# Revisiting Research on School Closings:
## Key Learnings for District and Community Leaders

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## Introduction

District leaders seeking to close schools often frame decisions as "right-sizing" or "modernizing the footprint" of the district. Historical influences such as population and economic shifts and desegregation during the civil rights era, and more recent factors like deteriorating building conditions, school performance "accountability" measures, declining enrollment, and the expansion of school choice policies have contributed to school closure decisions.[1] Whatever language used, or factors considered, these consequential decisions often spark fierce community debate.

In Pennsylvania, which operates one of the most inequitable public education systems in the nation,[2] several communities have controversial histories of school closures, including Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and rural regions.[3] Now, the prospect of future school closures again looms large as many districts have experienced several years of declining enrollment[4] and face financial cliffs, challenges made worse in the wake of COVID-19.[5]

To inform community members and guide district leaders navigating these difficult decisions, this brief revisits our [2013 Issue Brief on School Closings Policy](#). In this update, we focus on the inequitable impacts of school closures on students, staff, and surrounding communities, with particular attention to how systemic and historical inequities continue to influence the school closure process. We conclude with considerations from research on school closures for school district leaders and decision-makers contemplating closing schools that can better inform plans and address potential equity issues for students and surrounding communities.

## Part 1: Impact on Students

### 1. What do we know about student populations impacted by closings?

Research studies have documented the following characteristics of students most often attending schools slated to close:

### Defining Key Terms

**School Closure:** Refers to the different types of policies that districts may adopt. This can include closing a school building to be repurposed by the district, consolidating, or merging multiple schools, closing a building entirely and potentially selling the building to a third-party, or reopening a school under new management (such as a charter school).

**Consolidations:** A type of school closure, this term refers to the combining of schools and/or districts.

**Receiving Schools:** Schools designated to enroll students whose schools have closed.

- ***School closures more often affect students of color and students with economic disadvantage.***[6] Students of color and students with economic disadvantage are more likely to be enrolled in schools labeled as "underperforming"[7] and in schools with smaller and/or declining student enrollment.

- ***Black students in particular have been disproportionately impacted by school closures.***[8] This disproportionate impact has been identified in urban, suburban, and even rural cases. For example, Black students in California represent 5% of total students but nearly 14% of the student body of closed schools. In Arkansas, over two-thirds of African American students in annexed districts lost their school within two years—a rate over twice that of students from other racial backgrounds.[9] Black students disproportionately attend under-resourced, urban schools located in high-poverty neighborhoods; these schools are more likely to be closed. However, "these factors don't fully account for the disparate rates for predominately Black students" subjected to closures.[10] Two studies found that schools serving a greater number of Black students are more likely to close regardless of school characteristics like enrollment or performance on standardized tests.[11]

- ***Closed schools more likely serve students receiving special education services.***[12] Some scholars argue that the overrepresentation of students with IEPs in school closures is due to the failure of district officials to factor in these students' need for lower student-teacher ratios and spatial accommodations when evaluating building utilization rates.[13]

## 2.  How do school closings impact student achievement and related factors?

Research investigating the impact of school closures on students typically evaluates student performance on standardized tests (mostly math and reading assessments), attendance, and/or graduation or dropout rates. Overall, the findings in this area are mixed and can vary depending on type of closure (accountability vs. enrollment driven), grade levels of displaced students (elementary vs. secondary), student performance before closure (low-performing vs. high-performing students), and the cohort of students observed (those in the school during time of closure vs. rising students/younger cohorts). Most recent studies in this area have been conducted in urban settings with few research studies focused on student achievement for students experiencing school closures in rural or suburban areas.[14] Key findings from the research on this topic are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1. School closure impact on student achievement and related factors**

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| **Negative Impacts on Student Achievement** | • A handful of studies on large-scale urban closures document negative impacts on displaced students' academic performance in the announcement year, the year following the closure, and in some cases the long-term.[15]<br><br>• In New York City, accountability-driven closures had a negative impact on the academic achievement of low-performing students.[16]<br><br>• Research from Chicago and Philadelphia found negative impacts on student academic achievement in receiving schools. In Philadelphia, the decline in academic achievement was greatest for students in schools with the highest concentration of displaced students.[17]<br><br>• Some research has linked school closures to a decline in graduation rates and an increase in dropout rates for displaced students. In Baton Rouge, student graduation rates declined by 10 percentage points after school closings.[18]<br><br>• Other studies found school closures have negative effects on student attendance (including suspensions) for displaced students. In Philadelphia, receiving school student attendance was also negatively impacted.[19] |
| **No Impact** | • Some studies found school closures had neutral effects on displaced students' academic achievement or, at the very least, school closures did not harm it in the long term.[20]<br><br>• Two studies found no impact on receiving school students' attendance.[21] |
| **Positive Impacts on Student Achievement** | • Some studies found displaced students experienced increased academic achievement under certain circumstances, specifically when the new receiving school for displaced students was a high-quality school with "high levels of teacher attention and trust."[22]<br><br>• A study on NYC schools also found a positive impact on achievement and graduation rates for rising 9th graders, or the younger cohort of students who ultimately attended higher-quality schools when the lower-performing school they otherwise would have attended closed. This study also found that the academic performance of high-performing students who were displaced by the closure increased.[23]<br><br>• New Orleans students experienced positive effects on graduation rates following closures.[24] |

**A note on conditions for success:** While the research on the impact of school closures on student academic performance is mixed, studies have found that the negative effects can be reduced or eliminated if displaced students are able to attend a high-quality, high-performing school after closure.[25] Some research also indicates that intervening in elementary schools is more effective than high schools.[26] Unfortunately, the reality for many students and districts faced with closures is that the district may not have enough seats available in high-performing schools or have higher-quality schools in proximity for displaced students to attend.[27]

### 3. How can school closures impact students' educational experience outside of academic measures?

Some research studies have investigated the impact of school closures on student experience more holistically by exploring changes to school climate and student access to educational opportunities after a school closure. These studies have documented the following:

- **School climate:** Some qualitative studies found tensions often arise between students and teachers from the closed and receiving schools. Research on Chicago closings found displaced students and staff did not feel welcomed by their new schools and saw an increase in student fights and cases of bullying.[28]

- **Relationships**: Some students reported a sense of loss or disruption of friendships or relationships caused by the transition to the new school and others reported not fitting in. Relationships felt more "bureaucratic" after the transition between students and teachers, with some students naming decreased trust in teachers after the merger. These disruptions caused difficulties for students to adjust.[29] The sense of loss was characterized as traumatic by school community members following an Austin, Texas, school closing.[30]

- **Access to educational opportunities:** In some studies, students and teachers reported benefits like broader course offerings, higher expectations, and more social opportunities following a school closure. Participants noted, however, that increased offerings were paired with larger class sizes and less individualized attention.[31]

- **Facilities and technology**: Some studies reported that the consolidated schools did not necessarily have better facilities or technology. Furthermore, students were less likely to attend/access summer school during the transition, and student proximity to school worsened after the closure.[32]

In addition to students themselves, research has also found impacts on the parents and families of students in closed or receiving schools. While few studies explicitly explore this impact, research in Chicago found that families of students impacted by closures mourned the loss of the closed school. Families reported a loss of trusted relationships with school personnel and dealing with stressors throughout the process including safety concerns, lack of affordable transportation options, limited supports for students with special needs, confusion around attendance zones and availability of seats in schools, and inadequate time to find and enroll in new schools.[33]

## Part 2: Broader Impact on School Communities and Community Involvement

### 1. How do school closures impact staff?

While research on the impact of school closures on staff is limited, findings indicate that the process and implementation of closures can have largely negative effects on teachers including the following:

- **Increased stress for individuals and on professional relationships**: Teachers can find the process of closures stressful and professionally demoralizing, as it raises questions of job security and sometimes requires them to reapply for their positions.[34] Drawn out decisions around which schools to close can also contribute to an "us" versus "them" mentality that

makes it challenging to form trusting relationships with colleagues when reassigned to new schools.[35]

- **Feelings of loss:** The adjustment to a new school can be even more difficult for teachers than students as educators mourn the loss of tight-knit relationships and face challenges building new relationships at their next school.[36]

- **Increase in teacher attrition**: Some findings show an association between school closures and attrition, or teachers leaving their districts altogether. A Texas study found an increased likelihood that teachers from closed schools would leave their districts or the profession entirely. This was especially so for more experienced teachers and for Black teachers, creating increased instability in a profession already high in turnover and experiencing an underrepresentation of Black teachers.[37]

- **Inequitable impact on staff of color:** When school closings are accompanied by large-scale layoffs, they can have a racially disproportionate effect on teachers. For example, when New Orleans Public Schools was taken over by the state after Hurricane Katrina, the district laid off 7,500 employees, the majority of whom were Black, evoking memories of mass firings of Black educators after *Brown v. Board of Education.*[38] Subsequently, almost all district schools were converted to charters, which were then staffed predominantly by young White teachers working through organizations such as Teach for America.[39] In Chicago and Philadelphia, schools subject to closure or turnaround models have sometimes entailed staffing overhauls and conversions to charters, which have disproportionately impacted Black teachers.[40]

There are, however, some indications that consolidations of small rural schools and districts can lead to improved working conditions for teachers, such as a reduction in the number of classes they teach and increased professional development opportunities.[41]

## 2. What financial impacts do districts experience following school closures?

Fiscal constraints are routinely cited as a main driver of school closings, yet little research has been done to accurately evaluate how much money districts save in the long run by closing schools, or whether there are savings at all. Savings have been documented in some cases due to building sales and decreased building maintenance costs. However, as noted in RFA's previous brief, typically savings are only substantial if closures are coupled with large-scale layoffs.[42]

Existing research and media reports suggest that savings are often overestimated while additional costs—such as for transportation and preparing receiving schools to accommodate students from closed buildings—are underestimated.[43] School building sales can generate less revenue than initially projected, and if resale proves challenging, buildings may be left vacant for years. These vacant buildings often require continued maintenance and even surveillance, creating additional costs for surrounding communities.[44]

## 3. How do school closures impact broader communities?

Closed schools are not evenly distributed across the country, within states, or even locally within cities or regions.[45] For example, school closures disproportionately occur in segregated, low-income, communities of color.[46] Tieken & Auldridge-Reveles[47] label this uneven geographical distribution as spatial injustice.[48]

Recent research has centered the perspectives and experiences of individuals from these most impacted communities. While the findings are not generalizable and may not represent the entire range of experiences in any given community, studies have examined broader impacts in several areas.

- **Community Cohesion**: Beyond serving as places of learning, public schools are anchoring institutions that foster social ties and play a vital role in how communities view themselves and their histories. School closures are often disruptive events that can harm community cohesion and a sense of belonging among residents.[49] Ewing[50] argues that for communities that have long been socially marginalized, school closures can prompt what she calls "institutional mourning."[51] For rural communities, closures can be devastating since schools often function as providers of basic services, such as child and health care, and centers for local entertainment and recreation.[52]

- **Civic Engagement**: Some studies have documented a loss of civic engagement among community members following closures since schools often serve as gateways for community involvement and participation in democratic decision-making. A study on the 2013 Chicago Public School closures found that some parents did not engage as actively in their children's new school because they felt excluded from participation or demoralized following the shuttering.[53] Similar disruptive phenomena have been documented in rural communities, although the literature is not as expansive.[54]

- **Economic Impact**: A few studies have demonstrated that closures can lead to a decline in the value of neighborhood homes, property tax revenues, public investment, and population.[55] Kai Schafft, the director of Penn State's Center on Rural Education and Communities, argues that, in rural areas, school closings bring additional community costs in the form of transit expenses, stunted economic activity, and reduced housing values.[56]

- **Gentrification**: Conversely, some studies have shown an association between school closures and increased housing costs as part of the gentrification process in urban areas.[57] For example, Pearman[58] found that school closures increased the probability that, and the extent to which, highly segregated Black neighborhoods experienced gentrification. Gentrification and closures often go hand in hand, as new residents with fewer children and/or children who will not attend the public schools move into an area, which decreases public school enrollment.[59]

- **Crime**: The literature on the impact of school closure on crime is limited, although a 2020 Chicago study found a short-term reduction in violent and non-violent offenses in the vicinity of the closed school, regardless of whether the building was left vacant or repurposed. Meanwhile, the neighborhood receiving students from closed schools experienced a long-term increase in crime over a larger geographic area, which supports community arguments that closures forced students to travel long distances across dangerous territories controlled by rival gangs.[60] A 2018 Philadelphia study similarly found a 15% reduction in crime in neighborhoods of closed schools, particularly high schools, and a smaller uptick in crime in receiving neighborhoods, resulting in an overall net reduction in crime.[61]

## Additional Historical Context: School Closures in Black Communities

As discussed in Part 1, school closures disproportionately impact Black students. This continues a long history of Black communities experiencing asymmetrical trauma from closures, irrespective of their intent.  A conceptual paper by Morris, Parker & Negrón[62] outlines specific waves or eras of targeted attacks on Black people and communities that led to closure of education institutions, including:

- The **denial of formal schooling** in most places (anti-literacy laws) and underground education efforts by Black people during the Civil War era.

- The **rise of anti-Black violence and domestic terrorism** during Reconstruction when formal, systemized public education for Black people became available. The Harvard Library reports more than 630 southern Black schools were significantly damaged or destroyed between 1864 and 1876.

- The **implementation of desegregation** leading to the "overwhelming closing of Black schools" during the civil rights era. It also led to disproportionate busing of Black students and to many Black teachers being pushed out of the profession.

- **White flight** to suburban areas and policy changes shifting power from city to state governments leading to disinvestment in Black urban areas and impacting institutions from schools to public housing. Over time, this disinvestment prompted the demolition of many public housing projects while facilitating poor conditions in schools, laying the groundwork for current justifications for school closures, under-enrollment and "under performance."[63]

Black people have historically resisted these efforts to undermine their educational institutions through disinvestment and closure. However, many closure decisions continue to be made with little to no regard for the struggles Black community members endured to open and sustain these institutions, from covering initial land and construction costs to organizing and protesting for better conditions to the legacy of Black educators many of these schools are named after.[64]

## 4.  How have districts involved community members in school closure decisions?

Many school closure decisions have been enacted with little or no community involvement, and few states[65] require districts to more closely involve parents and families in the decision-making process (see call out box on Pennsylvania's Legal Requirements for Closing a Public School). Some studies of mass school closures in large, urban districts—the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) from 2011-2013, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) in 2013, and New York in 2010—have examined community involvement efforts from the perspectives of disproportionately impacted residents in low-income, urban communities of color who were engaged in efforts to resist closures.[66]

The most documented approach to involve community members in closure decisions has been to **convene public hearings** for them to provide comments and ask questions of the district's governing body. Studies found several limitations with this approach, including that hearings often:

- Exclude participation due to insufficient notice, conflict with the schedules of working parents, and lack accommodations for those with limited English proficiency.[67]
- Provide inadequate time for parent comments and lack a deliberative process to address concerns raised.[68]
- Limit parameters, with community input having little to no impact on districts' proposed lists of closings which were already based on data such as enrollment numbers, physical condition, and test scores.[69]

Several studies found that opponents of closures within communities of color believed that closure decisions had been predetermined based on data that ignored the historical context of segregation and chronic underfunding, and that public hearings did not represent collaborative, democratic decision-making where community members could influence the outcome.[70] Media reports have similarly noted that community members often criticize engagement efforts as lacking transparency and involving community members too late to allow for meaningful participation and input.[71]

## Pennsylvania Legal Requirements for Closing a Public School

Pennsylvania law provides few obstacles to a school district seeking to close one of its schools. Courts have found PA students are not entitled to educational services "at the school of one's choice."[72] Beyond illegal discrimination, districts can close a public school for virtually any reason. Where legal requirements exist, they are often process-related and relatively simple to meet. For example, a school district's governing school board must merely:

- Notify the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) and include reasons for closing and how the closing "contributes to the orderly development of attendance areas." 22 Pa. Code § 349.28
- Provide residents 15 days advance notice of one public hearing.  24 PS § 7-780.
- Provide 60 days advance written notice to impacted employees. 24 PS § 5-524.
- Ensure impacted students are provided with other public schooling arrangements. 24 PS § 13-1311.

Courts have not held districts to any specific evidentiary burden or recognized any rights of appeal for families, teachers, or others in the community. The entire process can happen within a few months. Importantly, closing a school does not relieve a school district of its federal responsibilities to students, including to provide special education and services for students experiencing homelessness.

Note the legal process and evidentiary burdens for closing charter schools are significantly more extensive, costly, and time-consuming.

# Part 3: Considerations for District Leaders and Policymakers

Research on school closures is a developing field, and it is hard to evaluate closure decisions in isolation as school district leaders are often facing a complicated array of issues. Some closures may be unavoidable. In some instances, if approached through intentional planning with equity concerns front and center, school closing decisions may even create opportunities for a district to improve a broken system. Below we highlight several considerations from the field to help district leaders and policymakers better make and implement school closure decisions. Specifically, decision-makers should:

## 1. Carefully examine the factors considered when weighing school closure decisions.

The unfortunate reality is that while research and community advocacy groups have further documented the negative impact school closure policies can and have historically had on students and communities of color, school closure decisions are still driven primarily by fiscal constraints, accountability measures, and building conditions[73] (see our 2013 brief for more details on decision-making processes and factors commonly considered, which have not substantially changed over the past decade). Research has shown that cost-saving expectations for school closings are often overly optimistic, while new systemic costs are underestimated. Likewise, impacts on displaced and receiving students, staff, and the broader communities are often context specific and may lead to unintended consequences. The decisions largely ignore or minimize other important factors and equity concerns.

For this reason, decision-makers should broaden the factors they consider when choosing whether to close schools and which schools to close beyond legal requirements. Khalifa et al.[74] recommend that school administrators in receiving schools:

- Seek to understand the history, culture, and experiences of incoming students and how they might perceive administrative actions.
- Consider the broader community context when taking administrative actions.
- Critique internal practices to avoid inadvertently reinforcing racism.

## 2. Provide adequate time and support to prepare for transitions following closure.

Research focused on Chicago's 2013 closures found impacted staff and students wished for more support and training dealing with logistical challenges, more care and effort in moving supplies, greater investments and attention to receiving schools in a timely manner, more thoughtful efforts to bring principals together throughout the transition process, and longer-term funding to keep support staff and upgrade technology in receiving schools. Scholars note that the level of care stakeholders perceive officials putting into the planning process is critical to cultivating trust and mutual respect.[75]

## 3. Ensure displaced students are sent to higher quality schools.

As discussed in Part 1, positive impacts of school closures are generally only found when displaced students are provided schools that are of higher quality than the closed schools. One study outlined[76] how displaced students should also be connected to specific teachers or school personnel who "can provide supplemental academic support to meet higher expectations in the new school." An investigation of NYC's school closures recognized that "reforms did not eradicate achievement gaps between student subgroups," but the

reassigned students did end up attending higher-performing schools. This finding is important for decision-making as even after sending displaced students to higher performing schools districts need to ensure students can access the educational opportunities and supports within that higher quality school.[77]

## 4. Involve students and families in the decision-making process and consider the sociohistorical context of the school and broader community in that process.

Districts should provide robust opportunities for meaningful community input before final decisions are made, that are not limited to the bare minimal legal requirements. Some researchers[78] explain that, particularly for high school students, "Facilitating youth and community involvement increases the possibility that such a decision is not perceived as coerced and that students will have more time to be strategic about where they choose to transfer."

## 5. Continue to invest in future research.

As discussed, there is a lack of research examining the purported savings of school closures, despite budgetary reasons commonly being used to justify closure decisions. The existing research is mixed on the impact of school closures, often lacking historical context and finding wide variation in their effects. Ongoing research can continue to uncover conditions that lead to student success in school closure decisions and provide more complete answers to all the questions examined in this summary. Research should also be conducted in a broader set of circumstances to examine closings by school type, quality, reason for closure, and geography. Much of the literature focuses on large urban closures with little attention paid to suburban and rural school closings.[79] Additionally, most studies focus on the impact of displaced students, but future research should also investigate the effect closures have on rising cohorts after the policy change alters the schools they attend within a district.

# Endnotes

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**RESEARCH FOR ACTION**