

**ADVANCEMENT
PROJECT**



CHANGING THE NARRATIVE

**How School Board Members
Can Combat Misinformation and
Champion Local Public Schools**



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► **Public schools are vital resources that are open to all children regardless of race, gender, immigration status, or disability.**

They are gathering spaces, polling places, home to little league and varsity sports teams, and hubs for other important neighborhood services.

As elected representatives, school board members have a duty to listen to their constituents, represent their needs, and advocate on behalf of students and families who depend on public schools. But billionaire-backed opponents of public education have deployed a playbook of false narratives in a nationwide push to close public schools—often misleading school board members and school district leaders, cutting families out of the process, and causing long-term harm to students and communities.

How to Use This Resource

As a school board member, YOU have the power to combat these false narratives, advocate for your constituents, and support public schools. Use this guide to learn frequently used false narratives from opponents of public schools, see explanations, and understand what questions you should ask.

“Declining enrollment” leaves us with no choice but to close this school. **X**

Certain education consultants and opponents of public schools encourage school district leaders to jump to the conclusion that “declining enrollment” means a school must be closed. But closing a school often does not address the root cause of enrollment declines, including whether such declines are temporary or reversible. In addition, school closure plans often fail to consider possible after-effects or other alternatives to closing a school. **When presented with this false narrative, you should ask these questions:**

We still don’t know where all the students have gone. One 2023 study of public school enrollment trends, Where the Kids Went: Nonpublic Schooling and Demographic Change during the Pandemic Exodus from Public Schools, found that although birth rates and moves to private or home school explained 60% of the national decline in public school enrollment, researchers were unable to explain the remaining 40% of the decline.

1. Is the district able to fully account for the **causes of declining enrollment?**

YES

Ensure that the accounting is accurate, public, and that the district tried measures to counteract the decline first. (See **False Narrative 3** for more info)

NO

Closing any school is likely premature because it is **not clear that the plan would address declining enrollment**, and in some cases may worsen enrollment across the district. (Continue reading for more info)

2. Is enrollment declining across your district as a **whole, or **only in particular schools**?**

YES

If across the **district as a whole**, declining enrollment is not a valid reason for closing only certain schools. Instead, make sure your district has consulted an independent credentialed demographer to assess changes to enrollment projections over the long term to accurately assess how the school district can anticipate future enrollment trends. (Continue reading for more info)

NO

If only in **particular schools**, explore which district policies may be contributing to this trend and how to counteract them. (Continue reading for more info)

3. Are **uneven enrollment trends** across the district a result of district policy?

For instance, has the district prioritized building new schools or, if applicable, authorizing charter schools rather than investing in the schools that are already serving children?

YES

Explore **re-evaluating your strategic priorities** and consider adopting a funding equity policy to invest in schools with the greatest need before considering school closures.

NO

Explore implementing or **expanding the community schools model in schools** experiencing enrollment declines, conducting a needs assessment of families in the school's feeder pattern, and empowering parents and students to identify solutions.

Sustainable Community Schools provide engaging and culturally relevant curricula, high-quality teaching, wraparound support services, positive discipline and restorative justice, and transformational parent and community engagement. A key component of community schools is that they provide the resources and programs that *members of the community want*. District leaders can attract families to stay in or return to the district by conducting outreach and providing resources and opportunities that families in the area are looking for.

4. Have enrollment numbers begun to **trend upwards again** since the Covid-19 pandemic?

YES

It might be **premature to close schools** before enrollment has stabilized.

NO

Prioritize making your district a **welcoming and inviting place**. Support a plan to attract and retain students in the district that includes robust community outreach and surveys. (Continue reading for more info)

5. Has an **independent** credentialed demographer studied birth-rate and enrollment projections in your district?

For instance, your state demographer may have conducted a demographic study that includes your locality or region.

YES

Make sure the **demographic study has taken into account migration patterns** to your locality or region and the trend of people having children later in life.

NO

The **enrollment projections are likely unreliable** and the school closure plan should not be voted on or approved before a reliable demographic study of your locality or region is conducted.

How do I know if a demographic study is reliable and un-biased?

Sometimes, district leaders commission consultants with business or architectural training to conduct demographic studies to provide justifications after school closure plans have already been drafted. Such analyses are biased and often unreliable. Before considering the findings of a demographic study, consider the purposes for which the study was conducted, whether it was conducted by an independent and credentialed demographer, and the quality and recency of the underlying data.

6. Have your district's enrollment projections taken into account planning or policy changes made by state or nearby local agencies?

For example, leaders in Denver closed two elementary schools and a middle school based on declining enrollment, despite the fact that a new large-scale housing development was almost complete in the school's catchment zone.

YES

Make sure the projections **take into account domestic and international migration** trends, in addition to housing construction and city planning.

NO

The **enrollment projections are likely unreliable** and the school closure plan should not be voted on or approved.

7. Have your enrollment projections considered the likelihood that closing a school will result in families leaving the school district all together?

Enrollment projections in school closure plans often overcount the number of families who will enroll their children in another school in the district—particularly when there is a charter school that's closer to the school proposed for closure. For instance, 10% of students whose schools were closed by San Antonio ISD left the district, which is a greater number than what the district had projected.

YES

Consider whether your district can afford to take steps that would **cause further decreases in enrollment.**

NO

The enrollment projections are **likely unreliable and may exacerbate districtwide enrollment declines.** For these reasons, the school closure plan should not be voted on or approved.

8. Has the district taken any action to **encourage families to return to the district**, such as increasing programming, resources, or advertising to highlight the benefits of the school slated for closure?

Closing schools to “manage enrollment decline” instead of reversing it is a losing approach. School district leaders should be rooting for every school, along with their educators, staff, and families—not looking at school closures as a foregone conclusion.

YES

Consider **conducting community outreach or surveys** to ensure that programming and resources are responsive to the needs of the community.

NO

Simply **closing schools may drive more families to leave the district**. The district should consider actions to champion the school and boost enrollment before the school closure plan is voted on or approved.

9. Is the school a **vital resource** for the communities and the families who rely on it?

Student enrollment is just one factor that indicates the value a school provides to a community, but often neighborhood schools provide other vital resources too. For example, schools may provide equipment or facilities that are essential to educating students with certain disabilities; instructional programs tailored to English Learner students; extracurricular programs like arts, sports, or music; or community services like health clinics or adult education classes.

YES

Do not close a school without a concrete plan for how **neighborhood resources will continue to be provided** to students and families when they are relocated to new schools.

NO

Explore how delivering such resources or implementing a **community schools model** could boost enrollment.



“Rightsizing” is Necessary to Improve “School Utilization” Rates.

No evidence connects “utilization” rates to improved outcomes for students or benefits to the community. Yet education consultants and opponents of public schools often sell the false narrative to school district leaders that because certain schools are “underutilized” (i.e., serve a small or unique population of students or community members), they should be “rightsized” (i.e., cut or closed). **When presented with this false narrative, you should ask these questions:**

“Rightsizing” is a euphemism that comes from the management consulting field that refers to closing or making cuts to public schools.

“Utilization” calculation in which the number of students enrolled at a school is divided by the school’s capacity, which is the projected number of students a school can serve.

1. Are the data on which the **“utilization” metrics** are based reliable?

YES

Consider how the metrics may be discriminatory against schools that **receive fewer resources and serve higher portions of low-income** and other high-needs students.

NO

The school closure plan should not be voted on or approved until the district shares **more reliable data** and considers all other alternatives.

2. Are the school **capacity metrics** that are used to calculate utilization recent?

YES

Consider how they may be **biased against older school buildings** or schools serving higher shares of students who require special services or small classes.

NO

Do not rely on potentially inaccurate measurements that may not account for recent renovations, reuses of space to meet the needs of students, or changes to facilities that may have made some spaces unusable.

Thinking about closing a school because the building needs repairs?

School buildings fall into disrepair based on previous decisions to not invest in those schools. Thus, closing a school rather than making those repairs often disproportionately burdens or punishes communities who have faced historic disinvestment in their schools. A better solution would be to invest in making repairs to these historical buildings, which could create or revitalize community pillars and start to reverse the generational harm of educational disinvestment.

3. Are the school capacity metrics based on overall square footage of the school?

YES

They may be **miscalculating usable classroom space**. Do not vote or approve the school closure plan until 1) a determination of underutilization is supported by a more reliable capacity estimate and 2) the school district demonstrates that an alternative is not feasible.

NO

Consider whether the metrics are **biased against older facilities**. For example, comparing older buildings that consist mostly of classrooms to recently renovated facilities that have dedicated spaces for support services or elective classes skews capacity measurements.

4. Has the district assessed class sizes and the use of space at school buildings slated for closure, and sought feedback from students, staff, and families about whether those class sizes/uses of space meet the expressed needs of students?

YES

Ensure that the school closure plan **accurately incorporates** and reflects the district's assessment and community feedback.

NO

Do not vote on or approve any school closure plan that fails to take into account each school community's **use of available space**.

5. Has the district's general counsel or legal representative advised that the school capacity metrics the district relies on **comports with any and all legal obligations related to class size, including any applicable collective bargaining agreement and federal, state, or local law regarding class sizes or teacher-to-student ratios for different populations of students (e.g., Pre-K classrooms, students with disabilities)?**

YES

Consider whether the school closure proposal could make it difficult to **maintain compliance** with applicable legal class size requirements—particularly if district enrollment increases.

NO

The school capacity metrics likely do not provide an adequate picture of enrollment at the school and could put your district at **risk of noncompliance** with its various legal obligations. The school closure plan should not be voted on or approved until these metrics are revised to comply with the district's legal obligations.

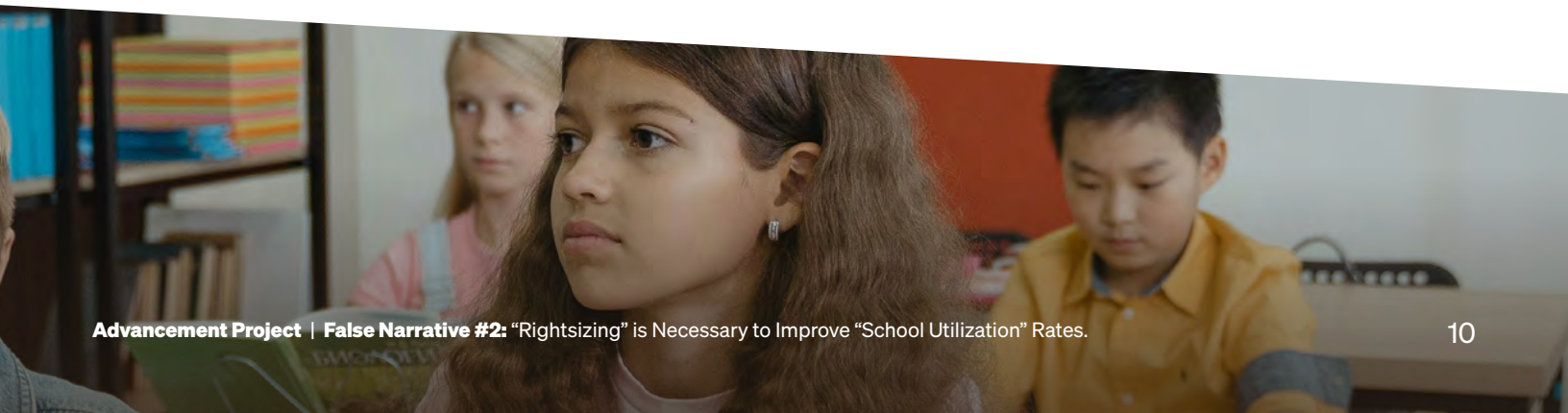
6. Have you visited the so-called “under-utilized” school buildings during the current school year?

YES

Talk about your experience in the school building with your fellow board members and district leaders to **emphasize the learning, the community, and the people the building currently serves** and whether closing the school would remove access to a valuable resource for those people.

NO

Reach out to leaders in your community to **request a visit and walk around the school buildings**. When you visit, note whether you see any extra space available, how the school community is putting space to use, and potential opportunities to expand or grow programs that are serving students and families well.



Closing Schools is Necessary to Balance the Budget. **X**

Education consultants and opponents of public schools often tell district leaders that closing a school building without staff layoffs is a solution to balancing the budget. Yet studies show that school closures do not save money unless they are coupled with mass staff layoffs, which is unpopular with families and educators and has broader economic effects for the community. In fact, districts that close school buildings often never realize broader budget savings. And promises to spare staff jobs or layoffs end up being rescinded several years later. **When presented with this false narrative, you should ask these questions:**

Most cost savings from closing schools comes from staff salaries.

If your district is promising cost-savings from school closures without cutting staff, they may be withholding information. For example, San Antonio ISD promised that their school closure plan did not include staff cuts, but they cut hundreds of positions the following year.

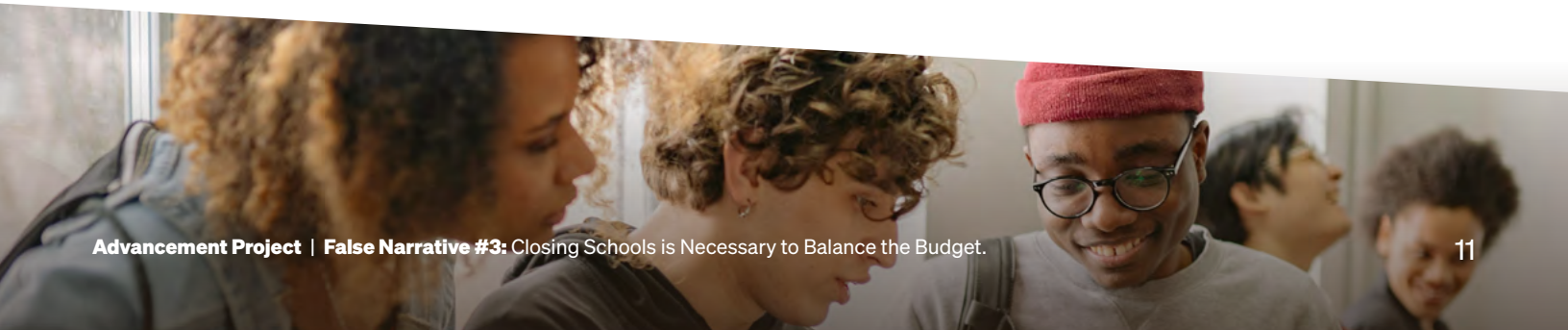
1. Have you seen a **robust budget audit and multi-year budget and staffing projections that show exactly how closing each school would reduce costs?**

YES

Inquire **what measures the district has tried to address budget shortfalls**, including marketing and community feedback campaigns to boost enrollment and applying for state, federal, or other grants to supplement funding. If cuts are necessary, actively engage the community in the decision-making process. (See False Narrative 5 for more info)

NO

It is premature to close schools if you have **not analyzed the potential cost, savings, and liabilities** that would result. The school closure plan should not be voted on or approved without a more reliable budget audit and multi-year budget and staffing projections.



2. Has the district considered the **additional costs associated** with closing schools and provided estimates for those costs?

These may include: costs of transporting students farther distances to get to school; costs to maintain vacant school facilities, including potential liabilities if the vacant buildings become hazardous; or increased payments to charter schools that may take over closed school buildings—particularly if state or local law requires the school board to allocate funding to charter schools geographically located within the district.

YES

Ensure that the district has shared this information **in a transparent manner** with your constituents and that constituents have an opportunity to comment on whether taxpayer funds should be used to incur these additional costs rather than to continue operations of the schools slated for closure.

NO

It would be **premature to close schools without knowledge of this information.** The school closure plan should not be voted on or approved without a thorough accounting of the associated costs.

3. Does state or local law require or encourage you to **sell or lease unused buildings to a private or charter school?** Or is there a nearby charter school where families currently attending the school slated for closure may go instead?

YES

Determine if **cost estimates account for further enrollment loss** and decreases to state and federal funding that will likely result if you approve the school closure plan. If not, approving the school closure plan is premature.

NO

Your cost estimates do not account for **further enrollment loss** that would likely result from closing schools. The school closure plan should not be voted on or approved without a more accurate cost estimate and proof that closing the school would address budget concerns.

Closing Schools Will **Achieve Equity.** X

At the behest of certain education consultants, some district leaders claim that school closures are necessary to achieve equity and provide historically marginalized students access to necessary resources available to other students in the district. This false narrative fails to take into account that closing the school would deprive families of a vital resource and impose barriers to accessing resources at other schools in the district (e.g., some families may not be

able to travel long distances to access the resources available at another school). In addition, **there is no educationally-sound justification for closing schools.** School closures have a demonstrated negative impact on attendance, academics, behavior, community well-being, and college and career attainment. **When presented with this false narrative, you should ask these questions:**

1. Will the district provide additional supports to **students harmed by closures?**

(e.g., *counseling, academic support, and after-hours transportation so that students can access extracurricular programs far away from home*).

YES

Confirm that the district's plan for **ensuring that students receive those promised supports is feasible**, not time-limited, and communicated directly with impacted families before voting on and approving the school closure plan.

NO

The school closure plan should not be voted on or approved without a concrete plan to ensure that students harmed by school closures can **access the additional academic and socioemotional supports** they will need to thrive, as well as the same resources and services that were available in their previous school.



2. Has the district robustly studied **which students would be impacted and in what ways?**

Too many district leaders decide to close the schools that serve the highest rates of low-income students, Black students, Latine students, Native American students, English Learner students, and students with disabilities. As a result, these decisions further harm the student groups who are most often marginalized in our education systems.

YES

Ensure that the district publishes the study and allows families and community members to assess and provide input on whether such studies represent their experiences. If community input reveals that such **studies were not representative of families' experiences**, consider requiring that a representative study be conducted before the school closure plan is voted on or approved.

NO

It would be unjust to close schools before examining whether the measure would **exacerbate existing racialized harms**.

3. Would the decision to close a school contribute to the nationwide trend of **Black students being disproportionately impacted by school closures?**

YES

Do not vote on or approve the school closure plan.

NO

Examine whether the school closure plan **disproportionately impacts other groups of students** such as students with disabilities, English Learner students, Latine students, Native American students, or low-income students.

4. Are you willing to **pledge to not close any schools now and in the future?**

YES

Consider **proposing this pledge** as a resolution and encourage your colleagues to vote in favor.

NO

Consider **introducing a temporary moratorium on school closures** or pledging not to close schools serving majority low-income families.

We Need to Close Schools as **Swiftly and Secretively as Possible** to **Minimize Opposition** Because it's the Hard but Right Thing to Do.

Increasingly, education consultants and opponents of public schools have shifted to advising district leaders on methods to expedite school closures—often depriving school board and community members of the ability to have a say in the process. Sometimes these methods involve adopting an alternative school governance model such as Student Outcomes Focused Governance, or SOFG (see box for more information). School districts do

not—and should not—have to make hard decisions alone. Indeed, by actively including constituents in the decision-making process and providing opportunities for meaningful feedback, school board members and the broader school community can together find viable alternatives to closing schools that better address the problems that the district is facing. **When presented with this false narrative, you should ask these questions:**

1. Are your constituents aware that district leaders are considering closing a school?

Too often, district leaders discuss school closures behind closed doors or use jargon and vague language to hide impending school closures. This limits the voters' ability to have a say in what happens to their schools and the community's ability to buy into the district's proposals.

YES

Actively seek feedback from the impacted community.

NO

Communicate that the district is **proposing to close schools** and the anticipated impacts to the community well in advance of a school board vote.

Student Outcomes Focused Governance (SOFG)

is a school board governance model that has gained popularity recently. SOFG cedes the school board's decision-making authority to the superintendent—including important decisions such as which schools to close. Thus, SOFG often cuts off constituents' ability to learn about or provide input about school closures.

2. Have you made the process of facilities planning or addressing budget shortfalls as democratic and community-driven as possible so that constituents have actual and meaningful input on school closure proposals?

YES

Consider whether the district has **presented other robust alternatives** to constituents for consideration that do not involve closing schools.

NO

No matter where you are in the process, consider **restarting using a participatory budgeting framework**. A decision as disruptive and important as closing a school warrants a democratic process.

3. Is your district considering adopting a new governance model that limits the democratic process?

Be wary of models that cede decision-making power exclusively to the superintendent to make decisions without a board vote and without community input.

YES

Oppose this governance model to prevent any limitation on your ability to represent your constituents or the ability of other community members to have input on decisions that affect their school.

NO

Stay on the lookout for any attempts to **disrupt your constituents' ability** to provide input on school district decisions or your authority to vote on decisions by the school district.

4. Have you presented a range of proposals to your constituents to **address budget or other concerns the district faces**, including options that do not involve closing schools?

YES

Stay involved in the democratic process, and **represent the needs of your constituents** as you make hard decisions on their behalf.

NO

Consider **restarting the process and giving your constituents a real say** in what happens to their schools before voting on or approving any school closure plan.

5. Has district leadership carefully considered all potential long-term consequences of permanently closing a neighborhood public school?

For example, has the district considered the extent to which closing certain public schools would chip away at the institution of public education and limit the availability of public schools for future generations?

YES

Ensure that the school board has discussed **the far-reaching implications of such decisions** frankly and publicly, allowing community members to have input in these discussions.

NO

It would be **premature to vote** on or approve any school closure plan.



But My District Is In A Fiscal Crisis! What Can I Do?

- 1. Be clear with stakeholders and constituents about the challenges the district faces and what options you are considering.** Be rigorous and creative when considering your options. Actively seek community feedback throughout the process.
- 2. Commit to complete transparency for your constituents. To begin with:**
 - a. Open your budget books, share your fiscal risks and the potential consequences of closing schools versus cutting other expenses.
 - b. Share robust demographic projections conducted by a neutral demographer who doesn't have an agenda or stake in whether schools close.
 - c. If there are potential staff layoffs, assess the economic impact of those layoffs on your community and region.
 - d. Frankly discuss the harmful impacts of school closures on children and the risks that closing schools presents to the overall viability of the school district.
 - e. Commission a study ([like this one](#)) of the harms that school closures would have on already marginalized communities.
 - f. Present robust alternative proposals that do not include school closures for the community to consider alongside any proposal to close schools.
 - g. Provide all this information well in advance of community input sessions to give constituents time to digest and provide high-quality feedback.
- 3. Authentically engage all impacted constituents when deciding how to use district funds.** Consider using a [participatory budgeting framework](#), which includes constituents in budget decisions.
- 4. Meet communities where they are. Families have a lot to juggle, and often with limited resources.** As such, they may not be able to show up to all board meetings or attend in-person events. Instead, visit schools during dismissals, post on student assignment or communication platforms, host events on social media, send mass texts, and use other non-traditional forms of communication. Seek input on the most effective ways to communicate with your constituents and effectively implement the feedback received.
- 5. Conduct an impact analysis that explains how each school closure plan would affect marginalized students and equity in your district.** This analysis should be completed and include comprehensive plans about how the district will address increased inequities or negative impacts on marginalized groups before a final vote to permanently close a school is scheduled.
- 6. Talk openly about what closing schools means for the institution of public education** and the ability of community members to have a say in decisions that affect school communities in your district or region.

Tempe Union High School District (TUHSD) in Arizona Formed a Committee of Stakeholders and Weighed Multiple Options. In 2023, TUHSD faced huge budget shortfalls spurred by the passage of Arizona's private school voucher law. Instead of hiring a consultant to decide which of their six campuses to close, TUHSD formed a committee of stakeholders to conduct a long-term budgeting process. The committee considered closing schools as a cost-saving measure, but community input revealed opposition to that option. Instead, the committee voted to make cuts elsewhere, which included reducing the number of administrators at the four smaller campuses from 4 to 3, phasing out some district office positions, and closing portions of some campuses. **As a result, no student was displaced from their neighborhood school, constituents felt heard, and TUHSD has a strategy for attracting and welcoming back disillusioned families who took private school vouchers, while also raising other revenue for the district.**

Want more information?

Check out Advancement Project's other resources!

1. [Action Kit: Stop Closing Public Schools](#)
2. [Save Neighborhood Schools – Say No to Private School Vouchers!](#)
3. [Project 2025's Plan to Eliminate Public Schools Has Already Started](#)

For further reading and listening:

1. [A Critique of Student Outcomes Focused Governance \(SOFG\)](#)
2. [NEPC Talks Education: An Interview With Thomas Dee and Sally Nuamah](#) - *University of Wisconsin-Madison Assistant Professor Christopher Saldaña interviews Thomas Dee and Sally Nuamah about the causes and potential consequences of declining enrollment.*
3. [Education Reform and Financialization: Making the Fiscal Crisis of the Schools](#)
4. [Death by a Thousand Cuts: Racism, School Closures, and Public School Sabotage](#)
5. [Revisiting Research on School Closings: Key Learnings for District and Community Leaders](#)

For More Information:

1. Reach out to Advancement Project at SchoolClosures@advancementproject.org
2. Contact Local Progress at helpdesk@localprogress.org or Kathleen Pointer at kpointer@localprogress.org