Abstract: By many accounts, public officials have inadequately represented today’s poor students, especially those of color. At the center of this inadequacy is their tendency to equate poor students’ interests with efforts to close so-called “failing” schools. This article examines how and with what consequences urban social-justice advocates have contested these efforts. To do so, it draws on evidence from a case study of advocacy efforts surrounding North Community High School, a predominantly poor and black public school in Minneapolis. The article describes how advocates in the North High Community Coalition successfully resisted attempts to close the school under the pretense of its apparent failure, examines how these advocates alternatively constructed and represented poor students’ interests and attached them to the redesign of North High, and concludes by articulating three general lessons about the political representation of poor students and identifying possibilities for future research regarding these groups’ efforts. This project was supported by a CURA Dissertation Research Grant.

By many scholarly and journalistic accounts, public officials have inadequately represented today’s poor students, especially those of color. At the center of this inadequacy is their tendency to equate poor students’ interests with efforts to close “failing” schools, a tendency encouraged by the edicts of the 2001 federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). These schools—often characterized by high proportions of poor students of color and identified by their dwindling enrollment and low standardized-test scores—are accused of wasting resources, educating ineffectively, and, ultimately, lowering student achievement. Many officials argue school districts can best serve poor students by closing failing schools and expanding school choice, most often in the form of open enrollment or charter schools. However, by stressing school performance per se as the primary influence on poor students’ educational outcomes, these efforts have obfuscated the manifold challenges that surround them.

As much if not more than anyone else, urban social-justice advocates have contested this failing-school construction of poor students’ interests. Working with activist coalitions, community organizations, and teachers’ unions, these advocates have mobilized against mass school closures in poor and racially segregated neighborhoods. In doing so, they have also positioned themselves as alternative representatives of poor students—those who attach these students’ interests to the redesign, versus the closing, of failing public schools.

Many commentators have highlighted these advocates’ efforts and their potential significance for reforming public education. However, important questions about these efforts remain underexplored: What alternative (that is, non-failing-school) constructions of poor students’ interests do they actually offer? What are their advantages and disadvantages for the redesign of public schools? What lessons do they hold for future efforts on behalf of poor students? In this article, I address these questions by drawing on evidence from a case study of advocacy efforts surrounding North Community High School, a failing public school in Minneapolis.

Background Fighting to Save North High. On October 12, 2010, the superintendent of Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS) issued a proposal to “phase out,” or...
close, North Community High School—perhaps the most publicly maligned failing school in the city (“[B]urn North High School down!,” City Councilman Don Samuels once exclaimed). North High, as it is more commonly called, was and is one of the poorest and most disproportionately Black schools in Minneapolis. It is located, not coincidentally, in Near North, a segregated north Minneapolis neighborhood with the same income and racial demographics.

The superintendent, in explaining her proposal, underlined the low scholastic achievement of North High students and framed the school itself as a primary cause. Citing below average standardized-test scores and dwindling enrollment, she claimed that it was incorrigibly challenged and in decline. Her understood intention was to fix its apparent failure by opening a new (and already authorized) charter school, Minneapolis College Prep. This intention comported with both NCLB recommendations and established trends in MPS, a district that had already closed several public schools and, following its strategic plan, authorized an increasing number of charter schools.

An African American–led advocacy organization calling itself the Save North High Coalition (hereafter, the Coalition) immediately mobilized against the superintendent’s proposal. The Coalition’s members at the time included North High’s Alumni Association, the Friends of North Foundation (a nonprofit foundation that provides fundraising and volunteer support for the school), the Public Education Justice Alliance of Minnesota (a citywide group of socialist and student activists, current and former teachers, parents, and interested city residents), Neighborhoods Organizing for Change (a nonprofit community organization focused on issues of racial and economic justice), a few parents and students, several community members, and various citywide supporters, such as me.

I began working with the Coalition in October 2010, less than two weeks after the superintendent issued her proposal. From then until the spring of 2012—by which point, the Coalition had stopped meeting—I accompanied its members and supporters to more than 40 meetings and public events. I used my participation in these meetings and events as an opportunity to explore how the organization constructed and represented the interests of North High students. To enrich and corroborate my analyses, I also gathered documentary evidence surrounding the organization’s efforts, such as news articles, flyers, and online video footage.

**School Failure or District Abandonment?** According to the Coalition, the superintendent’s proposal confused more than clarified the challenges facing North High students. These students, they argued, suffered not from a failing school but a district that had abandoned them, a trend perpetuated by her proposal. As one collective statement contended, “The district would rather throw out its most valuable assets than do the hard lifting to improve educational outcomes for North’s current students and students living on the north side.”

Coalition members reframed low test scores and declining enrollment as proof of MPS’s abandonment. Low test scores, they argued, said more about the presence of unaddressed challenges facing North High students than school performance per se. Similarly, they claimed that the school’s declining enrollment did not stem from its apparent failure but several MPS policy decisions. These decisions included, for example, the closing of North High’s feeder schools, the elimination of its guaranteed-attendance zone, and the implementation of various open-enrollment programs. Some members also suggested that individual district employees had actively discouraged enrollment at and support for North High.

After extensive lobbying and demonstrating by the Coalition, less than a month after issuing her initial proposal, the superintendent withdrew it and introduced a new one. This new proposal requested permission to hire a consultant who would lead district officials and school and community stakeholders in designing a “new” North High that would drive academic achievement for students.

At a meeting attended by more than 200 school supporters, the school board granted her request.

**Constructing Poor Students’ Interests**

Though it was a clear victory for the Coalition, the board’s decision did not so much resolve their concerns as force them to shift focus. To save the school, they would now have to shape its redesign as a community stakeholder and/or agitator—a shift acknowledged in their choice to rechristen themselves the North High Community Coalition. This new focus raised several important and already looming questions. If the recommendation to close North High rested on an inadequate *failing-school* construction of poor students’ interests, what alternative construction should they, as student and community representatives, bring to the redesign process? What educational challenges facing poor students did the *failing-school* construction obfuscate? What should redesign efforts do to address these challenges?

Coalition members primarily explored four alternative constructions, each of which is described below. The descriptions specify where each construction locates the interest of poor students, how each characterizes the educational challenges facing these students, and the practical implications of each for the redesign of North High and similar public schools (Table 1). These constructions, although theoretically distinct, were not always mutually exclusive in practice. For example, proponents of all four supported providing more adult mentorship to North High students. However, as I make clear, they did so for different reasons and, on the whole, fostered different visions of the school’s potential relationship to students.

The first two constructions centered on the goal—enforced by NCLB and emphasized in the district’s strategic plan—of making North High a high-performing (on standardized tests) *choice* for students.

---


5 Teasing out the effect of school performance on student achievement is notoriously difficult. Even assuming the adequacy of standardized tests as measures of achievement and educational success, most analyses pay insufficient attention to context.

6 The proposal also sought to deny North High a freshman class for one year, fostering a clean break and transition to the “new” school. The Coalition opposed this provision and, after several months, the district eventually abandoned it.
Table 1. Constructions of Poor Students’ Interests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specification</th>
<th>Failing School</th>
<th>Good School</th>
<th>Supportive School</th>
<th>Public School</th>
<th>Community School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poor students’ interests lie in efforts to…</td>
<td>…sanction and close failing schools and expand school choice.</td>
<td>…rebrand failing schools as “good” and marketable schools.</td>
<td>…reconstitute failing schools as supportive schools for underserved communities.</td>
<td>…restore and protect failing schools as well-funded public schools.</td>
<td>…reorganize failing schools as community-controlled schools.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges</td>
<td>The main educational challenge facing poor students is…</td>
<td>…low school performance, caused by ineffective and inefficient educators.</td>
<td>…a failing-school stigma that discourages them and drives away supporters.</td>
<td>…an intersecting and community-specific set of unaddressed needs.</td>
<td>…the unequal distribution of educational resources, made worse by NCLB.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Redesign</td>
<td>The redesign of failing schools should…</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>…advertise them in ways that excite current students and attract supporters.</td>
<td>…engage poor communities, identify their students’ needs, and implement a suitable program.</td>
<td>…expand their budget and educational resources for students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **Good School.** The first construction located poor students’ interests in efforts to rebrand North High as a *good school*. As one Coalition member said, “We need to package the positive things [happening in the school] right now.” Doing so, others suggested, would get current students excited about their education, raise performance, and create incentives for potential students, talented staff, and community members to join and support them. This *good-school* construction implied that the primary challenge facing North High students was the failing-school label itself. The label, many Coalition members argued, constituted a class- and race-coded stigma that discouraged poor students and drove away potential support. Consequently, redesign efforts should implement a targeted and positive marketing strategy around the school. The redesign, one member asserted, must “figure out who our customers are and advertise to them, saying ‘North [High] is exactly what you need.’”

- **Supportive School.** The second construction located poor students’ interests in efforts to *support* them as members of underserved communities. As one community member said, the district must “define … programs that are uniquely matched to the community [and …] attract students … who would benefit from those programs.” This *supportive-school* construction intimated that North High students were primarily challenged by an intersecting and community-specific set of unmet needs—such as needs for greater mentorship, parental involvement, housing stability, and a healthy learning environment. Proponents of this construction argued that redesign efforts should respond accordingly, engaging students’ communities, identifying their needs through this engagement, and implementing a suitable program to raise their performance. Early program suggestions from Coalition members included, for example, offering more mentorship opportunities, providing on-site housing services, and greening the classroom and curriculum.

   The other two constructions emphasized the goal of making North High a *stable public resource* for students, the existence of which does not rest on test scores or choice mechanisms:

- **Public School.** The third construction located poor students’ interests in efforts to restore and protect North High as a *well-funded public school*. One of the Coalition’s socialist members put the point succinctly: “We have to make the district publicly commit to reinvesting in the school.” This *public-school* construction implied that the main challenge facing North High students was an overall decline and unequal distribution of educational resources.

   As things stood, several Coalition members argued, federal and district policies had exacerbated this challenge. School choice and high-stakes testing had stimulated the flow of students and resources away from public schools attended by poor students and toward testing companies, wealthier public schools, and an unreliable patchwork of charter schools. These policies, one member summarized, “are designed to make [public] schools [like North High] fail [and …] aid privatization.” Redesign efforts should, thus, focus on expanding North High’s educational resources—such as a full liberal-arts curriculum, school supplies, a well-rounded and well-paid faculty, reduced class sizes,7 and extensive socioeconomic supports for students’ families.

- **Community School.** The fourth construction located poor students’ interests in efforts to reorganize North High as a *community-controlled school*. In other words, one Coalition member stated, “the community [must] claim the school” as its own resource. According to this *community-school* construction, the

---

7 At the time, North High already had small class sizes, due to its reduced enrollment. District officials, to some extent, saw this as an inefficient use of resources rather than a potential asset to the school and its students. See T. Post, “At North High, Freshmen Mark a New Beginning,” MPR News, 19 September 2012, minnesota.publicradio.org/display/web/2012/09/19/education/north-high-freshman-class-turnaround.
challenge facing North High students was not just distributive inequality but community disempowerment. Without community power, some members argued, district officials would (continue to) use school resources to address their own needs before the specific needs of North High students and families. Officials had consistently emphasized, for example, standardized-test preparation (a district need) over providing wrap-around socioeconomic support for students’ families (a community need). This construction suggested that, to expand community power, the North High redesign should cede more resources and decision-making (not just advisory) authority to students’ families and other community members. Moreover, one Coalition member argued, community members ought to solicit more support from “community partners [such as] the Urban League, churches, and businesses with an interest in training students to fill [living-wage] jobs.”

Advantages and Disadvantages of the Supportive-School Construction

As the redesign process moved forward, the Coalition gravitated most pointedly toward a supportive-school construction (although debates within the organization continued throughout its existence). That is to say, they espoused a redesign process aimed at raising North High students’ performance by supporting them as members of underserved communities.

Coalition members gained district backing for and promoted this construction in several key ways. First, they added MPS as a member of the Coalition. This addition symbolized and formalized a growing engagement between themselves as community and student representatives and the district as the manager of the school. Second, on January 29, 2011, they hosted a community potluck at North High. At this potluck, community members were invited to “re-vision” the school, identifying the types of school culture, curriculum, community support, leadership, and faculty and staff that they thought would support student excellence. The superintendent and multiple school board members also accepted invitations to attend. Third, the Coalition helped several community members—including many from its own ranks—secure spots on district-controlled redesign advisory committees. One was a hiring committee formed to advise the interview and selection process for the consultant who would lead North High’s redesign. Another was a community advisory board formed to advise the redesign process itself. In cooperation with the Coalition, the district assembled both committees as a way to identify and incorporate students’ community-specific needs into the redesign.

Through these and other measures, the Coalition successfully deployed the supportive-school construction. However, the question remains, how did this construction actually advantage and/or disadvantage North High redesign efforts? Because these efforts are still under way, and because my exposure to them was mostly in their formative rather than implementation stages, any answers I give are necessarily provisional.

That said, in my observations, I encountered two main advantages and two main disadvantages. To be clear, the supportive-school construction did not in itself determine their occurrence. Advocates can, in practice, bungle advantages as well as mitigate disadvantages. This construction did, however, make each more likely to emerge.

Advantage 1: Community Participation. The supportive-school construction’s primary advantage was its ability to foster greater community participation and recognition, an advantage shared with the community-school construction. District officials actually invited participation from the North High community to better identify students’ needs, something they had failed to do in the recent past. As I summarized above, community members participated in events cosponsored by the Coalition and MPS and received significant representation on multiple advisory committees. Redesign efforts also included a community survey and multiple focus groups, both of which aimed to uncover community members’ understandings of North High and its students’ needs. Perhaps most importantly, the final design draft for the new North High called and planned for increased, more personal, and more efficacious interactions between parents and teachers.

Disadvantage 1: Community Stigmatization. By underlining community-specific needs of North High students, the supportive-school construction also raised the risk of community stigmatization. This risk stemmed from a dominant discourse that, despite advocates’ best efforts, attributes these needs to family and neighborhood dysfunction. Some participants in North High’s redesign inadvertently fed, or at least failed to curb, this discourse. Most important among them was the Institute for Student Achievement (ISA), the consulting firm hired to lead the redesign. In its public presentations and promotional materials, ISA championed the idea of addressing students’ needs by building more strong and deep relationships—between students, teachers, advisors, parents, etc. Building strong relationships is, of course, an idea so ill-defined and well-intentioned that it cannot be criticized per se. However, when articulated in relation to a school like North High, it affirms an enduring yet oft-refuted, race-coded, and stigmatizing thesis that says poor people’s problems—including low student achievement—stem from the lack of functioning social ties in their neighborhoods. Fortunately, the new North High’s final design document shifted away from this idea somewhat, placing more emphasis on well-documented institutionalized barriers.

Advantage 2: District Support. The second advantage of the supportive-school construction was its ability to secure district support, an advantage shared with the good-school construction. Because it comported with MPS’s strategic plan and mission—that is, raising student performance on tests—the superintendent could more easily direct district resources, information, and personnel toward implementing its proponents’ suggestions. For example, early in the redesign process, district officials used student contact lists, personnel, and office supplies to advertise and support the Coalition’s community events. Later on, despite a diminishing and tight budget—the result of the recent recession, a district-wide decline in enrollment, and state legislative decisions—the district was able to set aside more than $150,000 to hire ISA, a strong proponent of the supportive-school construction. Throughout the redesign process, district personnel have, on the whole, remained committed to what the Coalition started.

Disadvantage 2: District Co-optation. By affirming the district’s mission of raising student performance, however, the supportive-school construction also opened up opportunities for
co-optation. It allowed district officials to claim broad support for North High students while, in practice, only emphasizing issues already deemed central to their mission and to raising test scores. As one might expect, these issues were, most often, those not requiring a substantial redistribution of resources. For example, at one community advisory board meeting, a district official circulated a “vision template” for the design that failed to consider housing instability, environmental racism, health disparities, or any distributional issues shown to affect student needs and success. Similar issues went unaddressed in ISA’s model for school reform and, with the exception of student health care, the final design draft for the new North High. Higher on the docket were nondistributional issues such as social-emotional supports, safety, and skill development. To be sure, these issues are significant, but they are not the whole picture.

Lessons Learned
In the fall of 2012, the new North High—officially, the North Community High School Academy of Arts and Communications—accepted its first freshman class. Although the Coalition had stopped meeting more than a year before then, the school and its ongoing development is a testament to their important efforts. Reflecting on these efforts, three general lessons about representing poor students’ interests stand out.

Lesson 1: Poor Students’ Interests Are Not Self-Evident. They are, in fact, contestable political constructions. That is to say, political actors shape their appearance by illuminating certain aspects of poor students’ educational experiences and obscuring others. Thus, even advocates with similar grievances (for example, district abandonment) cannot and should not assume prior agreement with one another about what poor students’ interests are. At its best, the Coalition enabled its members to articulate and defend different constructions, fostering productive debates about the direction of the organization, North High, and public education as a whole. At its worst, its most influential members acted on a presumed agreement with the supportive-school construction, marginalizing opportunities for productive disagreement.

Lesson 2: Not All Constructions of Poor Students’ Interests Are Equally Compelling. Some are downright bad, lending support to policy efforts that obscure and/or exacerbate educational challenges and barriers to upward mobility. As I have already suggested, the paradigmatic example of a bad construction in the NCLB era is the failing-school construction. A key task for advocates, then, is to avoid alternatives that reproduce the consequences of this construction. The most problematic alternative explored by the Coalition was the good-school construction. Unlike the other alternatives, this one obscured unaddressed material challenges facing North High students, calling for a redesign effort centered primarily on image. To be sure, in the short-term, this effort may have diminished the stigmatization of North High and its students as failing and dysfunctional. However, by ignoring the material challenges surrounding these stigmas, it would have reaped few if any substantive benefits in the long-term.

Lesson 3: No Perfect Construction of Poor Students’ Interests Exists. Rather, multiple workable alternatives, each featuring its own advantages and disadvantages, exist. For advocates, the key in any given political context is to recognize these advantages and disadvantages and ask which are preferable. The Coalition entered a political context where district officials showed willingness to redesign the school, students and others in their constituent base lacked resources and opportunities for sustained contention, and appeals to community already permeated the rhetoric surrounding the school and the superintendent’s redesign proposal. Given this context, their move toward a supportive-school construction was, despite its potential disadvantages, most prudent. Because of the district’s flexibility and the low likelihood of sustained mobilization, a more adversarial effort rooted in public- or community-school constructions likely would have fizzled out. In addition, given the prominence of community rhetoric, an effort rooted in good- or public-school constructions probably would not have resonated as well with officials and supporters.

Concluding Thoughts
The relevance of advocacy groups like the North High Community Coalition will, in all likelihood, persist and increase during the coming years. On May 22, 2013, the Chicago Board of Education voted almost unanimously to close 50 failing public schools, an unprecedented number. School districts in Philadelphia and Washington, D.C. recently moved to close 23 and 15 schools, respectively. In all cases, an overwhelming number of the affected students are poor, Black, and/or Latino. Public officials argue that proposed closings will benefit these students by granting them the choice to attend more efficient and effective schools.
Social-justice advocates in each city disagree and accuse officials of abandoning poor students.

Against this backdrop, it is ever more important to ask how and with what consequences advocates might replace the failing-school construction of poor students’ interests. The preceding sections specified four alternative constructions and assessed the advantages and disadvantages of one in particular. This analysis obviously leaves much room for further investigation. For example, what happens when advocates gravitate toward the other constructions considered within the Coalition? What alternatives did members of the Coalition not consider?

Beyond these questions, at least two related questions warrant further investigation. The first is about success. To successfully link redesign efforts to alternative constructions of poor students’ interests, advocates require the cooperation of several policy actors. Even the most conformist construction I encountered—the good-school construction—called for marketing efforts that would be hard to implement without district cooperation. The most adversarial constructions—the public-school and community-school constructions—called for public officials to substantially shift their focus from test performance and school choice to resources and power. Under what conditions are advocates most likely to achieve the cooperation needed to succeed?

The second question is about expectations. Both public officials and advocates place high expectations on public-education reform, whether they prefer the redesign or closing of failing schools. Not only are reforms expected to raise poor students’ achievement, they are also expected to deliver some measure of upward mobility in an increasingly unequal society. It is reasonable, I think, to expect that widespread redesign efforts informed by alternative and compelling constructions of poor students’ interests would have some noticeable benefits. Many of the reforms these efforts demand—better support services, more community involvement, increased funding, and so on—directly expand poor students’ educational opportunities. However, without simultaneous efforts to address related societal problems—the foreclosure crisis, the disappearance of living-wage work, high rates of incarceration, and so on—how much can we really expect them to aid long-term achievement and upward mobility?

Whatever the answer, advocates’ efforts on behalf of poor students will, I hope, continue to be a significant part of the urban political landscape.

M. David Forrest is completing his Ph.D. in the Department of Political Science at the University of Minnesota. He teaches political science in the School of Social and Behavioral Sciences at Arizona State University. His research focuses on issues of political organization and socioeconomic marginalization. This article is part of a larger project about the challenges and dilemmas of antipoverty advocacy in the post-civil-rights era. It was inspired and made possible by the members of the North High Community Coalition, of which the author was one.

The research upon which this article is based was supported by CURA’s Dissertation Research Grant. CURA awards this grant annually to support dissertation research on significant issues or topics related to urban areas. Additional support was provided by the Department of Political Science at the University of Minnesota and the Center for the Study of Democracy at the University of California at Irvine.