

Closing Schools | Changing Communities

Improving Educational Impact Statements to assess the effect of NYC school closures both inside –and outside—the classroom

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May 2013

Contents

NYC SCHOOL CLOSINGS A TROUBLING DOMINO EFFECT	3
SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES A COMPLEX AND CRITICAL RELATIONSHIP	4
NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION PLAYERS AND PROCESSES	7
ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT AN INSUFFICIENT PRECEDENT	9
DISCUSSION ACTIONABLE RECOMMENDATIONS	13
CONCLUSION.....	16
WORKS CITED.....	18

NYC SCHOOL CLOSINGS | A TROUBLING DOMINO EFFECT

In his 2005 address to the Sustainable Communities Summit, Chicago’s Mayor Daley situated schools as a critical element in constructing and cultivating strong communities by proclaiming “you start by building what I call community anchors: schools, libraries, parks, and police and fire stations. *The most important anchor, by far, is the school*” (The Planning Report, 2005). If we are to accept Mayor Daley’s assertion as truth, then what happens when these community anchors—our schools—are closed?

To answer this question, we can look to our own backyard. Since Mayor Michael Bloomberg took control of New York City (NYC) schools in 2002, over 164 schools have closed¹ (Durkin & Chapman, 2013). And while the sheer number of closings is daunting when sprinkled across a city as populated as NYC, when you start to see the City as pockets of neighborhoods –of communities –each having (and needing) its own ‘anchor’, the statistics take on a different meaning. It may seem obvious that a school’s closing holds significance for current students, parents, teachers and faculty who are directly affected in some way. But what about the surrounding community? The purpose of this paper is to critically examine the current school closing process within NYC in hopes of answering this question and also offer actionable recommendations on how the process can be modified and strengthened for students *and* communities; this will be accomplished in five sections. First, I will briefly survey existing literature that underscores the complex yet pivotal role that schools play within communities. Then, using NYC for context, I will outline the City’s current organizational structure and policy framework –describing the responsibilities of the Panel for Educational Policy (PEP), Office of Portfolio Management (OPM), as well as the methodology of the Educational Impact Statement (EdIS) –the current process used to evaluate potential school closings. Third, given that the EdIS is derived in many ways from the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) process –a land use assessment tool leveraged by NYC when significant land use

¹ As of April 2, 2013 (Durkin and Chapman, 2013)

changes are proposed – I will provide some background on the EIS and note three areas where both processes share similar weaknesses. More specifically, I will use these three examples to strengthen the argument that not only is EdIS limited in its evaluation on how ‘affected students’ will be impacted, it also excludes any formal consideration for the greater communal impact and is generally only advocated for by constituents that stand to gain from emphasizing its benefits. For this reason, school closings (as a change that directly shapes the built environment of our neighborhoods) –and the process that permits them –are actually manifestations of a larger economic development agenda whereby educational policy is leveraged to systematically alter the identity of communities. In the last section, I will not only engage in a discussion of these policy tensions, I will offer some concluding recommendations underscoring why a critical reexamination of the EdIS process –and more crucially the policy that allows this strategy to thrive—can afford communities the ability to drive the discourse of community identity forward and reclaim agency in shaping their environment, both inside and outside of the classroom.

SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES | A COMPLEX AND CRITICAL RELATIONSHIP

Extensive research has been conducted analyzing the effect of school closing on students’ academic performance, as well as the role of schools within communities –both of which will be discussed briefly below. A 2009 report conducted by the Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) examined the outcome of elementary schools closings on students by comparing “students age eight and older who were displaced by school closings to a group of students in similar schools that did not close” and yielded three findings of particular interest. First, bucking the notion that displaced students would somehow find themselves at other schools that offered superior resources, the majority of students’ destination schools were on par with that from which they came. Secondly, the report noted that school closings had the greatest impact on educational performance a year prior to actual

closing – a possible indication of the stress and anxiety that the pending change and relocation brought. Lastly, academic achievement of students who enrolled at new schools was related to the type and/or quality of the new schools in which the students transferred. So when you couple this finding with the fact that most students did not relocate to a school of better ‘quality’, the upside of the closing is not readily apparent. Interestingly, while the CCSR report examined the effect on academic achievement within elementary and high school—and was notably comprehensive in doing so—it failed to examine the impact on the students outside of school, as well as its influence on the community at large.

A second, yet related, area of research reinforces the belief that strong schools make attractive communities. In her pitch to make neighbors pay more attention to public schools, activist Ruth Miller (2013) argues:

“A huge part of making cities compete with suburbs for this talented and active class is improving urban schools. Schools are the key factor for 44% of new home purchases, and successful schools are strong indicators of vibrant communities. Whether or not you ever want kids yourself, to retain and attract good neighbors, you have good reason to support your local schools. And unlike bike lanes and upscale food trucks that primarily serve wealthier residents, a stronger public school system is a rising tide that would truly raise all ships.”

In New York State, a local realtor blogged that the closure would alter the ‘image’ of the neighborhood:

“Ask any Realtor you know... and they will tell you, one of the main attractions to this area was the close proximity to the school and that is exactly what young families want when they shop for a home. It is not just the house that makes them decide, it is the area, the quality of the nearby school, and the convenience of having it within walking distance. These are key components to a solid neighborhood” (Turco-Levin Personal Blog, March 2011).

It seems that many community members are beginning to formally recognize this as evidenced in a 2012 American Planning Association survey, which discovered that 67% of those polled desired urban planners to devote their energies to school-related projects, placing third only to job creation and safety at 70% and 69%, respectively (Vincent & McVoy, 2013). Acknowledgement, however, is not enough. As Bruce Katz, Vice President of the Metropolitan Policy Program at the Brookings Institution points out,

there is a disconnect between *acknowledgement* and *action*: “It is common sense that the quality of public schools and the quality of cities affect one another but rarely, if ever, are educational and urban policies connected ...” (McVoy, Vincent and Bierbaum, 2011). This inaction is particularly blatant when examining school closures and the policies that regulate the process.

So while research exists that outlines the effect of school closures on student academic performance as well as the relationship between schools and the fostering of desirable communities, the question remains –in what ways do communities change after a school closes? When Georgia’s DeKalb County opted to close its elementary school, neighbors claimed that “its closure has changed their community in palpable ways,” many residents claiming that they had been “damaged” and one long-time community member explaining “...it changed us. It changed the neighborhood” (Torpy, 2010). The same sentiment holds true in urban neighborhoods. Earlier this year in a reaction to an announcement that 54 public schools in Chicago were slated to close, concerned citizens questioned the underlying intent of the decision: “What are you trying to do?...Is this a land grab? Are you really, really concerned about our children’s safety, or are you trying to gentrify the neighborhood?” Others continued “How dare you take their community away from them? It’s about the community. They’re a family there” (Demarest, 2013).

The above examples underscore a key point. When schools close – even if it is ‘justified’ –the community experiences a loss. Because of this, we must all question whether the current methodology employed when deciding a school’s (and community’s) fate is inherently flawed. Schools are pivotal in shaping healthy communities that nurture *all* of its members with an objective of cultivating a reciprocal relationship where social capital is continually exchanged and enhanced. But all too often schools are closed without analyzing the repercussions of such actions. Such is the situation in which New York City

finds itself.

NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION | PLAYERS AND PROCESSES

In 2002, New York City educational reforms brought about the transference of public school governance to Mayor Bloomberg. As Michael Kirst (Professor Emeritus of Education and Business Administration at Stanford University) explains “a basic rationale for mayoral <school>control has been the assumed link between improved schools, city economic development, and retention of middle-class families.” The situation in NYC was no different –the mayor was tasked with not only ensuring that students received a proper education but to strengthen the link between seemingly disparate policies and balance the competing priorities of various stakeholders (students, new and existing residents, business constituents etc.).

As part of this change, NYC’s Board of Education was replaced with the Panel for Educational Policy (PEP) and another group—the Office of Portfolio Management (OPM)—was conceived. The PEP is comprised of 13 members –eight of whom are mayor appointed with the remaining members designated by each of the five Borough Presidents –who govern the Department of Education (NYC DOE) and are accountable only to the Mayor (NYCDOE, 2013). The OPM, on the other hand, is the NYC DOE’s implementation arm; once the policy is set by the PEP, it’s the OPM that oversees that the policy is acted upon. Each of these three modifications –mayor control, formation of the PEP and creation of the OPM –had the potential to alter the landscape of the NYC school system, but combined they have proven incredibly potent. One resulting outcome of this mixture –the process surrounding school closings –warrants deeper examination and will be the focus of the remainder of this paper.

Soon after the PEP was established, governing bylaws were adopted that outline the

responsibilities of the Panel as well eight trigger items for which a public review process is mandated prior to the PEP green lighting or denying proposals; the last of these items is listed as “proposals for all school closures or significant changes in school utilization” (Section 2.5 and 2.5.1 NYCDOE, 2009). But how does a school find itself on the proposal list for closing in the first place? Turning back to the OPM, this team examines a variety of factors annually—the majority of which are quantitative in nature – to gauge how well a school is performing (or not). These variables include standardized test scores and graduation rates as well as social measures such as classroom environments (CBS New York, 2013). Some of these metrics, such as the school progress report card, not only serves as an individual school assessment and accountability tool, but also as a peer barometer, since schools are analyzed relative to other ‘comparable’ schools. In 2012 alone, NYC DOE distributed ‘report cards’ to 1,193 public elementary and middle schools throughout five boroughs and evaluated each using grades A-F. Out of that total, 217 schools were recipients of less than stellar grades – “F’s, D’s or a third consecutive C” –up from almost half that amount in 2011 and consequently found themselves on the a closure consideration list (Chapman, 2012).

So after examining many, if not all, of the above criteria—each with varying degrees of transparency –proposals for school closings are put forward and an Educational Impact Assessment (EdIS) is prompted pursuant to NYS Education Law Sec. 2590-h(2). State –not City –law specifies that the EdIS must contain:

- *the current and projected pupil enrollment of the affected school, the prospective need for such school building, the ramifications of such school closing or significant change in school utilization upon the community, initial costs and savings resulting from such school closing or significant change in school utilization, the potential disposability of any closed school;*
- *the impacts of the proposed school closing or significant change in school utilization to any affected students;*
- *an outline of any proposed or potential use of the school building for other educational programs or administrative services;*
- *the effect of such school closing or significant change in school utilization on personnel needs, the costs of instruction, administration, transportation, and other support services;*

- *the type, age, and physical condition of such school building, maintenance, and energy costs, recent or planned improvements to such school building, and such building's special features;*
- *the ability of other schools in the affected community district to accommodate pupils following the school closure or significant change in school utilization; and*
- *information regarding such school's academic performance including whether such school has been identified as a school under registration review or has been identified as a school requiring academic progress, a school in need of improvement, or a school in corrective action or restructuring status.*

The EdIS itself is researched and written by the OPM, with its findings displayed on NYC DOE's website for a minimum of six months "before the first day of school in accordance with the NYC DOE's calendar in the preceding year that the action will take place" to afford public access. The EdIS is also disseminated directly to a plethora of community constituents including but not limited to the superintendent, community education council, community board and school-based management team(s). It should also be noted that it is the responsibility of the school superintendent (of the school to be closed) to alert parents to the findings, the date on which the change would come into effect, as well as the location where the physical EdIS is stored, instead of families receiving direct communication from the OPM. Following this notification period, a public hearing is held as well as a comment period whereby any stakeholders are invited to share their feedback. After supposed consideration of the above, the proposal is then voted upon by the PEP. If the PEP votes in favor of closing the school, responsibility is handed back to the OPM for implementation (Bloomfield, 2013). With this understanding of the EdIS, we now look to the Environmental Impact Statement—a predecessor in many ways—for a broader understanding of how a process with a similar framework may be contributing to the systematic altering of the built environment and social health of our communities, and alerting us to the real possibility of the EdIS following the same path.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT | AN INSUFFICIENT PRECEDENT

New York City's Environmental Quality Review (CEQR) process—and more specifically the Environmental Impact Assessment—is a land use review "by which city agencies assess, disclose,

mitigate to the greatest extent practicable the significant environmental consequences of their decision to fund, directly undertake, or approve a project” and has the power to alter the City’s physical environment and shape the identity of the surrounding community. The CEQR is undertaken by the City whenever a discretionary land use project is deliberated by the City Planning Commission (CPC). These projects can range from site remediation to the construction of a basketball area. As part of CEQR, the ‘lead (city) agency’ tapped to oversee the process is “responsible for undertaking, funding or approving an action, determines whether the action requires environmental review” (NYC DCP, 2012). As part of this determination, the lead agency is required to “notify and coordinate” with all interested stakeholders; relay the scope of their work to the public; and facilitate public hearings in which community members can comment on the assessment as it unfolds. Lastly, the lead agency is tasked with documenting the project’s ramifications and communicating the findings of the environmental assessment to the public prior to any final decision on the project being made (NYC DCP, 2012).

While an in depth analysis of CEQR and EIS will not be conducted in this paper, three key points are critical in understanding of how the process fit into our larger critique of the EdIS. First – there is a clear lack of understanding with both process’ methodology. Within the draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS), the lead agency is mandated to explain the methodology it is employing to ascertain how the project will affect such elements as land use, zoning and public policy, socioeconomic conditions, community facilities and services, open space, neighborhood character, natural resources, hazardous materials, transit and pedestrians, air quality and public health (NYC DCP 2012). However, since there is no set methodology for each of the above categories, it is usually left up to ‘best practice,’ making the assessment wrought with subjectivity. For example, while the methodology to determine the amount of hazardous particles may be

standardized and transparent, the same cannot be said about the criteria used to evaluate neighborhood character. These parameters can inevitably live under a shroud of secrecy making it nearly impossible to understand, let alone contest in the current discourse. The same holds true for the EdIS. For example, while “*an outline of any proposed or potential use of the school building for other educational programs or administrative services*” (x) may be fairly straightforward “*the impacts of the proposed school closing or significant change in school utilization to any affected students*” (viii) is not easily measured and therefore difficult to articulate in a manner that would afford an accurate assessment of long-term impact (NYS Education Law Sec. 2590-h(2)). Along the same lines, there are a disproportionate number of assessments that lend themselves to quantification versus those that focus on social characteristics—leading to an overall bias weighting. Moreover, there is a complete lack of comprehension; just as the EIS looks at each land use proposal in isolation of other proposals (recently put forward and/or completed) the current EdIS treats the school—and its surrounding community—as separate environments.

Secondly—and somewhat related—is the public’s role in assessing the impact of these land use changes—including school closings. While there are opportunities for public comments sprinkled throughout the EIS and EdIS processes, they can hardly be labeled participatory. And in addition to the questionable timing and setting of the public hearings, the simple fact is that lead agencies (Community Boards in the case of ULURP and PEP for EdIS) are not required to factor the community’s comments into their decision; they are only mandated to ensure that these comments are documented within the reports. And this latter point *only* holds true with respect to the EIS where the comments are relegated to the appendix of the document; they are omitted entirely from the final official EdIS documentation. In some instances of EIS, agencies may ‘incorporate’ community’s concerns into their project alternatives—alternatives that are required

as part of CEQR—but even then the agencies are under no directive to select any of these alternatives. So while the finished product of both the EIS and EdIS are touted as proof that the City (proxy for the CPC and PEP) has “taken a ‘hard look’ at the project’s impacts, mitigations and alternatives,” the reality felt by communities is often very different. It is not surprising then that many community members view the public comment period as meaningless: “I doubt anything will change from this meeting. They are committed to closing schools. They hold these public meetings to meet certain legal requirements” (Philips, 2010). This last sentiment has been echoed with respect to the EIS process as well. In *New York for Sale* (2008), Tom Angotti acknowledges that the CEQR’s EIS “has become an enormous, complicated document that is constructed by professionals who follow legal advice that is geared to prevent future litigation. Few decision makers have the time or patience to read an EIS, nor do the judges who are occasionally asked to rule on its adequacy.” Moreover, at times it seems even litigation where a ruling is made ‘against’ some aspect of the process is far from adequate. In the spring of 2010, an appellate court in NYS declared that the EdIS “must address with some specificity the impact of the change in utilization” though the feeling is that this has yet to become a reality on the ground (*Mulgrew v Board of Education of the City School Dist. Of NY*, 2010).

Lastly, there are clear similarities between the governing structure of the PEP and CPC, both of which force the issue of accountability to the foreground. To recap, in addition to “ex-officio non-voting member” role of the chancellor, the PEP is comprised of 13 members, the majority of whom are mayor appointed with the remaining 5 members assigned by each of the five Borough President (NYCDOE, 2013). The CPC shares the same basic organizational structure in that it also has thirteen members with six mayoral, five Borough President and one Public Advocate – appointee. The CPC also has a mayor-appointed Chair that can serve indefinitely while individual commissioners have 5-year tenure (NYC, 2013). Though Mayor Bloomberg has called the PEP an “‘advisory’ board for the

chancellor”; it is easy to understand why many critics categorize it more as a rubber stamp” (Fertig, 2009). Both groups can green light projects within a system void of checks and balances –making any chance of true accountability nonexistent. So while both the EIS and EdIS mandate that negative impacts be publically acknowledged and documented, they are under no legal obligation to mitigate them –resting the decision in the hands of thirteen individuals who essentially hold the power to systematically decide how the landscape of the city should be altered. This leaves many questioning how these changes will affect the vibrancy and character of communities. As an example, and in response to the closing of PS 285 in the Bronx, Gregory Delts (Office of Children’s and Family Services) argues that:

“The school has been improving steadily. Then they suddenly changed the standards making it impossible for the school to meet the new standards. They want to replace PS 285 with four smaller schools. I think that there is money involved in this since it is very likely that they want to create charter schools...If they turn every school into a charter school that hands-picks its students, then education will be elitist” (Light, 2013).

Under both processes, the lack of transparency, true accountability and inclusion of many residents as *key* stakeholders is apparent. Just as private developers prioritize projects based financial criteria, the EIS and EdIS processes have allowed the City to do the same –too often ignoring whether the projects and closings address legitimate community needs. Simply stated –New York City’s built environment –whether we are discussing the construction of new developments or the ‘deconstruction’ of public schools is being shaped through a scattered and unsystematic approach with *marketplace* competitiveness and potential profit being the key drivers.

DISCUSSION | ACTIONABLE RECOMMENDATIONS

It is impossible to ignore the influence of capitalism on the built environment. Sometimes masked as a social, cultural, or political cause, capitalism plays a critical role—whether primary or

supporting—in defining the urban landscape. Arguably, one mechanism that not only fosters the tenets of capitalism, but may help to disguise its intentions, is place branding. Place branding, defined as “a network of associations in the consumers’ mind based on the visual, verbal, and behavioral expression of a place, which is embodied through the aims, communication, values, and the general culture of the place’s stakeholders and the overall place design,” has been used by cities, states and even nations to articulate a place’s set of unique attributes, which form its identity, and position the place in the global marketplace (Zenker and Braun, 2010). While traditional place ‘boostering’ campaigns were mostly limited to the verbal or visual transmission of these attributes via advertising, strategies of late have added a second dimension that’s unmistakably policy-driven. This integrated approach goes beyond highlighting a place’s *existing* differentiating characteristics in the form of a logo or slogan; it uses policy—and in many instances economic and land use policy—to systematically alter the built environment in order to situate the place in a more competitive and *aspirational* light. Thus current place branding practices enables cities to transform their identities first superficially through advertising and then later through the usage of policy to ‘prove’ these claims. While much of the research on place branding has focused on physical additions to the built environment—such as high rise condos or luxury shopping centers—it is my argument that the same sense of ‘rebranding’ can be achieved by *removing* particulars assets from a community—especially when these assets are ‘anchors’ and thus carry infinitely more weight in cultivating community character. It is from this position that I put forth several recommendations to modify the existing school closure process in NYC:

- Improve transparency of school assessment: A common sentiment among many communities is that there is a lack of transparency around how schools are evaluated. Even if the assessment categories themselves do not change dramatically, the evaluations need to be performed consistently and systematically holding true transparency as key objective for *all* stakeholders.

For example, in addition to school report card grades being available online, more underlying detail can be made available for each category as well as at least three actionable steps that schools (and/or communities) can take to improve their standing. These steps should also be made public with schools having the opportunity to demonstrate the progress they've made to achieve these steps

- Collaborate with multiple city agencies: Currently, the EdIS is conducted within the Department of Education. Given the breadth of subject matter expertise held at various agencies throughout NYC, it seems that increased collaboration with these agencies (i.e. – Department of City Planning with respect to land use matters, understanding the effect of neighborhood demographic trends) would only enhance the assessment, and perhaps increase the perceived credibility of the EdIS itself as these agencies may be better positioned to comment on matters affecting the community that fall outside of the physical school setting.
- Evaluate role of 'lead' agency: Unlike the EIS, responsibility to conduct the EdIS is not delegated to a 'lead agency.' For reasons mentioned in the preceding recommendation, it follows that leveraging the knowledge of another agency may also be suitable for EdIS, not to mention that it may also provide a more objective lens through which to evaluate and propose alternatives. At the very least, 2-3 related agencies should be required to formally weigh in on the proposed change/closure.
- Create 'Community Impact Statement: Public comments should be assessed not only by the PEP and the CPC but an outside research team that can synthesize and make recommendations to both the PEP and CPC directly. This analysis should also be included as part of the official EdIS and EIS documents.
- Mandate 'comments on the comments': Within the EIS, the CPC is required to respond in

writing to public comments. The same requirement should be put in place for the EdIS.

- Fill the research gap: As mentioned earlier in this paper, there is a clear gap in research on the effect of a school closing on communities as a whole both in the immediate days and months following the closing as well as years down the road. Additional topics/questions for research include:
 - Longitudinal studies such as the percentage of students who once attended a closed school who continue to live in the neighborhood 5, 10, 15 years later
 - Do real estate values in neighborhoods where a school has closed rise or fall in the years following? Does this figure change depending on whether the neighborhood was urban, suburban or rural?
 - Do communities feel that school closings are a signal towards neighborhood gentrification? If so, what is the perceived role of the City and State in governing the processes that allow these changes to take place?

CONCLUSION

If the City is able to use economic, land use –and even educational policy –to decide what assets (physical, social or otherwise) should comprise a neighborhood, they may discard attributes, ‘anchors’ and people they feel do not align with this ‘rebranded’ image. Throughout the United States, processes like the EIS and EdIS afford cities and states the power to do just that. Attributes may be something as seemingly inconsequential as street signage designed in a particular style that no longer ‘fits’ with the neighborhood’s image –or as critical as closing a school without providing an accurate assessment of the reasons, as well as clear measures a school can take to minimize the risk of closure. A ‘blighted’ neighborhood –or a school in trouble – both of which may possess infinite amounts of social capital, may not align with branding model exclusively focused on capital of a different kind. As Bennet

and Savani (2003) conclude, “the quintessential difficulty associated with place rebranding is that a brand image suitable for one group of stakeholders may be inappropriate for another.” As noted throughout this paper, a discussion of place branding is incomplete without including its role in shaping the built environment. Places are not products –but in many instances, they are marketed as such in the hopes that a unifying brand will attract investors, entice new (wealthier) residents and boost its equity in the global marketplace. It is my belief that we need to adopt a far more critical approach to the current economic, land use and educational discourse, which in its current state only allows place branding to thrive. Only then can we ensure that our communities are given the means through which to share their story and preserve their own identity.

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