



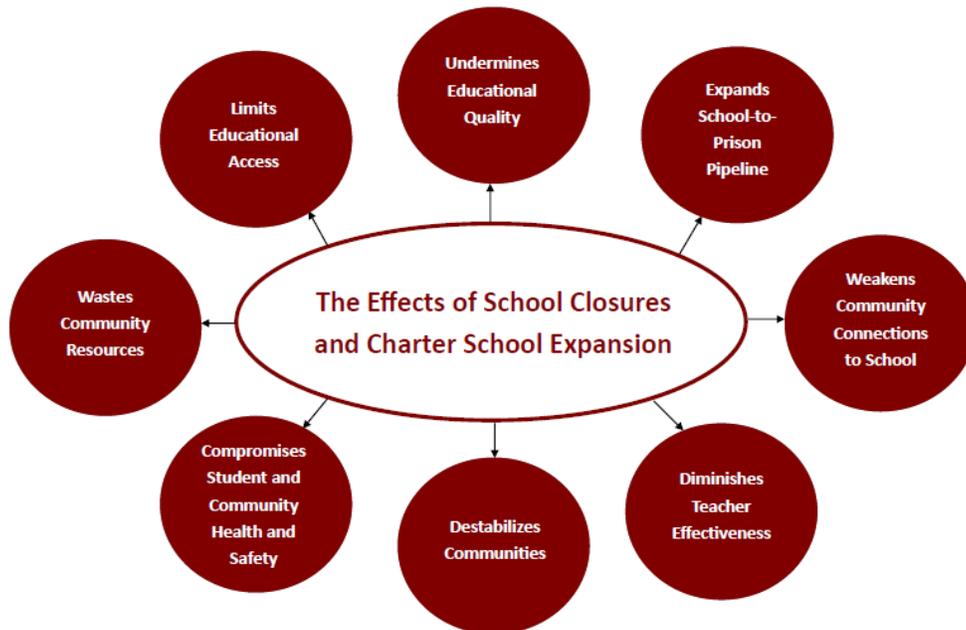
Congressional Briefing

Closed for Learning: The Impact of School Closures on Students and Communities

“[E]ducation is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments... It is the very foundation of good citizenship.”
– *Brown v. Board of Ed Opinion (1954)*

From the onset, the U.S. public education system has been wrought with challenges. It has never been a perfect system. Yet, for the past 15 years, the education reform movement has exploded -- backed by investors and philanthropists that have sought to privatize education by capitalizing on our flawed accountability system and its overreliance on high-stakes testing, high-stakes teacher evaluations, and high-stakes grading of schools. Today, the interests of children of color are being sidelined by the interests of philanthropists, hedge fund owners, and venture capitalists with their sights set on public education dollars and investments in inner-city neighborhoods. The result has been massive takeovers of school districts and school closures across the country, particularly in Black and Brown neighborhoods, which studies have found do not actually improve the academic futures of the displaced students they propose to help.

These mass closures reflect shortsighted and discriminatory state and federal policies rooted in an education reform model that rewards students who test well, have no disabilities or perceived behavioral challenges, do not experience the effects of trauma or poverty, and who can sit still for hours on end causing massive student push-out, particularly of students of color. It is a racist model that fails to take into account the history of communities of color that have survived years of discrimination, segregation, underfunding and marginalization—both inside and outside of schools. By adopting this business competition model wrapped in nice messaging about “school choice,” communities of color are experiencing a new wave of harms in their communities. In 2013 in Chicago, 50 schools were closed. That same year in Philadelphia, 23 schools were closed. In other major cities, like Washington, D.C. and New York City, the same pattern prevails. Without federal and state reforms, this pattern is likely to continue.



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By linking high-stakes testing results to billions of dollars in funding, federal programs like Race to the Top have paved the way for these closures and the deep destabilization of schools and communities. Through federal School Improvement Grants (SIG), school districts have obtained federal funding for schools in need of improvement if they agree to: (1) close the school; (2) replace the principal and at least 50 percent of staff; (3) convert it to a charter school; or (4) replace the principal and implement rewards, professional development and an evaluation system. Not coincidentally, since Race to the Top, there has been a massive explosion of charter schools, many of which are publicly funded but privately operated. Even though charter schools are required to abide by federal civil rights laws, they are often exempted from following certain local and state laws, receive less monitoring from State Education Authorities (SEAs), provide parents with fewer neutral and independent avenues to challenge unfair school-level decisions, and divert funding from traditional public schools. And while federal accountability should ensure that school districts provide struggling schools with additional resources and assistance to improve, many schools experience the opposite—districts actually take away key resources and staff like reading specialists, special education staff, and counselors yet they still receive federal funds. The result is that students—mostly Black and Brown students-- who remain in under-resourced schools experience even deeper disparities. Thus, it is no surprise that many public schools have been unable to meet unreasonable expectations to improve immediately or be closed.

Across the country, there have been walkouts, sit-ins, marches, hunger strikes, and countless other demonstrations to give a voice to communities of color that have been disenfranchised. Over these organized protests, state and local officials continue to shutter elementary, middle, and high schools. As students scramble to find alternatives, they are often confronted with discriminatory practices at receiving schools such as admissions criteria, an over-reliance on high-stakes testing, mandatory fees for registration and uniforms, and zero tolerance discipline policies. In some cities, displaced students are pushed into even more over-crowded, under-resourced schools. Because many schools are not required to provide bus transportation, children are forced to take public transportation in the dark morning hours because their neighborhood schools have been boarded up or re-purposed. When they arrive at their new schools, they are perceived as outsiders, and must rebuild vital relationships with teachers, staff and their peers.

Public education administration, which a few decades ago was widely considered one of the most important functions of state and local governments, is now being delegated to private actors and non-governmental organizations that are increasingly less accountable to the students and communities they serve. If these reforms continue unchecked, the end result will be a much less public, public school system. When we reflect on other systems that have become less public—like the U.S. prison system—we see that relying on privatization to reform a system is short-sighted and, absent strong accountability structures and transparency requirements, will ultimately harm the most vulnerable members under the control and care of the private systems. Privatization rarely breeds accountability. It almost always breeds corruption and fraud. Our children deserve better and should not be used as pawns in the “public school market.”

We urge federal policy makers to:

- Impose a national moratorium on school districts receiving federal education dollars for school closures and conversions to charter schools.
- Provide federal funding for schools to implement humane and sustainable alternative interventions in Black and Brown communities that are most at-risk of school closures. In particular, provide funding for the Sustainable Community Schools model, which aims to create (1) an engaging and culturally relevant curriculum, (2) high-quality teaching, not high-stakes testing, (3) wrap-around support services, (4) positive discipline practices such as restorative justice, and (5) transformational parent and community decision-making.
- Increase Title I funding by \$5 billion and ensure the appropriate use of Title I funding through adequate monitoring and compliance.
- Increase public transparency and data reporting for all Local Education Agencies (LEAs) receiving federal education dollars.
- Eliminate the reliance on narrow high-stakes tests to evaluate schools and teachers.
- Require SEAs to (1) increase monitoring of grantees’ compliance with SIG funding and (2) track students who transfer to charter schools to monitor expulsions, transfers, push outs, and suspensions.