

# Study finds closing low-performing NYC high schools had positive effects

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New York City's policy of closing very low-performing high schools during the last decade produced notable benefits for the middle schoolers who likely would have enrolled in these schools, according to a new report from the Research Alliance for New York City Schools at NYU. This first-ever study of the impact of school closures in New York City also highlights some important cautions to consider regarding the closure strategy.

The turn of the 21st century was marked by dismal performance in many of the country's large urban high schools. A 2004 Johns Hopkins report singled out New York City as having the highest concentration of "dropout factories" in the nation.

Over the next decade, the NYC Department of Education implemented a set of large-scale and much debated high school reforms that included closing large, low-performing high schools, opening new small schools, and extending high school choice to all [students](#).

"Closing struggling high schools was a controversial and politically charged approach, but until now, there has not been a rigorous assessment of the impact of these closures on students' outcomes," said James Kemple, executive director of the Research Alliance and the new report's author.

To begin to fill this gap, the Research Alliance studied the 29 low-performing high schools that were designated for closure in New York City between 2002 and 2008. According to the analysis, these 29 high schools were consistently among the lowest-performing in the city, even after accounting for differences in the demographics and prior performance of incoming students. At the time of the closure decisions, average graduation rates at these schools were below 40 percent.

The Research Alliance looked at the impact of the

closures on two groups of students: those who were enrolled in the high schools as they were being phased out (specifically, the 9,600 students who were 9th graders when the closure decision was announced), and those who had to choose another high school when their most likely option was closed (approximately 11,000 8th graders). Key findings include:

- Closing high schools produced meaningful benefits for future cohorts of students—i.e., the [middle school students](#) who had to choose another high school option because the school they likely would have attended was closing. These students ended up going to schools that were higher performing than the closed schools. In addition, the students' outcomes improved significantly more than students in a comparison group, including a 15-point increase in graduation rates.
- The phaseout process had little impact, positive or negative, on the academic outcomes of students who were enrolled at the time. These students had higher outcomes (including attendance and graduation rates) compared to students enrolled in the same schools prior to the closure decisions. However, gains made by students in the closing high schools were similar to gains made in other low-performing high schools that were not closed—suggesting that the phaseout process, in and of itself, had little effect on these outcomes.

"Combined with other recent research that has documented the positive effects of New York City's small high schools, our results offer support for the strategic use of school closures as part of a multi-dimensional high school reform strategy," Kemple said. "Still, these findings are just one piece of the puzzle."

Kemple notes that, while the Research Alliance study provides rigorous evidence about closures' impact on students, it does not address closures' effects on educators, parents, and neighborhoods (or on aspects of students' experiences not reflected in their attendance, mobility, and academic outcomes). Moreover, New York City's high school landscape has changed markedly since the early 2000s; [graduation rates](#) have improved substantially, and there is a growing focus on preparing students for postsecondary education.

"Dramatic actions like [school closures](#) may help put a system of failing schools on a positive trajectory," Kemple said. "It is not clear, however, that these reforms are sufficient to meet the demands being placed on New York City's current landscape of high schools. After the lowest-performing schools in the system have been closed, what can be done to help other high schools serve their students more effectively—particularly low-income Black and Latino students, who continue to have much lower graduation and college enrollment rates? How can high schools meet the challenges of preparing students for success in college and a career? These are central questions that should animate the current generation of high school reform."

**More information:** Performance-Based High School Closures in New York City: Impacts on Students' Academic Outcomes, Attendance, and Mobility: [steinhardt.nyu.edu/research\\_al.../hs\\_closures\\_in\\_nyc](https://steinhardt.nyu.edu/research_al.../hs_closures_in_nyc)

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