

to achieve cost savings, the first issue I turn to is school organization/optimization. Closing schools is not schools for the wrong reasons and under the wrong pretexts is a bad thing. Reorganizing schools may lead to cost cutting realities in a labor intensive industry. The fact is that you can't really cut much from costs. When enrollments decline significantly over time, fewer teachers are needed to get the job done and the schools reorganized.

But closing schools based on test scores, and pretending that we are somehow appropriately dismissing test scores is – well – just dumb.

Now let's talk about some of the more legitimate reasons that a district might choose to close/reorganize :

First, let's define "cost" and "cost cutting." Cost is the minimum amount that needs to be spent to achieve a fact, it's certainly possible to spend more than the minimum hypothetical – perfect world – cost of achieving a fact, but it's pretty much a given that spending on outcomes occurs in less than perfect conditions, including unevenly distributed facilities capacity, quality and efficiency. Ultimately, the goal is to find the minimum cost of achieving a fact – less than perfect conditions – in order to get closer to that hypothetical minimum cost of achieving a fact. In other words, the goal in times of budget cuts is to figure out how to spend less, but not compromise outcomes.

Here's a short list of legitimate reasons a district might choose to close schools.

Economies of Scale

Operating unnecessarily small schools within a district creates inappropriate inequities. Providing more resources in one school necessarily means less in others. If those differences are based on legitimate differences in costs and student needs, that difference that advances rather than erodes equity. But, sustaining inefficiently small schools at the expense of larger schools in a population dense school district doesn't meet those criteria. So, it's in the best interest of the district as a whole to have a more even distribution of enrollments across schools within districts. To make sure, for example, that there aren't schools in one part of town with only 100 or so students, and in another part of town with 1,200 students. That there aren't high schools with 100 students drawing resources from high schools with 1,500 students. This can be really tricky to accomplish, but it's optimal, while not reaching it is better than nothing. The literature on economies of scale (<http://www.science.org/doi/pdf/S0272775701000061>) suggests that elementary schools of 300 to 500 students and high schools of 600 to 1,000 students are optimal outcomes, and these sizes are consistent with literature that suggests that districts with 2000 to 4000 students have the lowest costs of producing outcomes.

Facility efficiency

Some school facilities are simply more efficient to operate than others. They have more efficient mechanical systems, are better insulated, have fewer deferred maintenance issues, potentially longer overall projected useful life. Some facilities are more efficient space for accommodating the kinds of programs and services that need to be delivered. Evaluating the costs of maintaining and upgrading the current stock of facilities and whether children can be more efficiently delivered with lower operations and maintenance costs is something any/all school districts should be engaged in.

Transportation efficiency

As population distribution shifts across spaces within a district, and while considering other reasons for closing schools, transportation efficiency should also be on the table. In a district with dramatically declining enrollment, school closings may be inevitable. In fact, a district may find itself closing some schools and opening others in different locations (less likely in more densely populated urban centers, but common in sprawling suburban areas).

Health & Safety Concerns

This one is (or at least should be) a no brainer. Kids shouldn't be housed in unsafe or unhealthy facilities. engage in cost-benefit analyses to evaluate/compare the costs of improving the problem facilities/spaces v options. Closing unsafe, unhealthy schools and appropriately distributing students among "better" spaces is a good reason for school closing.

Socioeconomic integration/balancing

A final reason why a district might close and/or reorganize schools to improve performance while maintaining or achieve better peer group balance across schools. Of course, this only works when the district is a) heterogeneous enough to create better balanced peer groups and b) geographically small enough to not incur substantial transportation costs. Such a policy. A substantial body of research indicates that concentrated poverty (<http://www.sciencedirect.com/pii/S0272775704001207>) and for that matter racial composition (<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1016/j.jurimetrics.2006.05.008>) (racial isolation) in schools can affect the costs of achieving a given outcome target. Optimizing peer group balance while considering interaction with other cost drivers (transportation) makes sense. Of course, the U.S. Supreme Court has placed constraints on the role of race in re-assignment policies, http://www.oyez.org/cases/2000-2009/2006/2006_05_908). But options remain available.

Improving peer group balance, optimizing school sizes, optimizing bus routes, making best use of most cost-effective and educationally efficient learning spaces all can help districts both reduce costs and improve outcomes.

AND ABSOLUTELY NONE OF THIS HAS ANYTHING TO DO WITH *CLOSING FAILING SCHOOLS*. No evidence that closing "failing" schools improves either productivity or efficiency.

It's not that sexy. It's not reformy. It's just good management decision making to get the most bang-for-the-buck that districts can and should be working on constantly.

Closing schools is never easy. Someone will always be irked, no matter what the reason for the closure. A school has lost its identity. Alums will feel that a piece of their childhood has been taken away. So if we're going to engage in the difficult political fights that school closing plans create, then we ought to be closing the schools for the right reasons!

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