



The Politics of Budgets: Rapides Parish Schools

Alexandria, Louisiana

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Amidst enrollment declines and tightening budgets, Rapides Parish Schools grappled with a hard truth: the district had too many schools for too few students. They had tried to consolidate schools a few years before, but the effort had failed after the school board proposed a plan that had not been introduced or explained to the public. But leaders learned from that experience and tried again. This time, they engaged stakeholders early and often, and the consolidation plan eventually gained the community's full support. Within a year of the plan's implementation, Rapides Parish Schools started to see measurable financial and academic results. This case study is a companion to a larger report, [*The Politics of Budgets: How Fourteen Districts Reduced Spending While Protecting Student Learning Experiences*](#).

I. Background and District Overview

Many of the schools in Rapides Parish are in neighborhoods that were thriving 50 or 60 years ago, but have since seen steep population declines of 3.2% from 2020 to 2025. Families moved to other nearby neighborhoods, leaving behind school buildings that were expensive to maintain. At one point, 13 of the district's 48 schools were operating at less than 50% capacity. Many of these low-occupancy schools were in areas with the highest poverty rates, and students at these schools tended to struggle the most academically.

The Rapides Parish student population is mostly White (47.2%), Black (41.9%), Latine (6.0%), or Multiple Races (3.2%), with smaller proportions of Asian (1.2%), Indigenous (0.5%), and Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (0.1%) students.

RAPIDES PARISH BY THE NUMBERS

- Schools: 48 (before consolidation); 43 (after consolidation)
- 2024-25 enrollment: 21,879 students
- Percent of economically disadvantaged students: 78.6%
- Annual operating budget: About \$249 million
- Full-time teachers (2025-26 school year): 1,620
- Full-time staff members (2025-26 school year): 3,081

II. Nature of the Shortfall or Financial Pressure

The cost of operating so many low-occupancy schools was straining the Rapides Parish budget, making it harder for the district to offer a full range of programming.

A year before implementing their successful consolidation plan, the district had tried to launch a similar plan, but failed because they underestimated the importance of community engagement. That earlier consolidation proposal was introduced behind closed doors during a school board retreat and then placed on the public agenda for a board meeting just five days in advance. This led to immediate public backlash. During the school board meeting, angry community members came out in force: the plan was widely criticized, and not a single part of the motion passed.

When the district returned to the proposal a year later, leaders were determined not to repeat the same mistake. This time, the superintendent led a deliberate, transparent process focused on building support and grounding decisions in both academic and financial data. They focused on closing schools that were underutilized operationally and underperforming academically. Leaders traced every dollar going into each school and paired that with five years of student achievement data. Based on this analysis, they were able to identify that the schools with the highest per-pupil costs were actually delivering the lowest academic returns.

But district leaders decided early on that they couldn't rely on numbers alone. To move forward, they would need to pair the closures with resulting gains that would seem meaningful to families and staff.

Instead of framing the closures as an unavoidable cut, the district positioned them as an opportunity to reinvest. The savings from the closures would be used to:

- **Fund salary increases for all teachers and staff**, creating a direct benefit for educators and a clear reason for teachers to support the closures.
- **Launch a fully funded Head Start preschool program** in two of the vacated

buildings, providing expanded access to early childhood education and signaling continued investment in the community.

- **Develop a new magnet program** in another repurposed building, offering families new academic options.
- **Introduce a new innovative behavioral intervention program** in another of the vacated buildings, further supporting students' social-emotional needs.

The district leaders communicated clearly that they were not abandoning these neighborhoods, but instead that the closures could fuel something positive.

III. Strategy Development and Implementation

The district implemented the school consolidations in two deliberate phases:

- **Phase 1:** Closing three elementary school buildings
- **Phase 2:** Closing one elementary school building and one middle school building, plus repurposing one high school building

The first phase targeted three elementary schools that had been operating under a “community zone model,” which had been introduced several years earlier and had fallen out of favor. The community zone model restructured nearby elementary campuses into grade bands: PK-1 in one building, grades 2-3 in another, and grades 4-5 in a third. While the intent had been to promote teacher collaboration and better manage class sizes, the model had proven unpopular with families, especially because it required frequent school transitions between grade levels.

In the first phase of consolidation, all three community zone schools were closed. Students were reassigned to existing elementary campuses across the district that were also operating below capacity, which allowed the district to reduce its building footprint without overcrowding other schools. Two of the vacated buildings were repurposed into federally funded Head Start centers.

The second phase included closing an elementary magnet school and a middle school magnet program, as well as repurposing a traditional high school. The high school, a historic landmark, was given new life: it reopened as a PK-12 academic and performing arts magnet school. Students from the existing elementary academic school and middle school magnet program were relocated to the former high school campus, and the district created a new academic and performing arts magnet high school for grades 9-12. The vacated middle school magnet facility was repurposed to house a new innovative behavioral intervention program.

Students who lived in the former high school attendance zone but did not meet the new academic and performing arts magnet admission guidelines were rezoned to another underenrolled high school campus, allowing the district to balance enrollment further.

This strategy not only preserved the historic high school facility, but also introduced a new academic offering designed to attract a wider range of students and created space for a behavioral intervention program.

At the center of the effort was a community steering committee. Made up of school administrators, classroom teachers and coaches, parents, and community stakeholders, including business owners in Rapides Parish, the group met monthly with the superintendent to review plans, give feedback, and help shape the district's approach. The steering committee visited four magnet schools in other areas around the state that resembled what the district hoped to create for the historic high school that would become a magnet school. Seeing those models firsthand helped the committee understand and imagine what was possible. When the final proposal came forward several months later, the steering committee gave it their full support, and the school board approved the plan.

Together, the two phases of implementation allowed the district to consolidate and redirect their resources, reduce operational costs, and create space for new programming that aligned with community needs.

IV. Lessons Learned from the Past

Ultimately, the district's overall success came from approaching the process differently than before: involving stakeholders early, listening carefully, and ensuring that every decision could be traced back to student outcomes, community priorities, and long-term sustainability. Throughout the consolidation process, district leaders learned several important lessons:

Wording was key. For example, using the word “cost” when discussing per-pupil spending raised concerns among families, particularly in high-poverty neighborhoods. Community members questioned why it would “cost more” to educate a child in one building than it would in another. In response, the district began framing the issue in terms of “expenses to educate,” shifting the focus to operational realities instead of implying student-level differences.

Leaders acknowledged the symbolic importance of school buildings. Some were named after local leaders or long-serving educators, and for many residents, these schools represented stability in neighborhoods that had seen decades of disinvestment. The buildings were more than just facilities; they were landmarks, legacies, and sources of pride.

Leaders had a “second life” plan already in place for closing schools. In a community already experiencing high vacancy rates, the prospect of another boarded-up, empty building was deeply distressing, and one of the concerns community members cited most frequently. The district learned that having a plan for these buildings before the closures occurred was key, and leaders made sure to share not just which schools would close, but also what would happen to the buildings afterward. They found that even if only part of the space was repurposed, having some plan for the building mattered to the community. It also wasn't necessary to repurpose an entire facility at once; smaller-scale programs or partial use could still send a powerful message. This attention to a continued physical presence helped maintain a sense of investment in the community while providing an additional academic resource. The messaging wasn't about closure and loss, but about new investment in a different form.

Leaders were explicit about how savings would be used. By clearly tying the school closures to teacher and staff raises, leaders built wider support for closures among educators and employees. Transparency about what would be lost and what would be gained was essential to building trust.

V. Outcomes and Impact

The district's consolidation strategy produced measurable financial and academic results within its first year of implementation. By closing underenrolled schools and reinvesting in people and programs, the district stabilized its budget, increased staff compensation, and introduced new learning opportunities for students.

The district's initial round of school closures generated an estimated \$4.5 to \$5 million in annual savings. The second phase of closures resulted in saving an additional \$1.3 million annually. These savings allowed the district to increase staff compensation. Every employee, including all teachers, received at least a 4% raise. Some departments in which staff had previously been paid below-market rates received a new salary schedule featuring increases beyond the base 4% raise. Leaders estimate that they are now paying between \$8,000 and \$10,000 more in total compensation per teacher per year than surrounding parishes, which supports recruitment and retention. In addition to improving staff compensation, the district expanded its educational offerings by reinvesting in new programming and repurposing existing facilities.

These outcomes reflect a strategy that was about more than just saving money: it was about using those savings to build a stronger, more responsive school system. By reinvesting in staff and creating new learning opportunities, the district demonstrated how difficult decisions, when handled thoughtfully, can lead to meaningful and lasting improvements for students and communities.

About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

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Front cover photo: A Rapides elementary school teacher leads a classroom activity. Courtesy of Rapides Parish Schools.

