



CLOSING PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN PHILADELPHIA

Lessons from Six Urban Districts

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

With nearly one-third of its seats sitting empty, 70,000 in all, the School District of Philadelphia plans to close multiple buildings over the next two years. In doing so, Philadelphia will be following in the footsteps of cities throughout the Northeast and Midwest.

The factors prompting the closings, in Philadelphia as in the other cities, include a dwindling population of school-age children, mounting budget pressures, deteriorating facilities, poor academic performance, and the growth of charter schools and other alternatives that have lessened the demand for traditional public-school education.

To better understand what is in store for Philadelphia, The Pew Charitable Trusts' Philadelphia Research Initiative studied six cities that have engaged in large-scale public school closings in the past decade—Chicago, Detroit, Kansas City, Mo., Milwaukee, Pittsburgh and Washington. That analysis produced the following conclusions:

- The money saved as the result of closing schools, at least in the short run, has been relatively small in the context of big-city school-district budgets, with the largest savings achieved when closings were combined with large-scale layoffs. Longer-term savings are difficult to project. In Philadelphia, school officials have downplayed expectations about the immediate impact on the district's bottom line, saying that the amount will be largely dependent on sales of unused buildings.
- Selling or leasing surplus school buildings, many of which are located in declining neighborhoods, tends to be extremely difficult. No district has reaped anything like a windfall from such transactions. As of the summer of 2011, at least 200 school properties stood vacant in the six cities studied—including 92 in Detroit alone—with most having been empty for several years. If left unused for long, the buildings can become eyesores that cast a pall over neighborhoods and attract vandalism and other illicit activity.

- The long-term effect of school closings on student performance appears to be minimal. While there is limited research on the subject, academic studies suggest that student achievement often falls during the final months of a closing school's existence. But such damage generally turns out to be short-lived. And some students wind up going to higher-performing schools and doing better there.
- The political fallout often is significant. In Washington, public discontent over the process contributed to the ouster of a mayor and a schools chancellor. In Chicago, it led to the enactment of a state law governing all future closings in the city.

No matter how well school closings are executed, and no matter how much more the surviving schools may have to offer, some parents and community leaders are likely to be upset over the shuttering of a particular school and the options open to the displaced students.

This study found several approaches that have worked better than others in generating public acceptance, though not necessarily enthusiasm, for the closings and the resulting changes in the school system. The experiences of other districts have produced consensus around taking the following steps:

- Try to persuade the community as early as possible that downsizing is needed. School officials in Philadelphia started that process many months before the planned announcement of specific closings. To some degree, though, their efforts in the spring of 2011 were drowned out by the public outcry over a \$629 million budget gap that led to layoffs and cutbacks.
- Hire outside experts, who are typically perceived as fair and disinterested, to help guide the process.
- Establish clear, quantifiable criteria for deciding which schools to close, such as the physical condition of the building, the percentage of seats in use, academic performance, and how the school fits with the rest of the system. Philadelphia is using those criteria and nine others.
- Show a willingness to make adjustments, although not wholesale changes, in the announced list of schools to be closed.
- When circumstances allow, make the decision on the school closings with one vote, not separate votes on each school. Doing so helps send the message that no neighborhood is being singled out for special treatment, positive or negative, and that the closings are part of an overall plan for the district's future.

While each city's process had its strengths and weaknesses, Kansas City's was among the best-received by the public, with little bad feeling evident even after the district closed half of its schools in two years.

The six cities, which have shuttered a total of 197 schools in recent years, vary demographically, economically and politically. In each case, though, the sequence of events featured these common elements: deciding that closings are necessary, preparing the process, selecting the schools, transitioning the students, and trying to dispose of surplus properties.

That sequence, which provides the structure of this report, also applies to Philadelphia, as its School Reform Commission prepares to decide which of its 257 schools to shut down. And Philadelphia officials have studied these and other cities for guidance on what to do and not do.

DECIDING TO CLOSE SCHOOLS

In all of the cities studied, Philadelphia included, the primary driver for closing schools has been falling enrollment, along with deteriorating or outdated facilities and tight budgets. In several cases, academic performance also was a key factor.

Falling Enrollment

In recent years, enrollment has fallen in many urban school districts, due to a long-term drop in the number of school-age children and an increase in the popularity and availability of alternatives to district-run schools. See Figure 1.

From 2000 to 2010, the number of children ages 5 through 19, which is how the Census breaks down the age groups, fell in many cities, including some with stable or growing overall populations. This population dropped 4 percent in Kansas City, 6 percent in Milwaukee, 11 percent in Philadelphia, 12 percent in Washington, 18 percent in Chicago, 21 percent in Pittsburgh and 32 percent in Detroit.¹

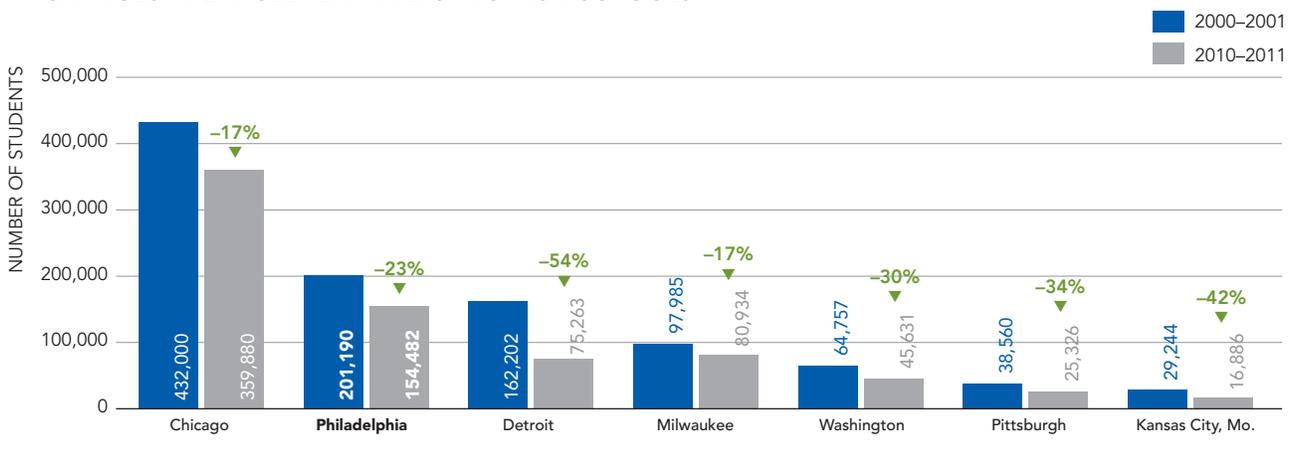
At the same time, charter schools, which are publicly funded but independently operated, enrolled some students who otherwise might have attended traditional public institutions. In Washington, for instance, charters accounted for almost 40 percent of all students enrolled in publicly funded schools in the 2010-2011 school year.² Nationally, the number of charter school students more than tripled between 2000 and 2010, going from under 500,000 to 1.7 million.³

In addition, students in a few districts can use vouchers to attend Catholic or other private schools. In Milwaukee, more than 20,000 students take advantage of this option each year.

These trends led to thousands of empty seats in each district. Since 2000, the Detroit public schools alone lost about 87,000 students, a decline of nearly 54 percent.

FIGURE 1

CHANGES IN ENROLLMENT IN DISTRICT-RUN SCHOOLS



SOURCE: Individual school districts.

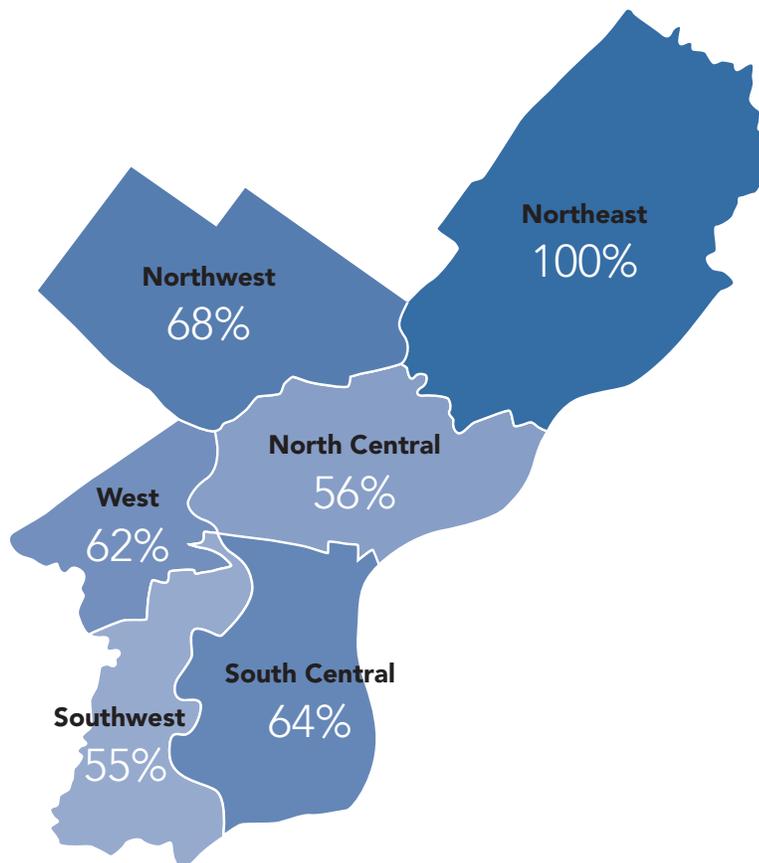
In Kansas City, despite a relatively small decline in school-age population, public-school enrollment fell from 30,000 students in 2000 to less than 17,000 in 2010. Causes included the growth of charter schools, a court decision that ended busing of suburban students into the city, and the annexation of seven city schools by a neighboring district.

Philadelphia's public school enrollment fell from 201,190 in 2000 to 154,482 in 2010, a 23 percent decline, due to the falling school-age population and the rise of charters; charter enrollment rose from 12,284 to 43,901 over the same 10 years.⁴ District officials expect these trends to continue. Many local charters are seeking permission to expand, and the state legislature is considering making it easier to start new ones. Vouchers also are under consideration.

It's not just the size of the school-age population that impacts school closings. The changing distribution of that population creates mismatches between where school buildings are located and where children live. In Philadelphia, for instance, schools in the Northeast operated at 100 percent of capacity last year, while just 56 percent of available seats were filled in the North Central planning area, which includes North Philadelphia. See Figure 2.

FIGURE 2

SEATS IN USE BY PHILADELPHIA SCHOOL DISTRICT PLANNING AREA



SOURCE: School District of Philadelphia, Master Facilities Plan Draft, April 2011.

Age and Condition of Buildings

The districts studied have a lot of older buildings that are costly to maintain and that suffer from deferred maintenance. Pre-World War II buildings were not designed for modern cooling and heating systems, and some lack cafeterias or adequate bathrooms. Some facilities built in the 1960s and 1970s have issues as well. According to Judy Marks, director of the National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities, a program of the National Institute of Building Sciences, many of those schools were built cheaply and hastily to accommodate the flood of baby boomers.

In Chicago, nearly half of all schools were built before 1930.⁵ In 2010, the average age of a public school was 56 in Detroit and 70 in Milwaukee.⁶ In 2008, Washington's Office of Public Education Facilities Modernization called the physical conditions of its schools "truly deplorable."⁷

In Philadelphia, the average age of school buildings is 63. Half of the structures were built before World War II. A recently completed Facility Condition Index analysis identified 24 buildings with "poor" ratings; an additional 140 buildings were "fair."⁸ The index is commonly used in the school-facilities field; it measures the cost of renovation against the cost of replacement. A poor rating indicates that renovation would not be worth the cost.

Budget Considerations

In most of the cities studied, budget pressure has been a key element in forcing districts to move ahead on closures that might have been long overdue.

In Detroit, the school system's state-appointed emergency financial manager, Robert Bobb, faced a deficit of \$218 million in 2009 that grew to \$326 million in 2010, more than 30 percent of district's \$1 billion budget. Officials in both Pittsburgh and Kansas City were facing unwanted state takeovers if they did not reduce spending gaps. Every city wanted to use its constrained resources for educational programs rather than on underused buildings.

THE COMPARISON CITIES

This report looks at six cities that have closed at least 20 public-school buildings in the last decade, most of them in the last few years. They are Chicago, Detroit, Kansas City, Mo., Milwaukee, Pittsburgh and Washington. Though these districts differ in size and political structure, they have all faced similar challenges. It is no coincidence that all are located in the Northeast or Midwest, where many cities have experienced years of population decline and neighborhood decay.

Pittsburgh stands out for the weight it put on academics in deciding which schools to close. Milwaukee had to take into account competition from both charter schools and vouchers. Kansas City underwent the most sweeping changes and is in the midst of the most rigorous process of finding new uses for empty buildings. Chicago and Washington are home to acute fears about gentrification and displacement. Detroit has struggled with how to handle an extensive inventory of vacant properties.

How much money is saved by closing schools depends in part on the degree to which closings are accompanied by job reductions—beyond those that are directly linked to each structure. Typically, closing a building does not cut many teaching jobs; most of the teachers are redeployed instead.

Savings vary from city to city and often have fallen short of expectations. Milwaukee anticipated reducing expenses by \$10 million per year in closing 20 schools but so far has saved \$6.6 million annually. After closing 23 schools, Washington officials said they have saved about \$16.7 million a year, below the initial projections of \$23 million. Pittsburgh reported operational savings of approximately \$14.7 million per year from closing 22 schools and laying off 279 staff members. Detroit reported that closing 59 buildings saved \$35 million in annual operating costs. Kansas City achieved substantial savings by combining closures with 700 layoffs as well as a restructuring of operations that eliminated \$30 million paid to outside service-providers.

In any event, the average annual savings, at least in the short run, were well under \$1 million per school for the districts studied.

The savings from the closings would be larger except that there are new costs as well. These include the expenses associated with mothballing and maintaining sites; transitioning students; moving desks, computers and other district property; and making improvements to the remaining schools, particularly those receiving displaced students. For example, Milwaukee spends more than \$1 million a year maintaining vacant buildings, Pittsburgh \$2 million, and Kansas City close to \$3 million.⁹ And generating revenue from closed buildings, either through sale or lease, is not easy.

In the School District of Philadelphia, a budget crisis in the spring of 2011 deflected attention from the school-closure process. During the crisis, officials cautioned against expecting significant savings as the result of future closings. The district's 2011–2012 budget includes \$10 million from the sale of unused buildings; whether that money, which is less than half of 1 percent of a \$2.7 billion budget, actually materializes remains to be seen. Officials hope the net savings will be greater in later years as more buildings are sold.¹⁰ The district has issued layoff notices, effective September 2012, to 850 maintenance workers, building engineers, custodians, and bus drivers—the sort of positions that can be reduced when schools are shut down. This move has not been linked to school closings, and it is unclear how many of the jobs ultimately will be eliminated.

Pennsylvania law requires that revenue from building sales go to a capital fund or to help pay off bonds. Savings on the operations side have no such restrictions.

Trying to Determine a District's "Right Size"

A key consideration in a school-closing plan is determining the right size for a district and how many empty seats it should maintain for future use. Figure 3 shows the number of buildings closed in each of the districts studied compared to the number still open.

The 2006 school closings in Pittsburgh eliminated about 10,000 of 13,700 excess seats, leaving the district operating at 88 percent of capacity.¹¹ Since then, enrollment has continued to decline; in 2011, just 70 percent of seats were filled. As officials contemplate future school closings, they said they are aiming to operate at about 85 percent of capacity. This will ensure the efficient use of remaining buildings, prevent crowding, and allow some flexibility.¹²

In Washington, Mayor Adrian Fenty and Schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee, after taking office in 2007, opted to close 23 schools. They did not have a specific capacity reduction target. As a result, the district was still left with more seats than needed.

Chicago also still has excess capacity. Officials there estimated that there were more than 100,000 empty seats in the public school system in 2011, about 20 percent of total capacity.

The scale of closures in Detroit over the past few years has been determined by the city's falling population and by the magnitude of budget cuts imposed under emergency financial management. This approach has led to parent complaints about crowding in some schools, despite school district estimates that there are still thousands of empty seats citywide.

After closing eight schools in 2009, Kansas City closed 21 more the year after. The 2010 closings represented 40 percent of the remaining schools. Then-Superintendent John Covington said the dramatic step was necessary to trim excess capacity in light of past enrollment drops and the likelihood that enrollment would continue to fall.¹³

As part of its school-closing initiative, the School District of Philadelphia plans to maintain some excess capacity for swing space and future enrollment shifts.¹⁴ Even though officials expect enrollment to continue to decline, the future school-age population—children under age five—was 3 percent higher citywide in 2010 than in 2000, according to the Census, with some neighborhoods showing gains and others big drops. The district's plan calls for reducing the estimated 70,000 empty seats

FIGURE 3

CLOSINGS IN CITY SCHOOL DISTRICTS

District	Closure Period	Schools Closed	Buildings in Use as of 2011
Chicago	2001-2009	44	602
Detroit	2009-2010	59	130
Kansas City, Mo.	2009-2010	29	29
Milwaukee	2005-2010	20	137
Pittsburgh	2006	22	64
Washington	2008	23	118

SOURCE: Individual school districts.

NOTE: This report focuses on years or periods in each city during which a large number of schools were closed. Several of the districts closed additional schools in smaller increments at various times in the last decade. Washington closed two schools in 2009 and one in 2010, while Detroit has closed more than 100 schools over 10 years. The number of buildings in use in Milwaukee excludes 38 school district-operated charter schools.

by half, resulting in a district-wide utilization rate of roughly 85 percent. The current rate is 67 percent, 59 percent for grades 6-12.¹⁵

PREPARING FOR THE CLOSURE PROCESS

Setting the Process in Motion

Veterans of school closings in big cities stress the importance of making a strong, early case that downsizing is necessary—as Philadelphia has tried to do—and of securing buy-in from community leaders. Experts say that it is important to convey the message that there is a problem, that solving it could produce educational benefits, and that the district needs the public’s collaboration to move forward.

Kansas City is an example of a city that invested heavily in making a case for closures. School officials worked hard to secure the early support of numerous groups, including the business leaders who make up the influential Civic Council. Once on board, the Civic Council helped pay for an information campaign supporting the rightsizing initiative. The school board wound up closing 29 schools over two years, half of the entire system. Even so, large segments of the public backed the initiative, accepting it as a necessary step.¹⁶

Determining the right timeline—from the initial announcement that some buildings will close until displaced students enter their new schools—is important as well. Moving too quickly leaves people feeling that they were taken by surprise and had no say. Moving too slowly can create uncertainty and disrupt learning while lowering the morale of students and staff.

In Washington, the timetable was compressed, and the results in terms of gaining public acceptance were not what officials had hoped. The announcement that closures were coming was made in September 2007, the list of targeted schools released two months later, and final decisions made two months after that. Officials now say that allotting additional time to gather feedback on selection criteria might have increased acceptance of the closures.

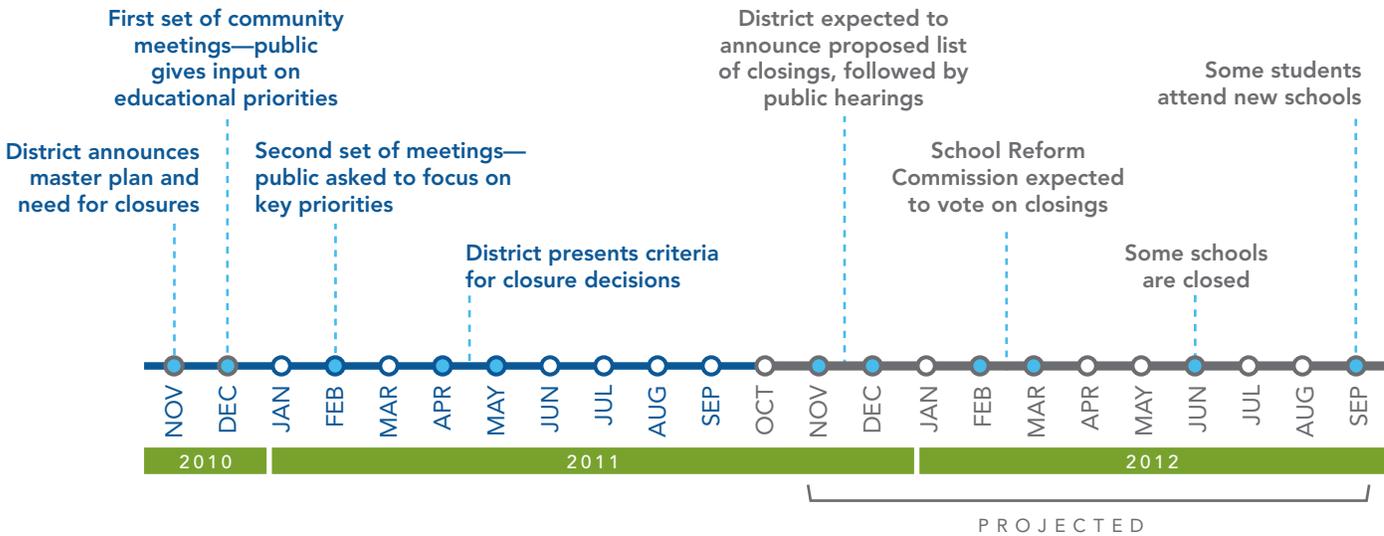
Detroit moved even more quickly when it was put under emergency financial management. The new manager, Robert Bobb, began looking at data upon taking office in March 2009; the district announced a first round of closure candidates later that same month; and final decisions were made in April. The following school year, in advance of a second round of closings, data gathering began in the fall.

The school district in Chicago announced in June 2004 that 10 schools would close before the start of classes in September, in addition to two closures that had been announced earlier. In subsequent years, the district made announcements in January or February for September closings.

In Philadelphia, nearly two years will have elapsed between the initial announcement of a facilities master plan in November 2010 and the first round of closures, scheduled to take effect in September 2012. But the planned period between the scheduled notification of intended closures (fall 2011) and the final decision (winter 2012) is likely to be in line with the other cities and not much longer than the legally required minimum, which is 90 days. The district expects to announce all downsizing actions this fall, including buildings that will close in 2012 and in 2013, and others that will phase out grade by grade, over time. See Figure 4.

FIGURE 4

TIMELINE FOR INITIAL SCHOOL CLOSINGS IN PHILADELPHIA



SOURCE: School District of Philadelphia.

Hiring Outside Experts

Several of the school districts studied, including Philadelphia, hired consultants to assist the closure process. The benefits of bringing in an outside party include expertise, a sense of objectivity, and the capacity to conduct analysis and outreach.

The Milwaukee schools, for instance, hired a consultant to run a public engagement effort after the district failed in 2005 to gather the school-board votes needed to make closures that officials deemed necessary. It worked; the board felt comfortable enough about public opinion to close schools the following year.

Kansas City School Board President Airick L. West said that using a meeting facilitator made people in his city feel that their feedback was recorded faithfully and not “filtered through the administration.”¹⁷ This was of particular importance in a district with a history of distrust among community members, the school board and district administrators.

Pittsburgh officials, who sought to focus on academics in deciding which schools to close, hired the RAND Corporation to develop a way to measure school effectiveness that took into account students’ socioeconomic status and past performance.

Washington relied on experts from the Urban Institute, the Brookings Institution and the 21st Century Schools Fund to create the framework for identifying the schools to be closed.

The Philadelphia School District has hired URS Corp., a California-based engineering design firm, and DeJong-Richter, an Ohio-based company that specializes in school-closing issues. Their roles are to assist in public outreach and develop a facilities master plan to guide the process, taking into account a system-wide view of building conditions, amenities like libraries and playing fields, and projected maintenance costs. Danielle Floyd, the district’s deputy for strategic initiatives, has been working closely with the consultants to shepherd the process.

SELECTING THE SCHOOLS TO BE CLOSED

The Criteria

In deciding which schools to close, there are several criteria that all of the cities studied have relied on, such as the building-utilization rate (student enrollment as a percentage of the building capacity), the condition of the facilities, academic performance, and the options for displaced students.

Districts differ in how these factors are weighed and give varying amounts of consideration to softer elements such as a building's historical significance. In some districts, a low score on a particular metric, such as a building's physical condition, automatically qualifies it for closure. And there is the degree to which academic performance is taken into account; Chicago and Pittsburgh gave it particular emphasis.

Officials and consultants in the six cities say that there is no perfect formula. Most of the districts started with the more obviously quantifiable criteria and incorporated other factors later.

In two cities, Milwaukee and Kansas City, officials held a series of community meetings in which residents were asked to identify the criteria to guide the process. While the items selected by the public in those cities were essentially the same as those chosen by school officials elsewhere, engaging the public in this way may have lessened community opposition.

In Philadelphia, the factors the school district is using are similar to those in the other cities. Decisions will be based on 13 criteria. See Figure 5. Facilities consultant Tracy Richter said that historic value will be part of the mix as well. The factors have not been given prescribed weights. Although the public did not help generate the criteria, officials said that community feedback to a proposed set of factors helped refine the overall policy.

FIGURE 5

CRITERIA FOR IDENTIFYING SCHOOLS ELIGIBLE FOR CLOSURE IN PHILADELPHIA

- Educational adequacy
- Academic performance
- Enrollment/population decline
- Percentage of students from outside boundary
- Academic program alignment/equity
- Neighborhood impact
- Sharing staff/resources
- Building condition
- Utilization
- Neighboring schools
- Potential to reduce excess space
- Feeder pattern alignment
- Reuse options

In the lexicon of the School District of Philadelphia, "educational adequacy" refers to the suitability of a building's facilities for a given program or grade level. The "percentage of students from outside [the] boundary" considers the extent to which a neighborhood school's enrollment relies on students from other neighborhoods. "Program alignment/equity" captures how a school fits into the district's program options, such as whether it provides vocational or special education or is a magnet school. "Neighborhood impact" takes into account the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the communities surrounding a school. "Feeder pattern alignment" refers to the grade configuration of a school and the impact eliminating the school would have on students' paths from kindergarten through high school.

SOURCE: School District of Philadelphia, Facilities Rightsizing Policy, 2011.

In June 2011, the Philadelphia Public School Notebook, which reports on the city school system, published what it described as “leaked, confidential” documents that appeared to outline the school district’s thinking on which schools might be closed or reconfigured.¹⁸ District officials said those documents were far from final. Even so, several City Council members criticized the district for being too secretive. The contents provide insight into the complexity of the process. For each school listed, there was a discussion of building conditions, amenities, academics, transportation requirements, and where its students would go if the building were closed. Although officials initially talked of closing as many as 50 buildings, fewer than 30 were mentioned.

Engaging the Public

The extent of public involvement in the overall process has varied from city to city, as has the degree to which the public has felt heard and included.

Consultants say that clear and consistent messaging by the district is critical because it fosters trust and minimizes confusion. Parents notice when district representatives say one thing at one meeting and something else at another. In Pittsburgh, Superintendent Mark Roosevelt visited every community himself to repeat his pitch for closures. It is also important, consultants say, for the district to work to achieve high public turnout at informational meetings and to reach all affected groups.

Making extensive data available is vital as well. Kansas City issued a comprehensive report card for every school. In Milwaukee, schools that were candidates for closures were given pseudonyms so that the public could digest the data objectively. Although some members of the public in Washington complained that they did not have enough input, the school district did make a point of saying yes to all meeting requests once the proposed closures were announced. In Detroit and Chicago, public engagement did not begin until after the unveiling of an initial list of closure candidates.

Compared to the other districts studied, Philadelphia got an early start. The first round of seven meetings took place in November and December 2010 and drew about 700 people. Acting Superintendent Leroy Nunery II, who was deputy superintendent at the time, used those meetings to present the facilities master plan. Participants were asked to discuss the elements they valued most in a school, such as computers, arts and safety. A second round of 10 meetings in February 2011 had participants prioritize the elements identified in the first round and give feedback on potential selection factors. At the third round of meetings, in April and May, district officials and consultant Tracy Richter talked about the criteria for selecting schools. Meetings in the fall of 2011 will focus on the specific schools proposed for consolidation and closure.

Nunery said that the meetings were designed to help parents understand that it is in everyone’s interest to create a more efficient set of schools, even if it means change and inconvenience for some. He said that he hopes that people will understand that, given changing population patterns, the impact of closures will not fall evenly across the city.

Due to the district’s budget crisis, which dominated public debate in the spring of 2011 and resulted in widespread layoffs and programs cuts, the early stages of the closure process did not receive as much attention as they might have. “When we start naming schools for closing, people will start paying more attention,” said Nunery. Added Danielle Floyd: “But I don’t think we can be criticized for a lack of outreach.”

THINKING ABOUT EQUITY

Some districts cite equity as part of the rationale for closing buildings.

By equity, they mean providing students across a school system with roughly equal access to arts and athletics, up-to-date science and computer labs, well-maintained buildings, an array of course selections, and support systems such as counseling or tutoring. How do school closings figure into this? As a practical matter, it is easier to offer services and options in one fully enrolled school than in several operating well below capacity.

In that sense, “equity is a concept you can sell” in making the case for closures, said Rebecca Lee-Gwin, chief financial officer for the Kansas City schools.

Pittsburgh’s concern about equity has gone beyond the distribution of resources. In making decisions there, officials considered such elements as whether a particular neighborhood had recently been disrupted by a previous closing and how to avoid increased racial segregation.

Officials in Philadelphia said they expected students leaving closed schools would wind up in buildings with more services and options. And in considering which schools to close, they have taken into account the impact on neighborhoods and on special populations such as English-language learners.

Public Opposition

No matter how extensive the outreach, no matter how compelling the argument, school closings almost always provoke some opposition from parents angry over the disruption of their children’s education and/or residents upset over the loss of a neighborhood asset. And public officials, whether elected or appointed, sometimes pay a price.

In Washington, a 2007 law gave Schools Chancellor Rhee the power to close schools with only the approval of the mayor who appointed her—and she used that power in 2008. Reaction to the closings, which some Washingtonians viewed as heavy-handed and insensitive to neighborhood concerns, was a factor in the 2010 electoral defeat of her patron, Mayor Fenty, and her subsequent resignation.

In Chicago, the 2004 closings of 12 schools, many of which had served public housing projects before those projects were demolished, generated widespread anger among community groups. Opposition built throughout several subsequent rounds of closures. In 2010, there was a call for the Illinois legislature to impose a moratorium on closings. Still, the school board, whose members are appointed by the mayor, closed or overhauled eight more schools from a preliminary list of 15.

In 2011, the increasing public outcry led to a new state law governing the school-closings process in Chicago. The law requires earlier notice, more public input, and greater transparency around selection criteria.

In Detroit, an emergency manager appointed by the governor has made the final decision on school closures since 2009, bypassing the elected school board. The other three cities studied require approval by an elected board, creating a different dynamic.

In Philadelphia, final decisions will be made by the School Reform Commission, members of which are appointed by the governor and the mayor. Although there has been little opposition to the school-closing initiative thus far, that could change once district officials announce the schools slated for closing. As Nunery put it, many parents have the attitude that, “This is going to be great as long as it doesn’t touch me.” The district expects that upset parents will ask their state legislators and City Council members to pressure commission members.

Adjusting the Plan

After getting public feedback on the announced closure lists, officials in all of the cities studied made some changes to the lists before approving them. In several cases, consultants say, districts proposed a larger number of closures than necessary to allow for some bargaining and compromise.

In Chicago, a few schools were kept open after parents expressed concerns about having their children cross gang territories to reach new schools. In Kansas City, one elementary school was saved after parents presented data showing that more than 90 percent of the students walked to school, meaning that to close it would increase transportation costs. Washington took four schools off the list following public testimony about physical barriers that would make walking to a new school difficult and about specific school attributes that were highly valued by a particular community. Detroit kept one school open after it found a university partner to share the building.

At a certain point, though, the list has to get locked in. And some officials said that having the school board vote once on the full package, rather than on individual schools, was crucial to the success of the process. In Pittsburgh and Kansas City, which have elected school boards, the superintendents forced a single vote on all of the closings to minimize horse-trading.

In contrast, the Milwaukee school board has voted on individual schools. In Chicago, each school listed for closing gets a separate hearing and recommendation from the hearing officer to the school board. Some educational-advocacy and parent groups said this process gave elected officials greater opportunity to intervene on behalf of favored schools.

In Philadelphia, there has yet to be a decision on whether the School Reform Commission will vote on the entire package or deal with the closure list in stages.

MOVING STUDENTS TO NEW SCHOOLS

Reassignments

In most cases, figuring out the fate of students displaced by closings is a key part of deciding which schools to close. Experts in the field agree that notification about the new school to which students are assigned, or the options available, should be made at the same time as the closing notification. Philadelphia officials expect to have the student-reassignment plan in place when the School Reform Commission votes in early 2012. Despite extensive outreach efforts, many districts have stories about families who showed up at closed buildings on the first day of the new school year.

School officials say it is vital that closing notifications be made in advance of deadlines for applying to alternative schools. Between 2005 and 2010, Chicago proposed its annual closings after the deadline for special-admissions schools. The new law governing school closings there calls for announcements to be made before those deadlines. Pittsburgh announced its 2006 closures after the magnet-school applications window had closed; reopening the process was a bureaucratic headache.

Grade reconfiguration is often part of closing schools. The goal may be to reduce the number of times students must switch schools in their K-12 years or to support new instructional models. As part of its closing process, Kansas City folded all of its middle schools into high schools; now, all of its schools are K-6 or 7-12. Detroit moved towards schools that were either pre-K-8 or 9-12. Nancy Kodman, executive director for strategic initiatives at Pittsburgh Public Schools, said that the downsizing process there created “every configuration imaginable” to give families more variety.¹⁹ In Philadelphia, a stated goal is to reduce the variety of grade configurations (there are currently 25) and create a more consistent pathway through the system.

The Impact on Students

In cash-strapped urban school districts, tracking the impact of large-scale closings on students has not been a priority. The research that has been conducted, though, indicates that any negative impact from the disruptions has been modest and temporary—and that some students ultimately benefit.

The most comprehensive study to date, from the Consortium on Chicago School Research, examined the impact of closings on students in that city between 2001 and 2006.²⁰ It found that the performance of students in schools slated for closing fell after the closure announcement and remained low for the rest of the school year. One year later, though, after having transferred to new schools, these students were doing about as well as they had before their school lives were disrupted. And among the 6 percent of displaced students who wound up in schools classified as “academically strong,” some were performing better than before.

Another group of researchers reported earlier this year on the impact of closures in a city which they did not identify but appears to be Pittsburgh. Their findings echo the Chicago report. The displaced students showed no long-term change in achievement levels unless they moved to schools that were “dramatically higher-performing than the ones they left,” in which case their performance improved. In addition, there was no discernible impact on the children in the schools that received displaced students.²¹

In Washington, the former chief of transformation management, Abigail Smith, said, “The headline is: not much impact,” though some students who went to better schools have done better.²²

In Detroit, a 2010 analysis of 34 schools that had received displaced students found some preliminary improvements among all students, including the new arrivals. Scores on a state reading test improved at 23 of the schools, while math scores rose at 18.²³

Still, even after closing schools, some of districts studied in this report have continued to suffer from poor academic performance. In September 2011, the accreditation of the Kansas City school district was revoked by the Missouri Department of Education, effective January 2012, due to the district’s continued failure to meet state standards. This could lead to a state takeover.

School closings may impact other aspects of the student experience. In Kansas City and Chicago, parents have complained about increases in violent incidents following school consolidation, although no authoritative studies have been done on the topic.

DISPOSING OF THE SURPLUS PROPERTY

Goals and Statutes Guide Reuse of Buildings

Once a school is closed, it becomes the district’s or city’s responsibility to put it to some productive use—or at least make sure that the building, often the largest in an urban residential area, does not become a blighting presence and a magnet for illicit activity. In Philadelphia, the responsibility falls to the district.

A preferred option is to sell the building. But a lot of closed schools buildings are tough sells, even in the best of times.

Many were shut down precisely because they were in areas suffering depopulation and disinvestment; in most cities, the relative marketability of various sites was not a factor in considering which buildings to close, although some local officials in Washington believe it should be.²⁴ In Philadelphia, as Nunery pointed out, many of the most likely candidates for closure are in struggling neighborhoods. And in many cities, Philadelphia included, there are closed Catholic schools available for potential sale as well. In September 2011, the former Northeast Catholic High School was sold to a charter school for a reported \$3.5 million.

Some closed buildings in Philadelphia will not be suitable for any reuse. “There is no doubt that some buildings will be razed,” said Richter, the facilities consultant. Some neighborhoods may want new green space on a former school site. In other cases, a property may simply be too expensive to renovate, leaving no option other than demolition.

There are other issues. Sales of public property are subject to state or local regulations; in some cities, the district may not own the buildings outright. Additionally, reuse goals vary widely, from prioritizing use of the buildings by charter schools to prohibiting such use; from seeking a profit to providing a public service requested by the surrounding community. Some districts prefer to lease rather than sell; some allow only short-term leases while others require 25-year agreements.

The process in the District of Columbia provides an example of the complications. Although a recently-enacted law gives charter schools priority in bidding on the closed buildings, some charter school advocates allege that the D.C. government has sought to prevent additional charters from moving into former district buildings. The U.S. Government Accountability Office has called for more transparency in the process going forward.²⁵

Former public schools in Washington now house city administrative officers and a police substation, as well as charters. The current mayoral administration has chosen to lease rather than sell sites, preventing them from being converted into condominiums or other private uses.

The Philadelphia School District's reuse policy, adopted in June 2011, gives "special consideration to proposals that emphasize educational or community centered reuse, subject to the need to exercise fiscal responsibility." Educational uses, which may include charter schools, get top priority, followed by other nonprofit or community purposes and then private usage. The first two purposes are eligible for discounts on the purchase price.

The Disposition Process

Real estate disposition is not a core skill for most school districts. With limited staff resources, the districts have struggled to balance community desires with market realities. Some districts, like Pittsburgh, have enlisted the help of the local redevelopment authority. Occasionally, there have been tensions between residents and developers.

Shannon Jaax, who heads Kansas City's effort to find new uses for the buildings, said that districts around the country would benefit from a "repurposing tool kit" outlining best practices. Districts "are reinventing the wheel every time," she said. Officials in other school systems and stakeholders such as the National Trust for Historic Preservation have expressed interest in the idea.

In Philadelphia, according to Richter, the district started looking at building reuse early on for two reasons: avoiding blight was seen as critical, and the district already was struggling to maintain an inventory of empty schools. District staff met with the Philadelphia Industrial Development Corporation and others in the redevelopment community.

Under the School Reform Commission's reuse policy, the superintendent will nominate a team to review proposals for each building. Teams will include representatives of the school district, community or civic organizations, the city planning commission, the neighborhood's city council member, and sometimes the state representative. The School Reform Commission will have the final say.

KANSAS CITY'S INITIATIVE TO FIND USES FOR VACANT SCHOOLS

Kansas City has undertaken a comprehensive approach to finding new uses for empty school buildings. The city of 459,787 residents now finds itself with 39 closed schools.

A year-long “Repurposing Initiative” for the buildings was launched in January 2011, headed by Shannon Jaax, a planner on loan from the city government’s Planning and Development Department.

Before the initiative got underway, the district set aside eight schools for mothballing and one for use as an administrative building. That left 30. Each property was subjected to a market analysis and a technical assessment, and residents and potential investors shared their ideas for reuse during site tours. Jaax and her staff are developing action plans for each of those properties that include a recommendation to sell, lease, demolish or mothball.

One early proposal called for turning four sites into “community catalysts,” each with a different focus such as healthy families or business and technology. These centers, to be run by nonprofit partners, would offer programs serving the entire community. The district has moved forward on negotiations for two sites: one for a charter school and a second for a senior housing.

The initiative faces numerous obstacles, including funding. Jaax proposed what she considered a conservative budget of \$500,000; the city came up with half that much.

Current Status of Closed Sites

In the districts studied, some closed school buildings have been converted successfully into administrative offices, nursing homes and condominiums. But most sit empty. While officials in some cities are reluctant or unable to provide precise figures, the total number is likely in excess of 200, including buildings still in district hands from prior downsizing.

Detroit alone had 92 school properties listed for sale as of August 2011, many of which had been closed for as long as a decade. More than a dozen were lots where the buildings had been demolished. Even so, the school district’s real estate department estimated that it had generated \$5 million in revenue from sales and leases of buildings since March 2009.

At last count, Pittsburgh had 18 buildings for sale. As of June, one of those schools, empty since 2004, was under agreement of sale with Pittsburgh Green Innovators for use as a green jobs incubator. Another is being leased to a charter school—a first for a former Pittsburgh public school.

The Milwaukee school system owned 27 surplus school buildings at the start of 2011. In the past few years, only one vacant school has been sold, a former middle school bought for \$600,000 in 2010. It is to be turned into senior housing.²⁶ Tax credits for affordable housing and historic preservation helped make the project feasible. One reason for the high number of empty properties in Milwaukee has been the district’s reluctance to deal with other school operators. Superintendent Gregory Thornton said that he did not want the buildings used by “anyone who is going to take enrollment” from the public schools.²⁷

In Chicago, 16 buildings have been converted to charters. All of those are leased from the district. Officials said two others became administrative offices and seven are empty. Four have been demolished since 1998, including one that became a hospital parking lot. Other buildings have been reopened by the district as “turnaround” schools.

A common problem is inadequate resources for securing and maintaining mothballed sites. This can lead to vandalism and structural damage that make disposition and reuse more difficult.

In Philadelphia, the school district reports having sold seven surplus sites in the last five years. The Durham School in Center City became a charter; the Hawthorne School just south of Center City became loft apartments; and a mixed-use development is planned at the Wanamaker School near Temple University.

Even so, as of 2011, the district had 10 vacant schools on its hands. With more closings to come, Nunery said that it was hard to predict how the district will do in selling the buildings. Given the low real estate values in many neighborhoods and the peculiarities of school structures, the district does not anticipate a windfall.

When buildings are sold, there can be unanticipated complications. In June 2011, after two years of negotiations, the district completed the sale of the North Philadelphia building that once housed Thomas Edison High School and later the Julia de Burgos Middle School. The price for the building, which had been shuttered since 2002, was \$600,000. The buyer, a development partnership, talked of razing part of the structure and building a grocery store as well as 56 units of low-income housing.

Then, in August, the site, which had long suffered from vandalism and drug activity, was ravaged by fire. City Controller Alan Butkovitz said that the district should have knocked the building down years ago, and therefore prevented the fire.²⁸ The development appears likely to move forward.

The Roberto Clemente Middle School in Hunting Park, empty since 2007, also has been a problem. Scrappers and squatters have broken in, damaging the property and creating a nuisance for neighbors.²⁹

On the disposition of buildings and other concerns, Philadelphia school officials have looked to the experiences of the districts studied in this report to shape their own school-closing initiative. As a result, they made an early case for the necessity of downsizing, established quantifiable criteria for deciding which buildings to close, and sought to frame the overall initiative in terms of producing a school system better able to respond to community needs.

The most difficult parts of the process—those that impact specific students, parents and neighborhoods—are yet to come.

ENDNOTES

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