

# Declining Enrollment, School Closures, and Equity Considerations

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# Table Talk

- What is your name/role?
- How is the issue of school closures affecting you/your work?

# This research focuses on school closures and equity

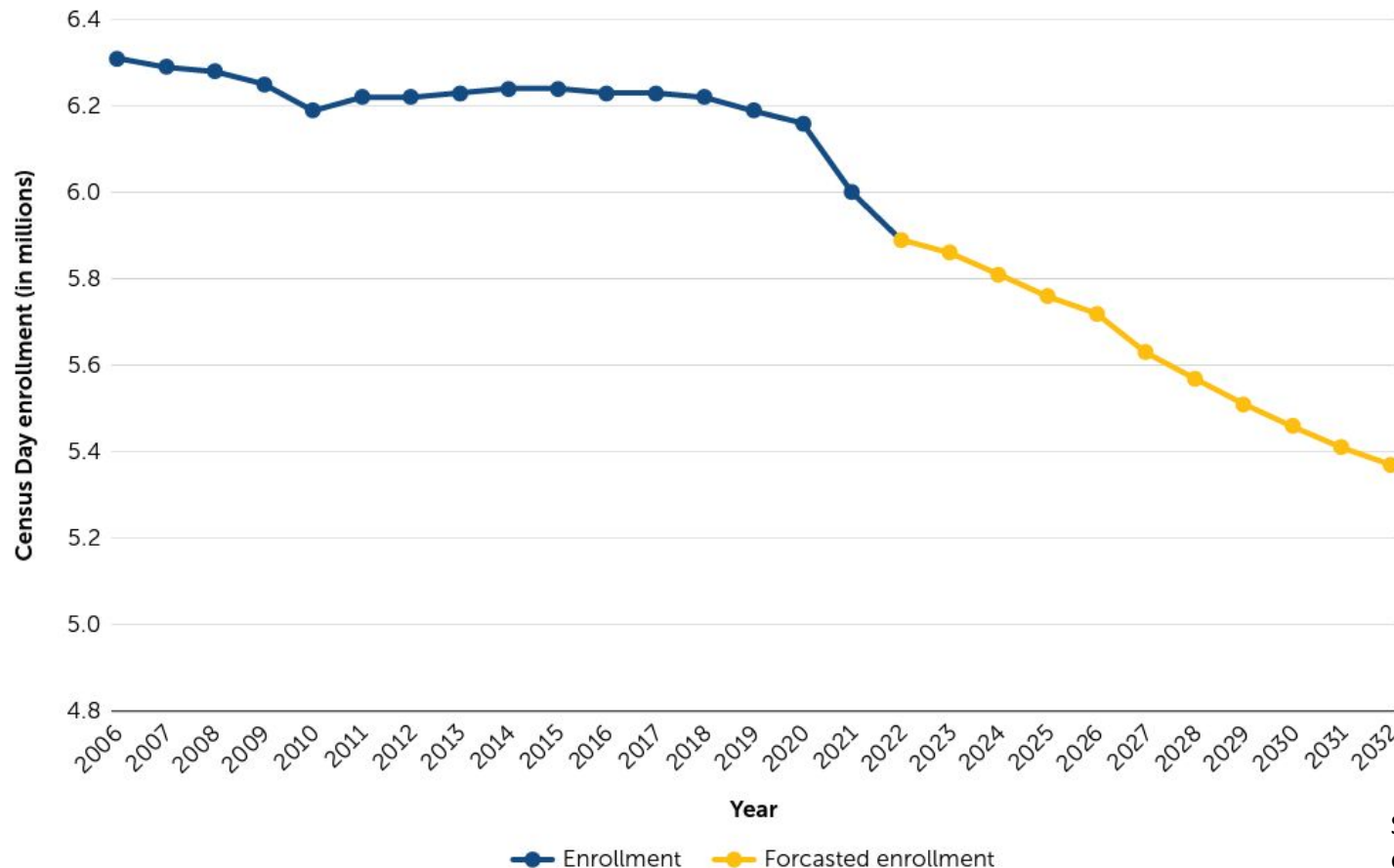
## We aim to support education policymakers and leaders in communities confronting school closures by:

- Exploring the racial dimensions of school closures
- Situating these disparities within the U.S. history of segregation, neighborhood disinvestment, and gentrification
- Discussing financial implications for districts
- Providing evidence and suggestions to help education leaders center equity as they confront declining enrollment-related school closures



# Against a backdrop of continued enrollment declines, school closures are likely to increase

California K–12 Enrollment From 2006 to 2021 and Forecast Through 2032



## Key points:

- Enrollment has dropped by 5% since 2018-19 and is expected to decline another ~9% by 2031-32.
- Enrollment losses are concentrated in coastal areas.
- The enrollment of Asian, Latinx, and multiracial students increased in the past 10 years, while the number and percentage share of Black and white students declined.
- Over the past decade, charter school enrollments have been increasing.

Source: California Department of Education (CDE), DataQuest. Forecasted enrollment is based on California Department of Finance projections.

# What do we know about common rationales for school closures and consolidations?

## Rationale #1: The district can improve educational opportunities and quality

### Rationale

- Underenrolled schools provide fewer services and opportunities for students.
- When underenrolled schools are also low performing or have staffing instability, closures may help offer students better educational opportunities.

### Evidence

- Evidence on the academic impact of closures is mixed. Several studies find an initial dip in performance. This can be mitigated by relocating students to higher performing schools. Some studies have found longer term benefits.
- Displacement can be disruptive and negatively affect behavior, absenteeism, and other measures of social-emotional wellbeing.
- Students already attending the receiving schools can experience negative outcomes as well.

# What do we know about common rationales for school closures and consolidations?

## Rationale #2: Closures help districts achieve fiscal sustainability

### Rationale

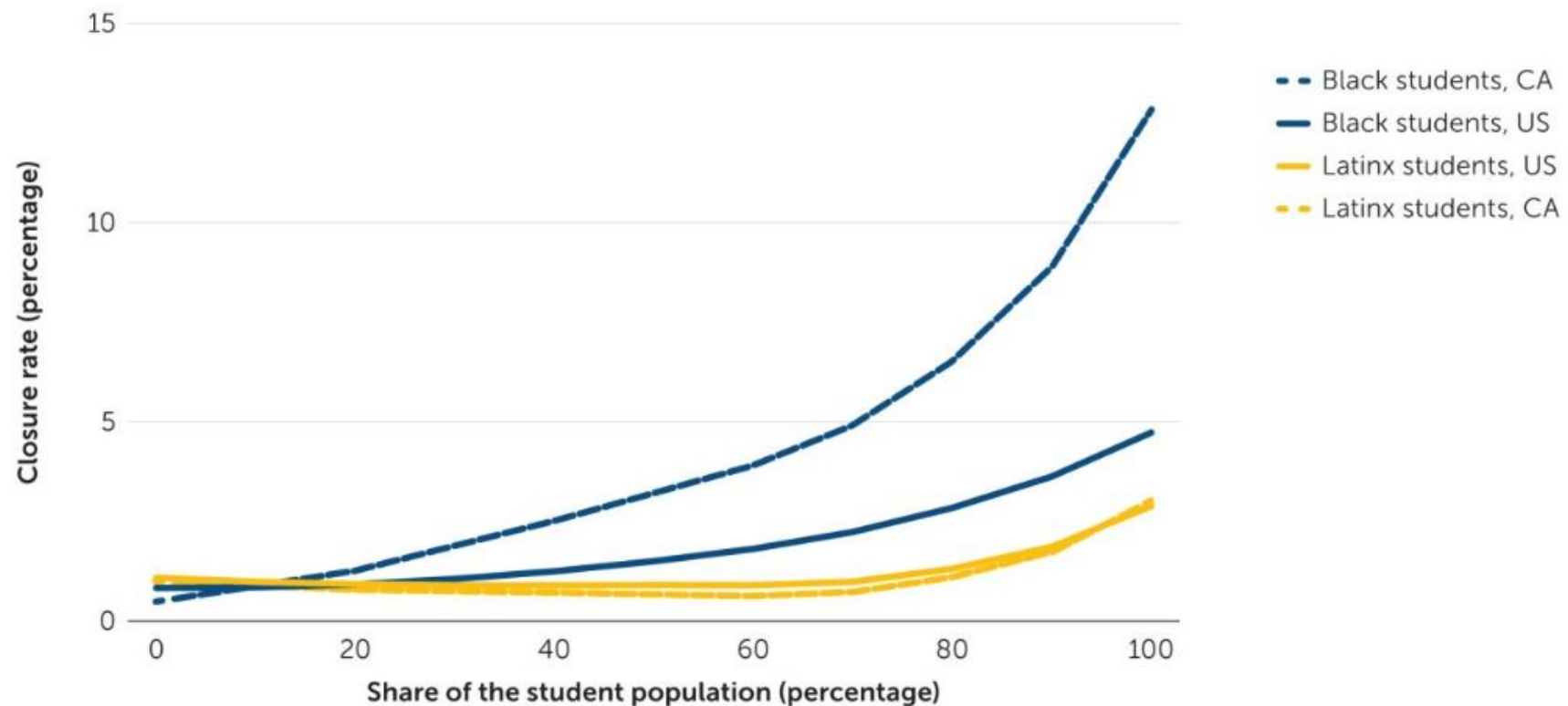
- It is more costly to operate a school with too few students, because:
  - Underenrolled school leads to inefficient personnel deployment, and
  - Underutilized facilities are costly to maintain.

### Evidence

- Over the long-term, budget savings can be realized. In the short-term, districts often overestimate the cost savings of closing a school because:
  - Layoffs/reductions must be paired with closures to achieve personnel savings,
  - There are one-time costs, and
  - There are ongoing costs that come with managing surplus property.

# School closures disproportionately affect Black students in California

School-Closure Rates by Student Racial Composition, 2000–18



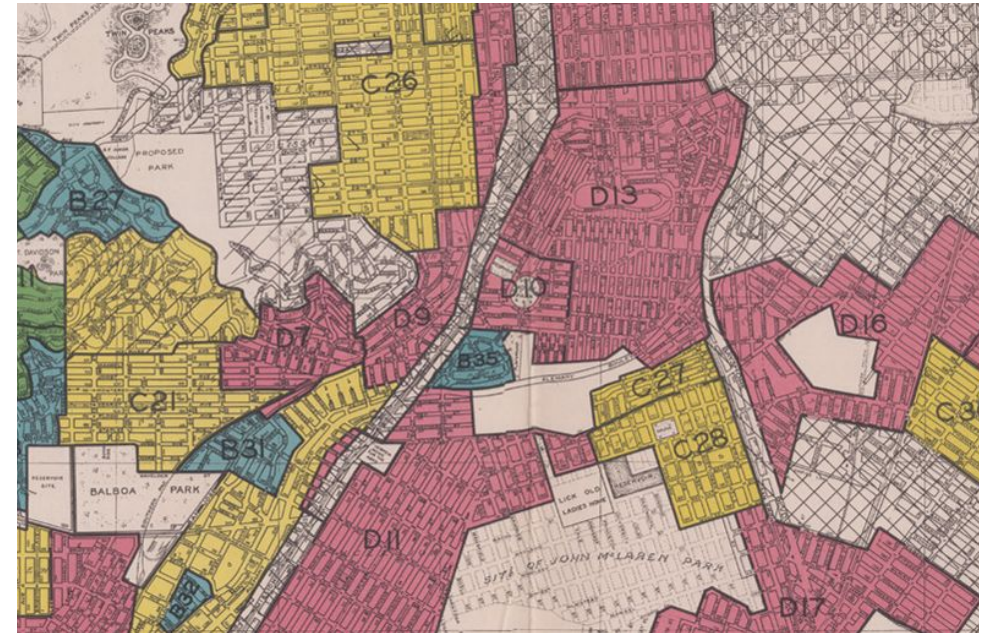
# What explains this racial disparity in school closures?

- Low achievement, school poverty rates, district enrollment trends, district proportion of charter schools, and district per-pupil expenditures were together unable to explain racial disparities in closure rates.
- After controlling for all of these factors, schools enrolling higher percentages of Black students were still more likely to close.
  - The odds of closure increased by nearly 25% for every 10-percentage-point increase in the share of Black students.
- Some contributing factors appear to include urbanicity and charter status, but again, these factors alone don't explain the racial disparity.



# It is no accident that school closures disproportionately affect students of color

- Schools slated for closure are often located in neighborhoods that are currently or were previously **underresourced**.
- Schools slated for closure are often in neighborhoods that were **segregated and redlined** during the 20th century; many are still segregated today and some have gentrified.
- **Gentrification** is exacerbating declining school enrollments.



# Summary of what we know from the evidence

- Racial inequities in school closures are substantial and persistent, especially for schools serving Black students
- Conventional explanations for school closures can't fully account for elevated closure rates.
- School closures may have limited financial benefits when viewed as a standalone cost-cutting measure for school districts.

# Local leaders can center equity when considering school closures and consolidations

*After conducting interviews with practitioners, parent organizers, and policymakers around the country and studying cases of school closures in several cities, we surfaced three main recommendations:*

 1. Establish and execute an **inclusive and transparent process**.

 2. Implement a strategy to provide displaced students as well as the broader community with accessible, **high-quality educational opportunities**.

 3. Develop and pursue a **long-term plan to address factors—such as housing affordability, gentrification, and economic disinvestment**—contributing to racial disproportionality in school closures.

# 1. Establish and execute an inclusive and transparent process



1. Provide ample time and opportunity for **community engagement** before and during the closure process and ensure there are opportunities for stakeholders to influence the process and result.
2. Establish and share **clear, values-based criteria** that the district will use when identifying schools for closure.
3. Share information about **demographic and enrollment trends** in the district to provide context as well as information about the demographics and characteristics of affected schools, neighborhoods, and students.
4. Share information about **student growth, achievement, and other outcomes** at schools that might be closed and the potential receiving schools, using assessment data that enable meaningful comparisons between school sites.

## 2. Provide displaced students with accessible, high-quality educational opportunities



1. Reserve and prioritize **seats in high-quality schools** for displaced students.
2. Provide **accessible, safe routes to high-quality schools** for displaced students.
3. Incentivize **effective educators** to work in schools receiving displaced students.
4. Provide receiving schools with **additional resources for student supports**.
5. **Repurpose empty school buildings** to provide services—such as childcare, extracurricular activity space, and mental and physical health care—that support students and their communities.
6. Use school closures as an opportunity to **rethink attendance zones** and revise school-assignment policies to reduce segregation and create new, more diverse school communities.

# 3. Pursue a long-term plan to address factors contributing to disproportionality in closures



1. **Equitably distribute funding** and other resources within the district.
2. **Regularly review population trends**, including projections of school enrollment disaggregated by demographic groups, to identify the extent to which the community is attracting and keeping families.
3. Collaborate with local governmental agencies, including housing and economic development authorities, to **expand and improve affordable housing options** for both educators and families.
4. Work with municipal officials to map out **transit plans** that provide equitable and safe access to high- performing schools.

# Table Talk

- What is rising up for you?
- What questions/comments do you have for the panel authors?



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