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General questions/arrange interviews

CPS students transfer to academically weak schools after school closings; impact on achievement minimal

CHICAGO—Eight in 10 Chicago Public Schools (CPS) students displaced by school closings transferred to schools that ranked in the bottom half of system schools on standardized tests, according to a study released Wednesday by the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago. However, because most displaced students transferred from one low-performing school to another, the move did not, on average, significantly affect their academic achievement.

In Chicago, multiple rounds of school closings have prompted a powerful backlash from some teachers, students, community members and advocacy groups. Most recently, media accounts have linked school closings, and the subsequent shuffling of students across gang lines, to a surge in teen violence in the city. Nevertheless, CPS and many other large urban school systems continue to make school closings a cornerstone of reform, touting the financial and academic benefits of closing underutilized or underperforming campuses.

Despite the high-profile nature of the issue, which has garnered even more attention since U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan began promoting the strategy on a national stage, very little is known about how students fare when schools close. The CCSR study looks at one piece of the school closing puzzle: the academic effects of school closings on displaced elementary school students.

“Understanding the effects of school closings on displaced students is important, given that CPS continues to implement this policy,” the report’s authors write. “Even though low performing CPS schools are now being “turned around” instead of being closed, a large number of CPS schools are under-enrolled. There are calls for more closings of underutilized schools to save money.”

The study, *When Schools Close: Effects on Displaced Students in Chicago Public Schools*, focuses on 18 CPS elementary schools closed between 2001 and 2006 because of chronically poor academic performance or enrollment significantly below capacity. The schools enrolled 5,445 students at the time of their closings. In order to assess the academic effects of closing on these students, the study compares students ages 8 and older displaced by school closings with students in similar schools that did not close. The comparison group provides an estimate of how the displaced students should have performed on a range of outcomes had their schools not been closed.

Key Findings:

- One year after school closings, displaced students who went to the **strongest** receiving schools (those where

scores on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills ranked in the system's top quartile) had a reading achievement level that was almost a month higher than expected. In math, the achievement level for students in the strongest schools was more than two months greater than expected.

- One year after school closings, displaced students who enrolled in the **weakest** receiving schools (those in the bottom quartile) experienced an achievement loss of more than a month in reading and half-a-month in math.
- Forty-two percent of displaced students re-enrolled in schools that ranked in the system's lowest quartile; 38 percent re-enrolled in receiving schools in the second quartile. **Only six percent attended schools with scores in the top quartile.** Students who did enroll in top schools generally had to travel longer distances.
- The most significant negative impact of school closings on both reading and math achievement occurred before schools were actually closed. Students' reading scores on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills showed a loss of about a month and a half of learning during the announcement year. In math, the learning loss was equivalent to slightly more than half a month.
- On average, school closings had no significant long-term effects on math or reading achievement. **One, two and three years after changing schools, students' reading and math achievement was not significantly different from what researchers would have expected had their schools not been closed;** and when displaced students reached high school, their on-track rates to graduate were no different than the rates of students who attended schools similar to the closed ones.
- Although the school-closing policy had only a small effect on student test scores, it did affect summer school enrollment and subsequent school mobility. Students who left a closing school were less likely than the comparison group to enroll in summer school in the summer following the closing; and they were twice as likely to switch schools during the school year following the closing.

The report's authors stressed that the findings were not meant to provide a comprehensive cost-benefit analysis of school closing policies. However, the authors did note, "These findings suggest the theory behind the school closing policy has some merit. After their schools closed, students did better when they attended a better school.

They continued, "This also suggests that the success of a school closing policy crucially depends on a large supply of 'better' schools and on an intentional strategy to enroll displaced students in these schools."

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Julia Gwynne

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