

Closing Schools

Center on Innovation & Improvement

Closing persistently low-achieving schools is one option that may be used by districts as part of an overall district improvement strategy (Kowal & Hassel, 2008; Steiner, 2009). This strategy involves closing an existing school and enrolling students who attended that school in other, higher-achieving schools. Closing low-achieving schools is an option used primarily by large urban districts as part of a comprehensive district reform effort that may also include targeted and intensive school-level interventions, strategies to improve the supply of human capital, and partnering with external charter or education management organizations.

The experience of districts that have closed schools for poor achievement (e.g., Chicago, Pittsburgh, Hartford, Denver) provides key lessons learned and guidance for districts considering closing schools (Steiner, 2009). Specifically, there are clear steps that districts can take to diminish the extent of the challenges and obstacles that will surface when closing schools. The steps, outlined by Steiner (2009) and supplemented by a set of guiding questions, are provided here.

When implementing the school closure intervention, districts should:

- 1. Establish policy context.** Strategically decide if closing schools is a feasible and necessary option by considering:
 - a. How closing low-achieving schools will contribute to the larger district reform effort.
 - b. The extent to which current (or past) school interventions have led to improved school performance in persistently low-achieving schools, and identifying those schools that have not improved despite repeated interventions and increased resources.
 - c. Which schools, if any, are having a negative impact on students' academic achievement.
- 2. Establish clear procedures and decision criteria** for closing schools, by:
 - a. Including key stakeholders, including business and community leaders, in developing criteria for closing schools (example: Denver Public Schools).
 - b. Developing a consistent and data-based method of assessing school performance, such as a performance index, that supplements state-level academic achievement data and that is uniformly applied to schools across the district.
- 3. Operate transparently.** Communicate the decision to close schools, through:
 - a. Ongoing and upfront communication with the school board or school committee members.
 - b. Keeping the district leadership and school board unified (example: asking school board members to vote on a slate of closures, rather than individual school closures).
 - c. Developing and articulating a clear rationale for the school closures, including the immediate benefit that students will receive as a result of the school closure.
- 4. Plan for orderly transition of students, staff in both the closed school and receiving schools.** Develop and implement a transition plan for students and staff by:
 - a. Creating options and ensuring immediate placement of displaced students.
 - b. Communicating directly (e.g., face-to-face) with the families of all displaced students.
 - c. Taking proactive measures to communicate with staff and plan for transitioning displaced staff.

Steiner (2009) identifies a number of implications for districts to consider when thinking about closing persistently low-achieving schools which is adapted and presented below as a set of district action principles.

Action Principles

For District

1. Assess the district's capacity to manage the closing of schools, including all of the steps involved in closing schools. Address capacity issues prior to closing schools.
2. Consider how closing schools fits or aligns with the broader district improvement strategy.
3. Prior to closing any schools, identify or develop options for students from to-be-closed schools—develop a supply of higher-performing schools.
4. Develop fair and transparent criteria for identifying schools that may be closed.
 - Engage community and business leaders in the development of criteria.
 - Access external and credible experts in the development of criteria.
5. Develop a clear rationale for why schools are being closed and how students will benefit.
6. Communicate early and often to the public the rationale for why schools are being closed and how students will benefit.
7. Work closely with the school board or school committee members to minimize challenges.
8. Develop and communicate a transition plan for students and staff that includes:
 - A dissolution plan for completing the closure process.
 - A transition plan for students that includes attention to students' safety in school and on their way to and from school.
 - A transition plan for staff and administrators.
9. Communicate directly with students and families once schools are closed to support the transition plan.
10. Communicate with receiving schools (e.g., those schools receiving students from closed schools) to ensure that incoming students are welcomed and integrated into the school community.

References and Resources

- Kowal, J., & Hassel, B. (2008). *Closing troubled schools*. Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education. Retrieved from http://www.crpe.org/cs/crpe/view/csr_pubs/223
- Steiner, L. (2009). *Tough decisions: Closing persistently low-performing schools*. Lincoln, IL: Center on Innovation & Improvement. Retrieved from <http://www.centerii.org/survey/>
- Walberg, H. J. (Ed.). (2007). *Handbook on restructuring and substantial school improvement*. Lincoln, IL: Center on Innovation & Improvement. Retrieved from www.centerii.org/survey/