

Five questions to guide closure decisions

The decision to close a school is one of the hardest decisions a school board member, community member, or state official may face. While these questions should be asked by all stakeholders, they focus on factors that are within the purview of administrators, school board members, and other elected leaders.

Before the decision:

Many districts and communities begin thinking about closure much too late—far after the circumstances (or thinking about the circumstances) can be changed. Thus, many years before any actual closure would need to occur, town and district leaders should engage community members in discussions about:

- enrollment numbers (overall and by grade/classroom)
- budget numbers and challenges
- any difficulty hiring teachers
- major required school renovations
- or any other circumstance that could eventually result in school closure.

Make sure that community members understand what these trends mean and the long-term possibilities of inaction, but be cautious about talking too much about closure: it can scare families from the district and also limit community voice in actual decision-making. Ground these conversations in data. Have short- and long-term plans for addressing each issue, but also solicit input. As relevant, create committees of diverse stakeholders to address issues.

Deciding whether to close:

States differ in who decides whether a school should close. Also, the decisionmakers may vary depending on the particular precipitating issue (e.g., enrollment, academics). Communities and students should have as much voice and power in these decisions as possible, though. And, throughout the process, *take seriously any concerns raised by students and communities*.

Here are five questions to guide discussion:

- *Will closing the school save a meaningful amount of money?*
 - Because it typically doesn't meaningfully reduce staff, closure often saves very little money. Fiscal justifications are often made with outdated numbers, miss critical costs (e.g., transportation, renovations to receiving school, loss of students to other schools), or make unsupported assumptions (e.g., the sale of the building). These calculations must be detailed (where, exactly, will the savings come from?) and backed by current data, and they must be honest.
 - At the same time, other rising or impending costs should also be considered, like maintenance to buildings and rising energy costs. Closing buildings might reduce or eliminate some of these costs.
- *Will closing the school increase academic opportunity?*
 - Research shows that students' test scores often decline in the year before and after closure. They can recover, but only if the students are sent to an academically stronger school—and they often aren't. So will this closure actually lead to more academic growth? And how will any short-term impacts be minimized?
 - Some research also shows negative impacts more long-term, on college enrollment, employment, and earnings, perhaps due to experiencing a disruptive event. How will those effects be addressed?
 - Research shows that closures can negatively impact behavior, through the disruption of the event and/or bullying (insider/outsider dynamic). How will these risks be mitigated?

- Attending a school with more opportunities—like AP classes, athletic teams, extracurricular options—doesn't guarantee that students can access them; seats in AP classes might be limited, for example, or participation in athletics might assume transportation over a long distance. How will the district ensure full access?
- Consider how closure will impact class sizes and teacher recruitment. Ideally, classes will be sized to allow for both good peer interaction and one-on-one attention; classes too small or too large can have negative academic and social effects and make it difficult to attract high-quality teachers.
- *Will educational access be maintained or expanded?*
 - When schools close, families are now often much farther from their new school. This can mean longer (and, sometimes, less safe) bus rides. Long bus rides can have negative impacts on children's academics, sleep, and respiratory health, and they may be developmentally inappropriate for younger children. Though few states have regulations or even recommendations on bus ride length, look closely at how closure might impact bus ride lengths and think carefully about how long is too long.
 - Closure can also reduce access to extracurricular activities for students, as families may not have the time or means to pick up children after practices, games, or events. Districts can minimize these effects through extra bus runs, but these must be planned carefully and available for all activities (not just athletics)—and the cost of these services should be factored into financial calculations.
 - Families are also impacted by these long distances: they can't attend conferences, pick a sick child up in the middle of the day, or attend afterschool events. This is especially true for families without reliable transportation. How will you ensure family access?
- *Will the burden of closure be equitably shared?*
 - Black and low-income communities are disproportionately likely to experience school closures, and closure may uniquely impact rural communities. The risks for students on IEPs or 504s are especially high with a closure, as they might experience a disruption in service.
 - Make sure you have the data to know whether closing a school will result in racial or class disproportionality, negatively impact rural and low-income families' participation, or disrupt special education services. Some of these effects (e.g., special education services, excessive bus rides) may be mitigated through careful planning; others might be reason to avoid closing a school or to change which school is closing.
- *Will the local community benefit from the closure?*
 - Schools are important to local economic and social well-being, too. They provide jobs, sustain other local businesses, attract new investments and families, and support a community's social and civic health. This is likely especially true in rural communities. Thus, the impact of closure on employment, civic and social vitality, and economic prospects should be considered. (It's worth noting that these factors matter not just to adults, but also to children's academic and social well-being.)
 - Arguments about how closure affects local communities—positively or negatively—should be supported with evidence and data.

A “no” to any one of these questions suggests that closure may be misguided; a “yes” to all five indicates that closure might be a reasonable next step. That said, the decision should still be arrived at democratically, and closures need to be well-planned, in a process guided by transparency, trust, and a desire to maximize student, faculty, and community-well-being.

Compiled by Mara Tieken, professor of education and author of *Educated Out* and *Why Rural Schools Matter*. For most of the research cited here, see Tieken and Auldridge-Reveles's "[Rethinking the school closure research](#)." For more information, see her [website](#) or contact her at mtieken@bates.edu.