

NEPC Review: Underachieving and Underenrolled: Chronically Low-Performing Schools in the Post-Pandemic Era (Thomas B. Fordham Institute, September 2024)



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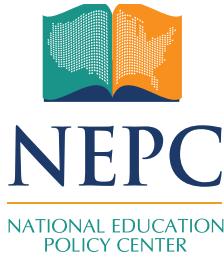
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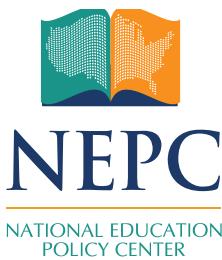
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Summary

A new Fordham Institute report argues that post-pandemic enrollment declines will inevitably force districts to make the controversial decision to close some schools. The report then offers policymakers twin criteria of substantial declines in enrollment and chronic low performance as indicators of which schools should be closed first, and it provides a 15-page appendix naming almost 500 schools it determines meet these criteria. The report suggests that closing these schools will meaningfully reduce budget deficits and improve education outcomes. However, little evidence presented in the report, or in the literature more generally, supports this contention. The report also fails to account for the broader civic and social purposes of schools, including their role in providing children with food, shelter, childcare, civic learning, health care and social services. Further, it ignores the potential harmful effects of closing schools in communities that have already experienced chronic disinvestment. For these reasons, policymakers would do best to ignore this report, specifically including its list of candidates for school closure. It offers an unfounded and oversimplified solution to highly complex challenges.



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I. Introduction

The year 2025 marks five years since the COVID-19 pandemic devastated communities and immediately shut down institutions across the globe. While the brunt of the virus's medical repercussions has weakened, the pandemic's legacies endure. One such legacy is related to its significant impact on schools. Nearly all schools across the country shut their doors early in the pandemic, but some struggled to reopen once the worst had passed.

Even before the pandemic, however, the threat of imminent mass permanent school closures existed nationwide. In 2013, for example, Chicago closed 49 schools—the most closed in a single year in U.S. history. District leaders cited underutilization, low performance and budget deficits as reasons to close schools.¹ The temporary closure of schools prompted by COVID-19 appeared to be the final nail in the coffin for districts already experiencing academic and enrollment challenges. In this context, the Fordham Institute released a report, *Underachieving and Underenrolled: Chronically Low-Performing Schools in the Post-Pandemic Era*, by Sofoklis Goulas, that argues that post-pandemic enrollment declines will inevitably force districts to make the controversial decision to close some schools.

II. Findings and Conclusion of the Report

The report measures enrollment declines by calculating the percentage of schools that lost 20% or more of their student population. This calculus is made using publicly accessible data from the National Council for Education Statistics (NCES). Similarly, chronic under-

performance is measured by using the Federal Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI) list of low-performing schools.

Using these criteria, the report concludes that one in 12 schools (5,100) experienced substantial enrollment declines in the three years following the pandemic, with CSI schools being twice as likely to have experienced such declines than non-CSI schools. Further, compared to non-CSI schools, CSI schools found to be underenrolled as well as underperforming were more likely to be charter operated (9% vs. 4%), located in an urban area (47% vs. 25%), and in a high-poverty neighborhood (69% vs 36%).

Based on these calculations, the report identifies and lists by state 500 schools as potential candidates for closure.

III. The Report's Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

The report is guided by a few critical assumptions. It assumes that closing schools will reduce budget deficits and improve academic outcomes for students. It also assumes that schools that have experienced post-pandemic enrollment decline of 20% or more should be closed, if they are also low performing. More generally, it emphasizes schools' academic purpose to the exclusion of their broader civic and social functions. These three assumptions do an astounding amount of work in propping up the report. In fact, other than the assumptions, the report offers only some basic calculations of which schools meet the identified thresholds for closure.

IV. The Report's Use of Research Literature

The report suggests that enrollment decline may be explained by parents deciding to educate their children at home.² Yet, the research the report draws on to support this claim states the opposite: "More than a third of the loss in public school enrollment cannot be explained by corresponding gains in private school and homeschool enrollment and by demographic change."³ The misuse of existing research in the report raises concerns about its claims and conclusions more generally.

Across the report much of the cited information comes from news articles, policy reports and studies from the co-author and the sponsoring organization.⁴ For example, the argument that previous school closures generally impact Black students because they are more likely to attend underperforming schools is from a study conducted by the Fordham Institute, which also sponsored this work.⁵ It is surprising to see very little, if any, peer-reviewed academic work cited despite robust and growing research evidence of the negative impacts of school closings on affordable housing, school accessibility, racial equity, attendance, and socio-emotional health.⁶

V. Review of the Report’s Methods

The report seeks to answer two questions: how many schools have experienced substantial enrollment decline post-pandemic and which of those schools were already underperforming? However, while the Data and Methods section describes the sources of the report’s data, it offers no rationale for its central calculation, noting only that: “Although there is no clear demarcation beyond which schools may be considered under-enrolled, for the purposes of this report, an enrollment decline of more than 20 percent is considered “substantial.”⁷

If such a blunt instrument, like closure, is being exercised, then it is critical that whatever criterion is being used is not arbitrary but is rather grounded in an underlying logical theory. The lack of rationale for the 20 percent criterion may set a dangerous precedent for the future if other research follows this example. In other words, the implications of school closures for students and communities are immense. They ought to be backed by strong reasoning, not arbitrary cutoffs.

Additionally, the report assumes that students who are once relocated after a school closure will not have to endure school closure another time. This is not necessarily the case. Indeed, in Chicago, many students who experienced closure, or the threat of closure, in 2013 were subjected to closings again in 2018. District leaders cited the same reasons mentioned in this report—unenrollment and low achievement.⁸ Meanwhile, nearly 39 new schools, mainly belonging to a handful of charter organizations partially funded by the public school system, were opened across Chicago during the five-year period following the 49 closures in 2013.⁹ Currently, a number of these same charter schools are also facing potential closure.¹⁰ This dynamic illustrates the importance of directly addressing the root causes of closure—e.g., poverty—rather than its symptoms, to avoid subjecting students to the same vicious cycle.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusion

Concerns Related to the Report’s Methods:

The report aims to identify schools that have experienced substantial enrollment decline and chronic low performance for potential closure. In so doing, the report counts the number of schools that experienced enrollment declines of 20% or more over three years following the pandemic. Using this approach, the report finds that one in 12 (or 5,100) schools meet the identified criteria across the United States. It then counts the number of schools identified for federal Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI), called “chronically low performing schools” in the report, and finds that they were more likely to experience enrollment decline. While the report identifies basic patterns between the pandemic, enrollment decline, and low performance, at no point are these relationships statistically tested. In other words, even if enrollment declines, low performance, and the pandemic are correlated, no causal inference can be drawn from the presented findings.

It is unclear if the analysis accounted for whether any of the schools identified in the report

for closure had in fact already closed during the report's time frame. As mentioned, school closures occurred *en masse* before the pandemic at similarly high rates.¹¹ Failure to check for that possibility might have skewed numerical analyses and perhaps misidentified current candidates. Moreover, if any of the candidate schools had already closed, a report on whether the closures actually correlated to improvements in academic outcomes or reductions in budget deficits, or—since such research likely lies beyond the scope of this report—at least references to demonstrating that claims made about budget and achievement effects were warranted.

Further, the report exaggerates its findings. In several locations it claims that CSI schools “were more than twice as likely [than non-CSI schools] to experience enrollment declines exceeding 20 percent.”¹² In fact, the difference was not quite twice as likely (15% compared to 7.6%). The mathematical difference is small, but the incorrect description exaggerates the difference between CSI and non-CSI schools, even considering the report’s arbitrary use of the 20% criterion.¹³

Concerns Related to the Report’s Assumptions:

Importantly, in addition to the above concerns about its methodology and reporting, the report is guided by a few critical assumptions that undermine its conclusions. To start, it assumes that closing schools will reduce budget deficits—without providing any supporting evidence to this effect. In fact, although there are no comprehensive national investigations of the topic, existing studies at the local level suggests that the cost savings of school closings pale relative to what districts expected.¹⁴ For example, a study conducted on Philadelphia school closings found that school closings between 2012 and 2013 only amounted to less than one percent of the district’s 300 million dollar annual budget deficit.¹⁵ Further, after closing schools, districts struggle to find buyers for buildings.¹⁶ Accordingly, closed school buildings often remain abandoned for several years afterward, eventually becoming eyesores and burdens to already disinvested communities.¹⁷ School closings may save districts some money, but leaders must ask how much and at what cost?

Similarly, the report assumes that closing schools will improve academic outcomes for students. But the evidence is mixed and is more often negative.¹⁸ The report acknowledges that students must attend a school that is of higher quality to experience benefits of closure,¹⁹ but it fails to mention that better placements may not be readily accessible to most displaced students.²⁰ Indeed, the most comprehensive study on this topic, which examined school closings across 26 states between 2006 and 2013, found that the majority of affected students did not end up in higher performing schools.²¹

More generally, the report treats the purposes of school through the narrow lens of academics. However, public schools play a much broader role in most communities. In the United States, 11 million parents in poverty rely on schools for daily childcare to go to work, 1.5 million homeless students rely on them for shelter, social workers, and health care providers, and 13 million children experiencing hunger rely on schools daily as a critical source of food.²² Rather than an evaluation of schools with a narrow focus on academic performance, enrollment, or building capacity, any proposal to close schools should also consider their

broader civic and social purposes.

The list of 500 low-performing schools proposed for closure consideration is also problematic.²³ As the report notes, CSI determination differs depending on each state's widely varied criteria for the designation. For example, Nevada appears to report more CSI schools than many other states—but this is likely because of its extremely inclusive criteria rather than an actual surplus of poorly performing schools. Flexibility in criteria also means that the designation can be used to serve very different goals. CSI is intended to be a tool to help channel more resources to underperforming schools most in need; however, if instead the CSI designation is alternatively used to justify closing schools, then different state reports might reflect very different realities. The report's approach of assuming CSI schools are likely candidates for closure sets a dangerous precedent, transforming a tool meant to help districts improve their schools into a hammer to help close them.

Moreover, the very act of creating a list of potential school closures like the one the report offers policymakers has been shown to be an unwise strategy. Studies make clear that the act of placing a school on a potential closure list contributes to instability of the school and its surrounding community.²⁴ Once the announcement is made, parents potentially affected by the decision begin to remove students and teachers begin to look for new jobs. These actions further weaken the school, dismantling neighborhood networks and community ties even before final decisions.²⁵

VII. Usefulness of the Report for the Guidance of the Policy and Practice

Policymakers would do best to ignore this report, specifically including its list of candidates for school closure. The work rests on arbitrary assumptions and calculations, and empirical research does not validate its claims that school closures automatically and reliably yield important benefits. Importantly, the report also ignores potential harm to already disinvested communities.²⁶ Overall, it offers an unfounded and oversimplified solution to highly complex challenges.

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12 The report finds that 15 percent of CSI schools experienced substantial post-pandemic enrollment declines, compared to 7.6 percent of non-CSI schools. For the phrase “more than twice as likely” to be accurate, CSI schools would have to represent 15.3 percent of cases or above, which is not the case by the report’s own estimates.

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13 The report finds that 15 percent of CSI schools experienced substantial post-pandemic enrollment declines, compared to 7.6 percent of non-CSI schools. On p. 11, it appears to arrive at “more than twice as likely” by rounding 7.6 down to 7 and comparing 7 to 15 (“For example, roughly 15 percent of CSI schools experienced an enrollment decline of more than 20 percent, compared to just 7 percent of non-CSI schools.”).

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