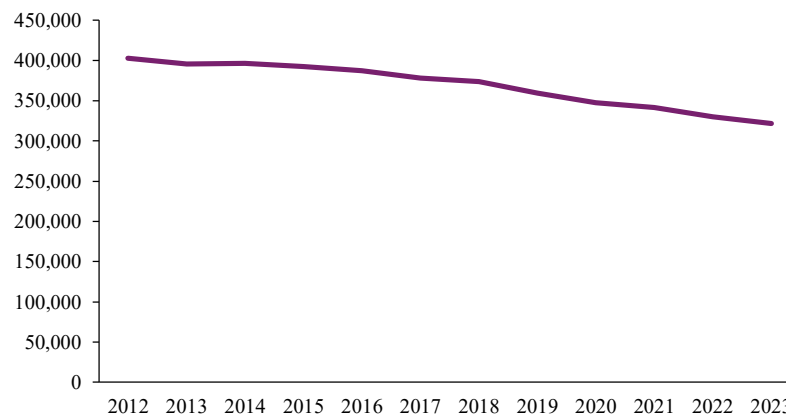


The Paradox of Progress: Examining the Consequences of Reform in Chicago Public Schools

Chicago Public Schools is the fourth largest school district in the United States, enrolling over 300,000 students at 630 different schools across the city (Chicago Public Schools “Stats and Facts;” National Center for Education Statistics 2022). 71 percent of students in the district are economically disadvantaged, and 88 percent identify as students of color (Chicago Public Schools “Stats and Facts”). Chicago Public Schools currently faces a trifecta of challenges: underutilized schools, an insufficient budget, and poor student performance. For decades Chicago has attempted to solve these problems by closing underperforming and underenrolled schools and replacing them with new schools. While this strategy was likely well-intentioned, it has exacerbated many of the problems it was trying to solve.

Chicago lost nearly a fifth of its student population between 2013 and 2023, falling from 400,000 students to 320,000 (U.S. Census Bureau 2023).

Chicago Public Schools Total Enrollment



This rapid decline means that there are not enough students to fill the available space. In fact, 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 (Chicago Public Schools “Facility Standards”).

2025-2026 School Year Utilization in Chicago Public Schools

	Number of Schools	Percent of Schools
Underutilized	275	58%
Efficient	175	37%
Overcrowded	24	5%
Total	474	

Keeping underutilized schools open is expensive for the school district. On average, Chicago Public Schools spends about \$12,500 per student at large elementary schools and high schools (those with over 500 and 1,500 students, respectively) (Issa et al. 2023). In contrast, at schools with fewer than 250 students, the district spends \$20,000 per student at elementary schools and \$32,000 per student at high schools (Issa et al. 2023). Returning to Frederick Douglass Academy High School, the district’s per-pupil expenditure for these 28 students was over \$93,000 in 2024 (Illinois State Board of Education). Chicago Public Schools currently has over \$9 billion of debt and ended the 2024-2025 school year with a \$734 million deficit (Chicago Public Schools “Debt Management;” Chicago Sun-Times and WBEZ). In short, Chicago cannot afford to maintain empty schools.

At the same time, Chicago is facing a crisis of student achievement. As of the 2024-2025 school year, only 28 percent of students were proficient in English, on average, at schools within Chicago Public Schools and only 20 percent were proficient in math (Illinois State Board of Education). This is 10 percentage points worse than the Illinois state average for English and nine percentage points worse for math (Illinois State Board of Education). To put this in context, more children in Chicago are unable to read at their appropriate grade level than there are citizens of Salt Lake City (Data USA 2023).

The district itself has acknowledged these issues and has cited them as reasons to close certain schools. Former Mayor Emanuel stated that “it was wrong to leave students in schools that had become severely underenrolled, were consistently low-performing, and were falling apart” (Karp et al. 2023). A press release from 2013 read “CPS simply has too many schools and too few children – today CPS has space for over 500,000 students, but just over 400,000 are enrolled in our schools” (Karp et al. 2023). Chicago Public Schools closed its first schools in 2002 and has closed 169 schools since (Lutton et al. 2018). Under Mayor Richard M. Daley, who served as mayor until 2011, these school closings occurred every year, but the constant changes were seen as “disruptive” (Karp et al. 2023; Encyclopedia Britannica n.d.). Instead,

when Mayor Emanuel came into office, he decided to close 50 schools in 2013 and then promised to not close any more for five years, intending to provide more stability for families (Karp et al. 2023).

Even as the district closed hundreds of schools due to underutilization, it pursued an ambitious expansion strategy, opening new schools—many of them charter schools—intended to solve a different problem: student performance. Over the same period that Chicago Public Schools closed 169 schools, it opened 193, 105 of which are charter schools (Lutton et al. 2018). Charter schools are “publicly funded, tuition-free schools” that have more freedom to choose how they operate than traditional public schools (Fischler and Claybourn 2025). Any student within Chicago Public Schools can attend a charter school, provided there is space.¹ Charter schools 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 (Barrett et al. 2020). Currently, 114 of Chicago’s public schools are charter schools, which enroll over 50,000 students (Illinois Network of Charter Schools). One out of every four high school students in Chicago attends a charter school (Illinois Network of Charter Schools).

Charter schools have been shown by multiple metrics (math and reading proficiency, standardized test scores, four-year-college attendance) to outperform traditional public schools, including when controlling for confounding factors such as race and income level of the students.² These results have been shown in Chicago specifically, as well as on the national scale

¹ Chicago is a choice district, meaning that students in grades K-12 can apply to attend a school other than the one in their neighborhood. Students are then selected for open seats via a random computerized lottery system. This system is widely utilized across the city—in the 2024-2025 school year, 43 percent of elementary school students and 75 percent of high school students attended a school other than the neighborhood school they were zoned in to (Chicago Public Schools “Choice Programs K-8;” Chicago Public Schools “High School Choice Programs; Chicago Public Schools “District Overview – Choice”).

² A study from the Center for Research on Education Outcomes at Stanford found that “the typical charter school student in our national sample had reading and math gains that outpaced their peers in the traditional public schools (TPS) they otherwise would have attended,” including Black and Hispanic students. This study controlled for demographic and income factors (Raymond 2023).

A study of charter schools in New York housed in the same buildings as traditional public schools found that charter school student attained higher levels of proficiency in English and math than their traditional public school peers (Sowell 2020).

Multiple studies on charter schools in Massachusetts have found that charter school attendance boosts scores on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System test, certain AP tests, the SAT, and four-year-college attendance rates (Angrist et al. 2013).

and in other cities and states.³ It is important to note that not all studies have shown that charter schools have a significant impact on student success, and more research needs to be done on the impact of charter schools on long-term outcomes such as higher education degree attainment and income, but charter schools are broadly seen as a more successful alternative to traditional public schools when it comes to bringing students up to standard and preparing them for college and beyond.⁴

While there is substantial evidence for the effectiveness of charter schools on improving student outcomes, closing existing schools to make way for these new charter schools may have actually worsened Chicago Public Schools' financial position and contributed to increasing rates of school underutilization. For one, it is not apparent that the closing of schools has saved the district significant amounts of money, or even any at all. The widespread school closings in 2013 were estimated to save about \$43 million in operations spending per year and an additional \$560 million in capital spending (Karp et al. 2023). However, analyses show that the district is actually only saving about \$25 million on operations spending annually, and over half of the school buildings closed in 2013 are still in the district's possession, which means they have not generated any revenue and in fact have cost the district over \$7 million dollars since 2013 for "heat, light, landscaping, general maintenance and repairs" (Haeberle et al. 2025).⁵ Of the 50 schools that the district closed in 2013, 26 remain vacant, 16 of which are still publicly owned, despite efforts to sell them (FitzPatrick et al. 2023). The difficulty of finding a use for these vacant buildings is exacerbated by the fact that charter schools are currently unable to use buildings that housed schools that closed in 2013 (Chicago Public Schools "School

³ One study found that students who attended a charter high school in Chicago have an 11 percent higher probability of enrolling in college within six years than their traditional public-school peers (Booker et al. 2014).

A study by the UChicago Consortium on School Research found that students in charter high schools had higher rates of attendance, higher test scores, higher rates of four-year college enrollment, and higher rates of enrollment in more selective colleges, on average, compared to students in non-charter high schools with similar incoming skills, school experiences, and background characteristics (Gwynne et al. 2017).

⁴ The Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard is currently studying "whether charter schools improve long-term outcomes (i.e., college attendance, wages after college, home ownership, etc.)," but the project is ongoing (Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard).

An Institute of Education Sciences report found that attending a charter middle school did not increase students' chances of enrolling in or completing college (Institute of Education Sciences 2019).

⁵ "CPS is likely saving roughly just \$25 million a year as a result of employing fewer principals, assistant principals, and clerks — the foundations of school leadership — than a decade ago. While there are about 1,000 fewer teachers, that number tends to vary with enrollment" (Karp et al. 2023).

Repurposing”). This has led to the school district paying to rent out buildings for charter schools on the private market while also paying to maintain a vacant school building down the street (“Chicago Charters and Vacant School Buildings”).

School closures have also deepened existing neighborhood challenges which have in turn accelerating the decline in student enrollment. Communities that have experienced school closures fight back against the notion that schools exist solely for student achievement and maintain that schools are community anchors that serve purposes beyond academics. Proposed school closures are often met with fierce opposition from teachers, students, and neighboring residents, who have utilized tactics ranging from protests to lawsuits to try and keep their schools alive (Lutton et al. 2018; Karp et al. 2023). Community members describe the school closings as “disrespectful and rude to [the] community” and “heartbreaking,” and refer to the now closed buildings as “like a graveyard” (Lutton et al. 2018; Karp et al. 2023). They also describe a lasting feeling of powerlessness. Eve Ewing, a sociologist at the University of Chicago, says that school closings play into social instability, “and the fact that so many black Chicagoans feel like this city is not a stable or a safe place to stay — and are leaving” (Lutton et al. 2018). Among census tracts with a majority Black population, tracts in which a school closed in 2013 lost 9.2% of their residents between 2013 and 2018, compared to a 3.2% population decline in tracts where schools did not close (Karp et al. 2023).

The introduction of new schools in conjunction with the spiraling negative effects of school closures has compounded enrollment and resource pressures in many neighborhoods. New schools were often opened in neighborhoods with declining populations, which contributed to a loss of students and resources at existing schools in that neighborhood (Karp et al. 2023). Starting in the 2024-2025 school year, Chicago began providing traditional public schools with a baseline level of funding, regardless of their size, but additional money is divided between traditional public schools and charter schools based largely on the number of students they are enrolling (Koumpilova 2024). This means that student enrollment, school budgets, and school survival are often tied closely together. Just this year, two charter schools announced their plans to stop operations after the 2025-2026 school year, due to financial deficits and declining enrollment (Camarillo 2025). These same schools recently had their contracts renewed by the district, one as recently as six months prior to announcing the closure (Camarillo 2025). The very schools that were promised to outperform those they replaced now find themselves facing

the exact same issues and outcomes. In fact, of the 193 schools opened in Chicago since 2002, 19 percent have been closed due to low test scores or too few students (Lutton et al. 2018).

The story of TEAM Englewood Academy High School exemplifies the destructive cycle neighborhood schools are facing. When it opened as a brand-new charter school, TEAM Englewood was flooded with new students and funding (Lutton et al. 2018). However, its enrollment started dropping after a few years, partly because Chicago Public Schools continued to open new high schools nearby, including a brand-new high school built just eight blocks away (Lutton et al. 2018). In 2018, TEAM Englewood was closed due to an insufficient budget and shrinking student enrollment. The Englewood neighborhood, a community of over 24,000 people, has experienced decades of disinvestment from the city of Chicago and now faces high rates of poverty and violent crime (Washington 2024). School enrollment and student outcomes are hard to improve, no matter what educational techniques are being used, when students are living in poverty and facing hunger and gun violence (Lutton et al. 2018).

Chicago is at a crossroads. The moratorium on closing schools is set to end after the 2026-2027 academic year (Cherone 2024). When that happens, Chicago's Board of Education will have to grapple with the same issues that have been facing Chicago Public Schools for decades: poor performance, a declining student population, and empty school buildings. Rather than continuing to destabilize communities and amplify these problems, Chicago Public Schools must break the cycle of school closures. Educational progress need not exist in opposition to supporting neighborhoods that have long been neglected by the city. There is another way. To center community needs while also pursuing student success, the board should consider a multi-pronged approach that includes allowing charter schools to utilize empty school buildings, consolidating schools rather than closing them, and investigating how to implement the policies that are making charter schools more successful in traditional public schools.

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