TOUGH DECISIONS

CLOSING PERSISTENTLY LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS

CENTER ON
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Twin paths to better schools.

Tough Decisions

Closing Persistently Low-Performing Schools

Prepared by Lucy Steiner of Public Impact

for the Center on Innovation & Improvement

Information   Tools   Training

Positive results for students will come from changes in the knowledge, skill, and behavior of their teachers and parents. State policies and programs must provide the opportunity, support, incentive, and expectation for adults close to the lives of children to make wise decisions.

The Center on Innovation & Improvement helps regional comprehensive centers in their work with states to provide districts, schools, and families with the opportunity, information, and skills to make wise decisions on behalf of students.

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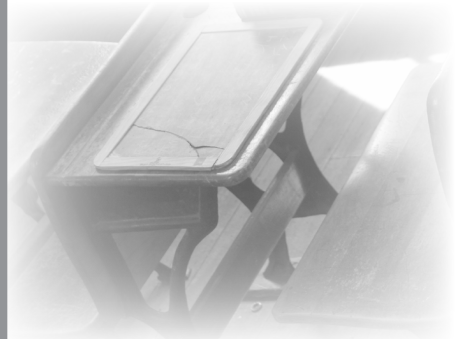
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Design: Pam Sheley

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Introduction

Barely one in three students at Thirman L. Milner Elementary, a K-6 elementary school in Hartford, Connecticut, tested proficient in reading and math between 2004 and 2007. Some years the average score was low as 14%, other years it reached a high of only 34%.

Over the years, Milner Elementary had a fairly high rate of teacher turnover. It also had ongoing support from the district—interventions included increased money for teacher professional development and leadership coaching. Nothing led to significant improvement in student learning. Several thousand miles away, Whiteman Elementary School in Denver was in a similar situation. Between 2001 and 2006, fewer than one in four students in the school tested proficient in reading and math.

Schools like Milner and Whiteman exist in almost every large city in America. This translates to thousands of children who leave elementary and high school unable to read and compute sufficiently to succeed and thrive. It also translates to millions of dollars spent on reform efforts that do not improve student achievement. What makes these schools unique is the decisive step the district took. After years of low performance, district leaders chose to close these schools.

Because "proficiency" on state tests can be much easier to reach in some states than others, it is not easy to determine exactly how many students across the country are in persistently underperforming schools. The best information we have about the number of schools in academic crisis comes from the data on No Child Left Behind (NCLB). NCLB requires districts to impose an escalating tier of interventions on low-performing schools. After five years of low performance, schools are assigned to the most serious category of intervention—restructuring.

A recent report from the Center on Education Policy (CEP) examining how many schools are in restructuring found that nationally, more than 3,500 schools were either planning for or in restructuring in 2007-2008.[1] This represents a big increase—more than 50%—from the previous year. This trend is likely to continue, and these numbers do

not capture the even greater number of schools that continue to under-perform year after year but aren't identified by the federal mandate.

So far, there is little evidence that districts have a coherent, effective response to their lowest-performing schools. The CEP found that between 86% and 96% of the schools in restructuring in the five states they studied had chosen the "other" option under No Child Left Behind. This option allows districts to choose their own response rather than implement one of the more specific options in the NCLB law. It is also unclear what will happen to schools that remain in restructuring and do not improve. The federal law is silent on the issue, and very few states have devised their own policy response to this dilemma.

And yet, while many districts remain mired in acrimonious political battles and uncertainty about a course of action, there are districts that have taken the decisive step of closing persistently low-performing schools. In calculating what students had to gain from school closure and what they had to lose, district leaders decided that the cost of leaving students in chronically underperforming schools was too high.

This paper describes why and how four urban districts—Denver Public Schools, Chicago Public Schools, Hartford Public Schools, and Pittsburgh Public Schools—closed schools for low performance. It focuses on two distinct closure strategies: 1) closing school buildings and dispersing students to other schools; and 2) closing schools and reopening the schools with new leadership and staff, often called "starting fresh." In the second case, students are either given the option to return to the school, or they transition elsewhere. This paper does not explore all the ramifications of option two— reopening schools with a new leadership and staff— because of the complexity of the topic. Readers who are interested in more information about reopening schools under new leadership should access other resources on this topic.[2] National interest in this strategy is sure to grow under the current federal administration. Both President Obama and Education Secretary Duncan have called for five thousand turnaround schools and have made a commitment to put funding behind this strategy.

This paper discusses the lessons district officials learned from their experience with these different types of school closure and the changes they made to their closure process as a result of these experiences. Written for state and district officials, this paper is designed to help decision makers who are contemplating closing schools for performance reasons learn from districts that have already tackled this difficult challenge.

Methodology

The Center on Innovation and Improvement commissioned Public Impact to conduct research on school closings. This research involved semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders (e.g., current and former district officials, foundation representatives, and, in the case of Denver, parents) from Hartford, Connecticut; Denver, Colorado; Chicago, Illinois; and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. In addition to these interviews, the author reviewed the research literature on school closure and read media accounts of school closures in each of the selected cities.
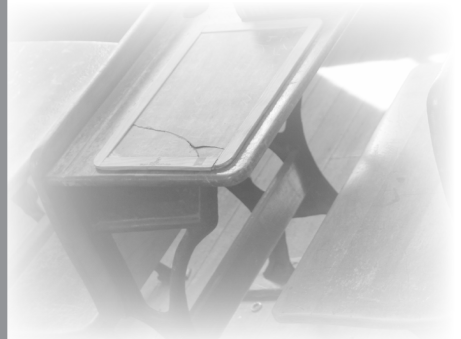
Research Questions

This report aims to help governors, state education leaders, superintendents, and other state and district leaders who are considering school closure learn from districts that have significant experience with the process. We gathered information about their experiences by asking the following research questions:

✖ Why did district officials decide to close low-performing schools rather than try another type of intervention? What were the considerations? What other interventions had been tried in the schools selected for closure? What role did NCLB's restructuring provisions play in the decision?

✖ What process did district officials follow to determine which schools to close? What steps did they take?

✖ How did the district communicate with the public and district and school staff about its decision to close schools? How did the district respond to public and staff reaction to the decision?

✖ What did the district do to facilitate next steps for the staff, students, and facility following the school closure?

✖ What lessons did district leaders learn about how to close schools effectively? Is there anything that they would do differently?

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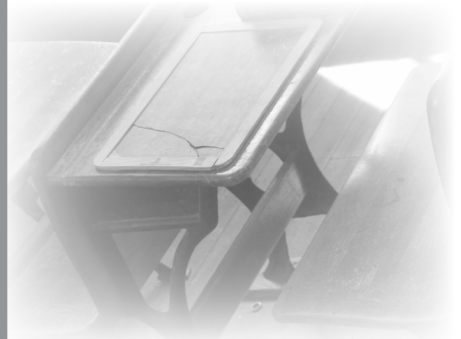
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Background

Districts that decide to close schools typically do so for several reasons. Most commonly, district leaders cite declining student enrollment or a loss of revenue. While these are pressing circumstances that district leaders cannot afford to ignore, experience suggests that leaders who only focus on these factors miss a critical opportunity to do the work that is central to their mission —increasing student learning. What follows is a description of the barriers that district leaders face when they make the decision to close schools for performance reasons. As the following sections will show, these barriers are formidable, but not insurmountable.

When asked why they are reluctant to close schools, most district leaders can produce a long list of reasons. Clearly, the high emotional cost for students and families is a deterrent, as is the emotional difficulty of disrupting and possibly terminating employment contracts with the school's current employees. In addition, closing schools for performance reasons is ineffective unless the new options for students are better than the old, either because students are able to move to a higher performing school, or because the closed school will reopen under new management, with a promising or proven new school design. Implementing either of these options is a complicated and time consuming process, one that many districts do not have the capacity to engage in successfully. There are also legal and contractual/collective bargaining challenges that may seem daunting, as well as technical and practical concerns related to closure. Each of these strategies requires skills and knowledge that current district employees may not have and may not know how to develop.

Closing

Political and emotional costs. The history of school reform efforts includes several examples of school closures that provoked tremendous outrage from those affected. Media accounts of parents who are angry about the decision, community leaders who feel betrayed, union officials and teachers who believe they have been unfairly stigmatized, and politicians taking sides against districts are common. For example, when school officials in Oakland, California announced at a school board meeting in 2007 that they were closing a high school, the reaction from parents, teachers, and school officials was heated. At one point in the evening, a teacher angrily interrupted a school board member who then turned around and shoved the teacher. After the school board member was escorted from the meeting by security guards, the crowd continued to heckle the speakers.[3] A report written about Chicago school reform efforts describes an atmosphere that exists in many urban districts. "Chicago exists in a politically charged, damned-if-you-do-and-damned if-you-don't environment," the authors note. "Just about anything the district does is likely to upset someone."[4]

In their paper, *Closing Troubled Schools*, Julie Kowal and Bryan Hassel describe school closure as "one of the archetypal challenges of public policy" because it is a decision that "imposes short-term costs upon a select group of people in order to gain a future long-term good for all."[5] Families have a strong incentive to protest the decision, because they are bearing the cost of the district's earlier failure by having to give up their current school and move their children to a school with many unknowns—new social dynamics, new activities, and new expectations. Staff members have the same concerns—they are giving up the familiar to move to an unfamiliar and possibly worse employment situation, or they may lose their employment altogether. Community members, even those without children in school, may feel that they are being asked to give up an institution that is closely associated with their neighborhood's identity. And the fact that the decision is made for a diffuse and long-term good—higher quality schooling options for future students—makes it even more problematic, particularly if the proposed changes will not affect the school's current students. Therefore, it is not surprising that those affected frequently join together to protest the decision, while those who will ultimately benefit are unlikely to support

(or even know about) the decision unless the immediate benefits are clear.

Challenges of providing better options. One of the charges frequently leveled at district officials who decide to close schools is that they are not able to provide a higher quality option for the impacted students. There are two primary ways to do this. Either the district closes the school building and transfers students to higher performing schools, or the district closes and reopens the school with new leadership and staff. Student transfers can be a challenge when there are no better quality options in the district for students to transfer to, or when there are space limitations at already overcrowded, higher-performing schools. Districts have had similar trouble adhering to the NCLB requirement that students in schools that have been low-performing for two years be given the option to transfer to higher-performing schools. In a large number of cases, district officials have found this to be unworkable because seats in higher-performing schools simply do not exist.

Closing schools and reopening them with new leadership and staff is an enormously challenging task, regardless if students are given the option of returning to the redesigned school or if the school engages in a new enrollment process. Very few districts have attempted the "new start" strategy, but among the few that have, the most common path is for districts to use the authority granted to them by state law to open charter schools. But opening new charter schools is not without its own challenges. Research documents detail the challenges associated with selecting and overseeing charter schools.[6] Districts that have established charter school or "new school" offices (e.g., Chicago, New York, Denver) have had to develop expertise (or hire people with expertise) in unfamiliar areas such as building a supply of quality applicants, selecting and vetting candidates, establishing performance agreements with schools, granting schools autonomy in key areas such as budgeting and hiring, as well as establishing oversight and accountability practices.

Legal and collective bargaining agreement barriers. Because there is so little experience with performance-based school closure in the United States, most state and local laws and regulations, as well as collective bargaining agreements, do not clearly lay out a dissolution process. In cases where districts have closed schools for performance

reasons, some district officials have been able to invoke the restructuring provision under No Child Left Behind to waive or renegotiate regulations and collective bargaining agreements that would prevent closure. While NCLB provisions have provided these districts with some bargaining power, the fear of a fierce legal challenge has prevented other districts from considering school closure, particularly if it involves removing teachers from their current positions.

Technical and practical concerns. Closing schools also requires some technical knowledge and practical decision making. Districts that close schools typically engage in some kind of assessment process where they analyze current and future enrollment patterns and determine the capacity of current facilities to take on additional students. In addition, transferring student and employee records; liquidating or reusing furniture, school materials, and other resources; and preparing the facility for an alternative use or sale are all time consuming jobs that require skills and knowledge that current district employees may not already possess.

Tough

Closing Persistently Low-performing Schools: Lessons from the Field

Despite the difficulties inherent in closing low-performing schools, there are districts that have taken this decisive step. The following sections outline how four districts—Denver, Chicago, Hartford, and Pittsburgh—tackled this challenging process. Because district officials made many decisions in response to local circumstances, their experiences are not meant to be prescriptive. This paper is a preliminary exploration of a complex topic. As such, it is meant to help district and state officials who are contemplating school closure learn from the districts that have already done this. As more districts decide to close schools for performance reasons, additional research will provide an even richer understanding of the process.

This paper explores four steps in the school closure process: 1) understanding why a district chose to close schools; 2) establishing criteria for closing schools; 3) announcing the decision; and 4) implementing a transition plan for students and staff.

decisions

District Profiles: Selected Characteristics

	Number of schools closed	Timeline	Number of students affected	History of school closure
Chicago	60 [7]	2001-2008	18,000 [8]	Between 2001 and 2008, Chicago Public Schools closed approximately 60 schools.
Hartford	4	2007	1,800	In 2007, Hartford Public Schools closed four schools for underperformance.
Denver	13	2007	3,000	Eight school buildings in Denver were permanently closed in 2007. Underperformance was one factor considered in the decision. Five other schools were closed but immediately reopened with new grade configurations and other programmatic changes.
Pittsburgh	22	2006	6,000	Pittsburgh Public Schools closed 22 schools in 2006. Student performance and the need to reduce excess capacity were the primary reasons given for the closures.

Why districts chose to close schools

The research literature on school closings suggests that most districts are reluctant to take this step, even in situations where schools are low-performing for years or even decades.[9] For the reasons outlined earlier in this report, closure is both politically and logistically difficult. In the case of the districts profiled in this study, several factors led to the decision to close schools for performance reasons.

Failure of prior interventions. Each of the districts in this study decided to close persistently low-performing schools after a lengthy period of attempting other, more "incremental" reforms. The interventions that these districts selected mirror those that have been tried in districts across the country. Research on state and district improvement strategies indicates that most districts (and states) have a pattern of escalating intervention that involves initial identification, followed by increasingly complex and prescriptive types of assistance.[10] This basic pattern existed before the passage of the

NCLB, but NCLB codified these steps into a federal mandate for schools that receive Title I funds.

According to Brad Jupp, former senior academic-policy adviser at the Denver Public Schools (DPS), DPS made the decision to begin closing schools after several years of trying alternative interventions. Schools across the district were at different stages, depending on where they fell in the NCLB accountability framework, which meant that DPS had multiple interventions in place in different schools. Several low-performing schools had been assigned support teams; some had participated in a curriculum planning process; others had gone through a district intervention called school "revitalization." Reflecting on these efforts, Jupp concluded that DPS had not had a high success rate of turning around persistently low-performing schools using these types of incremental changes.

In Chicago, early conversations about when and if the district should close low-performing schools also revolved around the history of past interventions.

District officials examined school data to determine what the menu of services should be for chronically low-performing schools and what the criteria should be for deciding which schools get which services. During this process, they uncovered evidence that some schools had been underperforming for more than fifteen years. In many of these schools, the district had implemented multiple interventions to no avail—including coaches, mentor principals, extra teachers, and extra workshops. According to Hosanna Mahaley Johnson, former chief of staff to CPS's chief executive officer, in one elementary school alone at least 20 million dollars had been spent over and above normal expenses over the last ten years with no effect on student achievement. "If you look at the gamut of things that you could do in a school system other than firing the staff," she commented, "it had been done."

Steven Adamowski had similar experiences with incremental change efforts prior to taking on the role of superintendent of the Hartford Public Schools. In his previous position as the superintendent of the Cincinnati Public Schools, Adamowski tried interventions such as replacing school leaders in low-performing schools. While he had some success with these reforms, a couple of things encouraged him to take a stronger stance. First, the passage of NCLB with its call for stricter accountability provided him with a federal mandate to respond to low performance. Second, Adamowski's study of different district reform strategies and his own reflections on his Cincinnati experiences led him to think that school turnarounds could only occur in the context of a larger district accountability system that included school closure.

Role of school closures in larger district reform effort. The districts in this study did not expect that closing schools would lead directly to improved student learning. Instead, district leaders viewed school closings as part of a larger improvement plan. Soon after being hired in Hartford, Adamowski began building a highly detailed district-wide accountability plan. According to Adamowski, Hartford's school reform strategy is guided by a theory of action called "managed school empowerment."[11]   Under this theory of action, the district defines its relationship with each school on the basis of the school's performance. The district gives a high level of autonomy to high-performing schools, intervenes in low-performing schools, and, in cases where the interventions do not lead to improvement quickly enough, closes and replaces persistently low-performing schools with higher performing school models.

Over the past few years, Denver has developed its own approach to improvement based on the school portfolio management theories developed by Paul Hill, an education researcher at the University of Washington, and his colleagues.[12] Hill argues for replacing centralized district bureaucracies with new, flexible models of school governance. Under a portfolio system, districts manage a diverse array of schools—some run by the district and some run by other organizations—each designed to meet different needs of students. Among the hallmarks of the approach is a commitment to performance accountability. Schools that do not meet specific performance targets are closed and replaced with new models. According to Brad Jupp, in the process of adopting these ideas, Denver has developed a more systematic body of incentives and interventions for its schools.

Chicago began closing schools for low performance several years ago. Since those early experiences with school closure, Chicago's district-wide reform effort has undergone multiple changes, but what has emerged is a system that is based on the portfolio model. Under this system, the district operates most of its schools directly, but also contracts with outside organizations to manage some of its schools. In 2005, CPS established an Office of New Schools (ONS) to oversee these contracts. In addition to opening new schools (many of which are charter and charter-like schools with independent governance structures), ONS is also responsible for monitoring the new schools that it has opened and closing them if they do not meet the terms of their performance contracts. In the last few years, ONS has also taken responsibility for schools identified by

the district for closure by putting the management of these schools out to bid and then overseeing the organizations that manage these schools.

Overcoming a culture of failure. One of the factors that influenced officials in each of these districts to close low-performing schools was their belief that in some schools, the culture was so damaged that it would be difficult if not impossible to reverse course. "It would be tragic," Brad Jupp commented, "to keep schools open that acculturate students to fail." Although it is disruptive and challenging for students and families, he explained, closure enables the district to meet its obligation to provide students with schools where they can succeed. At one school slated for closure in Denver, teachers defended themselves by arguing that they were providing a safe environment for students that didn't ask too much of them. It was after hearing comments like these, that Jupp and others at the district began considering closure more seriously.

Early conversations about school closure in Chicago also focused on the intractability of a negative school culture. When district officials examined student performance data, they identified several schools in which students' scores on standardized achievement tests actually dropped every year. Not only were students not succeeding, but their performance was declining the longer they were in these chronically low-performing schools.

In Hartford, a district-wide analysis of school performance in 2006 identified several schools that were extremely underperforming. In some of these schools, 80% of students were failing, and it was common to find middle schools with large numbers of fifth and sixth graders at a first grade reading level. Without a doubt, these findings created a sense of urgency. One district official described Hartford Public School's previous performance as "educational malpractice."

Establishing criteria for closing schools

Once district officials decide to close schools for performance-related reasons, they are faced with the dilemma of establishing fair and transparent closing criteria. Research on how to close schools for performance-related reasons is limited, but there is some evidence that giving the community a voice in establishing the criteria can help minimize opposition, as can partnering with an external evaluator to provide an expert second opinion.[13] Other research suggests that publicizing objective

criteria by which decisions will be made helps alleviate public concern.[14]

The districts in this study considered each of these issues and worked to create closing criteria that were acceptable to the public. It is important to note, however, that they still experienced setbacks and opposition. In some cases, school officials who encountered opposition were able to adjust the process immediately and accommodate objections; in other cases, they chose to proceed in spite of opposition. In retrospect, none of the officials interviewed for this paper concluded that establishing fair and transparent closure criteria is enough to ensure a smooth process. Nonetheless, in these districts, establishing criteria did lay the groundwork for a defensible closing process.

Involving key stakeholders. The first hurdle that each of the districts in this study faced in developing criteria for closing schools was to decide who would be involved and how they would contribute. In Denver, this was a major challenge. Several key stakeholders, including school board members, district officials, foundation representatives, and community organizations, all participated in tough negotiations over how the closure process would work. Ultimately, district officials and the school board decided to allow an external citizens group, A+ Denver, made up of over 100 political, business, nonprofit, and community leaders, to develop the principles and criteria for school closure with considerable opportunity for community input.[15]

Pittsburgh followed a similar process. The district superintendent, Mark Roosevelt, established a committee of local citizens, district staff, former principals, and parents to develop school closure criteria. His only stipulation was that the criteria needed to be based on school performance. After the committee made its recommendations, Roosevelt engaged the RAND Corporation to analyze current school performance. Roosevelt used RAND's rankings and the committee's criteria to develop a list of schools he recommended for closure.[16]

Chicago has a longer history of school closures than any of the other districts in this study. District officials, led by then-superintendent Arne Duncan, began closing schools in 2001 and continue to announce school closures annually. In the intervening years, the district's school closure process has changed a great deal including how key stakeholders are involved in the process. Prior to

2005, district officials set the criteria for closure internally, and the public's role was limited. In 2005, the district engaged in a year-long process of community outreach to get input from the public on what the closure criteria should be. District officials met with local unions, religious and community groups, elected officials, and parent groups to gather information. In addition, the district posted a survey on its website and convened neighborhood focus groups where parents and community members could express their opinions. In January of 2006, the district released a revised set of closure guidelines that reflected the concerns of the citizens who had participated in the community outreach process.[17]

Developing closure criteria based on district-wide data analysis. Experience suggests that adopting objective and specific selection criteria for closure can help convince the public of the legitimacy of the process, but there is little research or consensus about what these criteria should be.[18] Case study research comparing school closings in cities across the country suggests that urban districts are more likely than suburban districts to make closure decisions out of the public eye, an approach that produces results which can appear ad hoc and accidental.[19] Not surprisingly, this secrecy leads to accusations of unfairness. These concerns are exacerbated by the fact that many school closures tend to disproportionately impact low-income families and minority students, who are often over-represented in a district's lowest performing schools. Research documents several instances where opponents have halted the school closure process altogether.[20] As noted, the districts in this study engaged the public in determining how school closing decisions should be made, but they also invested in a data gathering process to ensure that the criteria were based on objective information about school quality. In some cases, district officials collected and analyzed the data themselves. In other cases, they hired outside experts to conduct the analysis.

Hartford officials conducted an internal data analysis that led to the creation of a school performance framework—the Overall School Index (OSI). The district then ranked all of the schools in Hartford on this matrix, according to their average standardized test results and whether they had made adequate yearly progress (AYP) over the last three years. At the end of this process, the district released a widely publicized one-page version of the OSI that assigned each school a color-coded ranking. Schools that got an OSI ranking lower than 40—meaning that 70% or more of their students were failing to meet state standards—were put in the "redesign" category. By district policy, schools that stayed in this category for two years were eligible for closure. When Adamowski presented his final recommendation to the board listing the schools he thought should be closed—one high school and three elementary schools —performance was the primary criterion in developing the list of schools to be closed, but Hartford officials considered geographic need as well in response to community support for neighborhood schools.

After a citizen's committee made its recommendations about how school closing decisions should be made, Superintendent Roosevelt in Pittsburgh engaged the RAND Corporation to conduct a thorough analysis of current school performance. RAND developed a new metric called the School Performance Index (SPI) that was designed to more accurately determine the educational value that each school provided to its students by measuring how schools contributed to student learning over several years, not just at one point in time. As part of its analysis, RAND assigned every school in Pittsburgh an SPI rating from one to four. These ratings were widely publicized, and every elementary and middle school with an SPI rating of one was then considered for closure. In addition to performance, the district also considered the following guidelines, developed with considerable community input, in establishing its final list of school closure recommendations:

- ✖ Commit to keeping high-performing schools open;
- ✖ Provide reassigned students with either a higher performing school option, or one that has a greatly enhanced educational program;
- ✖ Promote socio-economic, racial, educational programs and facilities equity;
- ✖ Preserve diversity across district;
- ✖ Consider number of students moving;
- ✖ Evaluate building capacity and condition;
- ✖ Reduce future capital investments; and
- ✖ Consider impact of transportation.[21]

To prepare the public for the high number of school closings planned for Pittsburgh—what the district called the "Right-Sizing Plan"—Superintendent Roosevelt explained that this process "marks the first time student and school performance data, rather than building size, politics, or other factors, have been the primary means of determining which schools to close."[22]

Prior to developing its closure criteria, Denver also engaged in an extensive data gathering process to guide its decision making. An external citizen's board, A+ Denver, considered over 500 pages of data including maps, financial records, academic performance results, demographic trends, school capacity, and information about current facilities in order to develop a comprehensive picture of the district's academic and financial health. Without access to this data, the committee would not have been able to analyze this information to develop a set of principles and criteria for the district to use as it considered program and facilities changes. The changes on the table included school closure, realignment (using facilities to serve different age groups), and reprogramming (changing the academic offerings). In making this request, then-superintendent Michael Bennet acknowledged the difficulty parents, students, and community members have accepting school consolidations and closures, and requested that the committee develop a set of closure criteria that was about more than just saving the district money.

Ultimately, A+ Denver developed the following set of criteria:

- ✖ Longitudinal (student on track) results,
- ✖ Enrollment,
- ✖ Standardized test scores,
- ✖ Retention and/or attendance rates,
- ✖ Space utilization,
- ✖ Physical condition, and
- ✖ Family and district transportation costs.[23]

Announcing the decision

Even when the process leading up to closure was relatively smooth, the districts in this study found that public pressure greatly intensified when they released the names of specific schools slated for closure. Anticipating this, each of the districts worked proactively to develop a communications strategy that would both enable the board and

district to remain unified during the difficult days ahead, and that would clearly explain to the public their rationale for selecting particular schools. Although their efforts did not eliminate public outcry—school board members, students, staff, and families still expressed feelings of anger and betrayal to varying degrees—district leaders believe that their efforts did win enough support to allow the process to go forward. They used two primary strategies—keeping district officials unified and being transparent about the rationale.

Keeping the district leadership and school board unified. Research on school closings dating back to the 1980s documents the growing sensitivity of urban school board members to neighborhood constituency pressures. In the 1960s and 1970s, school board members were increasingly elected to represent specific neighborhoods, rather than "at large." As a result of this shift, board members running for office needed to build and maintain a base of support in particular neighborhoods.[24] This dynamic, which remains the practice in many large cities, can make it difficult to close schools, particularly if board members share the community's concerns about bias, unfairness, or the loss of a community asset. Political pressure on both the board and the district leadership can be so intense during school closures that it creates a fissure between district administrators and the board that can derail the process.

In the last decade, several large urban districts—San Francisco, Detroit, Milwaukee, Baltimore, Oakland, and Seattle—have experienced contentious school closing processes. In some cases, the process ultimately led to the departure of the superintendent. The story of what happened in Seattle is a case in point. Soon after Superintendent Raj Manhas took charge of Seattle's schools in 2002, the district discovered a $24 million shortfall. In the spring of 2004, Manhas presented an internally-developed plan to close schools that was met with so much anger from the community and board members that he quickly abandoned his proposal. In the months that followed, Manhas allowed the board and the community to develop an alternative plan, which called for fewer schools to be closed. However, soon after this plan was released, two board members publically denounced it, going so far as to support a community group that sued the school district for discriminating against poor and minority students. Within a matter of months,

Manhas resigned, and a group of parents initiated an effort to recall school board members who had approved school closures.[25]

In Pittsburgh, Superintendent Roosevelt's decision to hire a nationally recognized, objective research firm—the RAND Corporation—was driven in part by a desire to avoid accusations of bias. Once RAND had assigned each school its performance ranking, the superintendent presented RAND's formal report to the board. In an attempt to keep the board unified, the school closing vote was structured so that individual board members had to vote yes or no on the entire slate. They could not give the green light to some closures and not others. According to observers, this was a critical step in keeping the board as unified as possible behind the decision. Even with this process, though, two board members rejected the entire slate. This did not halt the process—those in favor of closure still had a majority—but it did serve as a reminder that there was still opposition to the plan.

In an attempt to prevent neighborhood politics from influencing the decision, school board members in Denver followed a similar process. Board members agreed to vote for the closure "package" in an up or down vote, and not to make amendments for individual schools. The Board's only decision during its vote was on whether the district had fairly applied the externally-developed principles and criteria to the list of potential closures. Ultimately, the board supported the district's recommendation to close eight schools.

In several cities across the country, mayors have used legislative changes to "take over" the local school board. Clearly, in these cases, concerns about opposition from within the board are considerably lessened. In two of the districts in this study—Hartford and Chicago—mayors had the authority to appoint the majority of board members directly.

Not surprisingly, these boards were united in their support for the actions of the superintendent who had been hired either directly by or with the support of the mayor. The research on mayoral takeovers indicates that mayor-led school boards appear to be more willing to make decisions in favor of students, such as school closures, even if the decisions are not perceived to be beneficial to the adults in the system.[26] This seems to be true in both Harford and Chicago, although the lack of opposition carried its own public relations risks. In the case of Chicago, in particular, the public perception that the mayor controls the school closure process has led to ongoing community opposition from people who would prefer a more open and inclusive process.

Explaining the rationale for school closures to those affected. Experience with school closure suggests that one of the most difficult aspects of school closure is framing the issue for the public. One theme that emerges in the research literature on successful closures is the importance of offering an immediate benefit to those impacted by the decision. Rather than ask particular communities to sacrifice a current "good"—their neighborhood school—in return for an uncertain and abstract future advantage, district officials who offer communities a trade-up—give up this school in return for a better performing school—encounter less opposition.[27] In short, officials who encountered less resistance framed their closure decision in terms of its benefits, rather than its drawbacks.

According to media reports, district officials in Chicago struggled in the early years of school closings to explain their rationale to affected communities. District officials had plenty of data to indicate that some Chicago schools were extremely low-performing and had been for years, and they had some initial ideas about how they could open higher-performing schools to replace schools that had been closed. But the process for vetting and opening these new schools was not yet fully developed. In the meantime, the teachers' union was concerned about making sure its members' jobs were protected, school governance boards wanted to keep their authority, and some community groups were worried that the true reason the district wanted to close schools was to gentrify urban neighborhoods.[28] In this political maelstrom, it was difficult for the district to convince communities

that children would ultimately benefit from the closures.

Denver's more recent school closures were plagued by similar problems. According to parents interviewed for this report, district officials offered a clear and convincing rationale for closing schools based on chronic low performance, but failed to explain to the public how they would replace these schools with higher-performing options. The district is taking steps to remedy this—the superintendent recently established an Office of New Schools charged with the creation of high-performing schools—but that process has yet to be fully implemented. Soon after the closure plan was announced, a community advocacy group that supported the need for school closures criticized specific aspects of the plan, highlighting their analysis that students affected by closures were not being sent to better schools.[29]

In Pittsburgh, Superintendent Roosevelt fared somewhat better. Early in the process, he met with community groups in each of the neighborhoods where schools were to be closed. These meetings were unusual, according to observers, because he did not focus primarily on how school closure

could improve the district's overall financial health, although this was certainly part of his rationale. Instead, Roosevelt apologized that the district had, for years, provided their community's children with such a substandard education. He took responsibility for the district's poor performance and pledged to do a better job. He explained the RAND findings, showed them the school performance ranking, and promised to provide a new and better type of school for their children.

District officials in Hartford framed school closings in a similar way. Christina Kishimoto, assistant superintendent of school design, explains that district officials spent an entire year explaining to the community in a very clear way what the real status of the city's schools was—how dire the need was for improvement. But they did not stop there. A columnist in the local paper noted that for the first time in years he felt hopeful about real change in Hartford after listening to the superintendent. After "the usual failure-will-not-be-tolerated litany," he wrote, "Adamowksi grabbed my attention by saying that schools that don't cut it, that haven't cut it for years, have been closed, and schools that succeed will be rewarded."[30] Furthermore, the
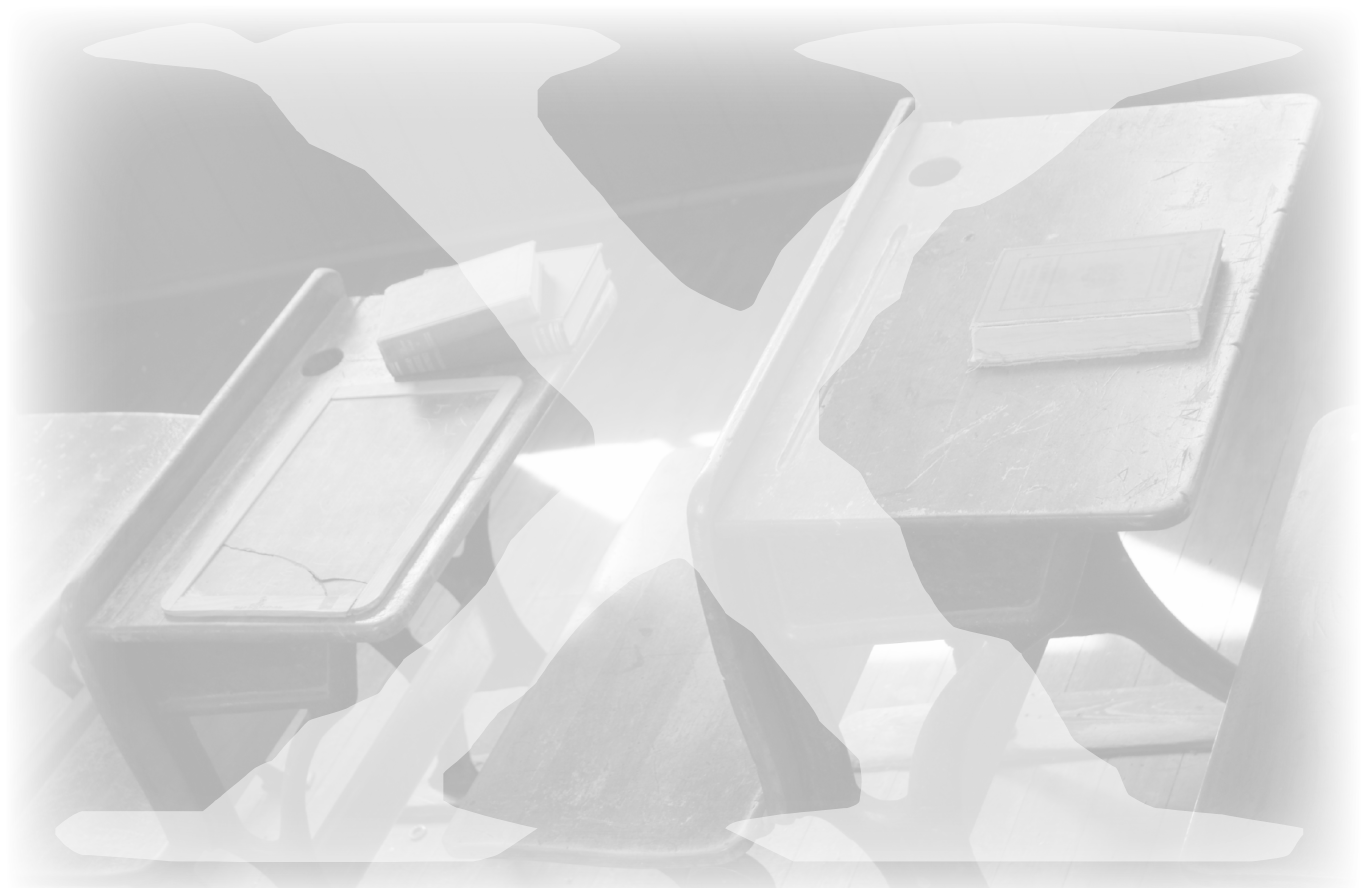
columnist explained, most of the schools that were closed would reopen with new teachers and a new school model designed to rapidly increase student achievement. According to Kishimoto, district officials knew the new schools had to be successful if they were going to build community trust. One way they communicated this was by focusing on a tangible goal. In Hartford, district officials assured families that students in the redesigned schools would learn to read on grade level within a few years.

Implementing a transition plan for students and staff

The first thing that parents want to know when the list of school closings is announced is where their child will go to school the following year. The first thing that staff members want to know is how the closure affects their employment. When and how districts communicate this information is critically important to ensure that students and staff have as smooth a transition as possible.

Most of the research on school closings focuses on the steps prior to transition planning. There is very little research on what happens to students and staff following a closure—where they are placed, the impact placement has on future performance, and the complications that arise. The districts in this study developed transition plans largely based on their informal interactions with other district officials, as well as local considerations. In some cases, a larger district reform strategy determined transition plans. District officials had three objectives in their transition planning: 1) placing students impacted by closures; 2) supporting students and families through the transition; and 3) clarifying next steps for staff members.

Placing students impacted by closures. Depending on the local context, districts have multiple choices about how and where to place students following a school closure. Some districts close school buildings and then assign students to a new school, while other districts allow families and students to choose among several possibilities. In some cases, students have the option to return to the same building with an entirely new staff and/or school model.

District officials in Denver relied heavily on earlier data collection efforts to plan the transition process for the 3,000 elementary students affected by school closures in 2007. They considered a number of factors—available seats, school performance results, demographic patterns, and transportation options—in developing their plan. For the most part, students were assigned to existing schools, although choice counselors did offer parents some information about other options, including charter schools. It proved difficult, even under this arrangement, to ensure that every child had an opportunity to attend a higher-performing school.

In Pittsburgh, most students were reassigned to existing schools, but the district also opened several K-8 Accelerated Learning Academies to ensure that students affected by the school closures were assigned to a school with an "enhanced educational program," as promised earlier in the process. America's Choice—a school design model that focuses on strong accountability—was implemented in each of these schools. In addition, the superintendent obtained permission from the governor to appoint principals in all eight of these schools (usually the role of the board) and give them authority to hire and fire their own teachers. According to observers, parents who were concerned about the closures were somewhat reassured by the news that their child would attend a program with a proven academic record.

District officials in Hartford held a series of parent forums to hear directly from parents about their concerns. The overwhelming message from these meetings was that it was more important to parents that their children attend neighborhood schools than that they attend a higher-performing school that would require students to be bused across town. From that time forward, the district's goal was to provide all students with high-performing schooling options in their own neighborhoods. To accomplish this, the district divided the city into quadrants and examined school quality in each quadrant. When they closed schools for performance reasons, they were very conscious of building up a supply of high quality programs— called redesigns —at both the elementary and secondary level in each quadrant. As a result of this plan, families affected by school closures were immediately given information about how their child could transition to a school with a stronger academic program.

Over the last seven years, Chicago has implemented several different student transfer policies following school closures. Initially, most students were assigned to other schools. This was very unpopular

with many families and communities, in part because the district did not convince families that students would be attending higher-performing schools. In 2004, Chicago Mayor Richard Daley and then-CPS CEO Arne Duncan announced that they intended to open 100 new schools in Chicago by the year 2010, many of them designed to replace existing low-performing CPS schools. This ambitious 100-school goal—known as Renaissance 2010—was designed to alleviate parent and community concerns about closure by providing students with higher-performing schools that they could opt to attend. The success of this policy has yet to be evaluated, but the intention is to shift the conversation away from reassignment to a discussion of how to empower families to access better schools.

Supporting students and families through the transition. Districts have a responsibility to support students and families during the transition to a new school. The districts in this study found that as students got older, they needed more emotional and academic support to transition to unfamiliar environments. As a result, they developed additional supports for older students.

Approximately 1600 students were affected by the early round of school closings in Chicago in 2003. From the beginning, the district made an effort to support parents and students through the transition. In addition to starting a hotline to answer parent's questions, the district hired family "liaisons" to go door-to-door to help parents understand their options. These counselors visited each family twice, once right after the closure list was announced, and once right before school started. In order to ease the concerns of principals in the schools that were slated to receive these students, the district assessed each of the students academically and provided many of the students with additional tutoring.

Denver's early experience with one school closure greatly influenced the support it offered families and students affected by closure a few years later. In 2006, Denver closed Manual High School after years of failed interventions. Recognizing that the transition would be very difficult for high school students, the district hired on-the-ground counselors from neighborhood youth organizations. This proved to be an enormously challenging role. Not only did the counselors help students transition to new environments that felt hostile and unfamiliar, but in many cases they were needed to prevent discouraged students from dropping out.

20

When Denver embarked on a much larger school closure effort a few years later, they acted on the lessons they had learned. First, they did not close any high schools. Second, they hired counselors to help families understand their options. Third, they actively prepared receiving principals by explaining what the district expected of them. As a result of these clearly stated expectations, receiving principals visited the schools in the spring to get to know parents and students, they invited parents to attend school activities the year before the transition, and they sent current students to talk to transitioning students about their new school.

Clarifying next steps for staff members. Informing current staff members of the decision can be a very challenging task. During the 2007 school closure announcement, then-CEO of the Chicago Public Schools Arne Duncan commented, "You can't do something this dramatically different with the same people. There will be new teams and new leadership in place. It's a clean slate. I feel a real sense of urgency. I have a huge need to challenge the status quo."[31] Not surprisingly, many teachers and the organizations that represent them take a very different view of school closings. At a public meeting to protest school closings in Chicago, Amy Sherwood, a teacher and union delegate, voiced her anger. "This is a school whose parents are dedicated, as well as the teachers and administrators," she said, "We have given extra time, energy, and our blood for years so these children can get what they deserve out of life," Sherwood said. "We will fight to keep it open."[32]

In many cases, collective bargaining agreements dictate what a district's options are for placing affected teachers, but districts have a lot of control over how they convey the news to staff members. In Denver, Chicago, and Hartford, district officials visited each school on the day of the announcement to meet with staff members and explain their employment options. According to interviews, district officials planned these meetings carefully, intent on providing clear and comprehensive information to anxious employees.

Of course, a great deal of the public conversation about school closings takes place in school board meetings and through the media. In these forums, school district officials often focus their comments on student needs, pointing out that students have not been well served in current schools. Depending on the tone of these comments, this can further

inflame staff opposition. None of the districts in this study were satisfied with their efforts to make the case for school closings in a way that appeased both the general public and existing staff members. Some candidly acknowledged that this may not be possible.

In the early days of school closures in Chicago, tenured teachers received a year's pay following a closure, but they were not guaranteed employment if they could not find another position in the district. In Denver, the human resources office printed a booklet that officials passed out during the meeting that explained that all staff members were guaranteed an interview at the school where the majority of students were being sent. If they chose not to do this or were not placed in this school, staff members went into a "general hiring pool." In the case of tenured teachers, the district was required to find placements for them—referred to as "force placements." Force placements were also required in Hartford. These guarantees did not hold true for teachers without tenure. None of the districts in this study were under an obligation to continue employing probationary teachers.

Tough

Implications for Districts Considering School Closure

As these descriptions indicate, closing schools can be a contentious, difficult process. Below, we distill the comments of district officials in these four districts to offer some preliminary guidance for districts considering closing schools for performance reasons.

Consider school closure in context of a larger reform effort

Decades of performance data suggest that there are schools that lack the capacity to respond to even the most intense district and state interventions. In these cases, closure may be a necessary solution. But experience with closure suggests that student achievement will not improve unless the district has other supports in place, most notably schools where students impacted by the closure will achieve at higher levels. Developing a district-wide plan to improve existing schools is a complex and challenging task. District officials in this study relied on the expertise of scholars and other district leaders with prior experience to help them build their plans, but they also decided to take the plunge without being certain of the outcome. As Brad Jupp commented about the improvement process in Denver, which he acknowledged had been messy and imperfect, "We have chosen not to let the perfect be the enemy of the good." Districts faced with numerous low-performing schools need to develop an overall plan for improvement that takes account of the fact that experimentation and course correction will be intrinsic to the process.

decisions

Develop a supply of higher-performing school options

Districts contemplating closure should consider whether opening new schools could ensure that impacted students have access to higher-performing schooling options or to schools that have strong potential to be higher-performing in the very short term. Unfortunately, most districts do not have experience increasing the supply of higher-performing schools. Vetting and implementing new school models in existing schools is technically challenging, as is hiring an outside operator to take over an existing school, or opening a new school that gets substantially better results with the same students (e.g., a proven charter school model). Aware of the challenges, district leaders in this study made an effort to hire people at the district level who had direct, previous experience or the skills needed to manage these complex new processes. They also networked with other district leaders engaged in similar efforts to learn from their experience.

Let data guide decision-making at all stages

Prior to initiating school closures, districts should invest in a comprehensive data gathering process that can guide decision-making at all stages of the process (e.g., establishing closure criteria, developing a transition plan). The information generated during this process will be unique to each district, but at a minimum it should include student and school performance results over time, available seats, the condition of facilities, and demographic trends. Districts that currently lack the capacity to gather and analyze these data should consider either contracting with an external provider or building this capacity internally.

Clearly explain to public how students will benefit

In announcing school closures, districts need to develop a communications strategy that clearly explains how students will benefit from the proposed closures. Districts should consider beginning with an explanation of current student performance that convinces the public that urgent action is needed. In the long run, though, an effective plan is one that helps the public move from a deficit model—with the focus on what people are losing—to a gains model—with the focus on how students and communities will benefit. While there is no sure fire

communications strategy that is going to eliminate everyone's concerns; a clear and consistent message about how student learning and opportunity will improve may lessen opposition to the plan. At the beginning of a school closure process, the touted benefits will be hypothetical. But over time, districts should be able to accumulate data on how students affected by closure fared in new settings. If students do better after closure, districts have a much stronger message to deliver when closing additional schools. To make that case, however, districts need strong data systems that enable tracking of individual students over time and comparing their performance in the new setting to their prior outcomes.

Avoid contentious battles with school board members

Early in the planning process, district officials who want to close schools need to reduce the chance that school board members will derail the effort. The strategies that accomplish this will vary depending on local circumstances, but district officials need to make this a priority. The district officials in this study engaged in multiple steps to persuade board members of the need to close schools. These included building personal relationships, regularly sharing student and school performance data, and using third parties (e.g., community groups, foundations) to put external pressure on reluctant board members. As part of their influence strategy, district officials should also consider soliciting school board members agreement to follow procedures that make it more likely that school closures will go forward (e.g., getting the board to agree to an up or down vote on the slate or evaluating whether closure criteria were fairly applied).

Provide support to students and families during transition

Districts that close schools have a responsibility to ensure that students who move to a new school or remain in the same building with a new environment and expectations experience a smooth transition. Carefully anticipating how the transition will impact students and families and providing support where needed is a critical piece of the overall planning process. The districts in this study found that these challenges differed depending on the age group. By and large, they reported that it was much easier to transition younger students to new schools or into new programs than to transition their older peers.

As students get older, they need more emotional and academic support to make the transition to unfamiliar environments. Districts that choose to move older students should anticipate this and have appropriate human and financial resources in place (e.g., counselors, tutoring services). In cases where families have several enrollment options, district leaders will also want to provide counseling support to families. Providing timely and accurate information about these options can alleviate parent concerns.

Clarify new principal's role in transition

Principals in receiving or redesigned schools play an important part in ensuring that student transitions go smoothly. There are several steps district officials can take to address this issue, beginning with selecting school leaders who have the capacity and will to make the transition successful. District officials can also clarify their expectations for principals regarding their role in the transition (e.g., initiating personal contact with parents and students, planning social opportunities for new families, inviting new parents to participate on school-wide committees). In addition, district officials should establish performance benchmarks for incoming students. Students are more likely to improve if the district establishes a timetable and holds principals and staff accountable for individual student progress.

Provide staff members with clear information about next steps

Staff member's options following a school closing are largely determined by local circumstances. Prior to the closure announcement, district officials need to have a thorough understanding of these options, including whether the district is obligated to provide further employment to staff members. In cases where the district is contractually obligated to continue to employ tenured teachers, for example, district officials should carefully consider their placement options. Research on forced placements indicates that this policy has a negative impact on overall teacher quality, so minimizing forced placements should be a top priority.[33] While it may not be possible to deliver the news that a school is closing in a way that staff members readily accept, district officials should be careful to minimize the uncertainty that staff members feel about their future. Providing clear written guidance immediately after the announcement is one way to avoid unnecessary confusion and misinformation.

Implications for Districts Considering Closure

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Consider school closure in context of a larger reform effort	✖ Increase supply of higher-performing schools ✖ Develop systems that provide ongoing support and oversight to existing schools ✖ Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good—take risks when necessary
Develop a supply of higher-performing school options	✖ Hire people with direct experience or necessary skills to vet and implement new schooling options ✖ Network with district leaders across the country who have experience building supply
Let data guide decision-making at all stages	✖ Contract with an external provider or build internal capacity to conduct comprehensive data analysis ✖ At a minimum, collect information about student and school performance results over time, available seats, the condition of facilities, and demographic trends
Clearly explain to public how students will benefit	✖ Develop a communications strategy that provides concrete information about how students will benefit from the proposed closures ✖ Begin with an explanation of current student performance that convinces the public that urgent action is needed
Avoid contentious battle with school board members	✖ Reduce the chance that school board members have the ability to derail the effort ✖ Solicit school board members agreement to follow procedures that make it more likely that school closures will go forward
Provide support to students and families during transition	✖ Provide more support to older students transitioning to unfamiliar environments ✖ Give families timely and accurate information about their options
Clarify new principal's role in transition	✖ Select school leaders who have the capacity and will to make the transition successful ✖ Clarify expectations for principals regarding their role in the transition ✖ Establish performance benchmarks for incoming students
Provide staff members with clear information about next steps	✖ Understand district options with regard to staff placement ✖ Communicate these options clearly to staff members immediately after closure announcement

School
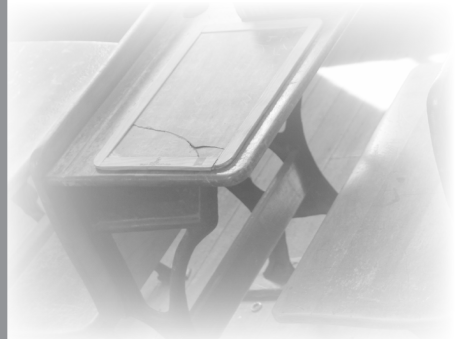
Conclusion

The temptation to allow chronically low-performing schools to remain open is powerful. District leaders naturally shy away from the emotional and political costs of closing schools. But, if the alternative is to allow students to continue to languish academically, each of the district officials interviewed for this report would say that the cost of inaction is too high. As one school board member who participated in a school closure process explained, "It's very emotional….People cry, and they plead, and they put their children up to the microphone, and they tell us how they can't leave the school. You're not heartless; you feel the pain. But you can't be married to bricks and mortar. You have to be married to providing the best educational experience you can."[34] For the district officials in this study, the difficult, messy, and controversial decision to close schools was driven by this imperative—to provide students with a significantly better educational experience.

Closing Persistently Low Performing Schools
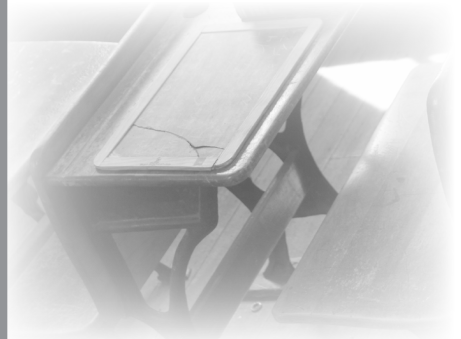
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For more information about School Turnarounds
or the work of the Center on Innovation & Improvement
please visit:
www.centerii.org