

SCHOOL & DISTRICT MANAGEMENT

The Harm of School Closures Can Last a Lifetime, New Research Shows



By [Libby Stanford](#) — June 18, 2024 ⌚ 5 min read



Desks and chairs are stacked in an empty classroom after the permanent closure of Queen of the Rosary Catholic Academy in Brooklyn borough of New York on Aug. 6, 2020. A new study examines the long-term effects on students whose schools close.

— Jessie Wardarski/AP

Students who attend a school that closes during their K-12 career have lower test scores along with worse attendance and behavior in the short term. In the long term, they're less likely than their peers to complete college and have a job, and their earnings tend to be lower.

Each year, [hundreds of schools across the country close](#) because of low enrollment, budget shortfalls, and poor performance. Decades of research have shown that those closures have a short-term, negative impact on students' academic achievement, with researchers documenting drops in test scores, attendance, and high school graduation rates that usually recover after three years.

But [a new working paper](#) shows that the impact of school closures often extends well past graduation, said Jeonghyeok Kim, a Ph.D. candidate in economics at the University of Houston and the researcher behind the study.

“Those students in secondary education, middle and high school students, they show a persistent drop in their test scores,” Kim said. “From those effects, I also found long-term negative effects on their higher education attainment and even their wages.”

Districts across the country are weighing school closures as they face tighter budgets with the coming end of COVID-era relief funds and declining enrollments. Some schools through the years have also closed due to poor performance. Research has shown closures disproportionately affect students of color and students from low-income families, which recently [prompted two civil rights groups to request guidance from the U.S. Department of Education’s office for civil rights](#) outlining when closures violate federal civil rights law.

Kim centered his research around a dataset of 470 Texas schools that closed from 1998 to 2015.

By age 26, the students who experienced school closures were 4.8 percent less likely to have attended college, 4.7 percent less likely to have completed college, and 1.3 percent less likely to be employed than their peers in schools with similar demographics and in similarly sized cities who did not experience a school closure. Annual earnings for those students from ages 25 to 27 were also 3.4 percent lower than their peers’.

In his research, Kim also documented immediate disruptions to learning among students whose schools closed.

Kim found a statistically significant drop in math and reading scores among students who went through a school closure. They were also absent on 1.8 percent more school days in the three years following the closure than the three years before. In addition, Kim found an increase in disciplinary action, including expulsions, out-of-school suspensions, and in-school suspensions, for bad behavior following school closures. The number of days students were disciplined for bad behavior in the three years following a school closure increased by 15 percent compared to the three years before school closures.

The declines in educational and post-graduation success were more pronounced among Hispanic students, economically disadvantaged students, and students who were in middle or high school when the school closed rather than in elementary school, Kim said.

“The more vulnerable students are more negatively affected, so maybe we can put more attention to those students in the process of school closure,” Kim said. “Then maybe we can alleviate the negative effect a bit.”

Schools close for a variety of reasons

Kim found that schools close primarily because of drops in enrollment, but poor performance is a factor as well.

Kim was able to determine the specific reason for closure in 267 of the 470 closure cases included in the study. Of those 267, 31 percent closed because of an enrollment change; 22 percent closed because of district changes, such as rezoning to accommodate shifting populations and the construction of new schools; 16 percent closed because of financial constraints; 13 percent closed because of old buildings; and 9 percent closed because of school reform, in which schools might not have been physically closed but converted into another type of school such as a charter or magnet school.

Only 3 percent of the schools in the study closed because of low performance. Another 3 percent closed because of a district merger, and 3 percent were marked as closed because of a coding change in the National Center for Education Statistics, the source of the data set.

A 2022 [study from the National Center for Research on Education Access and Choice](#) found that schools, including public and charter schools, are less likely to close if they increase enrollment, post high scores or rankings, or improve students' academic growth. Federal policies that prioritize high standardized test scores and include the potential for state intervention and closure for poor performance, such as the Bush-era No Child Left Behind Act and the Obama-era School Improvement Grant program, have encouraged districts to improve test scores, rankings, and enrollment to avoid closure.

But other factors have historically contributed to school closures as well. For example, people living in more disadvantaged neighborhoods may have less political power to advocate for keeping a school open, or budget decisions may force otherwise high-performing schools to close because of dilapidated buildings, [researchers told Education Week](#).

Studies have shown that schools with high Black and Hispanic populations are disproportionately likely to close. In a study of federal enrollment data from 2000 to 2018, researchers at the Stanford Graduate School of Education found that majority-Black schools were three times more likely to close than schools with smaller enrollments of Black students.

The effect of school closures is felt unevenly

Kim's study confirmed that students of color are more likely to experience school closures and that the closures have a greater effect on their educational attainment.

Hispanic students accounted for 47 percent of students experiencing school closures in Kim's study, while they made up 43 percent of the total Texas student population. Students who qualify for free-and-reduced price lunch made up 63 percent of students experiencing closures while they only accounted for 49 percent of Texas students.

Attendance among Hispanic students also took a bigger hit than it did among other student populations: Hispanic students were absent 6.4 percent more days following a school closure, compared with the 1.8 percent increase for all students. Black students experienced a 33 percent jump in the number of days on which they received disciplinary action following a closure, compared with the 15 percent increase among all students.

Economically disadvantaged students were absent 7.3 percent more often following a closure. They also had the highest increase of any group for the number of days of disciplinary action—38 percent.

The results ultimately show that school closures disproportionately impact students of color and students from low-income families.

“There is a long-term negative effect,” Kim said. “It is worsening inequality in some sense.”



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