



TEACHING TOLERANCE

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Nine Questions (to Ask and Answer) About School Closures

The information presented below is drawn largely from “Closed for Business,” a feature story by Sean McCollum for Teaching Tolerance magazine (Issue 52).

1. Do school closures follow a pattern?

Many public schools in urban areas are underfunded and under-resourced. They then get labeled “underperforming” and may be targeted for closure. In this environment, reformers and policymakers—often not local—promote “school choice.” Some students from closed schools go to charter schools. Others are sent to “receiving schools.” Receiving schools often have the same issues as the closed schools: They experience increased stress when adding displaced students, resulting in “underperformance” and the threat of closure, thus perpetuating the cycle.

2. Who experiences school closures?

The vast majority of school closures take place in urban communities of color with limited economic and political power and high poverty rates where school funding cuts are felt the hardest. For instance, more than 140 schools have been closed in New York City since 2002. More than 200 Detroit schools have been closed since 2000. And Chicago closed 50 schools in 2013.

3. Who is harmed by school closures?

Schools are more than places of learning. They serve as community hubs that unite residents and house daycare centers, polling places, health fairs, artistic spaces, adult education centers, concert halls and athletic facilities. Teachers and staff serve as role models and advisors, at times providing stability and continuity that may not be present elsewhere for their students. After school closures, youth report feeling a sense of grief and disorientation that can affect both their personal and their academic lives. When a neighborhood school closes, the sense of community is in danger of deteriorating.

4. How do school closures impact student achievement?

School closure does not necessarily lead to improved test performance for the students who must transition to a new school. The Center for Research on Education Outcomes at Stanford University reports that, on average, transferred students experience a loss of achievement gains. In “Closed for Business,” McCollum writes, “A study, conducted by Matthew F. Larsen at the Education Alliance for New Orleans, indicates that most students from closed schools experience ‘negative shock,’ resulting in lower attendance, lower GPAs, and lower chances of graduating.”

5. What is the fiscal impact of school closures?

School closures are costing many cities. The security and upkeep required to maintain unsold school properties can hurt district budgets. For example, Chicago officials overstated their savings from school

closures by at least \$122 million, according to a 2012 Pew Research Center report. In Washington, D.C., school closures cost the district \$40 million—four times what had been estimated.

6. Do charter schools outperform district schools?

A study commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education found little or no significant academic benefit to charter school attendance for middle school students. Many charter schools operate with integrity. However, some evidence suggests that a number of charter schools may be manipulating the makeup of their student populations to inflate academic scores. Charter schools consistently have smaller class sizes and lower percentages of English language learners and serve fewer students with special needs than traditional public schools. And, less-than-reputable charter school operators have been accused of using tactics to “push out” struggling students who threaten to drag down test scores.

7. Who is working to stop privatization and school closures?

The Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools, a national alliance of families, youth, community organizations and labor groups, states in its platform: “Rather than closing schools or turning them over to private, unaccountable managers, we should work to support and build up our schools as strong public institutions in the heart of each and every community.”

Journey for Justice Alliance is “an alliance group of grassroots community, youth and parent-led organizations in 21 cities” Member organizations are “pushing back and demanding community-driven alternatives to privatization of and dismantling of public school systems.”

The Opportunity to Learn Campaign, a national coalition of advocates and organizers, believes, “From voucher programs and charter schools to unequal funding streams and attacks on teachers, public education is facing numerous threats from education ‘reformers’ who laud competition and business-style policies that actually undermine our nation’s public school system.”

The Coalition for Community Schools, housed at the Institute for Educational Leadership, is an alliance of education organizations that offers alternatives to school closure. Its neighborhood school model advocates for partnerships between schools and other community resources.

8. What key strategies can help save and improve neighborhood schools?

It’s important for community efforts to be aware of and ready to respond to district takeovers by city and state officials. Building community awareness and grassroots organization is critical: Even if efforts are unsuccessful in stopping the closures in the short term, raising national attention to the issue of school closures and their disproportionate impact is needed to bring about larger policy change.

9. What do students experiencing school closure need from adults?

Being displaced from a neighborhood school and transferred to an unfamiliar one can be challenging for any student. Add to that transition the fear of violence, the cost of transportation and the distance of the new commute, and such a transition could place students at risk of disengagement or dropping out. Receiving schools must make deliberate efforts to support and make new students feel welcome through orientations and family outreach. Students and families will need support around transportation needs, including safe passage. Relationships are key. Teachers and staff need to connect with new students one-on-one. They can also help facilitate friendships from students’ previous schools.