

Lights Off: Practice and Impact of Closing Low-Performing Schools

2017

Executive Summary

The full report of this study consists of two volumes.

The link to Volume One is: http://credo.stanford.edu/pdfs/Closure_FINAL_Volume_I.pdf

The link to Volume Two is: http://credo.stanford.edu/pdfs/Closure_FINAL_Volume_II.pdf

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Introduction

For decades, communities across the country have grappled with the problem of public K-12 schools that do not deliver high-quality education to the students they serve. After more than a decade of school-based accountability, policymakers have increasingly realized that there are limits to how much effort should be made to turn around a low-performing school. Many education leaders feel a strong sense of urgency that the life chances of the students enrolled in these schools are diminished with each year of continued operation and endorse closure of those schools.

The option of closing schools that persistently perform poorly has gained traction. There are two parallel systems that engage in school closure in the public K-12 education realm. For more than a decade, the charter school sector has become more insistent in closing schools that do not meet certain academic performance benchmarks. Closure is the ultimate consequence in the contractual bargain charter school operators strike with their authorizers: Do well and your charter will be renewed, but do poorly and your charter (potentially) will lose the chance to continue. Charter schools may be closed because of academic failure, though the actual risk is diminished where their overseers are timid about demanding it. The traditional public school (TPS) arena was historically resistant to closures, especially in regions where the threat of labor reprisals was credible. But given the persistent trends in low performance in many TPS and about 15 years of evidence that alternative strategies have not produced substantial improvement, the use of closure as a policy intervention has grown in TPS across the country.

Closures of low-performing schools are usually hotly contested events. Supporters claim that by closing schools, students will be removed from an unproductive environment and be better off under the wing of other educators. They also believe that closing low-quality schools holds out the chance to transfer the building and facilities to other uses. Opponents are concerned that school closures will disrupt students' educational experiences, cause psychological stress and impair their outcomes.

Despite heated debates over the practice, empirical evidence about school closure is limited in scope and time and has produced mixed findings. The record is particularly weak about what school

settings closure students move to and how they progress academically in the post-closure era. Lacking reliable information on school closures, policymakers, educators and parents risk the future learning of affected students.

Taking advantage of the multistate, longitudinal dataset of unprecedented scale that CREDO has built under FERPA (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act)-compliant agreements with its state education agency partners, we systematically examined closure of low-performing public schools in both the charter and TPS sectors. Our investigation covered four broad areas. First, we built a national picture of school closures, for the first time providing a comparative accounting of the practice across sectors and across the country. Given the variation we observed, we examined whether equivalently performing schools faced comparable treatment across the country. From a focus on school outcomes, we shifted the focus to the schooling trajectory of students who were enrolled in closing schools in the final years of operation. Finally, and in many ways most importantly, we studied the impact of school closure on the academic progress of closure students. By addressing these questions, we hope to provide a solid foundation for informed evaluations of – and constructive discussions on – closure as a policy instrument to cope with academically low-performing schools.

Project Approach

We used the longitudinally linked data that CREDO had developed in partnership with 26 state education agencies to pursue our inquiry. We identified low-performing, full-time, regular (non-alternative) schools and closures in those 26 states from academic year 2006-07 to 2012-13, depending on the availability of data. A school was defined as low-performing if its average reading and math scores were both in the bottom 20 percent (i.e., the bottom four ventiles) in a state in a given year as well as the previous year.¹ Then we flagged the low-performing schools as closed based on the codes of the Common Core of Data (CCD) from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). A total of 1,522 low-performing schools, including 1,204 TPS and 318 charters, were closed in the 26 states during our study period.

Different analyses were conducted to address different questions. One group of questions aimed to provide for the first time an aggregate picture of the practice of closing low-performing schools across the country. We used descriptive analyses and tests of differences in statistics between groups to explore what the national landscape of closing low-performing schools looked like, whether similarly low-performing schools were treated equivalently, whether there was an early transfer of students in the year before the official closure, and what sectors and school settings displaced students moved to after their schools had closed.

¹ Each ventile covers 5 percent of the school population. The first ventile includes the lowest-performing 5 percent of schools in a state in terms of achievement. The 20th ventile includes the highest-performing 5 percent of schools in a state in terms of achievement.

The second group of questions focused on the fates of students who were enrolled in the final years of operation in the low-performing schools that closed. We employed the Virtual Control Record (VCR) method developed by CREDO in our analysis of the academic impact of closure on individual students. Using the VCR approach, a “virtual twin” was constructed for each closure student by drawing on the available records of students with identical traits and identical or very similar baseline test scores but who were enrolled in continuing low-performing schools in the same sector (charter or TPS). If matched, this virtual twin would differ from the closure student only in that one student attended a closed school. We then estimated the impact of school closure by comparing the academic progress of closure students and their virtual twins (or peers) from the same sector. The VCR matching protocol has been assessed against other possible study designs and judged to be reliable and valuable by peer reviewers.

To study the academic performance across low-performing schools, we relied on scores students received on state standardized achievement tests. Achievement tests capture what a student knows at a point in time. These test results were fitted into a bell curve format that enabled us to see how students moved from year to year in terms of academic performance and how students’ scores compared to students in other states in the study.

Two successive test scores allow us to see how much progress a student makes over a one-year period; this is also known as a growth score. Growth scores have the advantage that they allow us to zero in on the contributions of schools separately from other things that affect point-in-time scores. The parsed effect of schools in turn gives us the chance to see how students’ academic progress changes as the conditions of their education transform. This is the analytic foundation for our examination of the academic impact of school closure.

To assist the reader in interpreting the meaning of the effect sizes in our impact analysis, we include an estimate of the number of days of learning required to achieve a particular effect size.

Major Findings

Our analyses revealed the following major findings:

Closures of low-performing schools were prevalent but not evenly distributed. Closures were on the rise in the study period. Geographically, closures appeared to be concentrated in a few key states, especially so in the TPS sector. Considering locale and grade span, closure was mostly an urban phenomenon focused largely on elementary schools, where students have a longer time to recover and communities tend to have more than one school in the system to receive affected students. High school closures were rarer, probably because of strong community affinity and scarcer alternatives.

Low-performing schools that were eventually closed exhibited clear signs of weakness in the years leading to closure compared to other low-performing schools. Closing schools had lower academic performance and smaller student enrollment than low-performing schools that were permitted to remain open. In fact, there were steady declines in both academic achievement and

growth in closing schools in the last three years before closure. Enrollment in those schools also dwindled in the last few years of operation.

Variations in closures of low-performing schools by sector were particularly salient. Although the number of charter closures was smaller than that of TPS closures, the percentage of low-performing schools getting closed was higher in the charter sector than in the TPS sector. This pattern was particularly pronounced in the first (from the bottom) state ventile of achievement. On average, the academic performance of closed charter schools was lower than that of closed TPS. However, the performance differences between the charter and TPS closures varied widely from state to state, suggesting that districts and charter authorizers operated in different legislative and regulatory environments. It was also clear that within states, decision-makers in the charter and TPS arenas exercised varying degrees of political will and drew on different approaches when they determined how to deal with low-performing schools.

Closures of low-performing schools were not blind to socioeconomic status or race/ethnicity of the students who were enrolled. In both the charter and TPS sectors, and particularly in the lowest ventile of achievement, low-performing schools with a larger share of black and Hispanic students were more likely to be closed than similarly performing schools with a smaller share of disadvantaged minority students. Moreover, the closure rates for higher-poverty low-performing TPS in the bottom two ventiles surpassed the rates for lower-poverty TPS of similarly low performance. These observed inequivalent tendencies raise the issue of equity in decision-making about school closures.

There was an obvious early departure of students before the official closure. In both sectors a higher percentage of students transferred from closing schools one year before the official closure than did students attending continuing low-performing schools in the same period. The rate of early transfers was higher for closing charters than for closing TPS. Early leavers from both charter and TPS closures had worse academic performance than students who remained until the official closure as well as students who transferred from not-closed low-performing schools in the same sector in the same year.

A little less than half of displaced closure students landed in better schools. This held for both sectors. A higher share of displaced charter students ended up in better school settings than did TPS closure students, compatible with the stronger capabilities of parents of charter school students in maneuvering school choices. The chance for superior placement among students who left in the year before school closure was somewhat higher, implying some advantage for early departure given limited seats available in better local schools. Some students who did not land well in the first one or two years after closure attended a better school in the next year. However, the dominant pattern was for the schools that students attended in the second and third years following closure to mirror the quality of their schools in the previous year. The pattern possibly reflected families' preference for stability over improved quality in their choice of schools or the realistic constraint of the options for quality alternatives. These findings resonate with a widely held concern that there is a shortage of

better options for students displaced by school closures. This concern is well-founded, as better schools are critically important for students' future academic progress.

The quality of the receiving school made a significant difference in post-closure student outcomes. Closure students who attended better schools tended to make greater academic gains than did their peers from not-closed low-performing schools in the same sector, while those ending up in worse or equivalent schools had weaker academic growth than their peers in comparable low-performing settings. This pattern was stronger for TPS closure students. The finding also held for a number of racial-ethnic groups and was particularly salient for black and Hispanic closure students. The effect was most pronounced for black and Hispanic students in poverty. However, the academic benefit of closure is systematically constrained, as the supply of superior alternatives for closure students is limited and there are systemic access challenges such as parent information and district placement practices.

Implications

Views on how to deal with academically failing schools diverge among policymakers, educators and parents. As the most radical measure, closure has received politically charged debate. The findings revealed in this study establish a foundation for evidence-based discussion about the implications of closing low-performing schools.

Closing chronically low-performing schools seems to be an inevitable option. The widespread failure of school improvement strategies makes the option of keeping chronically low-performing TPS schools in the hope of making progress over time unattractive and impractical. Previous research by CREDO has also demonstrated that a charter school that performs poorly at the beginning is very unlikely to improve later on (Peltason & Raymond, 2013; Woodworth & Raymond, 2013). Hence, closing persistently low-performing schools seems to be pushed to the front as an inevitable alternative. Our findings point out several intricacies, and call for caution, in implementing this bold policy measure.

Decision-makers need to assure equity in dealing with low-performing schools. Only a small fraction of low-performing schools have been closed, and our evidence suggests that closures of low-performing schools were biased by non-academic factors. In particular, closures were tilted toward the most disadvantaged schools such as the ones with higher concentrations of students in poverty and higher shares of black and Hispanic students, which raises the issue of equity in the practice of closures. Districts and charter authorizers face exposure in this regard. They will benefit from reviewing their policies and processes for closures. They should identify and refrain from explicit and unconscious biases in decision-making about closing low-performing schools.

Distinct patterns of closures in the charter and TPS sectors call for attention to accountability in both systems. School districts have been more tolerant of low-performing TPS, as evidenced by lower rates of closures of low-performing schools in sum and by category in the TPS sector than in the

charter sector. Although districts are likely to be confronted with greater pressure from various stakeholders when dealing with academically failing schools, the well-being of students should be their top concern. Responsible districts should never let chronically low-performing schools continuously erode student learning outcomes. In the charter sector, there should not be schools with very poor performance, particularly in the lowest state ventile, since the contract with authorizers obliges individual schools to meet certain academic goals. The existence of poorly performing charter schools raises the question of how accountability is implemented. Apparently, agreement with the terms on paper is not always sufficient. What matters more is the will on the part of charter authorizers to execute the terms and take action when things go wrong in schools.

Individual states will benefit from reviewing their closure criteria and processes and from learning from the experiences of successful states. The state is the locus for the formulation and supervision of many education policies and practices. Our data demonstrated that states varied extensively in the prevalence of closing low-performing schools, the academic criteria that were applied in the decision about closures, and the focus on ensuring student academic progress in post-closure periods. Individual states have yet to review the level of rigor in their making and implementation of policies and practices for coping with low-performing schools. They can also learn useful lessons from their counterparts that have successfully closed low-performing schools, relocated closure students to better schools and promoted improved academic performance of closure students after closure.

The quality of the receiving schools plays a significant role in the academic progress of closure students. However, superior alternatives are limited. Innovative measures are called for to yield positive outcomes for students. Closing low-performing schools alone does not automatically lead to better outcomes for students, but needs to be accompanied by effective follow-up measures to ensure better treatment of students. Our findings of the role that the quality of the receiving school played in the academic progress of closure students suggest it is crucial to assign affected students to higher-performing schools. However, we cannot pin all our hopes on currently higher-performing schools if there are many students to place. Not even half of the displaced students in our analysis were able to land in better schools. The chance for superior placement will grow slimmer if there are further increases in the practice of closure. Additional options need to be designed – starting new schools, for example. It is true that new schools are likely to be mixed in quality. But if poorly performing schools are closed and better schools are kept, there will be an accumulation of high-quality schools over time.