HOW SCHOOL CLOSURES CAN HURT STUDENTS BY DISRUPTING URBAN EDUCATIONAL COMMUNITIES

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Authorities in cities across the United States are closing public elementary and high schools at a rapid clip. In the decade between 2000 and 2010, six major U.S. cities closed roughly 200 district schools – including 44 in Chicago, 59 in Detroit, 29 in Kansas City, Missouri, 20 in Milwaukee, 22 in Pittsburgh, and 22 in Washington, D.C. In the year 2013 alone, Chicago broke the record by closing 49 schools; in the same year, Philadelphia breached another record by shuttering ten percent of its public schools, 23 in total. Most of the schools closed have served predominantly African American and Latino students living in low-income neighborhoods.

Why are so many poor, urban, minority public schools closing? My research examines the forces at work – and highlights the downsides of closures intended to improve student achievement. Schools serve students and their families in various ways, and the measures currently used to weed out poor schools can unintentionally create instabilities and disruptions of community that leave many students worse off.

Reasons for School Closures

Population loss and collapsing enrollments can make some school closures inevitable, but other public school shutdowns happen due to tightening educational budgets and rising competition from charter schools, and because officials deliberately choose to weed out schools defined as the worst performing in a broad jurisdiction. In the current era, public schools compete for students and funding. Often, principals and teachers are called upon to improve key performance indicators such as test scores very rapidly, or face outright closure of the school where they currently work.

Reformers who favor performance-based school closures assume that, when schools with very poor test scores are shuttered, families will choose better-performing schools for their children, propelling market-like dynamics that should weed out schools that fail to perform well and improve school performance overall. This vision is problematic in important ways, however. Families may not have good alternatives, and measures of school performance may be incomplete or not fully informative for parents and educators – leading to school closures that leave students attending other academically ineffective schools. What is more, test scores do not measure all that schools do. Studies indicate that many students experience social disruptions as well as adverse academic effects after schools close. In many instances closures can undermine the very student outcomes that administrators and policymakers are trying to improve.

What Do Schools Accomplish – And What Does "Failure" Mean?

Schools are institutions that do many things for various stakeholders. They educate students, and at the same time they are employers of teachers and other school staff. Schools are sites where

social networks develop, where supportive ties are formed and maintained among families, teachers, and community members. Beyond that, schools are part of a system of local organizations, with ties to nonprofits, homeless shelters, churches, and social service agencies – all of which can be involved in guiding and caring for students.

Unfortunately, in contemporary debates about school "performance," district managers and urban officials tend to categorize schools simply by the numbers their students register on state tests, neglecting other important dimensions of school effectiveness that matter greatly to families and neighborhoods. In low-income communities with few stable local organizations, it is no wonder that many people look at the issues differently from district managers and want to hold on to schools that are supposedly failing. Research on various stakeholders reveals the conflicting concerns and values that lead to sharp conflicts.

- **School district administrators** view costs in terms of dollars spent for each enrolled student and measure and publicly report performance as changes in student test scores.

- **Teachers** want to be treated as valued employees and prefer to evaluate school performance in terms of curricula and mentoring systems designed through practical experience to meet the needs of particular kinds of students.

- **Students** value familiarity, stability, and comfort in their school surroundings, along with ongoing connections to classmates, teachers, and staff.

- **Parents** (who often face insecure employment and housing) want good educational results for their children in a stable, safe school setting, and also tend to value ongoing relationships with teachers and staff.

To be sure, parents, teachers, students, and administrators all care about academic progress and want to see improving test scores. But using only enrollment numbers and changes in test scores to decide whether a school is failing ignores the social relationships and meanings these institutions embody. Administrators want closures to lead to better academic outcomes, but shutting down a school is hugely disruptive. A shutdown forces students to move and tears apart social ties and people's sense of belonging. Very often, school closures decrease parental involvement; and teachers can feel devalued, leading to the loss of many who are very effective.

Improving the Process of Educational Reform

The market approach to reforming public education rests on the belief that competition driven by tests and enrollments will force bad schools to close and improve the overall array of schools, just like poorly run firms are supposed to be run out of business by better competitors. But schools do many things in vulnerable neighborhoods, and students and parents may be left significantly worse off if stable ties suddenly disappear. Certainly, schools must do better academically for poor and minority children, but perhaps we should think about school success not in terms of weeding out, but as a steady strengthening of all of the tasks, ties, and meanings schools embody. Educational reform should be able to take into account multiple meanings and dimensions of school effectiveness and invest in improving all of them, including valuable social ties as well as spurs to improved academic performance.