Lessons from the Headlines:

Key Questions for Districts Attempting to Close Schools

Kacey Guin and Marguerite Roza

Kacey Guin is a Research Analyst in Seattle, WA.

Marguerite Roza, PhD, serves as a Research

Assistant Professor in the Center on Reinventing

Public Education at the Daniel J. Evans School of

Public Affairs at the University of Washington. She

can be reached at MargRoza@u.washington.edu or

at (206) 616-9832.

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Introduction

Newspapers across the country highlight stories of districts that need to close schools. While the causes of enrollment decline vary, none is surprising; demographic shifts, economic changes, and alternative schooling options all contribute. But declining enrollment starts districts on a path that touches many other parts of district operations. Because many states allocate money to districts based on student counts, declining enrollments often mean declining revenues. School districts, however, rarely structure their expenditures to fluctuate with enrollment. Non-teaching staff, central office administration, and building operations are treated as fixed costs, which yield higher costs per pupil as enrollment drops. This combination of declining enrollments and tight finances make school closures necessary, but concerns about the effects on students and strong community connections to neighborhood schools make closures difficult.

Making the decision to close schools is a difficult process. There is no "right way" to proceed. This brief touches on the experiences of urban school districts as they sought to close schools. It offers insight into the critical questions districts encountered and descriptions of different paths chosen during the closure process. These questions include:

1. What is the financial bottom line?
2. How do student outcomes fit in?
3. What criteria are proposed to select schools for closure?
4. How will the community be involved?
5. Will the district leadership stay unified throughout the process?
6. What is the transition plan and how is it communicated?

What is the financial bottom line?

School closures are generally initiated by fiscal crisis. Districts from Seattle, Washington to Birmingham, Alabama have seen budget shortfalls in the tens of millions of dollars. As student enrollment and revenues continue to decline, anticipated operating expenditures remain steady or increase, leaving districts deeper in the red. Other districts, like Baltimore, are under pressure from state agencies to

> *SCHOOL CLOSURE STRATEGY ASSAILED; CITY WANTS TO SHUT 10 FACILITIES TO SAVE OVER $20 MILLION – Baltimore Sun, 2/11/07*
>
> *CLOSURES WON'T SOLVE $20 MILLION DEFICIT – Seattle Times, 5/19/06*

demonstrate efficient use of facilities, or risk losing capital funding.

The first issue districts face is determining how much will be saved by closing schools. While the estimates vary widely, the true savings are often elusive. Since many districts are in the early stages of closing schools, and many estimates are based on cost avoidance, there is little data on actual savings. Even if district estimates are realized, often these projections aren't enough to satisfy the anticipated budget shortfalls. For example, Detroit is facing a $118 million deficit next year, while school closures are projected to save only $18.6 million. These financial projections weigh heavily as teachers and parents struggle with the emotional and academic costs of closing schools. In other words, district leaders may need to take other efficiency measures, such as cutting infrastructure, when faced with large deficits and should not rely on closures alone to solve financial problems.

How do student outcomes fit in?

While decisions to close schools generally begin with a look at the dollars, experience shows they quickly circle back to a discussion of student outcomes. In Columbus, Ohio, the school board removed an elementary school from the closure list, after determining that some students would be moving to a lower performing school. In Cincinnati, the superintendent forced attention on student performance, when making the case for closures. *"We've got to make decisions that we determine are best for children." Superintendent of Cincinnati Public Schools. Cincinnati Enquirer, 11/18/04*

BOARD SAYS SCHOOL CLOSURE PLAN NEEDS WORK; DETAILS SOUGHT ON COST SAVINGS AND EDUCATIONAL BENEFITS - Seattle Post-Intelligencer, 5/12/05

BEGIN THE REVOLUTION; ROOSEVELT'S PLAN WOULD CUT, BUT IMPROVE, SCHOOLS – Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, 11/14/05

Where districts sidestepped performance issues, parents were quick to ask how the closure process would enhance or hinder the district's goals for student performance. In Seattle, where early closure discussions sidestepped student outcomes, parents accused the district of losing focus. When a higher performing school in the southeast part of the city made the closure list, parents threatened to pull their students from the district altogether.

Other districts made student outcomes front and center in the process. For Pittsburgh, school closures were part of a broader district redesign plan that included the creation of K-8 programs, accelerated learning academies, and early childhood learning centers. As the superintendent made clear, only schools with the worst academic performance were selected for closure. All students impacted by a school closure would move to schools with better academic programs. Whether the district leadership leads the discussion or not, student outcomes will play a pivotal role in the closure process.

What criteria are proposed to select schools for closure?

In order to select schools for closure, most districts develop selection criteria. These criteria, and the process by which they are selected, approved, and utilized, ultimately become the focus of intense public scrutiny, and in some cases criticism.

In Seattle, a citizens' committee was appointed to recommend schools for closure based on the Board's guidelines, which included enrollment, building capacity, academic performance, and equity. While data on the selection criteria were available, it was unclear how they were applied. Some accused the committee of making decisions on more subjective measures. "Principles trumped criteria," the final committee recommendation report stated, without further explanation. Without knowing exactly how the schools were chosen, parents and community members were suspicious of the process and quickly rallied to keep individual schools off the list.

> *MPS COMMITTEE OKS FRAMEWORK FOR SCHOOL CLOSURES; PLAN DEVELPED BY CONSULTANTS EMPHASIZED OBJECTIVE CRITERIA – Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, 11/29/05*
>
> *OPTIONS BEWILDER TASK FORCE: LIST OF SCHOOLS THAT COULD CLOSE NOW 30 – Columbus Dispatch, 10/27/05*

But getting around subjective criteria may prove difficult if many schools fall into the category of low enrollment or poor performance. In Columbus, the committee tasked with selecting schools for closure started with enrollment patterns and space availability in nearby schools. The resulting list of 31 schools left the committee in a pattern of circular logic, with some school closures predicated on the others slated for closure remaining open, and vice versa. One committee member likened the process to solving a Rubik's Cube.

For Milwaukee, the process of developing and applying criteria was multi-tiered. Consultants created a process to establish criteria and a framework to make decisions. Schools were ranked using this framework, and only schools that performed below the median score on every criterion were considered for closure. Each school's performance on these criteria was available via the district's webpage. A transparent strategy was also used in Pittsburgh, where the district worked with consultants to develop an analytic and seemingly unbiased method to rank schools academically. Only those schools with the lowest rankings were recommended for closure.

Baltimore was required to consider eight factors established by the State of Maryland when selecting schools for closure (See box below). This list represents the broad categories used by many districts when selecting closure criteria. One notable absence from this list is student outcomes.

As noted above, student outcomes often rise to the top of discussion on closures. To gain a clearer picture of a school, performance criteria might include current year test scores, as well as test scores over a 3 – 5 year period, in order to determine upward or downward trends in schools. At the high school level, where closing schools is often more complex due to location and transportation considerations, student outcomes criteria might also include graduation and college attendance rates.

How will the community be involved?

A neighborhood school can be the heart of a neighborhood and most districts seek to engage the community in the closure process. Community involvement, however, can stall or even derail closures as parents and teachers fight to keep *their* school open.

In Seattle, after the first closure plan was criticized for lack of community input, the district created a community involvement process that resulted in a second plan. In the months following, the superintendent caved to continued criticism and removed specific schools from the closure list. This only intensified public opposition to closures as parents saw an opportunity to influence the decision. From the time the Superintendent made his first recommendation to the time schools were finally approved for closure, 18 months of public debate, activism, and acrimony eroded community trust in the district and its leadership. In the wake of this process, the Superintendent tendered his resignation and a group of parents initiated an effort to recall the school board members who approved closures.

SCHOOL CLOSURES LEAVE PARENTS CYNICAL: CHANGES IN OAKLAND DISTRICT RAISE QUESTIONS ABOUT SINCERITY OF REQUEST FOR COMMUNITY INPUT – Oakland Tribune, 3/2/07

AN OPEN PROCESS TO CLOSING SCHOOLS; COMMUNITY INPUT PLAYING BIGGER ROLE THIS TIME AROUND – Seattle-Post Intelligencer, 3/3/06

Other districts involved the community, both directly and indirectly, in the closure process. A task force of community members in Columbus, charged with identifying schools for closure requested that all of their proceedings be public, to eliminate ambiguity about the process. Milwaukee and Pittsburgh went to the community when developing criteria, enabling them to be a part of the decision making process, but not be directly involved in the selection of schools for closure. For Pittsburgh, it took only a few months to develop the criteria, analyze the data and make recommendations for closures. This recommendation was vetted with the community and approved by the school board shortly thereafter.

But even strategic efforts at community input can backfire, when final decisions go against strong and organized community interests. In Oakland, the district sought community engagement for ways to address falling enrollment and poor academic performance. While closure was always a possibility, many parents and teachers felt betrayed after participating in school improvement conversations that still resulted in the decision to close their schools. When considering closures, it's clear that the role of community is a delicate one. One parent said, *"We engaged in your process with great sincerity… I'm very disappointed to see is that this was just a process." – Oakland Tribune, 2/23/07.* Clear approaches for community input and transparency on the limits on the community's role could serve districts well.

Will the district leadership stay unified throughout the process?

School district officials can guide a community through school closures and fiscal challenges by asserting unified leadership throughout the process.

BOARD MEMBERS DIFFER ON EVE OF SCHOOL-CLOSURE MEETING – Seattle Times, 6/7/06

MPS PANEL HOLDS OFF ON CLOSING SEVERAL SCHOOLS; COMMUNITY NEEDS' ANALSYIS PLANNED – Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, 2/23/05

In Pittsburgh, the school board decided to vote on an overall recommendation from the Superintendent for a slate of schools to be closed. The school board members had pledged to approve or reject the comprehensive plan, rather than comment on specific schools or aspects of a closure plan. The closure list drew criticism from the community, including accusations of racism, given the disproportionate impact on African American students. Rather than backpedal, the Superintendent defended the list, asserting that children impacted by closures would move to better academic programs. The board ultimately approved the plan as written, even though two of the three African-American board members voted no.

Baltimore took a different approach, with the board voting on each individual school recommended for closure. All recommendations for closure were approved. While Baltimore school board members are appointed, voting individually on schools can give elected board members the opportunity to vote against closing schools in the areas they represent, yet still result in necessary closures.

In Seattle, a division among the leadership delayed the closure process. The school board did not support the superintendent's early attempts to identify schools for closure. The board members later turned against each other when faced with the final decision to close schools, voting 5-2. This split vote resulted in the dissenting board members joining a lawsuit, suing the district over the closures.

Similar fissures surfaced in Detroit, with some board members lobbying to keep individual schools off the closure list. Others worked to keep the board unified: *"Board members need to know their role and stay in their lane. We need to understand that we are policy makers, and we need to focus on facts coming from the superintendent and the staff." Detroit school board member – Detroit Free Press, 3/3/2007*

One near certainty in any closure process is that objections will intensify once schools are named. In some cases, criticism comes in the form of allegations of racism, while in others, lobbying addresses the specific characteristics of schools named or not named. In the end, experience suggests that the success of the effort often depends on the extent to which the board and superintendent stay focused on the goals throughout the entire process.

What is the transition plan and how is it communicated?

Districts closing schools must have a proactive plan for students and staff that are affected, and a way to communicate this information to key stakeholders. Parents want to know where their child will go to school, how schools would absorb displaced students, and if closures will affect student-teacher ratios. Teachers and principals want to know where they will be placed. Many districts admittedly provided either too little information or waited too long in getting the information out.

SCHOOL BOARD WORKS TO MAKE CLOSINGS EASIER ON STUDENT; 'SUPPORT TEAM' TO HELP KIDS AT NEW SCHOOLS – Chicago Sun Times, 5/23/07

SCHOOLS PREPARE FOR NEW STUDENTS; CAMPUSES GET READY TO TAKE IN PUPILS FROM TWO THAT WILL BE CLOSED – Sacramento Bee 11/17/05

The Chicago Public Schools developed a strategy that included support teams, to help students make the transition into their new schools. In other districts, schools take the lead by welcoming new parents and students into their community. *"When we find out who is coming…we will send a note to the students through their principal and ask if they can visit us. We might be able to introduce them to the teachers in their grade for next year. We want to initiate a smooth transition early." Elementary school principal – Sacramento Bee 11/17/05.*

Another option for transitioning students is to phase out schools over several years. In Baltimore, many middle schools identified for closure are phasing out. While no more students are assigned to the schools, current students have the option to finish at their school. Phasing out schools can be expensive in the short term, but certainly less than avoiding closure all together.

In addition to communicating transition plans to parents and students, Milwaukee made a conscious effort to build internal support for closures by including a line item "school closure rebate" for each school's budget. Principals in Milwaukee said that they support school closures if their schools received more resources, so district leaders openly reallocated the "savings."

But some districts are finding that closing failing schools is much easier than providing successful ones for displaced students. In Pittsburgh, the new K-8 programs are unpopular with staff, who find implementation difficult, and parents, who think the district has done a poor job of integrating older and younger students under a single roof. These experiences reiterate the importance of transition planning when closing schools.

Avoiding the headlines: Closures as part of yearly planning and budgeting

As some districts are finding, closures have a way of derailing districts for years, particularly when enrollment declines over a long period of time. Even if districts are able to close some schools through the difficult process described above, it is often not enough. This leaves district leaders cringing at the thought of engaging in the process again.

School closure, however, does not need to be one-time policy decision but rather can be a regular response to predictable changes in enrollment. Closure could be a yearly decision, made in conjunction with the budgeting process. At the onset of the budgeting cycle, districts could have standing criteria and a clear process for taking stock of all schools and identifying which if any meet the criteria for closure. Based on such criteria, district leaders, school personnel, and parents should be able to recognize when a school is headed toward closure and can either work to increase enrollment or plan accordingly for closure. When schools are identified earlier for closure, the district can choose not to place new students at the school and give current students the option of finishing at their school, thereby avoiding forced moves.

The Oakland United School District engages in such a process, utilizing enrollment and academic performance data to identify schools in need of action. While implementing this process may be difficult at the outset, it begins to acclimate staff, parents, and students to the idea that closures can and should be part of a district's regular operations. This more systematic approach to managing a district's set of schools could effectively help the district be more responsive to enrollment fluctuation.