What Are Schools For?

On June 19, 2013, variations of the same message were being broadcast by staff across 50 different elementary and high schools across Chicago: "These are our final few minutes as a school." These schools, slated for closure by the city government, would not reopen their doors in the fall. Tears flowed and, even years later, people who lived through these school closures describe them as "horrible," "hurtful," and "disrespectful and rude". One mother, who lived through the closure of her elementary school and then the closure of her children's elementary school, says that when schools close, it feels like "it shut down our family." Chicago Public Schools closed its first schools in 2002 and has closed 169 schools since. Over 70,000 children in Chicago have experienced their school shutting down or dismissing all the staff. 88 percent of these children are black, and almost all closed schools were located on the South or West Side of Chicago.

City leaders have historically defended the closures as necessary reforms. Mayor Rahm Emanuel, who was responsible for the mass closures in 2013, justified school closures by saying it was wrong to leave students in low-performing, under-enrolled schools.

And he has a point.

More children in Chicago are unable to read at their appropriate grade level than there are citizens of Salt Lake City. As of the 2024-2025 school year, only 28 percent of students in Chicago, on average, were proficient in English and only 20 percent were proficient in math. This is 10 percentage points worse than the Illinois state average for English and nine percentage points worse for math.

Additionally, Chicago is facing a declining student population and severely underutilized schools. Chicago's student population has dropped 19 percent between 2013 and 2023, from 400,000 students to 320,000. This drop in the number of students means that there are simply not enough students to fill the available space. Over half the school buildings in Chicago are underutilized. One school, Frederick Douglass Academy High School, was built to accommodate 912 students but has merely 28 enrolled.

City officials have painted the school closures as an opportunity to "start over" and to "create much, much better options for those kids and for the community." Part of this effort

involved opening new schools, many of them charters. In fact, over the same period that Chicago Public Schools closed 169 schools, it opened 193, 105 of which are charter schools. Charter schools are open to all students in Chicago and are funded by the school district but have more freedom to choose how they operate than traditional public schools. They tend to have stronger links between teacher performance and retention than traditional public schools, which often find removing low-performing teachers difficult due to union contracts and tenure provisions. Charter schools have been shown to outperform traditional public schools by multiple metrics. In Chicago, charter schools students enroll in four-year colleges at a rate almost 19 percent points higher than traditional public school students, after controlling for students' backgrounds. Nationwide, charter school students advanced their math and reading abilities by an additional 6 days of learning for math and 16 days of learning for reading each year, compared to their peers in the traditional public schools they would have attended.

This strategy of school closure and replacement seems, on the surface, promising for improving educational outcomes. But the district has overlooked a crucial fact in their calculations of which schools should be closed: schools in Chicago do so much more than educate children.

Public schools in Chicago, especially those in neighborhoods that have experienced historic disinvestment, have been forced to wear many hats. Many children eat both breakfast and lunch at school, and 89 percent of Chicago Public School students are eligible for these meals to be completely free. Schools also often provide medical care and mental health counseling to their students, including school-based behavioral health teams meant to provide support after an incident of violence or tragedy, such as gun violence. The Safe Passage Program helps children get to and from school safely at nearly 200 schools across the city. These services extend beyond students as well. Families can pick up meals at their neighborhood school, enroll in programs like Medicaid and SNAP, and receive temporary financial assistance.

Due to the myriad of services they provide beyond education, schools are community anchors. Many would say that this function alone has intrinsic value: that schools are for bettering their communities and should be evaluated as such. However, even if the district cares strictly about educational outcomes, the services provided by schools outside of classroom instruction must be evaluated as necessary prerequisites for improving student performance. This

is evident in the fate of charter schools that were opened to replace underperforming schools. Of the 193 schools opened in Chicago since 2002, 19 percent have been closed due to low test scores or too few students. The very schools that were promised to outperform those they replaced now find themselves facing the exact same issues and outcomes.

In fact, any school opened in a neighborhood with a steadily declining population, high crime rate, and severe underdevelopment would likely face a similar fate. Families are vacating neighborhoods in the South and West Side of Chicago because these neighborhoods are not being invested in. They need more jobs, more grocery stores, and more affordable housing. As one resident put it, "It's not anywhere you can go to eat unless it is a liquor store." Schools operating in these environments face significant challenges that extend far beyond the classroom. Test scores are hard to improve when students are living in poverty and facing hunger and gun violence. For these schools, the additional services they provide are not merely supplementing their academic instruction—they are essential to creating an environment in which their students have the capacity to learn.

Chicago Public Schools' criteria with which they evaluate the success of schools is deeply flawed and has led to hundreds of wrongful closures. To begin with, the positive impact that a school has on a neighborhood through the essential social services it provides and community it cultivates has value in and of itself. Even if this were not the case, the resources schools provide their neighborhoods are necessary to help improve the conditions that impede student success and should therefore be included in any evaluation of performance. The district must rethink what schools are for to determine how they should be evaluated. If schools are meant to be community anchors that provide services that the city itself is not providing, they must be evaluated as such. If schools are meant to be purely places of academic learning, evaluated by test scores and student enrollment, the city must ensure that social and economic barriers to learning are addressed, so that low test scores and enrollment are not mistaken for a lack of effort when they are really symptoms of unmet need.