

School 19's Push for Improvement: A Look at Gentrification's Effects on Education

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Rochester, New York is a mid-size city in the western part of the state, known for its various art and music festivals, prestigious universities, companies like Kodak and Xerox. It's also known for its diversity. The third most populous city after New York City and Buffalo, there also happens to be a colossal issue with no clear solution slowly creeping into communities of color: gentrification.

It's one of the most controversial and least understood issues in American cities today. Not many can seem to agree on a concrete definition, and there is a lot of debate on whether the act of gentrifying is a good or a bad.

Generally, gentrification is a term used to describe when more affluent people move into an existing community, usually an urban district. The act of wealthier people moving in often raises rent prices and property values, which cause the displacement of poor people living in these established communities.

Although the topic of gentrification is often debated, research on it varies tremendously, which is where it usually gets confusing.

Some view this as the revitalization of a city, others see it as displacement. Not only that, but the cause of gentrification is not rooted in just one thing. Rather, it is a systemic and a structural problem, so there are multiple pieces that make up gentrification, which include but are not limited to redlining and blockbusting.

According to Britannica, redlining is the "illegal discriminatory practice in which a mortgage lender denies loans or an insurance provider restricts services to certain areas of a community, often because of the racial characteristics of the applicant's neighbourhood."

Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines blockbusting as “profiteering by inducing property owners to sell hastily and often at a loss... because of threatened minority encroachment and then reselling at inflated prices.”

Shane Wiegand, a fourth grade teacher who teaches his students about gentrification in Rochester, gave a talk last year which was reported by CITY Magazine. During the presentation, Wiegand showed a condensed version of what he talks about in his classroom.

He explained that there were legal clauses that allowed landowners to get away with not letting Black people live in certain neighborhoods. These were known as restrictive or racial covenants. Some suburbs of Rochester where these covenants can be found are: Brighton, Irondequoit, Beechwood and Levittown.

Wiegand also discussed the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and its role in housing discrimination. This happened through the practice of redlining, which increased in popularity after President Roosevelt created the National Housing Act of 1934, which halted bank foreclosures on family homes. Ironically, this was an act made to help families afford housing.

Neighborhoods began to be rated as “definitely declining” or “hazardous” by the government and were deemed to be dangerous, polluted or mainly inhabited by people of color. This, in turn, made it so that the FHA and banks would not grant loans to residents in these areas. The result of this discrimination is that the majority of Black people had to be renters, with some only able to afford public housing, which was less than ideal.

The FHA helped 35 million families get mortgages for housing, Wiegand said, and 98 percent of those families were white.

Protests in Rochester and all over the United States came about because of this, including the infamous Rochester July 1964 riots, where five people were killed and hundreds were arrested. Most of the rioters were residents of redlined areas.

Because of these riots, the 19th Ward Association was founded the following year, and it is one of the oldest neighborhood associations in the country, said Doris Meadows, a community activist and a member of the 19th Ward Association.

“The response to the riots was people getting very nervous about the city, and a lot of people started to move out, which helped redlining and blockbusting,” Meadows said.

This “white flight” is one of the historic conditions that make up gentrification. The Urban Displacement Project defines it as “the exodus of capital from urban centers.”

The growth of white suburbs was then aided by other housing and transportation policies.

Meadows, Karen Emerson, the president of the 19th Ward Association, and John DeMott, another member, have all lived in the 19th Ward of Rochester since the 1970s. As such, they have all seen the effects of gentrification and how it can affect the community. The association works with the community to try to figure out how to live with it.

“[Gentrification] is going to happen. It’s driven by economics. Whether it’s accepted, greeted with joy or greeted with unhappiness is a function of how well groups communicate with each other,” DeMott said.

He went on to say, “Communities that survive gentrification, from our observations, have systems in place to communicate and that may be through newspapers, radio, meetings, any number of systems that allow people to get to know each other.”

Amongst the oldest members of the association, there is still disagreement on how to handle gentrification in the community. Meadows and DeMott, while they are amicable, still butt heads on causes and solutions.

“I think the 19th Ward has always tried to cooperate and collaborate and communicate,” Meadows said, before adding, “Sometimes, we do not realize that we have not brought a gun to the gun fight, though. We do not have it in our minds that we have to defeat our enemy. We think that there’s room enough for both of us. That hasn’t always worked out too well.”

Someone who knows that sentiment very well is Dorian Hall, a deejay and the vice president of the Plymouth-Exchange Neighborhood Association.

The Plymouth-Exchange neighborhood, also known as PLEX, is close neighbors with the 19th Ward and is located on the southwest side of the Genesee River and includes the southern part of South Plymouth Avenue. It sits next to the University of Rochester, a local university with over 12,000 students. It is also one of the biggest employers in Rochester.

“I was born and raised in the Plymouth-Exchange Neighborhood, and I only moved away to go to college,” Hall said. “Then, when I came back from college, I actually bought a house right across the street from my mom.”

It was a few years later when Hall took interest in being involved with the neighborhood association.

“My introduction to [community work] was through my mom, Dorothy Hall. She has always been involved in community and networking, while I was deejaying, traveling and touring,” Hall said.

Dorothy Hall is the director of the Plymouth-Exchange Neighborhood Association and is a known activist in Rochester.

“One day she said, ‘I need you to help me with this neighborhood project,’” Hall continued. “And I’m like, ‘I do not want to get involved... I’m not interested.’ And she was like, ‘No, I need you to help me with this. Something’s not sitting well with me. You have the business background; you know some stuff. I just want you to come to this meeting with me.’”

Reluctantly, Hall went to the meeting, where he said representatives from a few influential organizations from Rochester attended, including representatives from the City of Rochester, ExxonMobil, the University of Rochester and Bergmann and Associates.

The topic of the meeting? Brownfields in PLEX.

According to the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), “A brownfield is a property... which may be complicated by the presence or potential presence of a hazardous substance, pollutant, or contaminant.”

The EPA website goes on to explain that over 450,000 brownfields exist nationwide, and “cleaning up and reinvesting in these properties increases local tax bases, facilitates job growth, utilizes existing infrastructure, takes development pressures off of undeveloped, open land, and both improves and protects the environment.”

The particular brownfield of the conversation was one Hall used to play soccer in when he and his friends were younger. The redevelopment of the land would benefit the “players,” as Hall liked to call them, at the table, while members of the community would not.

Talk of a new hotel or expanded housing for students was thrown around for a bit.

“They use brownfields for economic development,” Hall explained. “But really [they] should be cleaned up for the folks who already live there.

Nothing truly came to fruition at the meeting, as it quickly became clear to Hall that while his mother was there as a community representative, she was not actually wanted there.

The meeting was long and the terminology difficult to understand, and no one made any attempts to explain anything to Mrs. Hall.

“I went to the University of Buffalo,” Hall said. “At UB, I went for accounting, finance and management information systems, and obviously I had to take some law classes. I realized what the city was doing, and those folks were doing some unethical things.”

This launched Hall’s journey into activism and community work.

“It lit a fire under me,” he said. “It pissed me off. It made me mad people were taking advantage of not only my mother, but of my neighborhood. I’m especially not gonna let that happen to Mom.”

Since then, the community’s future is one of the most important things in Hall’s life.

“One thing that made me open my eyes is when I would talk to people, and they won’t realize they’re being racist. But they will say to me, ‘Oh, your neighborhood is up and coming.’ Like, what are you saying, huh?” Hall said. “What you’re saying is that it wasn’t a safe place to live or be, but now it’s ‘up and coming’ because you have folks who are not like my color moving in. That was kind of a disheartening thing that I would be going through.”

Besides his current position as the vice president of the PLEX Neighborhood Association, he is also on the board of the Western New York Landmark Society, Memorial AME Zion Church, Memorial Community Development Corporation, and City Routes Community Land Trust.

Through these organizations, Hall has gotten to know Rochester more intimately, and he has some ideas for how to find the solution for gentrification.

Running for Monroe County Legislature is one of these ideas, as he believes he can better help Rochester from within the system.

“Put in some legislation and contractual agreements,” he said. “Put something on paper because that’s what’s really going to protect you; the paper.”

As such, one of his key pieces is bringing back community schools.

“Community schools” is another term for “public schools,” but Hall prefers the former as it emphasizes community.

This is an important position and with his background and knowledge of community work and gentrification could be incredibly helpful as one of the least understood and most complicated parts of the impacts of gentrification is how it affects education.

Dr. Charles T. Lunsford School No. 19 is one of four elementary schools in the PLEX neighborhood. Children from the 19th Ward also attend this school since it sits on the border between the two neighborhoods. According to the New York State Education Department (NYSED), Black students made up 82 percent of the student population in the 2019-2020 school year. NYSED also reported that 94 percent of the overall student population was economically disadvantaged.

“We’re a school in receivership,” said Melody Bishop, School 19’s community school site coordinator. “There was a period of time that our school... was not showing that [we] were making progress. As a result, our school goes into what is referred to as receivership. And through that receivership process, the school can then make determination of what is their pathway for rectifying the situation and improving student performance.”

She went on to explain that School 19’s model for growing out of receivership is the community school model.

“That’s where you’re taking the ‘whole child health’ approach, working with families and the community,” Bishop explained.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the ‘whole child health’ approach Bishop refers to works to focus the school’s attention on the students and how their learning, health and the school itself are reflections of the local community.

Bishop’s role is to bring parents, families, community members and the school together. However, it’s been difficult, especially with enrollment numbers being quite low.

Fewer homeowners living in PLEX partly accounts for this. A lot of older homes have been turned into housing for students, hotels, like the Daybridge Suites, are being built in the area, and new apartment buildings are being erected to also be student housing.

“I think that because I’m older, and I’ve experienced and watched the transition,” Hall said. “I’ve noticed that folks are planning things, and they’re not taking into account the people living here.”

The University of Rochester is one of the biggest offenders of this. It is one of the number one employers in Rochester.

Hall explained, “They have a lot of political power. And when you have a lot of political power, you can push your vision ahead.”

Hall believes that vision does not take into account those living in PLEX, rather they just want to make money.

“The University of Rochester is in the business of having students,” Hall said. “As a university, if you grow, you need more space. They can’t grow up because they’re close to the airport. They’re not going to grow into the cemetery because the cemetery is on the other side. So where can they grow? ‘Oh, we can grow over into the poor African-American neighborhood.’”

And so they did.

Dorms for the university were built on a plot of land that had been vacant for a number of years while Hall was growing up, Hall said. It was vacant for so long because there were already plans for it.

“Now that I'm older, and I'm in this fight against gentrification, I know that people were planning for 30 or 40 years down the line how my neighborhood was going to be looking.”

This does not help enrollment numbers for School 19. This means that they are on the verge of being closed, which is actually quite common in gentrified neighborhoods.

Daniel del Pielago is the education organizer for a group called Empower DC, a nonprofit organizations based in Washington D.C. It specializes in rallying residents around community causes. He said in a 2015 interview with the U.S. News, “We believe [the school closings] are all part of the bigger picture of what’s happening here in the city and among cities around the country that have high populations of people of color where neighborhoods are rapidly gentrifying. To us, what we’re seeing is that a lot of these schools that are being closed are in areas where gentrification is happening.”

School 19 is not the only elementary school in the PLEX area. The chances of at least one of them closing the following year are almost definite, Bishop said.

“Someone’s bound to be closed, and we do not want it to be us,” she added. “Nobody wants it to be them.”

The four schools: School 2, 19, 4 and the Wilson Foundation are all within a mile and a half of each other. Low enrollment is the biggest issue with all of them.

“And why is it an issue? Because it didn’t used to be... The reason it poses a problem now is because charter schools are absorbing our kids,” Bishop said.

Charter schools, like public schools, receive public funding. They obtain a charter by committing to filling specific educational objectives, according to the National Charter School Resource Center (NCSRC).

The same center states that charter schools are “exempt from significant state or local regulations related to operation and management.”

Charter schools are growing in popularity, especially in urban areas where gentrification is happening, Bishop explained. She also said they tend to open up with some program specific things, which may be related to science, art or different cultures. They can offer unique experiences that public schools can’t, like an all-girls school or an all-boys school.

“Then you have schools like 19 that do not really have a specialization,” Bishop said.

School 19 is not the only public school to not have a specialization in anything. The other elementary schools in the area are facing the same problem, as are other public schools in Rochester. This means that students are not as inclined to attend 19, especially when there are other citywide schools in the area that may offer better experiences.

“I feel like 19 gets overlooked a lot,” Bishop said. “There are very few people that are like, ‘oh, I want to send my kids to School 19.’ It’s kind of like the place where kids just end up getting put because they didn’t get put somewhere else.”

Hall agreed, saying, “When you [put kids in charter schools], it kind of puts all the [less fortunate kids] in one school and one situation...”

This is linked to gentrification, especially as more affluent people move into the city. School 19 is not known for its success in education, and it does not currently have many programs that make it stand out from other schools.

Bishop believes parents who have extra time to be involved in their children's education are going to be more willing to put in the work to make sure that they are attending schools that will benefit them.

In contrast, parents of students who attend School 19 are, unfortunately, not able to give that same attention, Bishop said. "For a lot of different reasons, there is not the investment in the education that we would want to see. And I'm not blaming the parents... There are a lot of roadblocks."

The knowledge of the overall socioeconomic status of the students attending a school is vital towards their success, that way teachers, staff and researchers know what's missing from their lives and how to better provide for their students. What might be missing is cultural capital: something that lower income parents cannot always provide for their children.

Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist from the 1970s, defined cultural capital as "familiarity with the legitimate culture within a society."

He did this to explain how power in society was transferred and how social classes maintained. The overall idea was that the more capital one had, the more powerful they would be.

Families can pass down cultural capital to their children through a few different ways, including books, music and experiences such as talking about subjects of interest during dinner.

These different objects and events are not always luxuries that poor people can have.

As was stated earlier, NYSED reported that 94 percent of the overall student population was economically disadvantaged in the 2019-2020 school year.

“I would like to find a way to get parents more involved and engaged in their students’ learning and just being part of the school and the culture of the school,” Bishop said. “We are trying to work on that, but it has proven to be tough.”

While the socioeconomic status of these families is not because of gentrification, poverty plays a big role in gentrification, especially when people who could afford living in a gentrified area before suddenly have to work harder to be able to afford it again.

People and capital are flowing back into historically disinvested neighborhoods due to relative affordability, older, historic housing stock, close proximity to city centers, and revitalizations, the Urban Displacement Project explained. However, this causes long-term residents to be displaced as housing costs increase, and in the case of many parents of School 19 students, it can take them away from their children as they have to spend more time at work to afford to live in the same place.

“I think the way to [fix the rush of students going to charter schools] is to offer something at a public school that is not available at a charter school,” Hall said.

School 19 only has one extracurricular program, which is Strings for Success (SFS). It’s a violin program where students beginning in second grade, learn to play a string instrument of their choice. SFS students can participate in ensembles, performances, field trips and assemblies with visiting artists from Rochester and other places, the SFS website states. It is also offered during the school day so it is easier for students to participate.

Because of this groundwork that was laid out, School 19 is planning on moving forward with more art related programming.

“There is no elementary school that focuses on the arts,” Bishop said. “We feel like this is an open door for us to walk through.”

In general, the school district does need to work on programming, Bishop added. With so many schools being in close quarters that offer the same kind of education, the only competition they have is with charter and private schools, which excel in programming.

“Nobody wants to send their kids to a failing school,” Bishop said. “And I think that we benefit when we have programs that demonstrate success.”

In addition, because of PLEX’s proximity to the University of Rochester, it has experienced an influx of students moving into the area. These students usually do not have children and do not stay in the neighborhood, Hall explained, they take up space where a family raising a child could be.

“It's not the students' fault,” Hall said. “We love the students, but the students are also being taken advantage of. Because of the high cost to live on campus, most of the students want to live off campus.”

Investors and landlords will exploit this need and charge students \$400 or \$500 a room while “Creating an influx against the neighborhood because you can't find... African American families willing to spend \$2,000 a month on a rental property,” Hall said.

More families moving in may be more beneficial for the neighborhood. Depending on the socioeconomic status of the people moving in, it could still morph the community into something else by displacing existing residents.

In a case study conducted by the Urban Displacement Project in the MacArthur area in Oakland, CA, they observed a dramatic change in the demographic population. This change being the number of Black people dropping, while the number of white people increased.

Along with that change in the demographic, the case study also found that the MacArthur area saw an increase in educational attainment from 1980 to 2013.

“Coupled with major shifts in the MacArthur area’s racial/ethnic demographics,” the case study explained, “these data suggest that the 30 year changes in educational attainment are due to a higher level of education among newcomers in specific neighborhoods.”

This trend was consistent in the other cities studied.

And once again, the reason this becomes a problem is because Black, indigenous and people of color are still being displaced.

Cultural displacement is vital to discuss when the topic of gentrification is brought up.

“Even for long-time residents who are able to stay in newly gentrifying areas,” the Urban Displacement Project said, “Changes in the make-up and character of a neighborhood can lead to a reduced sense of belonging, or feeling out of place in one’s own home.”

This has happened in PLEX.

“The folks who live there, like my mother and folks who are on fixed incomes, their taxes go up,” Hall said. “And they do not have a sense of the community because now [there are no] homeowners.”

In addition, “Plymouth Avenue is almost becoming off-campus student housing,” Hall said. “That also hurts because in the end, if you wanted to buy property to raise your kid, you probably wouldn’t be looking in PLEX because it’s close to the university. That’s how it kills the neighborhood.”

Bussing has also become a problem for School 19, and it seems as if it won’t be resolved any time, especially with PLEX becoming more of a college town than a place where children live.

“Our kids have to live more than a mile and a half from the school in order to get a bus,” Bishop said. “You literally have to be 1.6 miles away... It’s ridiculous, if you think about it. Say

you have one kindergartener or first grader... you aren't going to expect them to walk a mile and a half to school."

The origins of this policy are unknown, but Bishop is working with some professors from, ironically, the University of Rochester, to rectify it.

"If you look at suburban districts, they don't follow that 1.5 mile rule," Bishop added. "I think Pittsford is .4 miles... We have a lot of parents who choose to live further away from schools, so that they can get buses, which does not help a neighborhood school."

With less people raising their children in PLEX, School 19 and other elementary schools in the area continue to suffer from low enrollment.

The progression towards less of a community has been felt in schools. Bishop has had a hard time trying to figure out how to get people involved

Hall explained that one of the reasons for this may be because "25 percent of the students are from the neighborhood and 75 percent of the students are bussed in."

When Hall was growing up, everyone knew each other in PLEX. He referenced the quote "it takes a village" to describe his upbringing.

"My mom and father were close with probably 80 percent of the people who owned houses in the neighborhood," Hall said. "If you were going to do something crazy or get in trouble, you knew you couldn't really do it because everyone's mom knows your mom."

The neighborhood was a tight-knit family, with the children who grew up together on the streets considering each other siblings, but that has slowly ebbed away.

"Most people walked to school and went to school in the area," Hall said. That is not the case anymore.

"There is no way for the neighborhood association to help the school," Hall said.

Because members of the community do not get to know each other, a different kind of education can't take place: a kind of education that emphasizes being part of a collective group. The loss of this shows how a culture is being displaced, and it's something that can be very isolating for the elders of the community who have managed to live through the gentrification process.

Another loss that has occurred is get-togethers. Hall lamented the fact that there is a significant lack of communal picnics, block parties and hangouts. It's a way for the community to get to know each other, but with there being less of one as the years go by, the neighborhood block parties have been replaced with university keg parties.

"On my street, I can count on my hand how many folks own houses," Hall said. "And we get together and... talk about how we can protect the neighborhood because there are a lot of students... [who] do not have a lot of interest in investing in the community."

Of course, Hall does not blame the students. He understands that they're enjoying college and having fun, but he still mourns the loss of a "true neighborhood," where everyone knows each other and can relate to one another. In its place is a semi neighborhood.

A semi neighborhood where there are "10 houses that are owners and 10 that are rentals," Hall explained.

The act of gentrification has grown to be a massive concern. It is more than the revitalization of a city, and it has many negative effects on the individuals of the community.

"[It] only occurs because of municipalities," Hall said. "[It] only happens because of the city planning. Without city planning, you wouldn't have gentrification. [It] specifically is based on city planning. They have a plan... a vision... they do not include you, and they try to push their plan through."

Unfortunately, many people still believe gentrification will continue to happen because it occurs simultaneously to a capitalistic economy, which Hall and DeMott both mentioned.

However, there are many people fighting against it and fighting to have their voices heard.

It has been and will continue to be a long and nasty fight, especially with large forces like the Rochester local government not being on the people's side. The education of primarily Black students is not being taken seriously by those in power, and it is unfair to the children.

"After working in the district for 20 years," Bishop said, "If the city of Rochester really, really, really wanted to support this district, they could."

"Public schools are fighting for funding," Hall said. "They're fighting to keep afloat."

And yet the Rochester City School District and the city of Rochester do the bare minimum to help out these schools.

While the district has mismanaged funds on multiple occasions, "The city of Rochester has not increased the amount of money it gives the Rochester City School District in ten years," Bishop said. "Even if the district is mismanaging funds... Does this city not still have the responsibility to provide that as a funding source? They're going to say 'well, we're not going to give it to you because you can't manage it right.' Well, we're constantly trying to patch a hole in the boat, so we can never get ahead."

Despite the lack of political help, School 19 is still hopeful for the upcoming year and has a lot of ideas to try out. The current plan is to open as an integrated arts school in the following year. They plan to offer programming for all students in pre-K through eighth grade that allows them to tap into various forms of art, visual art and dance.

There is no telling whether programming will really save School 19. Without local government's help and with said government approving development projects that displace long

time residents, neighborhoods and schools are going to suffer perhaps until something radical happens.

One thing is for sure, the people, the neighborhood, and the community associations of Rochester will continue to fight for what's right and stand behind their public schools.

“As long as we continue to grow as a school community and learn more about our students and our families, that combined with the programming will help School 19 in the future,” Bishop said.

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