

Journey for Justice

"A National Grassroots Education Alliance"

Urban districts across the country continue to shut down unprecedented numbers of public schools. The vast majority of these disruptive and painful closures have been justified in three ways:

1. That tough economic times require districts to tighten their belts, and that the *closures will save scarce dollars*;¹
2. That closing a "failing" school is the only way to *improve student academic prospect*;² or
3. That the targeted schools are *under-utilized*, and their closure allows the district to "right-size" in response to shrinking enrollments.³

But these justifications don't square with the FACTS. What is really going on, who is being affected and who stands to benefit, when our neighborhood public schools are under attack?

THE FACTS

Closing schools does not save money.

- A 2011 report from the Pew Charitable Trusts examined the costs of school closures in Chicago, Detroit, Kansas City, Milwaukee, Pittsburgh and Washington, DC and found that *no school district experienced a windfall of cost savings* and that the districts are now spending millions each year to maintain at least 200 shuttered school properties.
- An audit of closures in 2008 in Washington DC showed that the total cost of closures was \$39.5 million, nearly twice what then-Chancellor Michelle Rhee said would be saved by the closures.⁴
- In Chicago, the district declared that it would save \$43 million annually in operating expenses by closing schools, while at the same time incurring ongoing debt payments by borrowing \$329 million to pay for facilities improvements to accommodate students at designated "receiving" schools.⁵

Closing schools does not improve student academic performance.

- A report by the Consortium on Chicago School Research found that most students *lost* academic ground the year their school was slated for closure. Only 6% of students transferred to schools with dramatically better academic outcomes.
- A range of studies nationally show that the majority of students displaced by closings fare no better academically in their new schools.⁶
- In Chicago since 2002, only 18% of the schools that replaced closed schools are high performing. Of those, half are selective enrollment.⁷
- In New York, after over 10 years of schools closings, only 11% of black and brown children and 12% Latino children graduate college and career ready.⁸
- In Washington D.C., 13 of 20 designated "receiving" schools this year are in the bottom quarter of the city's schools, based on per pupil funding.⁹

Is it really about under-utilization?

- In Chicago, the district has designated any public school classroom with fewer than 30-36 students as “underutilized,” while the average class size throughout the state of Illinois is 20-21 students. The educational advantages of small class sizes are well documented, and both private and charter schools cap enrollment to obtain class sizes well under 30-36.
- Both Chicago and Philadelphia have *more schools* today than they had a decade ago. By opening *more schools*, as overall student-age population declines slightly, both districts have virtually guaranteed under-enrollment. In both cities, the majority of newly created schools are charter schools, authorized by the local districts in each city. In effect, both Philadelphia and Chicago have flooded the market with schools, and then complained of under-utilization.

SCHOOL CLOSINGS ADVERSELY AFFECT OUR MOST VULNERABLE YOUNG PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES

School closings are discriminatory.

- In Chicago, data from 2011 shows that 88% of students affected by CPS school closings are black; 94% are low-income and 10% are homeless. In CPS as a whole, 43% of students are African American, 86% are low income and 4% are homeless.
- In Philadelphia, 78 % of students impacted by closures are black, compared to the district’s 54% African American student population.
- In New York City, students with disabilities were 1.59 times as common in high schools on the closure list as the citywide average. In elementary & middle schools targeted for closure, the percentage of Black students (63.2%) was 2.26 times the citywide average of 28%.¹⁰
- Among 2,642 students who were displaced by DC’s 2013 school closings, only 2 were White. 93% of the students were Black, and 6% were Latino. 96% were low income. This compares to the DCPS total enrollment, in which 72% are Black, 14% are Latino, and 77% are low income.¹¹

These facts have led parents ten cities to file Title VI Civil Rights complaints with both the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Justice. Investigations have been opened in **several cities, including Detroit.**

Closings create “school deserts”—whole neighborhoods with no right-of-access public schools—destabilizing communities and wreaking havoc in the lives of some of our most vulnerable students.

- Nearly *half* the schools recently closed by the New York City Department of Education had been opened only in the last 10 years.¹² As a result of turnarounds and school closures, the highest needs students in New York City are now over-concentrated in the city’s most struggling schools.
- In DC, *one third* of those affected by school closings in 2008 are being displaced again by the closings in 2013.¹³

- A 2008 study of Chicago school closings¹⁴ found that planned school closings were disproportionately in areas that were experiencing large changes in median house prices, suggesting a correlation between school closings and gentrification.
- In other neighborhoods, school closings signal that resources are leaving the community. A Chicago housing advocate was quoted as saying, "There is no way I can market the community to young families. They aren't going to move into a community with a closing school." And, she said, the number of foreclosures is sure to go up because school employees such as janitors and lunchroom workers, many of whom live nearby, will be at risk when they no longer have a paycheck.¹⁵

Many parents believe that corporate reform interests are creating the school closure "crisis" --the budget shortfalls, academic "emergencies" and enrollment declines--in order to facilitate the transfer of students from public schools to privately operated charter schools. Indeed:

- In Washington D.C., the charter sector is increasing rapidly. When 23 schools in Washington D.C. were closed in the summer of 2008, the district lost over 4,000 students, 75% of them from the closed or receiving schools. In the same year, the city's charter schools gained almost 4,000 students;
- In June 2013, DCPS closed 13 public schools, displacing 2,000 students. By the start of summer, only 13% of those students had signed up to reenroll in a traditional DCPS public school.¹⁶
- Just months after the largest school closing action (50 schools in one year) in U.S. history, Chicago is has invited proposals for new charter schools for the 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 school years, in designated "priority neighborhoods" --primarily heavily Latino communities on the Southwest and Northwest sides.

This trend towards privatized management of public schools divides and hurts our students and our communities:

- A 2009 report from the Civil Rights Project at UCLA shows that charter schools are *more* racially isolated than traditional public schools in virtually every state and large metropolitan area in the country.
- In Newark, Chicago, New York and elsewhere, closing public schools while expanding charters is increasing the concentration of high poverty, high needs students left behind in traditional public schools. Nationally, charters on average, enroll lower percentages of poor, special needs and English language students than traditional public schools.

The Journey for Justice is a grassroots coalition of parents, young people and community members who are taking action to save our public school districts and stop the aggressive school closures in our cities. We believe that our students are better served when school improvement is an educational process that engages teachers, parents, students and communities rather than giving up on our schools or creating a smokescreen when the real agenda is privatization. We are demanding:

Sustainable School Transformation (SST)

Sustainable School Transformation is our proposal for a new approach to struggling students and struggling schools. The basic tenets of SST authorize school closure as a last resort only. Instead,

Struggling schools are resourced to appoint a school-based team, including teachers, administrators, parents and others, to:

1. Undertake a comprehensive needs assessment—done in partnership with parents, educators, students and community members—so that local solutions are tailored to local problems,
2. Implement research-based instructional and educational reforms,
3. Address essential social, emotional and physical needs of students, and
4. Recognize parent, student, and community leadership as key to sustainable student success.

The Journey for Justice is calling on Congress, and the Department of Education to implement The Sustainable Success Model.

¹ “Philadelphia Plans to Close Dozens of Schools,” *The New York Times*, December 31, 2012. By John Hurdle

² Press release, June 22, 2009. U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved 8/23/13 from:

<http://www2.ed.gov/news/speeches/2009/06/06222009.html>

³ “A Much-needed pruning of DC’s overbuilt school system,” Editorial in *The Washington Post*. November 12, 2012. Retrieved from http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2012-11-12/opinions/35506453_1_quality-charter-schools-small-schools-public-schools on 8/23/13.

⁴ “Audit of the Closure and Consolidation of 23 DC Public Schools,” Office of the DC Auditor, September 6, 2012. Retrieved from: <http://dcauditor.org/sites/default/files/DCA192012.pdf> on 8/23/13. Also “Here We Go Again – More DC Public School Closures” at <http://thewashingtonteacher.blogspot.com/2012/11/here-we-go-again-more-dc-public-school.html>

⁵ “Fact Check: Chicago School Closings” by WBEZ91.5. Retrieved from: <http://www.wbez.org/news/fact-check-chicago-school-closings-107216> on 8/23/13.

⁶ “Closing Public Schools in Philadelphia: Lessons from Six Urban Districts.” The Pew Charitable Trusts. October 2011. http://www.pewtrusts.org/uploadedFiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/Reports/Philadelphia_Research_Initiative/Closing-Public-Schools-Philadelphia.pdf

⁷ <http://www.catalyst-chicago.org/news/2011/12/06/19690/school-actions-could-top-100>

⁸ <http://schools.nyc.gov/Accountability/data/GraduationDropoutReports/default.htm>

⁹ “Background Information on DCPS School Closings: 2013 FINAL” by Mary Levy. Retrieved from <https://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&pid=sites&srcid=ZGVmYXVsdGRvbWFpbm9zaGFwcGVzaXRlfGd4OjQzNTQyNjA0ZWnkMWJhODc> on 8/23/13.

¹⁰ Independent Budget Office: Education Research Team. February, 2012. Statistical Profile of Schools on DOE’s 2012 Closure List. <http://www.ibo.nyc.ny.us/iboreports/2012schoolclosing.pdf>

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² “School Closures: A Shell Game with Students,” by NY CEJ and NY Communities for Change. 2012. <http://www.nyccej.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/school-closures-report.pdf>

¹³ “Racist School Closings in Washington, DC” TruthOut, May 31, 2013. Retrieved from: <http://www.truth-out.org/news/item/16672-racist-school-closings-in-washington-dc> on 8/23/13.

¹⁴ “Data and Democracy Project: Investing in Neighborhoods.” Andrew Greenlee, Nancy Hudspeth, Pauline Lipman, Danielle Akua Smith, Janet Smith, authors. A collaboration of the Collaborative for Equity and Justice in Education, college of Education, University of Illinois—Chicago and the Nathalie P. Voorhees Center for Neighborhood and Community Improvement, College of Urban Planning and Public Affairs, University of Illinois—Chicago. February 2008.

¹⁵ “School Closings Worry Poor Neighborhoods,” US News and World Report, August 11, 2013. Retrieved from: http://hosted.ap.org/dynamic/stories/U/US_SCHOOL_CLOSINGS_NEIGHBORHOODS?SITE=DCUSN&SECTION=HOME&TEMPLATE=DEFAULT)

¹⁶ “Small Percentage of Displaced Students Enrolling in DC Public Schools,” the Washington Post, June 11, 2013. Retrieved from: http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/small-percentage-of-displaced-students-enrolling-in-dc-schools/2013/06/11/ebe818fc-d2b4-11e2-8cbe-1bcbee06f8f8_story.html on 8/23/13.