

School Closures Overview

Lessons Learned from Urban School Districts

Tricia Davis, Marguerite Roza (Center for Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington) and Van Schoales (Piton Foundation)

Why do school closure dominate the news?

- School closures are generally preceded by other cuts, as districts try to cope with declining enrollment:
 - Climate of skepticism
 - Flight to suburbs, charters, or private schools - adds to the tension
- Closing schools is painful, political, and personal
 - Closing a school is “harder than moving a cemetery”
 - Generations feel entitled to buildings (part of their heritage). In Seattle, closing MLK elementary was seen as an attack on MLK.
 - Decisions made from “above” adding to distrust.
 - Effects on families are real as families are forced to restructure child care, transportation, etc.
- Benefits are hard to quantify, particularly for families.

Looking elsewhere provides lessons learned about closures

- Other urban districts have closed schools, including Seattle, Milwaukee, Pittsburgh, San Francisco, Portland, Dayton:
 - Was a committee used?
 - Were consultants used?
 - How was the community involved?
 - Who made the decisions?
 - What about the time line?
 - What were the ramifications
- Analogies from other public processes
 - Comparison to recent military base closures - panel decision
 - Bill Ruckelshaus and the EPA - used community involvement to inform the process, not make the decision

Lessons learned

1. Make a clear and compelling case for closure. (How will students be better off?)
2. Define the parameters of community involvement in a fast, rigorous, and transparent process.
3. Use objective, consistent criteria that start with student performance.
4. Make the decision and keep it made. Assert unified leadership throughout the process.
5. Be clear in the plan for those impacted.

Seattle Public Schools

You can't close schools by consensus

- Unsuccessful attempt to create school closure plan by superintendent. Board wavered on goals and process. - Spring 2005
- Developed Community Engagement Process in summer 2005:
 - A financial advisory committee confirmed the need to close schools
 - Superintendent appointed second Community Advisory Committee (CAC) to make recommendation for schools to close - Spring 2006
- Criteria
 - Guiding principles and criteria were developed by school board -- included multiple factors including academics and building considerations.
 - District was divided up into geographic zones so that CAC were to recommend schools from each geographic area for fairness.
 - Consultants provided extensive data for all criteria, but CAC used guiding principles to make closure recommendations.
- Timeline:
 - Process has now exceeded 24 months with more closures left to be identified.
- Decision:
 - After CAC presented recommendations to supt, supt. modified list in response from community, board then removed more schools from the list.
 - Board seen as wavering and postponed decision for several months
- After eventually approving a subset of schools for closure, a parents group has filed suit and moved to recall some board members. Supt has resigned.

San Francisco, CA

“Why are we doing this again?”

- The School Board established closure criteria in March 2005
- An initial list of schools was generated in April 2005 with little clarity about how or why schools made the list.
- Since then some schools were stricken from the list and the decision has been revisited throughout 2005 and into early 2006
- In 2006, the School Board established a Community Advisory Committee on Student Enrollment, Recruitment, and Retention to advise the Board on whether closure was needed.
- Finally, later in 2006 the School Board began to draft a long-term plan on student enrollment and closure.
- During this time, Supt has left and some transition in board.

Milwaukee, WI

“Our students have choices, and we must right-size in order to compete”

- Consultants:
 - An initial closure attempt had been unsuccessful, so the School Board used consultants (EdVise) to develop a community engagement process in 2005
- Community Engagement Process:
 - Community involvement process as well as community advisory committee was used to develop the criteria used for closure
- Criteria:
 - Criteria was based on enrollment and facility status and then there were filters including academic performance and special programs
 - Criteria was approved by the school board and then the administration used it to rank all schools
- Timeline:
 - Will be a 3 year process; currently 4 schools are scheduled to close and the same process will be used to close more
 - The district has made school closure part of their regular operations.
- Have a publicized transition plan as well as process detailed on district website; one can see how every school performed against criteria
- Leadership team has remained unscathed.

Pittsburgh, PA

“It’s racist for kids to have bad schools”

- Community involvement:
 - Superintendent appointed committee to determine priorities for closure
 - There was a process for public comment on plan after it was announced - comments had to be submitted in advance of public meetings
- Criteria:
 - Used RAND report to assess school performance (advanced analytic techniques); schools were ranked and this guided Superintendent’s recommendation
- Decision making:
 - School board decided before Superintendent made his recommendation that they would vote for recommendation as a whole (“yes” or “no” vote)
- Timeline:
 - Closure decision process took less than 6 months: began analysis early fall 2005 and Board approved plan February 2006 for closures to begin 2006-2007 school year
- Over 20 schools (approximately 1/4 of all schools) were announced for closure. New “better” schools were opened in place of some.
- Superintendent promised that every child who attended a school on the closure list would go to a better performing school

Lesson #1:

Make a clear and compelling case for closure. How will students be better off?

- Convince community that closing buildings is necessary and demonstrate what will be improved in the future
- Be cautious in promising that savings will be put back into schools. Arguments should be forward looking, “we doing this to avoid more cuts...”.
- Talk about closure as part of the district’s larger strategy for improvement that will include new schools and programs.
- Be sure to account for all transition costs as well as intangibles in the cost-benefit analysis

Lesson #2:

Define the parameters of community involvement in a fast, rigorous, and transparent process.

- Develop a clear decision process with all leaders signed on to the process
- Incorporate public input early in the process for developing criteria, not for commenting on schools identified
- Get expert advice / support, specifically in the area of data analysis
- Define the timeline early and don't alter it.

Lesson #3:

Use objective, consistent criteria that start with student performance

- **Academics/performance must be first priority**
- **Use growth and status achievement, how much value is the school adding to student achievement?**
- **Make sure the criteria are measurable, understandable and operationalized.**
- **Disaggregate data for all groups of students**
- **Post school rankings and data sources for all to see.**
- **Stick with the criteria.**

Lesson #4:

Make the decision and commit to rigid process. Assert unified leadership throughout the process.

- Have limited and clear timeline for debate.
- Get commitment from all leaders to accept the closure list in its entirety. Different parts of leadership shouldn't consider the plan separately.

Lesson #5:

Be clear in the plan for those impacted.

- Provide a transition plan - don't leave parents wondering about where they will go
- Describe new programs and schools that will be opened as ineffective schools are closed
- Communicate a plan for teachers and other staff displaced as they can be very powerful stakeholders!

Appendix

“The Grid Slide”

District	Time line (phased approach?)	Consultants?	Closure Criteria	Committee / Public Involvement	Results
Seattle, WA	Phased over 2 years; decision took ~ 18 months	No	Used guiding principles and criteria; CAC used guiding principles more than the quantitative data for criteria	Used Community Advisory Committee to make recommendations for closure	Did approve some schools, but contentious process; Superintendent resigned; will need to close more schools
Milwaukee, WI	Phased over 3 years	Yes - designed public input process	Began with enrollment and capacity considerations and then looked at school factors and academic filters	Public engagement process used to develop decision making process / criteria	Appear to be on track to close schools using phased approach
Pittsburgh, PA	6 month decision timeline; announced all closures at once	Yes - analysis on school performance	Used school performance first using RAND analysis	Advisory committee used to develop overall (broad) priorities (academics first)	Appear to be on track to close slate of schools
San Francisco, CA	Phased over unknown number of years; decision took ~ 18 months	No	Used broad criteria established by school board	Eventually developed committee to determine process for long term enrollment decisions	Appear to still be trying to close schools; Superintendent search is ongoing

Seattle's Guiding Principles and Criteria Determined by the School Board

Principles:

- Improve and sustain academic effectiveness
- Equity
- Minimize disruption to students, families, and staff

Criteria:

- Effective instruction addressing the needs of all students
- Opportunities to consolidate schools to drive additional resources for programs and services for students
- Opportunities and community commitment to add missing services needed by students in that region through consolidation
- Family satisfaction
- Building condition
- Operating costs per pupil
- Building capacity and/or potential for expansion
- Effective connections with community

San Francisco's Criteria Developed by School Board

- Enrollment trends
- Enrollment versus building capacity
- Co-location of other programs in the facility
- Performance
- Estimated savings
- Proximity to other schools
- Continued availability of similar curricular programs
- Programmatic considerations including Special Education, after-school and Child Development programs, and charter schools
- Condition and type of facility
- Access/transportation availability
- Traffic conditions
- Safety
- Legal obligations of the district, including desegregation and charter schools
- Community uses of the building

Milwaukee's Framework for Decision Making Developed by Community Engagement Process

Criteria:

- Building / Educational Adequacy
- Enrollment / Building Capacity
- Enrollment by Attendance Area

Filters:

- Building Capacities for Planning Purposes
- Specialty Schools
- Educational Accountability
- Buildings with Special Innovative Programs
- School Climate
- District Redesign Initiatives

Considerations

- Demographics
- Transportation Regions
- Historically Significant Buildings
- Local Cultural Considerations
- Gross Building Square Feet

Pittsburgh's Criteria

Developed by Advisory Committee

- Keep high-performing schools open if they can operate with a fair share of resources
- Move students to higher-performing school or school with enhanced educational program
- Promote socio-economic, racial, educational program and facilities equity
- Look at facilities that have space and conditions to support the moves
- Convert excess capacity resources to funds available for enhanced educational programs
- Preserve the diversity across the district
- Consider number of students moving
- Assess impact and opportunity on attracting and holding students
- Reduce further capital investments
- Consider the impact of transportation

There are many other schools in the news; some are more relevant than others

- Dayton Ohio: They are closing schools, but will be replacing all schools with new facilities in the process
- Detroit MI: The school system there is a mess; school closures are just one more difficult process they are going through
- Portland, OR: Closed closed schools as they transformed elementary and middle schools into K-8's. Very controversial.
- Note: with more time, could add more detail on these districts. Portland would be a good example.