

Philadelphia School Closings Photo Collective Statement

Amy Bach, Harvey Finkel, Melissa Holman, Jill Saull & Tieshka Smith

In 2013, the School Reform Commission (SRC), an appointed board that has controlled the Philadelphia School District since December of 2001, when the district was taken over by the state, announced that it would close nearly 60 public schools. Without soliciting community input or conducting site visits to the schools, the SRC announced their closure list based on an assessment by the Boston Consulting Group (BCG), which was funded by a \$2.7 million contribution from the William Penn Foundation to radically overhaul the district. The BCG did not conduct site visits to the schools nor solicit community input for which schools to close. Eventually the list of school closures was narrowed down to 23 schools, some of which, like M.H. Stanton Elementary School, were notified only weeks before the end of the school year. The neighborhoods affected by these closures are disproportionately low-income, black communities.

Wanting to capture the last moments of these public spaces - some of which had served generations of students and their families for nearly 100 years and all of which were important community cornerstones - renown photographer Zoe Strauss issued a call to local photographers to visit the schools during their last weeks to take photographs in order to create a public archive of these places slated to close. *The Philadelphia School Closing Photo Collective* was born and grew to include not only amateur, hobby, and

professional photographers, but other artists and concerned citizens using poetry and other formats to document and reflect on the meanings of these closings to the individuals committed to working there, as well as the students, families, and communities these schools served.

This collection of photographs is just a slice of the work produced by members of the collective (this work can be seen at <http://www.schoolclosingcollective.com/> and on the [Facebook page Phila School Closing Photo Collective](#)). The photographs appearing here were first exhibited as a body of work at Scribe Video and subsequently at The University of Pennsylvania's Graduate Student Center.

As a collective of diverse individuals, we each chose to document these school closures for a variety of reasons. Yet what unites us is a concern about the national plight of urban systems of public education, the absence of an equitable school funding formula that values all public school students across the state equally, the further destabilization of neighborhoods caused by closed and abandoned school buildings, the profit motives of the for-profit education companies, and the broken promise of a "thorough and efficient system of public education" as mandated by the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

AMY BACH recently moved from Philadelphia to El Paso where she is an Assistant Professor of Literacy at the University of Texas at El Paso. Amy's interests in literacy and photography and her public school advocacy work coalesced around her participation in the Philadelphia School Closing Photo Collective.

CATHERINE BRINKLEY is an amateur photographer, mother of two, and volunteer at Lea Elementary in west Philadelphia at Spruce and 47th streets. She recently completed her PhD in urban planning at the University of Pennsylvania and is in the last year of her veterinary studies (V2015) with a focus on healthy food system planning.

HARVEY FINKLE is a still photographer who has been documenting political, social and cultural movements for the past four decades. These movements include Poor Peoples Economic Human Rights Campaign (PPEHRC), Disabled in Action (DIA), Creative Access, a movement to access Deaf people to the activities of daily living and many of the groups affiliated with the Bread & Roses Community Fund. Currently, he is documenting the various Immigrant groups settling in South Philly. Harvey is self-taught and graduated with a Master's Degree in Social Work from the University of Pennsylvania.

JILL SAULL is a photographer, reading tutor, community activist and volunteer. She holds a BFA from Tyler School of Art and an MFA from MICA. She is a member of the Philadelphia School Closings Photo Collective and has been photographing both Germantown High School and Fulton Elementary School over the last year. She is also part of the Germantown High School Project that is engaged in creating an educational, adaptive re use for the Germantown High School Campus.

TIESHKA SMITH is a Philadelphia-based photographer, visual storyteller and blogger. Her body of work is comprised of still photography in the social documentary and visual storytelling tradition of Gordon Parks, Vivian Maier, Henri Cartier Bresson, Jamel Shabazz and others. She strives to make art that amplifies the voices of people and families who live in urban communities, and challenges people to rethink their views on race and class. Smith's work has been exhibited throughout Philadelphia and the NYC area, and featured in a wide variety of online and print publications. Her full photography resume can be found at <http://genxtraordinary.wordpress.com/resume>. A Chicago native, Smith is a graduate of Northwestern University and Keller Graduate School of Management, and she blogs at <http://theothergermantown.tumblr.com>.