

# WHAT'S NEXT SLPS?

# POLICY MEMO

**TO:** Board of Education of the City of St. Louis  
**FROM:** 'What's Next SLPS?' Campaign Coalition  
**DATE:** February 4, 2020  
**RE:** School Closure and Reconfiguration

## THE CHALLENGE

St. Louis Public Schools (SLPS) faces a serious challenge: over several decades, enrollment has dropped, losing some 90,000 students since the early 1970s. Currently, SLPS is using only 56% of the room available in its 68 buildings.<sup>1</sup> Citing the higher cost of educating students and lower quality of services possible in schools with lower enrollment, SLPS has begun closing schools, with additional closures planned for the upcoming school year.

Research on the impact of school closures suggests that closures present a significant risk to students and communities: when students are forced to move schools after a closure, their academic achievement, graduation rates and college enrollment are all impacted. Research also suggests that school closures tend to disproportionately occur in low-income communities of color.<sup>2</sup> St. Louis serves a high number of students of color and students from low-income families, who are already more likely to experience educational inequity.

Jacquelyn,  
Power Builder



EST. 2018

**WEPOWER**

[WWW.WEPOWERSTL.ORG/WHATS-NEXT-SLPS](http://WWW.WEPOWERSTL.ORG/WHATS-NEXT-SLPS)

## THE RESEARCH: SCHOOL CLOSURE AND RECONFIGURATION

As widespread school closures—whether because of strain on budgets, aging school buildings, declining enrollment, or persistent failure to provide education opportunity—have taken place in districts around the country in recent decades, there is a significant body of research available to understand how closures impact students. Results, overall, are mixed: in some cases, closures have a negative impact on students academic performance; in others, they have an immediate negative impact that goes away over time; in still other cases, closures have had a positive impact on students academic outcomes.

In some districts, closures have resulted in significant declines in student success (as measured by academic achievement, graduation, college-going, absences and suspensions). In Milwaukee, students had persistently lower grades, temporarily lower attendance and lower likelihood of graduating from high school and attending college after their schools closed.<sup>3</sup> Similar effects were observed in Philadelphia.<sup>4</sup> Following the closure of six high schools in New York City, students who were moved from closing schools were less likely to earn the state's more rigorous diploma when they graduated.<sup>5</sup>

After school closures in Washington, D.C., the negative impacts of moving from a closing school disappeared for students in as little as one year.<sup>6</sup> And while math scores for Chicago students impacted by closures remained lower over the long term, lowered reading achievement appeared to be temporary.<sup>7</sup>

In still other cases, closures have had positive impacts on student success. Following widespread closures in Ohio, New Orleans and Newark student achievement increased significantly.<sup>8</sup> Of note, the quality of the school where students are received matters tremendously. When students move to schools with better academic outcomes, their achievement tends to improve.<sup>9</sup> However, if students move to schools with similar or worse outcomes compared to their closing school, their achievement tends to worsen.<sup>10</sup> Notably, this overall effect was more complicated for students following closures in Milwaukee: while academic

achievement improved for students who transferred to schools with better academic outcomes, these students were still less likely to attend college.<sup>11</sup>

While more research is needed to understand the heightened impact that school closures may have on high school students, researchers suggest high school students may be at a greater disadvantage when their schools close because they have less time to bounce back before graduation.<sup>12</sup> When the New York City Department of Education closed 29 high schools between 2002 and 2008, the Department 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. Researchers could not identify an overall impact, either positive or negative, on student learning for those who stayed during the phaseout. But 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 significant positive impact: these students went on to attend higher-performing schools and graduated high school at significantly higher rates.<sup>13</sup>

The impact of closures also goes beyond student achievement and may not be easily measured. As sociologists have documented, communities experience palpable grief and mourning after the closure of a school.<sup>14</sup> In one study, 40 percent of students reported a sense of loss around their relationships with students and teachers, and damage to their friendships.<sup>15</sup>

When space in individual school buildings is underutilized, districts may consider co-locating schools. This is a common strategy that can reduce building costs, keep school communities together, and provide the benefits of a small school (such as more personal relationships and attention). In New York City, co-location of schools has become common, and has had positive impacts on graduation.<sup>16</sup> Research also suggests that co-location can impact the quality of individual schools within the building: when low-performing traditional schools are paired with high-performing charter schools, traditional schools tend to improve academically.<sup>17</sup>

## BEST PRACTICES:

### CONSIDER ALL OPTIONS

When facing under-enrollment, budget shortfalls and/or school buildings, districts should consider a range of options, including:

- ✓ **Co-location:** housing multiple school communities in one building to save on facilities costs and share resources. Sometimes done strategically to pair high and low performing schools.
- ✓ **Relocation:** moving schools out of aging buildings and into other facilities in better repair or that cost less to renovate.
- ✓ **Community Use:** housing both schools and other public services in school buildings to ensure that space is fully utilized, there is sufficient revenue to maintain the building, and that students and community members can benefit from expanded local services.
- ✓ **Closure and Consolidation:** closing schools and relocating students to other existing schools.

### PUT STUDENTS FIRST

- ✓ **When schools close, districts should prioritize ensuring that students from closing schools** are moved to schools with higher academic achievement<sup>18</sup>.
- ✓ **Be proactive:** ensure that schools with falling enrollment receive support and additional resources to ensure their enrollment improves.
- ✓ **Consider the burden on individual students** and families if the student commutes lengthen.

### PRIORITIZE RELATIONSHIPS AND SHARE POWER

- ✓ **Districts must build relationships** and share power with those impacted by closures.

- ✓ **School boards can solidify this power-sharing into policy** by creating formal roles for community members impacted by potential closures. These could include a district-wide community council, or individual school councils.
- ✓ **Districts can consider re-allocating staff time or hiring a position/positions dedicated to community engagement** in the closure and reconfiguration process. Districts should prioritize applicants with strong community relationships in hiring for this role.

### PUT EQUITY AT THE CENTER

- ✓ **Conduct an equity impact analysis** as part of all decisions around closure and reconfiguration, and include community members in this process. Weigh equity heavily in decisions about school closure and reconfiguration.
- ✓ **Consider impact beyond traditional academic measures:** weigh the impact of a school closure on community relationships and morale, the impact on the surrounding neighborhood, and the legacy of history.
- ✓ **Publicly and regularly acknowledge the legacy of racism** in creating the conditions that lead to school closure.

Gabrielle,  
Power Builder

COMPLETE THIS SURVEY TO  
MAKE YOUR VOICE HEARD:

[bit.ly/whatsnextslpssurvey](https://bit.ly/whatsnextslpssurvey)



## URGENT QUESTIONS:

The closure process is moving quickly, and community members need answers urgently. First, they need to know that SLPS is putting the needs of students first throughout this process. Second, they need to know how the district plans to engage and share decision-making power with the people most impacted by closures (including students, families, educators and the surrounding community).

### PUTTING STUDENTS FIRST:

- ✘ When closures occur, how will the District work to ensure that students impacted by closure and reconfiguration move to schools that provide improved academic opportunities and resources?
- ✘ If SLPS students experience temporary dips in academic achievement (as is common after school closures), how will their schools ensure that these students are not put at a permanent disadvantage?
- ✘ When closures occur, what is the District's plan to manage student transitions, ensuring that 1) students feel confident and welcomed to their new schools, and 2) minimize anxiety, stress and confusion associated with the transition?
- ✘ When closures occur, what resources will the District provide to respond to student and community trauma?

### COMMUNICATION AND SHARING POWER WITH THE COMMUNITY:

- ✘ How will the District collaborate with the community to ensure that decisions about closing or reconfiguring schools are conducted using an equity impact analysis?
- ✘ When closures or reconfigurations occur, how will the District plan regular, detailed and supportive communication with the people most impacted (including students, families, educators and the surrounding community)?

**INCLUDE COMMUNITY MEMBERS IN THE PROCESS. WEIGH EQUITY HEAVILY IN DECISIONS ABOUT SCHOOL CLOSURE AND RECONFIGURATION.**

## LONG TERM QUESTIONS:

- ✘ In the short term, much remains to be decided. Looking to the future, SLPS and the City of St. Louis will be faced with more difficult decisions, and should be prepared to answer the following questions:
- ✘ How can the District collaborate with other city agencies to proactively solve problems that cause or impact under-enrollment?
- ✘ When closures occur, what is the District's plan to retain effective educators from closing schools?
- ✘ How can St. Louis City agencies collaborate to ensure that school building space is quickly repurposed after a closure? How will they engage community members in repurposing buildings?
- ✘ When closures occur, how will the City of St. Louis help reduce negative impact on the surrounding community?
- ✘ In the years following closures, how will the District determine if closures were successful in meeting academic and fiscal goals?

## LOOKING FORWARD

Hard choices cannot be managed effectively without the people most impacted by them. School closures are fraught with hard decisions, and have historically risked inflicting trauma on and worsening relationships with low-income communities of color. Even as SLPS faces a tremendous challenge, there is an opportunity to reduce that risk by listening to and sharing power with communities impacted by potential closures or reconfigurations.

Johnnie,  
Power Builder



## ENDNOTES

- 1 Ryan Delaney, "More School Closures Coming for Consistently Shrinking St. Louis Public Schools," St. Louis Public Radio, January 17, 2020, <https://news.stlpublicradio.org/post/more-school-closures-coming-consistently-shrinking-st-louis-public-schools#stream/0>.
- 2 Center for Research on Education Outcomes, School Closure Study 2017, August 2017, <https://credo.stanford.edu/publications/school-closure-study-2017>.
- 3 Matthew Larsen, Does Closing Schools Close Doors? The Effect of High School Closings on Achievement and Attainment, October 2014, [http://www.tulane.edu/~mflarsen/uploads/2/2/5/4/22549316/mflarsen\\_schoolclosings.pdf](http://www.tulane.edu/~mflarsen/uploads/2/2/5/4/22549316/mflarsen_schoolclosings.pdf).
- 4 Matthew P. Steinberg and John M. MacDonald, "The effects of closing urban schools on students' academic and behavioral outcomes: Evidence from Philadelphia," *Economics of Education Review*, 69. (2019): 25-60, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2018.12.005>.
- 5 New York City Independent Budget Office, "Phased Out: As the City Closed Low-Performing Schools How Did Their Students Fare?" Schools Brief, January 2016, <https://ibo.nyc.ny.us/iboreports/phased-out-as-the-city-closed-low-performing-schools-how-did-their-students-fare-jan-2016.html>.
- 6 Umüt Ozek, Michael Hansen, and Thomas Gonzalez, "A Leg Up or a Boot Out? Student Achievement and Mobility under School Restructuring," (working paper, National Center for the Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research, American Institutes for Research, 2012), 78, <https://caldercenter.org/sites/default/files/wp78.pdf>.
- 7 Molly F. Gordon, Marisa de la Torre, Jennifer R. Cowhy, Paul T. Moore, Lauren Sartain, and David Knight, School Closings in Chicago: Staff and Student Experiences and Academic Outcomes (Chicago: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research, 2018), <https://consortium.uchicago.edu/publications/school-closings-chicago-staff-and-student-experiences-and-academic-outcomes>
- 8 Deven Carlson and Stephane Lavertu, School Closures and Student Achievement: An Analysis of Ohio's Urban Districts and Charter Schools (Columbus: Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2015); Whitney Bross, Douglas N. Harris, and Lihan Liu, The Effects of Performance-Based School Closure and Charter Takeover on Student Performance (New Orleans: Education Research Alliance for New Orleans, Tulane University, 2016), <https://educationresearchalliancenola.org/files/publications/Bross-Harris-Liu-The-Effects-of-Performance-Based-School-Closure-and-Charter-Takeover-on-Student-Performance.pdf>;
- 9 Mark Chin, Thomas J. Kane, Whitney Kozakowski, School District Reform in Newark: Within-and-Between School Changes in Achievement Growth," *ILR Review* 72, no. 2 (2019): 323-354, <https://doi:10.1177/0019793918774318>.
- 9 Steinberg and MacDonald, "The effects of closing urban schools on students' academic and behavioral outcomes"; Kori J. Straub and Meredith P. Richards, Evaluating the Impact of School Closures in Houston ISD: Part I - The Effect of School Closures on Patterns of Student Attendance and Achievement (Houston: Houston Education Research Consortium, 2016), [https://kinder.rice.edu/sites/g/files/bxs1676/f/documents/closures\\_upload\\_0807.pdf](https://kinder.rice.edu/sites/g/files/bxs1676/f/documents/closures_upload_0807.pdf); Matt Barnum, "17 studies that tell us something about how school closures affect student," Chalkbeat, February 5, 2019,
- 10 CREDO, School Closure Study 2017.
- 11 Larsen, Does Closing Schools Close Doors?
- 12 Larsen, Does Closing Schools Close Doors?
- 13 James Kemple, "High School Closures in New York City" (The Research Alliance for New York Public Schools, New York University Steinhardt School, November 2015) [https://research.steinhardt.nyu.edu/research\\_alliance/publications/hs\\_closures\\_in\\_nyc](https://research.steinhardt.nyu.edu/research_alliance/publications/hs_closures_in_nyc)
- 14 Eve L. Ewing, Ghosts in the schoolyard: Racism and school closings on Chicago's South Side (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2018).
- 15 Ben Kirschner, Matthew Gaertner, and Kristen Pozzoboni, "Tracing Transitions: The Effect of High School Closure on Displaced Students," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 32, no. 3 (2017): 407-429, <https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373710376823>.
- 16 Rebecca Unterman, Headed to College: The Effects of New York City's Small High Schools of Choice on Postsecondary Enrollment, (New York: MDRC, 2014), [https://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/Headed\\_to\\_College\\_PB.pdf](https://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/Headed_to_College_PB.pdf).
- 17 Sarah A. Cordes, "In Pursuit of the Common Good: The Spillover Effects of Charter Schools on Public School Students in New York City," *Education Finance and Policy* 13, no. 4 (2018): 484-512, [https://doi.org/10.1162/edfp\\_a\\_00240](https://doi.org/10.1162/edfp_a_00240).
- 18 Research suggests that students are more likely to make a successful transition after a school closure when they are re-routed to a school with higher academic achievement scores. tend to have declining performance when moved to schools with similar or worse achievement than their previous school.