



SHOULD WE QUESTION THE PURPOSTED BENEFITS OF SCHOOL CLOSURES?



It's happening again.

Another urban school district, this time Oakland Unified in California, has voted to close schools that serve a disproportionate number of students of color from low-income families.

Two schools will close this year, and five more next year, according to the plan the school board approved last month. Black students comprise 23 percent of the Oakland school district but 43 percent of the students in the schools slated for closure.

Oakland is the latest in a growing collection of urban school districts that have decided in recent years to close schools that disproportionately enroll students of color and students from low-income families. Other examples include Chicago, which closed or radically reconstituted roughly 200 schools between 2002 and 2018, St. Paul Minnesota, which approved six school closures in December, and Baltimore City, where board members decided in January to shutter three schools.

“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,” according to an NEPC brief authored in 2017 by Gail Sunderman of the University of Maryland along with Erin Coghlan and Rick Mintrop of UC Berkeley.

In Oakland, community members and educators reacted to the closures with protests, marches and a hunger strike.

When urban school boards close campuses, they typically cite the schools' poor academic performance or to the need to save money by shuttering buildings that are under enrolled.

Yet it's unclear that closures serve either goal.

In their policy brief, Sunderman, Coghlan, and Mintrop find limited evidence that student achievement improves as a result of school closures designed to improve academic performance.

“[S]chool 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,” they wrote.

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.

Similarly, NEPC Fellow Ben Kirshner and his CU Boulder colleagues Matt Gaertner and Kristen Pozzoboni found several harms for the high school closure they closely studied. Writing in the journal, *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, they identified declines in the displaced students' academic performance after transferring to their new schools, and they found that these students had difficulty adjusting to their new schools after their old relationships were disrupted.

The Oakland closures have mainly been justified as saving money by closing under enrolled schools that can't take advantage of the economies of scale available to larger schools. Similar arguments were made in Baltimore and St. Paul.

Several trends have exacerbated these enrollment challenges in urban districts, including a [now-abandoned Gates Foundation-funded push](#) around the turn of the century to improve student outcomes by funding the creation of smaller schools in multiple cities, [skyrocketing urban housing prices](#) that have pushed families with children out of large cities, and a [long-term trend of declining birth rates](#) (which was exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic—something that will be felt by schools in several years).

The pandemic also had an immediate impact on enrollment, as more parents turned to home schooling because they are concerned their children would contract COVID or infect a vulnerable loved one. The nation's public schools lost [1.3 million children, or three percent of their population](#), during 2020-21. Because most school funding is allotted on a per-pupil basis, enrollment declines lead to funding declines. This causes financial challenges because declines typically occur unevenly, rather than in neat blocks. Uneven declines make it impossible for schools, for example, to reduce staffing levels by one teacher because exactly 30 fifth graders have departed. More commonly, a few students will disappear from each grade level at multiple schools, a pattern that leaves districts with the same or similar fixed expenses even as they receive less funding because they're serving fewer students.

In Oakland, a combination of factors, including gentrification and pandemic-related enrollment declines, caused the student population to **decline 11 percent** over the past five years to just over 37,000. The school closures were touted as a way to address the district's **\$90 million budget** shortfall.

Yet in a **commentary** in *The Mercury News*, NEPC Fellow and CU Berkeley professor Janelle Scott pointed out that even the claimed fiscal savings are minimal. A consultant's report estimates the Oakland closures could save as little as \$4.1 million.

"These estimates don't fully account for disillusioned families and school staff who will likely leave OUSD for private, charter and public schools, fatigued by the constant threat of closure and consolidation," Scott wrote.

Nor does the fiscal analysis address the multiple determinants of the deficit, which include the intentional creation of small schools that are now slated for closure and the **costs of charter schools**. More importantly, savings projections do not account for the costs to students' health, well-being and safety, or offer clear plans for transportation and before- and after-school care, which are essential for working families.

A 2011 NEPC **brief** by Craig Howley, Jerry Johnson and Jennifer Petrie of Ohio University finds that, rather than saving money through economies of scale, school and district consolidation may actually increase costs. For example, even if a district is able to eliminate a principal position by consolidating two small schools, it may end up hiring multiple assistant principals to staff the resulting larger school. In addition, the researchers point to research suggesting "that impoverished regions in particular often benefit from smaller schools and districts, and they can suffer irreversible damage if consolidation occurs."

"Indeed, in the largest jurisdictions, efficiencies have likely been exceeded—that is, some consolidation has produced diseconomies of scale that reduce efficiency," the authors conclude. "In such cases, deconsolidation is more likely to yield benefits than consolidation. Moreover, contemporary research does not support claims about the widespread benefits of consolidation. The assumptions behind such claims are most often dangerous oversimplifications."

NEPC Resources on School Reform and Restructuring

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