

Background material on the negative effects of mass school closings

September 2017



In 2013, Parents Across America published a position paper opposing mass school closings (<http://tinyurl.com/yb24rkc3>). We were very concerned to see a growing number of large urban districts jumping on the school closing bandwagon with little regard for public opposition or the potential negative consequences for students. Since then, hundreds of schools have been closed around the U.S. and the results are clear. The mass school closings have:

- **lowered academic performance,**
- **not saved the promised amounts of money,**
- **exacerbated racial inequalities,**
- **further harmed the most vulnerable students, and**
- **destabilized communities leading to increased violence.**

School closings background material

Summative statements

“Student mobility can result in a negative impact on a student’s emotional, cognitive and physical wellbeing. Research in Chicago notes that school closings result in: 1) Disruptive and demoralizing climate: People in receiving schools reported a school climate of uncertainty, demoralization, tension, and stress affecting students, teachers, and families as a result of school closings, 2) Negative effect on teaching and learning: Teachers reported an influx of new students negatively affected academic work at receiving schools, and 3) Problems with safety and discipline: Transfer of students across gang lines and into unfamiliar neighborhoods, coupled with the stress experienced by transferred students, contributed to increased discipline problems and concerns about school safety (Lipman and Person, 2007). For students changing schools, they will be required to adjust to new peers, teachers and the overall environment. This change can result in stress and anxiety, which can lead to social and academic difficulties.

“Research finds that students can suffer socially, psychologically and academically from mobility. Further, research demonstrates that mobility is related to misbehavior and youth violence (Rumberger, 2003). According to Davies (2003), children report that moving, leaving friends, and changing grades, schools or classes can cause great anxiety. Transitions for some students result in academic difficulties, social/emotional problems, decline in self-concept, poor motivation, decreased attendance, and increased dropout rates.”

Statement from Ann Aviles de Bradley, Assistant Professor, Department of Educational Inquiry and Curriculum Studies, Northeastern Illinois University
On Proposed Chicago Mass School Closings, May 2013

(O)verall, there were no significant positive or negative effects on academic achievement resulting from the closure when students transferred to comparable schools (in Chicago). On the other hand, a study by Kirshner, Gaertner, and Pozzoboni (2010) contradicts the no-effect findings when examining comparable transition schools. The authors found that students who transitioned into new schools following closure scored lower on tests one year after closure; they were at an increased risk of dropping out, as well as an increased risk of not graduating.

“Interview data from this study suggests closure was viewed negatively by transitioning students and imposed a stigma upon them that followed them into their new schools. The researchers found that test score trends on standardized tests for transfer students declined after the closure was announced. Test scores for students from the cohort that transferred to other schools continued to decline for two standardized test administrations after the closure announcement.

School closings will also negatively affect the achievement levels for students in the receiving schools. A Michigan State University study found that “while the closing of low performing schools may generate some achievement gains for displaced students, part of these gains will likely be offset by spillover effects onto receiving schools.” For one thing, closings often lead to increased class sizes and overcrowding in receiving schools. As a result, the pace of instruction is slower and the test scores of both mobile students and non-mobile students tend to be lower in schools with high student mobility rates. One study comparing the curricular pace of stable schools and highly mobile schools in Chicago found that highly mobile schools lagged behind stable schools by one grade level on average.

“In various cities, school closures have led to several negative experiences for displaced students, including a doubling of the likelihood of dropping out of school, increased school violence, lowered likelihood of enrolling in summer school programs in the summer following school closure, higher rates of school-to-school mobility, disrupted peer relationships, and weaker relationships with adults.

Chicagoland Researchers and Advocates for Transformative Education (CReATE) Research Brief on School Closures, March 2013, p. 1
<https://www.dropbox.com/s/tq712v9x47gkajo/CReATE%20Research%20Brief%20%235%20School%20Closures%20March%202013.pdf>

1. School closings lower academic performance

“Twenty to twenty-five percent of students change schools each and every year. Sometimes these students do not adapt well to their changes and it can result in major learning and behavior problems. The authors conclude that all students that move from one school to another have more trouble and more problems than other students.

“A national study performed by Russell Rumberger and Katherine Larson found that 70% of all school changes between grades eight and twelve were accompanied by a change of residences, which is the leading cause of student mobility. States, schools, and districts need to recognize student mobility as a barrier to success, understand how it impacts academic achievement and must learn ways to address the issues relating to mobility. The negative effects of mobility include: lower test scores, lower

grades, decreased level of high school completion, students being more likely to repeat a grade, students having difficulty creating peer relationships, and can cause many behavioral problems.”

From research brief compiled by Erin Mason, President, Illinois School Counselors Association
<http://pureparents.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/ISCA-Response-to-School-Closings-and-Recommendations.pdf>

Quoting from “Investigating Critical and Contemporary Issues in Education/Mobility”

http://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Investigating_Critical_%26_Contemporary_Issues_in_Education/Mobility

“While the CPS policy did succeed in sending the vast majority of students to schools that were more highly-rated than their closed schools, only 21 percent managed to attend a Level 1 school. This is potentially problematic because ***past research found that students’ achievement improved only if they moved to a substantially higher-performing school than the one they left*** (emphasis added).

Though CPS assigned all students to a higher-rated school, just 27 percent were assigned to a Level 1 school (the district’s highest rating). Meanwhile, 30 percent were assigned to a Level 3 school (the district’s lowest rating). This suggests that there were simply not enough available seats in higher-rated schools in these neighborhoods to accommodate all of the displaced students.”

From Consortium on Chicago School Research, “School Closings in Chicago,” 2015

<https://consortium.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/publications/School%20Closings%20Report.pdf>

“In studies of three cities, large-scale closings were seldom found to improve student performance, and in some instances showed long-term negative effects...Beyond test scores, a body of research on student mobility indicates that students who change schools often tend to have higher dropout rates and lower graduation rates.”

From Research for Action/Pacer School Closing Policy March 2013, p. 5

<https://www.researchforaction.org/publications/school-closings-policy/>

2. School closings do not save the promised amounts of money

“The majority of savings achieved through closings are derived from personnel reductions including principals and assistants and clerical, food service, and custodial employees. The largest savings occur when closings are combined with extensive faculty layoffs, but these do not commonly accompany closings.

“Savings are mitigated by expenses such as maintaining vacant building sites, moving property, and transitioning and students and staff. Costs inherent in building closings are sometimes unexpected. For example, D.C. officials initially reported approximately \$10 million in implementation expenses associated with its 2008 closings. Yet a 2012 report by the District of Columbia Auditor reported costs exceeding \$40 million due to higher outlays for transportation, moving and relocation, demolition, and the significant devaluation of several closed buildings. Building re-sales have also proved problematic. Research on 12 cities—including Philadelphia and Pittsburgh—revealed that sales prices for most shuttered schools ranged from \$200,000 to \$1 million—frequently below initial projections—and

found challenges due to real estate conditions and difficulty in finding suitable occupants in depopulated or declining areas. The report found charter schools to be the most common receiver of district buildings.”

From Research for Action/Pacer School Closing Policy March 2013, pp. 4, 5
<https://www.researchforaction.org/publications/school-closings-policy/>

“Chicago Public Schools has admitted that closing 54 schools will not reduce this year’s budget deficit at all. That’s because all cost savings, plus tens of millions of additional dollars (for a total of \$233 million), will be put into receiving schools this year.

“Chicago Public Schools spokeswoman Becky Carroll said the district will realize \$43 million in net savings by closing 54 schools. But Carroll has not responded to multiple requests from WBEZ to itemize the costs and savings the district would realize by closing schools. And no news organization has published an itemized accounting of costs and savings that add up to \$43 million.

“In an e-mail, Carroll said “the bulk” of the district’s operational savings from closing schools would come from “reduction in non-teaching positions such as principals, clerks, engineers, etc.” The district would also spend less on utilities and maintenance.

“WBEZ did find one cost of closing schools that CPS had not considered in its equation. The district is [borrowing \\$329 million to pay for improvements](#) to receiving schools. Borrowing that money will cost \$25 million in debt service every year for 30 years, beginning in 2015—it will be paid for out of revenue normally directed to the operating budget.

“When it first announced closings, Chicago Public Schools said it would save \$560 million in capital expenses over the next 10 years by shuttering schools. The savings would come by avoiding repairs and other upgrades to those buildings. On May 2, the district [quietly lowered that number](#) to \$437.8 million. But most of the numbers fueling the revised figure are [not based on any new building assessments](#).”

WBEZ News, “Fact Check: Chicago School Closings,” Vevea and Lutton, May, 2013
<https://www.wbez.org/shows/wbez-news/fact-check-chicago-school-closings/81734980-e9fb-4c05-8605-af207b43d8c9>

“Over the next few months, community activists and district officials will likely haggle over whether that is enough of a savings to warrant the disruption that is caused by closing a school.

“The debate is complicated by the fact that CPS has not reaped the benefits of closing schools in the past. Of the 76 schools closed since 2001, the vast majority of them—nearly 80 percent—now house a new school, according to a Catalyst Chicago analysis.”

“When a school closes and eventually becomes a charter or magnet school, anecdotally it appears the savings have been minimal, if at all.

“A case in point: Lasalle II, the West Town version of the lauded Lincoln Park language school, is projected to cost CPS nearly \$6 million this year and has a student body of about 621. In 2005, when it was still Andersen Community Academy, it had 687 neighborhood students and its budget was about \$5 million, according to the 2005 CPS budget.

“Charter schools aren’t much better.

“Bunche Elementary in Englewood is one example. In the year it closed, CPS spent about \$ 2.97 million on Bunche, according to the 2005 budget. At the time, it had 400 students and was closed for low performance. This year, the charter school that replaced it, Providence-Englewood, has 406 students and its budget is virtually the same at \$2.96 million.

“Another example is Donoghue Elementary School. In 2002, the school had 414 students and a budget of \$3.1 million. This year, CPS budgeted \$3.6 million for the University of Chicago-Donoghue campus, which has 475 students.

“The Donoghue campus is 52 percent under-utilized, according to CPS.”

“School districts need to manage expectations concerning the savings that come from school closings, says Emily Dowdall, a senior associate for the Philadelphia Research Institute, which is part of the Pew Charitable Trust.

“In a report examining the experience of closing schools in six urban school districts, including Chicago, Dowdall found that the savings are minimal. The amount saved depends on whether the building is sold and whether the closings are done in tandem with large-scale layoffs.

“Selling buildings has been a particular challenge as many times closed buildings are in poor neighborhoods where property values aren’t high. Also, vacant school buildings often don’t have other uses, and are expensive to tear down in order to repurpose the land.

““The closed buildings are unlikely to be a windfall for any district,” Dowdall says. “And when they sit vacant, they become eyesores. I think everyone can agree that no one wants to see a big empty building in the middle of a neighborhood.”

“According to Dowdall’s report, only four CPS buildings have been demolished since 1998, one of them to become a hospital parking lot.

“Dowdall points out that in several cities, projected savings have fallen short. In Milwaukee, district officials said they would save \$10 million a year by closing 20 schools, but wound up only saving \$6.6 million annually.

“Yet she says cash-strapped school district’s officials often make the case that every dollar counts.

“A recent audit of 23 school closings in Washington D.C. found that it cost money instead of saving money—\$40 million, with some of those costs the result of shuttered, unused buildings falling into disrepair.

“Moving supplies and students, including busing for some children to get to new schools, was expensive. Also, the closings accelerated enrollment loss and, since the district is reimbursed based on student population, the district’s coffer’s dwindled.

“Closing schools,” Filardo says, “is not cost-neutral.”

Minimal cost savings for closing schools: analysis” Sarah Karp, Chicago Reporter, October 2012
<http://chicagoreporter.com/minimal-cost-savings-closing-schools-analysis/>

3. School closings exacerbate racial inequalities

“(L)arge-scale school closings in major urban districts—Detroit, New York City, Chicago, Baltimore, New Orleans, Columbus, Houston, Kansas City, Milwaukee, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, St. Louis, and Washington, D.C.—have disproportionately affected black and brown students.”

Research shows there is a high correlation between test scores and race and income. So reform policies have disproportionately harmed children of color. And as the nation's public schools gradually became "majority minority"—an odd catch phrase that means “less white”—and students of color became [more racially isolated](#) in the system, even more schools were slated for closure.”

“The Racism of School Closures,” Jeff Bryant, The Progressive, September 2016
<http://progressive.org/public-school-shakedown/racism-school-closures/>

“The real, underlying cause for these school closures is that there has been a realignment of political forces....As a result of this political shift, there emerged a well-organized and extraordinarily well-funded group of individuals and organizations that has exploited any political opening they could find to destabilize neighborhood public schools – almost exclusively within communities of color – and instead promote the expansion of charter schools.”

“Death by a Thousand Cuts: Racism, School Closures, and Public School Sabotage.” Journey for Justice report, May 2014
https://www.j4jalliance.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/J4JReport-final_05_12_14.pdf

“CPS has proposed closing 54 schools located primarily on the south and west sides. This plan is a continuation of disinvestment in our most disadvantaged communities, and will only serve to reproduce our city’s glaring segregation and inequality.

“This disinvestment has very real consequences for the health and well-being of communities, families, and children.”

“On Proposed Chicago Mass School Closings,” Statement by Daniel Cooper, Assistant Director, Institute on Public Safety and Social Justice, The Adler School, May 2013
<http://pureparents.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Cooper-statement.pdf>

“As a result of the the school actions in Chicago schools over 46,562 students will be affected. Many of these schools are located in predominantly African-American neighborhoods and thus the majority of students attending them are African-American as well.

“Nonetheless there are a few schools that have significant numbers of Latinos and in a few cases they are the majority. In the aggregate, 18% of all students affected by the school closings are Latinos.”

Statement from Francisco X. Gaytán, Ph.D., M.S.W., Assistant Professor, Northeastern Illinois University, “On Proposed Chicago Mass School Closings,” May 2013

4. School closings further harm the most vulnerable students

“Schools are one of the few stable institutions in some communities, and closing them has the potential to further destabilize fragile neighborhoods and disproportionately affect the most vulnerable students in the system.”

“Schools that were closed (in Chicago) were serving a larger share of vulnerable students than other schools in CPS. Students affected by school closures were more likely to receive free or reduced-price lunch, receive special education services, and be old for their grade. Their families were also more likely to have changed residences in the year prior to the school closings. Eighty-eight percent of students affected by school closures were African American. All the elementary schools that were initially targeted for closure (underutilized and low-performing) served similarly vulnerable students.”

From Consortium on Chicago School Research, “School Closings in Chicago,” 2015. p. 1,2
<https://consortium.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/publications/School%20Closings%20Report.pdf>

“Community groups in a number of cities, including Philadelphia, filed a civil rights complaint with the U.S. Department of Education arguing that closings have a disproportionate impact on African American and Hispanic students, and special needs students. A study of closings in New York City found closing schools had greater numbers of economically disadvantaged, special needs, African American, and English language learner students compared to respective district averages. The same is projected for planned closures in Philadelphia.²⁰In New York, several schools targeted for closure experienced dramatic increases in high-needs student populations in the five years prior to phase-out.²² Research on Chicago’s school turnaround efforts found that when a school closed and later reopened with new staff, the school tended to serve fewer special education students and more economically advantaged and higher achieving students.”

From Research for Action/Pacer School Closing Policy March 2013, p. 5
<https://www.researchforaction.org/publications/school-closings-policy/>

On May 21, 2013, shortly before the Chicago Board of Education voted to close 47 schools, a group of child mental health and other experts gathered at a press conference hosted by Parents Across America to express their grave concerns about the potential impact of the school closings, especially on the most vulnerable children.

These social workers, counselors, and academic researchers from prominent Illinois and Chicago organizations and universities submitted a set of statements to the members of the Chicago Board of Education detailing their serious concerns about the potential negative impact of school closings on Chicago Public Schools (CPS) students' social-emotional health. Their statements are available [here](#). Significant concerns raised by these experts included grief and loss, issues of transition, schools as community cornerstones, inclusion of student voice, and lack of adequate mental health services.

Excerpts from some of these statements are below:

“The possibility of an unprecedented number of schools closing in Chicago brings to the forefront the need to carefully consider the impact this will have on impacted students, families and communities. Of most concern to (the Illinois School Counselors Association) is the impact of these closures on students.

“ISCA recognizes that students from pre-k/kindergarten to 8th grade will respond differently to school closures and have a variety of developmentally specific needs. For nearly all of these closing schools, there is only one school counselor, many of whom are delegated to clerical tasks that do not directly serve their students. While school counselors are highly qualified to assist students with academic, career and social emotional challenges, questions arise about how this extent of school closures, and how the resulting needs of students will be properly addressed in such large numbers. ISCA recognizes that students, their families and communities will likely face some or all of the following issues as they prepare for, go through and then adjust to school closings:

“**Loss and Grief:** Not unlike losing a loved one, leaving a school that is closing may be devastating for some students and families who have built strong ties to faculty, staff and other families. Some students, especially young ones, may not understand the context of why their school is closing, why they cannot return to their school next year or why they must go to a new school that is unfamiliar to them. For those who have built strong ties to their closing school, grief and loss will likely be experienced. Students may express sadness, fear, anxiety, frustration, anger and confusion evidenced by crying, withdrawal, and changes in behavior or academic performance. Students from closing schools may believe their school is a failure and that therefore they too, are failures.

“**Transition:** The process of leaving a school and going to a new one, in and of itself, poses many potential challenges for students and families. While many students from closing schools will enter "welcoming" schools, the climate and culture of schools vary greatly from one to the next, even if they are in close proximity to one another. Families and students will not be familiar with the staff and faculty but may also not know the current families or the norms, procedures or expectations of the school. Depending upon how the "welcoming" schools receive their new students, children and families may experience anxiety, confusion and even isolation or alienation. Students who receive

special needs may be especially vulnerable in transitioning and adjusting to school closures. These students' families can be expected to have concerns about whether or not their children will have the same services at the welcoming school as they had at the closing school

Adjustment: Adjustment is part of the process of transition but how students adjust depends upon many factors. Adjustment is not always smooth. Students from closing schools will likely experience a period of adjustment, the length of which may vary for the individual student given contextual, personal and developmental variables. The processes in place at the welcoming school to help new students adjust will be critical. Students who have difficulty adjusting may lose ground academically, become withdrawn, depressed or even aggressive.

Illinois School Counselors Association Position Statement: "Response to School Closings and Recommendations," Erin Mason, 2013 ISCA President. 5/19/13
<http://pureparents.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/ISCA-Response-to-School-Closings-and-Recommendations.pdf>

"School communities are built on a network of important relationships.... The continuity of these relationships is critical for children whose lives may be frequently disrupted by trauma or loss. Without this kind of stability and continuity, children have a difficult time engaging in learning or even feeling like learning matters to them.

"Many of these school children are living in urban battlefields scarred by gangs, drugs, and violence. Some of them have been traumatized, often as witnesses or victims of violence that pervades their neighborhoods. The psychological implications of exposure to violence in children cannot be overestimated – it is destructive, can be life altering, and often leads to behavioral, social or academic problems.

"The closing of a school represents yet another traumatic loss for children who already feel devalued and disregarded by circumstances beyond their control. The school offers these children a sense of place and meaning in a protective, nurturing community that knows, values, and respects them. As the needs of children are disregarded, they may begin to disregard themselves and others, thereby contributing to all of the problems that make education in the inner city so challenging."

Statement On Chicago Mass School Closings by Erika Schmidt, LCSW, May 21, 2013
Director, Center for Child and Adolescent Psychotherapy, The Chicago Institute for Psychoanalysis
<http://pureparents.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Schmidt3.pdf>

"(R)ecent, important research shows that for elementary students, 'the combined experience of homelessness and school mobility was related to both poor academic achievement and problems in the classroom' and that the combination of school mobility and homelessness was associated with higher risk for 'poor educational well-being' than either mobility or homelessness alone. (Fantuzzo, LeBoeuf, Chen, Rouse & Culhane 2012). In short, these mass school closings will predictably set our most vulnerable learners back."

Statement, Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, May 20, 2013
<http://pureparents.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/HomelessStatementMay20.pdf>

5. School closings destabilize communities leading to increased violence

“Basic safety is a primary need to be met for all children. The closing of schools may pose greater danger for some students who must travel further to get to school or who must travel across known gang lines or through unsafe areas. As a result, students may experience anxiety, fear and thus may be more likely to be absent, tardy, to skip school, receive suspensions or show a decrease in academic performance. In addition, for students entering a welcoming school, even school itself may not be safe if they believe they are in fact, not welcomed by current students. Conflict between students from welcoming schools and students from the closing schools may be likely and should be anticipated.”

Illinois School Counselors Association Position Statement: “Response to School Closings and Recommendations,” Erin Mason, 2013 ISCA President. 5/19/13
<http://pureparents.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/ISCA-Response-to-School-Closings-and-Recommendations.pdf>

“Frey and colleagues (2008) discovered that school attachment is associated with lower levels of violent delinquency and aggressive beliefs, as well as with academic motivation. Moreover, students with consistently high attachment to school: a) had low levels of violent behavior and aggressive beliefs; b) perceived school climate more positively; and c) had higher academic motivation. Boys with consistently high school attachment during their transition from middle into high school had reduced levels of violent behavior, and both boys and girls with high levels of school attachment had lower levels of aggressive beliefs, high levels of perceived academic motivation, and more positive perceptions of school climate than students who had consistently low school attachment over time.

“In contrast, low attachment (or school detachment) is related to higher levels of violent behavior and aggressive beliefs, more negatively perceived school climate, and lower academic motivation (Frey et al, 2008) as well as higher risk for school dropout (Thomas, 2000; Weinstein, 2002). When school detachment is coerced it could be likened to a traumatic event that occurs without any preparation, shattering feelings of security and promoting a feeling powerlessness and vulnerability to a potentially dangerous world. By laying this understanding of trauma over the current proposal of school closings I suggest that this process of forced school detachment may have greater ramifications for affected students’ later in their school years.”

Statement by Cassandra McKay-Jackson, Assistant Professor, Jane Addams College of Social Work, University of Illinois at Chicago; On Proposed Chicago Mass School Closings May 21, 2013
<http://pureparents.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/McKayJacksonv2.pdf>

Neighborhood schools are one of the most important resources for many disadvantaged neighborhoods. They serve as local catalysts for civic engagement, providing parents with opportunities for collective influence. The shared trust, cohesion, and social capital that is built through parent interactions at schools is crucial for neighborhood stability. Neighborhood norms of trust and cohesion are associated with neighborhood safety and stability (Sampson, 2012).

“On Proposed Chicago Mass School Closings,” Statement by Daniel Cooper, Assistant Director, Institute on Public Safety and Social Justice, The Adler School, May 2013
<http://pureparents.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Cooper-statement.pdf>

“For many students and their families, schools serve not only as a place for formal instruction, but they serve as community centers, healthcare facilities, mental health clinics, recreational sites, childcare for working families, hubs of civic and political engagement, and a place to simply receive a warm meal. Families in poverty and Latino families in particular rely quite heavily on the multiple resources that schools provide. The closure of schools disrupts the provision of these resources and given the increased enrollment of these vulnerable children at other schools, the capacity of the receiving schools will be taxed to a great degree.”

Statement from Francisco X. Gaytán, Ph.D., M.S.W., Assistant Professor, Northeastern Illinois University, “On Proposed Chicago Mass School Closings,” May 2013

“While Arne Duncan dismissed parent and community concerns, affected schools and neighborhoods became increasingly dangerous. In 2006, the media reported that violence had soared at five of the nine high schools that accepted most of the students transferred out of the high schools closed under Renaissance 2010. West side activists rose in anger in 2007 when 27 children were killed within a few months of the closure of the only open enrollment high school in Austin, the city’s largest neighborhood, forcing their children to travel across several gang lines to get to school. The nation was gripped by the horrific 2009 recorded murder of Fenger High School honor student Derrion Albert by a few youth from a faction of students transferred to Fenger after their neighborhood high school was closed.

“In 2012, I wrote an article for Huffington Post, [“Are Charter Schools the Answer to — or One Reason for – Chicago’s Violence?”](#) The number of shootings and homicides had taken another alarming leap, and a charter school official suggested that the solution was opening more charter schools. The studies and reports I cited made it clear that this idea was exactly the wrong approach.

“The Violent Legacy of Chicago's Mass School Closings,” Julie Woestehoff, Sept. 1, 2016
<http://parentsacrossamerica.org/violent-legacy-chicagos-mass-school-closings-2/>