



**Blog**

October 5, 2023

# Declining Enrollment is Leading to School Closures. How Can Districts Limit the Harm to Their Most Vulnerable Students?

**BY CARRIE HAHNEL | MAX MARCHITELLO**



## SHARE THIS ARTICLE

Public school enrollment is declining across the country, and it won't bounce back anytime soon. The [steep drops in K-12 enrollment](#) in the aftermath of COVID-19 exacerbated a much [longer-term trend](#) rooted in [falling birth rates](#) and slowing immigration.

These declines have created budget problems for many school districts, because most districts are funded on a per-student basis: as they shed students, they also lose dollars. To address budget shortfalls and bring their number of schools and staff in line with their shrinking enrollments—a process sometimes called “rightsizing”—many districts have consolidated or closed schools or are contemplating doing so.

In the last year alone, Jefferson County Public Schools in Colorado decided to [close 16 schools](#). Oakland Unified in California [closed or consolidated 5 schools](#). And the Jefferson Parish School Board in Louisiana voted to [close 6 schools and relocate two others](#). More closures and consolidations are sure to follow.

Generally, the math of rightsizing checks out: with fewer students, districts need fewer schools. But the process of closing schools is excruciatingly difficult, emotionally heated, and often inequitable.

Closures can lead to [feelings of loss](#), as they can disrupt family routines, increase [student stress](#), fracture [teacher-](#)

[student relationships](#), and shutter buildings that have served as galvanizing community centers. The closure process can deeply strain relationships between district administrators, families, and educators.

And as we discuss in a [new report](#) released this month by [Policy Analysis for California Education \(PACE\)](#), closures often exacerbate inequities. Schools slated for closure often serve high concentrations of Black, Latino, and low-income students — and many are located in segregated neighborhoods that have experienced decades of disinvestment.

That's not an accident. Often, these neighborhoods are experiencing rapid gentrification, with wealthier, often white families displacing Black and Hispanic residents. Those with children may opt out of their local public schools – especially if they perceive them, correctly or not, to be unsafe or low performing. As a result, neighborhood schools lose enrollment and remain racially segregated, even as the surrounding area diversifies.

Closures affect racially homogenous and wealthier communities as well, particularly in places that are losing school-age residents. But in these areas, families with greater means usually have more options for how to respond to school closures. They can choose to send their children to private schools, provide transportation to other preferred public schools, or even move to a different neighborhood to access better schools.

To address these potential harms, school district leaders must center equity when considering school closures. In our report,

we offer several recommendations drawing on lessons from districts that have weathered closures.

First, when considering closures, district leaders can run an inclusive and transparent process that engages families, students, and educators. As part of this process, district leaders can:

- Provide ample opportunities for community engagement before and during the closure process, and ensure stakeholders can meaningfully influence the process and result.
- Establish and share clear, values-based criteria for identifying schools for closure.
- Share information about community-level demographic trends as well as district and school enrollment patterns to provide context.
- Share information about academic growth and other outcomes at schools that might be closed and the potential receiving schools.

Second, when closing schools, district leaders can work to do so in a way that improves academic quality for displaced students and the district as a whole. District leaders can:

- Reserve and prioritize seats for displaced students in the district's highest-quality schools, since research has found that closures [can sometimes improve academic achievement, especially if students are relocated to academically better schools](#). For example, Oakland Unified School District, which adopted the [Opportunity Ticket](#) policy

following advocacy by [Oakland REACH](#) parents, gives displaced students enrollment preference for any school in the district.

- Provide accessible and safe routes to school so that displaced students can attend high-quality schools elsewhere in the district.
- Provide receiving schools with additional resources, including effective teachers and other staff, so that they can offer academic, social, and emotional support and services to students.
- Repurpose empty school buildings to provide services that support students and their communities, such as childcare, extracurricular activity space, and mental and physical health care.
- Use school closures as an opportunity to rethink attendance zones and revise school assignment policies to reduce segregation and create new, more diverse school communities.

Third, district leaders can work with other city leaders to develop a long-term plan to address factors contributing to racial disproportionality in school closures, such as housing affordability and population declines. They can:

- Use community-level data to equitably distribute funding and resources to schools in high-need neighborhoods.
- Regularly review population trends, using these data to foster conversation about how the community can more effectively attract and keep families.

- Collaborate with local governmental agencies, including housing and economic development authorities, to expand and improve affordable housing options for both educators and families.
- Map out transit plans—including public transportation, bike routes, and walking routes—that provide equitable and safe access to high-performing schools as well as other valuable city services for every family.

With school enrollment expected to decline for the foreseeable future, closures may be inevitable — but the disproportionate impact on Black and Hispanic students is not. The fallout of closures can be managed with equity in mind. In doing so, district leaders can balance their budgets while also making choices that prioritize community voice, academic achievement, and values related to fairness and racial justice.

---





© Bellwether 2025