



Why Parents Across America opposes mass school closings

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What are mass school closings?

Mass school closings occur when school districts decide to close large numbers of public schools in a community within a single year, citing a variety of reasons like “underutilization” or academic failure. These closures go far beyond the periodic need to close schools because of drops in a district's school-age population. Rather, they result from policies pushed by the corporate education reform movement and its privatization agenda, and embraced by the U.S. Department of Education.

Mass school closings have rapidly expanded in the past two or three years. **Chicago** is facing up to **54 closings** in the fall of 2013. **Philadelphia** voted this March to **close 24 schools** in a single year, one in 10 of its public schools. **New York City** plans to close **26 schools** on top of the 140 schools that have already been closed in the past decade. **Washington, DC**, plans to close **15 schools** by 2014.

Why is PAA so concerned about mass school closings?

Studies on mass school closings have been clear: in city after city, mass closings have done far more harm than good. They do not lead to improved academic performance and they don't fix budget deficits. Schools that receive students rarely receive adequate time or resources to responsibly address school mergers.

As the vast majority of closed schools have high-minority enrollments, communities of color are disproportionately affected. In early 2013, parents from 18 cities filed discrimination complaints with the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights, claiming that recent and proposed school closings are yielding a disparate racial impact. The complaints cite issues of school safety, transportation, and equitable access and service for high need and at-risk student populations.

In city after city, communities have also complained about processes that have been fast-tracked, or that circumvent established policies around school closings. All of this has resulted in districts running roughshod over public, and especially parental input.

Parents and the general public should be aware that public school closings in many cities are accompanied by the simultaneous expansion of charter schools and non-public options – schools which have become the darlings of corporate reform, but whose track records are often worse than those of comparable public schools.

The negative effects of school closings

A number of significant studies address school closings. Many of those reports were summarized in a March 2013 research brief by the Chicagoland Researchers and Advocates for Transformative Education (CReATE). Their conclusions:

Overall, school closings:

- don't offer better academic outcomes for students, and
- don't save significant amounts of money.

School closings may also:

- cause students to feel stigmatized,
- increase the likelihood that affected students will drop out,
- lead to increased school violence,
- lower the likelihood that students will attend summer school programs,
- increase school-to-school mobility,
- disrupt peer relationships,
- weaken student relationships with adults,
- leave students with few social and emotional supports to help them adjust to the challenges of their new school, and
- lower achievement levels for students in the receiving schools.

What's behind the recent mass school closings?

The current push for mass school closings comes from business and political interests, not parents, educators, students or other stakeholders who are part of the public school community.

The guidebook of the mass school closings movement is a 2009 "School Closings Handbook" written by the controversial Broad Foundation, which boasts of training and placing non-educator superintendents and high-level school leaders in urban districts across the country to enact a brand of education reform that focuses on competition and privatization.

Another major player in the mass school closings movement is the notorious American Legislative Exchange Council, or ALEC, which openly seeks to privatize public education. ALEC has promoted mass school closures through parent trigger laws and A-F grading systems for schools, while simultaneously promoting charter school expansion.

PAA parent members report on mass school closings across the U.S.

From Charlotte, NC: PAA founding member Pamela Grundy, leader of PAA affiliate Mecklenburg-ACTS, reports that local mass school closings there in 2010 resulted in overcrowding and increased student suspensions. The closings disrupted already fragile neighborhoods and sharply deepened distrust of the school system, especially among African Americans.

From Chicago, IL: PAA co-founder Julie Woestehoff, head of PAA Chicago affiliate Parents United for Responsible Education, reports that the district's 2013 closing list was presented four months *before* a legislative task force was due to present a 10-year Educational

Facilities Master Plan. The district held 33 hearings on the initial “hit list” of 129 schools. Public comment was nearly unanimous that no schools should be closed, yet schools CEO Byrd-Bennett's summation of the process was that “Everybody got it, that we really needed to close schools, that we really needed to consolidate.”

From Philadelphia, PA: PAA founding member Helen Gym, head of PAA affiliate Parents United for Public Education, wrote this about the local school board's vote to close 24 schools in 2013: “Those of us opposing mass school closings have studied years of data and research reports documenting the academic and financial failure of school closings nationwide. The relentless and monied effort of corporate ed reformers is driving a visionless and battered District down a well-traveled road of failure.... (M)ass school closings are the tip of the iceberg leading to spiraling disinvestment in public education and in our neighborhoods and communities.”

Other reports on school closings from these and other PAA chapters and affiliates can be found on our web site, www.parentsacrossamerica.org.

PAA's position: Support ALL schools fairly – don't close them

Because of the negative effect that closing schools has on students and communities, PAA believes that schools should be closed only as a last resort, and never as a strategy for “academic improvement.”

Instead, we support:

- **improved conditions and stronger support for schools,**
- **sound, effective school improvement strategies, and**
- **meaningful parent involvement.**

One of the most popular propaganda lines that school leaders are using from the Broad school closing guidebook is that school closings, consolidations and transfers will result in more and better resources for everyone. For example, Chicago is promising transferred students I-Pads, air conditioning and special “learning gardens.”

But even if the promised benefits materialize (and there is good reason to suspect that they will not), they would have a more positive impact if they were provided to students in their existing schools, rather than in conjunction with a difficult, disruptive transition. It has always been the responsibility of school districts and school communities to provide adequately for every school and every student, not just those in selective enrollment, magnet, or other specialty schools. Students should not have to move to gain these benefits.

For the details of PAA's position on alternative school improvement strategies with proven track records, see our paper, *What Parents Want in a New Federal Education Law*, <http://parentsacrossamerica.org/paa-reforming-esea/>

Parents Across America is a non-partisan, non-profit grassroots organization that connects parents and activists from across the U. S. to share ideas and work together to improve our nation's public schools.
www.parentsacrossamerica.org