

WHAT'S NEXT SLPS?

CASE STUDIES: School Closure and Reconfiguration

The What's Next SLPS Coalition has selected case studies that illustrate the different ways that school districts have navigated school closures, key takeaways from each example, and when data is available, show how different approaches have influenced student achievement.

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CASE STUDY: CHICAGO CLOSURE / CONSOLIDATION

In 2013, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) closed 49 schools because of under-enrollment. These schools were primarily located in neighborhoods that struggled with concentrated poverty and shrinking populations.¹ Responding to previous research demonstrating that moving to a higher-performing school after a closure positively impacted students, CPS created a strategy to ensure students from closing schools were moved to 'welcoming schools.' These schools were all rated higher academically than the closing schools students had attended. The schools all received additional resources to ensure student transitions would be smooth, including the expansion of the Safe Passage program, which provides adult monitors along school commuting routes to ensure students arrive safely at school. Under this plan, families could also send their students to a school that wasn't designated their 'welcoming' school; 44% ultimately chose to attend another school. When families decided not to attend, it was most often because they lived too far from their designated welcoming school or because the school offered something else families valued, such as access to extra-curricular activities or a positive school climate.²

Interview research with school staff impacted by closures suggests that they did not experience the additional resources and supports of the 'welcoming schools' plan as intended. Staff reported that promised resources were few, and in the case of supports like the Safe Passage program, resources did not last as long as students needed them to. They also reported poor communication and negative relationships with CPS staff who supported the transition.³

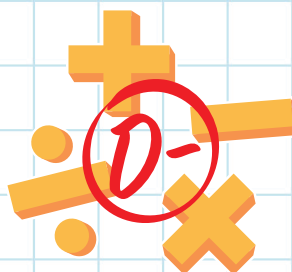
Chicago is also an example of the political turmoil caused by school closures. Chicago has been the basis of research about the community trauma caused by school closures,⁴ and a study that showed citizens who lived near a closing school were more likely to take political action and to vote. The same study found that those citizens were less likely to support Mayor Rahm Emmanuel.⁵

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- ✓ Evidence from across the country, including Chicago, shows that students whose schools close perform better when they move to schools with a track record of higher academic achievement than their previous school.⁶ Chicago's welcoming schools design is one model districts could use to ensure students have guaranteed access to a school while still giving families autonomy and choice to decide based on factors like student commute time.
- ✓ Having a strong, research-based program to support students and schools is only impactful if well executed.
- ✓ Poor engagement with the community leads to strained relationships, feelings of anger and distrust, and political consequences for decision-makers. These effects are particularly strong along racial and economic lines.



Students' reading scores lowered in the first year after their school closed, but returned to similar levels afterward.



Students' math scores remained lower up to four years after their school closed.

CASE STUDY: NEW YORK CITY SCHOOL PHASED-OUT CLOSURES

While more research is needed to understand the heightened impact that school closures may have on students of different ages, researchers suggest high school students may be at a greater disadvantage when their schools close. High schoolers have less time to bounce back before graduation and experience the disruption of transferring to a new school at a critical time for deciding their futures post-graduation.⁷ For this reason, districts should carefully consider how to handle high school closures to minimize academic harm to students.

Between 2002 and 2008, the New York City Department of Education closed 29 of its lowest academically performing high schools. Instead of closing schools immediately, they took a 'phaseout' approach, opting to close schools by no longer admitting new classes of 9th-grade students, reducing the size of the school by one grade level each year.

Though the general public widely viewed the slow 'phaseout' process as damaging for students who remained in the school, researchers could not identify an overall impact, either positive or negative, on student learning for those who stayed during the phaseout. Notably, students enrolled in closing schools during the phaseout period had better attendance and were more likely to graduate than students at that same school before the phaseout began. Researchers also followed the students who otherwise would have attended these closing schools and found a significant positive impact: these students went on to attend higher-performing schools and graduated high school at significantly higher rates.⁸

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KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- ✓ New York's model of school 'phaseout' is one option for districts to consider when deciding how to close high schools; however, many questions remain unanswered about this approach, including how it would impact students if used in closing elementary and middle schools.



When students remained at their school during a 'phaseout' closure, their academic outcomes stayed the same, but they were more likely to graduate than peers at the same school before closure was announced.

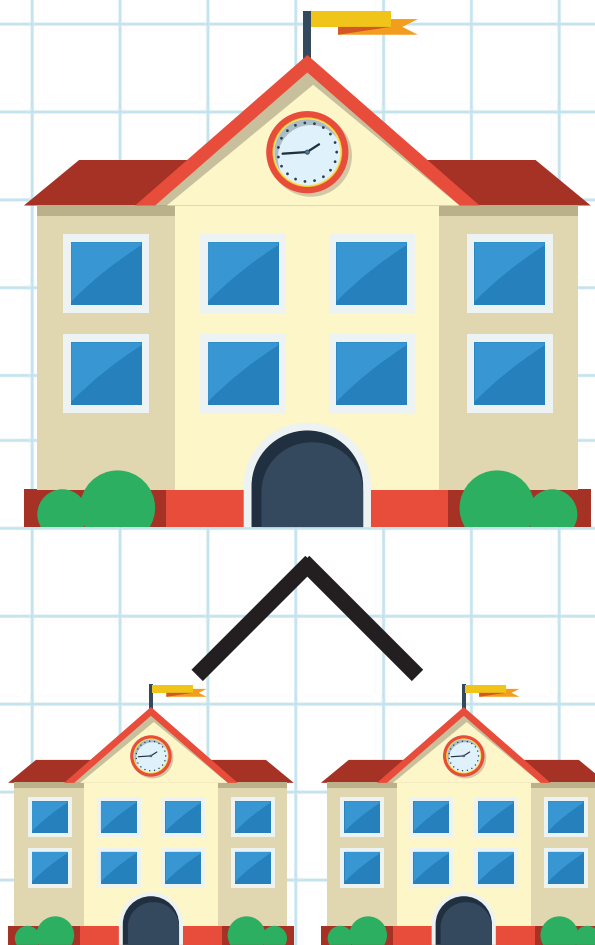
CASE STUDY: NEW YORK CITY CO-LOCATIONS

While co-locating schools (placing multiple schools in one building or building complex) has become increasingly common in districts across the country, there has been very little research on the impact of co-locating schools to solve problems like under-enrollment. New York is the most studied district that has co-located a large number of schools in recent years. By 2005, over 30% of schools were co-located.⁹ New York's push for co-location began in the late 1990s as an effort to offer students smaller schools, which education leaders believed could provide students with a more personalized, supportive experience founded in closer relationships with educators.¹⁰ Results suggest that co-locating smaller schools within the same building has increased student graduation rates,¹¹ increased likelihood students would enroll in college,¹² and increased the likelihood that they would stay in college after enrolling.¹³

Co-location has been controversial, and in many places, the subject of fierce backlash from school staff and sometimes community members.¹⁴ In one case, co-located schools were the subject of a lawsuit, which was later thrown out.¹⁵ This controversy can be due to disputes about how to divide shared space or coordinate schedules, differences in the way schools do things that may create conflict or confusion or resentment about differences between what co-located schools offer students.¹⁶

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- ✓ Research suggests that co-location, when used to provide a 'small school' experience to students, positively impacts their achievement.
- ✓ Co-locating schools requires careful planning, relationship-building, and clear guidelines.¹⁷ Even then, it may prove controversial and an ongoing source of frustration.



Attending a small school co-located within a larger school building increased the chances that New York high school students would enroll in and persist in college.



ENDNOTES

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