



Making School Closures Work for All Students

Turning Disruption into Opportunity

Metro Atlanta Crossroads

Atlanta Public Schools (APS) is in the midst of its “APS Forward 2040” planning process, a long-range initiative designed to address declining enrollment, underutilized facilities, and inequitable access to academic programs.¹ In December 2025, the APS Board of Education approved a consolidation plan that includes school closures, mergers, and program shifts, with implementation scheduled over the coming years. The district frames these decisions as efforts to balance enrollment, reinvest in overlooked schools, and expand access to quality programs. The facilities challenge is of particular importance. APS has the capacity to serve approximately 70,000 students, but current enrollment is closer to 50,000, leaving more than 20,000 seats empty - a utilization rate of about 65%. This mismatch between facilities and enrollment drove the consolidation decisions already taken in APS and reflects similar pressures emerging across Metro Atlanta districts.



While APS presents these decisions primarily as a facilities management issue, research underscores that school closures are not simply operational adjustments. They are interventions with direct and lasting consequences for students, families, and communities. Studies consistently show that closures can either provide access to stronger schools and better opportunities, or - if poorly implemented - disrupt learning, deepen inequities, and erode trust. For students in persistently low-performing schools, who are most likely to be displaced, the stakes are particularly high. For RedefinED Atlanta, this moment presents both a risk and an opportunity: if closures are inevitable, they can either replicate historical patterns of disinvestment or be leveraged to expand access to stronger educational environments.

1. <https://www.atlantapublicschools.us/Page/73903>

2. <https://www.ajc.com/education/2025/12/atlanta-board-of-education-approves-school-consolidation-plan/>

3. <https://www.k12dive.com/news/atlanta-public-schools-building-closures-redistricting-plan-2025-2030/757011/>

The Evidence

National research on district-run closures (excluding charter contexts) shows a clear pattern - closures consistently disrupt students, and improvements occur only when districts implement specific, carefully managed conditions.

Closures cause predictable short-term harm, with some effects lasting into adulthood.

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. These harms were not evenly distributed: students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and Hispanic students experienced the steepest losses, and disruptions were particularly severe for students displaced during middle or high school. While some academic gaps narrowed over time, others persisted well beyond the transition. By age 26, displaced students were one percentage point less likely to graduate high school, 1.2 points less likely to enroll in a four-year college, and 0.7 points less likely to earn a bachelor's degree compared to peers. They were also 0.7 points less likely to be employed and earned \$793 less annually, translating into an estimated 3.4 percent reduction in lifetime earnings, or roughly \$30,000 in present discounted value.⁴

Long-term outcomes depend not just on receiving-school quality but also on district capacity to prepare those schools.

Research for Action and the Pennsylvania Clearinghouse for Education Research (Pacer) emphasize that academic gains materialize only when displaced students are reassigned to substantially stronger schools, and even then only if those schools are resourced and supported to absorb them. Instructional quality and adequate staffing are prerequisites, but equally important are school climate and cultural alignment.⁵ Pacer highlights that students often lose their sense of belonging and safety during closure transitions, which can drive higher absenteeism and behavioral issues if not addressed. Furthermore, abrupt placements into schools with very different cultures or practices can amplify feelings of alienation, especially for Black and low-income students. In practice, this means that a favorable "quality differential" on paper is not enough; receiving schools must be prepared with resources, intentional supports, and cultural responsiveness if displaced students are to thrive.

Closures carry disproportionate equity impacts unless districts deliberately intervene.

A 2023 statewide analysis in California found that Black students made up just 5 percent of total enrollment but nearly 14 percent of students in schools that were closed between 2012 and 2021. Statistically, the odds of a school being closed increased by about 25 percent for every 10-point increase in the proportion of Black students enrolled, even after controlling for achievement, poverty, enrollment, charter share, and spending.⁶ Students with disabilities were also overrepresented in schools targeted for closure, raising additional concerns about continuity of services and supports. These findings confirm that closure patterns are not random: without explicit equity safeguards, they tend to replicate historical inequities and concentrate disruption in communities that already face systemic disinvestment.

4. <https://edworkingpapers.com/sites/default/files/ai24-963.pdf>

5. <https://www.researchforaction.org/research-resources/k-12/revisiting-research-on-school-closings-key-learning>s

6. https://edpolicyinca.org/sites/default/files/2023-09/pb_hahnel_sept2023.pdf

Risks in Context

In Atlanta, the stakes of closure are far from theoretical. APS currently reports that 31.2% of students in 2024-2025 are chronically absent - missing 10% or more of school days - a rate far above peer districts and well off national targets.⁷ With closures, even modest additional disruption could push marginal students into permanent disengagement. APS is also considering shutting or repurposing between 11 and 13 schools to manage a 20,000-seat surplus (capacity of ~70,000 versus ~50,000 enrolled), raising the likelihood that displacement will be concentrated in South and West Atlanta - communities that are predominantly Black and historically under-resourced.

Historic closures in these neighborhoods left several buildings vacant or underutilized for years, becoming visible symbols of disinvestment and community frustration. APS's 2025 facilities planning directly acknowledges this legacy: the district identified 16 surplus properties and pledged to convert them into early learning hubs, community spaces, and affordable housing to avoid repeating past harm.⁸ At the same time, capacity imbalances across clusters remain stark - Midtown and North Atlanta schools operate near or above capacity, while many South and West Atlanta schools are significantly under-enrolled.⁹ Without precise safeguards, closures risk worsening absenteeism, overburdening already full schools, leaving more vacant facilities behind, and widening inequities in the very neighborhoods APS says it intends to reinvest in.

Conditions for Success

For RedefinED Atlanta, the research evidence leads to a clear organizational stance: school closure can only be justified as an academic improvement strategy if three core conditions are guaranteed.

Displaced students must be placed in substantially higher-performing schools.

This is the single strongest predictor of positive outcomes across the research. In Texas, a 2024 longitudinal study of more than 470 closures found that students reassigned to weaker schools never regained lost academic ground, while those placed in higher-performing schools eventually recovered and, in some cases, outpaced peers who were not displaced.¹⁰ Philadelphia's experience confirms this: achievement gains only occurred when displaced students were moved into significantly stronger schools, while peers sent to schools of similar or lower quality did not benefit, and in some cases saw setbacks.¹¹ For APS, this means that "better than before" is not enough. A firm placement threshold - such as ensuring at least 90 percent 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.

7. <https://civicatlanta.org/blog/2025-09-07-aps-chronic-absenteeism-update>

8. <https://www.atlantapublicschools.us/Page/71276>

9. <https://civicatlanta.org/blog/2025-03-09-atlanta-public-schools-facilities-master-plan>

10. <https://edworkingpapers.com/sites/default/files/ai24-963.pdf>

11. https://staging-development-apps.gse.stanford.edu/oakland2/assets/oakland_files/The%20effects%20of%20closing%20urban%20schools%20%282019%29.pdf

Receiving schools must have staffing, capacity, and support in place before students arrive.

School closures not only disrupt the students leaving, but can destabilize the schools that take them in. In Texas, receiving schools experienced a loss of about 2.3 FTE per 1,000 students after closures, concentrated in teaching and support staff positions, undercutting their ability to meet new student needs. Philadelphia's data also show that when displaced students made up more than 10 percent of enrollment, math and reading scores for all students fell by -0.02 to -0.03 SD, underscoring the risks of overwhelming a school's capacity. For APS, this requires pre-certification that staffing levels, counselors, interventionists, and class-size protections are adequate, paired with stabilization funding where needed. It also requires capping the percentage of displaced students entering any single receiving school to prevent spillover harms.

Closure decisions must be equity-driven and supported by authentic community engagement.

Closures are rarely neutral: they disproportionately affect historically marginalized students unless districts take deliberate action. In California, schools with higher proportions of Black students were 25 percent more likely to close, even after accounting for poverty and performance.¹² The California DOJ's intervention in Oakland Unified illustrates the stakes, concluding that the district's closure plan would disproportionately harm Black and low-income students and mandating significant changes.¹³ For APS, this translates into a requirement for public Equity Impact Statements, robust multilingual engagement spanning months rather than weeks, and advisory bodies with real decision-making influence. Absent these safeguards, closures risk deepening mistrust in communities that have long experienced cycles of disinvestment.

While these three conditions represent the non-negotiable baseline for closures, they are not sufficient on their own. Additional safeguards - such as reliable transportation and commute-time limits, individualized transition planning, sequenced timing aligned to natural breaks, transparent monitoring of displaced students for at least three years, and visible reinvestment in shuttered facilities - are essential to create the conditions under which learning can improve. Without these protections, closures may balance facilities but will not translate into stronger academic outcomes. With them, however, closures can become a lever for expanding access to higher-quality schools and accelerating student achievement, even for those who begin in the most underperforming environments.

12. https://edpolicyinca.org/sites/default/files/2023-09/pb_hahneL_sept2023.pdf

13. <https://oag.ca.gov/news/press-releases/attorney-general-bonta-advises-oakland-unified-comply-state-laws-it-considers-1>