Closing Low-Performing Schools is a Failing Reform Strategy

Key New NEPC Brief Takeaway: Closing schools to improve student achievement is, at best, a “high-risk/low-gain” strategy.

Boulder, CO (PRWEB) May 18, 2017 -- Federal and state school accountability policies have used standardized test results to shine a spotlight on low-performing schools. A remedy offered to “turn around” low-performance in school districts is the option to close the doors of the low-performing schools and send students elsewhere.

School Closure as a Strategy to Remedy Low Performance, authored by Gail L. Sunderman of the University of Maryland, and Erin Coughlan and Rick Mintrop of the University of California, Berkeley, investigates whether closing schools and transferring students for the purpose of remedying low performance is an effective option for educational decision makers to pursue.

Closing schools in response to low student performance is based on the premise that by closing low-performing schools and sending students to better-performing ones, student achievement will improve. The higher-performing schools, it is reasoned, will give transfer students access to higher-quality peer and teacher networks, which in turn will have a beneficial effect on academic outcomes. Moreover, it is argued that the threat of closure may motivate low-performing schools (and their districts) to improve.

To investigate this logic of closing schools to improve student performance, the authors drew on relevant peer-reviewed research and well-designed policy reports to answer four questions:

1. How often do school closings occur and for what reasons?
2. What is the impact on students of closing schools for reasons of performance?
3. What is the impact of closing schools on the public school system in which closure has taken place?
4. What is the impact of school closures on students of various ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, and on local communities and neighborhoods?

Based on their analysis of the relevant available evidence the authors offer the following recommendations:

- Even though school closures have dramatically increased, jurisdictions largely shun the option of “closure and transfer” in the context of the federal School Improvement Grant (SIG) program. Policy and district actors should treat the infrequency of this turnaround option as a caution.
- School closures have at best weak and decidedly mixed benefits; at worst they have detrimental repercussions for students if districts do not ensure that seats at higher-performing schools are available for transfer students. In districts where such assignments are in short or uncertain supply, “closure and transfer” is a decidedly undesirable option.
- School closures seem to be a challenge for transferred students in non-academic terms for at least one or two years. While school closures are not advisable for a school of any grade span, they are especially inadvisable for middle school students because of the shorter grade span of such schools.
- The available evidence on the effects of school closings for their local system offers a cautionary note. There are costs associated with closing buildings and transferring teachers and students, which reduce the available resources for the remaining schools. Moreover, in cases where teachers are not rehired under closure-and-restart models, there may be broader implications for the diversity of the teaching workforce. Closing schools to
consolidate district finances or because of declining enrollments may be inevitable at times, but closing solely for performance has unanticipated consequences that local and state decision makers should be aware of.

- School closures are often accompanied by political conflict. Closures tend to differentially affect low-income communities and communities of color that are politically disempowered, and closures may work against the demand of local actors for more investment in their local institutions.

In conclusion, school closure as a strategy for remedying student achievement in low-performing schools is at best a high-risk/low-gain strategy that fails to hold promise with respect to either increasing student achievement or promoting the non-cognitive well-being of students. The strategy invites political conflict and incurs hidden costs for both districts and local communities, especially low-income communities and communities of color that are differentially affected by school closings. It stands to reason that in many, if not most, instances, students, parents, local communities, district and state policymakers may be better off investing in persistently low-performing schools rather than closing them.

Find School Closure as a Strategy to Remedy Low Performance, by Gail L. Sunderman, Erin Coghlan and Rick Mintrop, at: http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/closures

Find Documents:
Press Release: http://nepc.info/node/8647
NEPC Publication: http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/closures

This policy brief was made possible in part by the support of the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice (greatlakescenter.org).

The National Education Policy Center (NEPC), housed at the University of Colorado Boulder School of Education, produces and disseminates high-quality, peer-reviewed research to inform education policy discussions. Visit us at: http://nepc.colorado.edu

If you have any questions regarding information in these press releases please contact the company listed in the press release. Our complete disclaimer appears here - PRWeb ebooks - Another online visibility tool from PRWeb
Contact Information
William J. Mathis
National Education Policy Center
http://nepc.colorado.edu
+1 (802) 383-0058

Gail L. Sunderman
University of Maryland
(443) 932-1934

Online Web 2.0 Version
You can read the online version of this press release here.