



Equity Dispatch

Silent School Bells: School Closures and Equity



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IMPACT: Educate, Engage, Empower--For Equity

"Why are they closing our school?"
"Why are we so powerless?"
"What can we do?"

--Ravitch, 2010

Educate

Within the last five years, school bells in buildings across the nation have been silenced. In the Midwest region alone, over 2100 schools have closed, and in one major Midwestern city, there have been over 100 school closures within the last two years (Rich, 2012). In Chicago, thousands of students will enter new classrooms this year because their former school was one of the 47 selected for closure this past spring (Babwin, 2013). In fact, it has been estimated that over 1.5 million students have been affected by the enormous loss of schools in the Midwest (Rich, 2012). With rising school accountability measures, increasing school choice options, decreasing school funding, and continuing economic uncertainty, this is a trend that is likely to continue (Resmovits, 2013) and requires all education stakeholders to examine their systems with equity in mind. We must be vigilant in identifying and examining systemic structural elements such as institutional racism and classism that lead to the decline of schools in traditionally marginalized communities. While efficiency and educational quality are important considerations, school closures have a significant effect on the lives of students, families, and communities;

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Equity Spotlight



Pauline Lipman is professor of Educational Policy Studies and

therefore, these groups should have an authentic voice in decisions about closure. Finally, when closures do occur, school officials should bear the interests of students and families in mind, with careful attention to and support for the transitions students, families, and communities will need to make.

There is no question that when schools close, leaving deserted playgrounds, unoccupied desks, empty lockers, and silent school bells, the whole community is affected. In Milwaukee, there are nearly two-dozen vacant school buildings and some of those buildings are considered unsuitable for occupancy (Kittle, 2013). Many of these unused schoolhouses are located in zip codes with high African American populations (Vivea, 2010), and these idle buildings may contribute to economic turmoil demonstrated in declining property values and increased crime rates for the core neighborhoods these closed schools once served (Lipman & Haines, 2007; Seger, 2012). Additionally, rural towns that have a low tax base pay a high price when schools close, leaving these areas with no local school as well as reduced revenue streams, civic participation, jobs, and extracurricular opportunities for school-aged children and youth (Lyson, 2002). At the same time, districts across the country have built more than 12000 new schools and undertaken more than 130,000 renovation projects between 1996 and 2006. These investments disproportionately benefitted students in more affluent districts, who saw an average investment in facilities of \$11,500 per student vs. \$4140 per student in poor communities (Building Education Success Together, 2006).

Racial and class disparities in school closures should trigger deep and critical examination of district policies and practices. These closures can be the result of gaps in power between low-income communities, communities of color, and more affluent and white communities (Condrón & Roscigno, 2003). For example, more affluent communities may have greater representation on or influence with school boards. In other instances, school closures are subtle vestiges of the desegregation era, in which more poorly-resourced and maintained schools in African American communities were closed and students were bused to better-maintained, predominantly white schools; a perception still exists that schools with higher proportions of African American students are de facto of poorer quality (Bell, 1976, Frankenberg & Le, 2008). Therefore, as researchers, practitioners, and policy makers, we must view this problem through a structural racism prism that crosses class lines (Lawrence, Sutton, & Kubisch, 2010).

Lawrence, Sutton, and Kubisch (2010) propose the structural racism framework as a means to critically examine historical legacies of racism in school policy and practice, disproportionality in representation on school boards and other influential positions within school systems, the ways whiteness and white privilege increase access to wealth and opportunities to learn, and the ways those in 'power' and those perceived to be 'powerless' have internalized racism and classism. Examining systems using a structural racism framework can pave the way to a more equitable system, as the framework encourages us to unravel the threads that bind power and privilege together. In relation to school closure, a structural racism framework might draw attention to the ongoing divestment in schools in particular areas. In some school districts, greater resources (e.g., state, district, and local funding; volunteer hours; gifts and PTA contributions) are brought to bear in schools serving gentrified areas rather than those schools that serve low-income and minority communities (Lipman & Haines, 2007; Condrón & Roscigno, 2003). The continued disparities in investment, which often lead to the decline of particular schools, eventually become an argument for closing them (Lipman & Haines, 2007). Some consider these micro-aggressive school reform actions upon low-income and communities of color as "an act of war upon the community" (Lipman & Haines, 2007, p. 490) or attempts to "redline" opportunities to learn from low-income students and students of color (Holzman, 2012).

Director of the Collaborative for Equity and Justice in Education at the University of Illinois at Chicago where she teaches courses in Social Foundations of Education. Pauline's research is multi-disciplinary, drawing on political economy, sociology, anthropology, urban studies, and education. Her research and teaching focuses on race and class inequality in schools, globalization and education, neoliberal education policies, and the political economy of education. In particular, she focuses on the relationships between education policy and urban economic policies and politics. Since 1997, her research has centered on education policies in Chicago, especially the role of school closings and privatization in gentrification and displacement of low-income communities of color, increased education inequalities, and the role of education in the drive to make Chicago a global city. At the root of this research is a concern for economic and racial justice.

Pauline is the author of numerous journal articles and book chapters and several books on these topics. Her newest book is *The New Political Economy of Urban Education: Neoliberalism, Race, and the Right to the City* (Routledge, 2011). In 2011, Pauline received the American Educational Research Association, Distinguished Contribution to Social Contexts in Education Research, Lifetime Achievement Award. Pauline is an activist scholar. The Collaborative for Equity and Justice in Education collaborates with community organizations and teachers to produce research that teachers, students, and parents can use to fight for education justice. The Data and Democracy Project, which she co-founded with faculty in the College of Urban Policy and Planning at UIC, also produces reports that parents and community members can use to better understand the relationship of education, housing, and urban development and implications for working class and low-income communities of color.

Pauline is a founding member of Teachers for Social Justice, a 15-year-old organization of Chicago educators

This framework can serve only as the beginning of efforts to reduce school closures and resulting impact on communities hardest hit by the phenomenon. System-level change requires that leaders who seek to disrupt inequitable policies and practices develop deep levels of race and class consciousness so that both problem framings and strategies for change are equitable (Lawrence, Sutton, & Kubisch, 2010). It also requires centering families and community members from traditionally marginalized groups in the evaluation of school and district performance and resource distribution (Hopson, 2009). This does not mean that schools should never close; indeed, there may be numerous reasons to target schools for closure, including the ongoing provision of low quality educational services (Mintrio & Trujillo, 2005), population shifts (Rich, 2012), declining enrollment due to rising student mobility (Rumberger, 2003), budget deficits (Sunderman & Payne, 2009), or consolidation to increase educational quality and efficiency (Lyson, 2002). However, a close examination of the research suggests that in many cases, these goals cannot be met by school closures (Howley, Johnson, & Petrie, 2011; Sunderman & Payne, 2009). At the same time, these goals must be balanced against the legacies of schools in their communities and the needs of current students and families within those communities. Therefore, careful deliberation with the families and community members most closely affected by closures should be central to the decision-making practices of schools' governing bodies.

Even when carefully considered and done in the interest of students, school closings can have a profound effect on students, families, and communities. When Warren City School District of Ohio closed a local school, a community member described it as "a painful experience," while another said that it was "like losing the soul of the community" (Rich, 2012). Remaining cognizant of these effects and providing necessary supports to students, families, and communities is essential. As part of transition planning, consider creating opportunities for students to get to know their new school and socialize with future classmates. Be sure to provide all families with clear, detailed, and accessible information about the change, and solicit their needs and desires. If possible, work with the community to find new uses for buildings that are being closed. Though the negative effects of school closures may never be fully prevented, taking steps to mitigate these effects is an important part of the work of equity-minded change agents.

Silent school bells remind us that we are a nation in transition. Ensuring that we reverse the trend, begun long before desegregation, of divesting from and closing schools in poor or African-American neighborhoods (Bell, 1976), should be our primary focus. When schools must close, providing authentic voice to and support for students, families, and communities in transition is essential. When we ask ourselves who benefitted from the emptying of particular hallways and desks, our answer should unequivocally be the students who once frequented them.

Have a question or comment about this article? [Share it here!](#)

Engage



fighting for just education policies and working to make their classrooms critical, multicultural, anti-racist, and grounded in the lives of their students. TSJ is part of a national network of teacher activist groups in cities around the U.S. Through TSJ, Pauline has been involved in coalitions of teachers, unions, and community members to organize against high stakes testing, school closings, and privatization of public education and to make public education more just, equitable, and liberatory. She is a strong supporter of social justice unionism exemplified by the Chicago Teachers Union and is currently involved in fighting the dismantling of public education in Chicago and in the campaign for an elected representative school board.



Upcoming Events

Illinois

October 4-5

[Higher Education Conference](#)

Elk Grove Village, IL

Indiana

September 26-28

[Fall Council of Administrators of Special Education Conference](#)

Indianapolis, IN

Michigan

May 15-17, 2014

[31st Annual Michigan Home Education Conference](#)

Lansing, MI

In 2012, nine schools in Detroit, Michigan, were closed and four more were converted to charter schools (Abbey-Lambertz & Sands, 2012). As students transitioned, many of them found a stable haven in [The Education Experience](#), a program at the St. Vincent & Sarah Fisher Center in Detroit. The St. Vincent & Sarah Fisher Center has been serving the city since 1844, when it opened as a kindergarten for orphaned children. Though education has always been part of its core mission, the Center pursued service to children and adults through a number of avenues, including residential facilities for foster children. In 2006, the Center, like many other entities in Detroit, experienced funding cuts. Rather than close completely, the Board of Trustees decided to go back to the organization's roots of educational service to children. Since then, they have helped support Detroit's transitioning schools and communities through educational programs for both children and adults.

The Education Experience, one of the organization's signature programs, was created in 2011. The Children's Education Experience is a community-based, individualized afterschool program for children in grades 1-5. The program combines afterschool tutoring and coaching with social and recreational activities, such as participating in the Children's Urban Garden, a place for youth to plant and harvest their own fruits and vegetables. The Saint Vincent and Sarah Fisher Center provides transportation for youth to create greater access to the program.

The Adult Education Experience is mainly aimed at preparing Detroit adults for the community and economy through education. In Detroit, 230,000 out of 700,000 residents need their GED. Again, the Center operates from the assumption that education is not a "one size fits all" venture and personalizes student learning. In addition, achievement of a GED is not the end of the road; program staff work with adults on next steps through job searches or further education.

As an Equity Assistance Center, we applaud the St. Vincent and Sarah Fisher Center for rallying around the communities most intensely affected by urban school closings. These programs demonstrate the ability of community organizations to empower children and adults as they work toward a better future.

Empower

Something to Read!

When Schools Close: Effects on Displaced Students in Chicago Public Schools

Policymakers and school community members may be interested in this report, written by the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago Urban Education Institute, which examines the impact of school closings on students. Researchers focused on regular elementary schools that were closed between 2001 and 2006 due to underutilization or low performance and asked students who were forced to leave these schools and enroll

Minnesota

October 17-18

[2013 Education Minnesota Professional Conference](#)

St. Paul, MN

Ohio

Ohio 1-2

[Ohio's Annual Special Education Leadership Conference](#)

Columbus, OH

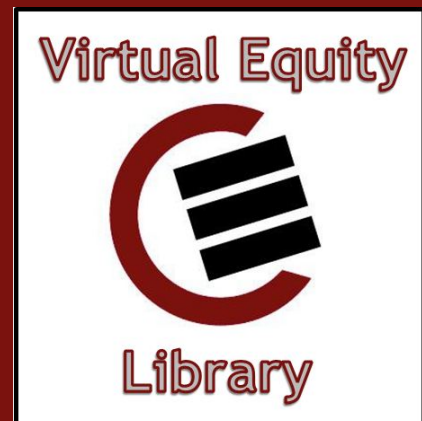
Wisconsin

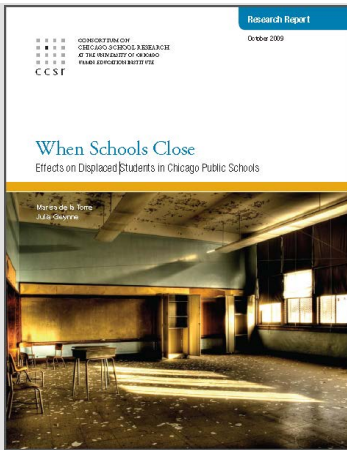
October 3

[2013 Diversity & Library Series: A Mile in My Shoe 2013-Race & Ethnicity](#)

Community Event

Appleton, WI





elsewhere experienced any positive or negative effects. Researchers also looked at a number of student outcomes, including reading and math achievement, special education referrals, retentions, summer school attendance, mobility, and high school performance. Additionally, the report also examined characteristics of the receiving schools and asked whether differences in these schools had any impact on the learning experiences of the students who transferred into them.

Major findings include:

- Most students who transferred out of closing schools re-enrolled in schools that were academically weak;
- The largest negative impact of school closings on students' reading and math achievement occurred in the year before the schools were closed;
- Once students left schools slated for closing, on average the additional effects on their learning were neither negative nor positive;
- Although the school closing policy had only a small overall effect on student test scores, it did affect summer school enrollment and subsequent school mobility;
- When displaced students reached high school, their on-track rates to graduate were no different than the rates of students who attended schools similar to those that closed.

If the rationale for school closure is boosting student achievement, this report suggests that school closure alone may be an ineffective route to improve outcomes.

Something to Use!

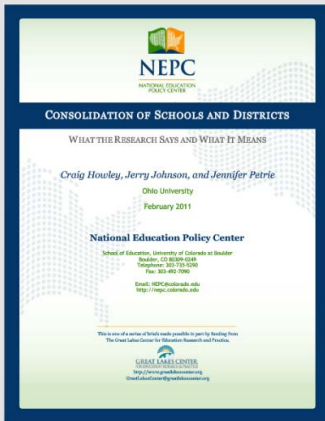
BUILDING NAME	Year	DISTRICT NAME		
ITEM NUMBER	DESCRIPTION	ENTRY TYPE	ENTER DATA IN SHADED CELLS	USER GUIDE DEFINITIONS AND DIRECTIONS
<p>Some of the items listed below will be available from state department of education websites, district websites, school building websites, and other public sources. However, much of the information will need to be obtained from a school official.</p>				
11	Student/Teacher Ratios	#		Item 4/Item 10
12	Highly Qualified Teachers	%		% of teachers meeting highly qualified status: teachers must have: 1) a bachelor's degree, 2) full state certification or licensure, and 3) total teacher years of experience/total number of teachers
13	Average Years of Experience	#		1 = Bachelor, 2=Masters, 3=Doctorate
14	Average Education Level	#		Average annual salary of professional teaching staff in school
15	Average Salary	\$		Total days of Teacher Absences/Total Teachers
16	Average Days of Teacher Absenteeism	#		Professional Staff currently in the school who were not in the school the previous year/Item 10
17	Teacher Turnover	%		
18	Total Regular Instructional Programs	#	Teacher	Students
19	General Education	#		Regular Instruction Programs
20	Computer Science	#		Self-contained elementary regular instruction classrooms
21				Classes to teach the use of computers

Resource Equity Assessment

Wondering how equitably resources are distributed to schools across your district? The following spreadsheet will enable you to analyze the distribution of particular types of resources – including programs, facilities, staff, and more

– throughout your district. Print out a comparison report once you have completed the assessment.

Something to Read!



Consolidation of Schools and Districts: What the research says and what it means

This report provides an overview of research on consolidation of schools and districts. It provides some important recommendations for policy makers and could serve as a good tool for anyone who intends to participate in discussions regarding consolidation of schools and districts.

The report recommends that individuals who are interested in maintaining schools should: Closely question claims about presumed

benefits of school consolidation to states; Avoid statewide mandates for consolidation and steer clear of minimum sizes for schools and districts; consider other measures to improve fiscal efficiency or educational services; and investigate deconsolidation as a means of improving fiscal efficiency and improving learning outcomes.

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