

RESEARCH REPORT: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY MAY 2018

School Closings in Chicago

Staff and Student Experiences and Academic Outcomes



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors wish to acknowledge all of the educators and students who graciously let us into their schools, generously gave their time, and shared their experiences with us. The authors are indebted to each of the welcoming school leaders who agreed to participate in this study, and to the staff members who helped us schedule the site visit interviews, collect parent/guardian permission forms, and organize the student focus groups. We would also like to acknowledge the Chicago Public Schools for providing us with the administrative data that allowed us to do this work.

The authors also appreciate the many individuals who contributed to this report. We thank Maheema Haque for helping us code interviews, summarize qualitative data, and for contributions to the literature review. We were also fortunate to have the input of several people who provided constructive criticism along the way. We are grateful to our Consortium colleagues who read multiple drafts of the report and provided us with helpful suggestions for improvement, including Elaine Allensworth, Kylie Klein, Bronwyn McDaniel, Eliza Moeller, Jenny Nagaoka, Penny Sebring, and Jessica Tansey. Furthermore, prior to writing this report, we presented preliminary findings to several groups, including to members of our Steering Committee, the Consortium Investors Council, and program staff at the Spencer Foundation and the Chicago Community Trust. At each presentation, participants asked us thought-provoking questions and offered helpful suggestions for our analysis, interpretation, and subsequent writing. We also received vital feedback on the penultimate draft from two external reviewers, James Kemple and Mary Pattillo, who provided important points for us to consider as we finalized this report. In addition, we received extensive written feedback on the penultimate draft from several Steering Committee members, including Gina Caneva, Lynn Cherkasky-Davis, Lila Leff, Shazia Miller, and Beatriz Ponce de León. We thank them for their close read and thoughtful comments. We also thank our colleague Todd Rosenkranz, who conducted a thorough technical read of the report, and the UChicago Consortium's communications team, including Bronwyn McDaniel, Jessica Tansey, and Jessica Puller, who were instrumental in the production of this report.

We are grateful to the Spencer Foundation and the Chicago Community Trust for supporting this work and providing us with the necessary resources to conduct the analyses and write the report. We also gratefully acknowledge the Spencer Foundation and the Lewis-Sebring Family Foundation, whose operating grants support the work of the UChicago Consortium. Finally, we greatly appreciate the support from the Consortium Investor Council that funds critical work beyond the initial research: putting the research to work, refreshing the data archive, seeding new studies, and replicating previous studies. Members include: Brinson Foundation, Chicago Community Trust, CME Group Foundation, Crown Family Philanthropies, Lloyd A. Fry Foundation, Joyce Foundation, Lewis-Sebring Family Foundation, McDougal Family Foundation, Osa Foundation, Polk Bros. Foundation, Robert McCormick Foundation, Spencer Foundation, Steans Family Foundation, and The Chicago Public Education Fund.

Cite as: Gordon, M.F., de la Torre, M., Cowhy, J.R., Moore, P.T., Sartain, L.S., & Knight, D. (2018). *School closings in Chicago: Staff and student experiences and academic outcomes*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.

This report was produced by the UChicago Consortium's publications and communications staff: Bronwyn McDaniel, Director of Outreach and Communication; Jessica Tansey, Communications Manager; and Jessica Puller, Communications Specialist.

Graphic Design: Jeff Hall Design
Photography: Eileen Ryan
Editing: Katelyn Silva, Jessica Puller, Jessica Tansey, Andrew Zou, and Gina Kim

Executive Summary

Across the country, urban school districts are opting to close under-enrolled schools as a way to consolidate resources. Motivated by a reported \$1 billion deficit and declining enrollments in depopulating neighborhoods, the Chicago Board of Education voted in May 2013 to close 49 elementary schools and one high school program located in an elementary school—the largest mass school closure to date. In order to accommodate the nearly 12,000 displaced students, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) designated specific “welcoming” schools for each of the closed schools.¹

Although cost savings was the primary stated reason for closing schools, city and district officials saw this as an opportunity to move students into higher-rated schools and provide them with better academic opportunities. Underutilized schools, the district argued, were not serving students well. Supporters of the policy hoped that exposing students to better environments would generate academic gains and offset negative consequences.

There was strong, vocal opposition to the policy, including from the Chicago Teachers Union as well as from many families, students, and community groups. Most of the schools slated for closure were located in historically disinvested and primarily Black neighborhoods, with many of the schools serving areas of the city with high unemployment and crime rates. Critics feared that closing schools in these areas would destabilize communities and disrupt the lives of children and families, affecting their safety and security. Many also worried about students in welcoming schools and how they might be affected by large enrollment increases.

Prior studies on school closures have looked at the effects of closing schools on students’ test scores, with a

few studies looking at effects on student attendance and GPA. Evidence has shown that students experienced minimal or negative short-term effects beginning in the announcement year, with no long-term positive impacts.² Prior studies from the UChicago Consortium on School Research (UChicago Consortium) and others have shown that these effects were mitigated when students attended significantly higher-performing schools or had fewer disruptions.³ A small number of qualitative studies have investigated how closing schools affects students, families, and staff. Findings reveal several potentially negative effects, including on student and teacher relationships.⁴ Missing from prior studies is an in-depth understanding and comparison of the experiences of staff and students across multiple receiving schools. In addition, most studies have not looked beyond test scores to other kinds of relevant outcomes, such as mobility or suspension rates for displaced students or students in receiving schools. Policymakers need more information to understand the pros and cons, and implications, of closing schools.

1 Throughout the report we refer to district-designated welcoming schools as welcoming schools and other CPS schools where displaced students attended as receiving schools.

2 de la Torre & Gwynne (2009); Kirshner, Gaertner, & Pozzoboni (2010); Barrow, Park, & Schanzenbach (2011); Engberg, Gill, Zamarro, & Zimmer (2012); Brummet (2014); Bross, Harris, & Liu (2016); Larsen (2014); Steinberg, Scull, & MacDonald (2015).

3 de la Torre & Gwynne (2009); Barrow et al. (2011); Engberg et al. (2012); Kemple (2015); Bross et al. (2016).

4 South & Haynie (2004); Deeds & Pattillo (2014); Cole & Cole (1993); Seidman, Allen, Aber, Mitchell, & Feinman (1994).

In this report, we provide evidence of the short-term and multi-year impacts of the 2013 CPS school closures on students' academic, behavioral, and other relevant outcomes. We also illuminate the voices and experiences of the staff and students most directly affected by closures across six welcoming schools.

Our study addresses two primary research questions:

Research Question 1: How did staff and students affected by school closings experience the school closings process and subsequent transfer into designated welcoming schools?

Research Question 2: What effect did closing schools have on closed and welcoming schools students' mobility, attendance, suspensions, test scores, and core GPAs? ⁵

To answer our research questions, we used a mixed methods design. This design allowed us to zoom in to illustrate what it was like for staff and students going through the school closings process in six welcoming schools, and zoom out to look at the impact of the policy on all affected students on a variety of outcomes.

Financial, utilization, and performance challenges faced by districts will likely result in more school closures in the future, in Chicago and elsewhere around the country. We hope findings from this report will provide helpful information for policymakers, educators, community members, families, and students to consider when closures are proposed.

CONTEXT

2013 School Closings in Chicago

In early December 2012, CPS identified a list of 330 underutilized elementary and high schools at risk for closures.⁶ By February 2013, the district narrowed down the list to 129 elementary schools that were still under consideration. At the end of March 2013, CPS announced the final list of 53 schools and one program recommended for closure, and a final vote was set for the end of May 2013. Ultimately, 47 elementary schools

and one high school program at an elementary school were closed at the end of the 2012–13 school year, primarily in the south and west sides of the city. Two other elementary schools were phased out the following year. Communities and schools had several occasions from December 2012 to May 2013 to attend meetings and hearings to advocate that their school be removed from the different recommended closure lists because of the staggered process for and the late announcement of the final list of school closures.

The district assigned students from closed schools to specific welcoming schools. These schools had to be within one mile of the closed school, higher-rated than the closed school (according to the district performance policy rating), and have enough available seats to accommodate students. The district invested resources in these welcoming schools, such as new or upgraded technology and extra discretionary funds for the first year, to enhance their learning environment and to prepare for the influx of students. In 14 cases, CPS determined that the closed school building should house the welcoming school, meaning that welcoming school staff and students had to relocate to the closed school buildings.

When the closures took place at the end of the 2012–13 school year, nearly 12,000 students were attending the 47 elementary schools that closed that year, close to 17,000 students were attending the 48 designated welcoming schools, and around 1,100 staff were employed in the closed schools. Thirty-six of the closed schools had a Level 3 rating (“on probation;” the lowest of three possible ratings), 11 had a Level 2 rating (“good standing;” the middle of three possible ratings), and none had a Level 1 rating (“excellent standing;” the highest of three possible ratings) in 2012–13. In contrast, 13 of the designated welcoming schools had an “on probation” rating, 23 had a “good standing” rating and 12 had an “excellent standing” rating that same year.

Sixty-six percent of students from closed schools attended the 48 designated welcoming schools. The rest enrolled in 311 other schools in the district.⁷ On

⁵ Core GPA is the combination of grades in English, math, science and social studies classes.

⁶ CPS labeled a school as underutilized if the enrollment of the

school was below 80 percent of its capacity, measured in fall 2012.

⁷ Six percent of students from closed schools transferred out of the district—a rate similar to prior years for the closed schools.

average, a designated welcoming school received 150 displaced students, accounting for 32 percent of their student population in fall 2013. However, some of the designated welcoming schools doubled in size, while others only received a small percentage of students from their corresponding closed school.

While the changes in the population of students and teachers suggest welcoming schools had to make major adjustments, to really understand what happened requires listening to student and staff experiences.

KEY FINDINGS

Student and Staff Experiences

To understand student and staff experiences, we identified six welcoming schools in which to conduct in-depth case studies, and interviewed educators and students in these schools.⁸ The highlighted qualitative findings represent the key themes we found across the six case study schools and are based on the views, experiences, and perceptions of staff and students in these schools.⁹

- **School staff said that the planning process for merging closed schools into welcoming schools was not sufficient, resulting in staff feeling unprepared.** Once welcoming schools were identified, the district asked staff to produce written transition plans outlining how the schools would serve their new student populations. To help support principals in this process, the district provided them with principal transition coordinators. Planning for a merger of this magnitude was highly complex and involved a great deal of adaptation. School leaders said they did not know how to balance the need to plan with the recognition that the process, in reality, was unfolding with a high degree of uncertainty and ambiguity.

Planning was also difficult because staff only had a few months and they did not always know how many of the closed school students would enroll in their schools, nor their final budgets. As the school year started, staff said they did not feel ready, and much of what had been written in the transition

planning documents quickly became irrelevant as realities shifted.

- **Getting school buildings ready to receive students on time was challenging because the moving process was chaotic.** After the Chicago Board of Education voted to determine school closures at the end of May 2013, there was only one month left until the end of the school year. The new school year was scheduled to start on August 26, 2013, giving staff just two months to prepare the buildings, move supplies and furniture, and hire personnel for the 2013–14 school year. One of the largest impediments to getting ready for the school year was that the moving process was perceived as poorly managed. Roughly 95 school buildings needed to be packed up for the move. Staff said boxes were strewn throughout the school buildings and many staff reported that they lost valuable school supplies and materials during the move. As a result of the disorder and chaos, teachers said they did not have everything they needed for instruction or to support students at the beginning of the school year.

In addition to having to deal with the clutter of moving boxes and the chaos of unpacking, staff also lamented that some of the welcoming school buildings were unclean, some needed serious repairs, and many upgrades fell short of what was promised or were delayed. Poor building conditions were seen as a barrier to preparedness, undermining community hopefulness about the transition. The inadequacy of the building space resulted in administrators and teachers spending a lot of time unpacking, cleaning, and preparing the physical space, rather than on instructional planning and relationship building.

- **Students and staff appreciated new investments in Safe Passage, technology, and resources.** To help support students in welcoming schools, the district provided extra funds and technology the first year of the merger. Some of the extra funds were used to

⁸ For more information about the qualitative methods, see Appendix A.

⁹ In addition to using interview and focus group data, we also analyzed survey data from the *My Voice, My School* surveys given to CPS students and staff yearly.

pay for welcoming events and activities, hire extra student support personnel, and/or add or boost academic supports for students. Many of these initial supports, however, were hard to sustain after the first year, according to school leaders, due to budget cuts in subsequent years and the end of the one-time influx of resources. However, some of the welcoming schools gained new STEM or IB programs, which the schools were able to maintain. One lasting support that interviewees appreciated was the expansion of the Safe Passage program, a program that hires Safe Passage workers to stand along designated walking routes during before- and after-school hours for added safety. Although school communities appreciated the expansion of Safe Passage, safety is still a major concern in many communities affected by school closures.

- **When schools closed, it severed the longstanding social connections that families and staff had with their schools and with one another, resulting in a period of mourning.** Those impacted by school closures expressed feelings of grief in multiple ways, often referring to their closed school peers and colleagues as *“like a family.”* The intensity of the feelings of loss were amplified in cases where schools had been open for decades, with generations of families attending the same neighborhood school. Losing their closed schools was not easy and the majority of interviewees spoke about the difficulty they had integrating and socializing into the welcoming schools. Even though welcoming school staff and students did not lose their schools per se, many also expressed feelings of loss because incorporating a large number of new students required adjustments. Staff said they wished that they had more training and support on what it meant to welcome staff and students who just lost their schools. Interviewees wished that their grief and loss had been acknowledged and validated.
- **A lack of proactive efforts to support welcoming school communities in integrating the populations created challenging “us” vs. “them” dynamics.**

Creating strong relationships and building trust in welcoming schools after schools closed was difficult. Prior to the actual merger, school communities said they felt as if they were competing with one another to stay open, which made accepting the loss that much more difficult. Displaced staff and students, who had just lost their schools, had to go into unfamiliar school environments and start anew. Welcoming school communities also did not want to lose or change the way their schools were previously.

To try to rebuild community within newly merged welcoming schools, staff held welcoming events, but these efforts often fell short. Tensions and conflicts arose, in part, because of differences in school cultures and expectations. Closed school staff and students, in each case, talked about feeling marginalized and not welcomed into the welcoming schools. Because of these feelings, staff and students said there was an increase in student fights and bullying, especially the first year of the transition. Over time, relationships began to improve. Staff expressed a need for more training and support in integrating school communities after school closures.

KEY FINDINGS

Student Outcomes

In order to determine the effects of school closures on student outcomes, we compared the outcomes trends of students affected by closures with students in similar schools that were not affected by any school actions.¹⁰ These comparisons allowed us to estimate how the affected students would have performed had their schools not been affected. Using administrative data, we analyzed school transfer rates, number of days absent, suspension rates, reading and math test scores, and core GPA.¹¹

Compared to students from similar schools, we found:

- **Students who were attending welcoming schools that relocated into the building of closed schools transferred out at higher rates just before the merger; mobility was not affected by school closures in subsequent years for either group of students.**

¹⁰ We focused on students who were in grades K-7 in spring 2013: 10,708 students from closed schools and 13,218 students from designated welcoming schools.

¹¹ For more information about the quantitative methods, see Appendix B.

Students from closed schools transferred by necessity, while students in welcoming schools also left their schools for other district schools at higher rates in the summer prior to the merger. In fall 2013, 21 percent of the welcoming school students did not return to these schools. This number was almost 5 percentage points higher than expected given their prior school mobility and the mobility rates of other students in similar schools. The increase in the transfer rates was driven exclusively by students who were attending the 14 welcoming schools that had to relocate to the closed school buildings. In other words, when welcoming school communities were faced with having to move school buildings, families from the welcoming schools were more likely to look at other options.

- **All students affected by school closures had no changes in absences or suspension rates after the merger.** The number of school days missed by all students in our sample have been decreasing over time. Absences for students affected by school closures showed similar trends after the merger to the trends for students in comparison schools. Consequently, school closures did not affect the attendance rates of these students because absences changed at similar rates districtwide.

The percent of students suspended started to decrease in the 2013–14 school year, coinciding with the change in the CPS Suspensions and Expulsions Reduction Plan (SERP). These declines were evident for all students—those affected by closings and the comparison groups. The decline in suspension rates for students from closed schools was slightly more pronounced than the one for the comparison group, but differences were not significant.

- **Students affected by school closures did experience negative learning effects, especially students from closed schools.**
 - **The largest negative impact of school closures was on the test scores of students from closed schools; their scores were lower than expected the year of the announcement.** Similar to what

other studies on school closures have found, student test scores in this case were lower than predicted given students' prior performance. Students' scores in the spring of the year of the announcement were roughly one and a half months behind in reading and two months behind in math. One reason for this might be that the announcement year was a disruptive year for many of these schools as they faced uncertainty about whether they would be closed. The district tried to avoid distractions in students' learning by waiting to announce the final list of school closures until after students took the state mandated tests (ISAT). However, students in closed schools still performed lower than the comparison group in the spring, even though their performance had been very similar in the fall and winter (measured by NWEA tests). Given the push to announce final closure decisions post-ISAT testing, it is not clear why there was a gap in ISAT test scores. The deviation in test scores in March between closed and comparison schools was somewhat unexpected as both were under the same threat of closing at the time the ISAT tests were given.¹²

- **Students from closed schools experienced a long-term negative impact on their math test scores; slightly lower and short-term effects for reading test scores.** Reading test scores rose back to expected levels the second year post-closings for students from closed schools, but their test scores did not improve at a higher pace than students in similar schools. However, the gap in math test scores remained for four years post-closings, the last year in our analyses. The size of the effect was similar to the effect during the year of the announcement, which was approximately two months behind in math.
- **Students from welcoming schools had lower than expected reading test scores the first year after the merger.** Reading test scores of students from welcoming schools were negatively affected the first year post-closing, scoring approximately one and a half months lower than expected given students'

¹² We ran some tests to try and understand whether there was any way to predict which schools would be on the final list of closures, but we found no distinctive data on these schools

that would allow us or them to predict which ones were going to be on the final list.

prior performance. This was a short-term effect, as reading test scores rebounded the next year.

Welcoming school students also had slightly lower than expected math scores, although this was not a significant difference.

- **Other learning measures, such as core GPA, were not affected immediately after closures, although we found some negative effects three and four years post-closures for students from closed schools.** Overall, core GPA improved slightly, especially the years after school closures for students. These increases initially occurred at the same rate for students affected by closures and their comparison group, but in years three and four post-closures (2015–16 and 2016–17), the core GPA for students from closed schools did not increase as much as the comparison group. The effects on core GPA were small, but negative, in years three and four post-closures. These negative effects were more pronounced for students who were in primary grades (3–5) in the announcement year (2012–13).

Conclusion

Our findings show that the reality of school closures was much more complex than policymakers anticipated; academic outcomes were neutral at best, and negative in

some instances. Interviews with affected students and staff revealed major challenges with logistics, relationships, and school culture. A number of different factors played a role in why students did not benefit as much as hoped and why it was difficult for leaders and staff to create positive and welcoming learning environments, especially the first year of the merger. Closed school staff and students came into welcoming schools grieving and, in some cases, resentful that their schools closed while other schools stayed open. Welcoming school staff said they were not adequately supported to serve the new population and to address resulting divisions. Furthermore, leaders did not know what it took to be a successful welcoming school, suggesting a need for training that is more ongoing, along with time for reflections and targeted support. Students and staff appreciated the extra resources, technology, programs, and the expansion of Safe Passage, although they wished for longer-term investments because student needs did not end after one year. Staff and students said that it took a long period of time to build new school cultures and feel like a cohesive community. On the other hand, many of the negative concerns that critics raised did not materialize. Outcomes, such as absences and suspensions, were not affected by school closures. Our hope is that this report will add to our collective understanding of the effects of school closings.

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This report reflects the interpretation of the authors. Although the UChicago Consortium’s Steering Committee provided technical advice, no formal endorsement by these individuals, organizations, or the full UChicago Consortium should be assumed.

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