

Answering the Important Questions About Closing Schools



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With many school districts facing declining enrollment as well as fiscal pressures due to lower inflation-adjusted resources, board members across the U.S. have been weighing the possibility of closing public schools. These are often painful decisions for district leaders and for the schools' neighborhoods.

In the Q&A below, National Education Policy Center director Kevin Welner asks political scientist [Sally Nuamah](#) of Northwestern University to help us understand some of the most important issues surrounding these school-closure decisions. Prof. Nuamah is the author of the 2022 book, *Closed for Democracy: How Mass School Closure Undermines the Citizenship of Black Americans* (Cambridge University Press).

- 1. The most common and central claim made by today's advocates for school closures is that such closures are necessary for districts facing budget deficits or are otherwise needed to reduce spending. What does research tell us about the validity of these budgetary claims? How much, if at all, do school closures help school districts balance their budgets?**

While school closings are often initiated and justified as a means to address budget deficits, there is very little national-level evidence supporting their effectiveness in achieving this goal. Potential reasons for this include: 1) The majority of school district expenses are

related to personnel, costs that are not necessarily addressed by closing a school building; 2) School districts struggle to sell buildings where closed schools once operated, meaning the financial burden of maintenance remains, and the district fails to benefit from the potential liquidation of assets; and 3) Closures do not typically address underlying issues such as poverty and displacement, which contribute to financial instability. These issues persist post-closure, further exacerbating budget deficits. Even when cost savings occur, they are minimal compared to what was initially projected. 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 annual budget deficit. Across studies conducted at the local level, school closings rarely result in the expected financial benefits proposed by districts.

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Dority, B.L. & Thompson, E.C. (2013). Economic issues in school district consolidation in Nebraska. *Great Plains Research*, 23(2), 145-157. Retrieved November 14, 2024, from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23780197>

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2. Among those advocating school closures for cost-cutting reasons, we often hear that districts' hands are tied—that there are no other realistic options available. What does research tell us about the validity of that claim? Are there other options that districts or states should consider, either to reduce spending or to increase revenue?

When the possibility of school closures is raised by district leaders, community members often propose alternative uses for school buildings that could allow them to remain operational. For example, converting schools into community centers that provide wraparound services—such as health clinics and childcare—could create sustainable solutions. Other strategies include integrating adult education programs within schools or combining vital community services under one educational roof. Additionally, community members advocate for increased funding from federal, state, and/or local governments, driven by concerns that forcing schools to focus on profit strategies undermines their role as public institutions. This raises the broader issue of school funding models. In many states, schools are funded through property taxes, a system that reinforces educational inequality by linking resources to local wealth. To address these disparities, scholars and community members have long advocated for more progressive tax models that require higher contributions from wealthier communities to ensure equitable access to quality education.

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tive REPORT.pdf

Shakeshaft, C. & Gardner, D.W. (1983). Declining to close schools: Alternatives for coping with enrollment decline. *The Phi Delta Kappan*, 64(7), 492-496.

3. How important is the increasingly common school-choice context, where families can opt out of their neighborhood or assigned school? Particularly when a district's funding comes entirely from the state, as in California, should districts be concerned that closing schools will result in students—and their funding—leaving district schools?

Districts should indeed be concerned about the broader political context. Over the past two decades, support for alternatives to public schools, under the banner of school choice, has had direct consequences for government and philanthropic funding for traditional public schools. Research shows that funding levels from philanthropic organizations for public schools have dropped by nearly half, as more support has shifted to alternatives such as charter schools. Additionally, voucher programs, which allow families to use public dollars to attend private schools, further undermine public school funding. Some research points to similar harms from the growth of charter schools. Because public schools are typically funded on a per-pupil basis, declines in enrollment directly impact their budgets. Looking ahead, trends suggest that funding for school alternatives will continue to rise, affecting public school resources and reinforcing the perception that traditional public schools are incapable of providing a quality education. This creates a self-perpetuating cycle of disinvestment.

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4. How do charter schools fit within the school-closure discussion?

It is important to note that charter schools can and are being closed with increasing frequency, often with little fanfare, because they lack the democratic structure that facilitates a process of registering opposition from those affected. A couple examples are the closure of Walter Palmer in Philadelphia and the current closures of the Acero Charter schools in Chicago. Moreover, charter schools often choose to close themselves when they can no longer sustain themselves or when they are subject to non-renewal. This is a significant concern for communities because these closures often happen abruptly, leaving communities that have already seen their traditional public schools close with few alternatives.

Paino, M., Boylan, R.L., & Renzulli, L.A. (2017). The closing door: The effect of race on charter school closures. *Sociological Perspectives*, 60(4), 747-767.

5. What does research tell us about the academic impacts of school closures?

The academic impacts of school closures are complex. Research suggests that once schools are closed, *if* students attend a receiving school of higher quality, their academics improve or at the very least remain neutral. However, the academic performance of students at the

receiving school may decline. On the other hand, the likelihood that students from closing schools will attend a higher-quality school is low. Instead, they are more likely to attend a school of the same or similar quality as the one they previously attended, which can result in poorer academic outcomes for those students. Further, there are additional harms related to the transition, including concerns about safety, attendance, and the emotional trauma of displacement. These factors are important to address independently but also because they tend to directly impact academic learning.

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Jack, J. & Sludden, J. (2013). School closings in Philadelphia. *Penn GSE Perspectives on Urban Education*, 10(1). Retrieved November 14, 2024, from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1015745>

Steinberg, M.P. & MacDonald, J.M. (2019). The effects of closing urban schools on students' academic and behavioral outcomes: Evidence from Philadelphia. *Economics of Education Review*, 69(2), 25-60.

6. Opponents of school closure policies claim that they disproportionately impact low-income communities and communities of color. What does research tell us about the validity of this claim? Does research help explain how and why we see particular patterns regarding which schools are closed—and which are not?

Research clearly shows that school closures disproportionately affect low-income Black populations in both urban and suburban areas. While minorities represent a higher fraction of public school students, that alone does not explain these disparities. For example, a report by the Urban Institute found that while Black students make up 31% of the urban school population, they represent over 61% of those affected by school closures. This disparity is consistent across suburban districts. In 2013, when Chicago closed the most schools in U.S. history in a single year, over 90% of the affected students were Black and low-income. These disparities are tied to a history of disinvestment in these communities and their contemporary lack of access to resources and opportunities.

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Forney, E. (2017, March 23). *Subtracting schools from communities*. Urban Institute. Retrieved February 24, 2025, from <https://www.urban.org/features/subtracting-schools-communities>

Tieken, M.C. & Auldrige-Reveles, T.R. (2019). Rethinking the school closure research: School closure as spatial injustice. *Review of Educational Research*, 89(6), 917-953.

Nuamah, S.A. (2022). *Closed for democracy: How mass school closure undermines the citizenship of Black Americans*. Cambridge University Press.

7. What connection, if any, is there between school closures and gentrification/displacement?

Research suggests that gentrification facilitates school closures, and vice versa. A national study conducted by researchers at Stanford (the Pearman & Marie Greene, 2022 cite below), using longitudinal data, revealed that school closures increased the probability that the most segregated Black neighborhoods experienced gentrification by eight percentage points. They found no evidence of increased gentrification for other groups. Other research has shown that efforts to attract new residents through private housing developments often coincide with decisions to close traditional public schools and build charter schools. Once schools are closed, they may be converted into businesses like bars or luxury condos, thereby changing the affordability of the community and access to its services. These changes also make the landscape of schools less accessible to low-income and minoritized students.

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Zuk, M., Bierbaum, A.H., Chapple, K., Gorska, K., & Loukaitou-Sideris, A. (2018). Gentrification, displacement, and the role of public investment. *Journal of Planning Literature*, 33(1), 31-44.

8. Finally, what have you and other researchers learned about the nature and impact of community responses to district-level contentions that schools must be closed?

Communities have aggressively fought back against school closures. In cities like Chicago and Philadelphia, the establishment of a clear public process for closing schools is a product of prior collective action by parents demanding such a process. Communities not only protest but also attend school board meetings in large numbers, present data and statistics to defend their schools, mobilize votes to oppose mayors when the school board is under their control, and campaign for an elected school board in areas where one does not exist. They also develop social media campaigns to educate the public on these issues and gather community support for proposed alternatives, such as community-school models. In some cases, communities even engage in month-long hunger strikes, like the one in Chicago at Dyett Elementary. Legal action is also taken to protect schools. The response to these efforts is mixed: In some cases, schools are saved, and mayoral or governor-controlled school boards are overturned (e.g., Philadelphia or more recently in Chicago). Some of these efforts have led to multi-year moratoriums on school closures. However, in many cases, targeted schools are still closed. Given the current political climate, it is unlikely this trend will stop anytime soon. The struggle continues.

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Good, R.M. (2016). Histories that root us: Neighborhood, place, and the protest of school closures in Philadelphia. *Urban Geography*, 38(6), 861-883.

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NEPC Resources on School Finance and Funding

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