# The School Closure Crisis

Fiscal concerns are forcing many public school districts to close schools. Between 2002 and 2003 the number of California public schools closed quadrupled, and the 2004 number will be enormously larger. School closure is an emotional and political nightmare, but the harshness of the blow can be softened by using objective demographic criteria to validate the difficult decisions. When facing the need to consider school closure, stakeholders can call on demographers.

New Trend: Closures Increase Dramatically

Recent funding problems and enrollment declines have caused many public school districts to close facilities. In 2003, the number of California public schools that closed was more than four times the 2002 figure (see chart at right). Many of the schools closed last year were in small districts with few schools (average daily attendance below 2,500), making decisions especially distressing.

Hundreds of additional schools are being considered for closure in 2004. Now, even large districts, such as San Diego, Oakland, Sacramento City, West Contra Costa, San Jose, and San Juan Unified, are considering closing one or more elementary schools. Today elementary schools are closing, and by the end of the decade, middle and high schools will follow. Closures are not limited to California: many other parts of the U.S. and Canada face this crisis.

School closure is disruptive and traumatic for all concerned. Parents and children often identify strongly with

California Schools Closed
Regular K-12 Public Schools (charters excluded)
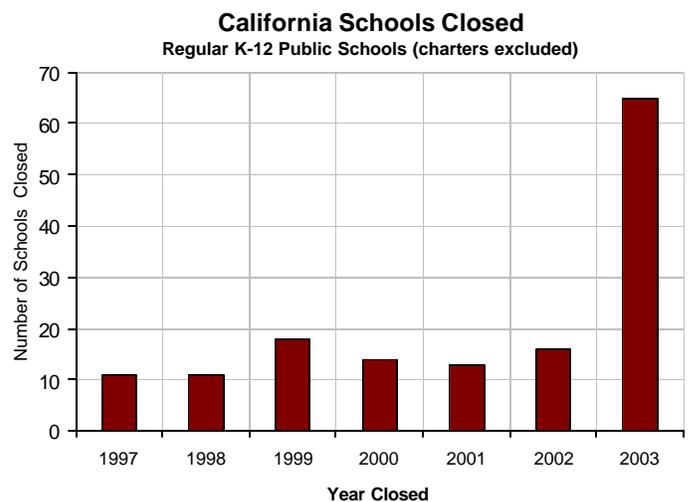
Data source: California Department of Education, http://www.cde.ca.gov

their neighborhood school and dislike, even detest, changes. On page 2 we provide recommendations for easing the pains associated with closure.

Why Schools are Closing
The demographic viewpoint

Financial challenges and falling enrollments are prompting many districts to study school closure. Under-utilized facilities are expensive. Tight budgets make school closure an obvious alternative, particularly if districts have enrollment declines. As demographers, we focus on the reasons enrollments decline, including:

1. *Birth trends.* The number of births dropped in many areas after a 1990 peak, producing elementary enrollment declines which will be followed by middle and high school declines a few years later.

2. *Recession-related migration.* Although a few areas had positive migration flows during recent years, most of California experienced some recession-related out-migration of families with school-aged children.

3. *Housing growth (or lack thereof).* The three regions of California with the most housing growth during the last decade were the only ones with kindergarten growth (Sacramento metro area, San Joaquin Valley, and the Inland Empire—see map on p. 4). All other regions have lost kindergartners, with the Los Angeles and San Francisco Bay areas losing the most. In some cases, enrollment decline in one area with older housing (like Sacramento City and San Juan Unified Districts) is accompanied by housing and enrollment growth in another area nearby (Elk Grove Unified).

Making the Decision
Recommendations for process

Because school closure is such a divisive issue, it is very important to pay attention to the process. Our experience leads us to recommend the following:

1. *Follow objective criteria (see right).*
Before making any closure decisions, it is essential for a district to adopt and use specific, objective criteria. Some degree of subjectivity is unavoidable, but it is extremely important that the process be even-handed and that people perceive it as such. Inevitably, parents of children attending schools that might close will protest, but stating objective criteria in advance will help people understand the decision.

2. *Timing.* Choose your timeline carefully. Do *not* close schools when bond or parcel tax measures or school board elections are imminent; closure decisions are always difficult, disruptive, and potentially politically disastrous. We have seen closure decisions lead to board member recall drives, resignations, litigation, and defeat of funding measures at the polls.

3. *Allow enough time for the process.* A long process allows members of the public to get used to the idea of school closure and to give input. Public hearings can help lessen anger and are very important, although they can be quite time-consuming. Allow enough time to explore all reasonable options.

4. *Be transparent.* A completely transparent public process can help subdue anxiety, rumors of "conspiracy," and perceptions of unfairness. Public notification and publicity encourage district residents to be involved.

5. *Use a community group to review alternatives and make recommendations.* Create a balanced advisory group that reviews criteria, hears community reactions, and makes recommendations. Broad-based involvement builds consensus and acceptance by those affected.

6. *Be sensitive.* Neighborhood school closure is always an emotional issue, and those affected may need help dealing with the transition. They deserve special attention and detailed information about proposed changes.

7. *Terminology.* Call the process something like "school consolidation," "enrollment, school closure, boundary realignment study," or "school facilities realignment."

Criteria

Some common criteria used to decide which school or schools to close (see #1 at left) are:

- *Financial considerations.* Maximize savings. This may mean closing schools with the highest operating cost per pupil or those with the greatest leasing revenue potential.

- *Attendance area enrollment trends.* Schools with neighborhood enrollment losses are closure candidates. Consider your inter- and intra-district transfer patterns. Also, be sure to consider information about future housing. You don't want to close a school, only to find you need it a few years hence.

- *School Size.* Ideal minimum and maximum school enrollments (sizes) are rather subjective, but need to be decided early in the process.

- *School location.* If two schools are near each other, consider closing one of them. Consider whether to close centrally-located schools or peripheral ones. Districts closing more than one school should spread closures across the district.

- *Facilities characteristics.* Examine both permanent and portable capacities, age of buildings, campus acreages, condition, recency of renovation, and special features like computer labs and playground sizes.

- *Access, traffic, student safety.* These are difficult to quantify. City or county traffic data can be helpful, if only to indicate where to station crossing guards.

- *Minimize disruption.* Minimize the number of students affected by potential closure. When a school is closed and students are dispersed, it is usually less disruptive to keep relatively large groups together as students relocate.

- *Location of special programs.* Decide whether to keep special programs (special education, language programs) at particular sites. Moving them distresses program participants, but relocation of special programs may help balance enrollments.

- *School performance.* Consider using test scores as one criterion.

How Demographic Analysis Can Help with Closure Decisions
District-wide and subarea-specific enrollment forecasts help districts make good decisions.

While non-demographic factors, particularly financial shortfalls, may be driving school closure, it is important to analyze the issue from a demographic perspective. If enrollments are likely to stabilize or decline, closure is probably indicated and demographers can help determine which school or schools are closure candidates.

Should schools be closed?

The first demographic step, a district-wide forecast, helps indicate whether closure is in order. If enrollments are going to increase soon, closure is probably the wrong decision. If the district has experienced recent ethnic shifts, separate forecasts by ethnicity may yield important information because enrollments may grow faster than a straight-line forecast would suggest.

Which schools should be closed?

The second step is to decide which school or schools to close. Demographers can provide attendance-area resident forecasts showing which parts of the district have enrollment declines. It is very important to focus on where students live as well as on where they attend school. We have found large intra-district transfer flows that mask subarea enrollment in some districts.

A word to the wise: Consider long-term facilities needs

Many districts closed schools during the late 1970s and the early 1980s when enrollments declined (after the post-World War II Baby Boom generation left school). These closures were necessary to keep schools running efficiently. Many districts also sold closed sites. In some cases this was fine, but in other cases, 1990s enrollment growth plus class size reduction produced facilities shortages with few expansion options.

Today we appear to be in a similar situation. Fiscal constraints and enrollment declines, though not as massive as in the 1970s, are causing many districts to close schools.

Most forecasters see a California birth increase by 2020 as a result of ethnic shifts (see our Fall 2003 Research Report: California Ethnic Trends).

We urge districts to resist the temptation to sell sites. We strongly believe that closed schools should *not* be sold. Keep sites in reserve to accommodate future enrollment growth.

Can we help you?

Lapkoff & Gobalet is celebrating its 15th anniversary in 2004. We help clients by providing custom demographic services, including:

- Enrollment forecasts
- Analyses for school opening and closure decisions
- Attendance area realignment
- Political redistricting
- Segregation analysis
- Litigation support services

What makes Lapkoff & Gobalet different? We are trained at the Ph.D. and postdoctoral levels in demography and demographic research techniques. We provide high-quality, objective analyses to help reconcile community differences on controversial issues.

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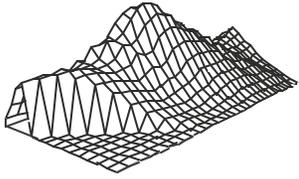
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Kindergarten Enrollments by Region California, 1995 vs. 2002

Many areas experienced kinder-garten enrollment declines between 1995 and 2002. Statewide, kinder-garten enrollments fell by 15,400 (-3.3%). This is equivalent to 770 kindergarten classes of 20 students each.

Of the state's 58 counties, 41 lost enrollments, (particularly Los Angeles, Santa Clara, San Diego, San Mateo, Alameda, and San Francisco), prompting many districts to consider school closure. Only 17 counties had kindergarten enrollment increases (especially Riverside, Placer, San Joaquin, and Sacramento).

Kindergarten Enrollment Change 1995 to 2002

Decrease
Increase

Far North
-11% (-1,713)

Sacramento Metro area
+6% (+1,392)

Sierra
-12% (-251)

San Joaquin Valley
+1% (+475)

Inland Empire
+5% (+2,456)

San Francisco Bay Area
-7% (-5,586)

Central Coast
-5% (-894)

Los Angeles area
-5%(-9,572)

San Diego area
-4% (-1,701)