

## EDUCATION WEEK

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### Chicago School Closings Found to Yield Few Gains



A school crossing guard walks back into Frazier Elementary School in January, 2006. Arne Duncan, then the CEO of the Chicago schools, ordered Frazier closed for low academic performance.  
—Charles Rex Arbogast/AP-File

#### Federal Officials Are Pushing Similar 'Turnaround' Policy

By **Dakarai I. Aarons**

A majority of Chicago students affected by school closings were sent to schools that were low-performing, just like those they left behind—moves that had no significant impact on performance for most students, a [study released last week](#) finds.

The lack of academic improvement raises questions about a strategy that's part of U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan's spotlight on changing the nation's lowest-performing schools.


The study, by the University of Chicago's [Consortium on Chicago School Research](#), examines the academic effects of the closings on students at 18 elementary schools shut down between 2001 and 2006. To measure the impact, the researchers compared students 8 and older with their counterparts in schools that had similar characteristics but continued to operate. The schools had a combined enrollment of 5,445 at the time of their closing.

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"Certainly, when schools were closed for academic reasons, the idea was to try to change their educational prospects and what they might obtain. Unfortunately, we didn't find that," said Julia Gwynne, a senior research analyst with the consortium and the report's co-author. "The main reason why that seems not to have occurred was because most students did not attend schools that were substantially better than the ones that were closed."

A Chicago-style strategy has been championed nationwide by Mr. Duncan, the chief executive officer of the Chicago district from 2001 until December 2008, when President-elect Barack Obama tapped him to be education secretary. School closings are one element of the so-called "turnaround" plans **Mr. Duncan has promoted as secretary**, which also include measures that would replace principals and teachers in persistently failing schools.

"It would be difficult to measure a student's academic achievement based solely on a school's closing," Monique D. Bond, a Chicago schools spokeswoman, said by e-mail, noting the district believes the consortium's study is a "fair analysis."

"We need to review the data to get a better understanding of its findings, which will help to inform us as we move forward with considering our future school closing policies," she said.

The 405,000-student district still closes and consolidates schools, but moved in 2006 toward more frequent use of a strategy that keeps students in their current buildings but replaces principals and teachers.

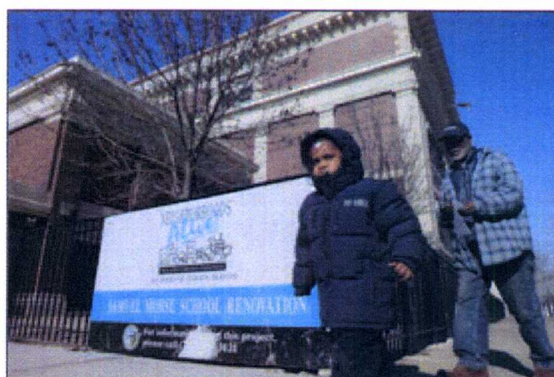
### Payoff Questioned

Among the students displaced, 40 percent were enrolled in schools that were on probation, and 42 percent were enrolled in schools where Iowa Tests of Basic Skills scores were in the lowest quartile in the city, according to the study. Just 6 percent of displaced students were enrolled in schools with itbs scores in the highest quartile, it says.

"If the findings are correct—for Chicago, at least—we have to question the value of closing schools and creating the dislocations that would attend those school closings for little or no constructive result," said Daniel L. Duke, a professor of educational leadership at the University of Virginia, in Charlottesville.

Mr. Duke, who runs a university program that prepares leaders to turn around low-performing schools, said placing strong leaders who are supported by teacher-leaders and central-office employees has proved to be an effective strategy for many of the schools the program has worked with.

While students who went from one low-performing school to another did not see achievement gains, the study says, those who transferred to some of the district's highest-performing schools did show progress.



John Washington picks up his great-grandson, Rayshaun Cates, at Samuel Morse Elementary School in Chicago in 2006. The school was also closed for low academic performance that year by Arne Duncan, then the CEO of the Chicago schools.  
—Charles Rex Arbogast/AP-File

The announcement that specific schools were closing had a negative impact on student achievement, the study suggests. The announcement was often made in January, a few months before students took standardized tests. In the year that closings were announced, students in schools slated to close fell 1½ months below the expected achievement level in reading and more than a half-month below the expected level in math, based on an analysis of itbs scores.

That negative effect was temporary. A year later, the displaced students were achieving at their expected levels, the study says.

Julie Woestehoff, the executive director of Parents United for Responsible Education, a Chicago advocacy group often critical of Mr. Duncan's initiatives as district chief, said the study's findings are more evidence that the district's reform strategies are not working. The group has called for the end of Renaissance 2010, a district program that closes low-performing schools and replaces them with charter and charter-like schools run by private groups.

"When Arne Duncan announced this program, he said it was going to lead to dramatically better education for the children. We were hoping that would be true," Ms. Woestehoff said. "There hasn't really been any payoff from all the money that has been spent and all the disruption that has been caused to communities and especially to students."

Chicago's school closings returned to the spotlight this fall after a student was brutally beaten and killed in a fight near a high school. Local activists have contended that the closings created a dangerous mixture of students from rival neighborhoods. Mr. Duncan has said that blaming the closings for a rise in violence was "absolutely ridiculous." ("[Outcry Against Violence](#)," Oct. 14, 2009.)

### **Can They Be Fixed?**

The displacement of students after school closings also had an impact on student-mobility rates and participation in the district's summer school programs, the study says.

Students were more likely to switch schools again not only in the summer after that first year in the new school, the researchers found, but also during the school year. Third, 6th, and 8th graders were less likely than their peers in similar schools to attend summer school in the summer after their schools had closed.

Rebecca Herman, a managing research analyst for the Washington-based American Institutes for Research, said policymakers should especially focus on making sure that students affected by closings are being placed in higher-performing schools, and ensuring that those schools are equipped with supports to help them take on the new students while maintaining quality.

Particular attention should also be paid to the transition period after announcements of school closings are made, she said.

Ms. Herman, who was the lead author of a [federal guide on school turnarounds](#), said the Chicago study leaves some questions unanswered. For example, were there "differences in

