



# NEPC

NATIONAL EDUCATION  
POLICY CENTER

## SCHOOL CLOSURE AS A STRATEGY TO REMEDY LOW PERFORMANCE

*Gail L. Sunderman*

University of  
Maryland

*Erin Coghlan*

University of California,  
Berkeley

*Rick Mintrop*

University of California,  
Berkeley

May 2017

---

### National Education Policy Center

School of Education, University of Colorado Boulder  
Boulder, CO 80309-0249  
(802) 383-0058  
[nepc.colorado.edu](http://nepc.colorado.edu)



This brief is made possible in part by funding from the Great Lakes  
Center for Education Research and Practice: [greatlakescenter.org](http://greatlakescenter.org)



**Kevin Welner**

*Project Director*

**William Mathis**

*Managing Director*

**Don Weitzman**

*Academic Editor*

**Alex Molnar**

*Publishing Director*

Briefs published by the National Education Policy Center (NEPC) are blind peer-reviewed by members of the Editorial Review Board. Find NEPC publications at <http://nepc.colorado.edu>. NEPC editorial board: <http://nepc.colorado.edu/editorial-board>.

**Suggested Citation:**

Sunderman, G.L., Coghlan, E., & Mintrop, R. (2017). *School Closure as a Strategy to Remedy Low Performance*. Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center. Retrieved [date] from <http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/closures>

# SCHOOL CLOSURE AS A STRATEGY TO REMEDY LOW PERFORMANCE

*Gail L. Sunderman, University of Maryland*  
*Erin Coghlan, University of California, Berkeley*  
*Rick Mintrop, University of California, Berkeley*

---

## Executive Summary

This brief investigates whether closing schools and transferring students for the purpose of remedying low performance is an option educational decision makers should pursue.

The logic of closing schools in response to low student performance goes like this: By closing low-performing schools and sending students to better-performing ones, student achievement will improve. The new, higher-performing schools will give transfer students access to higher-quality peer and teacher networks, which in turn will have a beneficial effect on academic outcomes. The threat of closure may motivate low-performing schools (and their districts) to improve in order to preempt school closure.

To investigate this logic, we draw on an evidence base that consists of peer-reviewed research studies and well-researched policy reports, but relatively few of these exist for school closures. We ask:

1. How often do school closings occur and for what reasons?
2. What is the impact on students of closing schools for reasons of performance?
3. What is the impact of closing schools on the public school system in which closure has taken place?
4. What is the impact of school closures on students of various ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, and on local communities and neighborhoods?

## Recommendations

The relatively limited evidence base suggests that school closures are not a promising strategy for remedying low student performance.

- Even though school closures have dramatically increased, jurisdictions largely shun the option of “closure and transfer” in the context of the federal School Improvement Grant (SIG) program. Policy and district actors should treat the infrequency of this turnaround option as a caution.
- School closures have at best weak and decidedly mixed benefits; at worst they have detrimental repercussions for students if districts do not ensure that seats at higher-performing schools are available for transfer students. In districts where such assignments are in short or uncertain supply, “closure and transfer” is a decidedly undesirable option.

- School closures seem to be a challenge for transferred students in non-academic terms for at least one or two years. While school closures are not advisable for a school of any grade span, they are especially inadvisable for middle school students because of the shorter grade span of such schools.
- The available evidence on the effects of school closings for their local system tells a cautionary note. There are costs associated with closing buildings and transferring teachers and students, which reduce the available resources for the remaining schools. Moreover, in cases where teachers are not rehired under closure-and-restart models, there may be broader implications for the diversity of the teaching workforce. Closing schools to consolidate district finances or because of declining enrollments may be inevitable at times, but closing solely for performance has unanticipated consequences that local and state decision makers should be aware of.
- School closures are often accompanied by political conflict. Closures tend to differentially affect low-income communities and communities of color that are politically disempowered, and closures may work against the demand of local actors for more investment in their local institutions.

In conclusion, school closures as a strategy for remedying student achievement in low-performing schools is a high-risk/low-gain strategy that fails to hold promise with respect to either student achievement or non-cognitive well-being. It causes political conflict and incurs hidden costs for both districts and local communities, especially low-income communities of color that are differentially affected by school closings. It stands to reason that in many instances, students, parents, local communities, district and state policymakers may be better off investing in persistently low-performing schools rather than closing them.

# SCHOOL CLOSURE AS A STRATEGY TO REMEDY LOW PERFORMANCE

## Introduction

Accountability policies in education—most prominent in federal laws such as the newly enacted Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), or the former No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)—have trained the spotlight on schools that are identified as the lowest performing based mainly on standardized test scores. Included in the federal and state reforms that have been enacted to “turn around” these low-performing schools is the option to simply close the doors of persistently failing schools and send their students elsewhere. Traditionally, districts have pursued the option of school closure when declining enrollment or concerns about school size and fiscal efficiency led to school and district consolidation<sup>1</sup>. The option of closing schools as a mechanism to improve student achievement and school quality is relatively new.

School closure has been advanced as a reform policy at the federal level through mechanisms such as the School Improvement Grants (SIG) program, which provides targeted grants to states and schools that use school closure as a strategy to lift student performance.<sup>2</sup> At the state level, Louisiana, Michigan, and Tennessee have experimented with state takeover of academically failing schools by instituting special state-run school districts that have the option to close schools<sup>3</sup>. At the local level, so-called parent-trigger laws enacted across seven states allow parents to petition to change school governance and staffing, or in some cases, close the doors of low-performing schools.<sup>4</sup> Such policies focus the public eye on low-performing schools and have the potential to lead to school closure, but other factors such as state policies that broaden access to charter schools<sup>5</sup> may also contribute to declining enrollment in traditional public schools and thereby to an increase in school closures, especially in urban areas.<sup>6</sup>

The logic of closing schools for reasons of student performance goes like this: by closing low-performing schools and sending their students to better-performing schools, student achievement will improve. The new, higher-performing schools will give the transfer students access to higher-quality peer and teacher networks, which will have a beneficial effect on academic outcomes.<sup>7</sup> In theory, the threat of closure will motivate low-performing schools (and their districts) to improve. The reality, our review of research finds, is more complex and nuanced. School closures are difficult to implement well, putting their purported beneficial effect in doubt.

Supporters of school closure and student transfer programs argue that it is a matter of urgency to close failing schools and transfer students into better-performing ones, and claim this urgency is rooted in a quest for equalizing opportunities to learn.<sup>8</sup> Critics emphasize that closing schools most often impacts low-income and minority communities in large urban cities in a jolting process of “shock therapy,” noting that closures often undermine democratic localism and community involvement while doing little to improve student achieve-

ment.<sup>9</sup>

This policy brief reviews the existing literature on public school closures. We make policy recommendations based on the research findings to date for policymakers who may be considering closures as an option to improve academic performance. We review research studies that address what happens when schools are closed and students are sent elsewhere, including research on schools closed for low performance and schools closed because of declining enrollment. We do not review cases where schools are closed and “reopened” under another operator, such as a charter school, nor do we focus on charter school closures. The research base is small, especially with respect to peer-reviewed sources. While we give preferential consideration to peer-reviewed research, we also include findings from policy reports by think tanks and policy centers that ground conclusions on strong evidence-based criteria. Specifically, we address four questions:

1. How often do school closings occur and for what reasons?
2. What is the impact on students of closing schools for reasons of performance?
3. What is the impact of closing schools in the public school system in which closure has taken place?
4. What is the impact of school closures on students of various ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, and on local communities and neighborhoods?

## Review of the Literature

### *1. How often do school closings occur and for what reasons?*

The number of public school closures per year has nearly doubled since 1995.<sup>10</sup> Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) show that throughout the 1990s, school closures across the country averaged fewer than 1,000 per year, but following the passage of NCLB that number increased dramatically, with an average of 1,500-2,000 closures annually since the early 2000s. Using the NCES data, researchers from the Urban Institute found that since the early 2000’s, about 2% of U.S. schools are closed each year and never reopened, affecting more than 200,000 students annually.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, they found that in the 2012-13 school year, over 53% of school closures occurred in suburban districts, 26% in rural areas, and 21% in urban areas.

This proliferation of school closures may be attributed to federal, state and local policy initiatives. At the federal level, school closure was first incorporated into education policy in 2001 when the Federal Government reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB). NCLB outlined a new School Improvement Grant (SIG) program that provided financial incentives for low-performing schools and districts to implement one of four strategies prescribed by the legislation. In the “turnaround”

strategy, school leadership and faculty would be fundamentally reconfigured; in the “transformation” strategy, schools would implement a more stringent performance management system for teachers and administrators; in the “restart” strategy, underperforming schools would be temporarily closed and reopened under new governance (e.g., charter school operators); lastly, in a school “closure and transfer” strategy, schools would be closed and their students sent elsewhere.

According to U.S. Department of Education data, the school “closure and transfer” strategy was the least popular and least-used option by SIG grantees, accounting for less than 2% of all grants awarded to schools over three years.<sup>12</sup> Federal grants for school closures went to just 21 schools in the states of California, Colorado, Missouri, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Virginia, Washington, and Wisconsin between 2010-11 and 2012-13.<sup>13</sup>

While school closure was the least used SIG strategy under NCLB, it is possible that school closures will continue to be used as a reform policy under the newly enacted Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which replaces NCLB. ESSA mandates that states intervene in the lowest-performing schools that fail to improve over time, but it gives states flexibility to design their own accountability policies to regulate school and student performance.<sup>14</sup> Several states have indicated that they may continue to use school closure or charter conversion as school improvement strategies in their next-generation accountability plans.<sup>15</sup>

At the state level, states have included the option to close schools as an improvement strategy in special state-run school districts. The intent of special school districts is to give the state the authority to intervene in low-performing schools (often, those schools in the bottom five percent of statewide performance) and to override local school board decisions.<sup>16</sup> Often, state-run school districts authorize “turnaround” strategies similar to those outlined in the federal SIG program, such as replacing the principal and/or teachers, transferring the school

*Several states have indicated that they may continue to use school closure or charter conversion as school improvement strategies.*

to a charter operator, or simply closing the door of a low-performing school and sending students elsewhere. The states of Louisiana, Michigan, and Tennessee were the first to create such districts, but the reform has been introduced in other states, including Arkansas, Georgia, Nevada, and Pennsylvania.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, policies at the local level such as “parent trigger laws” that operate in

California, Connecticut, Indiana, Louisiana, Mississippi, Ohio, and Texas give parents the ability to petition for the implementation of similar SIG strategies when they are dissatisfied with their local school’s performance.<sup>18</sup> While special state-run school districts and parent trigger laws may contribute to the rising number of school closures, we found no conclusive data that quantifies the closures resulting from such reforms.

Other factors that may influence school closure, especially in urban areas, include declining enrollments in traditional public schools<sup>19</sup> and increasing enrollments in charter schools.<sup>20</sup> The increasing enrollment in charter schools often entails lost revenue for traditional public schools, which may trigger further closures.<sup>21</sup> However, this point should be interpreted with caution. Other factors, such as overall declining state spending on public education<sup>22</sup> or demographic changes and geographic mobility between districts<sup>23</sup> may also lead to school

closures. As noted earlier, an analysis of school closures in the 2012-13 school year found that the majority occurred in suburban and rural areas.<sup>24</sup> There is no conclusive empirical evidence yet that points to the causes of school closure in non-urban areas.

*In sum, public school closures have dramatically increased, but the use of the “closure and transfer” option as a strategy to deal with poor test performance of schools is very infrequent.*

## **2. What is the effect of school closure and transfer on students?**

### *Student academic performance*

There are only a few studies addressing the impact of school closure on students, and the evidence from this research is mixed. We identified four studies (three are peer-reviewed, and one is from a university-based research center) that analyze student achievement data to determine whether performance improved for students who moved to new schools after their home school closed. Three of the studies focused on urban elementary and middle schools,<sup>25</sup> while one focused on an urban high school.<sup>26</sup> These results should be interpreted with caution, given the paucity of research examining how school closure impacts different types of schools (elementary, middle, or high school) in different areas (urban, suburban, or rural).

The schools in these studies were designated for closure at the end of one school year, with their students transferred to another school the following academic year. Closure decisions were based on a mix of factors, such as the overall condition of the school buildings, location, and enrollment, but the studies report that district officials often chose to make student achievement a major factor in determining which schools to close. In each of the four studies, increases in student achievement for displaced students are possible only if displaced students are transferred to higher-performing schools. However, important nuances complicate this finding.

Three of these studies highlight student achievement in the year directly leading up to school closure, including after the closures were announced. Using longitudinal statewide student-level administrative data of test scores for all students in grades 3-8, Brummet<sup>27</sup> analyzed over 200 elementary and middle school closures in Michigan, finding that student math scores dropped during the last year the school was open compared to the three years prior to closure. De la Torre & Gwynne<sup>28</sup> use student test scores from displaced students at 18 elementary schools in Chicago, and also look at test scores from a comparison group. These authors found similar results to Brummet, noting that the school closures caused significant stress in the lives of students and teachers, with negative effects on both reading and math scores during the last year of school operation. In both the Brummet and de la Torre & Gwynne studies, the authors identified students who exited the public school system after the closure decision was made. While both studies found that some students enrolled in charter or private schools and some families moved out of their school district, the major-



ity of students re-enrolled in another public school.

In a 2010 study, Kirschner and colleagues<sup>29</sup> find similar results. Looking at school closure in one large urban high school in the southwest, they compared longitudinal student standardized achievement scores from students in a closed high school (the “treatment group”) with those of two groups: students who attended the high school in years prior to closure, and all students in the district who never attended the closed high school. They found that test scores in both reading and math began to drop for the treatment group compared to the comparison groups after the closure was decided. Moreover, Kirschner and colleagues found increased dropout rates and a significant decline in graduation rates after closure had been announced compared to the non-treatment groups.

These studies reveal unintended “fadeout” effects during the last year(s) that the underperforming schools were in operation, ranging from a drop in test scores to changes in dropout and graduation rates at the high school level. The findings indicate that school closure may have detrimental unintended consequences for students during the last years that a school remains open prior to its closure.

*Students are not necessarily transferred to better schools.*

These studies also examine what happens to student achievement after students are transferred to new schools. Even if they’re transferred to higher-performing schools, several studies found that transfer students experienced a drop in achievement during their first year at the new school. Math and reading scores tend to improve in years two and three after the transfer to a higher-performing school, but these gains tend to be marginal and not significantly different from their expected level of learning had those students not transferred.<sup>30</sup> The studies also found modest negative “spillover” effects on achievement at the receiving schools, meaning that the influx of new students had adverse effects on the math and reading test scores of students in the receiving schools, although these effects were not always statistically significant.

In addition, students are not necessarily transferred to better schools. De la Torre & Gwynne<sup>31</sup> found that only 6% of students in their sample of 18 Chicago elementary schools transferred into the top quartile of schools. In fact, 40% of displaced students enrolled in schools that were on probation, and 42% enrolled in schools that scored in the lowest quartile on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills. Often, because there are no higher-performing schools within the neighborhood or local community, displaced students transfer to schools of equal or lower performance<sup>32</sup>. On a positive note, when the Chicago Public School district chose to close an additional 43 elementary schools in 2013, they assigned students to higher-performing schools in the district (district officials were influenced by the findings from the 2009 de la Torre & Gwynne report), resulting in 93% of displaced students attending a receiving school that was better than their closed school.<sup>33</sup> To date, there has been no follow-up research on the academic outcomes of the Chicago students who transferred to higher-performing schools.

Lastly, in a 2015 report from the Research Alliance for New York City Schools, Kemple<sup>34</sup> examines high school closures that occurred as a “phase-out” process where students are given

the option of remaining in their school until graduation or transferring before then (as was the case in the studies reviewed above). Analyzing data on 29 high school closures in New York City, Kemple found that there were no adverse effects on the academic performance of students who remained in schools slated to be “phased out” over time. Moreover, when these low-performing high schools were ultimately closed, it forced middle school students to choose alternatives and many ended up going to higher-performing schools, which led to modest improvements in attendance, progress towards graduation, and graduation rates.

*In sum, based on a limited number of rigorous studies, school closures have at best weak and decidedly mixed benefits, while at worst they have detrimental repercussions for students if districts do not ensure that seats at higher-performing schools are available for transfer students. In districts in which such assignments are in short or uncertain supply, “closure and transfer” is a decidedly undesirable option.*

### *Other school factors*

The 2009 Chicago elementary school closure study conducted by de la Torre & Gwynne<sup>35</sup> has the most extensive research on other school factors affected by school closure, further complicating the picture of what happens to daily student life when local neighborhood schools close. For instance, the authors found that displaced students were about twice as likely as students in a comparison group to change schools a second time after enrolling in a receiving school. Moreover, using survey data the authors determined the degree to which students perceived that their teachers at the transfer schools gave them individualized attention and the degree to which they trusted their relationship with new teachers. The survey data found that students experienced an initial drop in both perceived teacher personal attention and student-teacher trust when they first transferred, and that these measures did not improve until the end of the first school year. The school closures, however, did not influence whether or not students were retained in-grade at higher rates in their receiving school than students in the comparison group, nor were there significant changes in special education referrals for displaced students at their receiving school. Students who transferred at the end of their eighth grade year were just as likely to be on-track to graduate high school at the end of their freshman year in their new school as students in a comparison group. The study by Engberg and colleagues<sup>36</sup> found a significant spike in student absenteeism for displaced students during the first year of transfer.

In the Chicago study, de la Torre & Gwynne also noted the transportation challenges that displaced students encountered. They cite several contemporary newspaper articles highlighting a surge in teen violence as students crossed rival gang lines in order to get to their transfer school. Other authors have also addressed issues associated with transportation, such as the financial burden on low-income families paying for public transportation, the limited ability of displaced students to participate in afterschool programs and sports, and the challenge for students to hold down an afterschool job if commuting to school becomes a significant time commitment.<sup>37</sup>

*In sum, again based on a few studies, it seems that school closures are a challenge for transferred students in terms of a variety of other school factors at least the initial one or two years. At least for middle school students, because of the shorter grade span, school closures are therefore inadvisable.*

### **3. What is the effect of school closure on the local school systems where they occur?**

Closing schools is likely to affect how resources are distributed and used within districts, how staffing decisions are made, and how the system as a whole operates. Because studies that investigate the effect of “closure and transfer” on school systems are rare, we reviewed research on closing underutilized schools in major urban districts and in particular, a case study of the Detroit public school system. This provided us a base from which to infer potentially positive or negative systemic consequences of closing schools for reasons of performance. Then, we briefly review the existing findings on what happens to teacher employment in local school systems once schools close.

Districts may also close and/or consolidate schools when student enrollment drops and school buildings are underutilized rather than for academic reasons. Several large urban districts have seen significant decreases in student enrollments since the early 2000s, leaving urban districts with lower per-pupil spending having to support the same number of school facilities and the fixed costs associated with running them. Such is the case in cities such as Detroit,<sup>38</sup> Chicago,<sup>39</sup> and Philadelphia.<sup>40</sup> After schools are closed for underutilization, the school building may be transferred to a charter or private school operator and reopened several years later, but it is also common for school buildings to be repurposed or sold for office space, homeless shelters, or churches.<sup>41</sup>

In many instances, the closed school building is either abandoned or eventually demolished. In an examination of 12 large urban districts, the Pew Charitable Trust<sup>42</sup> found that since 2005, these districts have sold, leased, or reused 267 properties, but still own at least 300 closed school facilities that remain vacant, some of which have remained empty for a decade or more. When districts successfully sell the property, the Pew study found, it often sells well below valuation.

A case study of Detroit, where nearly 200 schools have closed since 2000, provides a closer look at the costs of school closure on local school systems.<sup>43</sup> While the district’s original plan for school closure anticipated large cost savings, the district experienced several “hidden costs.” The district spent millions of dollars on expenses such as boarding up and securing closed buildings and accommodating the transfer of students to new schools. Moreover, textbooks, furniture, and computer equipment left in abandoned schools required an additional \$4.5 million in 2008 to clear out closed school buildings and store and maintain the supplies. In some cases, after closing a school, the district spent additional resources to accommodate the integration of students into new schools, investing in renovations or new construction at the absorbing school. Ironically, a few schools that received multimil-

lion-dollar renovations ended up closing a few years later; between 1999 and 2012, the Detroit public schools spent over \$78 million upgrading schools that were later closed. It also costs the district about \$50,000 a year per closed school to cover costs associated with water pipe maintenance, police responses to break-ins, and miscellaneous repairs. Thus, the district experienced relatively little overall savings. Moreover, after closing schools, student enrollment in traditional public schools continued to decline as parents chose to remove their students from the district or enroll them in private or charter schools, which continued the vicious cycle of revenue loss for public schools. In a 2007 study of several Michigan school districts, Coulson found that school consolidation across the state more often results in greater rather than fewer costs to districts.<sup>44</sup> After closing schools, districts spend money on transportation for students and increase spending to manage the consolidation process and cover capital construction costs. In sum, closing schools using low performance as the sole criterion may only add to the problem of surplus properties that cities and urban districts have to manage, and may lead districts to incur hidden management costs.

There are a few studies in the literature on closing schools that address the issue of teacher employment when schools close. Research from the Chicago Public School system found that teachers (often African American) affected by school closures were in almost all cases not rehired or retained in “closure and restart” models, and instead were replaced by White teachers.<sup>45</sup> If this pattern were repeated beyond the population that de la Torre and colleagues studied, it would have broad implications for the diversity of the teaching workforce. Brummet<sup>46</sup> found that when schools closed, the schools that absorbed displaced teachers saw a drop in overall performance during the first few years as teachers integrated into the school, a finding seen in other research as well.<sup>47</sup> Since research on what happens to teachers during school closures is very thin, this is an area that requires further investigation.

*In sum, the available evidence on effects of school closings for the local system in which they occur tells a cautionary note. Hidden costs for closed schools and transfers reduce the available resources for the remaining schools. Closing schools to consolidate district finances may be inevitable at times, but closures for performance reasons only may have unanticipated consequences, especially on the teaching profession, that local and state decision makers should be aware of.*

#### **4. What is the impact of school closures on students from various ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds and on local communities and neighborhoods?**

Using a national dataset, researchers from the Urban Institute<sup>48</sup> found that school closures in urban and suburban areas tend to disproportionately involve students from low-income and minority backgrounds. Within urban school closures, 61% of impacted students are African American, even though on average, African American students make up about 31% of urban school populations. This finding resonates with other reports on urban school closures.<sup>49</sup> In addition, researchers from the Urban Institute found that while Black students typically account for 14% of student enrollment in suburban schools, school closures disproportionately impact these students, who account for 29% of students in suburban closures.

In both urban and suburban areas, school closures also disproportionately impact students living in poverty. In sum, school closures tend to disproportionately affect low-income students and students of color.

School closures often generate political conflict in poor and minority neighborhoods when these communities lose neighborhood schools, especially when community members are left out of the decision-making process leading to closure.<sup>50</sup> In a 2012 ethnographic study of a Midwestern high school serving mostly African American students, Ayala & Galletta<sup>51</sup> found that community members reported weak communication channels between district and community actors as a reason for rising political tensions, as district administrators and community members saw the problem of low school performance in different ways. While parents and community members were concerned about the performance of their local school, they wanted more resources and effort invested into school improvement before resorting to school closure, a desire that was not clearly addressed by the district administrators. Briscoe & Khalifa<sup>52</sup> also found differences in perspectives between district and community actors in the proposed closure of a predominately Black urban high school. African American community members saw school closure as part of ongoing and historical racial oppression and felt that district administrators were not considering their viewpoints. In contrast, district administrators focused on school problems and declining enrollment and attempted to insulate themselves from local political conflict by employing bureaucratic communication procedures. In other research, a 2012 study of a mid-sized urban district by Finnigan & Lavner<sup>53</sup> found that higher-income community members were more successful at influencing the closure process through formal and informal mechanisms that influenced the school board decision-making process, while low-income groups had far less power to affect decisions through these channels.<sup>54</sup>

Closing schools has the most direct impact on the daily lives, academics, and social networks of students, yet their voices are often ignored in the decision-making process.<sup>55</sup> Using open-ended surveys, peer interviews, and focus groups, Kirschner and colleagues<sup>56</sup> found that students saw the closure of their high school as an unwanted externally imposed mandate. Students expressed strong connections to their home school and had developed strong relationships with teachers, other students, and the local neighborhood. Those relationships were severely disrupted when their home school closed. Students felt that they were not included in the school-closure conversation, and many questioned the rationale for the decision, noting that they did not need to be rescued from a failing school. Moreover, students reported disruptions to their peer social networks and found it difficult to fit in with the other students at the transfer school. They also felt adversely labeled by negative stereotypes they encountered in their new school.

*In sum, school closures tend to disproportionately affect low-income students and students of color. In addition, school closures are often accompanied by political conflict, often differentially affect low-income communities and communities of color, may go against the demand of local actors for more investment in their local institutions, and may be contrary to student desires.*

## Recommendations

The purpose of this policy brief is to investigate the evidence and make recommendations on the use of school closure as a strategy to remedy low student performance. Our interpretation of the relatively limited evidence base suggests that school closures are not a promising strategy for the purpose of remedying low student performance.

Our judgment is based on the following findings:

- Even though school closures have dramatically increased, jurisdictions largely shunned the option of “closure and transfer” in the context of the federal School Improvement Grant (SIG) program. Policy and district actors should treat the infrequency of this turnaround option as a caution.
- School closures have at best weak and decidedly mixed benefits; at worst they have detrimental repercussions for students if districts do not ensure that seats are available at higher-performing schools for transfer students. In districts where such assignments are in short or uncertain supply, “closure and transfer” is a decidedly undesirable option.
- School closures seem to be a challenge for transferred students in non-academic terms for at least the initial one or two years. While school closures are not advisable for a school of any grade span, they are especially inadvisable for middle schools because of the shorter grade span of such schools.
- The available evidence on the effects of school closings for the local system in which they occur tells a cautionary note. Hidden costs for closed-down buildings and transfers of teachers and students reduce the available resources and capacities for the remaining schools. Moreover, closure and restart models in which teachers are not rehired may have broader implications for the diversity of the teaching workforce. Closing schools to consolidate district finances may be inevitable at times, but closings for reasons of performance only have unanticipated consequences that local and state decision makers should be aware of.
- School closures are often accompanied by political conflict. Closures tend to differentially affect low-income, politically disempowered communities and communities of color, and closures may run against the demand of local actors for more investment in their local institutions.

In conclusion, school closures as a strategy for remedying student achievement in low-performing schools is a high-risk/low-gain strategy that fails to hold promise for improving student achievement and non-cognitive well-being. It has the tendency to cause political conflict and incur hidden costs for both districts and local communities, especially low-income communities of color that are differentially affected by school closings. In many instances, students, parents, local communities, district and state policymakers may be better off investing in persistently low-performing schools than closing them.

## Notes and References

---

- 1 Howley, C., Johnson, J., & Petrie, J. (2011, February). *Consolidation of schools and districts: What the research says and what it means*. Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center.
- 2 U.S. Department of Education (2016). School Improvement Grants. Retrieved February 1, 2017, from <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/index.html>
- 3 Duke, D. (2016). *The children left behind: America's struggle to improve its lowest performing schools*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- 4 Rogers, J., Lubienski, C., Scott, J. & Welner, K.G. (2015). Examining the parent trigger as a strategy for school reform and parental engagement. *Teachers College Record*, 117, 1-36.
- 5 Holyoke, T.T., Henig, J.R., Brown, H., & Lacireno-Paquet, N. (2009). Policy dynamics and the evolution of state charter school laws. *Policy Sciences* 42(1), 33-55.
- 6 Baker, B. (2016, November). *Exploring the consequences of charter school expansion in U.S. cities*. Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute.
- 7 Hanushek, E.A., Kain, J.F., & Rivkin, S.G. (2004). Disruption versus Tiebout improvement: The costs and benefits of switching schools. *Journal of Public Economics*, 88(9), 1721-1746.
- 8 Steiner, L. (2009). *Tough decisions: Closing persistently low-performing schools*. Lincoln, IL: Center on Innovation & Improvement.
- 9 Lipman, P. & Haines, N. (2007). From accountability to privatization and African American exclusion: Chicago's "Renaissance 2010." *Educational Policy*, 21(3), 471-502.  
  
Sunderman, G.L. & Payne, A. (2009, December). *Does closing schools cause educational harm? A review of the research*. Bethesda, MD: Mid-Atlantic Equity Center.  
  
Trujillo, T. & Renée, M. (2012, October). *Democratic school turnarounds: Pursuing equity and learning from evidence*. Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center.
- 10 U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2016). *Digest of Education Statistics, 2015* (NCES 2016-014), Chapter 2. Retrieved February 1, 2017, from <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=619>
- 11 Urban Institute (2017). *Subtracting schools from communities*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute. Retrieved April 1, 2017, from <http://www.urban.org/features/subtracting-schools-communities>
- 12 U. S. Department of Education (2015). *School Improvement Grants national summary: School year 2012-13*. Retrieved February 1, 2017, from <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/data/school-impro-grants-nat-sum-sy1213.pdf>
- 13 U.S. Department of Education (2016). *School Improvement Grants*. Retrieved February 1, 2017, from <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/index.html>
- 14 U.S. Department of Education (2017). *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)*. Retrieved February 1, 2017, from <https://www.ed.gov/essa?src=rn>
- 15 For example, see:

Massachusetts Department of Education (2017, February). *Massachusetts consolidated state plan under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)*. Retrieved March 1, 2017, from <http://www.mass.gov/edu/government/departments-and-boards/ese/programs/accountability/financial-support/title-i-and-other-federal-support-programs/essa-every-student-succeeds-act/essa-state-plan.html>

Ohio Department of Education (2017). *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)*. OH: Ohio Department of Education. Retrieved March 1, 2017, from <http://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Every-Student-Succeeds-Act-ESSA>

Tennessee Department of Education (2017). *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)*. TN: Tennessee Department of Education. Retrieved April 3, 2017, from <http://www.tennessee.gov/education/section/essa>

- 16 Duke, D. (2016). *The children left behind: America's struggle to improve its lowest performing schools*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- 17 Duke, D. (2016). *The children left behind: America's struggle to improve its lowest performing schools*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- 18 Rogers, J., Lubienski, C., Scott, J., & Welner, K.G. (2015). Examining the parent trigger as a strategy for school reform and parental engagement. *Teachers College Record*, 117, 1-36.
- 19 National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2014, December). *A growing movement: America's largest charter school communities*. Washington, DC: National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.
- 20 U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2017). *Public charter school enrollment*. Retrieved February 1, 2017, from [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator\\_cgb.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cgb.asp)
- 21 Baker, B. (2016, November). *Exploring the consequences of charter school expansion in U.S. cities*. Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute.
- 22 U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2017). *Public school revenue sources*. Retrieved February 1, 2017, from [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator\\_cma.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cma.asp)
- 23 U.S. Census Bureau (2010). *2010 Census: urban and rural classification and urban area criteria*. Retrieved February 1, 2017, from <https://www.census.gov/geo/reference/ua/urban-rural-2010.html>
- 24 Urban Institute (2017). *Subtracting schools from communities*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute. Retrieved April 1, 2017, from <http://www.urban.org/features/subtracting-schools-communities>
- 25 Brummet, Q. (2014). The effect of school closings on student achievement. *Journal of Public Economics*, 119, 108-124.  
  
de la Torre, M. & Gwynne, J. (2009, October). *When schools close: Effects on displaced students in Chicago Public Schools*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research.  
  
Engberg, J., Gill, B., Zamarro, G., & Zimmer, R. (2012). Closing schools in a shrinking district: Do student outcomes depend on which schools are closed? *Journal of Urban Economics*, 71, 189-203.
- 26 Kirshner, B., Gaertner, M. & Pozzoboni, K. (2010). Tracing transitions: The effect of high school closure on displaced students. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 32(3), 407-429.
- 27 Brummet, Q. (2014). The effect of school closings on student achievement. *Journal of Public Economics*, 119, 108-124.



- 28 de la Torre, M. & Gwynne, J. (2009, October). *When schools close: Effects on displaced students in Chicago Public Schools*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research.
- 29 Kirshner, B.; Gaertner, M. & Pozzoboni, K. (2010). Tracing transitions: The effect of high school closure on displaced students. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 32(3), 407-429.
- 30 Brummet, Q. (2014). The effect of school closings on student achievement. *Journal of Public Economics*, 119, 108-124.
- Engberg, J., Gill, B., Zamarro, G., & Zimmer, R. (2012). Closing schools in a shrinking district: Do student outcomes depend on which schools are closed? *Journal of Urban Economics*, 71, 189-203.
- de la Torre, M. & Gwynne, J. (2009, October). *When schools close: Effects on displaced students in Chicago Public Schools*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research.
- 31 de la Torre, M. & Gwynne, J. (2009, October). *When schools close: Effects on displaced students in Chicago Public Schools*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research.
- 32 See also:
- Engberg, J., Gill, B., Zamarro, G., & Zimmer, R. (2012). Closing schools in a shrinking district: Do student outcomes depend on which schools are closed? *Journal of Urban Economics*, 71, 189-203.
- 33 de la Torre, M., Gordon, M.F., Moore, P., & Cowhy, J. (2015, January). *School closings in Chicago: Understanding families' choices and constraints for new school enrollment*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research.
- 34 Kemple, J. (2015, November). *High school closures in New York City: Impacts on students' academic outcomes, attendance, and mobility*. New York, NY: The Research Alliance for New York City Schools.
- 35 de la Torre, M. & Gwynne, J. (2009, October). *When schools close: Effects on displaced students in Chicago Public Schools*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research.
- 36 Engberg, J., Gill, B., Zamarro, G., & Zimmer, R. (2012). Closing schools in a shrinking district: Do student outcomes depend on which schools are closed? *Journal of Urban Economics*, 71, 189-203.
- 37 Kirshner, B., Van Steenis, E., Pozzoboni, K., & Gaertner, M. (2016). The costs and benefits of school closure for students. In W.J. Mathis & T.M. Trujillo (Eds.), *Learning from the federal market-based reforms: Lessons for the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)* (pp. 201-215). Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing Inc.
- Weiss, E. & Long, D. (2013, April). *Market-oriented education reforms' rhetoric trumps reality: The impacts of test-based teacher evaluations, school closures, and increased charter school access on student outcomes in Chicago, New York City, and Washington, D.C.* Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute.
- 38 Grover, J. & van der Velde, Y. (2015). *A School District in Crisis: Detroit's public schools 1842-2015*. Detroit, MI: Loveland Technologies.
- 39 de la Torre, M., Allensworth, E., Jagesic, S., Sebastian, J., Salmonowicz, M., Meyers, C., & Gerdeman, R.D. (2013, February). *Turning around low-performing schools in Chicago*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research.
- 40 Pew Charitable Trusts (2013, February). *Shuttered public schools: The struggle to bring old buildings new life*. Washington, DC: Pew Charitable Trusts.

- 41 Pew Charitable Trusts (2013, February). *Shuttered public schools: The struggle to bring old buildings new life*. Washington, DC: Pew Charitable Trusts.
- 42 Pew Charitable Trusts (2013, February). *Shuttered public schools: The struggle to bring old buildings new life*. Washington, DC: Pew Charitable Trusts.
- 43 Grover, J., & van der Velde, Y. (2015). *A School District in Crisis: Detroit's public schools 1842-2015*. Detroit, MI: Loveland Technologies.
- 44 Coulson, A. (2007). *School district consolidation, size and spending: An evaluation*. Midland, MI: Mackinac Center for Public Policy.
- 45 de la Torre, M., Allensworth, E., Jagesic, S., Sebastian, J., Salmonowicz, M., Meyers, C., & Gerdeman, R.D. (2013, February). *Turning around low-performing schools in Chicago*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research.
- 46 Brummet, Q. (2014). The effect of school closings on student achievement. *Journal of Public Economics*, 119, 108-124.
- 47 Engberg, J., Gill, B., Zamarro, G., & Zimmer, R. (2012). Closing schools in a shrinking district: Do student outcomes depend on which schools are closed? *Journal of Urban Economics*, 71, 189-203.
- 48 Urban Institute (2017). *Subtracting schools from communities*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute. Retrieved April 1, 2017, from <http://www.urban.org/features/subtracting-schools-communities>
- 49 Bross, W., Harris, D.N., & Liu, L. (2016, October). *Extreme measures: When and how school closures and charter takeovers benefit students*. New Orleans: Education Research Alliance for New Orleans.
- de la Torre, M., Allensworth, E., Jagesic, S., Sebastian, J., Salmonowicz, M., Meyers, C., & Gerdeman, R.D. (2013, February). *Turning around low-performing schools in Chicago*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research.
- Grover, J., & van der Velde, Y. (2015). *A School District in Crisis: Detroit's public schools 1842-2015*. Detroit, Michigan: Loveland Technologies.
- 50 Ayala, J. & Galletta, A. (2012). Documenting disappearing spaces: Erasure and remembrance in two high school closures. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 18(2), 149-155.
- Briscoe, F.M. & Khalifa, M.A. (2015). 'That racism thing': A critical race discourse analysis of a conflict over the proposed closure of a black high school. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 18(6), 739-763.
- de la Torre, M. & Gwynne, J. (2009, October). *When schools close: Effects on displaced students in Chicago Public Schools*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research.
- Finnigan, K.S. & Lavner, M. (2012). A political analysis of community influence over school closure. *Urban Review*, 44, 133-151.
- Johnson, A.W. (2012). "Turnaround" as Shock Therapy: Race, neoliberalism, and school reform. *Urban Education*, 48(2), 232-256.
- Kretchmar, K. (2014). Democracy (in)action: A critical policy analysis of New York City public school closings by teachers, students, administrators, and community members. *Education and Urban Society*, 46(1), 3-29.
- Lipman, P. & Haines, N. (2007). From accountability to privatization and African American exclusion:

Chicago's "Renaissance 2010." *Educational Policy*, 21(3), 471-502.

- 51 Ayala, J. & Galletta, A. (2012). Documenting disappearing spaces: Erasure and remembrance in two high school closures. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 18(2), 149-155.
- 52 Briscoe, F.M. & Khalifa, M.A. (2015). 'That racism thing': A critical race discourse analysis of a conflict over the proposed closure of a black high school. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 18(6), 739-763.
- 53 Finnigan, K.S. & Lavner, M. (2012). A political analysis of community influence over school closure. *Urban Review*, 44, 133-151.
- 54 See also:
- Hess, F.M. & Leal, D. (2001). The opportunity to engage: How race, class, and institutions structure access to educational deliberation. *Educational Policy*, 15(3), 474-490.
- 55 Kretchmar, K. (2014). Democracy (in)action: A critical policy analysis of New York City public school closings by teachers, students, administrators, and community members. *Education and Urban Society*, 46(1), 3-29.
- Toneff-Cotner, G. (2015). The political and structural exclusion of student voice in the school closure process. *Journal of Peace Education and Social Justice*, 9(2), 55-65.
- 56 Kirshner, B., Gaertner, M., & Pozzoboni, K. (2010). Tracing transitions: The effect of high school closure on displaced students. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 32(3), 407-429.
- Kirshner, B. & Pozzoboni, K.M. (2011). Student interpretations of a school closure: Implications for student voice in equity-based school reform. *Teachers College Record*, 113(8), 1633-1667.