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Chicago school closings' impact minimal, report finds

Only 6% of students were transferred to top campuses

By Azam Ahmed

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When Chicago Public Schools began closing schools for poor performance and low-enrollment back in 2001, it ignited a fire that has never quite stopped roaring.

Critics of the policy have marched, protested and fought every step of the way to prevent the closings, arguing that the policy broke up school-based relationships and was disruptive for kids. The district said the initiative was meant to give students a shot at attending better schools.

But a recent report shows there was almost no difference in achievement for students whose elementary schools were closed from 2001 to 2006, mostly because the schools they later went to were among the city's worst.

Only 6 percent of the students landed at top schools, as measured by standardized test scores, according to the report by the Consortium for Chicago School Research. Those students showed significant learning gains.

"We don't know whether we saw only 6 percent going to top schools because those were all the seats available or because parents didn't feel comfortable sending them to another neighborhood," said Marisa de la Torre, one of the report's authors.

The study examined 18 schools where 5,445 students were enrolled in kindergarten through eighth grade just before the schools closed. Researchers tracked those students' Iowa Test of Basic Skills scores for three years after their schools' closings.

Researchers found that the greatest negative impact to learning occurred in the window between when closings were announced and the actual closing occurred. Typically, announcements were made in January, six months before schools closed.

Once students began studies in their new environments, they largely made up for lost time and performed on par with the control group selected by researchers, meaning they did no better than before.

At the same time, the handful of students that went to the top schools were scoring at a higher level just a year later. Those who attended schools with a high level of teacher-student trust and personal attention also showed higher gains.

"The quality of the school a kid attends matters," said Robin Steans, director of Advance Illinois, a nonprofit education group. "Obviously the focus and drive to make sure these kids ended up in better placements fell short."

The school board changed policies during the 2006 school year in part to address some of the concerns. Instead of closing schools, it moved to turn around weak schools by firing and replacing staff.

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