



SCHOOL CLOSURES: WHEN A SCHOOL IS MORE THAN JUST A SCHOOL



In a new short film produced by the *Partnership for the Future of Learning*, Chicago activist Irene Robinson describes the many ways that her children's school was more than just a school: "We cooked there. We had holiday meals there with the children and the parents. We had GED classes in our school for the parents."

The film, *Kings and Queens*, tracks the impact of school closures in Chicago, which five years ago closed roughly **50 schools housing 12,000 students**. It was the largest school closure in an American city. Robinson speaks to the hidden costs of losing so many institutions all at once. These costs are sometimes not obvious—like losing the sense of community that schools foster and create, or leaving children with a false sense that the schools closed because, as Robinson puts it, the students are "too dumb."

A recent **commentary in the New York Times** highlights NEPC research on another problem with school closures: They don't work. Proponents of the mass closures in Chicago touted them as opportunities for students to move from troubled schools (being shut down) to better learning environments where their achievement would improve. Yet **research reviewed by NEPC** authors Gail L. Sunderman, Erin Coghlan, and Rick Mintrop noted that even when students transferred from closing schools to schools with higher test scores, achievement still dropped in the first year and improved only slightly after that. Moreover, the reality is that students do not necessarily transfer to a school with higher test scores. In fact, **one study** reviewed by Sunderman, Coghlan and Mintrop found that only six percent of students in a sample of 18 Chicago elementary schools transferred into the top quartile of schools. By contrast, 40 percent enrolled in schools that were on probation, and 42 percent enrolled in schools that scored in the lowest quartile on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills.

These harmful school closures are not necessary. In a report entitled **Democratic School Turnarounds**, Tina Trujillo, Michelle Renée Valladares, and Tara Kini offer recommenda-

tions for school improvement that do not entail school closures. These include:

- Focus school turnaround policies on improving the quality of teaching and learning rather than on technical-structural changes.
- Engage a broad cross-section of schools' communities—teachers, students, parents, and community organizations—in planning and implementing turnaround strategies that are tailored to each school and district context.
- Surround struggling schools with comprehensive, wrap-around supports that stabilize schools and communities.
- Increase current federal and state spending for public education, particularly as it is allocated for turnaround-style reforms.
- Incorporate multiple indicators of effectiveness—apart from test scores—that reflect the multiple purposes of schools.
- Support ongoing, systematic research, evaluation, and dissemination examining all aspects of turnaround processes in schools and districts.

Valladares also writes about Chicago school closures [in this piece](#) for the *Washington Post's Answer Sheet*.

NEPC Resources on School Reform and Restructuring

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