio and its residents. These families had organized officially for over a decade, but many others before them had resisted against similar challenges that these families faced today. These experiences motivated and empowered members of Familias Unidas del Chamizal to confront EPISD about the school closures in their barrio.

A History of Organizing

Participants began their testimonio by describing their racial/ethnic background and their identity within Barrio Chamizal. Testimonialistas expressed strong connections to Mexico, via their ethnicity, national origin, immigration status, and family ties. They described their racial and ethnic identity as Mexicana, Hispana, Indigenous Native Mexica, Chicana, Mexican American, and Hispanic. Throughout the testimonios, it was apparent that their sense of pride from being from Barrio Chamizal had become part of their identity. Their barrio was not just a place that was made up of streets, houses, borders, and other physical structures. It was about the people and their lived experiences. Over the years, common interests around organizing brought participants together to fight against what they viewed as social injustices in their barrio. As Estela described, people used to refer to the area as the barrio, but in a derogatory way, “Por ejemplo, antes no tenía nombre. Era el barrio. Ahora por lo menos ya tenemos el Barrio el Chamizal.” The name gave Estela and others a united identity and a sense of pride for their hood. It encapsulated what it meant to live in the Chamizal, a community of immigrants that had a strong attachment to their language, culture, and traditions.

These families created Familias Unidas del Chamizal to have a structure for organizing. Sandra described the purpose of Familias Unidas del Chamizal.
The purpose of Familias Unidas, we started organizing to deal with these issues, to better the conditions of the Chamizal and to really develop a community that can defend itself. But at the same time, we can work together and plan for the betterment of our community, porque somos 7,000 residentes. We are 7,000 residents here in the Chamizal. They've tried to displace us through our history a couple of times. Con el Chamizal Treaty, there was a lot of houses that were—Se las quitaron, les dieron dinero a los residentes and they moved them out.

Sandra viewed Familias Unidas del Chamizal as an organization that provided a voice for her and other Chamizal residents. The advocacy they prioritized, specifically the resistance to school closures, was a reflection of their values and sense of community.

The activism in the Chamizal was rooted in issues that had been present in the neighborhood for decades. The advocates have changed throughout the years, but the issues have not. Zaira shared her perspective on the importance of having power in numbers when organizing.

Before I got involved with Familias Unidas, we would do, I call it now, in retrospect, pop-up activism, but there is this difference. An issue comes up, you get your people to speak against the issue, but in the Chamizal, it's not like that. It's like, we stick together because it's a struggle and we're going to advocate to ask for resources. Like I said, the work of Familias Unidas or La Mujer Obrera has decades in the Chamizal, whether that was organizing for better jobs, for cleaner air, for public spaces, for public schools.

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6 The Treaty of the Chamizal, signed in 1963, ended a 100-year land dispute between Mexico and the United States (Stoddard, 1970). Over 1100 Mexican American people lived within the boundaries of the disputed land. They were forced to relocate after the land was granted to Mexico in the treaty.
It's not like we get together because, ‘I just met you … because now, we have this same issue we're tackling.’ There's this community-driven connectedness and having the leadership, it's in that community, born and raised there, and really finding ways to direct that energy. Talk about a resourceful group of people, the community. Organizing a community is different than just an activist's role.

Chamizal residents connected with each other on issues that focused on improving the quality-of-life in their community. They shared many of the same struggles that brought them together to advocate for their community. This engagement was developed over the years through Familias Unidas del Chamizal. It created a space for them to advocate for collective needs in their barrio. As Zaira described, the advocacy was not about one person, it was about bringing a community’s shared concerns and advocate, together, for a better barrio.

In recent years, Familias Unidas del Chamizal placed a large focus on school closures that occurred in their area, while remaining committed to other organized projects that had taken years to bring to fruition. For decades, Barrio Chamizal did not have a community center or library. Zaira shared that La Mujer Obrera had advocated for a library in the community since the late 1980s. Decades later, Barrio Chamizal will inaugurate the Chamizal Community Center and Library, at the site of an old Levi’s factory, in the second half of 2021. Zaira expressed that “It’s a long road to organizing,” in relation to the amount of time it took for this project to be a reality. In partnership with La Mujer Obrera, Familias Unidas del Chamizal persisted, for years, in bringing this very much needed resource to the heart of their neighborhood. Sandra felt this community center would help bridge the digital divide in her community. She described the features of the new resource.
We are one of the communities, if not maybe the only one, that doesn't have a community center. You know, Segundo Barrio even has the Armijo, tienen su library y todo eso. So, for many years, we have been organizing with our residents to get a community center. It was really hard, especially now that everything's like digital. Even to register the kids online, there is nowhere to go here. They would have to go to Armijo and get online las señoras para usar las computadoras allá. So, we fought under the quality of life [bond] back in 2012 to get signatures, to get support from the community, and we even did a survey of what we wanted to see in the community center because we didn't want just a rec center. So entonces, they gave the money for the community center. It was supposed to be open ya, pero por COVID, creo que they extended it hasta como septiembre … we fought for a pool, but they didn't want to give us a pool, so they gave us a splash park.

We have a green space donde las señoras pueden caminar. We have a library. We have … like different multipurpose rooms inside the facility. We have a mural y luego también tiene los basketball courts afuera. Ese se peleó por Familias Unidas. Now we have a community center en donde las familias van a poder ir. We have a computer lab, I think, for the kids. We have a kitchen. That's being built by the city right now.

For Sandra and other Chamizal residents, this new facility meant that they did not have to figure out how they would travel to a neighboring barrio to access essential services, such as internet or books. For those that did not have transportation, these resources would become available within walking distance, in their own neighborhood. Many of the families in the Chamizal did not have access to computers or internet. This new resource would be a place where they could learn and improve their computer literacy. For instance, participants described it as a place where they would be able to access computers and register their children for school each year.
Estela viewed this community center as an opportunity for the residents of the Chamizal, especially children, to flourish.

Quedamos completamente satisfechos porque nos dieron un splash y nos dieron varios espacios. Sobre todo, son bienestares para toda la comunidad, porque hay espacios, por ejemplo, canchas de fútbol, canchas para que los niños de aquí sean unas personas productivas en base a la educación. Que no anden, por ejemplo, en drogas, que tengan los espacios de deportes, que tengan un espacio para los niños para poder llevar. No teníamos nada aquí. Lo único que teníamos era el Armijo y estaba un poquito retirado, pero estaba también muy lleno. Necesitábamos salud aquí en el barrio. Yo pienso que ese es uno de los logros que hemos tenido, porque ya este año que entró, este verano se inaugura. Le digo, fueron constantes luchas, constante todo lo que pueda y guste, pero fue uno de los logros que hemos tenido.

Estela described the amenities of the new Chamizal Community Center and Library and how it added green space to the barrio. Families were able to come together and access the internet, read books, and exercise. Prior to this, families had to go outside of their neighborhood to access these basic resources. The closest recreation center and library were in the adjacent Segundo Barrio, about two miles away. They wanted to have this type of space in their own barrio, where they could gather with their families and neighbors to improve their health and quality of life.

Similar to Estela, Adela viewed this community center as a safe space for the children of the Chamizal.

… ya estamos utilizando las instalaciones, de repente nos vamos ahí a caminar y los niños a jugar las canchas y eso. Nosotros esperamos que ahora sí que no vayan a venir de otras áreas, que sea realmente un espacio para el Chamizal, porque se necesita. Aquí en el
área se necesita principalmente para rescatar a los niños de las calles. Ahorita como padres, yo siento que estamos viviendo una era bien difícil, estamos los papás luchando contra corriente.

Both Estela and Adela wanted this space to help keep their children out of trouble. They hoped their children would spend their time with educational resources at the library, or playing sports, instead of becoming involved in illicit behavior.

Adela was also ecstatic about the prospect of hosting the swap meets they organize, to exchange goods and celebrate their Mexican culture, at the new community center.

Nosotros tenemos … una costumbre muy bonita, hacemos un tianguis, a veces en Barrio Park, en el Estrella Park. Ojalá podamos hacerlo próximamente en el rec center, Hacemos un tianguis donde mostramos todas las bondades de la cultura mexicana, hacemos talleres de comida, hacemos talleres de música, talleres de baile, teatro, muchas cosas. Invitamos artesanas mexicanas para que vengan y muestren su arte, pintura, ósea rescatando la cultura. También hacemos venta de comida, ¿verdad? Porque la asociación se maneja con fondos, para seguir haciendo programas y apoyando gente. Eso nos encanta, cuando tenemos esos tianguis, los niños, mis hijos, a ellos les gusta mucho participar en eso. Y es como parte de enseñarles nuestra cultura porque cuando los niños tienen tanto tiempo aquí, van olvidando el español, van olvidando sus raíces, entonces nosotros queremos rescatar eso. Ósea nosotros queremos que se sientan orgullosos, pues de sus raíces, de lo que somos, ¿verdad?

Participants communicated excitement about the resources the park will bring, once constructed. For years, these families had to travel to other areas where these resources were provided. For many in the area, going to another community to access these critical resources was prohibitive.
because they did not have transportation. They now had a place to gather, learn, fundraise, and celebrate their Mexican culture, within their own community. Participants illustrated a close-knit community that advocated for this type of space to develop and foster community.

**Symbolic Borders**

The area where the school closures happened was in South Central El Paso. It was divided by Interstate 10, which was the main highway that ran through El Paso. Another member of Familias Unidas del Chamizal, Zaira, viewed the interstate as a barricade, “… I-10 seems to be the great divider in our community …” The heart of Central El Paso was north of the interstate and it was a stark contrast from the area located south of the freeway. Areas located north of Interstate 10 had more resources in schools and affluent residents, while areas south of the freeway had less resources in schools and socioeconomic disadvantaged residents. Barrio Chamizal began south of the freeway, where various bridges were erected to make way for Union Pacific Railroad’s headquarters, nestled between Barrio Chamizal and Downtown El Paso. The Chamizal neighborhood could be accessed by heading south on Piedras Street, past the first community divider, Interstate 10, and a bridge that went over the second community divider, train tracks. Once the other side of the tracks were reached, Barrio Chamizal began.

Sandra grew up in Barrio Chamizal. As a member of Familias Unidas del Chamizal, she explained how the group advocated for various social, political, historical, and cultural issues, within the symbolic borders they created around the Chamizal area.

Familias Unidas del Chamizal trabaja en la comunidad que está cercas del international port of entry. Nuestras boundaries, we gave it its boundaries. The reason why we gave it those boundaries is because we are surrounded by like these man-made, you know, structures, no structures, pero barriers. So entonces tenemos el Cotton Bridge, ahí es
As Sandra explained, the symbolic borders established by Barrio Chamizal gave the area meaning derived from the eyes of the individuals that lived in the neighborhood. The borders included two interstates, railroad tracks, polluting factories, and schools. These places enveloped the barrio and would produce challenges for these residents, but this was home. These symbolic borders dictated social class, socioeconomic status, and immigration status differences from those that lived in more affluent areas, north of Interstate 10. There was strong cultural pride for the barrio, their traditions, Spanish language, and working-class backgrounds.

Figure 1 maps Sandra’s illustration of Barrio Chamizal, with key landmarks that are referenced throughout the next two sections. Barrio Chamizal is highlighted in blue. Members of Familias Unidas del Chamizal worked and organized at La Mujer Obrera. Douglass Elementary School is located in front of an abandoned Salazar Housing complex and is steps away from W Silver Recycling. About one half mile away, sits the defunct Beall Elementary School. About a mile away from Beall, Zavala Elementary School is located right next to U.S. 54, which leads directly into Ciudad Juárez, via the Bridge of the Americas port of entry. Project Vida is feet away from Zavala, a significant landmark in relation to Beall closing, that is explained in the next section. Right outside of Barrio Chamizal, Burleson Elementary School is located about a mile away from Zavala. Burleson was closed and students were reassigned to Zavala. Beall
closed and students were reassigned to Douglass. Barrio Chamizal goes right up to the front door to Mexico, highlighted in green on the map. Each country has a Chamizal park that is divided by the U.S.-Mexico border.

Figure 3.1, Map of Barrio Chamizal (Google, n.d.)

Working-class, immigrants, and racial and ethnic minorities have called Barrio Chamizal home throughout history. Douglass Elementary School was established for the small population of African Americans that used to live in that neighborhood, decades ago. According to Sandra, it was a school that housed all grades, K-12. After they desegregated schools, African Americans
left the community. “They didn't stay here, and now it serves the needs of the immigrants, porque cuando se extendió el Segundo Barrio, que ya no había cupo para nosotros allá, nos movimos east y venimos quedando en el Chamizal.” In the present day, the Chamizal was a tight-knit community of immigrants that spend their lives on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. The participants described how connectedness of their lives to both El Paso and Ciudad Juárez. Zaira captured the essence of how these families lived their daily lives.

The Chamizal is going to exist because it's like the Ellis Island, as they say. It is where immigrant families find community … The bridge is there to go to Juárez where you shop, where your family is. That area has always been immigrant. That area has always been some level of exploited, some level of poor, but … unless they're serving the industry, do people find any value.

Participants like Zaira described how the geographic proximity to Mexico gave Barrio Chamizal residents a sense of comfort. They desired to be close to their family and friends. Some spent the week in El Paso, working and going to school, and would go stay in Ciudad Juárez for the weekend. Others yearned to have the privilege of traveling between both countries but could not because of their immigration status. Living in the Chamizal provided them space to embrace their Mexican identity while residing in the U.S.

Section 2: Family Testimonios on School Closures

The testimonios of families recognized the importance of Beall and Burleson in their community. The stories that participants shared illustrated the significance of these schools to their community. It empowered them to resist against the school district’s decision to close schools in the barrio. The consensus among testimonialistas was that these schools helped them
develop close-knit relationships with families that attended these schools. Ramon recalled the trust families had in each other at Burleson.

If there was a concern … we would come up to each other and talk to see the problem. In other words, it was a very close community at Burleson … It was like a family because we knew each other … who were the grandparents of these students, the grandparents of that student, who were their brothers or tios or tías. They had the confidence of going up to you and telling you, ‘You know what? This is what's going on.’ … Every parent knew the teachers starting from kinder all the way to fifth … We were there to help each other. If somebody was in trouble, or their kids were financially, emotionally … in trouble, we were there to help each other … The teachers could come up to us and let us know what's going on or what was the problem with our kids. We would help them, also the teachers, we would work together.

The families would look out for each other’s children at Burleson. It was more than just sending their children to school. It was a place where the adults fostered friendships and would help one another out when they were most in need.

Similar to the Ramon’s experience at Burleson, Adela identified with the people at Beall and considered them family.

Éramos como una familia, había una cercanía muy fuerte con las maestras. De hecho, una de ellas vino ayer a visitarme, estuvo aquí en la casa porque había mucha familiaridad, había mucha empatía. Muchas maestras también son Mexicoamericanas o tienen esa raíz mexicana. Como este es un barrio hispano, yo creo que nos identificamos y nos ayudamos.
It was part of Adela’s and other Chamizal families’ culture to help each other out. Adela felt reflected in the teachers that taught her children because they shared Mexican American backgrounds to her and her children. This created a special bond between families and teachers. When Adela’s husband was murdered in Ciudad Juárez, in 2018, Beall provided stability for her and her family. Zaira described Adela’s traumatic experience to explain how Beall was more than just a school in the Chamizal. It was a community with resources for families.

I'm glad you talked to [Adela] because I think she articulated it in one of the early meetings that her husband had been murdered in Juárez. Her kids, they were in transition from trauma and Beall offered them a stability that she was very grateful for and acknowledged. It was evident that there was programming to tend to the needs of these … drastic situations. It's different from a kid in another school, the layers of what they're going through. That's why, I think, Beall worked really well because those programs really needed, not just a classroom or a school, it needed a community. It made it a place where you had resources for your family. It was a place where we had meetings and celebrations. They talked about making it into a resource center after they closed it, but it was a resource center. Why'd you close it? We have a lot of healing to do … I think the impact has been the most visceral because it was such a centrical point of the community. Like I said, it wasn't just location central, as far as accessibility, but the resources and the activities, and the programs that were there, were very strong and connected the community. The impact, I think … really dismantled the little stability that we have formed in those spaces. For me, that was where we were able to start beginning to solidify or bring stability into our life. It really dismantled that.
The experiences of Zaira and Adela at Beall exemplify how important this school was to their community. The teachers had an understanding of the needs of the Chamizal community. It was not just a place where their children received an education. The school provided emotional support for families and gave them the stability they needed during difficult times. Beall captured the essence of the Chamizal community. Its location was a focal point that brought families together in a safe space and created a sense of community.

Participant testimonios detailed family struggles with a litany of issues that were caused by school closures and led them to resist. Four interwoven themes from the family experiences with school closures at EPISD emerged from the data: “Yo no sabia que tu y Schlesinger, no podian hacer tortillas,” “They very much left us in limbo,” “The targeting of a community that can’t fight back,” and “Y ahí vienen todos como burros por sus audífonos.” The four themes in aggregate revealed a contentious relationship between the school district and the families of children that attended schools that closed. Families resisted because they felt their needs were not heard or prioritized by the school district. The district did not take them seriously in their roles as parents, grandparents, and community members invested in the education of their children. In various instances, the school district devalued them because of who they were and where they lived.

“Yo no sabia que tu y Schlesinger, no podían hacer tortillas”

The school closures at EPISD were made with no consideration for the impact the decision would have on children and families. Testimonialistas explained that there was little to no input from affected families and a lot of input from people in positions of power. The power and money were more important to district officials than the condition of schools they placed
students in. Participants explained that the appointed Board of Managers\(^7\) stepped off the board in 2015 and allowed elected trustees to take office. The Board of Managers had analyzed the closures but decided to not make any decisions because they had not been elected by the people. They left this to the new board members that took their seats. The process was not transparent, as politicking over which schools to close occurred in the background. The district’s behavior led families to resist. As the district set up a hastily put-together closure process, members of Familias Unidas del Chamizal realized that the closures had been worked in the background for a while.

The district passed a bond in 2016. Participants explained that a committee of parents and other community stakeholders was created to inform the district of what the community wanted to see in the bond. Familias Unidas del Chamizal had already formed a Beall Committee because they had heard that there was a possibility that Beall would close. They approached Geske to ask him about the possibility of school closures. Geske told them that he did not know details about school closures but knew that they would create a bond committee to gather all the facts. He appointed two Familias Unidas del Chamizal members, Sandra and Alejandro, to the bond committee. Alejandro quickly realized that the bond committee was different than what was described to him when he first approached to join the committee.

\(^7\) In 2010, then-state Senator Eliot Shapleigh raised concerns about EPISD “‘disappearing’ students to raise scores on the state-mandated accountability test and avoid federal sanctions” (Times Report, 2017). This happened at Bowie High School, in Barrio Chamizal. On October 5, 2012, the former EPISD superintendent, Lorenzo Garcia was sentenced to three-and-a-half years in prison for his role in changing test scores at Bowie and awarding a $450,000 no-bid contract to his mistress. In May 2013, the state removed the elected EPISD Board of Trustees and appointed a Board of Managers through May 2015, when the state gave power back to the elected trustees. None of the trustees that were on the board during the public corruption trial were part of the new board.
They separated us into groups, and the big emphasis is that this was an order to better the district. We thought that we had an equal shot of keeping Beall open by participating, but they were never, they were not honest with us. It turns that they kept telling us that they were going to have a committee, they were going to have the stakeholders involved in terms of Beall and Zavala. We would have stakeholders meeting to decide which school would be the best to close. Towards the end, when some of the plans were already being finalized, they sent out the papers and we read that for the first time … that they were going to consolidate Zavala and Beall, as part of the bonds, and that they would build or rebuild Zavala.

As Alejandro explained, the news of consolidating Beall and Zavala was something that had never been discussed up until that point. Familias Unidas del Chamizal was opposed to a new school at Zavala because it had high levels of contamination and its location, next to a highway, was not safe. Sandra described this as the moment they realized they had to drop out of the committee.

Las compañeras hicieron esa decisión de que no puede ser esa escuela la opción y como vimos que ellos insistieron que cerraran Beall y movieran a los niños a Zavala, nosotros decidimos hacer el strike, el committee, porque dijimos, ‘We're not going to participate in a process that has already been decided.’ Nosotros sentimos que el cierre de Beall ya estaba decidido desde antes que comenzaran esas juntas, aunque ellos dijeron que no, que ahí se iban a hacer las decisiones. Nosotros decidimos salir de ese comité porque no íbamos a apoyar que Zavala fuera la escuela del Barrio Chamizal.

The district formed the committee to ensure transparency and allow for community input. The opposite happened. Families felt that the district deceived them. It became clear that the decision
was made without consideration of the impact on the children. Instead, money and power were prioritized over the safety and education of children. The committee culminated with a decision that was made in consultation with a powerful stakeholder, outside of the committee, and presented to members of the committee as a solution to the closures.

The powerful stakeholder was Bill Schlesinger. Alejandro stated how he and Sandra felt when they realized what was happening and made the decision to leave the committee.

When we found that out, and we tried to even raise our hands to say, ‘Hey, I thought we were going to get a say in this.’ They refused to recognize us. In the meeting, they refused to even meet with us regarding that. It was a done deal, in other words. That's when we left. We said, ‘No, we cannot participate in this bond committee if that's the way that it's going to be done.’ It was totally dishonest on their part and not informing us. We protested, we set up every time they have a bond committee meeting, we would protest outside. We thought the whole thing was settled, but in the end, the bond committee, they voted not to consolidate Beall and Zavala. Schlesinger was totally mad at us. Other people say, ‘Well, you just missed your chance. You missed your chance for an $11 million replacement.’ After that, they hired some consultant to bring the three groups together, or at least Zavala and Schlesinger and us. We had one meeting at Bowie and everybody stuck to their position. The consultant told us, ‘Well if you all can’t agree,

8 Bill Schlesinger was the Co-Director and CEO of Project Vida, a community health center located in Barrio Chamizal (Martinez, 2016; Project Vida, 2021c). Bill and Carol Schlesinger founded Project Vida, a program of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church (Martinez, 2016). They were co-directors since its inception in 1991. They spent two years talking to residents of the Chamizal to understand their needs. They provided services that included after-school programs, health clinics, childcare, sexual and reproductive health education, homeless prevention, a wellness program, economic development training, and housing (Martinez, 2016; Project Vida, 2021a).
maybe they will eliminate all the schools in the barrio.’ That's the last we heard of the district.

The committee was created to allow for community input, but when the Chamizal members of the committee tried to voice concerns, they were not acknowledged by the committee facilitator. For Alejandro and Sandra, it was a welcomed surprise when the bond committee voted against the consolidation of Beall and Zavala. People did not want to send their kids to Zavala because an $11 million renovation was not going to eliminate the presence of pollution in schools.

Bill Schlesinger played a key role in keeping Zavala open. Project Vida was a nonprofit created from community input to address the needs of Chamizal residents (Project Vida, 2021a). Participants said that Schlesinger did not want Zavala to close because it did not benefit his organization. It was located around the corner from Zavala, where Schlesinger’s nonprofit provided services. Former Senator Jose Rodriguez brokered a meeting between former superintendent, Juan Cabrera, and a few members of Familias Unidas del Chamizal, in 2015, when rumors started spreading about the closure of Beall. Cabrera told Alejandro that he could not close Zavala because he had signed a memorandum of understanding, for 20 years, with Schlesinger’s organization.

That’s when Cabrera told me… ‘Yo no sabia que tu y Schlesinger, no podian hacer tortillas’. Cabrera, he never came down and informed the Beall parents that they were going to sign this memorandum, to keep Zavala open. That memorandum included Beall. If you look at the memorandum and read it, the memorandum states that they will provide services for a community school. The boundaries being Piedras East. Well, Piedras East includes Beall. Then, they listed the things that they were going to provide under that memorandum, but we never knew exactly if it was legal for the district to do that, to sign
a memorandum with … Project Vida. But how can you sign a memorandum to not build a school, not close a school for 20 years with a nonentity? … It wasn't part of the school district.

Cabrera also shared with Alejandro that Schlesinger had said to him, "Well, if you close Zavala, I'm going to build a charter school and take your kids." Schlesinger had provided much-needed services to this community for decades. The potential closure of Zavala drove him to use his power against the community he served. The participants explained that it was not in their best interest to keep Zavala open or consolidate Beall with Zavala. Testimonialistas felt that Schlesinger’s business interests were more important than what the community wanted, even though his nonprofit was founded on the needs of the community. He further exuded his power on the district by warning that he would open a charter school and take money away from a neighborhood with schools that already lacked resources.

Schlesinger and members of Familias Unidas del Chamizal had shared space because their work overlapped. Zaira explained that at one point, he was “housed in Mujer Obrera. He rented space there. The relationship with him, it wasn't like strangers, but the way that he ended up maneuvering was very much in the dark.” Zaira realized that Schlesinger’s motives were driven by money and his business interests.

He's a poverty pimp either way. He could have done anything. I use those words because I see the way that he maneuvers. They own property in that area. That's what it comes down to. That's where the property they own is. If you close down that school, that makes all that property. You're taking value away from property. That's not what Schlesinger is doing in the barrio. When it comes down to what he was going to do or how, or when, he was defending his community to give them that credit, I suppose. I shouldn't say it like
that because it's such shitty things that they dish out to that community. He was defending his interests.

Zaira felt that Bill Schlesinger was a poverty pimp because he was in charge of an organization that provided critical services to the Chamizal community, yet when Chamizal residents became vocal against school closures, he betrayed them. Instead, he wielded his power over EPISD at the cost of hurting Chamizal residents. He was a White man of privilege, that led a nonprofit organization that helped low-income, vulnerable populations. The vision of his organization was “to identify the comprehensive vision of the community for its future and to develop community-based structures and programs to implement that vision in light of the needs and direction of the wider society” (Project Vida, 2021a). His actions failed the mission of his organization by ignoring the needs of the community. It was similar to how EPISD ignored the concerns that families raised. While he acted in the best interests of his organization, members of the community he served had a comprehensive vision that Zavala was a threat to the health of their children.

EPISD used its positions of power to institute a closure process that was not transparent and kept affected families out. Participant testimonios revealed that they felt the decision to close Beall had already been made long before the decision was finalized. Sandra expressed that Beall’s closure was always going to happen.

Siempre la decisión de cerrar Beall fue, y todos los esfuerzos que hizo el distrito, fue para nomás to execute that decision that it wasn't to include us and we saw it very clearly in all the actions that they took.

The district made false promises to these families. The actions included not following through on a promise that would have kept Beall safe for at least five years. Sandra spoke about an instance
that confirmed Beall’s closure, long before the vote took place. The district had bought new air conditioners but told maintenance workers to not install them because the school would close.

They had bought air conditioners for the school to upgrade it and later on, we found out from the maintenance people, because the air conditioners would break down a lot, one time they caught fire, they had to evacuate the kids because they were in very bad conditions. We said, ‘Well, how come you guys never put in the air conditioners?’ She said, ‘You know what? Because they had decided to close the school, we're not allowed to put the air conditioners in,’ dice, ‘They're just sitting there, brand new.’ I'm telling you, the district had made a decision and they had no intention of doing anything big, pretty much abandoned the school, let it deteriorate, and allowed the kids to be under those conditions just because they had already decided to close the school.

From Sandra’s perspective, the air conditioners were needed to cool the school, but they decided to put kids through unsafe conditions. The needs of families and their children were not taken into consideration by the school district. This was the same thing they were doing by closing schools and transferring students to other schools that posed health and safety threats to students.

Adela recalled when teachers at Beall started telling her and other families that they would not be returning the following year because the school was closing.

Había como una histeria colectiva, una tristeza colectiva porque muchas maestras, muy buenas maestras, por cierto, ya no quisieron continuar porque tenían esa desesperanza de que la escuela ya no iba a continuar. Ya se había terminado. Ellas, algunas, se derrotaron. De hecho, otras se comunicaban mucho conmigo, ‘¿Qué les dijeron en el distrito?’ De hecho, algunas participaron en las últimas juntas, porque ellas estaban también luchando...
a su manera, pero nosotros sentíamos como que la directora las tenía amenazadas. No podían hablar, ya al final no quisieron hablar con nosotros, sí estuvo muy tenso.

Families were worried about the impact of closures on the education of their children. Teachers were worried about losing their jobs if schools closed. The teachers were afraid to speak out because they feared losing their job. The threat teachers felt from their principal was a tactic put in place to make sure they kept voices out of the process. The steps that the district took to pick Beall as one of the schools that would close was illogical to Adela.

Hasta parece un capricho porque si usted se pone a pensar que va a cerrar una escuela, usted haría un estudio, pienso. Diría, ‘Voy a hacer un estudio para ver los pros y los contras.’ Por eso decimos, tomaron una decisión como que alguien dice, ‘Esa, la del medio, vamos a cerrar esa’. En realidad, no analizaron…la escuela que tenía más familias o más alumnos registrados. Porque primero dijeron ‘Es que es porque no hay alumnos’, pero nuestra escuela era la que tenía más alumnos. ‘¿Por qué no cerraron Douglass? ¿Por qué no cerraron otra escuela? ¿Por qué la de nosotros si había más alumnos?’ No había lógica en su razonamiento. Decíamos, ‘No está justificado’. Estaba raro, pero no sabíamos, no sé si tenían algún convenio con alguien, no tenemos idea.

The closure of Beall made no sense to families because the answers they were receiving did not add up. Adela said that there was no logical argument for closing Beall. Instead, she felt that the deal to close schools happened in the background, as the leadership of two powerful organizations united against the families that would be affected by the closure of Beall.
“They very much left us in limbo”

Testimonialistas heard the news about potential school closures from different sources. As rumors spread, individuals were influenced to take an active role in preventing the closure of their children’s schools. Alejandro recalled when he first heard about the school closures.

When we first knew that they announced that they were possibly going to close Beall, this was just kind of like an item in the *El Paso Times*, which our community does not read. It wasn't even in *El Diario* or on the TV. You know, *Familias Unidas* picked it up from there … and informed the parents. That's how the parents found out, that they were going to … close the school. That's when they begin the process of forming the Beall Committee, the Beall Parents' Committee, which was separate from Familia's. They had their own group of just Beall parents, because *Familias Unidas* covered the entire barrio, but Beall's Parents' Committee was the one that … organized in order to save the school.

Alejandro read the news about potential closures in the *El Paso Times*, a local newspaper that published in English. If the news had been in *El Diario*, a local Spanish language newspaper, that published on both sides of the border, more people would have been informed of the news.

Many of the residents in Barrio Chamizal were immigrants, many from Ciudad Juárez, and spoke or felt more comfortable in Spanish. When *Familias Unidas del Chamizal* began organizing the Beall Parents Committee, Alejandro offered to assist. He became involved in meetings at Beall and attended school board meetings at the district.

Shortly after moving to El Paso from Ciudad Juárez, around 2011, Adela first heard that Beall could close from her son’s teacher.

*Yo tengo muy grabada esa imagen. Una maestra se acercó a mí muy asustada y me dijo,*

‘Miss, por favor, hagan algo porque van a cerrar la escuela’. Dice, ‘Las maestras estamos
asustadas. Nosotros no podemos hacer nada, pero ustedes sí’. A mí me impactó mucho, porque yo la vi a ella realmente, era a la hora de la salida, me estaba entregando a mi niño, el que está desaparecido. Él estaba en tercer grado fíjese, estamos hablando del 2011. Desde entonces yo escuché sobre el cierre, imagínese fueron 10 años de que estuvimos escuchando de que se iba a cerrar. Yo me acuerdo que ella me dijo y digo yo, ‘Maestra, ¿qué podemos hacer?’, ‘No sé, únanse hagan algo, protesten’. Fue ahí donde surgió esa necesidad … Yo me asusté cuando ella me dijo. Dije, ‘Ay, caray. Para que ella esté preocupada es porque ya la van a cerrar en una semana o en dos semanas’. Sí, fue algo muy difícil…No fue precisamente en el 2011, un poquito más adelante, pero yo recuerdo que su primera maestra de mi hijo … y ella fue la que me dijo.

The rumor that Beall would close spread for years before it became a reality. Teachers felt helpless and encouraged Adela to unite with other families to protest the closures. A few years later, Adela joined the Beall Committee. The committee started meeting informally in 2015, holding outdoor meetings in the back and front of the school. She took an active role that led her to the expand her participation and join Familias Unidas del Chamizal. She took interest in environmental projects, such as Proyecto Verde, a community garden the group maintained in Barrio Chamizal.

Sandra started hearing rumors about potential school closures and started inquiring with Beall leadership.

… habían rumores que la escuela posiblemente iba a cerrar, pero cuando le preguntabas como a la principal, le preguntabas de las maestras, ellos te decían que no tenían información, el distrito no les había dado, que ellos no sabían nada de los cierres. Y luego entonces cuando le preguntábamos al distrito, de los cierres, decían, ‘No se ha hecho
ninguna decisión oficial’, ‘Nothing is official.’ ‘Nothing is official.’ Entonces, como nada era ‘official,’ no había discusión con los padres. Decía la escuela, ‘We have nothing informed. You probably have more information than we have.’ So entonces cuando tratamos de decirles a los papás, ‘¿Sabes qué? Hay una posibilidad de los cierres’, que empezamos a organizar a los papás para tener estas discusiones, muchos de los papás no sabían que iba a cerrar la escuela, porque los maestros les decían una cosa y la principal les decía otra cosa, y el distrito decía otra cosa. Usaron eso para que los papás no se pudieran organizar y no se pudieran preparar y no pudieran pelear. They very much left us in limbo.

The pretext that closure decisions were not finalized allowed the district to dismiss family concerns. Because Sandra felt that the district ignored her, she began reaching out to Chamizal families and provided them with information about potential school closures. It was around 2015, when Estela first met Sandra outside of Beall and found out about its potential closure, “Estaba ella fuera de la escuela informándonos, que si sabíamos nosotros de eso y recuerdo sus lágrimas en su rostro, y nos estaba comunicando que si sabíamos nosotros. Fue cuando decidimos unirnos y formar el grupo de Familias Unidas.” The district was not responsive to concerns of families, so that forced them to organize and resist their silencing.

Through the school closures, Yadhira described that she felt district leadership discriminated against her and other families.

No, para nada, nunca ni siquiera me tomaron en cuenta, no hubo absolutamente nada. Nosotros, al contrario, no solo no fuimos tomados en cuenta, fuimos totalmente discriminados porque, si usted está yendo a pedir información, si usted está al pendiente, si yo, como le digo, acudí a las juntas del distrito y yo que iba no sabía, ¿qué será los
padres que no están involucrados, los padres que tienen que trabajar y que no pueden hacerse cargo de sus hijos? Yo que sí iba no lo sabía, y ¿van a saber los demás? El distrito nunca, jamás nos tomó en cuenta, jamás nos quiso, aunque sea un papel de decirnos, "Mire, va a pasar esto", una explicación, nada.

Yadhira expected the district to provide her with answers. Instead, Yadhira and other families felt that the district did not take them into consideration for any decision. Her and other families did not know how to navigate meeting protocols. District officials never provided guidance and met their inquiries with silence.

Families expressed that EPISD viewed them as a burden. The testimonialistas took this personal. They wanted to be seen as families concerned about the education of their children. Yadhira expressed frustration over the district’s perspective of her and other members of Familias Unidas del Chamizal.

Para mí lo más importante es que el distrito sepa que muchos de los padres de estas áreas no tuvimos la oportunidad de estudiar. La mayoría de las veces no fue por voluntad, así que nosotros estamos enfocados en la educación de nuestros hijos. Estamos enfocados en la superación de ellos, en el bienestar. Sería muy positivo que el distrito nos escuchara y nos apoyara para poder nosotros sacar adelante a todos estos niños. En vez de ser una zona que sea despreciada por ser de pobres, de peleoneros, de viciosos, de gente no educada, que tal vez si hacemos un equipo podemos ser al contrario, una zona que se distinga en muchachos con calificaciones sobresalientes. Creo que nuestros muchachos tienen muchas ganas de superarse, porque ellos no quieren seguir el mismo camino que nosotros.
Families wanted their children to have access to a good education. Many of the residents in the Chamizal were not educated. This caused economic hardships for many and they view education as a way for their children to overcome barriers and find success.

The extent of Adela’s relationship with EPISD was her involvement as a parent at Beall. She used her position as a parent to advocate against the closure at Beall. She explained the reasoning behind her resistance to the closures.

Solamente he ido a defender mi postura. A lo mejor me ven como una mamá que protesta, pero siempre he dado argumentos válidos en mi protesta. Yo no estoy protestando por algo que no me afecte. Estoy protestando por algo que a mí me afectó y que le afectó a mis hijos. Si nos tomaran en serio yo creo que habrían reconsiderado su decisión, pero yo siento que nunca nos han tomado en serio.

Adela placed a high value on her role as a parent. She was not protesting. She was advocating for her children’s education. It was easy to ignore resistant parents because the district never viewed them as invested parents. They viewed them as protestors. Zaira expressed disappointment with the superintendent’s view of her and other families that fought school closures at EPISD.

Cabrera said it and I think he called us protestors. They never regarded us as parents. He blogged about it on the EPISD platform. I don't know why in our community we think it's okay to do that to parents, women, and children … We've been constantly made to feel as if we don't have any value, as if we're protestors and not parents.

The school district’s view of parents made an impact on families resisting closures. The top leader at the district used his position of power to diminish parents as protestors. They were parents of school-aged children that lived in a poor neighborhood, with a lack of resources. They
wanted the district to invest in their children, not close their schools. Leticia explained how she felt discriminated by the district and how they should have perceived her and other families.

Tampoco no vamos a estar dejando que nos estén humillando por la raza, por ser hispanas, por ser mujeres. Como a veces que sí tratan a uno que porque, ‘Son estas mujeres, estas peleoneras’, como le digo, pero nosotros defendemos los derechos de nuestros hijos, no porque seamos mujeres y seamos hispanas nos van a tratar mal … En EPISD saben quiénes somos, pero la verdad no nos quieren. Ya nomás escuchan que Familias Unidas y como que, ‘Ay, ahí vienen estas otra vez’. Ya saben de nosotros. Ya nomás nos tuercen la boca en cuanto llegábamos y ya lo sabíamos, pero no nos interesaba … El distrito nos tiene que ver como los padres de los niños de las escuelas que ellos representan. Ellos representan las escuelas y pues deben de tratarlos bien, de dejar que nosotros digamos lo que pensamos, tomarnos más en cuenta porque no nos están tomando en cuenta. Ellos hacen lo que ellos quieren y nosotros somos los padres … Todo lo sabemos nosotros. Nosotros no sabíamos nada, pero tuvimos que empezar a aprender. Sabemos cuánto dinero les dan por cada niño, que si los niños faltan, cuánto les quitan. Por eso yo sé que para ellos nomás es interés. Es interés porque, si nosotros les quitamos a los niños, es como yo les decía, ‘Hay que hacer una huelga, al cabo ¿a poco nos van a meter a todos a corte? … Si ya faltando niños, pierden dinero’.

Leticia expressed that she resisted against the districts, even after she felt humiliated by the district for her race and gender. Even if district officials viewed her and others as a nuisance, she persisted because she was a parent that was concerned with the education of her child. Families had to teach themselves how to navigate through district processes in order to resist against closures. Leticia considered her relationship with the school district to be interdependent, in
theory, but not in practice. She and other families sent their kids to school and the district received money for each student. In her view, the district could not operate schools without families. Yet, these families were different from others because they were poor, many did not speak English, so families thought the district felt that they were not entitled to a voice.

Estela’s family history with Beall motivated her to do all she could to save her grandchild’s school from closing. She felt that they would be successful if many families united because there was power in numbers.

Cómo le decía, escuchando primero del cierre de escuelas … decidimos unirnos. Como nosotros nos sentimos esa vez, sobajadas o menos que nada, por el cierre de las escuelas, sentimos que teníamos que luchar, que alguien tenía que levantar la voz para tomar decisiones, y para informarles al barrio que tenemos obligaciones, pero que también tenemos derechos. Tratar de comunicarles a todo el barrio que tenemos derechos, que teníamos que levantar la voz todos juntos para que nos hicieran caso, dándoles a entender la unión hace la fuerza. Entre más seamos, entre más distribuyamos la voz, más pronto nos iban a oír…Teníamos que estar unidas, y luchar por eso. Poco a poco empezamos, como dicen, un granito de arena, ya después eran dos, un montoncito, y ahorita ya hemos tenido éxito, hemos logrado varias cosas, luchando. De poquito en poquito creo que hemos luchado, y eso es lo que nos da la motivación para seguir adelante, seguir luchando para ser escuchadas, como le digo, para tener un barrio digno.

Through the school closures, Estela expressed that she and others felt devalued by the school district when they continued to ignore their voices. This motivated them to strengthen their resistance against the school closures. Estela created a sense of urgency with her neighbors, to unite as a community, and send a strong message to the school district. She attended her first
school board meeting when the school closures became more of a reality. As time went on, she invited others to join the committee and they started attending school board meetings together.

Maria and Ramon had three children that attended Burleson. Through the closure process, Ramon described how he thought the district viewed him and other families.

You've seen it, they don't listen to us. They don't hear us, we're trash. We're crazy. We cry too much. We think only about ourselves, not about our kids, which I mean that's something stupid that they mentioned … We're fighting for some schools to be open. It's because we're doing it for our kids, not for our own benefit. I mean, what do we get out of it, when we have to work, for our kids, who are going to be there? So, that's how I think they discriminated us. They didn’t listen, they just, ‘Okay we're going to close it, okay? Okay, bye.’ If it would have happened on that [west] side, you know that a lot of people were going to rise and they were going to even get lawyers to stop them. We don't have the resources or the financial to get good a lawyer and put a stop to it.

Ramon and Maria were happy with the education their children were receiving at Burleson. Similar to other testimonialistas, they felt ignored by the district, which made them resist the closures more. In their view, Burleson’s closure was imposed because the school was in a poor community, where families did not have the means necessary to resist school closures. They explained that the district would not have closed schools in West El Paso because many of the families were wealthy, which gave them power. If the school district would have ignored the voices of West El Paso families, they had the means necessary to pay for lawyers and would have fought the district. Participants wanted the district to answer why Burleson would close. Maria, for example, recalled when they first learned that Burleson would close, a month before the vote took place.
… when we found out that Burleson was going to be closing ... This was something that a parent, because they had gone to a board meeting, and that's where they heard it. Parents didn't really have the opportunity, to even get more parents to get involved, because it was a short time to speak out ... I know that they had previously had schools in mind to close, and Burleson was never that school to close. It was always this particular school, Zavala Elementary. It was always that because it's in a bad community and in an intersection of going to Mexico. It was just a shock for us to find out that Burleson was closing. And we found out, it was in actually December, like mid-December before the holidays were coming up. That's when we found out. I just feel that it wasn't transparent enough from EPISD to let us know because it was from one day to another, ‘Oh, it's gonna close.’ When I know that for a fact, that Burleson was never in the school closure list.

This short time frame did not give them sufficient time to organize other concerned families from Burleson. They organized a small group, but they became stronger when they united with members of Familias Unidas del Chamizal. Burleson families did not know how to fight the closures, so this organization provided the structure they needed to resist. Ramon and Maria remained active members of Familias Unidas del Chamizal, while most of the other Burleson families that joined gave up the fight.

Familias Unidas del Chamizal led efforts to organize families and save the schools from closing. Many of the families had never attended a school board meeting. As Sandra explained, Familias Unidas del Chamizal had to coordinate logistics of the school board meetings, from finding transportation to learning proper meeting etiquette.
Creo que fueron unas de las maestras que empezaron a hablar con los papás sobre el cierre, pero la relación, en sí, con el distrito no existía, de los padres. Hasta después de que nosotros empezamos a organizar ahí a los papás, a tener juntas, y fue cuando empezamos a tener comunicación como con Geske⁹ … Familias Unidas empezó a llevar a papás a las mesas … y nos organizábamos para que nos hicieran sign up for public comment los papas. Les empezamos a enseñarles como hacer public comment cuando tenían unas juntas. Tuvimos que ofrecer transportación porque los papás no tenían transportación ni sabían dónde eran las juntas. No había esa conexión con el distrito.

The families had to adapt to the way school board meetings functioned. Some of the members of Familias Unidas del Chamizal had attended school board meetings in the past, so they did their best to teach other members how to navigate these systems. They had to make sure to sign up for public comment prior to the meeting, via an online system. Many of the families did not have access or know how to use a computer, internet, or both. One person would sign up all those that wanted to address the school board before each meeting. They would have three minutes to address the Board of Trustees, but sometimes their time was cut down to two minutes. For those that did not speak English, it was more difficult to understand how the meetings worked because all materials were in English.

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⁹ Bob Geske was the trustee that represented these families on the Board of Trustees. He was first elected in 2013 but had to wait to take office until 2015, because of the district’s public corruption scandal. He was appointed to fill a vacancy on the Board of Managers, in 2015. A few weeks later, he was officially sworn in with the other elected Board of Trustees who had been waiting to take their seat for two years. Geske served on the Board of Trustees until 2021.
Many of the families would take their kids to the meeting because they did not have childcare. Many of them had busy lives and had to drop everything to attend the school board meetings. Zaira described the coordination behind attending a school board meeting.

Well, so we began going to school board meetings, right? That became a real focal point in getting, you know, cause hardly anyone has transportation, so organizing transportation time. You know, because all these decisions that were happening, they were happening really fast, from the closures to the bus hub. The reality is, Familias Unidas, you know outside of the parent Beall organizing was doing a lot for the community at large…It's a lot of work, you know, and so the parents really built that and sustained that momentum. For us, in the community that lacks a lot of resources and as an organization that has resources, or as far as we have, we were there to provide and sustain in that way. From taking a 16-passenger van to an EPISD meeting and packing some burritos to make sure all the kids are fed because we're there until 10:00 PM.

There was also a need for English speakers to assist those that did not speak English by translating meeting materials into Spanish. They also had to explain what was happening because many of them did not understand or speak English. The district did not provide interpretation accommodations.

The presence of Familias Unidas del Chamizal at the monthly EPISD school board meetings was difficult for the members that attended. They were working families that had to put their lives on hold each time they attended school board meetings. As they attended more meetings, they started appearing on the local television news. Adela mentioned that she would run into people that would tell her they saw her on the news. As district officials continued to dismiss her concerns, she imagined how the public might have viewed her and other families,
“‘Estas viejas chirinoleras no tienen nada que hacer’. Créame que sí, yo tengo muchas cosas que hacer, pero tenemos que luchar por lo que es justo, no podemos quedar indiferentes cuando algo no se está haciendo de la manera correcta.” Chirinoleras was a Mexican slang word used to describe the women, in this instance, as combative, loud, and gossipy. Adela felt that the sacrifices she made to attend the meetings were worth the cause they believed in and hoped that at least some people in the community were paying attention. District officials were not listening and were increasingly annoyed by their presence at school board meetings.

Estela took her grandchildren to speak at a board meeting. They made an emotional plea to the school board and she felt like they did not even pay attention.

… ellos mismos fueron a atestiguar ahí en EPISD, ellos mismos hablaron de su inconformidad, de sus cosas, fueron pensamientos personales de ellos, llorando decían, ‘No me quiten mi escuela’. Al distrito le valió tres cacahuates lo que ellos decidieran, lo que ellos pensaran, porque ni siquiera nos oían, como que si se pusieran unos audífonos en el momento que llegábamos nosotros a rogarles, a suplicarles, que nos dejaran nuestra escuela. Como si ellos se pusieran una venda en los ojos y unos audífonos en los oídos, ahí bloqueaban todo y no les importaba nada.

Estela thought that the school board would be compelled by the voices of children, but they were not moved. Estela expressed that it was as if members of the school board put on headphones on to tune them out. This was a common occurrence at board meetings. Families felt that the district ignored them and considered them a nuisance. They felt this view become more negative with each meeting they attended.

The unresponsiveness from the district drove the group to go on a hunger strike outside of Beall. For days, healthy members of Familias Unidas del Chamizal camped out in front of
Beall. They slept there, did not eat, and only drank water. Leticia felt the district would not hear their concerns. Leticia’s pre-existing health conditions should have precluded her from participating, but she wanted to be a part of the message to the district.

Even though Leticia had a pre-existing health condition, she felt it was important to participate in the hunger strike. She went on a hunger strike for about three or four days. The families were invested in the education of their children. They wanted the district to understand their concerns about closing their school, but the district continued to ignore them.

For Estela, it was exhausting to continue fighting after feeling humiliated on many occasions by the district, stumbling through processes, but she was proud of her identity as a member of Familias Unidas del Chamizal, because there was also a lot to celebrate.

On one occasion, Estela shared that the Chamizal community organized another event at Beall to resist the school closure. They surrounded the school and gave it a large group hug to send a message to the school district that this school was vital to the Chamizal.
Todas las familias del barrio se involucraron. Hicimos un abrazo a la escuela, nos unimos todos de los brazos y abrazamos la escuela, que fue todo alrededor de la cuadra. Todo el barrio, unidos, hicimos un abrazo a la escuela en protesta de que no nos fueran a cerrar. Pues fueron muchas etapas muy impactantes, donde hicimos nosotros la lucha porque no nos cerraran la escuela. No porque nos aferráramos a la antigüedad o algo, sino porque era algo, ¿cómo le quiero decir? Lógico, se puede decir. Que no nos cerraran esa escuela porque, por ejemplo, nos daban una opción, que nos fuéramos todos a Douglass y nosotros pedíamos que nos fuéramos [de] Douglass a Beall porque tenía su estructura, tenía la capacidad, cumplía con todas las reglas y había más seguridad, sobre todo … y aun así nos ignoraron.

The logic behind closing Beall and sending kids to Douglass did not make sense to families.

Beall was a community treasure and they felt that their kids were in a safe learning environment.

In contrast, they felt that Douglass’ location was not ideal for their children to attend school.

There was a recycling plant, feet away, the school was very small, and they did not feel their kids would be in a safe environment, especially with a canal being right next to the school.

Familias Unidas del Chamizal organized a plethora of events throughout Barrio Chamizal. They were out in the community organizing press conferences, holding marches, and giving tours of their community to show the environmental and safety issues throughout the area.

Testimonialistas explained that they led these efforts because the district continued to ignore their concerns. They started seeking assistance from community leaders outside of EPISD.

Senator Jose Rodriguez was one of their champions and was surprised at their ability to organize. Adela recounted what Senator Rodriguez said to her and her colleagues, “Es la primera vez que yo veo a unos padres tan organizados, que están peleando realmente por un bienestar para sus
hijos.” Yet, they felt invisible to the person that was their voice on the EPISD Board of Trustees, Bob Geske. Adela remembered only one occasion where Trustee Geske met with Familias Unidas del Chamizal and felt that it happened because of pressure from the district, “Es que este señor es nuestro representante, pero nunca se reúne con nosotros, ahí fue, yo creo que le dijeron, ‘No, pues ve, porque ya estas señoras están muy alteradas’”. To the families of the Chamizal, it became evident that the person that was elected to be the voice of their area was not willing to include their voices in the discussions that would disrupt the education of their children. He did not make any efforts to engage them, giving them only one opportunity to meet with him. He did not speak Spanish, so he could not communicate with these families, and they could not communicate with him. Neither Geske nor EPISD made arrangements for an interpreter that would have allowed the families to communicate with their elected leader.

Parent involvement was critical to the success of organizing against the closures. Prior to the school closure threat, only two or three parents would participate in parent meetings held in the mornings at Beall. Over a few months, the number of parents engaging at meetings increased to 220. Sandra talked about the positivity of parent engagement on their children’s education.

We increased the participation of parents in la escuela. They developed clubs en la tarde, las maestras, para los niños, because we didn't have any after-school programs. So entonces las maestras hicieron unos clubs—the reading club, the math club, the art club. I think we even had a folklorico club pa los kids. The parents really, really worked hard to really create a school that was model, and to really show that there was a relationship, and I want to be part of the school and support it. I'm telling you, el PTA, they were doing activities. We supported the PTA, the meetings, the events that we had. They developed something called culture night. Las maestras … llegaban así de padres,
something that I had never seen. We didn't just sit down and take it, we didn't just sit
down and say or complained, or said, ‘Bueno pues let's get up and move … ’ They fought
until the end to show the district that our school was important to the community, and
that it was an important center for the families. We saw the parents were a lot more able
to participate in the meetings, because of the accessibility.

This level of engagement was unprecedented, and it provided enrichment, like extracurricular
activities, that did not exist prior to Familias Unidas del Chamizal organizing. They held
community meetings to not only talk about school closures, but also discuss grades and educate
the parents on the importance of attendance. They also marched around the neighborhood to
remind people to register their children for the new school year. These efforts provided stability
and a healthy space for the families. They wanted to help the school succeed, so their kids would
have a fair education, with adequate resources.

Families organized event after event, hoping to change the mind of district leadership on
closures. The district moved ahead, ignored these voices, and never established a relationship
with families. The families felt that the district held negative views of them. Leticia felt the
negativity as soon as she arrived at the district for any meeting.

Yo siempre se lo decía a [Sandra], ‘Siempre que venimos a una junta al distrito, siempre
nos hacen sentir y nos tratan como, así como nos tratan mal’. Y como que, ‘Ustedes no
saben inglés, no entienden. A estas no les hagan caso’ … Qué feo, qué triste que nosotros
defendiendo la escuela de nuestros hijos y que ellos se porten de esa manera. Casi
siempre salíamos todas muy tristes y nos decepcionábamos de que nos trataran así …
Una vez salió Reveles y empezó a gritonearnos allá afuera y le dijimos que queríamos
hablar con Cabrera, ‘Sí, sí, ahorita, que quién sabe qué, él está ocupado’ … Una persona
que nos gritaba, siempre nos ha gritado y se ha peleado con nosotros bien feo, Reveles …

Cabrera nunca nos dio la cara, nunca en esos años nos dio la cara … Siempre nos trataron así, siempre, tanto Geske, que era nuestro representante, nos trataba muy mal.

As Leticia shared, she felt that district officials did not have respect for families. District officials were rude and ignored them for not speaking English. Participants felt they were marginalized for seeking answers to the closures. The superintendent never wanted to meet with them. He would send other members of his leadership team but would avoid confronting the families.

“The targeting of a community that can't fight back”

Participants felt that racism was present in the school district, as it worked to exclude these residents on the basis of their immigration and socioeconomic status, language, and Mexican culture and nationality. The Chamizal was a historically poor, underserved neighborhood. Additionally, many residents did not speak English. Their lives took place on both sides of the U.S. – Mexico border, traveling back and forth for leisure, or to visit family and friends. Some would live in El Paso during the week for work and spend the weekends in Ciudad Juárez. Hence, they celebrated their Mexican identity, customs, traditions, and language. EPISD additionally created situations that placed children in schools around dangerous pollution, which led to health issues for many of the people that lived in the area. The perceived treatment that participants experienced as a result of their immigration and socioeconomic status, language, and Mexican culture and nationality was what fueled their fight to be seen and heard.

There was an era when Ku Klux Klan (KKK) members were elected to the EPISD school board. They named many of the schools that were still operating in the school district. Sandra still felt the ramifications from these racist actions today.
Historically that's always been, I mean, like we always say, you know the KKK took over the school board back in the day, and I don't think they've ever left. I think that the system is still very discriminatory, and it really leaves out a large number of kids that can least afford it. We've been lied to, you know, parents have been lied to, all this time.

EPISD had a painful history. Racism had been institutionalized in public school systems for many years. The racist behavior of the past had segregated communities in the present. While public schools were officially desegregated in the mid 20th century, they were never desegregated. Prior to desegregation, schools had been erected and lines were drawn on the map. In El Paso, Interstate 10 was the barrier between communities - the have and have-nots.

As Alejandro recalled, Douglass was a school for the Black community. It was named in honor of the famous abolitionist, Frederick Douglass. Slavery may have ended, but Black people did not have the freedom to be educated in the same room as White people, until less than 70 years ago.

... the railroad still goes by there. The canal is still there. And the reason it was put there is because they were discriminating against the Black families. It was first 1920, 1925, I forget when they … established the school there. It was an action, when the district, they could have done something with Douglass School and turned it into some activity, but there's no public health criteria that they could cite, that would allow them to place the school there. It's just discrimination, outright. Why would they put Black families there? The land in which they were owned, downtown became more prized as it developed, so they had to move it to the outskirts. That was probably the worst piece of land they could choose, right next to the canal. Nobody wanted that piece of land.
Schools, by law, were integrated, yet many of the same injustices lingered. The segregation was invisible because it was institutionalized. Black and Brown kids lived in areas, where racist actions of the past left them with poor performing schools in the present. The Black community moved out of Barrio Chamizal, but the same educational challenges of receiving a fair, quality education remained. The residents of the Chamizal were attending a school that was built on a less than ideal piece of land, adjacent to a polluting recycling plant, railroad tracks, and a canal. Alejandro expressed his view on how EPISD schools in Barrio Chamizal had unique needs.

The marginalization of barrio schools takes place in many different ways … it would take a lot of money to solve the problem. If you don't consider that these schools are any different than the other schools in the district, then you're not going to spend an extra amount of money to resolve the problems in these schools.

Alejandro described an issue of equity. Many of the students in Chamizal schools came from immigrant families. Their families did not speak or understand English. Because of their socioeconomic status, families could not afford a car. They did not have access to internet. Alejandro considered that ignoring these realities was a form of marginalization. He felt that the district needed to provide more resources for Chamizal families and address these gaps.

EPISD had systems in place that made it difficult for families to take an active role in their children’s education. Every year, families had to register their kids for school. Sandra stated that the student registration had moved online and families in Barrio Chamizal did not have access or knowledge of operating a computer.

All these barriers, I feel like they're meant to push us out, instead of really helping us. I don't know, sometimes I question the system, how it really excludes us as a whole. Es
ahí, como decimos, el institutional racism, que estos sistemas de veras si están diseñados para excluir nuestra comunidad y para que nomás unos cuantos puedan … nomás los afortunados o los que puedan sobrevivir. A mí se me hace que esa es la opresión que existe y que estamos nosotros siendo subjected to that como padres, porque también estamos hablando de la cuestión de los niños.

Many of the issues that families faced in the Chamizal were because of the zip code they lived in. A person with privilege, like a district administrator, may have thought that it was simple to move registration to an online platform because they used a computer on a daily basis. A person of privilege took a few minutes to complete the registration process because they would have access to a computer and knowledge to operate it. For a resident of the Chamizal, it would take several days to complete the process. First, they had to find a device. Then, they needed help in navigating the registration system. The registration process was not equitable. Zaira captured the persistent racism and discrimination that seeped out of the school district, into Barrio Chamizal.

Because of the poverty and the immigration status, with families that live there. I mean, because of the lack of planning for a predominantly immigrant community. For the lack of respect and concern for a predominately Spanish-speaking, poor community. I mean, on the micro and the macro, because there's a war on poverty and we live in a xenophobic, White supremacist system.

These participant descriptions captured how the system functioned and showed that institutionalized racism was working well.

The discrimination that Chamizal residents experienced, on behalf of EPISD, was layered and based on the status of a person with Mexican descent. Sandra explained that Chamizal
residents were of Mexican descent, but they were poor, a status that set them apart from the wealthy Mexican families, within the district, that attended schools like Mesita.

… you have a lot of elite Mexicans in El Paso. A lot of the elite Mexicans go to Mesita. I think we need to be careful when we evaluate it like that, porque nosotros, I think it's more … it has to do with the immigrant families. It's more of that sense. Como te digo, it's tied … to economics. Las poor immigrant families live in the barrio and the elite Mexican families are in that area … It is a question of status, legal status. It is a question of, we could say national origin, but it's also an economic status. Even the low-income poor communities in Northeast do not compare to the situation of what the immigrant families are experiencing in the barrio. Por eso, más bien es cuando nos marginan, nos marginan como una comunidad de inmigrantes de bajos recursos que no nos hemos podido asimilar a este sistema. Que viene siendo el sistema americano donde nuestros niños … It's a process of just assimilating our children, pero como nosotros como padres no podemos participar en ese sistema, es por eso que nos excluyen. Te digo que tiene que ver con la movilidad, con el idioma, con las condiciones económicas de nuestra comunidad. Todo eso hace elite to this system that really does not want to educate our kids, and it is an economic situation because the district refuses to invest the money necessary to educate immigrant kids in poor communities, because it is a resource thing.

That's why they have this system that is only one-size-fits-all. The elite Mexicans had the necessary economic status to buy property in a nice part of town and send their kids to a good school. By being part of a school with adequate resources, they wielded power that participants in this study did not possess, based on their socioeconomic status. The education system at EPISD was set up to exclude poor, immigrant families based on their
economic status and geographic location. A healthy economic status led to power and connections, which led to resources.

Members of Familias Unidas del Chamizal saw that Mesita Elementary continued to be the school with the most demand at EPISD. They recalled when EPISD closed a struggling school, Vilas, but branded it with the Mesita name that would continue to provide the quality education families had come to expect. They wanted the same to happen in their barrio. Sandra wanted to develop a similar plan for her community, knowing that the district was willing to split the Mesita community into two schools. She thought that the same could happen in Barrio Chamizal, “Si el Distrito está dispuesto a hacer eso para esa comunidad, y si nuestra comunidad tiene todas estas necesidades, tiene todos estos niños chiquitos, tiene todas estas cosas, nosotros podemos trabajar en desarrollar un plan para mejorar la escuela”. The families that lived north of Interstate 10 experienced their own school closure, when Vilas closed, but they had an opportunity of upgrading their educational quality, in the same building, with a prestigious name. Adela spoke about an interaction with a barrio parent that sent her child to Mesita.

‘Es que es un mundo diferente’. Tú vas a Mesita y es totalmente diferente, sus programas son muy distintos porque hay más recursos. Ahí está la discriminación, cuando hay más recursos, hay más maneras de tener un nivel académico más alto, que los niños aprovechen mejor, hay más apoyos, más estímulos, más motivación y trabajan mejor.

The approach to education at Mesita was a world apart from the education at any Barrio Chamizal school. The difference was that these families lived north of Interstate 10, in wealthy neighborhoods.
When Yadhira moved to El Paso, she stayed with family in West El Paso. After a while, she found her own place in the Chamizal and noticed that these schools lacked resources, compared to schools on the west side of El Paso.

Ya los cambié a una escuela de acá del área de El Chamizal y fue mucho la diferencia. Los niños, por ejemplo, mi hijo estaba en Morehead, estudiaba francés y acá no había francés, no había nada, nada más le dijeron, ‘¿Sabe qué? No puede continuar porque no hay esa clase que él tiene’. Mi hija también tenía otro electivo y tampoco lo pudo tomar. Yo dije, ‘Bueno, no me afectaba mucho, no puedo yo pagar otra casa, no puedo pagar el nivel para estar yo en el West’. En ese tiempo no se usaba el open enrollment, tenías que usar la escuela que te tocaba. Yo les decía a mis hijos que no se pusieran tristes, que a lo mejor después había una oportunidad de volver a sus escuelas, a lo mejor si yo algún día tenía trabajo o algo.

Yadhira became aware that the district did not have equitable schools, after experiencing a stark difference in resources and programming, between Chamizal and West El Paso schools. Her children wanted to stay at the other schools with more resources, but their mother could not afford to live on that side of town. Her second oldest son was able to continue his studies at Coronado, a top school on the west side, after he was accepted into the magnet program. The bus would pick him up every day and take him to Coronado. This was the only way a student with his socioeconomic background could access an adequate education.

During a conversation with district officials, it became clear to Alejandro that the district did not provide schools with resources, based on need. Familias Unidas del Chamizal was advocating for more resources for Chamizal families.
For instance, the schools like Beall and Burleson, and some in el Segundo Barrio, they want to treat them the same as the other schools in El Paso. The schools on the border are just different in terms of culture, in terms of family, language, in terms of economic status, a lot of difference. You wouldn't think, because let's say El Paso's 85 percent Hispanic, but within that group, there's a lot of difference between the Hispanics and immigrant families that have crossed, say, and they've been in the area in the last five years or something. That's what the district doesn't understand because they want a one-size-fits-all. We'd been told that not too long ago when we had a meeting with all the principals and the administrative staff, that they would not be able to implement a special program in the barrio schools because they would have to implement that program in all the schools. I thought that was totally negating the whole idea that these schools have different characteristics, basically, that they need more help. It is very evident that the schools like Mesita, some on the east side and some on the west side…get probably the same amount of state money, but they have other resources that go along with them. Parents who have money, parents who work to gather money for special programs. Even the difference of Mesita having a grant writer for special programs, that's non-existent’ in the barrio schools.

Alejandro noticed that there were schools that did not need more resources, yet struggling families requested more help and were told it would not be fair to help them more because it was not going to be the same across the district. Adela defined the distribution of resources as follows: “Hay un pastel. El pastel se lo reparten esas personas que están liderando y realmente no reparten equitativamente. Por eso hay esta discriminación y esa discrepancia dentro de la repartición de recursos y por eso tenemos que estar luchando.” Adela’s statement described
equity, the distribution of more or less resources to schools that would give students a fair chance at a quality education.

Veronica felt that even though her children were born in the United States, they experienced discrimination. Veronica described advocating for her children’s education as follows: “… imposible cuando hay racismo, aunque ellos sean Americanos, se les trata también como inmigrantes, se ve mal … Siendo que nacieron aquí, yo pienso que tienen los derechos como ciudadanos americanos …” Veronica’s experience showed that anti-immigrant sentiment was ever-present and rampant in these communities. Any Chamizal child could encounter discriminatory actions, by the school district, based on suspected immigration status. The problem was not necessarily about citizenship status, but rather discriminatory action against non-White culture.

The school closures in the Chamizal happened during the tenure of Trent Hatch, a White male that was president of the school board. At a meeting that occurred shortly after the initial announcement of potential closures, Zaira recalled they were stuffed into a room with no air conditioning. Hatch attended the meeting and the district presented information about building capacity. She realized that 90 percent of EPISD schools were not at 100 percent capacity, which to her meant that almost any school could be deemed under capacity. Zaira took issue when Hatch released the list of 21 schools that would potentially close. She noticed that the schools that were being targeted served the highest percentage of Spanish-speaking students. Zaira attributed this discrimination to Hatch’s political views.

It was hard not to bat an eye at that, considering what Trent Hatch had been saying publicly. Privately, parading around with Ted Cruz. One guy who works at the courthouse in the Public defender's office told me that Trent Hatch said that, you know,
he didn't want to pay for immigrants, like immigrants don't belong in public education.

Cruz had been campaigning on that for years before Trump. This was a plan of attack that had been all ready.

School board elections were nonpartisan, so those that ran could shield their political affiliation. While voting history was public, many voters could not access this information easily. Hatch was the president of the board, representing the affluent West El Paso, leading efforts to close schools in South Central El Paso. Zaira felt that Hatch was using his position of power to espouse his anti-immigrant sentiments and directly attack the families of Barrio Chamizal. Zaira expressed that there was a complete disregard for human life as the district moved forward with the closures.

The disregard for our children's lives, the targeting of a community that can't fight back in a lot of ways, we were under an administration, during the Trump era that essentially, the feeling was, if you even as protested, showed up to a protest or you were seen at a protest, you could get deported. There was such a level of fear and being created strategically by a party that was dominating our school district. They got away with a lot. Trent Hatch resigned from the board, the month after voting to close schools, when the local teacher federation uncovered that he had been living outside of the district he represented.

Helena felt that the school district provided insufficient resources at schools because they served immigrants, like her.

… como padre no hemos sabido exigir, no hemos hecho una unificación de padres y exigir que les den los mismos apoyos, los mismos incentivos que les dan a otras escuelas, que tienen mejores maestros, más capacitados o tienen mejores programas o tienen más incentivos para muchas cosas. En las escuelas de barrio como que mandan lo que sobra,
lo que les queda … Por discriminación, porque somos latinos, porque desgraciadamente hay discriminación, más con los inmigrantes, como que olemos mal. Gracias a Dios nosotros no somos inmigrantes, somos inmigrantes porque no somos americanos, pero me refiero a los padres que tienen sus hijos ciudadanos, pero son indocumentados, yo siento como que los odían, como que vienen a quitarnos dinero o impuestos. No entiendo su forma de pensar, de ese desprecio, de ese desapego, de ese, ‘No, tú eres hispano, no mereces mucho apoyo, no mereces sobresalir’, cuando está visto que hay mucho hispano que es político, que hay mucho hispano que es juez, que hay mucho hispano que tienen puestos o cargos altos y que están bien preparados. No entiendo, como que hay cierto todavía racismo o apatía hacia la gente latina, como que, ‘Tú no importas mucho. Tú con que aprendas lo elemental o nomás sepas leer y escribir, es más que suficiente’. Como que no hay estímulo para los latinos, cuando se ha demostrado que hay muchos latinos magníficos. Hay de todo, en la viña del Señor hay de todo, hay buenos, hay malos.

Participants described how the children of Barrio Chamizal were invisible to EPISD. They did not have adequate educational resources or programs in their schools. Like Veronica, Helena felt pervasive anti-immigrant sentiment and racist nativism. As she mentioned, people like her, who were not born in the United States, were viewed as if they carried a bad stench. It communicated that only certain types of people belonged in the United States. In her view, undocumented families experienced more discrimination because their children were U.S. citizens, but they were viewed as people that were taking resources from people that did possess U.S. citizenship.

Individuals that immigrated from Mexico to Barrio Chamizal assimilated into U.S. culture when they entered the public school system. The school district did not assimilate to their needs - a detriment to their education. Instead, their language, culture, and traditions were
replaced with the English language and a doctrine on “how to be American.” Alejandro talked about how the assimilation in schools slowly erased Mexican roots.

This happened in my own family. No, we aren’t going to Juarez, it’s too dirty. They don't speak English. That’s here in El Paso … The image crosses from Mexico and especially in immigrant families, low-income, that's how they're treated. That's the institutional racism. They don't say dirty Mexicans, but the lack of attention to the education, healthcare, and other services are very much different. That's why we say institutional racism because it's not obvious. There's not anybody holding a gun to our head or something and telling us. The dominant ideology of the school system is still very much Anglo-oriented. You can have probably 90% of the teachers and others in the EPISD are Hispanic but you still have a very Anglo-orientated school system.

Alejandro and other participants expressed that many immigrant families felt that speaking English was the key to success, so they assimilated and distanced themselves from their home language and culture. The school district erased Mexican culture through the lack of resources in schools.

“Y ahí vienen todos como burros por sus audífonos”

The Chamizal neighborhood was a unique place in El Paso. The Spanish language dominated conversations and Mexican food restaurants lined Alameda Avenue, the street that welcomed one into the neighborhood from the freeway and over the bridge. Sandra described what it was like to be born and raised in the Chamizal, an incomparable experience to other parts of El Paso.

Nuestras escuelas son muy diferentes y nuestras vidas son muy diferentes a comparación de El Paso que está más asimilado a la cultura Americana. Aunque no necesariamente
tanto, porque El Paso está muy aislado de todo el resto de los Estados Unidos y por ser frontera. El barrio de nosotros todavía retiene mucho de esas demográficas de inmigrantes. Yo crecí con la comunidad de inmigrantes, yo no hablaba inglés. Yo batallé mucho con el inglés, yo diría como hasta high school fue cuando yo empecé a desarrollar más mi inglés, pero yo batallé mucho con el inglés. No necesariamente académico, pero yo le tenía miedo, yo no lo practicaba mucho. Yo sentía como que no estaba mejor que las otras personas, porque no hablaba el inglés. Son unas de las cosas que los niños del barrio pasan en el transcurso de ese proceso. Especialmente en niños que sus escuelas hablan totalmente español. Yo no digo que es malo, pero hay fallas. Yo experimenté mucho trauma en ese sentido, yo pienso que no entienden en realidad cómo les afecta estas cosas a los niños, cuando ese sistema o esa educación no te reconoce quién eres y no respeta quién eres.

The pressure to learn English in school was a trauma for her and many of the children in schools today. She felt more comfortable speaking Spanish, but societal norms pressured her to assimilate to American culture. School was the only place where Chamizal children were expected to speak English. When they were home, their families only spoke Spanish. Others met in the middle and spoke Spanglish.

At a meeting, Estela was humiliated by a district employee for needing interpretation. In a rare move for the district, they provided devices for families that did not understand or speak English. As Estela made her way toward the table with devices, she overheard a district employee laughing at her and others needing interpretation equipment.

Yo iba pasando por donde estaba una persona del Distrito y burlándose irónicamente dijo, ‘Y ahí vienen todos como burros por sus audífonos’. Para mí eso fue una ofensa, porque,
aunque no hablo inglés, yo dije, ‘Yo pago mis impuestos. Yo tengo mi casa y tengo derechos’. Cuando yo escuché eso, les pedí el micrófono y les dije, los enfrenté ahí. Esa persona que lo dijo inmediatamente desapareció de la junta, inmediatamente, porque cuando la quise buscar ya no estaba. Me preguntaban que quién había sido, la busqué y no estaba.

Estela felt humiliated. The district compared her and others that needed interpretation as donkeys running up to grab headphones, so they could listen, understand, and participate in the meeting. The district created a space for everyone to understand the meeting, but they made her feel bad for accessing the resources they provided. They channeled their resentment for having to provide these accommodations on those that wanted to have an opportunity to participate in the meeting. It was not a culturally responsive approach. This type of behavior made people ashamed and unwelcomed for not understanding English.

As members of Familias Unidas del Chamizal resisted school closures, the district was consistent in discriminating against their Spanish language. The person that represented the Chamizal families on the board, Bob Geske, did not speak or understand Spanish. Adela said that she could only remember one meeting, with Geske, and all he said to them was, “‘No, yo no sé nada.’ No sé si nada más eso sabe en español, pero nomás nos decía, ‘Yo no sé nada’”. The families gathered for a school closures meeting at Beall Elementary School. The meeting was conducted in Spanish and Geske showed up. He sat in the back and did not address the families. Sandra recalled when Zaira asked a Spanish-speaking communications district employee why someone was not translating for Geske.

‘¿Por qué no hay translation para el representante? Él está allá atrás y él no entiende español y no está oyendo lo que los papás están diciendo’. Se supone que esta junta era
para eso, para escuchar a los papás, para ver los problemas y ver qué es la mejor opción.

Sin embargo, ellos no hicieron eso.

The district employee told Zaira not to worry because he was translating for Geske. During the duration of the meeting, she kept looking back and “nothing was being translated to Geske. It was always superficial, this puppeteering process they never heard us.” For the families, their school board trustee’s attendance at the meeting was meaningless. He did not understand any of what was being said and he did not make an effort to ask someone to translate. He could not take their voices to the district and advocate on their behalf, as he was elected to do, because he did not understand Spanish.

Maria and Ramon were stunned to hear that Burleson would close a month before the final vote took place. Ramon thought that the person that represented Burleson on the board, Al Velarde, would have been a strong voice against the closure.

For example, Velarde, for us, when he went and talked to us about the closing, about Burleson. He was a big disappointment the way he behaved with us, the way he acted with us, the way that he stood up there. And then instead of saying something for the Burleson community to, you know, trust them on the closings of the schools and why are they closing it, he stood up there and just went, I remember his words that came out of his mouth. He just went, ‘Mi español no muy bien, so yo no muy bien.’ There was even a parent that got up and told him, ‘Hey, what do you mean your Spanish is not good? You were the spokesperson for the El Paso Police Department and you were always constantly coming out on KINTV, Channel 26, speaking perfectly in Spanish and now all of a sudden you forgot how to speak Spanish?’ He just kept quiet. As a matter of fact, he even walked away. So, that was a big disappointment.
The person elected to represent the Burleson area evaded families’ questions, based on his inability to speak Spanish. District administrators had repeatedly ignored family voices and school board members did the same thing because they could not communicate in the preferred language of the people they represented. This behavior excluded many residents from participating and accessing information related to the school closures.

These families were invested in the fight to save their children’s schools from closure. They were in attendance at monthly school board meetings, where many of them did not understand what was being discussed because the meetings were held in English. The district did not offer an interpreter for members of the public, and members of the board, to understand and communicate with each other. Adela recalled that members of Familias Unidas del Chamizal raised the issue of not having an interpreter at the school board meetings.

Nosotros siempre pedimos eso en las juntas, que las juntas fueran bilingües, que hubiera un intérprete. Yo entiendo el inglés, pero hay mamás que no entienden nada de inglés. ¿Cómo vamos a expresar nuestras necesidades? Primeramente, cuando están hablando en inglés y no se entiende, ¿cómo va a participar, el papá … me dijeron, ‘Cuatro miembros de la junta no entienden, ni hablan español, nada más dos miembros hablan español’. Yo estoy hablando en español, ni siquiera el 50 porciento de los miembros me entiende. ¿Cómo van a solucionar un problema que yo les estoy exponiendo, si no están comprendiendo lo que yo estoy diciendo? Eso es parte de la discriminación. Desde el momento en que las juntas no son bilingües, eso es discriminación. Si yo hablo en inglés, porque yo algunas veces comenzaba mi discurso en inglés, me presentaba y todo, luego yo pedía permiso para hablar en español, porque las mamás no entendían. El chiste era también que nosotros mismas comprendiéramos lo que estábamos diciendo y que ellos
comprendieran lo que nosotros estábamos diciendo. Si no hay una comprensión en ambas partes, ¿cómo se va a dar solución? Yo digo, eso es discriminación y es un problema muy fuerte de discriminación.

School board members sat at the dais, some did not understand Spanish, and did not make an attempt to understand the language. They excluded non-English-speaking voices from public discourse by not engaging them. Participants felt that they had a right to speak during the public comment portion of the meeting, in addition to the right to be understood. Given the community that EPISD served, participants felt that interpretation services should have been readily available for many of the people that did not understand English, or board members that did not understand Spanish.

Adela talked about her experience at an August 2019 school board meeting. She felt marginalized and discriminated against, when in my role as a member of the EPISD Board of Trustees, I was stopped from translating her public comment by Diane Dye, a member of the school board.

… Recuerdo que cuando me tradujo lo regañaron, a mí me dio mucha pena. Dije, ‘Él va a tener un problema’ … El hecho de que ella no permitiera o la junta o los miembros de la junta no permitieran una traducción, en este preciso momento fue cuando yo me sentí discriminada. Yo como lo dije ahí, yo ya estaba muy enojada, yo necesito que me entiendan, que me entiendan los miembros, que me entiendan los papás. Si se está televisando, que entienda la ciudadanía lo que yo estoy diciendo, pero principalmente los miembros de la junta porque eran los que iban a resolver nuestro problema. Si no se entendía, cómo iba a haber esa empatía, cómo va a haber una empatía si usted no
comprende lo que yo estoy diciendo, ahí usted no se puede poner en mis zapatos, no puede haber una empatía, sencillamente no me comprende, no va a solucionar nada.

Adela’s description of this moment occurred during an item I placed on the agenda to reopen the schools that had been closed seven months prior. Dye is a White woman that claimed to know Spanish but stopped me from translating for other members of the board that did not. It was not the first time these families had spoken in Spanish during public comment. By not having an interpreter, the district sent a message of exclusion. The school district was only inclusive of individuals that spoke and understood English. Adela made the best of this experience. She was proud of her advocacy because she set a positive example for her kids. One day, her child came home from school and was very proud of Adela because he ran across the video of her being discriminated.

Usó una palabra, que yo estaba pateando traseros … ‘No, qué bárbara’. A mí me da mucha satisfacción que el niño dijera, ‘Me siento muy orgulloso de ti porque estás haciendo algo por mí’. Que él reconozca eso, independientemente de que hayan cerrado la escuela, lo que haya pasado, yo estoy dejando un legado para mis hijos. Yo estoy haciendo algo por ellos, y que él lo reconozca y que lo valore ahorita que es adolescente, digo, "Wow", estoy haciendo algo correcto, ¿no?

Adela’s son was proud of her for standing up to a person in a position of power that attempted to silence her for speaking Spanish. The resistance Adela and other participants displayed throughout the closures was empowering for their self-worth and for their children. Their voices were consistently ignored, but they did not lose their voice. They found it and it became stronger with time. In their advocacy against the closures, they persisted because they were invested in the education of their children.
Section 3: Family Testimonios on Transitioning

Beall and Burleson closed at the end of the 2018-2019 school year, four months after the EPISD Board of Trustees voted on the closures. Families experienced a tumultuous closure process. In the months that followed, the transition was challenging. Two themes emerged from the data, a lack of consideration for students and families affected by school closures and a lack of a transition plan. First, the testimonialistas expressed that the school district showed a complete disregard for their children, so it was easy for them to ignore health and safety issues related to contamination in schools where they transitioned students. Second, participants explained that EPISD did not provide a transition plan and left families with insufficient resources. Instead of a warm handoff to a new school, families and students experienced tensions at their new schools and their education was disrupted. Mostly negative and few positive experiences uncovered elements that the school district could have provided for a smooth transition. This section concludes with family sentiments regarding the former superintendent, Juan Cabrera, in relation to how he handled the school closures.

Lack of Consideration for Students and Families

There were industrial businesses around Barrio Chamizal. As the closure of Beall was imminent, there were two fires that happened, weeks apart. One was at a cardboard facility and the other was at W Silver Recycling. Zaira described the fire at the cardboard facility, which happened on the last day Beall was open.

Then, there was two fires that summer, one on the last day of school and then one later that summer. Already the kids were going to cry. They're already crying. Their school was voted to close. We've spent seven days camped out in front of Beall on hunger strike in April, May. By this point, everyone knew. It wasn't going to be a surprise. The
mourning process began the day after the vote in January, but the closure process began too. The heaviness and the tears were already there. But when the last school bell rang and they came outside, there was a huge black smoke hovering over Douglas because one of the cardboard recycling facilities caught fire. Both Douglas and Beall students could see the plumes and the flames because it wasn't too far, but that was their last day of school. I don't know if you remember your last days of school? I remember my last days of school being fun. You stayed after school and had like water balloons, and shaving cream, and silly string. Oh, if you'd ever seen such a gray dreary sight, was the last day of school at Beall.

The next month, W Silver Recycling caught on fire, igniting the concerns of families that would transition their children to Douglass in the next few weeks. The health and safety of their children was at risk. Fumes surrounded their barrio, on two separate occasions, in consecutive months.

When the closures happened, the Beall students were designated to Douglass and the Burleson students were designated to Zavala. Douglass was next to W Silver Recycling. The recycling facility had been in the neighborhood for many years. Zaira could not bring herself to call it a recycling center because of the amount of toxic waste processed at the facility.

I said, where they're handling metals, batteries, and electronics. Some of the most dangerous, toxic things to be handling, next to tires. These are not only the heavy metals and dangerous, you know, but these are from the maquilas in Juárez that have little to no accountability. This trash that is like, scary, unknown trash. You know what I mean? It's not just a recycling facility. It’s like, there was an X-ray machine dumped in there once! The gamma rays or whatever the hell, is still there! That's how long it lasts. It's not like
'recycling cans or bottles.' Right? Like, there's this massive, industrial waste dump two feet away from the kids, you know?

Familias Unidas del Chamizal reached out to professors with environmental expertise, at UTEP. A professor agreed to visit the site and assess the condition of the soil. The professor found moderate levels of lead in the soil. Sandra explained that the State of Texas assessed contamination standards at a lower level than environmental experts. This meant that the contamination had to be severely high in order for the state to consider it a danger to the health of students. UTEP professors had been advocating to change the standards on lead because the research suggested that even the smallest traces of lead could cause irreparable damage. At the abandoned housing tenements, behind Douglass, they had found traces of copper pollution in the playground, but the state did not regulate copper. Sandra explained that copper was known to cause dementia and reproductive issues in women.

Sandra explained that the recycling facility had been in business for so long that it was exempt from any environmental regulations, under a grandfather clause. W Silver Recycling removed the blacktop from a parking lot and converted it into a dust parking lot. Sandra mentioned that there were regulations that prohibited exposed parking lots. The paved gravel provided a protective layer against the spread of pollution. Sandra depicted how the pollution could spread through the neighborhood.

… you have all that traffic and you're picking up all that dust. And then it gets on the wheels, and then you go through the school, y toda esa cochinada, all that stuff, you carry it to other parts of the community…Toda esa stuff ahorita, ya quitaron mucha de esa cochinada y ahorita está exposed. Como cuando hay todos estos winds, esa dust se recoge, and it ends up en el canal, and it ends up en el playground de Douglass…
W Silver Recycling’s exemption allowed it to continue releasing harmful pollutants, into the Chamizal, without any laws or ordinances that provided accountability.

Environmental concerns around Zavala were derived from its proximity to the freeway that led to the Bridge of the Americas port of entry, into Ciudad Juárez. Experts from UTEP also found moderate to high levels of lead contamination at Zavala. The lead was present in the playground, which was located next to the highway. The finding was not surprising because of the school’s proximity to the highway. It had also been in operation for years, even prior to when gasoline was leaded. Sandra stated that professors were in disbelief about the amount of lead at Zavala, “It's alarming that they have [the] little kids’ playground right next to the highway.” The children that used the playground were still in the early stages of their development, so the lead posed a greater threat to their health.

Familia Unidas del Chamizal raised these concerns with EPISD. At first, district officials committed to conducting a full assessment, based on the preliminary findings that the group shared with them. The district never moved forward with a full study. Instead, they interpreted the findings in the preliminary assessment and compared them to state standards, concluding that the moderate to high levels of contamination found by UTEP professors were acceptable by state standards. Alejandro explained the harmful pollutants that contaminated Zavala on a daily basis.

We had found lead contamination in front of the Zavala school and they'd been forced to move their childcare's playground from the front of the school already, you know? Like I said, you either follow the science or you follow the politics. To us, there was no science to renovating that school. We had already been protesting the maquila trucks and meeting
with TxDOT.\(^{10}\) We knew that there were possibilities that they would have this new I-10 connect, that would queue all the tracks right there in Zavala, all the traffic going into Mexico. That's what's happened. Beforehand, only around four o'clock, so you would have all this traffic, there in front of Zavala. Now you go, and it's pretty much all day long, trucks, cars, and everything because of the new I-10 connect.

The I-10 Connect Project, in front of Zavala, was a construction project that connected the main interstate to other smaller highways in El Paso. These two schools were the solutions arranged by the school district when schools closed. The contamination and location of these two schools made the buildings uninhabitable for the education of students.

The residents of the Chamizal had experienced a range of health issues related to the contaminated air in their neighborhood. Sandra’s daughter attended and ran track at Bowie High School. When she was running during track practice, she would experience headaches that she believed were caused by the idling 18-wheeler trucks in front of the school. Familias Unidas del Chamizal surveyed barrio residents and found that many children and mothers suffered from undiagnosed and diagnosed respiratory issues. Estela disclosed that she knew many people in the Chamizal that suffered from respiratory issues, such as asthma. She also said that there had been elevated blood lead levels detected in children. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Sandra said that researchers from UTEP had started an investigation that tested Chamizal children for lead. The idea was to test the kids every few months and follow them for years. Sandra’s daughter was

\(^{10}\) While families were not successful in preventing school closures at EPISD, on November 20, 2020, they celebrated a win when the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) permanently removed idling trucks waiting to cross into Ciudad Juárez (Familias Unidas del Chamizal, 2020). This meant that the semi-trucks that lined up to cross the border on a daily basis, would no longer contaminate the area directly in front of the high school that served the Chamizal neighborhood.
tested twice, and low levels of lead were found in her blood. She was hopeful that the study would resume and provide answers about how the pollution throughout her neighborhood had affected the health of Chamizal children.

The presence of lead in Barrio Chamizal was a concern for many families. Estela and her family made the decision to opt out of the study. She wanted to avoid bad news.

… pero sí hay muchos niños aquí en la colonia que sí se han detectado con plomo. Del plomo ni le quisimos hacer el examen, porque ya que nos explicaron que si el plomo existía no se podía salir, que esto y que lo otro, dijimos, ‘Nos vamos a torturar más’, y de plano no se los hicimos, pero mucha gente sí ha salido…Muchos compañeros de aquí mismo del barrio con asma, con plomo, con enfermedades virales y cosas que ahorita, por ejemplo, con la pandemia se hacen más vulnerables.

Estela and her daughter, Leticia, preferred not to know if their children had lead poisoning. Leticia’s daughter was not feeling well, and she went to the doctor, but Leticia never picked up the results. Similar to avoiding the lead testing, she did not want to encounter possible bad news.

Ella se empezó a sentir mal … El año pasado, que muchos dolores de cabeza, que le dolía mucho la cabeza y que se sentía mareada y se cansaba mucho. La llevé a hacer exámenes, pero nunca fue por ellos porque fue cuando empezó lo de la pandemia y todo eso y ya no fui por ellos. Le hicieron de sangre y todo para saber qué tenía, por qué los dolores de cabeza y todo eso. Luego se ponía a correr y no aguantaba correr y así y a mí me preocupa, decía, ‘No vaya a tener algo mi hija’, pero a la vez no quería hacerle exámenes. Mucha gente les hizo los del plomo y la verdad yo tuve mucho miedo. Yo no acepté hacerle la del plomo a mi hija, porque yo decía, ‘Si llega a tener plomo, dicen que no se puede hacer nada, y si llega a tener, yo voy a estar muy preocupada y me voy a sentir
For Leticia, the loss of her newborn son was trauma that she continued to carry. As a mother, she felt better not knowing if her daughter had health issues. This situation showed the role cultural behavior plays in avoiding healthcare. Many of these families were medically underserved, but also lacked educational resources that would urge them to prioritize their healthcare.

Chamizal residents did not only experience health issues related to lead contamination. Many children that lived in the area suffered from asthma. Alejandro shared that families attributed the location of these schools to ongoing health issues.

There is no doubt, there's a lot of asthma in the Chamizal, and we have a lot of families who said they would not send their kids to Zavala for that reason. We have families that have told us, ‘Yeah, we sent our kids there for a while and they couldn’t take it.’ The asthma became a lot worse. This is all information just from families and we tried to get them to do a study there and we weren’t able to do that.

The pollution in the area where these families lived had caused long-term issues in the health of the students attending schools in this area. The education students received not only lacked resources, a notion that speaks to the quality of education based on location, but also on the well-being of the children that attended these schools. Participants felt that schools were safe spaces where students were educated, but they were being harmed on a daily basis because of geography and decisions, such as school closures, that come with long lasting effects.

The people that lived in this area had been victims of mental and emotional anguishes. Zaira explained that women had attributed reproductive issues to this pollution. Zaira’s health
also suffered when she lived in the Chamizal, near the recycling facility. She remembered a doctor’s visit, where she became concerned with the doctor’s assessment.

My doctor was like, ‘Your white blood cell count is depleting. You can't fight anything and you're on the verge of a stroke or a heart attack, and we don't know why.’ I’m getting this news … no one could figure out where the hell my white blood cells are going and we're living in one of those most contaminated spaces in El Paso.

Around the same time as this grim diagnosis of her health, Zaira moved out of the area. She was poisoned by carbon monoxide, and her landlord did not make changes to keep her and her daughter safe. While Zaira did not want to leave the Chamizal because of her identity within the community, it made a difference to her health. She was breathing cleaner air and no longer lived in a place where she was fighting contaminants. The move occurred after the closure of Beall. She moved north of Interstate 10 and her daughter attended Crockett. She also remembered when she had to go to the hospital because one of her friends had a baby born with developmental issues that led to death.

To sit in this space, learn all these things, and then go into the community and have one of our members, who lives really close to the highway and the bridge, and visit her in the hospital because her baby was born riddled in cancers. And to mourn with her five days later because her baby died because his lungs couldn't … To her, that was her baby boy who didn't make it. And to me, that's a system of abuse and exploitation on her body and her baby's.

The trauma of losing a child and knowing it could have been preventable made it really hard to accept. These families were not able to live in another area, where there was better air. They should not have had to go through this amount of pain because of the area they were born, raised,
and still lived in today. These stories, among a myriad of other issues, is what fueled Familias Unidas del Chamizal to resist and demand a safe and healthy environment for all that lived in the barrio.

**Lack of a Transition Plan**

Across all testimonios, the consensus was that EPISD did not provide a transition plan, resources were scarce, and challenges surfaced throughout the transition. A detailed transition plan would have provided families with guidance on moving their children to new schools. Sandra felt that EPISD did not give the transition the needed attention.

Te digo que no hubo transición, no hubo recursos, es más, recortaron recursos. El distrito trato el año primero del cierre como cualquier otro año. Evaluaron el número de maestros de acuerdo al número de estudiantes. Evaluaron el número de personal de acuerdo al standard personal per student or whatever the requirement que quiere TEA. Pero no proporcionaron extra staff to accommodate kids. No hicieron un plan de transición específicamente para mover esos niños y para que esos niños se adaptaran a la Douglass.

No habían programas.

Participants had to adapt to the transition conditions created by the school district. Schools in the Chamizal already lacked resources. EPISD closed schools and children were transitioned to schools with less resources and health and safety hazards. When families gave district officials proof of the contamination at Zavala and Douglass, they dismissed their concerns by telling them that level of contamination was acceptable by standards set forth by the State of Texas.

Participants felt that the school district effectively impeded disadvantaged Chamizal children from receiving an equitable and safe education.
Many families did not have transportation for their families. Leticia did not want to send her kids to Douglass, but she had no choice because she did not own a vehicle to take her child to another school.

Lo único que nos querían proporcionar era que iba a haber transportación, que no nos preocupáramos, y eso era todo. Ellos no hicieron nada, ello les valió nomás, ‘Lleven a sus hijos allá y si no quieren, agarren un transfer para llevárselos a donde ustedes quieran’.

Ellos no sabían que nosotros para el transfer también nosotros teníamos que batallar en transportación. Decíamos, ‘¿Ustedes nos van a dar transportación si queremos otra escuela?’ ‘No’. No nos quedaba de otra. Los papás que no tenemos cómo movernos no nos quedaba de otra.

The district did not consider the socioeconomic conditions of Chamizal residents. Any family at EPISD had the choice to send their child to any school within the district, but many Chamizal residents could not make that choice. Sandra illustrated this issue, “Is it really a school of choice? For our community, is it really designed to allow us to take opportunity of that? How can that be a school of choice, even though that's the way the district promotes it?” It was a systemic issue that excluded poor, immigrant communities such as Barrio Chamizal. The families did not want to transition their children to the schools that EPISD designated, so the district’s answer was they could request for their children to move to any school within the district. They did not take into consideration that most of them did not have the privilege of taking their children to other EPISD schools. Families wanted the district to transition students to a safe school with resources, so that families were not put in the position of needing a choice that was not viable because of their socioeconomic status.
The district did not offer any support from members of the superintendent’s leadership team. They committed to one resource for Beall families – one year of school bus transportation to Douglass from Beall. There was no implementation plan for this transportation, so it failed. Zaira explained how the district did not consider any safety precautions when they provided a bus at Beall to transport students to Douglass.

Even that crosswalk that is in front of Beall … at Piedras. Parents and kids still had to cross it, but it wasn't even turned on or manned … I remember in those first few weeks of school, seeing a mom and she had a kid in a stroller and two kids in elementary school, and they almost got run over. ‘Okay, now that that school's closed, that crosswalk is not needed.’ Even little things like that, it was, like first of all, the bus, only a year, really? Then, the crosswalk … that could have been part of the transition plan. Instead, between EPISD and the City, I remember we were at the City saying-- because they were discussing whether to paint it again. They're like, ‘The school's going to close anyway. Let's not even repaint it.’ This was before the January decision to close it … It wasn't fair, there was no plan. There was no attention paid to what it would mean to transition such a huge number of students from one school.

As Zaira expressed, Beall’s closure meant that any safety measures put in place at the school no longer had to be sustained at a closed school. Families, out of necessity, were still walking their children to school buses at Beall, yet there were not any traffic safety measures in place. Then, when the buses dropped children off at Douglass, their health and safety was in danger because of contamination found at the school, and its location near a recycling facility and canal.
The school district invited students and families to tour Douglass, right before Beall closed. Alejandro talked about the tour and the steps the district could have taken to establish a better bus stop at Beall.

They go and visit classrooms and stuff. That's not a transition … You might say that might be a small part, but for them to sit down and talk about the problems that they were going to have with the transition like the buses, that they were going to bus so many, 200 students. And where were they going to park the buses? For a while, they had all these parents and kids standing out in the sun, just because of the location they chose in front of Beall. When the Beall committee said, ‘Hey, put the buses on the other side, where there's shade, at least in the evening.’ You had to be standing there in the sun in the afternoon, in the afternoon sun, simple things like that.

The district toured students and families around Douglass to help them with the transition, but never sat with them to listen and address family concerns. To Alejandro and affected families, the tour felt superficial because they walk around the school, but the district never provided any substantive information or resources that would have helped them transition. They would have wanted to know more about how the bussing system would work and what the school would offer students to ease the transition. The tour took place months before students transitioned.

This time frame gave the district enough time to solicit family input, address concerns, and develop a transition plan. The transition was guided in the same way that the closures took place - no involvement from families. The logistics around the bus stop at Beall highlighted the lack of preparation on the district’s part, when they made families stand under the immense heat, in addition to the traffic safety concerns.
The transition happened days after a White domestic terrorist, inspired by Donald Trump’s racist, xenophobic rhetoric, drove to El Paso, targeted, and killed people of Mexican descent, at a local Walmart (Romero, Fernandez, & Padilla, 2019). Zaira recalled that Chamizal residents were scared that they would also be targeted while they were out in public, for example, taking their children to the bus stop at Beall. This also happened months after Trump visited El Paso at the El Paso County Coliseum, adjacent to Barrio Chamizal.

We sat there waiting with them in the sun, and mind you, the massacre just happened at Walmart. Everyone's on edge. Not only is everyone on edge, but … the immigrant community was like, ‘Shit, they're targeting us.’ There was a stop, drop, and roll, duck and cover kind of feeling whenever you were out. Mind you, also, Trump had visited and came to the Coliseum where we had all these cars in our neighborhood and people that never been there, that were Trump supporters, just suddenly there with flags and hats. We could hear the grandma. I remember there was a grandma who was at Walmart when it happened and she was out there waiting for her kid and feeling totally triggered just being outside, waiting for this bus. It's things that people don't think about, but on top of that, being in the sun, the abuela with her umbrella. Bring your umbrella next time. They weren't even taking lists. They were like, ‘What kids are on the bus? I don't know.’ They were just hopping on the bus.

Chamizal residents were in distress about moving their children to a new school. The bus situation was chaotic. The school district did not provide any staff that would make sure students arrived at school and were picked up by their designated parent or guardian. Earlier that year, the school district devalued these families when they closed schools in the Chamizal. Now, a racist had come into their community and killed people that looked and spoke like them. This tragic
event had exacerbated what families were feeling about the transition. The district had provided a bus stop for families to take their kids, without putting traffic safety precautions in place and exposing them to high summer temperatures as they waited for the bus. In other words, there was no consideration for families. The timing of the transition was hindered by the attack on El Paso. This situation communicated that the district should have been more culturally responsive in the advent of all of that had happened, given the imminent transition.

Families noticed the absence of counseling. Some children were not coping well with the transition. Yadhira’s child was not adjusting to the transition. She was in third grade and hoped that they would keep Beall open until she finished fifth grade. Yadhira thought that the district would at least provide a professional that would ease students into accepting their new school. Seeing that the district had not provided resources, Yadhira wanted to come together with other members of Familias Unidas del Chamizal and make their children feel welcomed at Douglass.

… les decía a las madres de Beall, ‘¿Por qué no hacer un tipo de fiesta de recibimiento?’

Ya nos habían obligado a irnos, pero no por nuestro bien, sino por el bien de los niños. Hacer, por ejemplo, como una fiesta de recibimiento de los niños para que se vieran involucrados y que vieran que no era rechazo, sino que todos los niños somos del barrio, hacerlos unidos y decir, ‘Todos somos Chamizal. Todos estamos en la misma situación que tú’. ¿Por qué no hacerles así una especie de bienvenida para que los niños no sufrieran tanto eso, para que no se vieran tan afectados? Porque se vieron afectados psicológicamente de una manera muy fea.

Yadhira and other families fought to not have their school closed, but now her focus had shifted to making the situation that she tried to avoid work. She wanted to see her child succeed at the new school, but the school district set her up for failure when they failed to provide emotional
support. Adults closed schools, instructed families to attend a new school, and the children suffered the mental and emotional consequences.

When Beall and Burleson closed, families had to begin the transition to Douglass and Zavala. Families did not want to move to either school, but their socioeconomic status prevented them from seeking another school within the district. Others experienced similar struggles but worked hard to find a quality school and somehow make it work. Adela’s daughter wanted to move to Douglass because all her friends were moving there from Beall. Douglass was never an option for Adela because of the contamination and safety issues present at the school. She did not have a car, but she knew she had to do what she could to give her daughter a good education.

‘¿Qué voy a hacer? No tengo carro’. Yo tuve que pedir un préstamo y comprar un auto …

Fueron tiempos difíciles, las primeras dos semanas la mentora de [mi otra hija] tuvo que venir por ella a mi casa. A mí me daba mucha pena y yo decía, ‘Yo quería llevar a mi niña a la escuela’, y me privé de sus dos primeras semanas de ambiente muy diferente, de una escuela muy distinta. Yo lloraba mucho, decía, ‘¿Porqué?’ Igual [mi hija], su primer día de clase. Eso para la niña fue así como muy traumática. ‘Mamá, llévame a Douglas, es que mira, ahí está atrás de la casa’. Le digo, ‘No’. Ya las cosas mejoraron, ya tuve mi auto. Ahorita todo está bien, con ellas en sus escuelas en las que están, pero la niña todavía me dice, ‘Oye mamá, ¿cuándo me vas a inscribir en Douglas?’ Yo le digo, ‘No, nunca, mi [hija], nunca’.

Adela made sacrifices to make sure that her daughter would relocate to a good school. She secured a school for her daughter, north of Interstate 10. She was working many hours each week to provide for her family as a single mom. She had immigrated to the United States with a visa, so she did not have a social security number to use for her car purchase. Her immigration status
made her ask her best friend to register the car under her name. Many Chamizal residents are faced with similar situations. Adela’s daughter missed her friends that moved to Douglass, but for Adela it was about making sure her daughter had a quality education.

If families did not want to transfer their children to Douglass or Zavala, and they had a way of sending their kids to other district schools, they could use the district’s open enrollment policy. Ramon said the only assistance they received from the district was brief instructions on the ability to transfer their students to any campus. He remembered that at a meeting, a district employee told them they had the choice of sending their children to schools that were in the affluent area of the district.

She said, ‘The students from Burleson, they’re going to go to Zavala. If you don’t want to send them to Zavala, you know what? You have the option to send them wherever you want to send them within the school district of El Paso.’ The first thing that came out of her mouth was, ‘If you want to send them to the best schools on the west side, you can send them over there. That's the reason El Paso is an open enrollment.’ We were like, ‘Oh, so you’re saying that the schools from the west side are better than the ones from south central. We know where you’re coming from, what you’re trying to say.’

The district employee’s statement confirmed that schools in rich areas of the district were equipped with more resources and could provide a better education for the families they served. The institutional racism embedded within the school system only supported a quality education for families with a certain socioeconomic status, one that disadvantaged families in South Central El Paso did not possess.

The families developed relationships with key staff members at their new schools, such as office clerks or administrative assistants. This helped them get acquainted with the processes
at new schools. For those that had transportation, these staff members guided them through the district’s open enrollment procedure. Adela arrived at the school where she wanted her daughter to transfer from Beall. In the parking lot, she encountered an individual that would end up being her daughter’s second grade teacher. The teacher introduced her to the school’s registrar, and they forged a friendship.

Yo estuve investigando todo, ella me dijo, ‘Mira tienes que llenar esta forma, tiene que ir a Beall, que te llenen esto, luego tienes que hacer el transfer’. Ni siquiera en Beall me ayudaron con eso, porque tenían tanta premura por cerrar … Yo digo, ‘Qué buena persona’, no tenía por qué estar, y a veces estaba después de su tiempo para atenderme. Decía yo, ‘Hijole no, qué bárbaro’. Cuando a una persona le gusta su trabajo, ayuda a la gente y me encantó. Yo tuve que hacer todo sola, andaba toda perdida, pero las cosas se me fueron facilitando y logré tener el transfer.

The school closures were decided without considering the impact on affected children. This lack of consideration continued when families transitioned. An inadequate transition process made families go to the school where they wanted to enroll their children and figure out the process on their own. Once there, families had to ask what type of resources the school provided and determine if it was suitable for their child. This gave families an opportunity to find a school, outside the Chamizal, with more resources. Adela’s situation revealed that there was inequitable school funding in this immigrant community of Color. It placed the burden on Adela and other families that were invested in the education of their children to seek adequate schools, instead of EPISD providing equitable schooling.

Similar to Adela, Helena never considered the transfer of her granddaughter to a contaminated school, like Zavala. Helena explained that not many Burleson students transferred
to Zavala. Most went to two schools that were south of Interstate 10, but within the vicinity of Burleson.

Se fueron a otras. La mayoría se fue a Clardy y a Cooley. Unos que otros todavía buscaron mucho más allá, pero a Zavala fueron contados los que se fueron, y los que se fueron, fueron de ahí, del Sherman, porque me imagino que fueron los que tenían más problema en cuestión de transportación … Porque le digo, a muchos los llevaban adultos mayores, ya personas muy grandes que se veía que apenas podían caminar.

The families that moved to Zavala did it out of necessity. Helena concluded that many of the low-income families that lived in the Sherman housing complex, close to Burleson, were the few that moved to Zavala. This economic disparity forced the decision on those Burleson families. Helena’s family had a vehicle, so they made the decision to move her granddaughter to Clardy, about a mile away from Burleson, which was closer than Zavala.

Mi hija estuvo peleando, que ella no la iba a mandar a Zavala. Ahí decían que tenía que mandarla a Zavala, mi hija les habló y les dijo que no, que no la iba a mandar allí, que le dieran el cambio para acá, para la Clardy. No querían. Yo hablé con una de las secretarias y ella fue la que me ayudó a hacer el cambio de la niña para acá, para la Clardy, pero mucha gente sí estaba batallando mucho. En primer lugar, porque fue muy, como le digo, muy sorpresivo el aviso, ya cuando se enteraron. Muchos padres para hacer el cambio, que no querían irse a la Zavala, estaban batallando mucho… Mucha gente no estaba enterada del cierre. Al final para ellos fue muy problemático conseguirle el lugar a sus hijos que no querían que se fueran a la Zavala.

Some district employees made it difficult for Burleson families to move their children to the school of their choice. Helena established a connection with a clerk at Clardy and that is what
allowed her granddaughter to move to that school. Other families had similar difficulties and relied on secretaries at distinct schools to facilitate the transfer process for them. In Helena’s case, contamination concerns aside, Zavala was further away from her family than Clardy. The relationships that Helena, Adela, and other families made, with school staff members, were crucial in transitioning their students to schools that the school district did not designate as their new school.

Ramon and Maria were familiar with the district’s transfer policy. Every year, they completed transfer forms for their children to attend Burleson because they lived outside of the school’s boundaries. Maria expressed frustration with the transfer process, complicated after the closure of Burleson.

They were literally saying, ‘Burleson students, they're all going to Zavala.’ Like, in other words, we didn’t have no option. When I went ahead and tried to transfer my girls from Burleson to Clardy, Zavala already had them there, as students for Zavala. I’m like, ‘No.’ I was like fighting and I know that transfers take time. I constantly was one of those parents, that was like every week calling Clardy, ‘Please accept them. Please accept them, cause I don't want them to go to Zavala.’

In the computer system, EPISD transferred all Burleson students to Zavala. It made the transfer process difficult, even for parents like Maria, that completed the transfer each year. Ramon recalled that the district’s lack of transition plan made it difficult to enroll his children at Clardy. The transfer finally happened because they received assistance from attendance clerks at Burleson and Clardy.

… never like guidance … or even phone calls from counselors for us, parents, or for the students. ‘You know what? This is what you need to do, if you’re not going to send them
to Zavala, you have to do this, this.’ We were left alone, in other words … If it wasn’t for the staff from Burleson, the attendance lady … we couldn’t do it … the process that we needed to do. Even from Clardy, the attendance lady … she has been very helpful to us. Every time that we have to put the transfer, she tells us what to do, what steps to do next. If it wasn't for those two ladies, we don't know where our kids would have been right now.

District employees had to step in and act as guides for the families that were transitioning because of school closures. This valuable help was the transition plan.

The absence of a transition plan made it difficult for families to adapt to new educational environments. Members of Familias Unidas del Chamizal created a transition plan and shared it with the district, but they did not implement it. Alejandro thought the district should have held an orientation with families to prepare them for the transition.

They should have had meetings with the parents and say, ‘This is possibly what your kids are going to go through when they get there.’ In other words, orientation from the start … All these little specific things that would help alleviate some of the stress on the parents and the kids. ‘There's going to be extra help when you get to Douglas school, you can have extra help. You can have … access to psychologists or to counselors, and you can have extra help on the playground, because we know there's going to be fights … the parents, they pay taxes, barrio parents pay taxes. Essentially the school system should be serving them and not the parents serving the school system.

The closures disrupted the education of students and families were not prepared to transition. EPISD leadership failed these families, as they have for many years. Sandra felt it would have been appropriate for the district to ease families into the closures by giving them two years to
prepare for the transition. She wanted the district to provide families with resources and inform the transition with their input.

Ahora, they should've developed a parent program … they never even talked to us hasta el first day of school cuando se iban a registrar … After the closure, there were no meetings with us about the closure, donde nos explicaron, ‘Así se va a hacer, ¿qué tienen preguntas? ¿Qué quieren ver?’, nunca nos preguntaron eso. Nunca hubo una junta para preguntarnos y dijeron, el distrito dijo, que iban a haber juntas. Consejería, es el regular program que tienen de consejería. Ósea, el resource program que existe ya. No, que dijéramos, ‘Hicieron un extra program, just to deal with the trauma donde los niños pudieran hablar sobre el cierre’, a los niños no les hablaron sobre el cierre.

A digital divide had been persistent in this community. Many of these families did not have access to a device or internet. If they did, they might know how to use the device. This prevented them from registering their kids at a new school or accessing vital district information. Families wanted workshops to have an understanding of the needs that they could address. Students were experiencing trauma and needed support for their mental and emotional well-being. Barrio Chamizal residents possessed low socioeconomic and distinct immigration statuses, but they also contributed to the school district’s finances. The district could have worked to close these gaps by providing equitable funding in these schools.

**Community Tensions.** The narratives that families used to advocate against school closures complicated the transition to a new school. Many of the children were paying attention to what their families were saying. Yadhira struggled to convince her children to move to Douglass because they knew that it was not a safe space for them.
Fue bien difícil, porque nosotros queríamos decirle al distrito por qué no podía elegir Douglass para quedarse…porque estaba junto a una recicladora, estaba junto al canal, estaba junto a una calle muy transitada y hay mucho, mucho tráfico…Al quererle decir eso señalamos que era la escuela contaminada, señalamos que era una escuela muy peligrosa, señalamos que era una escuela de bajas calificaciones y señalamos que Beall era más alto en calificaciones. Esta escuela tenía menos niños. Señalamos las cosas, el por qué no queríamos ir a Douglass. El decirle a nuestros niños, ‘Ahora vete a Douglass’, me decían, ‘No, porque está contaminada’.

After losing the fight to save Beall, Yadhira was in a position to tell her kids to move to a school that she strongly advocated against for months because her socioeconomic status prohibited her from sending them to an adequate school. The children understood that the contamination at Douglass would be harmful to them. Other families found themselves in this exact position – not being able to send their kids to what they considered safe schools in the district because of where they lived and their socioeconomic status.

The transition created community tension. This became another barrier that prevented families from feeling good about their school environments. Many families, students, and employees were not receptive of the families that were forced to transition to their school. Sandra explained that the division was caused by the closure process and blamed EPISD.

… the district really divided our community. When they decided to put option one and option two, I think they did it very clearly with the intention for both groups to fight and to create division, because they didn't want the Douglass parents to join the Beall parents. No creo que querían eso. Entonces, I think that their intention was to divide the community, which they succeeded.
As the school closure vote approached, the district released two options. Both options included the closure of Alta Vista and Burleson, paired with either Beall or Douglass (Castillo, 2018). This was what Sandra determined as the root cause that divided Douglass and Beall families. When her child started school at Douglass, she realized that the conflict had not been resolved.

Cuando se fueron muchos de los papás para la Douglass, o muchos de los niños, there was a lot of bullying within the school. I'm not just saying from Douglass to the kids de Beall, pero también habían muchos fights between Douglas and Beall. Both groups se estaban peleando. One of the teachers, the PE teacher, when we complained about the sun being too hot, they called the Beall kids babies. The teacher, the coach, called them babies porque los Beall kids fueron a decirles a sus moms … they had to put them in the gym, in front of all the kids.

The school district created a divisive environment for Chamizal families. They all lived within the same area but belonged to different schools. The schools were supposed to be a safe space for education, but even the adults that worked at Douglass marginalized students for not coping well with the transition. Veronica was disheartened by the rivalry that formed between Douglass and Beall students.

… supuestamente los niños de Douglass estaban reclamando su escuela, que ahí venían los niños de Beall y algo así. El caso que no está bien eso. Yo pienso que una escuela es una escuela y no debe haber diferencias de que, ‘Porque este niño viene de otra escuela o porque tal’, así. Como midiendo barrios, pero no son barrios, son escuelas.

The district sowed division between families and students through the closure process. The disruption escalated when they did not provide any resources to ease the transition. Families were already concerned about their children’s emotions related to the transition. When they
encountered these tensions at their new schools, it became another worry that they did not expect to encounter.

The hostility between Douglass and Beall families continued through the transition. Leticia was not happy about sending her child to Douglass but made an effort to get involved at the school and attended a parent meeting.

A mí me tocó en una junta que fui, que una señora se paró y nos dijo bien feo, dijo, ‘Es que desde que vinieron, tanto los niños como las mamás de Beall, esta escuela no es la misma, yo no sé para qué los trajeron’. Y me paré yo y le dije … ‘¿Sabe qué, señora? Nosotros no estamos aquí porque queramos, a nosotros nos trajeron. Pero si ustedes nos hubieran ayudado, ayúdenos pa que nos abran nuestra escuela y podernos ir nosotros a nuestra escuela, porque nuestra escuela era mejor que la de ustedes’. Yo agarré y me salí … ‘Yo ya no vuelvo a venir a sus juntas porque no nomás a los niños nos atacan, también a nosotros y esto no puede estar pasando, que no se dieron cuenta lo que hicieron’, y me salí. Dije, ‘Ahorita me peleo a fregazos con ella”. Sí, si a mí me encienden y yo sí soy capaz, dije, ‘No, mejor me salgo’.

Families could not find common ground on education. They blamed one another for the escalating tension between the kids and adults. They each had a distinct perspective on how the transition was impacting their children’s learning environment. The families at Douglass felt that their children’s education was fine before the Beall families arrived. For Beall families, they did not want to be at that school, but had to be there out of necessity for their children’s education.

**Negative Experiences.** Families shared their experiences with the quality of education their children received at their new school. Most noticed that the transition caused negative effects on their child’s education. Sandra researched other school closures around the country.
She found that if students were sent to higher performing schools, they adapted after two years. If students were sent to poor performing schools, with scarce resources, it was detrimental to the student’s education and they could not recover academically. Having this newfound knowledge, Sandra determined that EPISD transitioned her child to a school with less resources than Beall, after she was promised that they would move students to better schools.

… todo dependía de la escuela donde los están mandando y si evalúas a Douglass, ¿Pos qué diferencia de lo de la Beall? … No hay mejores condiciones. No hay nada diferente que no le pudieran haber dado en la Beall. Entonces, a nosotros nos dijeron que los niños fueron movidos a una escuela mejor, que iban a invierten ese dinero en programas y maestros mejores. Pero cuando se usa el año escolar regular y no se les da nada extra o se les da una mejor situación, no veo cómo eso es beneficioso a nuestros niños … Los recursos que existen no sirven para nada …

What he needs, he needed like enrichment programs … I was thinking, pos programas de STEM, algo que dijera, ‘Bueno, pues wow, like the district really focused on the programs.’ We don't even have summer school, you know. They totally lied to the parents, to the teachers, to everything. You know, it's just so unfortunate all this stuff they did to our kids and I don't think no one really sees how damaging it was to our community and to our kids.

The district promised families an increase in the quality of education for their children, with adequate resources, but like the transition plan, it never happened. The institutional racism continued excluding poor families from accessing a fair education. Sandra evaluated the test scores at Douglass, compared them to Beall, and concluded that Douglass’ students had been failed by the school’s leadership.
I think that Douglass was failing dramatically. I think they didn’t meet standard the year before. I think it was really, really, really low in scores. I heard that that principal, las maestras no lo querían … Yo me imagino que, that also sets the attitude of the school or the leadership … [The Beall principal] was very different, I'm telling you … at least she tried. Even though some parents se quejaban, but that's just general, pero yo si veía que ella at least had a different style. Teníamos muy buenas maestras. Cuando paso eso … the first year, quitearon muchas maestras en Douglas. They quit, se fueron … Beall, if you evaluate the grades, cause we started evaluating the grades, the grades were constant. They would increase every year, your tests scores, hacían increase, increase … They never fluctuated. Because when you see the barrio schools they go up, down, up, down every year. Pero Beall was the only one that was consistently gradually increasing compared to Douglas. Yo si pienso que muchas de las maestras de Douglass, they were not qualified. I don't want to say that they were bad teachers, pero no eran muy buenas maestras y yo creo tenía que ver con el principal. [The Beall principal] … was always on top of them and stuff like that. You could even ask the parents, muchos de los papás del grupo te pueden decir que we had, hasta eso, very good teachers.

EPISD transitioned students from a school that showed constant academic progression, to a school with academic struggles. Post-closure, some teachers from Beall moved to Douglass, while others retired. Beall’s principal also moved to Douglass, but she was only there for a year. The prior principal returned to his duties when she left. The district’s decision to bring back the principal maintained the poor academic status quo for students.

Maria and Ramon transitioned their three children from Burleson to Clardy. The kids were about to complete their second year at the new school but had not been able to adapt.
Ramon stated that his children were hopeful that the lawsuit against the school district would reopen Burleson, “Still up to today, they still will tell us every morning ‘Dad, mom, are they going to open Burleson or how’s the lawsuit?’ Are they going to be able to open it?” They missed the teachers at Burleson most. Ramon said their two oldest daughters had felt a direct impact, from the transition, on the quality of their education.

... when my second daughter ... was in first grade, when she was in Burleson, she was learning how to read perfectly. Right now, we’re struggling with her, how to read. In other words, she came down. My oldest daughter, with her math. When she was in Burleson, she was picking up math ... I was kinda surprised because me and math don’t mix, in other words, but she was picking it up right away. When we transferred her to Clardy, she went down on math. She started forgetting stuff, she wasn’t that interested no more.

Maria and Ramon’s work schedules compelled them to enroll their children at Burleson because it was close to Ramon’s mother and she provided childcare. In the transition, their main priority was to find a school that would be convenient for Ramon’s mother. They transferred to Clardy. This school did not meet the quality of education they had received at Burleson. Since the transition, they have had to navigate through academic struggles. This highlighted an issue of inequitable schools at EPISD. Families wanted access to schools with high academic standards and resources. Clardy’s location, south of Interstate 10, was another example of an EPISD school that was not equitable for families that lived on that side of the freeway.

**Positive Experiences.** The testimonialistas described the transition to be mostly negative, but a few had positive experiences when they were paired with a good teacher. Leticia never wanted her daughter to go to Douglass, but her daughter’s teacher was a pleasant surprise, “Le
tocó muy buena maestra aquí en Douglass … y ella sí era de Douglass, hay que reconocer, muy buena maestra.” The teacher provided a quality education for her daughter, but it was difficult to know that her health was at risk at Douglass on a daily basis. Yadhira was concerned that her daughter was not picking up the English language. She would turn the television to a channel in English, but her daughter would switch it to a Spanish channel. She brought these concerns to the principal at Douglass and they suggested she test for the gifted and talented program. She successfully tested into the program and was placed in a classroom with one other student that was also admitted.

Ella subió mucho. Ella empezó a hablar inglés y empezó a leer inglés. Ya me traía … libros de capítulos en cuarto, leyéndomelos en inglés. La maestra me le corrregía la pronunciación y a mí eso me gustaba, porque tenía los dos. Yo le corrregía español, le corrregía la escritura en español y la maestra en la escuela el inglés. Eso es yo lo que quiero, que sea ella completamente bilingüe, que ella entienda bien.

Yadhira wanted her daughter to be proficient in English and Spanish. She equated that to her daughter having a chance at success. Yadhira did not speak English and EPISD discriminated against her use of Spanish when they did not provide any accommodations at district meetings. She did not want language to be a hinderance on her daughter.

Adela was very happy with the school she found for her daughter. The teachers had been excellent, her daughter’s academic achievement improved, and she noticed that the school had more resources than any school south of Interstate 10.

Sí, porque yo lo siento así, porque yo lo estoy viviendo, siento que esas escuelas del gateway, del 10 para allá, no sé, tienen más apoyo. Yo siento, no lo sé, yo no administro recursos, yo no formo parte de la mesa directiva, desconozco todo eso, pero yo lo veo. Yo
Adela had heard other families talk about the quality of education above Interstate 10, but now that her daughter was attending a school north of the freeway, she had lived experience. The change was drastic, but positive, for her daughter’s academic performance. She realized that the school served a different population and had more resources when she was asked to provide a gift during the Christmas season. At Beall, she had never been asked to buy a present for her child to participate in a gift exchange. The Beall families were never asked to provide a gift for children at the school because they could not afford it. Instead, Beall made arrangements to find gifts for all of their students each year. It was a stark socioeconomic, academic difference. These families were invested in their child’s education. It was important for their child to have a quality education. For one parent, that education existed north of Interstate 10 and for the others chance paired them with a good teacher that advanced their child’s education.

*Family Sentiments on Juan Cabrera*

Testimonialistas ended their testimonio with words for former superintendent, Juan Cabrera. They were happy to see him leave, but his departure did not address their educational needs. For some of the testimonialistas, it would have made a significant impact on their families if the former superintendent made them feel visible. They wanted him to listen to their concerns during the school closures. Maria would have urged him to be “more transparent with parents.” Ramon always felt ignored by Cabrera. He wanted someone in his position of power to listen to families and not discriminate against them based on where they lived. Estela felt that she earned the right to be heard. Her taxes contributed to the school district and she did not think social class should act as a divider, “… no por ser pobres tengamos menos derechos que los demás.” Estela
and other families felt devalued by the superintendent because they were poor and did not have the same rights as others. The feeling of devaluation was present throughout the sentiments expressed in participant testimonios.

Sandra viewed Cabrera as a product of institutional racism: “I think that Juan Cabrera was doing his job, he was doing what the system is meant to do.” The poor schools had always had needs that Cabrera and prior superintendents had failed to address. Zaira expressed a similar feeling.

[His departure] did not solve the problem. The problem is systematic and it's discriminatory. There needs to be a reckoning and an accounting for what's happening to children in the barrio, in regards to what kind of education they're getting, what kind of resources they're getting, and what kind of investment they're getting … our kids have been getting the short end of the stick consistently.

She felt that the departure of Cabrera from the district would make no difference for Chamizal families because the barrio had always been discriminated against, no matter who was at the helm. For Alejandro, Cabrera’s vision for a 21st century education was not functional for all students at EPISD.

I would tell him, ‘If you're going to implement the 21st century, you need to take special consideration with the barrio schools and provide all the assistance and equipment and programs that are needed for … barrio students and parents to participate in the 21st century education.’ That would eliminate the kind of systemic discrimination that the district has participated in for so long.
He would have wanted to see Cabrera focus on equity. He failed to study the needs of these residents during his tenure. For Alejandro, Sandra, and Zaira, the 21st century education would only be a reality if all students had a fair chance at education.

The former superintendent devalued Barrio Chamizal residents through his actions. He did not view them as concerned parents. Yadhira felt humiliated when Cabrera published a letter that called members of Familias Unidas del Chamizal liars.

A mí me hubiera gustado decirle al señor Cabrera, ‘Señor, ¿por qué mejor no viene a una junta y nos dice a nosotros lo que usted piensa? ¿Por qué publicarlo y ponernos en mal ante toda la ciudad? ¿Por qué no mejor venir a una junta y decirnos,’ ‘Señoras, ustedes están mintiendo por esto, por aquello’, y arreglar todo paso por paso y nosotros decirle bien las cosas, lo que nosotros sentíamos, ¿lo que nosotros pensábamos? ¿Por qué no buscar mejor él, un acercamiento en vez de publicar una carta diciendo, ‘Las madres de Familias Unidas dicen mentiras’?

She felt that he could have set up a meeting with families and engaged them in a productive conversation. Instead, he viewed the families as adversaries and made every effort to exclude them from any conversation. Helena saw her ethnicity reflected in Cabrera. She felt betrayed by him because he was not a champion for his own people.

Él como hispano, ¿por qué no apoya a su gente hispana? ¿Por qué no abre un poquito el oído hacia las necesidades de sus hermanos hispanos y por qué no les brinda la oportunidad de algo mejor, de una educación mejor para que sean también esas personas con un futuro mejor? Esa sería mi pregunta hacía él o lo que yo le diría. ¿Por qué negarles esa ayuda? ¿Por qué no permitirles que ellos sean también personas en un futuro bien preparadas, con un futuro mucho mejor?
Helena wanted Cabrera to help people of his own ethnicity succeed. In section two of this chapter, Sandra described elite Mexicans in comparison to poor, immigrant families, like Helena’s. Cabrera may have had the same ethnic background as Helena and other Chamizal families, but his socioeconomic status and lived experiences set him apart from helping his own people because they were poor.

Families were not deterred by the battles they lost against EPISD. Adela felt the former superintendent made the wrong choice to lead with his own interests in mind, “Pues que nosotros teníamos razón, que nunca hizo su trabajo, que siempre vio por sus intereses, que no solamente no nos escuchó, sino que yo creo que hasta nos afectó. Eso en palabras decentes.” Like other participants expressed, it would have made a difference for Adela if Cabrera would have listened to her concerns. Leticia felt that the former superintendent would be held accountable one day.

Yo le diría a Cabrera, como él nunca ha querido al barrio el Chamizal, siempre nos quiso quitar todo y lo consiguió, pero yo digo que todavía no estamos vencidas. Le diría, ojalá y que qué bueno, si él quiso robar y él les estuvo quitando el dinero, porque yo digo que es de eso, les quitaba el dinero para hacer sus escuelas, para hacer sus cosas él. Mientras a nuestros niños les quitaba el dinero, él se hacía más rico, porque él cada vez estaba ganando más, mientras aquí no había dinero para la escuela de nuestros hijos. Le diría que le aproveche, porque como nosotros siempre dijimos, ‘Cabrera es un ratero y algún día va a tener su merecido’. No pagas allá, aquí se paga todo antes de irse y él va a pagar.

Leticia saw him abuse his position of power and earn a lot of money doing it, while her child attended a school that lacked resources and closed, and was forced to transition to a school that had fewer resources. Cabrera never made an effort to understand the needs of Chamizal
residents. Veronica saw an economic divide between her reality and the reality of people that
held positions of power.

Híjole, le diría cosas muy fuertes, pero bueno … Que debe de tener un interés no porque
tenga el puesto quiera manipular, porque él puede darse el lujo de andar allá jugando golf
y no le importa mucho. Él está en su barrio bonito y acá estamos en el barro bajo, como
quien dice, una diferencia. Que se ponga en los zapatos de los demás, ponte en los
zapatos de la persona que los está llevando … Yo pienso que no les importa mucho lo
que las madres de el Chamizal sientan o lo que ellas estén pasando. Como dice,
personalmente ellos tienen su economía y son los que llevan el control, ellos hacen lo que
quieren … Como dicen, se sienten la mamá de Tarzán. ¿Sí me lo entiende? Sí, ellos viven
en una casota. ¿Cómo le puedo explicar? Ellos a veces viven en un nivel superior en su
mente, pero nosotros somos iguales, no tienen por qué rebajarnos así, ¿sí me entiende?

Her reflection of Cabrera illustrated the economic disparity that existed between her and the
former superintendent. Veronica viewed people equally and did not discriminate against anyone
for being poor or rich. In order for Cabrera to understand what she faced each day, he had to
step away from his affluent neighborhood, cross Interstate 10, and visit her poor neighborhood.
Chapter 5: Discussion, Implications, and Conclusion

This study chronicled families’ experiences with school closures that led them to resist. Families also described how they made sense of transitioning their children to new schools. The families that were impacted by EPISD’s school closures lived in Barrio Chamizal, an underserved community in South Central El Paso, Texas. This was a community of immigrants, most of Mexican descent. They possessed a low socioeconomic status and many only spoke Spanish. Zaira, for example, described how the geographic proximity to Mexico gave Barrio Chamizal residents a sense of comfort. They desired to be close to their family and friends. Some spent the week in El Paso, working and going to school, and would go stay in Ciudad Juárez for the weekend. Others yearned to have the privilege of traveling between both countries but could not because of their immigration status. Participants stated that living in the Chamizal provided them space to embrace their Mexican identity while residing in the U.S. Chamizal residents had encountered marginalization throughout history. Testimonialistas shared that the school closures at EPISD made them feel devalued and displaced their families in the barrio. These stories of oppression were best told using testimonio, a method of inquiry that empowers Latinx individuals to recount their experiences with a social event, often displacement, and offer them an opportunity to find redemption from oppressive behavior (Blackmer Reyes & Curry Rodriguez, 2012; Pérez Huber, 2008; Pérez Huber, 2009).

Testimonio methodology was derived from Latinx Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Pérez Huber, 2009; Solorzano & Yasso, 2001). LatCrit expanded upon Critical Race Theory by focusing on educational issues specific to Latinx individuals. LatCrit guided the analysis of 10 testimonios, conducted with 11 testimonialistas, in the Chamizal area. In view of the impact of school closures on a marginalized population, LatCrit was applied to (1)
understand how families, affected by school closures, experienced interconnected oppression related to their race/ethnicity, class, culture, immigration status, socioeconomic status, language, environment, and gender; (2) interpret school closures through a social justice lens to understand what led families to resist; and (3) use testimonios to expose forms of oppression.

An overview of Barrio Chamizal and a history of Familias Unidas del Chamizal informed the findings of this study. Four themes, in relation to families resisting school closures, emerged from the data: (1) “Yo no sabia que tu y Schlesinger, no podían hacer tortillas,” (2) “They very much left us in limbo,” (3) “The targeting of a community that can’t fight back,” and (4) “Y ahí vienen todos como burros por sus audífonos.” The four themes were derived from participant testimonios, where participants shared stories of marginalization they sustained on behalf of EPISD. The first theme, “Yo no sabia que tu y Schlesinger, no podían hacer tortillas,” described how a system of power, politics, and privilege took precedence over the interests of families and their children. The second theme, “They very much left us in limbo,” characterized participant perceptions on how EPISD viewed and excluded them from the closure process. The third theme, “The targeting of a community that can’t fight back,” chronicled how participants felt devalued by EPISD. The fourth theme, “Y ahí vienen todos como burros por sus audífonos,” illustrated the testimonios shared by participants on how EPISD shamed families for not speaking English.

Finally, the testimonios revealed two themes related to family experiences with the transition after the school closures: (1) Lack of consideration for students and families and (2) Lack of a transition plan. The district did not have any considerations for the impact school closures would have on families and they did not provide them with a transition plan or resources, post-closure.

On the surface, school closures at EPISD were not transparent and families were not included in the closure process. A thorough analysis of these closures uncovered disturbing
findings that led families to resist against EPISD. The testimonios constructed a narrative around the experiences of parents, grandparents, and a community member with school closures and transition. The next section provides an in-depth discussion on the findings.

**Discussion**

Participants shared that EPISD leadership did not solicit input on school closures from affected families. The process lacked transparency. Finnigan and Lavner (2012) found that influential community stakeholders pressure school board members on consequential decisions, such as school closures, if it is to their benefit. Clearly defined processes enable transparency and the perception of certain individuals having insider influence is eliminated (Henderson et al., 2007). Individuals with resources and power influence district decisions in ways that poor immigrants of Color cannot. Even if families organize and hold demonstrations against this marginalization, they do not wield power, so they cannot influence district decisions. These disadvantaged families were left out of the process and had to deal with the effects of a disruptive school closure. In the end, the schools that families advocated for, closed. This situation recognizes the power differentials in the community, whose voices matter, and whose do not.

Processes need to be clearly defined so families can have equal access to district officials (Henderson et al., 2007). This was a persistent issue with the school closures at EPISD. The district never defined a process for the closure of schools. Family resistance was fueled by anger when they felt the district ignored them or officials were indifferent toward their concerns. Sandra, for example, expressed frustration with the way EPISD closed schools. She felt the district ignored voices and lied to families. Such actions made families resist against the closures (e.g., attendance at school board meetings, hunger strike) to be seen and heard. The district
worsened the situation by disrespecting the families publicly and further excluding them from the process. A school closure plan, centered around social justice and equity for displaced families, would have provided structure for families and district officials to outline the entire process, including a way for families to provide feedback, and reach a decision together. A plan would have established guidelines, including adherence to civility, and families would have felt valued, seen, and heard.

The civic engagement of immigrants is stronger when they acquire membership in grassroots organizations (Terriquez & Rogers, 2011). This was true for Ramon and Maria. They were blindsided by the closure of Burleson. They were involved in the education of their children but did not know how to organize against school closures. Familias Unidas del Chamizal provided necessary support to resist school closures. According to Terriquez and Rogers (2011), individuals that join community organizations to advocate for educational issues expand their community participation in other civic issues over time. A positive outcome of this study is that people that were motivated to join Familias Unidas del Chamizal because of school closures have remained engaged. Adela, for example, found comfort in the group to resist school closures. As she learned more about Familias Unidas del Chamizal, she expanded her membership. She took an active role in environmental issues and worked to make the Chamizal Community Center and Library a reality.

The advocacy of families against school closures was a headache for the district. Parent engagement is critical to the success of a healthy partnership between schools and families. Parents that are seen as a “problem” are often advocates for their children, but do not know how to communicate with school district leadership in a way accepted by the school district (Henderson et al., 2007). School districts could establish rapport with parents by acknowledging
their right to voice their educational concerns. Through the closure process, participants shared that EPISD did not make an effort to connect with parents. Each time families encountered district officials, they felt unwelcomed. In one instance, the superintendent wrote a blog about these families, characterizing them as protestors. Testimonialistas felt insulted by this rhetoric. They were families speaking up for the needs of their children and their community. The school district dismissed and invalidated their concerns.

Schools should commit to addressing parent concerns with civility (Henderson et al., 2007). Participants stated that EPISD viewed families as protestors and did not solicit their input when they closed schools. These actions made participants, in this study, feel devalued by the school district.

The intent of equitable schools for students should include parent engagement. There are some parents that need more resources and assistance to become involved in the education of their children. Immigrant families, such as testimonialistas from Familias Unidas del Chamizal, play an active role in participating at their children’s schools (Terriquez & Rogers, 2011). Participation increases with time, motivated by the idea of improving schools. Over a few years, Chamizal families organized and increased parent involvement at their schools. They wanted to show the district that they were invested in the education of their children. As school closures became a reality, more families became involved. The lack of a school closure plan united residents under Familias Unidas del Chamizal. They made efforts to be seen through community events they organized, such as a community hug around Beall, marches around the Chamizal, and educational tours of their barrio to bring attention to the contamination issues they found at schools that EPISD ignored.
The participation of families would increase if schools provided support for parent engagement (Henderson et al., 2007; Terriquez & Rogers, 2011). The literature encourages schools to engage parents by providing programs that address their needs and involve them in decision-making processes. Many Chamizal residents wanted to participate in their child’s education but did not know how to get involved as a result of their limited experience with the U.S. education system. Most members of Familias Unidas del Chamizal, for example, had to learn how to sign up for public comment at school board meetings. The district did not provide any guidance, help, or interpretation for those that did not understand or speak English. The meetings were conducted in English and many of these families only spoke Spanish. Estela, for example, felt that the EPISD Board of Trustees did not acknowledge any of the school closure concerns raised by members of Familias Unidas del Chamizal. In one instance, she took her grandchildren to address the school board.

… ellos mismos fueron a atestiguar ahí en EPISD, ellos mismos hablaron de su inconformidad, de sus cosas, fueron pensamientos personales de ellos, llorando decían, ‘No me quiten mi escuela’. Al distrito le valió tres cacahuates lo que ellos decidieran, lo que ellos pensaran, porque ni siquiera nos oían, como que si se pusieran unos audífonos en el momento que llegábamos nosotros a rogarles, a suplicarles, que nos dejan nuestra escuela.”.

Such actions disenfranchised families, but it did not deter them from attending school board meetings, even if district officials expressed frustration and annoyance as a result of their presence. EPISD missed an opportunity to give families a role in the school closure process. These experiences highlight a need for schools to work with families. These families wanted to participate in decision making but felt that they were not welcomed or included.
Immigrant families view education as a medium to improve the lives of their children (Terriquez & Rogers, 2011). This was a driving factor that participants shared in their testimonios. Helena, for example, wanted her grandchildren to have access to the best teachers and programs because it would give them a better chance at a good life. The school closures, however, displaced families, and relocated students to lesser quality schools within EPISD. The closure of schools in Barrio Chamizal exacerbated the issue of inequitable funding in schools that served low-income immigrant communities of Color. Sandra, for example, felt cheated because the district had promised that children would transition to better schools, but to her, Douglass and Zavala were not better than Beall and Burleson. After the schools closed, EPISD transitioned students to two schools that families opposed because their locations raised safety and health issues related to contamination. If the families did not want to attend either of the schools EPISD provided for transition, they could go to any other school in the district – knowing full well that disadvantaged families did not have the necessary resources and support needed to realistically consider the open enrollment “choice.”

EPISD’s use of open enrollment, a school choice policy, was problematic for Chamizal families. Open enrollment served families with certain privileges. In theory, open enrollment policies should help disadvantaged students, such as those that lived in Barrio Chamizal, enroll in higher quality schools (Lavery & Carlson, 2014). In practice, open enrollment is as a pseudo school voucher that benefits middle- and upper-class families. These families have jobs with flexible work schedules and a steady income that allow them to take their kids to the school of their choice, while low-income, minority families, such as Barrio Chamizal residents, often do not have flexibility with their work schedules or adequate or reliable transportation to make school choices (Olson Beal & Munro Hendry, 2012; Paino, Boylan, & Renzulli, 2017; Winchell
Lenhoff, 2020). Adela, in this study, worked longer hours to purchase a car and transition her daughter to a school that was not contaminated by pollutants and had more resources. Her immigration status forced her to ask a friend, a U.S. citizen, for help registering the car under her name. Middle- and upper-class families do not have these struggles. Their socioeconomic statuses give them the privilege to make school choices for their children. EPISD addressed its inequitable schools by instituting an open enrollment policy. The district should have worked to adequately fund its schools, so families could access a fair education in their own neighborhood.

The school closures at EPISD exposed institutional racism. Families felt devalued by the district because of their ethnicity, immigration and socioeconomic statuses, and language. Estela, for example, captured how a district employee embarrassed her at a community meeting, as she approached a table to check out interpretation equipment: “Y ahí vienen todos como burros por sus audífonos”. The district never provided this type of equipment, but when they finally did, people were humiliated for utilizing this accommodation. The lack of interpretation at district meetings showcased how EPISD leadership did not understand the families they served. If interpretation were a normal staple of district meetings, it would not have been viewed as an accommodation.

The legitimacy of school administrators is important to consider in relation to school closures. The neglect or bias of school administrators is connected to their legitimacy (Pearl, 2011). Legitimacy is derived in part from parent perceptions. Administrators should always work to address parent concerns. Through the school closure process, the EPISD administration and school board ignored the voices of families. Adela, for example, felt district leadership left her and others with more questions than answers. They wanted to understand the school closure process and raised concerns about the health and safety of other schools in the area. When
concerns are not addressed, such as the school closures at EPISD, families invalidate administrator legitimacy and resist against them (Pearl, 2011). The district alienated families by not responding to their concerns. They also failed to provide interpretation equipment for families that did not speak English at school board meetings. This led families to conclude that EPISD did not value them because of their socioeconomic status, immigration status, and Spanish language. Resistance against the legitimacy of administrators has a strong connection to ethnicity, class, race, and bicultural parents, such as members of Familias Unidas del Chamizal (Pearl, 2011). The resistance is rooted in parent opposition toward systems of oppression. The school closures at EPISD revealed how institutional racism continues to target low-income, Immigrants of Color because of their culture and where they live.

Participants felt that the decision to close schools at EPISD happened without any consideration of the impact on children or families. Testimonialistas felt that the school district devalued these families for being a poor immigrant community of Spanish speakers, to keep their disadvantaged students from receiving an equitable and safe education. This is why families resisted the school closures. It was about money and power – a message that participants interpreted as EPISD not caring about the conditions they placed students in. They transitioned students to polluted schools. They did not provide any resources or a plan for them to transition. At a minimum, school districts should provide families with resources and enough time between the closure and transition (Sunderman & Payne, 2009).

Families experienced a complicated transition. Attendance and registration clerks played a significant role in the transition by helping families with necessary paperwork and directing them through complex district processes. The district did not provide mental health support for their children and they encountered tensions with school employees, families, and students at
their new schools. The most EPISD provided were buses during the first year of transition. Leticia recalled that it was a very complicated process for her because she had transportation needs and had to spend money on new uniforms. A transition plan would have addressed vital academic and social needs (Sunderman & Payne, 2009).

**Implications for Research**

This study advances the literature on school closures and transition. This study was framed through a LatCrit lens that provided an understanding of the interconnected marginalization related to race/ethnicity, class, culture, immigration status, socioeconomic status, language environment, and gender that families experienced because of school closures at EPISD. Participants shared that the school district did not address these issues or include them in the closure process. The district was not culturally responsive to the needs of the families they served. My hope is that this research will help school boards and district administrators, that serve predominantly Latinx families, work with their communities and incorporate possible school closures.

Like all studies, this research had some limitations. The 11 participants in this study came from one organization. While Familias Unidas del Chamizal provided the structure needed for families to resist school closures, there may have been other families who resisted, but were not part of a formal organization. Future research should explore ways that people resist that extend beyond formal organizations. Similarly, this study took place two years after the school closures happened. It would be beneficial to evaluate school closures from the moment they are announced to when they are closed, including students’ transition to new schools. Future studies should certainly prioritize these factors.
This study found that participants resisted school closures because the school district devalued them for who they were and made the decision to close schools without considering the impact on their children. The narratives exposed the effects of school closures on a disadvantaged community made up of Immigrants of Color. These stories demonstrated that there was more to school closures than buildings, enrollment, and finances (Bierbaum, 2018; de la Torre, et al., 2015; Deeds & Pattillo, 2015; Freelon, 2018; Green, 2017; Lee & Lubienski, 2017; Nuamah, 2020; Sunderman & Payne, 2009; Sunderman et al., 2017). It was about the families and their experiences in seeking a fair education for their children, impeded by mechanisms of institutional racism, power, and politics. Future studies should investigate not just what encourages families to resist, but also what prevents them from resisting. As Maria and Ramon explained, many Burleson families gave up their efforts to resist because they felt their arguments would not change the minds of district officials. They were right. The district did not listen to the concerns families had with the school closures. There is also room for future research on how school districts engage Latinx families in the process to close schools.

Families are left with the effects of school closures that are caused by the influence of various stakeholders: administrators, school board members, teachers, community members, and other elected officials. The point of views of a district’s administration and school board members could help contextualize decisions differently and provide a greater understanding of the issue. Similarly, teachers were also affected by the closures. As families explained in this study, many chose to retire because they were uncertain about their future. After the closures, teachers were moved to other schools. These stories also need to be told. Future research could also be augmented by including student voices, on how they perceived the school closure process and their transition to new schools.
There also needs to be a better understanding of community member influence on school closures. This study recounted how a powerful White man used his power to sway district leadership against closing Zavala, where his organization provided services. This could be further examined, including how elected officials, from other levels of governments, may get involved in advocating for or against school closures and how that shapes decisions. Such investigations may further address whose voices matter and whose do not matter. Similarly, who gets involved and for what interests?

Deeds and Pattillo (2015) followed teachers and families through the school closure and transition process at a district in Newark, New Jersey. Similar to EPISD, school leadership did not solicit significant community input and they did not provide a transition plan. The transition was based on hearsay and teachers could not help families because they were not offered any guidance. The testimonialistas shared comparable stories about their transition experience at EPISD. Existing literature has chronicled school closures across distinct communities, but more research could be conducted on transition processes, after schools close. The findings from this study are a good starting point on transitions caused by school closures. Future research should examine transitions, post-closure, to better understand the experiences of families.

Even though this study looks back at closures that happened two years ago, the final word on closures has not been made. There is a pending lawsuit, in federal court, that may alter the outcome of this decision. My positionality as a current elected member of the EPISD Board of Trustees put me in a unique position while conducting this research. To preserve the integrity of this study, I recused myself from participating in any discussions related to the lawsuit. A future investigation should explore this federal lawsuit more in depth. It would enhance the literature on school closures by discussing how these particular closures ended up in a court of law. At the
time of this research, the lawsuit had been going on for less than a year, so more could be learned.

**Implications for Practice**

This study exposed the impact of inequitable schooling on a poor community, made up of Immigrants of Color. School districts that serve Latinx families should invest in culturally sensitive family education programs. Many of the families in Barrio Chamizal had an interest in their child’s education, but they did not know how to navigate the U.S. system of education and be more engaged in their child’s education. Alejandro captured this sentiment when speaking about parent engagement.

> You would have to have a full-blown program for the parents and be active in communicating with them and say ‘This is what's happening in the school. Let's have a meeting and let's talk about this. This is what we want to implement.’ The district does not see them. It's what you might call it, we say that it's historical, institutional racism.

Adequate parent programming in schools for Latinx families should be a part of an equitable approach to education, especially in historically underserved areas. Latinx parents would have an understanding of how processes work at the district and be better prepared to support their children’s education.

The school closures at EPISD were mired in controversy. Participants shared that EPISD misled and discriminated against families because of where they lived. This study exhibited an unfavorable school closure and transition process for families that lived in a disadvantaged community. A detailed process should be implemented at any district that considers school closures or consolidations, even if it is derived from a voter approved bond. Districts that serve Latinx families must be culturally sensitive to the needs of these families. Sifting through the
data brought me to several implications for practice that should be included in school closure processes that impact Latinx families.

1. A notice of potential school closures should be communicated to families, outlining a timeline and criteria for the closures. The process needs to be transparent from the start. The closure plan should be easily accessible for the public to access, especially families (and in Spanish).

2. School districts should solicit input from families by providing various platforms for them to voice their concerns in English and Spanish. School districts could provide this engagement via community meetings, phone calls, email, mail, and social media. Families should be a part of the process from beginning to end.

3. Interpretation should always be available for non-English speakers and the deaf community, so that school districts are culturally responsive to the language of the communities they serve.

4. The geography of closures should be considered to add fairness to the process. Communities that have a history of marginalization should be excluded from school closures, unless the plan makes it mandatory to transition families to a better performing school or a brand-new school is built.

5. In her testimonio, Sandra suggested families should be given at least two years to prepare for a transition because it gives them sufficient time to identify and communicate their needs to the school district.

A community inclusive school closure process could mitigate resistance. School districts could also address the engagement needs of immigrant families by holding meetings around family schedules, offering translation services, and assigning them a significant role in crafting school
events and policies (Harpin, 2011; Terriquez & Rogers, 2011). From the start, families understand what is at stake and they have an outline of the process. For school districts, it builds trust with the community and overcommunication with families addresses concerns that may come up throughout the process.

A school closure process should also include a transition plan. This would help families move through the school closure process and post-closure with guidance on the transition after a closure takes place. The lack of a transition plan made the families in this study learn as they went. Essentially, they were building the plane as they were flying it. The testimonios of Sandra, Alejandro, Yadhiria, and Leticia provided a structure for the ideal transition plan for Latinx families:

1. School districts should hold several orientations for families to get acquainted with their new environment. This is also a good opportunity for district officials to answer any questions that families may have.

2. A needs assessment should be conducted with affected families. This would better prepare school districts to provide adequate resources for transition, such as transportation.

3. Mental health support should be provided to parents and families that are having difficulties with the transition.

4. To ease community tensions among families, students, and employees, a school district could plan a social gathering to unite members under one roof.

5. Families should have weekly community meetings with district leadership and provide them with feedback on their experiences with the new school. This would give families a space to voice their concerns and have them addressed.
These five steps illustrate a way of improving the transition to new schools after a school closure. Latinx families should also be able to see their language reflected in district leadership during a school closure and transition process. The experiences of Latinx families with transition, in this study, provide a foundation to further explore transitions post-school closures. More research on this topic could help strengthen transitions in practice.

School closures are disruptive to education. If they do happen, there should be a warm handoff between the closed school and the school where families transition. EPISD had a clear focus on finances and capacity, but as one participant described - no consideration for human lives. The school district also worsened the situation by excluding families from the start. The participants in this study persisted in their resistance against school closures. In the end, they lost, and the schools closed, but their advocacy empowered them to be agents of change for their children. If administration would have taken time to plan the closures and transition, a different, more engaging process would have played out.
References


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Appendix A – Informed Consent and Interview Protocol

Introduction

Hello! Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me today.

My name is Joshua Acevedo. I am a doctoral student in the Department of Educational Leadership and Foundations at The University of Texas at El Paso. I am also on the EPISD Board of Trustees, since July 2019. Over the past months, I have been researching the school closures that occurred at EPISD, in 2019. I know that you and your family were affected by the closures that the EPISD Board of Trustees voted on two years ago. The research being conducted is solely for the purpose of this dissertation and will have no impact on my role as a member of the EPISD Board of Trustees. Your participation will not affect you, your child, or your family within EPISD. Your raw data will not be shared with current, past, or future members of the EPISD Board of Trustees, current, past, or future EPISD administrators and superintendents, or any other EPISD employees.

As we know, El Paso has a long and complex history of tensions around race/ethnicity, language, immigration status, income, and class, when it comes to community-school relations. These tensions exist to this day and play a role in how decisions are made about schools. For my dissertation study, I am trying to understand the specific experiences of parents from marginalized communities - both the experiences you have had with schools in general and school closures in particular. Today, I want to hear about your experiences with these closures and your child’s transition to a new school.

There are no direct benefits to you for taking part of this study. However, these testimonios offer you an opportunity to tell your stories, reflect on these experiences, and find redemption. This research may also help me understand parent experiences with school closures
and transition at EPISD. Taking part in this study is voluntary. You have the right to choose not to take part in this study. If you do not take part in the study, there will be no penalty or loss of benefit. If you choose to take part, you have the right to skip any questions or stop at any time.

I have asked you to meet with me for a one-time interview for research purposes. This study is minimal risk. We have scheduled this interview at your convenience and in a private space. During the interview, you will be asked to answer questions about (a) your experiences with school closures, and (b) your perspectives on the transition your child faced when moving to a new school. Interviews will last approximately between 60 to 90 minutes. Some questions may be sensitive and/or cause discomfort. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. To be as accommodating as possible, I’ve compiled a list of resources should you need assistance.

To keep a record of your comments, I will be recording our discussion on Apple’s Voice Memos application and taking some notes. If you do not want to be audio recorded, only handwritten notes will be taken. No one other than our research team will hear the raw records. Your identity will be kept confidential in all documentation, there will be no identifiers directly linking the audio files with transcripts, and your name will not appear in any report resulting from the study. The data collected, including audio recording and transcript, will be kept indefinitely to use in potential future studies. If you do not want your data to be retained after this present study concludes, please contact me at (915) 257–4953 or jacevedo3@miners.utep.edu.

Within three months of the initial interview, I will contact you for a follow-up, to make sure that I understood your answers and to see if you have any thoughts to add. I will provide you with a transcript, when it is completed, after the interview, via email or mail. Please note that
your participation in this study involves remote and/or virtual research interactions with our research staff. You will be audio recorded by a device that is separate from the online conferencing system. Therefore, privacy and confidentiality are not guaranteed due to the nature of the research environment.

You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may call Joshua Acevedo at (915) 257 – 4953 or jacevedo3@miners.utep.edu. If you have any questions or concerns about your participation as a research subject, please contact the UTEP Institutional Review Board (IRB) at (915) 747 – 6590 or irb.orsp@utep.edu.

If you agree to participate, please state that you understand what the research entails and that you agree to participate. If you do not agree, please let me know and the interview will not continue.

(If the participant states that they agree.)

Let’s get started.

**Background Questions**

1. First, I was hoping you could tell me a bit about yourself.

   Where are you from?

   How would you describe your race/ethnicity?

   How did you come to live in the neighborhood of [insert school name]?

2. Tell me about your kids.

   How many do you have?

   What are their ages?

   How many attended Beall Elementary School or Burleson Elementary School, which were closed by EPISD?
What were your children’s experiences like at Beall/Burleson?

What were your experiences as a parent like with that school?

**Parent Experiences with School Closures**

1. Can you describe the nature of the relationship between parents in your community and the school district, even before the school closures were announced?

   Did you ever interact with the superintendent’s team or the school board? If so, what were those interactions like?

   As a parent within that district, how do you feel that the district involved you in decision-making that impacted your family?

2. Tell me about when you learned that your child’s school might be closing. What do you remember hearing at that time?

   Can you put me in your shoes and walk me through how you came to be aware that your child’s school was potentially being shut down?

   What was your opinion of this decision?

   How do you think the school board came to the decision to shut your child’s school specifically? Why did they target Beall/Burleson and not some other school?

3. How did it make you feel that your school could close? Tell me what was running through your head.

   How did it make your child feel? What did they tell you?

4. How, if at all, was parent input solicited in the process of making this decision?

   In what ways did the district contact you? Verbal (individual or group) and/or written?

   Did the district contact you in Spanish?

   How do you feel that the district views you?
5. Here in El Paso, we have a long history of complex racial/ethnic dynamics around the politics of schooling, and the way Latino(a), Spanish-speaking, immigrant, and poor communities are positioned in relation to our schools.

   Can you speak to your experience as a [race/ethnicity] parent trying to advocate for your child’s education, broadly speaking?

   In what ways, if at all, have you experienced marginalization as a parent in EPISD?

   Describe a time when you felt marginalized because of your race/ethnicity.

6. Pretend I am an outsider to El Paso, and I do not know anything about Familias Unidas del Chamizal.

   Tell me the story of how the group came to be, what it stands for, and how you came to be involved.

   How is Familias Unidas del Chamizal’s voice represented at EPISD? How is your voice represented?

7. Describe an action, event, or meeting organized by Familias Unidas del Chamizal.

   As a [race/ethnicity] [gender], how did it feel to be a part of this community organizing?

   What was the purpose?

   What was the outcome? How did you feel about it?

**Transition**

1. The next questions are about your child’s transition to their new school.

   What school did you move to? What has it been like?

   Can you describe a moment or story that stands out to you about your child’s experience at this new school?

   What challenges, if any, has your child faced?
As a parent from Beall/Burleson’s school community, how did it feel to join the [new school] community?

2. With the transition to the new school, what resources, if any, were provided to help with the transition?

   Did the district provide members of the leadership team to make sure the transition was smooth?

   In retrospect, what information do you wish you knew during the transition?

3. I am wondering if anything has been positive about the transition.

   Can you describe a moment or experience at this new school that surprised you or turned out to be positive?

   What, if anything, has helped you and your child with this new transition?

4. Environmental and health concerns have been raised by parent advocates, about two of the schools, where students transitioned. One is next to a recycling plant and the other is near a highway, that leads to the Bridge of the Americas, into Ciudad Juárez, where many trucks cross and pollute the environment on a daily basis. Can you speak to this issue?

   Have you or your child experienced any of the pollution from the recycling plant or trucks crossing into Ciudad Juárez?

   If so, have you or your child needed to seek medical help and/or medication?

5. On June 21, 2020, Familias Unidas por la Educacion sued EPISD over school closures in the Chamizal neighborhood, claiming these actions systematically discriminated against poor Mexican American students in this community.

   Can you describe some of the ways their actions were discriminatory?

   How long has this discrimination been present in the Chamizal?
6. If you could say anything to the former superintendent, what would it be?

7. Is there anything else you would like to share with me?

After the Testimonio

I will send you a transcript of this testimonio, within three months. Can you please provide me with a preferred method of delivery, email or mailing address?
Appendix B – Consentimiento y Protocolo de Entrevista

Introducción

¡Hola! Muchas gracias por tomar tiempo de su día para hablar conmigo hoy.

Mi nombre es Joshua Acevedo. Soy estudiante de doctorado en el Departamento de Liderazgo Educativo y Fundaciones de la Universidad de Texas en El Paso. También formo parte de la Junta Directiva de EPISD, desde julio de 2019. En los últimos meses, he estado investigando los cierres de escuelas que ocurrieron en EPISD, en 2019. Sé que usted y su familia fueron afectados por los cierres que la Junta Directiva de EPISD votó hace dos años. La investigación que se está llevando a cabo es únicamente para el propósito de esta disertación y no tendrá ningún impacto en mi trabajo como miembro de la Junta Directiva de EPISD. Su participación no le afectará a usted, a su hijo, o a su familia dentro del distrito escolar, EPISD. La información y datos recaudados no serán compartidos con los miembros actuales, pasados, o futuros de la Junta Directiva de EPISD, los administradores y superintendentes actuales, pasados, o futuros de EPISD, ni con ningún otro empleado de EPISD.

Como sabemos, El Paso tiene una larga y compleja historia de tensiones en torno a raza/etnia, idioma, estatus migratorio, ingresos y clase, cuando se trata de relaciones entre la comunidad y escuela. Estas tensiones existen hasta el día de hoy y juegan un papel en cómo se toman las decisiones sobre las escuelas. Para mi estudio de disertación, estoy tratando de entender las experiencias específicas de los padres de las comunidades marginadas - tanto las experiencias que han tenido con las escuelas en general y los cierres escolares en particular. Hoy, quiero conocer sus experiencias con estos cierres y la transición de su hijo a una nueva escuela.

No hay beneficios directos para usted por participar en este estudio. Sin embargo, estos testimonios le ofrecen la oportunidad de contar sus historias, reflexionar sobre estas experiencias,
y encontrar redención. Esta investigación también puede ayudarme a entender las experiencias de las madres y los padres con el cierre de escuelas y la transición en EPISD. Participar en este estudio es voluntario. Usted tiene el derecho de elegir no participar en este estudio. Si usted no participa en el estudio, no habrá penalización o pérdida de beneficio. Si decide participar, tiene derecho a omitir cualquier pregunta o dejar de participar en cualquier momento.

Le he pedido que se reúna conmigo hoy para una entrevista única con fines de investigación. Este estudio es de riesgo mínimo. Hemos programado esta entrevista a su conveniencia y en un espacio privado. Durante la entrevista, se le pedirá que responda preguntas sobre (a) sus experiencias con el cierre de escuelas, y (b) sus perspectivas sobre la transición que su(s) hijo(s) o hija(s) enfrentaron al mudarse a una nueva escuela. Las entrevistas durarán aproximadamente entre 60 y 90 minutos. Algunas preguntas pueden ser sensibles y/o causar incomodidad. No tiene que responder a ninguna pregunta que no quiera contestar. Para su comodidad, he creado una lista de recursos si necesita ayuda.

Para mantener un registro de sus comentarios, voy a grabar nuestra discusión utilizando la aplicación Voice Memos de Apple y tomar algunas notas. Si no desea ser grabado(a) en audio, solo se tomarán notas escritas a mano. Para mantener un registro de sus comentarios, voy a grabar nuestra discusión en esta grabadora de audio y tomar algunas notas. Solamente nuestro equipo de investigación escuchará estas grabaciones. Su identidad se mantendrá confidencial en toda la documentación, no habrá identificadores que vinculen directamente los archivos de audio con las transcripciones, y su nombre no aparecerá en ningún informe resultante del estudio. Los datos recopilados, incluidas la grabación de audio y la transcripción, se conservarán indefinidamente para utilizarlos en posibles estudios futuros. Si no desea que sus datos se
conserven después de que concluya este estudio comuníquese conmigo al (915) 257 - 4953 o jacevedo3@miners.utep.edu.

Dentro de los tres meses de la entrevista inicial, me pondré en contacto con usted para un seguimiento, para asegurarme de que he entendido sus respuestas y para ver si tiene alguna idea o más información que añadir. Le proporcionaré una transcripción, cuando se complete, después de la entrevista, por correo electrónico o correo. Por favor tenga en cuenta que su participación en este estudio implica interacciones de investigación remotas y/o virtuales con nuestro personal de investigación. Usted será grabado(a) en audio por un dispositivo que está separado del sistema de conferencias en línea. Por lo tanto, la privacidad y la confidencialidad no están garantizadas debido a la naturaleza del entorno de investigación.

Antes de empezar, le quiero dar una oportunidad de hacerme cualquier pregunta que tenga. Si tiene preguntas más tarde, le puedo llamar a Joshua Acevedo al (915) 257 - 4953 o jacevedo3@miners.utep.edu. Si tiene alguna pregunta o inquietud sobre su participación como sujeto de investigación, comuníquese con el Consejo de Revisión Institucional de UTEP (IRB) al (915) 747 - 6590 o irb.orsp@utep.edu.

Si está de acuerdo en participar, por favor indique que entiende lo que implica la investigación y que está de acuerdo en participar. Si no está de acuerdo, por favor hágamelo saber y la entrevista no continuará.

(Si el/la participante declara que está de acuerdo.)

Empecemos.

**Preguntas de fondo**

1. En primer lugar, esperaba que pudiera hablarme un poco de usted.

¿De dónde es usted?
¿Cómo describiría su origen racial/étnico?

¿Cómo llego a vivir en el barrio de [insertar el nombre de la escuela]?

2. Hábleme de sus hijos.

¿Cuántos tiene?

¿Qué edades tienen?

¿Cuántos asistieron a la Escuela Primaria Beall o a la Escuela Primaria Burleson, que fueron cerradas por EPISD?

¿Cómo fueron las experiencias de sus hijos/hijas en Beall/Burleson?

¿Cómo fueron sus experiencias como madre/padre en esta escuela?

**Experiencias de padres con cierres escolares**

1. ¿Me puede describir como es la relación entre los padres en su comunidad y el distrito escolar, incluso antes de que se anunciaran los cierres de escuelas?

   ¿Alguna vez interactuó con el equipo del superintendente o la Junta Directiva del distrito? Si así fue, ¿Cómo fueron esas interacciones?

   Como madre/padre dentro de este distrito, ¿Cómo cree que el distrito la/lo involucró en la toma de decisiones que impactaron a su familia?

2. Hábleme de la primera vez que se entero que la escuela de su(s) hijo(s) podría cerrar. ¿Qué recuerda haber escuchado en ese momento?

   ¿Puede ponerme en su lugar y explicarme cómo llego a ser consciente de que la escuela de su(s) hijo(s) podría cerrar?

   ¿Qué opino de esta decisión?

   ¿Cómo cree que la Junta Directiva tomó la decisión de cerrar específicamente la escuela de su(s) hijo(s)? ¿Por qué cree que escogieron a Beall/Burleson y no a otra escuela?
3. ¿Cómo se sintió al saber que su escuela podría cerrar? Dígame qué pasaba por su mente.

¿Cómo hicieron sentir a su(s) hijo(s)? ¿Qué le dijeron su(s) hijo(s) a usted?

4. ¿Cómo, si acaso, se solicitó la participación de los padres en el proceso de tomar esta decisión?

¿De que manera fue contactado(a) por el distrito? ¿Verbal (individual o en grupo) y/o por escrito?

¿El distrito la/lo contactó en español?

¿De que manera cree que la/lo ve el distrito a usted?

5. Aquí en El Paso, tenemos una larga historia de dinámicas raciales/étnicas complejas en torno a la política de la enseñanza escolar, y la forma en que latino(a)s, hispanohablantes, inmigrantes y comunidades pobres se posicionan en relación a nuestras escuelas.

¿Me puede hablar de su experiencia como un(a) madre/padre [raza/etnia] tratando de abogar por la educación de su(s) hijo(s), en términos generales?

¿De qué manera, si acaso, ha experimentado marginación como padre en EPISD?

Describame un momento en que se sintió marginada(o) por su identidad racial/étnica.

6. Finjamos que no soy de El Paso, y no sé nada sobre Familias Unidas del Chamizal.

Cuénteme la historia de cómo el grupo llegó a ser, lo que representa, y cómo se involucró usted.

¿Cómo es representada la voz de Familias Unidas del Chamizal en EPISD? ¿Cómo es representada su voz?

7. Describame una acción, evento o reunión organizada por Familias Unidas del Chamizal.
Como un(a) [género] [raza/etnia], ¿cómo se sintió ser parte de esta organización comunitaria?

¿Cuál era el propósito?

¿Cuál fue el resultado? ¿Cómo se sintió al respecto?

Transición

1. Las siguientes preguntas son sobre la transición de su(s) hijo(s) a su nueva escuela.
   ¿A qué escuela se mudaron? ¿Cómo ha sido esta experiencia?
   ¿Me puede describir un momento o anécdota que destaca en su mente sobre la experiencia de su(s) hijo(s) en esta nueva escuela?
   ¿Qué retos, si acaso, ha(n) enfrentado su(s) hijo(s)?
   Como madre/padre de la comunidad escolar de Beall/Burleson, ¿cómo se sintió al unirse a la comunidad de [la nueva escuela]?

2. Con la transición a la nueva escuela, ¿qué recursos, en su caso, se proporcionaron para ayudar con la transición?
   ¿El distrito proporcionó a miembros del equipo de liderazgo para asegurarse de una transición sin dificultades?
   En retrospectiva, ¿qué información hubiera deseado tener durante la transición?

3. Me pregunto si algo ha sido positivo en torno a la transición.
   ¿Me puede describir un momento o experiencia en esta nueva escuela que la/lo sorprendió o resultó ser positivo?
   ¿Qué, en todo caso, la/lo ha ayudado a usted y a su(s) hijo(s) en esta nueva transición?
4. Los padres que han abogado por parte de sus hijos han planteado preocupaciones ambientales y de salud, sobre dos de las escuelas, donde los estudiantes hicieron la transición. Una escuela está al lado de una planta de reciclaje y la otra escuela está cerca de una carretera, enseguida del Puente de las Américas, que conduce a Ciudad Juárez, donde muchos camiones cruzan y contaminan el medio ambiente a diario. ¿Puede hablarme de este tema?

¿Usted o su(s) hijo(s) han sufrido contaminación por parte de la planta de reciclaje o camiones que cruzan a Ciudad Juárez?

Si es así, ¿usted o su(s) hijo(s) han necesitado ayuda médica y/o medicamentos?

5. El 21 de junio de 2020, Familias Unidas por la Educación demandó al EPISD por el cierre de escuelas en el barrio Chamizal, alegando que estas acciones discriminaban sistemáticamente a los estudiantes mexicanos estadounidenses pobres en esta comunidad.

¿Me puede describir algunas de las formas en que las acciones del distrito fueron discriminatorias?

¿Cuánto tiempo ha estado presente esta discriminación en el barrio Chamizal?

6. Si le pudiera decir algo al exsuperintendente, ¿qué le diría?

7. ¿Hay algo más que quiera compartir conmigo?

Después del Testimonio

Le enviaré una transcripción de este testimonio, dentro de tres meses. ¿Puede proporcionarme un método preferido de entrega, correo electrónico o dirección postal?
Appendix C – List of Community Resources

Some of the questions in this study may be sensitive and/or cause discomfort. To be as accommodating as possible, I’ve compiled a list of resources for participants, should they need assistance. Please see below.

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Help Line

1-800-950-6264

Hours: Monday thru Friday 10 a.m. thru 6:00 p.m. EST Assists with information about mental health conditions, treatment options and recovery strategies.

Crisis Hotline: 915-779-1800 or 1-877-562-6467

For a complete list of community resources, visit:

https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a8d18b929f187a729ab7d9f/t/5c707e1753450a57fe72492e/1550876184139/Community+Resources+2019.pdf
Appendix D – Lista de Recursos Comunitarios

Algunas de las preguntas en este estudio pueden ser sensibles y/o causar incomodidad. Para la comodidad de los participantes, he creado una lista de recursos, en caso de que algún participante necesite asistencia. Los recursos se encuentran abajo.

*Línea de Ayuda de Alianza Nacional sobre las Enfermedades Mentales, (NAMI por sus siglas en inglés)*

1-800-950-6264

Horas de lunes a viernes 10 a.m. a 6:00 p.m. EST Ayuda con información sobre condiciones de salud mental, opciones de tratamiento y estrategias de recuperación.

*Línea de Crisis: 915-779-1800 o 1-877-562-6467*

Para una lista completa de recursos comunitarios, visite:

https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a8d18b929f187a729ab7d9f/t/5c707e1753450a57fe72492e/1550876184139/Community+Resources+2019.pdf
Appendix E – Map of El Paso Independent School District, District 1

(El Paso County Elections Department, n.d.)
Vita

Joshua Acevedo was born and raised in El Paso, Texas. He earned a Bachelor of Science in Microbiology, with a Concentration in Chemistry, in 2012, a Master of Arts in Political Science, in 2015, and a Master of Public Administration in Public Policy and Management, in 2017, from The University of Texas at El Paso. He also earned a Certificate in Education Finance, in 2020, with a Concentration in Finance Strategy, Policy, & Leadership, from Georgetown University.

Mr. Acevedo has experience working in higher education and K-12 education. He has also worked in local and federal government. In higher education, Mr. Acevedo has managed grants and taught government and policy classes. Since July 2019, he has served on the El Paso Independent School District Board of Trustees, for District 3.