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OPINION | COMMENTARY

Shutting Bad Schools, Helping Students

Relocating children isn't popular, but there is a clear educational benefit.

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As difficult and disliked as school closures can be, a new study being released Tuesday by the Fordham Institute indicates that the students usually benefit. When we looked at the impact of closures on their achievement, we found that, on average, children directly affected by closure gained significantly—the equivalent of an extra month of learning in their new schools.

Shutting schools is politically dangerous. Just ask a big-city mayor or superintendent who has tried it. In Chicago, Mayor Rahm Emanuel has had to fight for his political life after taking heat for closing scores of schools in 2013. Even with school budgets drowning in red ink, authorities in Chicago, New York City, Washington, D.C., and many other places have faced intense resistance to school closures. Survey data helps explain: Nearly 60% of Chicago voters disapproved of the school closures supported by the mayor.

So shutting schools is unpopular. But what if that's best for the kids trapped inside?

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For our new study, we looked at Ohio, home to cities that have struggled with sluggish economies, waning populations and competition from charter schools. Taken together, the school districts in the state's eight major cities lost more than 50,000 pupils over eight years. Some schools wound up with too few kids to be sustainable; others were closed because of educational failure. Some charters closed, too, for the same reasons.

As one might expect, these urban school closings affected mainly disadvantaged pupils. In the nearly 200 closed district and charter schools we studied, 73% of students were African-American and more than 85% were poor. The average student in a closing school scored at approximately the 20th percentile on Ohio's math and reading tests.

The study utilized state records to chart the trajectory of students' test scores before

and after the school closings. Our research team from Ohio State and the University of Oklahoma estimated the academic impact of closure by comparing displaced-students' achievement trends with those of similar students who were unaffected by closure.

To suggest the size of the educational impact of closure, we presented the findings as "additional days of learning," which assumes that a year's worth of learning happens over a 180-day school year. This metric captures the incremental benefit of an intervention—in this case, school closure—on test scores, and is frequently used in education research to convey the results of statistical analyses.

The research reveals that displaced students typically receive a better education in their new school, relative to what they would have received in their closed school. Three years after closures, the public-school students had gained, on average, what equates to 49 extra days of learning in reading—gaining more than a year of achievement growth, as measured by state reading exams. In math, they gained an extra 34 days of learning, as measured by state math exams. In the charter sector, displaced students also made gains in math—46 additional days. These learning gains correspond to an improvement that moves students from the 20th to 22nd percentile in the achievement distribution.

Across both sectors, when students landed in higher-quality schools than the ones they left behind, the gains were even larger—60 days in both math and reading for public-school students, and 58 and 88 days, respectively, for charter students. In other words, students displaced into a higher-quality school make gains that boost their achievement from the 20th to 23rd percentile.

These results suggest that charter and district authorities should welcome school closures as a way to improve the education outcomes of needy children. Of course they must also be judicious, take into account the supply of higher-quality schools, and work with parents and community members to ease the transition. But done properly, shuttering bad schools might just be a saving grace for kids who only get one shot at a good education.

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