

The Fight for Dyett

How a Community in Chicago Saved Its Public School



▲ Protesters hold a vigil following a silent march to President Obama's Chicago home during the 2015 Dyett hunger strike.

AFT President Randi Weingarten, right, stands with hunger striker Irene Robinson. ►



BY EVE L. EWING

For an August day in Chicago, the weather is unseasonably cool, and many of the people sitting in the park have blankets draped over their laps or around their shoulders. In many ways, this looks like any family gathering in Washington Park—older faces and younger faces in a circle of fabric lawn chairs and coolers, chatting amiably. But rather than pop, picnic food, or snacks, many of the coolers are filled with infused water or high-nutrient juices. Thermoses of hot broth are propped against a tree. And there are people here you wouldn't see at a family picnic: visitors from across the city, reporters and photographers from across the country. Worried nurses flit from person to person. No music is playing. Sometimes folks laugh and joke cheerfully; other times they look off into space, exhausted.

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Behind it all, a tremendous black building looms, its windows dark. And that is the reason these people are here—not for any family reunion or summer gathering, but in the name of this shuttered building, Walter H. Dyett High School. They are not picnickers, they are hunger strikers. And they are putting their lives on the line in hopes of seeing their vision for this school become reality.

Why do people fight for schools like this? While the Dyett hunger strike would rise to public prominence as one of the most visible examples of community members fighting to save a school, it is hardly the only one. Across the country, school stakeholders who are culturally and geographically very different have waged notably similar battles to get their schools off district chopping blocks.

In Detroit in 2017, hundreds of parents and community members rallied in front of the state of Michigan's offices to protest the closing of schools that others referred to as "consistently failing" and "the worst of the worst."¹ In Shreveport, Louisiana, in 2011, parents held meetings and circulated a petition to save Blanchard Elementary, which the district called "small," "lacking," and "old."² In Austin, Texas, in 2016, parents organized high turnouts at community meetings and picketed to fight the district's closure of 10

Across the country, school stakeholders have waged notably similar battles to get their schools off district chopping blocks.

schools it said were in poor physical condition and under-enrolled.³ In Dyett's case, the media declared that "by just about any definition, [the school] has failed."⁴

To outside observers, concerned neighbors and friends, and informed citizens reading about education issues in the news or seeing these protests on television, it may be hard to reconcile these characterizations. If the schools are *small, the worst, lacking*, and so on, why is anyone fighting for them? This question may be amplified by the image of public schools we see and hear in the media, from the 1983 report *A Nation at Risk* to the movie *Dangerous Minds*. As someone who attended public schools and later taught in one, I can't count how many times a stranger remarked to me in casual conversation that I was an "angel" or a "saint" because public schools were "just so bad," with no clear reasoning about why or in what way.

This excerpt, which is drawn from my book *Ghosts in the Schoolyard: Racism and School Closings on Chicago's South Side*, tells the story of one group of people fighting to keep a school open and, moreover, to see it reflect their vision for their community and their children's education. We see that this community's choice to resist a school's being characterized as "failing" is in fact about much more than the school itself: it is about citizenship and participation, about justice and injustice, and about resisting people in power who want to transform a community at the expense of the people who live there.

The Dyett Tradition

So much of black life in Chicago happens in Washington Park that if you are African American, even if you are from the West Side or (like me) the North Side, it is hard not to find yourself there at least once each summer. The African Festival of the Arts, the Bud Billiken Parade, and family barbecues all find a home in the massive park. Sitting at the southern edge of Bronzeville, it covers 367 acres landscaped by Frederick Law Olmsted, the architect most famous for his design of New York City's Central Park. At the northern end of the park, facing 51st Street, a low building of black glass looks out over a broad expanse of grass.

In summer 2015, the building is empty, but the flag still flies above it. The sign still says "Welcome to Walter H. Dyett High School" in black against a yellow background, bright against the backdrop of the dark building and Chicago's more-often-than-not gray weather. But no doors are open. No teenagers gather to talk or to run, to flirt or gossip or tease, to play football or scramble for forgotten homework or do the things teenagers do. Walter H. Dyett High School is closed.

Not many schools are named after teachers, so it is notable that this building is as much a living monument to Walter H. Dyett as it is an educational institution. It is also notable that this man,

arguably the most renowned and respected educator ever to emerge from Bronzeville—a community famous for its musical venues and figures—was a bandleader and music teacher.

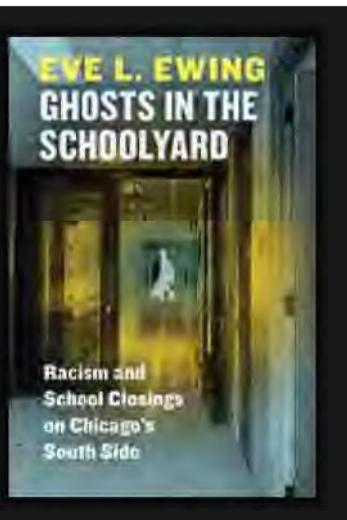
Walter Henri Dyett was born in 1901 in Saint Joseph, Missouri. His mother was a pianist and soprano vocalist, and his father was a pastor in the AME church. Dyett began his musical life as a violinist after his family moved to California; as a student at Pasadena High School, he became concertmaster of the orchestra and also played clarinet, bassoon, and drums.

After graduating in 1917, he attended the University of California at Berkeley, where he was first violinist in the school's symphony orchestra while he completed his premed studies. In 1921, Dyett received a scholarship to the Illinois School of Medicine and moved back to Chicago to pursue his studies. However, his mother and sister, already living there, needed financial help, and he took on work as a musician to support his family. In a curriculum vitae dating from 1960, Dyett described the early days of this work: "One year violinist in Erskine Tate's Vendome Theatre Orchestra playing the silent pictures and stage presentations along with Louis Armstrong and other now internationally known musicians. Transferred to orchestra leader in the Pickford Theatre—one of the Vendome chain—and remained until talking pictures came in and orchestras went out."

He next became youth music director at a church, then a private teacher of violin and music theory. Finally, in 1931, Dyett began the work for which he would become beloved: he became a music teacher at Phillips High School in Bronzeville. When Phillips was relocated in 1936 and renamed DuSable High School (after the city's founder, the Haitian Jean Baptiste Point du Sable), Dyett went along to the new school.

Tribute concerts, memorials, and articles about Dyett often cite his influence on the Bronzeville musical legends who were his students, such as Von Freeman and Nat King Cole. But while these figures loom large in history, they were far outnumbered by

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the thousands of average Bronzeville teenagers who discovered a love of music through his schoolwide concerts and community initiatives during his 38 years as a teacher.

"Choice" and Change

In 2000, Dyett Middle School faced a major upheaval. Chicago Public Schools (CPS) introduced plans to convert Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. High School, a little more than a mile away, into a college preparatory school, with a selective admissions system based on test scores and grades rather than open enrollment. King would receive a multimillion-dollar renovation, and students from all over the city would be able to attend—if they could meet the stringent admissions requirements. The move was part of CPS's creation of a suite of "selective enrollment" schools designed to attract the top academic (and top socioeconomic) tier of the city's high school students through a rigorous curriculum and high-end facilities. The transition also meant that if their test scores did not make them eligible to attend the new, selective King, students in the area would need a new place to go—so Dyett would be changed from a middle school to a high school.

Neighborhood residents were not happy with this plan. One parent of a King student expressed frustration that the \$20 million to be invested in the school's renovation was nowhere to be found when the school's enrollment was based on neighborhood attendance boundaries. Another community member lamented that young people in the area would be "shipped out of their neighborhood in order to turn King into a magnet school," suggesting that this ostensibly public school would no longer be public at all.

The development of selective enrollment schools was just one piece of what would, over the following decade, become an expansion of "choice" within CPS. No longer would students necessarily attend the schools in their immediate areas, as they had done for generations. Instead, new schools appeared or were converted across the South Side, with varying purposes and admissions policies: several charter schools, a military academy, a technology school, an international school, and others now dotted the landscape. This evolution of the district into a "portfolio"⁵ of options parents are expected to choose among was part of a nationwide trend that deemphasized local or community-based schools in favor of thinking of each city as a marketplace of options.

While choosing the best option from a menu of possibilities is appealing in theory, researchers have documented that in practice the choice model often leaves black families at a disadvantage. Black parents' ability to truly choose may be hindered by limited access to transportation, information, and time, leaving them on the losing end of a supposedly fair marketplace.⁶ Further, this shift in Chicago occurred in tandem with a broader conversation about a city in flux—a city that, in order to claim a place as a "world class"



Protesters at a Chicago budget town hall occupy the stage to ensure their voices are heard. ▲

ing to send their children elsewhere.

On November 30, 2011, parents of Dyett students received a letter from CPS CEO Jean-Claude Brizard. It stated that the school was not meeting students' needs and that a grade would be phased out each year, with the closure of the school completed by the 2014–2015 school year (when only seniors would remain).⁷

Brizard told the local news media he would prefer to send new teachers and resources to Dyett and other schools proposed for phaseout rather than shutting them down. But he felt that Dyett was beyond such measures and that sending more resources would be pointless. As it turned out, at least one group was dissatisfied with Brizard's characterizing Dyett as an unsalvageable failure. And they were ready to take him on, using a variety of tactics.

The phaseout nature of the plan meant there was a window of a few years for teachers, students, parents, and community members to organize in hopes of reversing the school board's decision. In 2012, they staged sit-ins and several were arrested for peacefully refusing to leave City Hall. Thirty-six students filed a federal civil rights complaint with the U.S. Department of Education alleging that closing Dyett reflected racially discriminatory practices. In 2013, several groups came together and formed the Coalition to Revitalize Dyett, a partnership of community organizers, representatives from the Chicago Teachers Union and Teachers for Social Justice, professors from the University of Illinois at Chicago, and organizational partners such as the DuSable Museum of African American History and the Chicago Botanic Gardens. The coalition developed a plan to keep Dyett open, which it submitted unsolicited to new CEO Barbara Byrd-Bennett (Brizard was gone by then, after only 17 months in the position). They proposed that Dyett be a high school focused on "global leadership and green technology," with a focus on environmental sustainability, social justice, and 21st-century careers, to be known as Dyett Global Leadership and Green Technology High School.¹⁰

urban center, was dead set on transforming its neighborhoods to make them more attractive to white residents at the expense of a displaced black populace.⁷

Meanwhile, the school "right over there" languished. While enrollment at Dyett High School varied over the decade, its student numbers eventually began to decline. By 2011, only 19 percent of the students within Dyett's attendance area were enrolled in the school.⁸ Most families in the neighborhood were no longer choosing Dyett, opt-

There was reason to believe the hunger strike could be effective: direct historical precedent.

This proposal was an extension of a project already in the works before news of Dyett's phaseout was announced: a plan for a "Bronzeville Global Achievers Village" that would align Dyett with local elementary schools. The "village" plan was based on community outreach to local parents over the course of 18 months and was intended to create a sense of stability and solidarity in a part of the city rocked by years of school closures.¹¹

For Dyett's supporters, the official assessment of the school as a failure was unacceptable, the latest manifestation of a long-running pattern of abandonment and disregard. "The Board's policy of closing one school after another in this hot real estate market has disrupted the lives of countless African American children and set back their educational opportunities. Some of us at Dyett and [Florence B.] Price [Elementary School] have been moved two or more times," wrote the students in their Title VI civil rights complaint.

On September 4, 2015, the coalition formally announced the hunger strike while standing in the broad green space in front of Dyett. News cameras and reporters gathered around as Jitu Brown, the national director for the Journey for Justice Alliance, began to speak. On that day, several members of the coalition, along with activists and community allies, were beginning a monumental undertaking. They vowed not to eat until the mayor agreed to move forward with the Dyett Global Leadership and Green Technology High School.¹²

There was reason to believe the hunger strike could be effective: direct historical precedent. In 2001, 14 parents and community members in Little Village, a Mexican American neighborhood north and west of Dyett, held a 19-day hunger strike after CPS promised a new building to relieve overcrowding in the neighborhood school, then delayed the project. The strikers camped out in tents on the land sited for the school, which they called Camp Cesar Chavez. Paul Vallas, CEO at the time, refused to meet with them or negotiate or respond to what he called blackmail. "I'm not going to locate it on a site because people are threatening not to eat. You could have one of these [protests] a week," he said. When Vallas left Chicago and was replaced as CEO by Arne Duncan, Duncan declared that he had "a hell of a lot of respect for [the protesters]" and agreed to move forward with the new school.

Could the same story unfold in Bronzeville? Conceding to the board, stepping back and letting them renege on their word or reroute the process they had already established, or create a whole new process, would be like conceding that their version of the world had merit. In their world, Dyett was a failure. Nothing worth saving. A disposable school serving disposable people, to be moved around in whatever ways were convenient at the moment. This moment was a referendum on the history, legacy, and future of Bronzeville and on the right to black educational self-determination.

"All of Us Wanted Dyett"

Like many other aspects of CPS's bureaucratic functioning, attending a board of education meeting is theoretically very easy and practically not easy at all. Meetings are open to the public, but they

always take place at 10:30 on Wednesday morning—an awkward time for working parents or teachers. You have to sign up in advance, and the online registration notoriously fills up and closes within minutes of opening. Many days before the August 26 meeting that Dyett supporters planned to attend to make their case to the district, I had set my alarm early so I could get my name on the register the second it opened. I thought back to several weeks before, when this meeting was supposed to be the day the board would make a final determination on Dyett. Now things seemed no closer to a resolution. When I arrived at the meeting, the chambers were already full, and I had to sit in an overflow room watching the proceedings on closed-circuit television. When it was time for public comment, Bronzeville resident and hunger striker Jeanette Taylor-Ramann took the podium and spoke, despite appearing tired and physically weak. She was wrapped in a blanket. "The only mistake I ever made was being born black," she said to the board.

Others took the podium, talking about other issues unrelated to Dyett, and each speaker shed light on another way the city was struggling. The board proceedings mandate extremely strict time limits,

with a large red digital countdown clock, and as people stepped to the microphone asking for care and attention toward things extremely important to them, each was met by dispassionate stares from the people on the dais. It was a depressing display, like some feudal society, with subjects asking for mercy from a panel of powerful lords. A mother told the board how her homeless children were denied the transportation benefits they were supposed to receive from the district and how she had to spend food money to get them to school on public transit. The treasurer of the Chicago Teachers Union spoke of how proposed special education cuts would hurt students with disabilities; when she began to cry, she was removed by security. A teenage girl said that her college and career counselor was being laid off and that she didn't know how she would get to college; she was also removed by security.

Suddenly, a member of the coalition burst into the overflow room. "Is anyone here a doctor? Jeanette just fainted." Everyone looked up at him wide-eyed, and he whirled away. I got up and went to the exit, where a security guard stood. "Yes? There's no room in the chambers," the guard said, moving between me and the door. I peered around him, craning my neck to see Jeanette Taylor-Ramann being carried out on a stretcher. The meeting continued uninterrupted.



A rally and sit-in at Chicago City Hall results in 16 arrests.

Whether you're in Detroit or Austin or Louisiana or Chicago, you want to feel that your school is your school.

Eight days later, CPS announced that Dyett would be reopened.

Dyett was to become an open-enrollment arts high school, featuring an "innovation technology lab." Despite the talk about "innovation," the coalition's plan would not be used and was not acknowledged or referred to in any way in the press release. In fact, none of the proposals or any aspect of the RFP was mentioned in the press release.¹³ It was as if it had never happened.

"They have won," said Congressman Bobby Rush, speaking of the hunger strikers. No coalition members were in the room to hear him, however. They were not admitted to the chambers where the press conference took place. They sat outside.

The next day, Jitu Brown told Amy Goodman of *Democracy Now!* that the hunger strike would continue:

We do not see this as a victory. This is not a victory for the children in Bronzeville. ... I got a call from CPS CEO Forrest Claypool 15 minutes before the press conference, that we were locked out of by CPS, and he told me—I asked him, "Well, where is the room for negotiation?" And he said, "Well, we're moving forward." So my message to him today is: So are we. We're moving forward. ... This is not something that we take lightly. These are our children. These are our communities. We have to live with CPS reforms after the people that

implement them get promoted to some other job. So we will determine the type of education that our children receive in Bronzeville.¹⁴

Why do people fight for schools like Dyett? Why did the coalition continue to fight even after those in power assured them of their own victory? Because it was never just about Dyett. A fight for a school is never just about a school. A school means the potential for stability in an unstable world, the potential for agency in the face of powerlessness, the enactment of one's own dreams and visions for one's



▲ Hunger striker Jitu Brown at a Labor Day rally.

own children. Because whether you're in Detroit or Austin or Louisiana or Chicago, you want to feel that your school is your school. That you have some say in the matter, that your voice can make a difference. You want to feel that the rules are fair, not that you're playing a shell game. You want to feel like a citizen. So you fight.

The Dyett hunger strike ended on September 20, 2015, after 34 days and two hospitalizations. At a press conference, hunger striker Monique Redéaux-Smith addressed the crowd:

While we cannot yet claim complete victory, we do understand that our efforts so far have been victorious in a number of ways. ... Through community resistance, [Dyett] was slated to be reopened in 2016–17. And even though there was a request for proposals, we know that the plan for that space was to become another privatized school within Bronzeville. But again, with community resistance and this hunger strike, we pushed CPS and the mayor to commit to reopening Dyett as a public, open-enrollment neighborhood school. And that is a victory.¹⁵

The members of the coalition did not see their plan for Dyett come to fruition. But they garnered national attention for a struggle that, years earlier, had implicitly been declared dead. "There are some schools so far gone that you cannot save them," Brizard had said, declaring that the building was devoid of hope. Those who fought for Dyett understood that what was on paper a question of numbers actually reflected the belief that their lives, their children's lives, and their hopes did not matter. The end came only when it became apparent how deep that disregard really was, and the fight became a matter of life or death in a terrifyingly immediate way.

Today, the lights are back on at the huge black building in Washington Park. Walter H. Dyett High School for the Arts boasts almost \$15 million in new investments, including facilities for dance, textile design, and music.¹⁶ And starting in sophomore year, all students are required to take music. When the school opened for its first (new) day in 2016, the building greeted a new freshman class of 150 students, above the target of 125. And 85 percent of them were from the area immediately surrounding the school. When asked what she thought of the new Dyett, one of the new students said, "We value our education more because of what people sacrificed."¹⁷

I have looked through a lot of old photographs of Walter Henri Dyett. Dyett served in the military, and I have seen his portraits in uniform. I have seen photos of him in childhood. I have seen photographs of him leading distinguished musicians arrayed in perfect rows, in pristine black-and-white formal wear. I have seen him at the front of his classroom, orchestrating music from the students known as "the Captain's kids," some of whom lied about their addresses to study under him. But my favorite photograph shows Dyett standing in Washington Park. It's spring, and several young women are gathered for a baton-twirling training camp, learning to be majorettes. My own grandmother, who was born in Mississippi and migrated north in 1943, was a baton twirler, and I always envied the skill. In the photo, Dyett stands amid the trees and seems unaware of the camera. He's demonstrating how to twirl the baton as the girls watch intently, hands on their hips. The girls wear shorts, and Dyett's sleeves are rolled up. When I look at the photo, I think of these regular days as an educator, the moments that don't make headlines but that make all the hard work feel worth it. The moments of intense



▲ Walter Henri Dyett in Washington Park, June 1940.

The fight for Dyett was about honoring the everyday moments that make a school a place of care, a home, a site of history.

focus and commitment where trying to help someone understand seems like the most important thing in the world, deserving all your energy. In this photo, I see Dyett not as a historical luminary, the person whose name ends up over the door of a building, but as an ordinary person trying to do what he can for the young people of Bronzeville. I see a warm day in Washington Park, with people convened to be together but also to pursue something they think is vital for their lives.

And this, in the end, is what the fight for Dyett was about. It was about honoring the everyday moments that make a school a place of care, a home, a site of history. It was about saying *this is not a failed school, and we are not a failed people. We know our history.*

We will prevail. You will not kill us.

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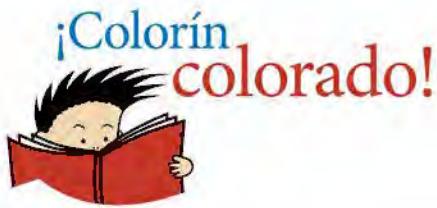
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