Centering Equity in the School-Closure Process in California

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Contents

Executive Summary

Enrollment in California public schools has been declining and is projected to fall even more steeply during the next decade. Because funding for school districts is largely based on average daily attendance rates, a decline in enrollment results in a loss of funding. To address budget shortfalls and align services with student counts, many districts have consolidated or closed schools, or they are contemplating doing so.

School closures may enable districts to achieve budgetary savings and economies of scale that help them provide more resources on a per-pupil basis. But closures come with a cost. They often save less money than districts anticipate, have mixed impacts on academic achievement, are disruptive to students and families, and may contribute to neighborhood blight. School closures also disproportionately affect students of color and low-income students. In some communities, they exacerbate decades of segregation, neighborhood disinvestment, and gentrification.

Leaders in declining-enrollment districts will need to consider the benefits and costs when seeking to balance their budgets with new enrollment realities. This report makes three recommendations for how local decision makers, including district officials and school board members, should approach school closures:

- establish and execute an inclusive, transparent process;
- implement a strategy to provide displaced students and the broader student community with accessible, high-quality educational opportunities; and
- develop a long-term plan to address factors—such as housing affordability, gentrification, and economic divestment—contributing to the disproportionate closure of schools serving low-income students and students of color.

State leaders can help by supporting the collection and dissemination of data on demographic trends and projections, including how these patterns will affect schools, and by creating space to reflect on potential solutions with an eye towards regional needs and priorities related to racial and economic integration.

This report neither argues for a moratorium on school closures nor asserts that district finances supersede community needs and preferences. Instead, it aims to provide evidence and suggestions to help state and local education leaders as they confront declining enrollment. It also urges them to work with other city and county agencies, including housing and economic development authorities, to increase opportunities for low-income families and communities of color so that fewer enrollment-related school closures are necessary.

Introduction

Empty seats have become increasingly common in California's K–12 public schools. Driven primarily by falling birth rates, slowed immigration, and out-of-state migration, the state's public school enrollment has been in decline for years (California Department of Finance, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this student exodus. Between 2007 and 2022, enrollment in California public schools, which include both traditional and charter schools, dropped by at least 390,000 students, or more than 6 percent.[1] Enrollment is expected to decline an additional 9 percent by 2032. The drop is especially acute in California's coastal and urban areas, where high costs of living are prompting families to move to other parts of the state or outside California altogether (Jong, 2022; Lafortune & Prunty, 2022; Tadayon, 2022; Xie & Willis, 2022).

Because school districts are funded based on average daily attendance rates, a decline in enrollment results in a loss of funding. California, like more than two dozen other states, primarily uses a student-based formula to fund its schools (EdBuild, 2023). Districts receive a base grant for each student they serve as well as supplemental grants based on the number and concentration of students who are low-income, English learners, experiencing homelessness, or in foster care. If districts lose students, they also lose revenue. Yet a school district's costs do not decrease by a commensurate amount, at least not immediately. This imbalance can dramatically increase the per-student cost of services. To address budget shortfalls and realign the district's number of schools and staff with its student count—a process some districts call *rightsizing*—many districts have consolidated or closed schools, or they are contemplating doing so.

While school closures can help close budget holes, the cost savings are often minimal in the context of a district's overall budget, especially in a large district. In some cases, savings fall short of a district's estimations and needs, particularly in the short term when districts incur additional one-time costs (Pew Charitable Trusts, 2011, 2013). In the long term, of course, even modest cost savings can be significant in achieving a balanced budget and fiscal sustainability.

In some cases, closing a low-performing school can help the district improve student achievement (Bross et al., 2016; Carlson & Lavertu, 2015). But more often, displacement has a slight negative impact on students' academic achievement (Barnum, 2019; Gordon et al., 2018; Larsen, 2020). Students already attending the receiving schools can suffer academically as well (Steinberg & MacDonald, 2019).

[1] Historical data throughout this report are from DataQuest, accessed February 1, 2023. Projections are the authors' analysis of public K–12 enrollment data from the California Department of Finance, accessed February 1, 2023, from dof.ca.gov/forecasting/demographics/public-k-12-graded-enrollment.

Further, school closures can worsen racial and socioeconomic inequities. Closures disproportionately affect students of color and low-income students. In some communities, they exacerbate decades of segregation, neighborhood disinvestment, gentrification, and other trends that have reduced opportunities for people of color and low-income families.

In racially and economically diverse and in homogenous districts alike, discussions on school closures can surface community tensions about the fair distribution of resources and opportunities and can generate significant community pushback, ranging from demonstrations at school board meetings to student walkouts and hunger strikes. For example, the Oakland Unified School District board's decision to close two schools in 2022–23 and slate five more for closure in 2023–24 was met with vocal opposition from many community members, including some who argued that the district's actions would disproportionately harm Black students and communities (Finney, 2022).

For all these reasons, school district leaders must center racial and socioeconomic equity when considering whether and how to close or consolidate schools. ***Centering equity* means making it an essential part of a decision rather than an afterthought.** In this context, that includes engaging with and addressing the needs and concerns of communities of color and low-income communities before, during, and after the school-closure process.

This report situates school-closure decisions in a larger historical context and explains how declining enrollment and school closures connect to broader patterns affecting housing, school access, and educational opportunities for Black, Latinx, and low-income students as well as other historically marginalized groups. It unpacks arguments regarding the costs and benefits of school closure. Finally, it makes three recommendations for how local decision makers, including district officials and school board members, should center equity when considering whether and how to close schools:

- establish and execute an inclusive, transparent process;
- implement a strategy to provide displaced students and the broader student community with accessible, high-quality educational opportunities; and
- develop a long-term plan to address factors—such as housing affordability, gentrification, and economic divestment—contributing to the disproportionate closure of schools serving low-income students and students of color.

Few education leaders want to confront school-closure decisions. But since enrollment in California public schools is expected to continue to decline, these tough choices are inevitable. With advanced planning and foresight, district leaders and their governing boards will have a wider range of options for how they make these decisions and mitigate harm for their communities' highest need and historically marginalized students. This report neither argues for a moratorium on school closures nor asserts that district finances supersede community needs

and preferences. Instead, we aim to provide evidence and suggestions that will help state and local education leaders navigate school-closure processes and identify solutions that could reverse the cycles of disinvestment that have caused school closures to affect students and communities of color disproportionately.

Historical Context for School Closures

This report addresses school closures, not the full history of neighborhood-based disparities and racial injustice.[2] Those topics span generations and implicate housing, education, and economic decisions, policies, and practices. Nevertheless, engaging with that history is important and necessary because it gives context for why current educational opportunities are unevenly distributed across communities and provides the backdrop against which school-closure decisions occur.

Racially Restrictive Laws and Policies Segregated Neighborhoods and Schools

Schools slated for closure are often located in low-income, racially and economically segregated neighborhoods. These patterns of segregation were created by city ordinances, racial covenants, and exclusionary zoning that dictated where people of color could live (Baker et al., 2022). The Federal Housing Authority deepened racial segregation by refusing to insure mortgages that it considered risky. It created maps that color-coded neighborhoods based on their purported lending risk, with supposed high-risk neighborhoods outlined in red. Black and brown neighborhoods were habitually redlined across the country, blocking families in those communities from accessing federally backed loans (Best & Mejia, 2022; Gross, 2017; Rothstein, 2017). This practice contributed significantly to the racial wealth gap, as White families often purchased homes with federal support while Black and brown families could not (Lee, 2019).

Without access to the new suburban housing stock and often unable to purchase homes even in their own communities, families of color were concentrated in specific parts of cities, such as the South Side of Chicago, East Oakland, or Watts in Los Angeles. Even after legalized segregation was outlawed and practices like redlining were banned, segregation endured because Black, Latinx, and lower income families were priced out of predominately White and higher income neighborhoods. Moreover, modern-day housing practices often work to sustain segregation. For example, many cities restrict the development of multiunit housing (Badger & Bui, 2019; Knapp et al., 2007), and federal housing programs like Section 8 vouchers often keep low-income families in impoverished neighborhoods (Schwartz et al., 2016).

[2] These issues are grappled with more deeply and completely in recent scholarship: *The Color of Law* (Rothstein, 2017); *Ghosts in the Schoolyard* (Ewing, 2018); *Children of the Dream* (Johnson, 2019); *Caste* (Wilkerson, 2020); and *The Sum of Us* (McGhee, 2021).

In education, school district lines were drawn on top of segregated housing patterns. A series of federal court rulings prohibited integration efforts across district lines, which enabled wealthier, predominately White families to self-segregate and consolidate resources and opportunities. Since generations of Black and Latinx families had been unable to accrue housing wealth, having been blocked from participating in federally supported home-ownership programs, they could not buy higher priced homes in more desirable neighborhoods with better schools. Even within districts, enrollment zones follow segregated housing patterns. Decades after *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), schools in the United States are as segregated as they were before that landmark decision (Orfield et al., 2019).

Inequitable and Inadequate Funding Led to Underresourced Schools

School finance systems can exacerbate inequities. Most states rely heavily on local property taxes to fund their schools, which means that school districts in communities with greater property wealth often receive more funding than districts in areas of lesser property wealth, despite state efforts to equalize funding. This is somewhat less of an issue in California because relatively few districts receive property taxes in excess of their state-established funding targets.[3] But this was not always true: Before the California Supreme Court ruled that the state's method of funding schools was unconstitutional in the *Serrano v. Priest* decisions in the 1970s, local variation in tax wealth resulted in wide disparities in school funding.

Although equity in school funding has improved in California, there are still so-called basic aid districts that generate and keep excess property tax revenue. In addition, higher income districts generate more revenues through other means, such as facilities bonds and parcel taxes, which are flat taxes imposed on a piece of land (Lafortune & Gao, 2022; Lang & Sonstelie, 2015). On top of these persistent inequities, California schools have suffered from decades of underfunding. After 1978's Proposition 13 capped property taxes, California's per-pupil funding levels fell precipitously (Murphy et al., 2022). From the mid-1980s through the economic recovery that followed the Great Recession, California's per-pupil funding levels regularly ranked between 25th and 35th nationally (Lafortune & Herrera, 2022). Since then, total funding has improved, but when adjusted for regional cost differences, California school funding still falls below the national average (Farrie & Sciarra, 2022). As a result of this history, California's lowest wealth communities, which are often racially segregated, experienced decades of underinvestment in their schools, predisposing them to the kinds of fiscal, structural, and demographic challenges that lead to school closures.

[3] Under California's Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), the state calculates a funding target for each district, based chiefly on the average daily attendance of students and the percentage of students who are low income, English learners, experiencing homelessness, or in foster care. The local school district's property taxes are first used to fill this "bucket," and the state tops off the remainder using state funds. In roughly 100 out of about 1,000 local educational agencies, local property taxes exceed LCFF targets. These districts, called "basic aid districts," get to keep the "spillover" funds. In California, property taxes are a smaller slice of the school-funding pie than they are in many other states, in large part because of Proposition 13. Passed in 1978, Proposition 13 limits property taxes to 1 percent of the purchase price. Although this policy has reduced disparities in the property tax revenue among districts, it has also severely reduced tax revenues and decreased housing affordability.

Gentrification Is Exacerbating Declining School Enrollments

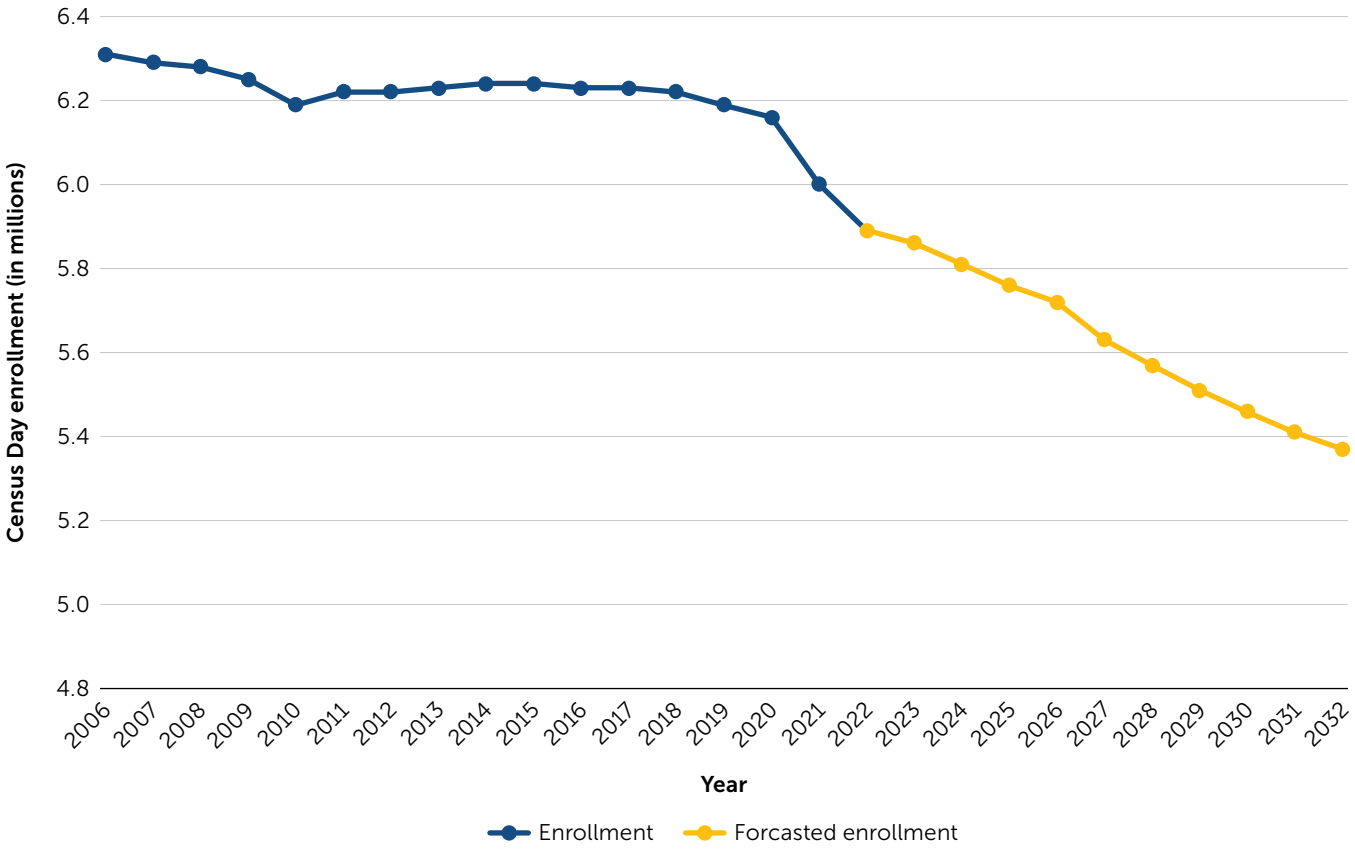
Many of these previously underresourced neighborhoods are now being gentrified. In cities like Los Angeles, Oakland, Sacramento, San Diego, and San Francisco, wealthier residents, who are often White, are moving to urban centers, displacing Black and Latinx families (Richardson et al., 2020). These newer residents tend to have fewer children, and those with children often opt out of their local neighborhood schools—particularly if they perceive those schools to be unsafe or low performing. Enrollment declines in these schools, and schools remain racially segregated even as the surrounding area diversifies. In response, the school district identifies these schools as underenrolled and therefore potential sites for closure. Recent research demonstrated that "gentrification was associated with declining enrollment at neighborhood schools" (Pearman, 2020).

Large, segregated, and gentrifying urban districts are not the only communities experiencing enrollment declines that may force possible school closures. Smaller districts, cities that serve more homogenous racial populations (including many predominately Latinx communities), and wealthy suburbs also face shrinking school enrollments due to lower birth rates and migration to other parts of the state or country. In these communities, historical housing policies and gentrification trends may explain less of the enrollment decline. Nevertheless, district policymakers may still need to confront issues of inclusion and fairness as they consider school closures as a means of balancing their budgets.

Declining Enrollment Trends in California

Enrollment in California public schools has declined for 5 consecutive years, mirroring a slowdown in statewide population growth more generally. This slowdown is mostly due to declining birth rates (Johnson & McGhee, 2021), reduced immigration (McGhee et al., 2021), and out-of-state migration (McGhee et al., 2021), but it has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused steep enrollment losses between 2019 and 2022 (D'Souza, 2023). The pandemic forced school buildings to close temporarily, prompted some parents to switch from public to private or homeschool enrollment, and contributed to out-of-state migration (Dee, 2023). Some of those pandemic-induced changes were temporary. For instance, many fewer California students were being homeschooled in 2022–23 than during the pandemic (Fenterwald & Willis, 2023). Others, like migration patterns, appear more lasting. For the first time since 2000, the state enrolls fewer than 6 million students (Lafortune & Prunty, 2022). All told, California's public school enrollment decreased by 6.3 percent between 2007 and 2021 and is expected to decline an additional 9 percent by 2032 (Figure 1).

Figure 1. California K–12 Public School Enrollment From 2006 to 2021 and Forecast Through 2032



Source. California Department of Education (CDE), DataQuest. Forecasted enrollment is based on California Department of Finance projections.

Enrollment losses are not affecting every community equally though. Losses are concentrated in coastal areas, including Southern California and the San Francisco Bay Area (Lafortune & Prunty, 2022). Parts of Northern California and the Central Valley, conversely, recently experienced enrollment gains (Lafortune & Prunty, 2022). Enrollment losses are also affecting some student subgroups and school types more than others.

Enrollment Trends Among Racial and Ethnic Groups

Enrollment of Asian American, Latinx, and multiracial students increased during the past 10 years, both in raw numbers and as a share of the student population. This increase—about 214,000 students—was not enough to make up for the decline in the number of Black and White students however. Between 2012 and 2021, enrollment of White students fell by more than 309,000, a decline of 4.4 percentage points. During the same period, enrollment of Black students fell by about 86,000, a drop of 1.3 percentage points, from 6.3 percent to 5.1 percent of all students (Table 1).

Table 1. Racial and Ethnic Composition of California's K–12 Public School Enrollment in 2012 and 2021

	2012		2021		Change	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage Points
American Indian/ Alaska Native	39,777	0.7	26,814	0.5	–12,963	–0.2
Asian American or Asian/Pacific Islander	681,855	11.4	693,165	12.0	11,310	0.6
Latinx	3,125,354	52.1	3,213,871	55.4	88,517	3.4
Black	380,857	6.3	294,664	5.1	–86,193	–1.3
White	1,566,388	26.1	1,256,571	21.7	–309,817	–4.4
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	33,951	0.6	25,038	0.4	–8,913	–0.1
Two or more races	173,311	2.9	287,524	5.0	114,213	2.1
Overall	6,001,493	–	5,797,647	–	–203,846	–3.4 percent [a]

Source. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics Common Core of Data, 2012–21.

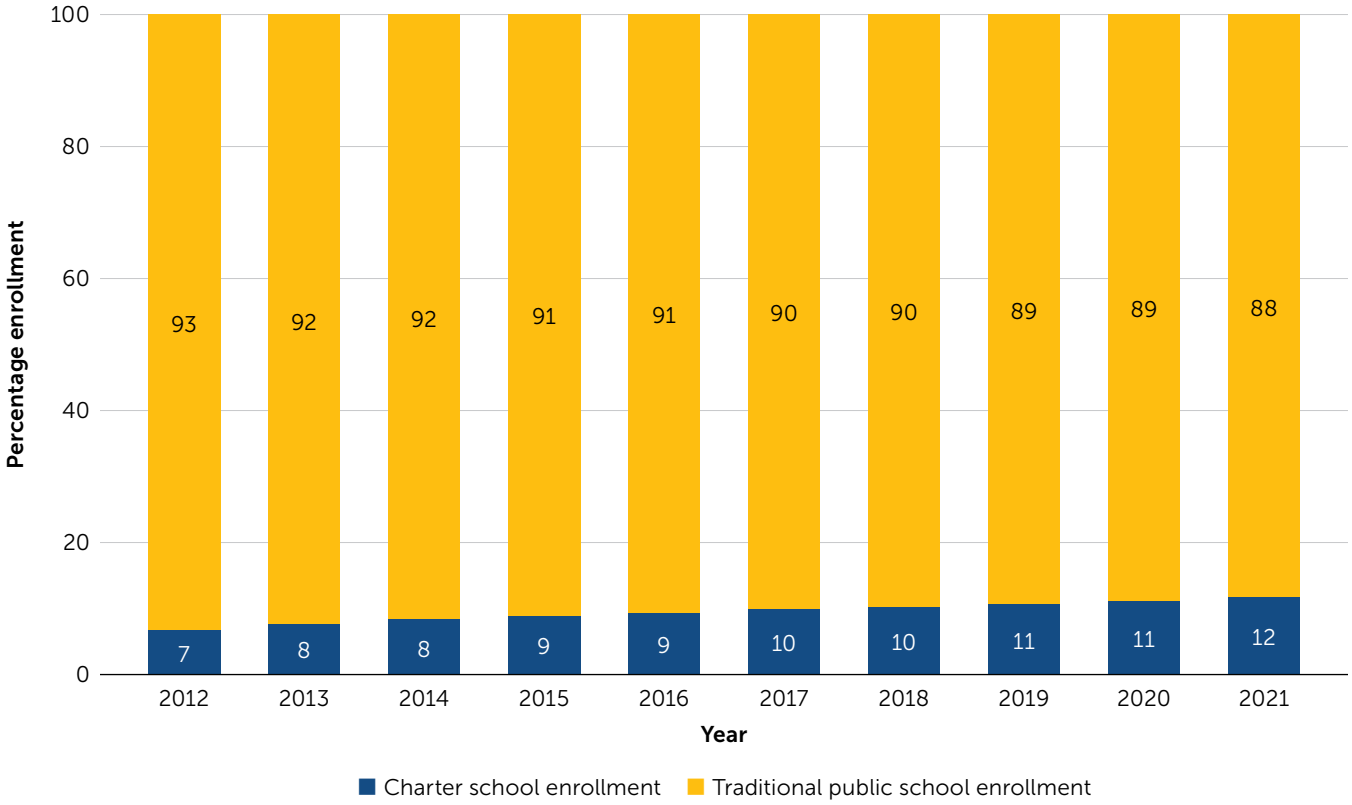
Note. Based on aggregated school-level data, which affect the total enrollment because of data suppression for some schools. The data are also limited to public schools, which include charter schools but exclude vocational, discipline, and other specialty schools.

[a] This calculation represents a percentage change rather than a percentage point change.

Enrollment Trends in Traditional Versus Charter Schools

Enrollment in traditional public schools decreased even more rapidly than the statewide figures suggest. While roughly 204,000 students left California's public school system overall, enrollment in the state's charter school sector grew by nearly 279,000 students. As shown in Figure 2, charters enrolled 6.8 percent of the state's public school students in 2012. By 2021, charters accounted for 11.8 percent. During the same period, enrollment in traditional public schools decreased by 8.6 percent, or roughly half a million students. This is important to understand because some people argue that charter schools have pulled students away from traditional school districts. The data do suggest some movement from the traditional public schools to charters. We estimate that, on the high end, up to 58 percent of the decline in enrollment in traditional public schools could be attributed to transfers to charter schools. However, that assumes that *all* of the increase in charter school enrollment came from students transferring from California-based traditional public schools, which is unlikely. This means that roughly half of the decline in enrollment is for reasons other than moving to charter schools, such as changing birth rates and migration patterns.

Figure 2. Traditional and Public Charter School Enrollment Trends in California, 2012–21



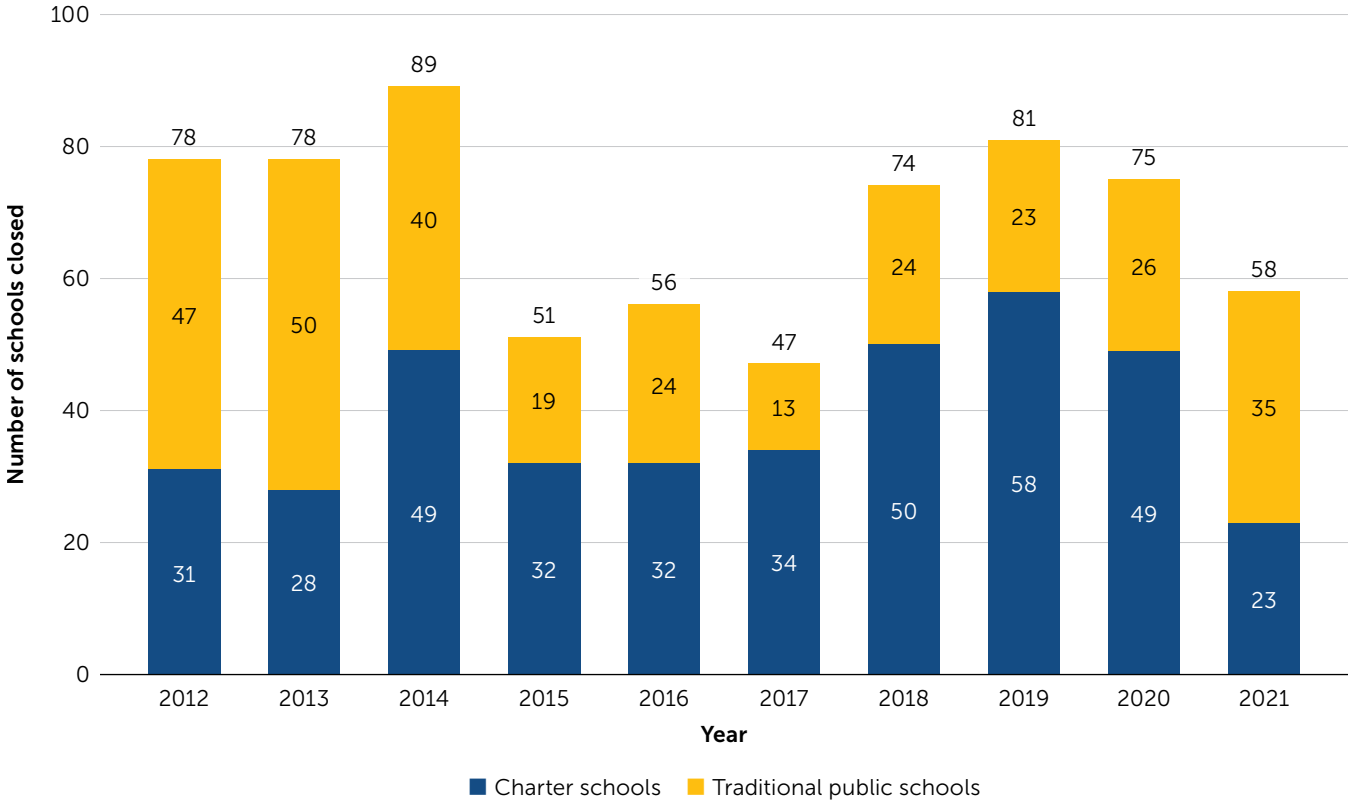
Source. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics Common Core of Data, 2012–21.

Note. Based on aggregated school-level data, which affect the total enrollment because of data suppression for some schools. The data are also limited to public schools and exclude vocational, discipline, and other specialty schools.

School-Closure Trends in California

School closures have been relatively uncommon during the past 10 years. In any given year, only about 50 to 80 schools were closed. For reference, in 2021 California had about 9,000 traditional public and 1,300 charter schools. As shown in Figure 3, 687 schools were shuttered between 2012 and 2021. Of those, 44 percent were traditional public schools and 56 percent were charter schools, making charter schools more likely to experience closure than traditional schools. That said, new charter schools were also more likely to open during this period. In fact, for every charter school that closed between 2012 and 2021, an average of 1.75 charter schools opened. By contrast, for every traditional school that closed, another 1.2 schools opened.

Figure 3. Annual Closures of Traditional Public Schools and Charter Schools in California, 2012–21



Source. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics Common Core of Data, 2012–21.

Note. The data are limited to public schools and exclude vocational, discipline, and other specialty schools.

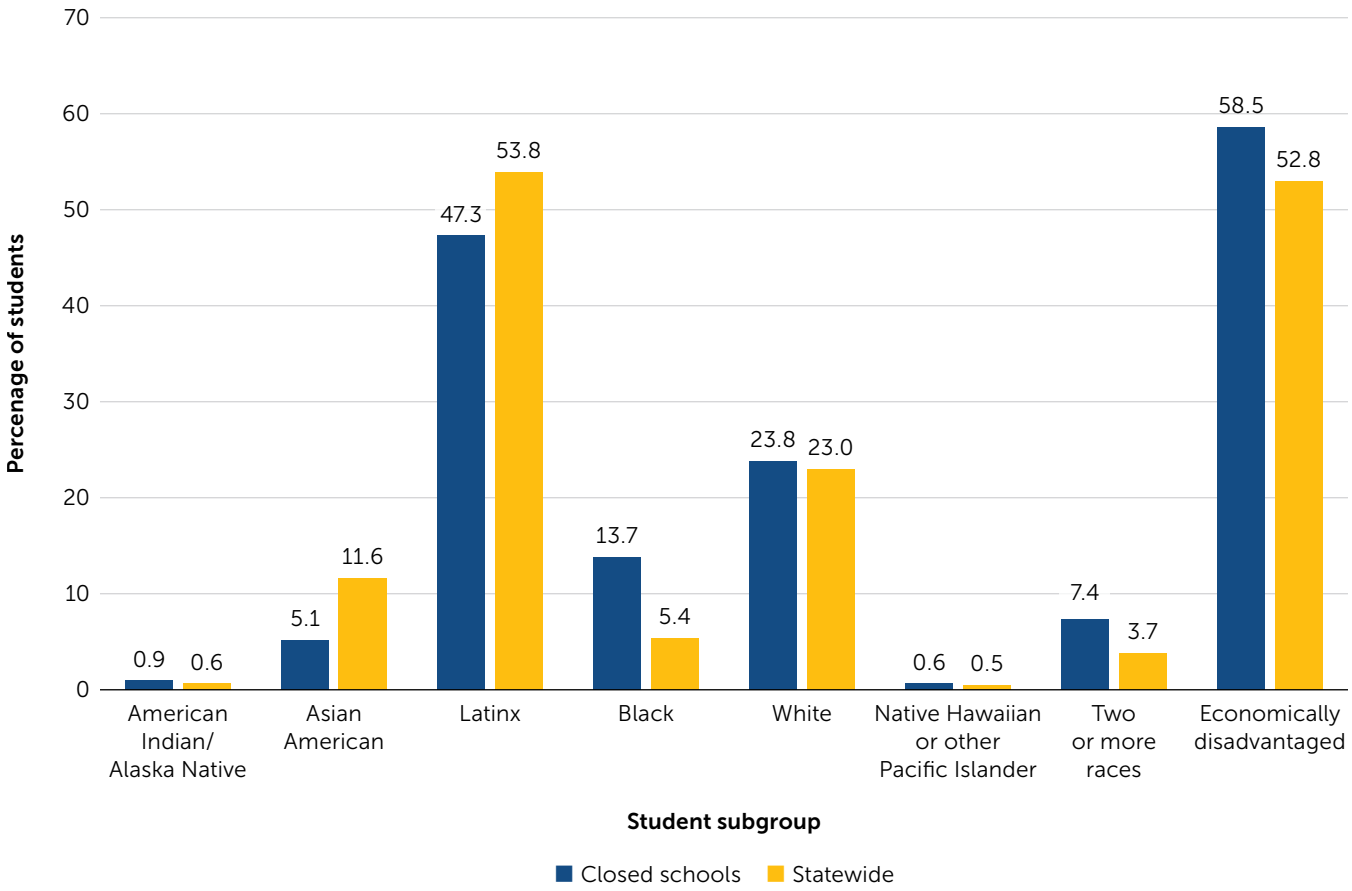
Approximately 167,000 students attended a school that was closed between 2012 and 2021. On average, roughly 17,000 students were displaced each year during the past decade, representing about 0.3 percent of the state's public school enrollment.

Interestingly, school closures did not increase dramatically even as California's enrollment began to decline in 2017. While there were more school closures than in the previous 3 years, the number of shuttered schools was in line with levels from earlier in the decade. It is possible that the higher rates of school funding provided through the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) as well as 2012's Proposition 30 and 2016's Proposition 55—which increased sales and income taxes to fund schools—allowed schools to operate below capacity for longer. Similarly, the large infusion of pandemic-relief funding that districts received in recent years may also temporarily be staving off school closures during this period of steep declining enrollment. Finally, state hold-harmless provisions that protected districts from enrollment-related funding declines during the pandemic may have delayed decisions to close schools.

Disparities by Student Subgroups

Since White students are leaving the public education system in the highest numbers, we might expect that the highest number of closures would be in schools predominantly serving White students. This is not the case. Figure 4 shows student demographics in closed schools compared with statewide enrollment levels. White students accounted for 23 percent of California's students between 2012 and 2021 and were 24 percent of displaced students. Latinx students were somewhat less likely to experience a school closure than their numbers might suggest. They represented 54 percent of state students but only 47 percent of displacements.

Figure 4. Student Demographics in Closed Schools Compared With Statewide Enrollment Levels



Source. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics Common Core of Data, 2012–21.

Note. Based on aggregated school-level data, which affect the total enrollment because of data suppression for some schools. The data are limited to public schools and exclude vocational, discipline, and other specialty schools. Enrollment counts are derived from the previous year; for example, for a school that closed in 2020, the enrollment for this analysis is based on 2019 levels. Statewide enrollment percentages are totaled across the 10 years in the analysis.

Native, Pacific Islander, Black, multiracial, and economically disadvantaged students, on the other hand, disproportionately experienced school closure. Multiracial students were nearly twice as likely to attend a shuttered school as their statewide enrollment would suggest. Black students were more than 2.5 times as likely.

Disparities by Geographic Locale and Charter Status

Location also plays a role in which students experience school closures. Of the students who experienced a school closure during the past decade, 50 percent attended school in a city. The racial and economic disparities shown in Figure 4 may be explained, in part, by the fact that urban schools disproportionately enroll students of color and economically disadvantaged students. Schools in those geographic areas also experienced a greater enrollment decline between 2012 and 2021.

There were significant racial disparities *within* locales as well. As shown in Table 2, White students make up 19 percent of all students who attend school in a city, but they account for only 8 percent of students enrolled in a closed school in those cities. On the other hand, Black and Latinx students in cities are significantly overrepresented in closed schools.

Table 2. Enrollment in Closed Schools by Race/Ethnicity, Urbanicity, and Charter Status

	Percentage of White Students		Percentage of Black Students		Percentage of Latinx Students	
	Overall	Closed schools	Overall	Closed schools	Overall	Closed schools
City	19.3	8.0	6.0	11.3	56.1	71.1
Rural	36.5	28.8	2.8	2.1	47.6	64.2
Suburb	24.8	20.2	5.3	15.9	51.2	54.3
Town	29.5	54.1	2.6	0.0	58.8	38.3
Charter	28.2	29.0	7.9	16.0	48.9	40.5
Not charter	23.4	16.8	5.4	10.6	54.2	56.4
Statewide	23.0	23.8	5.4	13.7	53.8	47.3

Source. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics Common Core of Data, 2012–21.

Note. Based on aggregated school-level data, which affect the total enrollment because of data suppression for some schools. The data are limited to public schools and exclude vocational, discipline, and other specialty schools. Statewide enrollment percentages are totaled across the 10 years in the analysis.

It is also the case that Black students disproportionately attend charter schools, that charter schools are disproportionately located in urban areas, and that charter schools are more likely to be closed. These factors compound to place Black students at an increased risk of experiencing a school closure.

Disparities by District

Because district boards are vested with making decisions to close schools, it is important to understand disparities within districts. Between 2012 and 2022, 16 districts closed five or more traditional public schools, accounting for 32 percent of all school closures. In 12 of these 16 districts, Black students were overrepresented among shuttered schools. The disparity was particularly large in Los Angeles Unified, Oakland Unified, and Compton Unified school districts. In 7 of the 16 districts, Latinx students were more likely to attend a closed school than their share of the district's enrollment would suggest. The disparity is most pronounced in San Diego Unified School District, where Latinx students are 47 percent of the student population but 67 percent of students whose school was closed. In the majority of the districts, White students were far less likely to experience school closure than their peers. Asian American and Pacific Islander students rarely experience school closure at a rate greater than their district enrollment levels suggest. See the Appendix for data on the racial and ethnic impacts of school closure within the 16 districts in California with the most closed schools during the past decade.

How California Policymakers Have Addressed Declining Enrollment and School Closures

Over the past several years, California has mitigated the financial repercussions of declining enrollment by pumping massive amounts of state and federal dollars into schools. A healthy economy between 2018–19 and 2021–22 meant that state and local funding for schools and community colleges surged by nearly 40 percent (Legislative Analyst's Office, 2023). The state has also taken advantage of the significant influx of federal COVID-19 relief funds, which have given district budgets a considerable boost; those federal funds first hit district budgets in the 2020–21 school year and must be fully spent by 2024 (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). Although economic growth has slowed, Governor Gavin Newsom has maintained funding levels for schools in 2023–24, including a cost-of-living adjustment meant to keep pace with inflation.

In recent years, policymakers have sought to increase fiscal safeguards. Since the Great Recession, the state has built up its reserves and its rainy day fund for schools. To soften the fiscal blow for districts experiencing declining enrollment, Governor Newsom changed the LCFF formula in 2022–23 to allow districts to calculate average daily attendance using a 3-year average rather than just a single year. With this switch, funding in shrinking districts will decline more gradually than it otherwise would.

Despite these recent boosts in funding and fiscal safeguards, some districts have faced significant budgetary pressure because of declining enrollment and other factors. In these cases, school consolidations and closures are often used as a mechanism for reducing costs and rightsizing a district. In fact, school consolidations are among the recommendations that California's Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team (FCMAT) has made to ailing school

districts like Oakland Unified, Inglewood Unified, and Vallejo City Unified. FCMAT, an agency charged with assisting County Offices of Education with supporting districts in fiscal distress, reviews district budgets and recommends actions that will help districts achieve fiscal stability.

Policymakers and state leaders have also offered guidance on school closures. The legislature has expressed its intent for districts to involve the community before making decisions about closing schools, and it says that districts may (not shall) use a District Advisory Committee (DAC) to advise the governing board on the use or disposition of school buildings (Cal. Education Code §17387 et seq., 1996). Although not legislatively required, a DAC is intended to help districts gather information and community perspective regarding the impacts of a school closure in the context of a district's Facility Master Plan (California Department of Education, 2023). A DAC is also known as a "7–11 Committee" since they are statutorily required to have at least 7 but no more than 11 members. To support districts in navigating school-closure decisions, the California Department of Education (CDE) has issued *Closing a School Best Practices Guide*. This guide includes chapters on gathering facts, deciding which school(s) to close, making the decision, supporting the transition, and disposing of school property. None of this CDE guidance is binding.

State leaders have begun to weigh in more explicitly on the role of equity in school closures. In 2022, Governor Newsom signed into law a bill authored by Assembly Member Mia Bonta requiring that districts, if in fiscal distress, perform an "equity impact analysis" before approving the closure or consolidation of a school (Cal. Education Code §41329, 2022). This bill currently applies to just a handful of school districts that meet the state's "fiscal distress" criteria—which means they have accepted emergency apportionments from the state and have not yet paid them off (California Department of Education, 2022).

To remove any question as to whether *all* districts, not just those in fiscal distress, must abide by equal protection laws when considering school closures, Attorney General Rob Bonta issued guidance in April 2023. In this guidance, he declares it "essential that school closure decisions comply with federal and state civil rights laws" (Bonta, 2023), and he describes the ways in which closures are governed by Assembly Bill 1912 and a variety of state and federal antidiscrimination mandates.

A recent lawsuit filed by the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF) in Pasadena Unified School District may test some of the ideas laid out by Attorney General Bonta (*Chavez et al. v. Pasadena Unified School District et al.*, 2022). The suit claims that by closing three schools that predominantly serve Latinx students, the district violated California's Equal Protection Clause. MALDEF alleges that Pasadena Unified did not account for "basic racial equity" when making its decision.

Districts in fiscal distress may now find themselves in a predicament. LCFF has, in theory, given them local control over their resources. Advice and oversight agencies like FCMAT and the County Office of Education may be recommending or even requiring school closures.

And the legislature and Department of Justice may be requiring a complex series of steps to ensure that these closures have no disparate impact on students of color and other protected groups. Against this backdrop, district leaders must manage the always-challenging local politics and tensions that come with closures. How districts navigate this policy gauntlet remains to be seen.

Examining Rationales for School Closure

School closures are extremely challenging for all stakeholders involved, including both district leaders and community members.

For district leaders, declining enrollment eventually creates a budget problem that must be addressed. As districts lose students, they receive less revenue but operate the same number of schools, which come with fixed costs as well as costs that take time to reduce, like teaching positions. This results in higher per-student costs in underenrolled schools than in schools that are filled to capacity. Absent major changes to school funding structures or service offerings, districts can operate underenrolled schools for only so long before the situation becomes financially untenable. School closure or consolidation is a logical and sometimes necessary strategy to align a district's enrollment with its building resources and fiscal capacity.

For students, teachers, families, and communities, a school closure is an upsetting and destabilizing event. It can displace students and educators from familiar settings, force families to travel longer distances to school, disrupt teaching and learning as well as social-emotional well-being, and change the character of a neighborhood. Students of color and low-income students, often already underserved by their public schools, are more likely to lose access to their neighborhood schools. Given these many potential impacts, it is understandable that stakeholders often mount resistance to school closures. Many families and community members argue that instead of shuttering the school, the district should invest in it to support students, improve the quality of education, increase enrollment, and maintain a school within the neighborhood. To support those investments, they urge the district to find money or make cuts elsewhere.

Faced with the possibility of a school closure, the perspectives of district leaders and community members can come into conflict. In general, there are two main reasons why school districts contemplate closing schools when enrollment declines. First and most often, when a district needs to close a structural budget gap, school closure or consolidation is used as a strategy to help achieve fiscal sustainability. Second, if a district is already struggling to rightsize its enrollment with its budget, it may regard closure as a means to improve both educational opportunities and quality. To help stakeholders navigate school closures, this section explores these two lines of reasoning and the evidence available for each of them.

By Closing or Consolidating Underenrolled Schools, the District Can Achieve Fiscal Sustainability

When considering the budget implications of declining enrollment, district leaders decide how best to align their school infrastructure and resources with the number of students they serve. Districts often rely on various utilization metrics to identify underenrolled schools, such as enrollment relative to capacity or "density," which refers to the number of students per square foot of space (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). Most districts aim to fill classrooms to maximum capacity relative to physical space and to class-size ratio caps spelled out in collective bargaining contracts and, in some cases, in state law.

The general rule is that it is more costly to operate a school with too few students. The major reason, from the district's perspective, is that an underenrolled school leads to inefficient personnel deployment, whether or not there are instructional benefits to smaller student-to-staff ratios. Classrooms with empty seats still need a teacher, which means that the per-student cost of instruction is higher in underenrolled schools. Consider a hypothetical district with a maximum student–teacher ratio of 25:1 for grades K–5. In this example, schools with 600 and 480 students each need, at minimum, four teachers for each of their six grade levels (assuming students are spread evenly across the grades). On a per-student basis, the cost of four teachers per grade is markedly lower in the first school than in the second. Moreover, the second school does not receive as much funding, but it nevertheless maintains the same teacher-salary costs. The reduced costs corresponding with fewer students can only be achieved once enrollment has dropped sufficiently at a given grade level. Only then can schools reduce teaching positions accordingly, but those savings lag the budgetary loss. In addition, administrative costs are relatively fixed. For example, a school needs a principal whether that school enrolls 150 or 600 students. It may also need an office manager, cafeteria workers, and various other positions that are difficult to reduce in proportion to enrollment declines. By closing a school and relocating students, the district is usually able to eliminate positions and save ongoing personnel-related costs.

Also, physical school infrastructure generally incurs a set cost annually. For example, heating and cooling costs depend on the building, not the number of students enrolled. These costs are unlikely to vary significantly even if enrollment drops dramatically. Maintenance, repair, and custodial costs function similarly. When a school's enrollment decreases, the cost for each of these services increases per student. By closing a school, the district may be able to reduce ongoing utility and maintenance-related costs—although these cost savings also depend on what the district chooses to do with the vacant property.

Weighing the evidence: To what extent do school closures save the district money?
Although the level of savings will vary by district size and urbanicity, districts often overestimate the cost savings of closing a school (Pew Charitable Trusts, 2011, 2013). In addition, the overall savings may represent a small fraction of a district's budget—an amount that may or may not be meaningful, depending on the size of the district's current and projected budget gap. Research

on closure-related cost savings is scant, but one analysis of six large urban school districts found that, on average, districts that closed schools saved—over the short term—"well under $1 million per school" each year (Pew Charitable Trusts, 2011), an amount that could be significant in a small district but negligible in a large district.

Recent budget figures from two districts offer additional insight. In Oakland Unified, the district projected that it could save between $4 million and $15 million—roughly 2 percent of its revenues—by closing eight campuses over 2 years and consolidating another six schools (McBride, 2022). Jeffco Public Schools in Colorado estimated as much as $12 million in savings after voting to close 16 elementary schools in late 2022 (Robles, 2022). To put this into context, those savings corresponded to about 1.4 percent of the estimated $835 million in the district's General Fund revenues (Jeffco Public Schools, 2021).

School closure typically does not produce dramatic savings, at least in the near term, for several reasons.

First, closing a school does not necessarily result in an immediate and substantial reduction in staff positions. While some administrative and classified positions may be reduced immediately, displaced certificated personnel, which make up the largest share of a district's budget, are often reassigned to other schools. As a result, staff salaries do not automatically decrease after closing a school. Savings can be realized, however, if the closures are paired with layoffs (Pew Charitable Trusts, 2011). The same six-district study mentioned previously found that Pittsburgh saved $14.7 million after closing 22 schools and laying off 279 staff members: a savings of 2.7 percent. Of course, layoffs—like school closures—are politically unpopular. Discussing layoffs at the same time as closures could make an already difficult situation even more toxic.

Second, districts do not always account for the one-time costs that come with closing schools. Districts must move school resources, such as desks, computers, and books, to new locations. The schools receiving the displaced students may also need adjustments or renovations to accommodate the influx of new students (Pew Charitable Trusts, 2011). Displaced students may need additional services to smooth their transition and support their academic or social-emotional well-being. Displaced teachers may need more professional development, depending on their new school or subject-area assignment. In addition, districts may need to pay higher transportation costs when relocating students to new school sites; this is especially true for students with exceptional needs.

Finally, there are ongoing costs that come with managing surplus property. If renting or repurposing a school, the district may need to pay taxes and manage the upkeep of the building. There may also be substantial short-term costs associated with selling the surplus property. The sale of surplus property is governed by a complex set of state laws (Cal. Education Code §17385 et seq., 1996), and it may take years to find a suitable buyer. Kansas City, for example, spent nearly $3 million a year to manage vacant buildings pending their sale (Pew Charitable Trusts, 2013).

Selling unused buildings is often complicated and may not recoup as much money as anticipated. In 2013, Philadelphia leaders pledged to raise more than $60 million in building sales, but they generated only $24 million (Benshoff, 2015). More recently, $67.6 million in building sales in Philadelphia netted only $42 million because of closing costs as well as the fact that local bonds complicated and raised the costs associated with selling schools.

By Closing or Consolidating Schools, the District Can Improve Educational Opportunities and Quality

Although families and teachers usually appreciate smaller classes, which allow for individualized attention, district leaders may contend that underenrolled schools face problems when it comes to economies of scale and that these problems compromise the overall quality of education that the district can offer. Where underenrolled schools are also low performing or suffering from staffing instability, districts leaders may see closure or consolidation as a way to offer students in those schools better educational opportunities. This may be especially true in a time when many districts are struggling to recruit and retain quality educators; consolidation could help ease problems related to staffing shortages.

To understand the economies-of-scale argument, we need to begin with an explanation of how resources flow from districts to school sites. The majority of a district's budget (roughly 80 percent) is spent on staffing (Cornman et al., 2021). This makes staff the primary resource worth examining. Most districts use standardized staffing formulas to allocate staff to schools based on the number of students they enroll. For instance, a middle school may get one teacher for every 30 students, one principal regardless of size, and one assistant principal once the school exceeds a certain enrollment threshold. The school may receive clerical support staff, counselors, coaches, and other positions based on size. Some districts allocate additional personnel or guarantee smaller class sizes to schools that have student populations with higher needs, but even then, money is almost always allocated on a per-enrollment basis.

These funding structures mean that in most districts, schools with fewer students get fewer resources to maintain staff and programming. As a result, small and underenrolled schools may struggle to offer as many classes, electives, or extracurricular activities as larger schools. They may be less able to provide support services for students, such as counseling, tutoring, and health and wellness services. District leaders may see school consolidation as a way to concentrate resources in a manageable number of school sites, thereby ensuring that every student attends a well-resourced school, rather than spreading resources thinly over too many sites. This may or may not be a shared value across the community. For instance, some families may be willing to exchange a breadth of offerings for other benefits, such as smaller class size or a school within walking distance.

While the economies-of-scale argument is usually about strengthening *districtwide* opportunities, school closures can also be about addressing performance issues in *specific schools*.

It is no coincidence that underenrolled schools are often (though not always) underperforming, particularly in urban communities. Because of segregation, gentrification, and historical underinvestment, schools with declining enrollment disproportionately serve students and communities that already face a range of challenges. High-poverty schools, for example, generally offer less rigorous academic courses even when they receive more resources (Lee et al., 2021). Moreover, such schools are disproportionately staffed by less experienced educators and have higher turnover and vacancy rates (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Individually and collectively, these factors decrease the quality of education provided to low-income students. Because of neighborhood segregation and address-based school assignments, students of color and low-income students are also far more likely to attend these underresourced schools than their White and wealthier peers.

When these school-level inequities combine with community-level disparities in housing, health care, employment, public safety, transportation, and more, a school is more likely to experience poor academic performance as well as enrollment declines. District leaders may see school closure or consolidation as an opportunity to break these patterns and provide students, particularly high-need students, with higher quality education.

Weighing the evidence: How do school closures affect achievement and other outcomes? The evidence on the impact of school closure on students' academic performance is mixed (Barnum, 2019; Gordon et al., 2018; Kemple, 2015; Larsen, 2020). When districts close schools, there is often no guarantee that displaced students will attend a better school or receive higher quality education. Some researchers have found that school closure results in an immediate drop in performance for displaced students (Barnum, 2019; Gordon et al., 2018; Larsen, 2020). For example, after Chicago closed dozens of schools, the academic performance of the displaced students suffered, particularly during the first year the closure was announced. Math achievement suffered over the long term for displaced students. Students in the receiving schools saw their reading performance decrease (Gordon et al., 2018).

Displacement can also be disruptive to students and costly to their social-emotional well-being. Increasing student mobility by reassigning students to new schools can lead to negative behavior and higher absence rates, which in turn can have academic consequences (Gordon et al., 2018; Steinberg & MacDonald, 2019).

Conversely, some studies have found positive student outcomes after school closures, such as in Ohio and New Orleans (Bross et al., 2016; Carlson & Lavertu, 2015). In some cases, research finds that an initial drop in student performance prompted by a school closure can be mitigated over time as the initial shock and consequences of the disruption wear off (de la Torre & Gwynne, 2009; Engberg et al., 2012). Attending a higher quality school than the one that was closed is critically important to improving student achievement.

How districts decide to approach school closure and processes for reassigning students can determine whether student achievement improves or suffers. For example, New York City employed a "phaseout" approach rather than eliminating schools outright. Evidence from that effort found that displaced students tended to go to marginally better high schools. After transferring, they also had slightly better academic performance and demonstrably better graduation rates than a comparison group of students (Kemple, 2015).

School closures affect not just students but also the broader community. Schools are important neighborhood institutions, and closing them weakens the community's social fabric, fractures friendships, and likely breaks student–teacher relationships (Good, 2019; Kirshner et al., 2010). Eve L. Ewing (2018) describes an often-extended period of mourning after a school closes, particularly in vulnerable communities that rely more heavily on public institutions (Emmanuel, 2018).

School closures, particularly in urban settings, can exacerbate racial segregation. An analysis of school closure and the rezoning of elementary attendance boundaries in Richmond, Virginia, found that the reforms resulted in a significant increase in racial segregation (Siegel-Hawley et al., 2017). The authors found that the rezoning plan was put together hastily without public consultation by "the school system's consultant on rezoning 'over the weekend at the request of two the school board members.'" In that process, White families "wielded outsized influence." As a result, attendance zones were expanded in such a way that deepened racial segregation.

School closures have also been shown to contribute to the gentrification of Black neighborhoods (Pearman & Greene, 2021). A study of all urban school closures from 2000 to 2012 found that school closures "increased the likelihood that the most segregated Black neighborhoods experienced gentrification by 9 percentage points." The authors argue that a school closure "lessen[s] the aversion that white households have for moving into a Black neighborhood."

Recommendations

Amid rapidly declining school enrollment, school closures and consolidations are inevitable. District leaders may not be able to avoid the pain that comes with school closures, but they can take measures to prevent or mitigate the disproportionate impact these closures may have on students of color and low-income students. Leaders can also seek to build trust, provide displaced students with access to higher quality educational opportunities, and address root causes of inequities.

Learning From Past School Closures

To identify strategies to center racial and socioeconomic equity in the school-closure process, we studied past episodes of school closures, focusing on how districts identified schools for closure and how they engaged community partners. Our study included a review of school-closure incidents in California, including Oakland Unified, Pasadena Unified, Azuza Unified, and Alum Rock Union Elementary, as well as beyond California in Chicago Public Schools, Philadelphia City School District, Denver Public Schools, and Jeffco Public Schools in Colorado. We reviewed research, news coverage, district documents, and other sources to learn about the consequences of school closures on district budgets, communities and neighborhoods, displaced students, and students attending receiving schools.

We also conducted 11 interviews with practitioners, parent organizers, policymakers, and researchers. We focused principally on (a) the causes of declining enrollment, (b) districts' processes for identifying schools for closure and reassigning students, (c) districts' outreach and community-engagement efforts, (d) how school closures affected students and communities, and (e) how districts could more effectively and equitably support students and communities when making school-closure decisions.

We found that the process of closing schools has been excruciatingly difficult in districts across the country for all stakeholders involved. In some cases, community stakeholders say that districts misled or alienated families and educators. When closing lower performing schools, districts have often reassigned students to nearby schools that perform about as poorly as the ones that were shuttered. In many places, these experiences have strained community as well as labor–management relationships.

Based on this research as well as our review of the evidence on how closures affect district budgets and student outcomes, we make three recommendations. First, district leaders can engage with students, teachers, parents, and other stakeholders through an inclusive process to understand their vision for effective education of their children. Second, districts can implement forward-looking strategies to provide displaced students and the entire school community with high-quality educational opportunities. Third, districts can develop a long-term, cross-sector plan to address declining enrollment as well as the underlying policies and factors contributing to community-level racial and economic inequities. (Note that some of these suggestions are included in CDE's *Closing a School Best Practices Guide,* 2023).

Recommendation 1: Establish and Execute an Inclusive, Transparent Process for School Closure

If districts are considering closing schools, they should thoughtfully plan and execute an inclusive, transparent process that engages a wide range of stakeholders. Closing a school is a significant community event with considerable consequences for neighborhoods, families, students, and educators. Those stakeholders will want to be heard and will want their views on how the district can best meet their needs to be considered.

To ensure the process is *inclusive*, district leaders should do the following:

- **Provide ample time and opportunities for community engagement.** Before and during the closure process, districts should hold multiple events in person and in online forums to actively solicit community participation. These events should be available in multiple languages. Districts should ensure that the events are held at times and locations suitable for working parents and even provide childcare support. These meetings should be publicized far enough in advance for people to plan to attend them, and the district should avoid moving meeting times and locations at short notice. Districts should create other accessible, multilingual ways for stakeholders to offer input, such as surveys, phone calls, or a process to gather online comments. Whatever the format, the district should not assume that all families have access to internet connectivity. **Jefferson County Public Schools** in Colorado offers one example. Before voting to close 16 schools in 2022, the district held two in-person meetings at each school site slated for closure, with meeting times and locations published well in advance of the events. Each school had a committee that included parents, staff, and principals from the closing and receiving schools. The district also issued a survey that received 2,400 comments (Keystone Policy Center, 2022).

- **Provide opportunities for stakeholders to influence the process and result.** Public engagement itself is important, but for it to be meaningful there must be the possibility that stakeholders can affect the contours of the final policy. District leaders should make clear how public comments will affect the final closure decision. This includes stakeholders' ability to influence the list of schools slated for closure, the timeline, the district's policies for student reassignment, and the opportunities afforded to displaced students.

To ensure the process is *transparent*, district leaders should do the following:

- **Establish and share clear, values-based criteria that the district will use when identifying schools for closure.** Stakeholders will want to understand exactly how the district selected schools for closure. The criteria and data should be transparent and made available sufficiently in advance of public meetings. Stakeholders will also want to know what values guided the decision. For instance, how will the closure serve students' educational needs, increase access to high-quality educational opportunities, or advance racial or economic integration? Unspecified values and opaque criteria guiding the identification process may lead to confusion, competition, and resentment.

- **Share information about demographic and enrollment trends in the district to provide context.** Districts should explain how and why enrollment patterns have changed historically and how they are expected to change in the future. This should include analysis of demographic shifts, migration patterns (if possible), trends in the number of educational options beyond traditional public schools (including charter schools, private schools, and homeschools), and other contextual factors that help explain the current situation.

- **Share information about the demographics and characteristics of affected schools, neighborhoods, and students.** Districts should be transparent about which schools and neighborhoods will be affected and should share school-level data on the racial, economic, and linguistic characteristics of the students served by these schools. They should also compile and share information about the characteristics of the schools slated for closure and how they compare to other district schools, including the potential receiving schools. These data should include information about enrollment, class size, program and course offerings, and current commute times and bus routes. These data should be shared and discussed during public meetings and should be easily accessible on the district's website.

- **Share information about student growth, achievement, and other outcomes at the schools slated for closure and the potential receiving schools.** Since high test scores may result from a school serving a high-income community rather than the caliber of education that the school provides, the district should share growth data to help the public understand the school's impact on student learning. It should also share other outcome measures, such as chronic absenteeism rates, suspension rates, high school graduation rates, rates of access to and completion of the A–G courses required for students to be eligible to attend a public 4-year university, and the results of locally administered surveys and assessments that enable meaningful comparisons of school sites.

Recommendation 2: Implement a Strategy to Provide Displaced Students and the Broader Student Community With Accessible, High-Quality Educational Opportunities

When closing schools, district leaders should focus on how to do so in a way that improves academic quality throughout the district. There are at least two ways districts can approach this. First, they can ensure that displaced students end up in schools that support academic success as well as social-emotional well-being. This approach focuses on not just mitigating harm but also improving opportunities for affected students. Second, while consolidating or downsizing, districts can address broader issues related to equal opportunity and student needs. Essentially, district leaders can use the consolidation conversation as an entry into a broader strategic conversation about how to improve the provision of services districtwide.

District leaders can take the following actions:

- **Improve racial and economic integration.** Racially and socioeconomically integrated schools contribute to better student outcomes (Century Foundation, 2019; Johnson, 2019; Schneider et al., 2022). Along with closing or consolidating schools, districts can adjust attendance zones and revise school-assignment policies to create new, more diverse school communities. Districts should also ensure that the burden of changing schools and traveling longer distances to attend reassigned schools is shared equitably by families in the community.

- **Reserve and prioritize seats for displaced students in the district's highest quality schools.** Displaced students should receive priority access to the district's highest performing schools—particularly in districts where school closures are concentrated in low-income or gentrifying neighborhoods or in school sites that have historically served a high-need population. This may contribute to both better academic opportunities for students and the district's desegregation goals. (See the textbox for examples from Oakland and New Orleans.)

- **Provide transportation services.** Giving displaced students a real opportunity to attend a high-quality school across the district requires adequate, accessible, and safe routes to school. Without these, closing a neighborhood school risks limiting the caliber of schools that students can access. While California's recent significant investment in school transportation may increase the use of school buses, California districts still face challenges with funding school transportation, and many students will still reach school via other means. Regardless of whether districts offer transportation or encourage families to drive their children or use public transit, they should conduct a robust analysis to ensure that there are safe and reasonable transportation options for all students (Ekbatani, 2022).

- **Incentivize effective educators to work in schools receiving a large concentration of displaced students.** Displaced students may need additional academic supports, and students in receiving schools may also experience disruptions. All of these students will benefit from highly effective teaching. Districts can provide incentives to effective educators to work at schools receiving displaced students.

- **Provide additional support to receiving schools.** Schools that will receive an influx of displaced students require additional support to facilitate that merger and build a new community of students and educators (Gordon et al., 2018). Districts should provide additional resources to receiving schools so that they can hire tutors, counselors, paraprofessionals, and other support staff and provide academic, social, and emotional supports for students.

- **Repurpose vacated school buildings to serve student and community needs.** When feasible, districts should repurpose empty school buildings to provide services that support students and their communities, such as childcare and mental and physical health services. Rather than allowing a recently closed school building to remain empty, Alum Rock Union School District voted to transform Cesar Chavez Elementary School into an early childhood learning center (Gabbert, 2022). Advocates we spoke with said that the district claimed this was a win-win: It produced critical financial savings—estimated to be about $1 million in "overhead and administration costs"—while offering a valuable service to the community in partnership with Kidango (kidango.org), a regional nonprofit provider of early childhood education.

Promising Practice: Give Displaced Students Priority Enrollment

At least two school districts, **New Orleans Public Schools** and **Oakland Unified School District**, have offered school-enrollment priority to displaced students. This makes it possible for students affected by school closure to transfer to a desirable school.

After New Orleans Public Schools closed three schools in 2018, displaced students received high priority in the district's enrollment system for the following year. Additionally, the nonprofit education organization **EdNavigator** (ednavigator.org) offered these students and their families support and information regarding their school placement (Valant, 2022). An analysis of the policy found that families were more likely to select highly rated schools, and school-selection support increased the likelihood that students would be placed in their school of choice. While student scores remained markedly below state averages, test scores for displaced students who received placement support did increase the following year.

Since 2019, Oakland Unified has given Opportunity Tickets to students displaced by a school closure (Oakland REACH, 2022). The Opportunity Ticket, championed by parent leaders with the nonprofit organization **Oakland REACH**, gives the displaced student enrollment preference for any school in the district. The tickets reserve 51 percent of open seats at high-demand schools for displaced students. Students who receive an Opportunity Ticket are eligible for open seats after students who have a sibling in the school. Students with an Opportunity Ticket cannot exceed 10 percent of the school's total enrollment.

Recommendation 3: Develop and Pursue a Long-Term Plan to Address Factors Contributing to Disproportionality in School Closures

Even a well-managed school-closure process that provides high-quality educational opportunities to displaced students is wholly insufficient to address the root causes and broader problems raised in this report, including neighborhood-level segregation and disinvestment, gentrification, and population declines.

School districts alone cannot remedy these problems. District officials and board members are not the local leaders responsible for rewriting zoning laws, expanding affordable housing, or bringing well-paying jobs to communities. That said, we recommend that districts collaborate with other local government agencies, including housing and economic development authorities, to create cross-sector, multiyear strategies to invest in economically disadvantaged families and communities of color. Local leaders can take the following actions:

- **Equitably distribute funding and other resources within the district.** Ensure that school sites serving higher need populations receive greater resources, even if those schools are experiencing enrollment declines. This may mean that those schools receive significantly more funding on a per-pupil basis.

- **Collaboratively review population trends, including school enrollment projections disaggregated by demographic groups, to identify the extent to which the community is attracting and keeping families.** Too often, conversations about housing needs and school-enrollment projections happen in silos. As a result, it is possible that community members can protest the development of new affordable housing units even as they also protest school closures. Local leaders need to support the community with connecting these issues and their potential solutions. As just one example, regional leaders can encourage school districts to include new housing projections from housing elements in their facilities' master plans. **San Francisco Unified** is an example of a district already doing this (Aleksey, 2023).

- **Work together to expand and improve affordable housing options.** Efforts should include improving access to multifamily and mixed-income units, especially in areas with high-performing schools. Efforts should also include expanding affordable housing options for educators and school staff, something that may be easier in California now that the state allows districts to build staff housing on school property without requesting zoning changes (Lambert, 2022). Constructing affordable housing for educators may be more economically feasible than raising salaries since construction costs can be funded by local bonds.

- **Expand transportation services to provide better access to schools, jobs, and other resources.** School district and municipal officials should work together to map out transit plans—including public transportation, bike access, and walking routes—that give every family equitable and safe access to high-performing schools as well as other valuable city services.

Promising Practice: Expand Affordable Housing for School Staff

To address teacher shortages, many districts across the country have worked to create affordable housing for educators. When expanded to families as well as to classified staff, who earn lower incomes and are disproportionately people of color, these practices can also help communities address fair-housing goals. Additional long-term, affordable housing can help address the problem of declining enrollment. Here are a few examples of places that have tried this:

In 2022, **Jefferson Union High School District** in Daly City, California, opened more than 100 affordable apartments for district educators and school staff (Har, 2022). Discussions on how to recruit and retain educators in the high-cost community began in 2017 (Tokofsky, 2022). A year later, voters passed a bond providing more than $30 million to fund the housing project.

San Francisco Unified School District recently began construction on Shirley Chisholm Village, a new affordable housing development for educators (Office of the Mayor, 2022). The Village is funded by a variety of sources, including federal tax credits, a 2015 voter-approved bond, and the Mayor's Office of Housing and Community Development.

The city of **Welch in McDowell County, West Virginia,** built a small apartment complex with affordable housing (Plona, 2022). The original idea was to develop new housing to attract and retain teachers. The apartment complex is the first multistory building to be constructed in the community in decades. The project, conceived in 2011, received financial support from the American Federation of Teachers (Todd, 2022).

Recommendations for State Leaders

School closures have historically been a matter of local control. However, with declining enrollment plaguing districts up and down the state, and considering how divisive and difficult it can be to manage school closures locally, school closures should also be seen as a statewide or regional issue. State leaders, including those in the legislature, can help support data-informed, equitable decision-making so that California's public education system is responsive to statewide demographic trends and equity needs.

To begin, state leaders can support the collection and dissemination of data on population-level demographic trends and projections, including how these patterns will affect schools and districts. Through a legislatively authorized study, a State Auditor report, or informational legislative hearings, the state could share projections on where new schools may be needed and where schools may become underenrolled. The state could also examine current and projected district size and efficiency.

State leaders can create space for legislators and education stakeholders to reflect on these data and discuss potential solutions. This may include commissioning a statewide review to make recommendations regarding school consolidation and closure, with county superintendents, county fiscal overseers, or the state superintendent empowered to act on those recommendations—recognizing that local districts are not always able or willing to close schools, despite the threat of fiscal insolvency. These discussions should include considerations for regional needs and priorities, such as racial and economic integration.

One model to consider is the Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) process that has been used to support the closure of military bases to increase efficiency and realign the number of domestic military installations with modern-day military priorities (Congressional Research Service, 2019). Some elements of that process—including the establishment of an independent commission, the reliance on objective criteria, and the public hearing process—could make sense in public education, particularly because school closure is fraught with competing priorities and incentives at the local level. It is difficult for any community to support a move that could lead to the loss of decision-making authority, jobs, neighborhood schools, and more. Given that declining populations and shifting demographics are a regional issue, regionwide support may be helpful with navigating the process more fairly and effectively.

State and county education leaders can also support districts as they navigate the school-closure process by providing guidance on how to engage community members more effectively, how to center equity in the process, and how to use consolidation as a window to address broader teaching and learning priorities. In addition, state leaders can require or encourage policies that give displaced students priority access to preferred schools and high-quality academic opportunities.

Conclusion

Over the next decade, when school enrollment is expected to decline, school closures are also likely to increase across California, particularly in the state's large coastal cities. Communities of color have historically been disproportionately affected and harmed when districts elect to shutter schools.

By centering racial equity in the school-closure process, districts can reverse that troubling trend. There may still be situations in which schools in predominately Black, Latinx, or low-income neighborhoods need to be closed. But in all cases, districts must engage stakeholders in the process and ensure that displaced students have high-quality educational opportunities.

Leaders can also do more to acknowledge the critical role that systematic segregation, underinvestment, gentrification, and housing unaffordability play in underenrollment in schools located in communities of color. Recognizing that context should push district policymakers to work across sectors and agencies to invest in low-income communities and communities of color so that fewer enrollment-related closures are necessary.

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Appendix

Between 2012 and 2022, 687 schools were closed across 354 unique school districts in California. Los Angeles Unified School District closed 77 schools during this period, accounting for more than 11 percent of all schools closed in the state during the decade. Table A-1 lists the districts that closed five or more schools between 2012 and 2022. We compared the percentage of students who attended a closed school with the overall enrollment in the district by race and ethnicity. In the "Difference" columns for each race and ethnicity, the positive values indicate a group of students who experienced school closure at a rate lower than their share of the district's overall enrollment would suggest. The negative values indicate the opposite: students who were more likely to experience a school closure during the past decade.

Table A-1. Demographics of School Districts That Closed Five or More Schools Between 2012 and 2021

	Percentage of Asian American/ Pacific Islander students			Percentage of Latinx students			Percentage of Black students			Percentage of White students		
	Closed schools	District	Difference	Closed schools	District	Difference	Closed schools	District	Difference	Closed schools	District	Difference
Los Angeles Unified	1.34	7.91	6.57	64.17	78.10	13.93	28.44	9.48	−18.97	3.93	10.26	6.33
Oakland Unified	4.38	14.51	10.13	41.63	44.04	2.41	40.38	27.27	−13.11	3.56	9.93	6.38
San Diego Unified	6.70	14.67	7.97	67.23	47.42	−19.81	18.27	9.78	−8.49	5.03	23.84	18.80
Acton-Agua Dulce Unified	14.95	8.60	−6.35	25.26	61.68	36.42	7.57	12.31	4.74	45.03	76.18	31.15
Long Beach Unified	5.17	12.49	7.32	59.95	59.93	−0.01	13.77	15.54	1.77	15.51	14.78	−0.74
Pasadena Unified	3.40	7.35	3.95	70.34	57.18	−13.17	16.64	14.02	−2.63	5.98	15.82	9.84
Mountain Empire Unified	3.28	1.89	−1.39	32.16	38.86	6.70	5.80	3.12	−2.68	50.19	36.36	−13.83
Sacramento City Unified	14.01	19.32	5.31	38.45	39.37	0.92	13.21	17.01	3.80	4.85	18.24	13.39
Ravenswood City Elementary	0.51	2.55	2.04	81.17	74.60	−6.57	8.59	6.75	−1.84	0.77	0.72	−0.05
New Jerusalem Elementary	9.15	13.21	4.05	50.62	61.91	11.29	19.97	19.50	−0.47	14.01	67.60	53.59
San Bernardino City Unified	0.61	2.62	2.01	78.58	78.09	−0.49	13.60	13.54	−0.06	5.28	7.18	1.90
Vallejo City Unified	14.62	19.84	5.22	41.39	39.43	−1.96	31.28	29.53	−1.74	8.91	8.41	−0.50
Sierra Unified	2.08	2.96	0.89	9.84	19.64	9.81	1.09	7.20	6.11	70.16	90.92	20.76
Fresno Unified	6.35	12.74	6.38	61.17	65.39	4.23	12.19	9.01	−3.18	12.40	10.53	−1.87
Compton Unified	0.09	1.00	0.91	65.45	76.58	11.13	29.35	17.15	−12.20	0.64	0.39	−0.25
Twin Rivers Unified	11.68	10.01	−1.66	49.96	39.72	−10.25	15.85	14.46	−1.39	14.93	26.70	11.76

Note. This table is organized by the number of schools closed, with districts that closed more schools listed first.

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