SCHOOL DISTRICT RIGHTSIZING

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What is school district rightsizing?

As school districts across Texas face declining enrollments and financial pressures, many are considering school closures and student relocation. This practice is referred to in research and public announcements with several terms, including *rightsizing* (Barber, Hartt, Collins, 2023), *school closure* (Kim, 2024), or *school consolidation* (Connecticut School Finance Project, 2019, Green, 2013). The intention of this practice is often to optimize resources; however, research suggests that rightsizing frequently lead to negative consequences for students, educators, and communities (Eddins, Pehrson, and Burgess, 2024). Consequences include an increase in bullying for incoming students and student transfer patterns that suggest low-performing students and students of color are less likely to be transferred to high-performing campuses (Eddins, Pehrson, and Burgess, 2024, Stroubb & Richards, 2016). Rightsizing can lead to population displacement through impacts such as gentrification or general reduced quality of life (Berglund, 2020; Hackworth, 2015)

As an exception to this rule, there are select districts which have seen positive outcomes from consolidation efforts, particularly when implemented with strategic planning and community support. This brief aims to summarize relevant research to articulate the impact of rightsizing on student achievement, finances, and communities, as well as recommend best practices from the literature for districts seeking to implement rightsizing in an effective and community-minded way.

Does rightsizing effectively stabilize districts, or does it exacerbate challenges?

Determining the exact number of school districts that have undergone resizing—through closures or consolidations—since 2020 is challenging due to limited comprehensive data. However, several indicators provide insight into the prevalence of rightsizing:

- 755 public schools were closed across the United States in the 2021–22 academic year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023a).
- The total number of public school districts in the United States decreased from 117,108 in 1940 to 13,551 in 2018—primarily due to consolidations (McGee, et al., 2021).
- Public school enrollment dropped from 50.8 million students in fall 2019 to 49.4 million in fall 2020 and 2021 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023a).

Is there an impact on student achievement?

Research on school closures shows mixed effects on student performance. In many cases, closing a school disrupts learning in the short term and can lead to drops in achievement, especially if students must change schools mid-year (Eddins, Pehrson, and Burgess, 2024). Research For Action found that students from closed schools had slower academic growth than similar

students whose low-performing schools stayed open (Eddins, Pehrson, & Burgess, 2024). However, context matters. When displaced students end up attending a significantly higher-performing school, they tend to make greater academic gains, whereas those who move to a school of similar or lower performance often experience weaker growth (Eddins, Pehrson, & Burgess, 2024).

A Chicago study illustrated this clearly: about 80% of students displaced by closures transferred to schools that were also in the bottom half of performance, and as a result, their overall achievement did not change much (Gwynne & de la Torre, 2009). But students who managed to enroll in top-tier receiving schools saw measurable improvements – gaining nearly an extra month of learning in reading and over two months in math after one year (Gwynne & de la Torre, 2009).

Rightsizing can conditionally benefit students academically *if* they are transitioned into better learning environments equipped to support the students; without that, academic benefits are limited and disruptions can even harm progress. For example, schools that are receiving the students should have the capacity to do so, both in terms of space and staffing. Schools need to anticipate the differing needs of students who are dealing with the loss of their home school, new transportation patterns to get them there, and how these new students will be received by their new classmates and teachers (Huddleston, 2017). Research suggests that "policymakers can use school closures to improve educational outcomes for current and future students. But they must keep in mind that closing a school does impose costs on at least some current students. A strategy to close ineffective schools needs to be coupled with a strategy to replace the seats lost with seats in higher-quality educational environments" (Winters, p. 8, 2019).

Are there long-term impacts for students?

A study on Texas students found that school closures led to immediate disruptions in learning. While the drop in math and reading scores may seem small at first glance, it took students up to four years to recover academically (Kim, 2024). The same study also reported a 15% increase in disciplinary actions, along with a rise in suspensions and expulsions (2024). These disruptions can have lasting effects: students—especially those who are Hispanic, economically disadvantaged, or in middle or high school at the time of the closure—were found to be less likely to attend college and had lower earnings by age 26.

"For school closure to have a positive effect on its current students, the new school they attend must not only be better, but better by a large enough margin to overcome the negative effect of the transition," found the Manhattan Institute in review of patterns in school closures, continuing with, "Students who were displaced from the lowest-quality schools experienced the greatest benefit" (Winters, p. 4, 2019).

Community and Equity Effects of School Closures

The impacts of school closures extend beyond the classroom, disrupting families, neighborhoods, and local economies. The loss of a school can weaken community cohesion, decrease civic engagement, and even contribute to economic instability (Eddins, Pehrson, and Burgess, 2024). Beyond community impact, school closures disrupt students' academic and social stability. Relocated students often face longer commutes, increased absenteeism, and difficulty adjusting to new learning environments (Steinberg & MacDonald, 2019). There is also shown to be a disproportionate impact on students of color with economic disadvantage, especially Black students, and students receiving special education services as their school are more likely to be closed (Eddins, Pehrson, and Burgess, 2024).

Receiving schools may struggle with overcrowding and resource strain, which can negatively impact both displaced and existing students (Steinberg & MacDonald, 2019).

Increased transportation costs, facility upgrades at receiving schools, and unexpected administrative expenses can offset financial benefits (Connecticut School Finance Project, 2019). In rural areas, school consolidations have also been associated with declining property values, further affecting local economies (Smith & Zimmer, 2022).

While the consequences of school closures vary, the impact largely depends on how districts handle the process. A review of case studies found that thoughtful planning, such as planning for student mobility and ideas for building repurposing, transparent communication, such as sharing the purpose and timeline of the closure, and community involvement, such as hosting town halls and listening sessions, can mitigate harm and improve outcomes for both students and neighborhoods (Samuels, 2011, Winters, 2019).

Mary Filardo, the executive director of the Washington-based 21st Century School Fund, argues that too many school districts distrust the public when it comes to closure decisions (Samuel, 2011). “The reason you involve the community is not to make [closings] palatable,” she said. “The reason you involve the community is because you want to make better decisions” (Samuels, p. 3, 2011).

Are budgets stabilized with rightsizing?

Rightsizing is often pursued to stabilize district budgets and eliminate underutilized facilities, but the financial impact is complex. While closing under-enrolled schools can yield savings, they are usually modest relative to a district’s total budget. An analysis of multiple urban districts found that closures only saved districts about 4% annually (Tessone, 2011). In Kansas City, Missouri, a major rightsizing initiative in 2010 resulted in nearly half of its schools closing, reducing the budget by $68 million in one year and over $100 million within two years (Esselman et al., 2012). The district eliminated more than 1,200 staff positions, achieving long-term cost reductions through buyout incentives (Esselman et al., 2012).

The meager savings that school closures may yield are often offset by hidden costs, including increased transportation expenses, facility upgrades at receiving schools, and maintenance of vacant buildings (Connecticut School Finance Project, 2019; Samuels, 2011). Large-scale closures can also accelerate enrollment declines as families seek alternative education options, such as homeschooling or private schools, further straining district finances (Ellerson & McCord, 2009). A study from the Reason Foundation (2025) highlights ongoing enrollment losses driven by declining birth rates, increased homeschooling, and a shift toward private and charter schools (Smith, Barnard, & Campbell). The National Center for Education Statistics projects a further loss of 2.7 million students by 2031–32, suggesting school closures alone may not effectively stabilize enrollment (NCES, 2023b).

What are examples of community and economic effects of rightsizing?

School closures can lead to reduced neighborhood property values**,** particularly in lower-income and rural areas (Smith, 2025). As a result, they can negatively impact the financial well-being of the families they are intended to help, further limiting the opportunities of students.

North East Independent School District (NEISD), San Antonio: In 2024, NEISD closed three schools to address declining enrollment and a $39 million budget shortfall. The closures saved $5 million annually but faced strong opposition due to increased transportation burdens and emotional impacts on students (Manno, 2025).

Chicago Public Schools: A 2013 mass school closure affecting 50 schools resulted in lower test scores, higher dropout rates, and increased gang-related incidents among displaced students (Eddins, et al., 2024). Research found displaced students and staff did not feel welcomed by their new schools and saw an increase in student fights and cases of bullying (Eddins, et al., 2024).

Certain rural districts in Maine that engaged community stakeholders in the planning process and repurposed school buildings for educational and vocational programs saw increased long-term enrollment stability and better fiscal outcomes (Wolf, Witte, and Kisida, 2019).

What could effective rightsizing look like?

Research from The Center for Reinventing Public Education (2022) discusses several strategy concepts to minimize negative impacts:

Transparency: Base decisions on clear evidence, such as declining enrollment or budget constraints, and openly share this data. Providing multiple closure scenarios rather than a single mandated plan can increase community involvement and trust. Clearly explain the criteria used for closures to avoid perceptions of bias.

Engage Stakeholders Early: Form advisory groups with parents, teachers, students, and community leaders to review proposals and provide local insights. Inclusive decision-making fosters understanding and support, ensuring rightsizing is done *with* the community, not *to* it.

Prioritize Student Equity: Ensure students transition to better-performing schools. Offer support such as academic resources, counseling, and teacher placement assistance.

Communicate: Explain the closure process, timeline, and decision-making criteria in plain language. Regular updates through meetings, letters, and online resources help prevent misinformation.

The impact, the success, and the failures of school rightsizing is highly context-dependent (Barber, Hartt, & Collins, 2023). “The development of more nuanced place- and people-based responses that better reflect the local conditions rather than a one-size-fits-all approach” may help avoid unnecessary closing of schools and the harms that can cause (Barber, Hartt, & Collins, 2023, Discussion and Conclusion section, para. 4). When rightsizing is found to be the necessary action, “having the capacity to work with local organizations, agencies, businesses, and the community at large may spark innovative alternative uses that could support community health and wellbeing” (Barber, Hartt, & Collins, 2023, Discussion and Conclusion section, para. 4).

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