



School closures and students with disabilities

SUMMARY: Advanced to improve efficient building utilization, school closures in Chicago Public Schools disproportionately impacted students with disabilities who often occupy separate, less populated classrooms.

Students with disabilities are educated in a variety of settings to align with the Least Restrictive Environment requirements of the Individuals with Disability Education Act, but urban districts such as Chicago tend to have a higher percentage of these students educated in separate classrooms. The state of Illinois requires class sizes for separate special education rooms to be capped at a certain number depending on the amount of time students receive services during the school day.

School closures are often introduced as a means of increasing school district efficiency and reaping fiscal benefits through seemingly responsible cutbacks. Students with disabilities are placed at special risk by these policies as they are penalized by building utilization measures that fail to account for their often less populated classrooms. While previous scholarship

has mostly examined the impacts of school closures, fewer studies have sought to understand what may have contributed to these schools' risk of closure in the first place. Additionally, little attention has been paid to what goes on within the 'black box' of the school buildings themselves, as well as the impact of closures on students with disabilities.

A recent study focused on the massive round of school closures in Chicago Public Schools in 2013. During that round of closures, the district initially determined that buildings were inefficient if they were not utilized within 20% of the design capacity, or the total number of students if all homeroom classrooms were filled with 30 students each. While 330 schools were deemed underutilized, 47 were eventually slated for closure. This study examined 44 of them and, in addition to building utilization, included measures of school climate, student performance, enrollment, race and income of students, neighborhood demographics, proximity of competition, redevelopment pressure, and building quality as control variables.

A significant positive correlation was found between schools that closed and those with large shares of students with disabilities. Holding all else constant, for every percentage point increase in the share of students on an Individualized Education Program within a school building, there was found to be a 5.3% increased chance that the school may be slated for closure. Among the control variables, the study found school closure to have a significant correlation with:

- a low building utilization rate,
- poor perceived effectiveness of the school’s learning environment, and
- an aging building.

“From our model results, a profile of a “typical” closed school emerges. It is one that had the responsibility to provide legally-entitled services to a large proportion of SIEPs [students with an Individualized Education Program], a less effective learning environment (as measured by the school climate survey), and a surplus of space in a vintage structure.” - Weber, Waitoller, & Drucker

Means of school closure that rely primarily on building utilization fail to acknowledge the supposed ‘wasted’ space often so necessary for schools with large numbers of students with disabilities. As it did in the Chicago

case, not accounting for the ways in which special education spaces manifest differently may serve to discriminate against students with disabilities who often face the brunt of school closures.

This brief is based on a study in *Urban Education*.

Weber, R. N., Waitoller, F. R., & Drucker, J. M. (2022). Disposable spaces: How special education enrollment affects school closures. *Urban Education*.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/00420859221126700>

AUTHOR BIOS:

Rachel Weber is a Professor in Urban Planning and Policy at the University of Illinois Chicago.

Federico Waitoller is an Associate Professor in Special Education at the University of Illinois Chicago.

Joshua Drucker is an Associate Professor in Urban Planning and Policy and an Affiliate with the Government Finance Research Center at the University of Illinois Chicago.

Edited by: Paul Faulkner, Center for Evaluation and Education Policy