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Lessons from the Headlines

What to do when you close a school

By Kacey Guin and Marguerite Roza

Newspapers across the country highlight stories of districts that need to close schools because of enrollment declines. While the causes 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 operations. Because many states allocate money to districts based on student counts, declining enrollment often means 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. We looked at urban school districts as they sought to close schools and can offer some insight into the critical questions districts encountered and the different paths that were chosen.

These questions include:

- What is the financial bottom line?
- How do student outcomes fit in?
- What criteria are proposed to select schools for closure?
- How will the community be involved?
- Will the district leadership stay unified throughout the process?
- 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, Wash., to Birmingham, Ala., have seen budget shortfalls in the tens of millions of dollars. As enrollment and revenues continue to decline, anticipated expenditures remain steady or increase, leaving districts deeper in the red. Other districts, like Baltimore, are under pressure from state agencies to 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. Estimates vary widely, but 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, little data exists 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 in 2007-08, 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?

Decisions to close schools generally begin with a look at the dollars, but 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.

Where districts sidestepped performance issues, parents were quick to ask how closing schools 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 closure would move to schools with better academic programs. Regardless of whether the district's administrators lead the discussion, student outcomes will play a pivotal role in the closure process.

What criteria are proposed to select schools for closure?

To determine which schools to close, 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. Data on the selection criteria were available, but 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 the exact selection process, parents and community members were suspicious and quickly rallied to keep individual schools off the list.

Getting around subjective criteria may prove difficult if many schools fall into the category of low enrollment or poor performance. In Columbus, the committee that selected 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 closures predicated on others slated for closure remaining open, and vice versa. One committee member likened the process to solving a Rubik's Cube.

For Milwaukee, 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. Each school's performance on these criteria was available via the district's webpage.

A transparent strategy also was 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 which schools to close. They were: student enrollment trends; age or condition of school buildings; transportation; educational programs; racial composition of student body; financial considerations; student relocation; and community impact in the geographic attendance area for the school proposed to be closed as well as the schools to which students will be relocated. Absent from the criteria was student outcomes.

To gain a clearer picture of a school's achievement, performance criteria might include current year test scores, as well as test scores over a three- to five-year period, to determine upward or downward trends. At the high school level, where closing schools is often more complex due to location and transportation considerations, student outcomes might also include graduation and college attendance rates.

How will the community be involved?

A 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 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 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. After this process, the superintendent tendered his resignation and a group of parents initiated an effort to recall the school board members who approved closures.

Other districts involved the community, both directly and indirectly, in the process. A task force of Columbus community members, charged with identifying schools for closure, requested that all 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 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. 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?

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

In Pittsburgh, the board opted to vote on an overall recommendation from the superintendent for a slate of schools to be closed. Board members had pledged to approve or reject the comprehensive plan, rather than comment on specific schools or aspects. 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's board members are appointed, voting individually can give elected board members the chance 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.

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 success 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?

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.

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.

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, 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 said they support school closures if 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

As some districts are finding, closures have a way of derailing you for years, particularly when enrollment declines over a long period of time. Even if districts can close some schools, 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 a regular response to predictable enrollment changes. It 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 closure criteria. If this is in place, district leaders, staff, and parents should recognize when a school is headed toward closure and be able to work to increase enrollment or plan accordingly.

When schools are identified earlier for closure, the district can choose not to place new students 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. Implementing this process may be difficult at the outset, but it begins to acclimatize 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.

Marguerite Roza (margroza@u.washington.edu) and Kacey Guin work for the Center on Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington in Seattle.
