The Final Decision: Community Participation and School Closure Decisions

The decision to close a school is typically one of the most contentious issues a community faces. Closures are frequently carried out in response to declining enrollment trends, escalating operational costs, and excess classroom space. District leaders must balance the interests of competing factions in the community with the district’s overall needs or demands.

The complex relationship of the superintendent, school board, and community in many ways determines the success of the school closure process. This article discusses a study of community influence over one school board’s decision to close schools. We examined which community members participated in the school closure process, whether they participated formally or informally, and whether their participation influenced the school board members.

This case study of a medium-size school district in New York was conducted in the fall of 2006. We interviewed 6 (of 7) school board members and 20 community members, including individuals invited to participate on committees, parent-teacher organization (PTO) presidents, union leaders, city

By Mark S. Lavner, Ed.D., and Kara S. Finnigan, Ph.D.
government officials, school district administrators, parents, and members of community-based organizations. The interviews lasted from 30 to 120 minutes. We also examined newspaper articles, letters to the editor, school board meeting minutes, and internal committee analyses to triangulate our findings and uncover additional details not mentioned by interviewees.

Background Context
During the 2004–05 school year, district leaders attempted to close an elementary school after an internal analysis determined that the school was operating far below capacity because of decreased enrollment. Intensive community outcry caused district officials and school board members to reconsider this decision and initiate a second process during the 2005–06 school year that included formal methods to acquire community input.

The complex relationship of the superintendent, school board, and community in many ways determines the success of the school closure process.

First, district officials invited select community members to participate on two formal committees: (1) a facilities committee charged with examining the infrastructure of the city schools and (2) a school community committee to ensure community input into the process. The facilities committee, which included nine members appointed by the mayor, the superintendent, and a prominent business leader, not only evaluated the infrastructure but also visited other urban districts to examine their approaches to school closures. The data compiled by the facilities committee were then shared with the school community committee.

The school community committee—composed of 31 individuals, including invited school district officials, members of the unions, members of community agencies, city officials, parents, and members of the faith-based community—was charged with identifying factors on which to base the decision and rank all the district schools.

Three public hearings were conducted to share the school closure process and gather community input. After a list of potential closures was announced, four public sessions were held at high schools that were unaffected by the closings. Through these efforts, board members reported that the public had ample opportunity to provide input and to participate in the process. In fact, once the list was made public, a vociferous public response ensued as hundreds of citizens attended the hearings to lobby for keeping their particular school open.

The school community committee generated a list of 16 schools for potential closure, which they submitted to the superintendent and the school board. In the final decision, the superintendent proposed and the school board approved the closing of one school, the relocation of another, and the nonrenewal of the lease for two annexes.

Process and Procedure
We found important differences between the responses to the initial closure announcement and the responses to the second closure process. In the first case, the reaction from community members directly associated with the closure of Washington School (not the school's real name) was swift, vocal, and well organized. This unexpected reaction focused on a school that was considered to have a “higher range of student needs” by the state; Washington is 95% minority and 94% disadvantaged, with a 15% suspension rate.

The PTO president coordinated the effort to deter the closure and enlisted the support of parents, community members, and school staff who began writing letters and making phone calls to local and state politicians, as well as to the superintendent’s office. Their mobilization led to increased pressure on the school board and district officials to consider other factors that were not included in the initial analysis, such as a school’s role in its local community.

Community members who already felt victimized by other agencies’ leaving their neighborhood (e.g., the post office and police station) were steadfast in their belief that the school should remain open. This culminated in a school board meeting in which 50 community members expressed their discontent with the process and decision.

The district administrators and school board members did not anticipate the community’s response. Board members quickly divorced themselves from the process and blamed district administrators for moving forward without appropriate input. According to one board member, the superintendent attempted to make a decision without a “systematic review.”

Although they reported not being influenced by individuals or groups as to which school(s) would close, board members were in fact influenced by the widespread condemnation from the affected community, as evidenced by their decision to halt the closure and blame district officials for the process. This response was considered atypical by one board member who shared that the culture of the board was to “simply support the superintendent.”

During the second process, board members were generally supportive of the committees, but they expressed reservations about the public’s ability to remain objective. Recall that the school community committee ranked the schools on certain criteria. The criteria they developed included the following:

- **Student enrollment and population trends** (e.g., percentage of seats available, increase/decrease in enrollment)
Financial considerations (e.g., total investment in facilities, construction cost per square foot, and percentage of remaining repairs)

Place in the neighborhood (e.g., percentage of students being homeschooled, extent of community/district use of facility, number of partnerships/volunteers)

Overall state of facilities (e.g., classroom and site adequacy, facilities condition, mechanical/electrical systems, and custodial issues)

Economic reuse (e.g., tax potential from development and compatibility of reuse with zoning and neighborhood)

Table 1 shares the committee’s ranking of the 8 lowest-ranked of the 16 schools. (Again, school names were changed for this article.) The total scores for the 16 schools identified for closure ranged from 37 to 102. For the individual criteria, such as enrollment trends and financial consideration, many of the higher-ranked schools of the 16 ranked in the 20s and 30s, whereas the lower-ranked schools (as seen in Table 1) ranked in the single digits or teens.

For example, Clinton School had the lowest score (37) and had the lowest ranking of all schools (1) for its place in the neighborhood, but a medium ranking (14) for its economic reuse. Although board members reported that they valued the “objective” data, suggesting that these facts influenced their decision, the ways in which these categories were defined were clearly subjective. The subjectivity is further illuminated by the fact that the five schools recommended for closure by the school community committee were not the five with the lowest overall scores.

Although board members were reluctant to attribute any influence to the large, vocal turnout of community members associated with particular schools, they conceded that it was easier to close a school that lacked strong community support. Furthermore, several community members and board members noted that certain schools on the list would never close because these so-called power schools were perceived to carry undue influence due to the socioeconomic status associated with their neighborhoods and higher achievement levels.

Harrison School, for example, is designated by the state as having a middle range of need and significantly outperforms similar schools on academic assessments. At the urging of parents, the superintendent later interjected academic performance as a consideration, suggesting that concerned and actively involved community members influenced the process (though it would make little sense to close a high-performing school). In the end, few people felt this process was fair and, as in any such decision, there were clear “winners” and “losers.”

The formal opportunities for involvement included committee membership (by invitation only), as well as testimonials at public hearings and board meetings. Research has found that community members who are actively involved in these types of formal opportunities have greater wealth, education, and time. Conversely, these factors interfere with the participation of more disadvantaged citizens.

In our study, there was a distinct perception by some minority and disadvantaged community members that these formal means of participation did not represent their interests. In addition, members of the faith-based community were upset that meetings were not held at churches and community centers, and thus were less likely to be accessed by certain groups. Furthermore, committee members expressed frustration that the time line did not allow for adequate discussion with their constituents.

Beyond these formal opportunities, citizens became involved through informal means of communication, such as letters to the editor of the local newspaper and petitions, letters, e-mails, and phone calls to board members, district administrators, and local politicians. These informal means of citizen participation tend to be less dependent on socioeconomic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Name</th>
<th>Enrollment Trends</th>
<th>Financial Consideration</th>
<th>Place in Neighborhood</th>
<th>Overall State of Facilities</th>
<th>Economic Reuse</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clinton</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackson</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tyler</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jefferson</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harrison</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garfield</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grant</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polk</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The top five candidates for closure as identified by the school community committee are italicized. Two schools whose leased facilities were not renewed as a result of this process do not appear on this list.

a Relocate school.
b School slated for closure.
factors if the type of grassroots mobilization occurs that we found in the initial closure process.

Much to the dismay of committee members who believed that more closures were necessary, of the 16 schools cited for potential closure, only the Garfield School was closed, while the Clinton School was slated to relocate and two other leased facilities were not renewed. Interestingly, Garfield tied for fifth highest on the potential closure list but was the only school slated for closure. When asked about the influence of community members to save Garfield, board members and district administrators recalled little contact from school stakeholders and the PTO president described failed attempts to involve parents. Academic performance did not appear to be a factor, as Garfield had a low score on this criterion but midrange scores on all other criteria.

Research has found that community members who are actively involved in these types of formal opportunities have greater wealth, education, and time.

The committee’s recommendations and the public display during formal hearings appeared to have had the greatest influence over the decision to keep schools open, yet the informal methods were also clearly an influence. As one district employee who served on a committee shared, “If ever you want to get really good information about how people feel about their schools, go through a school closure process.” Although board members were cognizant of the differences among community members, they contended that it was easier to close schools when there was little opposition.

In accordance with other research, our study indicates that citizens with greater levels of wealth, education, and time and who were associated with particular schools influenced this process in both formal and informal ways. In addition, our study suggests that disadvantaged citizens were less likely to participate through the formal opportunities provided by the board (partly because they were not invited and partly because of issues of access and resources) but ended up having their voices heard through grassroots mobilization and persuasion.

Implications and Recommendations
This study has the potential to inform district leaders, particularly in urban school districts, who are struggling with critical decisions about school closures. Although giving citizens the opportunity for input into the process is essential, additional steps should be taken to ensure a fair and equitable process, given the likely influence of certain (more powerful) individuals and groups. To this end, we recommend the following:

- All formal committees should include community members who represent the interests of the most disadvantaged individuals. Furthermore, all formal hearings and meetings should be coordinated with PTOs, neighborhood associations, or parent liaisons to build on the networks that already exist. Consideration should be given to holding meetings in neighborhood facilities, at various times of day, and in the evenings so that they are accessible to all community members.
- Roles should be clarified so that committee members understand the expectations for their involvement, including whether they are a decision-making body or a fact-finding or advisory group. If those involved feel that they are just “window dressing,” they not only develop resentment but also are less likely to participate in the future. Members require a clear understanding of the time expectation, work requirement, and duration of their commitment. Finally, members serving in this capacity should be given the time and resources to communicate with their constituents.
- Merely sharing the process with the community will not ensure that it proceeds in a fair and equitable way. Board members and district officials should convey the broader district needs and demands and should be more transparent with regard to the criteria used, including which factors are more heavily weighted and why, in an effort to build trust. A vague or unclear process leaves board members unable to answer to their constituents and opens them up to the influence of emotion and misinformation.

In the end, the school closure process should provide the opportunity for participation to all interested citizens, rather than favoring the most vocal, visible, or powerful members of the community. Decisions based on these factors may unfairly favor those with the organizational capacity or economic wherewithal to influence the process and, in the end, may result in a backlash that could either be detrimental to the already-difficult school closure process or have long-term effects on the district by increasing the distrust and disengagement of the community.

Mark S. Lavner, Ed.D., is an elementary school principal in the Canandaigua City School District in Canandaigua, New York. Email: LavnerM@canandaiguaschools.org
Kara S. Finnigan, Ph.D., is assistant professor of educational leadership at Warner Graduate School, University of Rochester, in Rochester, New York. Email: kfinnigan@warner.rochester.edu