



DOES CLOSING SCHOOLS PAY OFF?



Oakland, California is hemorrhaging schools. As many as a third of the district's 76 schools **could close** in the next five years, according to an announcement made at a November school board meeting. In fact, this is **not the first time** in recent memory that the district has closed schools.

The closures are expected to save money in a district with declining enrollment and a **\$30 million shortfall**. The shortfall has already forced cutbacks in funding for sports teams, and school librarians—driving many school libraries to close. **For years**, Oakland's finances have been in disarray, with a state takeover only worsening the problem.

Oakland Superintendent Kyla Johnson-Trammell **has said** that the closures will help the district provide a better education by concentrating money in a smaller set of schools. "At the end of the day this isn't about saving a dollar, it's about how we can strategically reduce our footprint and increase quality, because that is really the call from many of our parents and students." Similar thinking can be found in other school districts, such as **Chicago, Washington, DC and Detroit**.

But does closing schools really save money? Does it improve education?

Not necessarily, according to research in a **policy brief** recently published by the National Education Policy Center. In *School Closure as a Strategy to Remedy Low Performance*, Gail Sunderman of the University of Maryland, and Erin Coghlan and Rick Mintrop of the University of California, Berkeley, conclude that closures are "a high-risk/low-gain strategy that fails to hold promise with respect to either student achievement or non-cognitive well-being." Sunderman, Coghlan and Mintrop found that closures don't necessarily result in students transferring to higher performing schools. In addition, the transfer itself can set students back as they adapt to new environments.

School closures also often fail to deliver promised cost savings, the brief's authors note. That's because closures come with hidden costs such as mothballing buildings, transporting students to schools that are farther from their homes, and renovating receiving schools to accommodate additional enrollment.

It remains to be seen how, if and when school closures will impact Oakland. But research suggests that closures are not the silver bullet they may initially appear to be.

NEPC Resources on School Reform and Restructuring

NEPC in the News

- *EdWeek Market Brief: Educators as Ed-Tech Company Brand Ambassadors Raises Ethical, Policy Questions, Report Finds.* January 17, 2019
 - *The Washington Post: New York City offers some unpleasant truths about school improvement.* January 7, 2019
 - *Chalkbeat Indiana: Indiana online schools have success lobbying lawmakers despite dismal academics.* January 4, 2019
-

This newsletter is made possible in part by support provided by the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice: <http://www.greatlakescenter.org>

The National Education Policy Center (NEPC), housed at the University of Colorado Boulder School of Education, produces and disseminates high-quality, peer-reviewed research to inform education policy discussions. Visit us at: <http://nepc.colorado.edu>