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When Schools Close: Lessons from Two Urban Districts
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Introduction

It is difficult to close a school. The decision to do so may be reached because of declining enrollment, fiscal mismanagement, or, more likely, low academic performance. Closing a school for very poor academic achievement is not a straightforward decision: Research indicates that reassignment resulting from school closure often has a neutral to negative impact upon students’ academic performance – unless those students enroll in substantially higher-performing schools. No matter the rationale for closure, or the potential benefits, shuttering a school often leads to what one research team called “a period of mourning” for the school’s families, administrators, and teachers. Indeed, school closure can be accompanied by fierce opposition from community leaders and other stakeholders – even in cases in which the school’s performance data are among the lowest in the state.

Districts and states do not, therefore, close schools lightly. As one study of Chicago Public Schools put it,

>Closing schools is difficult and often fiercely contested. Schools are one of the few stable institutions in some communities, and closing them has the potential to further destabilize fragile neighborhoods and disproportionately affect the most

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3 Gordon et al., “School Closings in Chicago: Staff and Student Experiences and Academic Outcomes | UChicago Consortium on School Research | The University of Chicago.”

vulnerable students in the system. Districts must weigh the impact that closing schools has on those directly affected with any benefits that might accrue from consolidating resources into fewer school buildings.\(^5\)

Given the community response to school closure and the risks to student outcomes,\(^6\) how can district and state leaders manage school closures so as to maximize the benefits to students and communities? Answering this question is made more difficult by the context-specific nature of the inquiry.

This memo examines the approaches taken by two urban districts for lessons learned: Chicago Public Schools and New York City Department of Education. Both districts closed dozens of schools between 2000 and 2014, and both have the advantage of participating in research-practice partnerships upon whose findings we draw below.\(^7\) Although school closures in these systems yielded different outcomes, the same underlying principle pertains: reassigned students benefit most when they move to substantially higher-performing schools. The burden upon states and districts, therefore, is not only to close schools that do not serve students well, but to simultaneously expand the number of academically strong options district-wide.

**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.

According to district officials there were 403,000 students enrolled in CPS, which had seats for 511,000— a disparity that created a “utilization crisis” in which sparse resources were spread too thin across too many schools with low enrollment.\(^8\)

The changes took effect almost immediately; CPS reassigned students by 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 by the following strategies:

- CPS assigned each student to a “welcoming school” that had demonstrated historically higher ratings than the student’s previous, soon-to-be-closed, school.\(^9\)

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\(^7\) The Chicago Consortium on School Research at the University of Chicago, and the Research Alliance for New York City Schools at New York University.

\(^8\) de la Torre et al., “School Closings in Chicago: Understanding Families’ Choices and Constraints for New School Enrollment | UChicago Consortium on School Research | The University of Chicago.”, 5.

\(^9\) CPS’s rating system included recent test data, academic growth trends, and student attendance.
• 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 66% of students attended their designated welcoming school, and a full 93% attended schools that were higher-rated than their original school. Moreover, 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 Individual Education Programs (IEPs). Overall, some two-thirds of displaced students ended up in higher-performing schools.

A more recent study (2018), however, found quantitative and qualitative evidence that “school closures were much more complex than policymakers anticipated; academic outcomes were neutral at best, and negative in some instances.” For example, students from the closed schools had lower math test scores four years after reassignment, and students from the welcoming schools earned lower reading scores than anticipated.\(^\text{10}\)

Why were academic results disappointing? Many factors contributed, but the 2015 study presaged an important one: the process was limited by the small number of truly high-quality seats in the district, more generally. Even though most of the displaced students moved to higher-rated schools, only 21% 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 Chicago Consortium of School Research 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.”\(^\text{11}\)

_A key take-away from Chicago Public Schools, therefore, is that the receiving schools need to be not only higher-performing than the closed schools, but substantially so._

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.

\(^{10}\) Gordon et al., “School Closings in Chicago: Staff and Student Experiences and Academic Outcomes | UChicago Consortium on School Research | The University of Chicago.”, Executive Summary.

\(^{11}\) de la Torre et al., “School Closings in Chicago: Understanding Families’ Choices and Constraints for New School Enrollment | UChicago Consortium on School Research | The University of Chicago.”, 35.
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.”

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

We found that 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.

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 formed only one important component of several changes to secondary education. The changes also included a push for smaller, high schools across NYCDOE, stronger accountability measures, and high school district choice programs. The district also received an influx of philanthropic support to enact its reforms.

While the number of high schools nearly doubled, the average enrollment per high school declined by almost half. In the 1999-2000 school year, the 212 schools enrolled an average of 344 first-time 9th graders. By 2010-2011, 409 high schools enrolled an average of 178 first-time 9th graders. The reduction in school size occurred primarily because of the opening of 183 new schools that enrolled 110 or fewer first-time 9th graders each year.

The Research Alliance for New York City Schools reports that student outcomes improved across a number of important metrics during this period, including high school graduation rates (51% to 69%) and college readiness rates (from 13% to 27%). Although these reforms did not eradicate

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12 Kemple, “High School Closures in New York City.”
14 The authors define college readiness 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
achievement gaps between important 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), all groups of students made progress in graduation and college-ready outcomes. 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.”

Thus, the relatively positive results of school closures in New York City during the period under review reinforces the findings from Chicago: reassignment can benefit students when the receiving schools are substantially higher-performing - whether historically or as a consequence of additional, positive reforms.

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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.”
