

Snapshot: High School Closures in New York City

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In the first decade of the 21st century, the NYC Department of Education implemented a set of large-scale and much debated high school reforms, which included closing large, low-performing schools, opening new small schools and extending high school choice to students throughout the district. The school closure process was the most controversial of these efforts. Yet, apart from the general sense that school closures are painful, there has never been a rigorous assessment of their impact in NYC.

To begin to fill this gap, the Research Alliance undertook a study of the 29 low-performing high schools that were designated for closure in New York City between 2002 and 2008, looking particularly at the impact of these closures on students' academic performance, attendance, and mobility. Key findings include:

- **The schools designated for closure were, in fact, among the lowest performing in the City**, based on a composite of 10 performance indicators averaged over four years leading up to the closure decision. Even after accounting for differences in the demographics and prior achievement of incoming students, these schools performed poorly in relation to others in the system. It should be noted, however, that there were a number of high schools in the district (between 10 and 29 depending on the year) that exhibited similarly low performance but were not closed. A subset of these schools serve as a comparison group in our study.
- **Closures had little impact, positive or negative, on the academic outcomes of students who were enrolled during the phaseout process.** These students had better outcomes, compared to students enrolled in the same schools prior to the closure decisions. However, these gains were similar to gains made in the other low-performing high schools at the same time—suggesting that the phaseout process, in and of itself, had little effect on these outcomes.
- **The phaseout process did increase student mobility**, largely through transfers to other New York City high schools, rather than transfers to other districts or students dropping out. Notably, while transfer rates increased, the characteristics of students who transferred were virtually the same as the characteristics of students who transferred before the phaseout.
- **Closing high schools produced meaningful benefits for future students**—i.e., middle schoolers who had to choose another high school because the school they likely would have attended was closing. These students ended up going to schools that were higher performing than the closed schools, both in terms of the achievement and attendance of incoming students and on the basis of longer-term outcomes. In addition, “post-closure” students' outcomes improved significantly more than students in the comparison group, including a 15-point increase in graduation rates.

Several things should be considered in interpreting these results. First, closures were instituted as part of a constellation of reforms aimed at improving secondary education in NYC—at a time when the system was characterized by many persistently low-performing high schools. The findings from this study, together with strong evidence on the positive effects of NYC's new small schools, provide support for the strategic use of school closures in the context of this kind of multi-dimensional high school reform effort.

Second, there are a range of other possible impacts from a school closure that our study did not examine, including, for instance, effects on educators, parents, and neighborhoods. Policymakers should be attentive to the potential for these other impacts when making decisions about closing schools.

Third, while this study shows clear gains for students in the wake of a closure, these students still did not fare well. On average, just 56 percent graduated from high school within four years, and less than half earned a Regents diploma. Finding ways to close the gap between these students and their higher-performing peers is essential.

Finally, the City's high school landscape and demands placed on secondary education have changed markedly since the early 2000s; while graduation rates have improved substantially, the labor market increasingly requires a post-secondary credential. Dramatic actions like school closures have helped set the system on a more positive trajectory. However, additional strategies are likely needed for the challenges of today and the future.

Read the full report: http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/research_alliance/publications/hs_closures_in_nyc