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OPINION

As public schools close in Atlanta, keep the focus on children's well-being

We cannot maintain the status quo in Atlanta; we must leverage every opportunity for improvement.



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Superintendent Bryan Johnson, (right) interacts with a 11-year-old student Ronnie Burks at the Sylvan Hills Middle School's first day of class in Atlanta on Thursday, Aug. 1, 2024. (Ziyu Julian Zhu/AJC)

By Angira Sceusi – For The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

3 hours ago



Editor's note: The Atlanta Journal-Constitution is running a series of guest essays about APS Forward 2040, the long-range plan under discussion in Atlanta Public Schools to reshape its future. Here is the latest of these essays.

[Atlanta Public Schools](#) is in the midst of determining which schools to close, an inherently sensitive and complicated process.

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The school district deserves credit for taking on these tough decisions and doing so in a way that has so far been transparent and provided ample opportunities for community

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narrowing that gap is necessary if the district is going to remain financially solvent.

As the district moves toward recommendations that could be approved by the end of the calendar year, [Superintendent Bryan Johnson](#) and the Board of Education need to prioritize three considerations, all of which involve kids, not data points or spreadsheets.

- First, students whose schools close must be placed in substantially higher-performing schools.
- Second, schools that receive these students must have staffing, capacity, and support in place *before* students arrive.
- Third, the impact of closure decisions must be closely monitored over time.

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As difficult as closure decisions are, other cities offer examples to learn from – and mistakes to avoid making. When not implemented thoughtfully and with robust support, closures tend to have a negative impact on students who are displaced, and students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and students of color tend to be most affected.

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Harms of school closures have not been evenly distributed

For example, a 2024 longitudinal study of more than 470 closures in Texas shows that displaced students experience immediate academic setbacks, with declines in test performance, higher absenteeism, and more disciplinary incidents in the years following closure.



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These harms were not evenly distributed: students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and Hispanic students experienced the steepest losses, and disruptions

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between 2012 and 2021. Statistically, the odds of a school being closed increased by about 25% for every 10-point increase in the proportion of Black students enrolled, even after controlling for achievement, poverty, enrollment, charter share, and spending.

Students with disabilities were also overrepresented in schools targeted for closure, raising additional concerns about continuity of services and supports.

In other words, there are plenty of ways that school closure decisions can hurt students and exacerbate inequities.

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To avoid these outcomes, APS staff and the Board of Education can start by ensuring any student whose school is closed is placed in a significantly higher-performing school.

Evidence from Texas and [Philadelphia](#) shows that displaced students sent to schools of similar or lower quality did not benefit and in some cases saw setbacks.

Here are solutions for ensuring quality education for all kids

We cannot maintain the status quo in Atlanta; we must leverage every opportunity for improvement. As such, a firm placement threshold – such as ensuring at least 90% of displaced students are assigned to schools in the top quartile on growth and climate measures – must be established and publicly reported before closure votes are finalized.

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APS should require precertification that staffing levels, counselors, interventionists, and class-size protections are adequate, paired with stabilization funding where needed. Meaningfully supporting receiving schools also requires capping the percentage of displaced students entering any single school. Giving new students the individualized attention they need will be impractical if receiving schools are overwhelmed by transfers.

Last but not least, APS must keep a close eye on how displaced students perform in their new schools, both initially and over time. Longitudinal studies are necessary to evaluate performance, make comparisons, and learn from this experience.

Unfortunately, if birth rates and enrollment patterns continue on the current trend, APS is likely to face more capacity gaps in the future. And, unfortunately, they're not alone – DeKalb and Clayton counties and other districts both near and far will grapple with similar challenges.

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Monitoring student and school performance throughout the closure and receiving process can have short- and long-term benefits, lessons that could be shared across metro Atlanta and beyond.

Offering these guidelines should not be seen as an admonishment. Former Newark, New Jersey school superintendent Cami Anderson once famously compared leading a large urban district to ["16-dimensional chess,"](#) and I sympathize with the myriad factors that Superintendent Johnson, APS staff, and the Board of Education have to consider as they move through this painful, if necessary, task.

My ask in this instance is what it is in all other instances – that even in this complex process chock full of numbers and logistical details, our focus remains on the students

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to ensure every Metro Atlanta student has access to high-quality public education options.

About the Author

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