

Quality and Schools: Managing School Closings to Optimize Student Outcomes

Ashley Berner and David Steiner

Institute for Education Policy, Johns Hopkins University

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Closing schools is challenging. It quickly becomes very political, as it involves numerous stakeholders who each have a different agenda. The focus should naturally be on optimizing outcomes for students, but the process can become so challenging that this goal can get obscured or lost.

The need to close schools is often clear. Whether due to declining enrollment, fiscal mismanagement, or low academic performance, the need to make the decision is not ambiguous – but how to navigate the process is certainly not. No matter the reason for closure, shuttering a school often leads to what one research team called “a period of mourning” (Gordon, 2018) for the school’s families, administrators, and teachers. Indeed, school closure can be accompanied by fierce opposition from community leaders and other stakeholders.

This policy brief shares two urban case studies: Chicago Public Schools and New York City Department of Education. Both districts closed dozens of schools between 2000 and 2014, and each used different methods and achieved different outcomes. This is a companion piece to [IEP’s policy report](#).

These case studies illustrate that the outcomes of school closures vary, from negative academic impact in Chicago to positive gains in graduation rates and test scores in New York City. The important finding is that the *academic caliber of the schools into which the students move must be considerably higher than schools they left*.

Case Study 1: Chicago Public Schools

In May 2013, the board of Chicago Public Schools (CPS) voted to close 47 elementary schools, citing under-enrollment and a \$1 billion deficit. The changes took effect almost immediately; CPS reassigned students for Fall 2013. Mindful that most of the schools

slated for closure were located in the city's most fragile communities, CPS attempted to mediate disruption using the following strategies:

- CPS assigned each student to a “welcoming school” that had demonstrated higher ratings on assessments, academic growth trends, and student attendance than the student’s previous, soon-to-be-closed, school. Note that approximately 66% of students accepted CPS’s assignment.
- CPS made sure no welcoming school was more than one mile from each student’s residence and put in place “Safe Passages” – routes with adult monitors to ensure student safety.
- CPS invested some of the cost savings in new school programs and facility-upgrades in the welcoming schools.

To what extent did CPS’s approach seem to work for students and families?

A 2015 study found that families used an array of information to decide where to enroll their children – i.e., not only their designated welcoming school, but also public surveys on school safety and, above all else, proximity to their homes. Families who moved residence during the summer of 2013 faced some difficulties in enrollment, as did those whose children had received special education services. All told, 93% of students whose schools were closed enrolled in new schools that were higher-performing *relative* to the schools the students left.

A more recent study (2018), however, found quantitative and qualitative evidence that “school closure was much more complex than policymakers anticipated; academic outcomes were neutral at best, and negative in some instances,” (Gordon, 2018). For example, students who had left the closed schools had lower math test scores four years after reassignment, and students already in the welcoming schools earned lower reading scores than expected.

Why were academic results disappointing? Many factors contributed, but the 2015 study presaged an important one: the success of school closures had been limited by the small number of high-quality seats in the district. While the welcoming schools were indeed performing higher than some others, they were not the top rated in the City. Specifically, 21% of the impacted students enrolled in CPS’s top-rated schools (Level 1 schools), and almost a third enrolled in Level 3 schools – the lowest rating CPS assigns. The report noted, “This suggests that there were simply not enough available seats in higher-rated schools in these neighborhoods to accommodate all of the displaced students,” (de la Torre, et al., 2015).

Case Study 2: New York City Department of Education

New York City, the nation's largest school district (NYCDOE), closed nearly four dozen low-performing high schools between 2000 and 2014. Unlike Chicago Public Schools' rapid approach to elementary-school closures, NYCDOE adopted a "phase-out" strategy: high schools slated for eventual closure stopped accepting 9th-grade students, and current students were allowed to transfer out if they chose.

An analysis of 29 high school closures between 2003 and 2009 examined students' outcomes across a variety of measures (graduation rates, mobility, attendance, and academic performance). Importantly, the study included "9th-grade students who chose to stay after a closure announcement, 9th graders who transferred elsewhere, and 9th graders required to attend different high schools because of closures," (Kemple, 2013).

The analysis found neutral to positive effects of phased-out closure on all three groups of students:

For students already enrolled in a school that was later closed, the phase-out process did not have a systematic impact, positive or negative, on their attendance or academic performance. This held true whether they remained at the school throughout the phase-out process or transferred to another high school. However, we found that for rising 9th-grade students, the closure of their most likely high-school option led them to enroll in somewhat higher-performing high schools and substantially improved their likelihood of graduating with a New York State Regents diploma (Kemple, 2013).

Thus, the study concludes, "High school closures in New York City during this particular period (2003-2009) produced meaningful benefits for future students while not harming, at least academically, the students most immediately affected by them."

Importantly, closing low-performing high schools was one plank of several changes to reform secondary education in New York. It that resulted in more, smaller, high schools across the city; stronger accountability measures; and high school district choice programs. The number of high schools nearly doubled with average enrollment declining by almost half. Specifically, in 1999-00, 212 schools enrolled an average of 344 first-time 9th graders. In 2010-11, 409 high schools enrolled an average of 178 first-time 9th graders.

Student outcomes improved across multiple measures during this period, including high school graduation rates (51% to 69%) and college readiness rates (from 13% to 27%). The authors of the study note that "college readiness is defined as earning a New York State

Regents Diploma and receiving a score of 80 or higher on a Mathematics Regents examination and a score of 75 or higher on an English Regents examination. This indicator is used in the New York City Department of Education and New York State Education Department's designation of 'Regents-Based Math and English Aspirational Performance Measure.'"

Reforms did not eradicate achievement gaps between student subgroups (75% of Asian and white students earned a Regents' diploma, whereas only 48% of Hispanic and African-American students did so during this period). But, as lead researcher James Kemple stated in an NPR interview, "[The reassigned students] ended up attending high schools that were higher-performing, with higher attendance, better test scores, better graduation rates, and did much better than students we compared them to,' he says. That included a 15-percentage-point increase in the students' high school graduation rate," (Kamenatz, 2016).

References

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