

## Issue Brief

### **School Closures: A Shell Game with Students**

Over the past decade, Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s Department of Education has closed 117 schools in NYC, including 25 school closures just this year.<sup>1</sup> The Mayor’s school closing policy is becoming more shell game than education reform. Certainly, there are instances in which closure is the best option for a school that is too dysfunctional to improve. However, under the Bloomberg administration, school closure has substituted for a real, comprehensive strategy to improve struggling schools serving the city’s highest-needs students.

When a school is closed, the schools that replace them often don’t serve the same populations of students. Instead, many of the newly created small schools serve a lower percentage of the highest-needs students, especially students in self-contained special education, than the large campus schools they replaced.<sup>2</sup> Because these students face steep academic challenges, they are likely to bring down a school’s graduation rate.<sup>3</sup> Below are a few examples of the disparities in percentage of struggling students at new and closed high schools.

***Table 1: Highest-Needs Students at New Small Schools vs. Closed High Schools They Replaced***

<b>School</b>	<b>Self-Contained Special Education at the Large Old Campus Schools</b>	<b>Self-Contained Special Education at the New Schools on Campus</b>
Morris High School	14%	2%
Taft High School	13%	8%
Rockaway High School	12%	2%
Theodore Roosevelt High School	12%	6%
South Bronx High School	11%	0%
Adlai Stevenson High School	10%	4%
South Shore High School	10%	1%
Seward Park High School	9%	0%

<sup>1</sup> This does not include the 33 schools where the Mayor is proposing a different model for closure in which schools receive a new name and 50% new staff, but keep the same building and students.

<sup>2</sup> NYC DOE. 2011 Progress Report Results for High Schools; 2001-02 State School Report Cards. The currently closing high schools on the Stevenson (N=2), Taft (N=1) and Roosevelt (N=1) campuses were taken out of the overall campus averages. If we also subtracted Bronx High School of Business (one of the 33 PLA schools) out of the average, the percent of self-contained students at the new schools on the Taft Campus would fall to 7%.

<sup>3</sup> In 2010, 28% of NYC students in special education graduated from high school in four years, compared to 61% citywide. This rate would be even lower for students in self-contained special education.

The recently released MDRC study on the new small schools<sup>4</sup> misses an important point. While it is commendable that the new small schools are producing higher graduation rates, it is not clear that these schools serve the same population. The MDRC study does not include students in self-contained special education or collaborative team teaching; the omission of those high-needs students likely increases graduation rates in the new small schools.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the MDRC report does not acknowledge that some of the very highest-needs students – homeless students, students from juvenile detention centers, and over-the-counter students – are likely not to participate in the small school lotteries. Instead, these students are likely to end up at the large campus high schools that are disproportionately targeted for closure.

Indeed, when the new small schools *do* serve high populations of the highest-needs students, they are also often slated for closure. For example, the two new small schools on the Stevenson High School campus that have the highest percentages of self-contained special education students – Gateway High School (8%) and School for Community Research and Learning (10%) are now being closed. Similarly, the Urban Assembly Academy for History and Citizenship for Young Men on the Taft High School campus with 13% of students in self-contained special education (the highest rate on that campus) is being closed.

Nearly half (11 out of 25) of the schools slated for closure this year are schools opened during Mayor Bloomberg’s administration,<sup>6</sup> a cycle of closure that damages students and communities without accomplishing any actual school improvement. In 2004, the NYC Department of Education (DOE) closed MS 391 in Crown Heights, where 12% of students were meeting state standards in English Language Arts (ELA). It was replaced with MS 587, where this year 13% of students met state ELA standards. Now the DOE is closing MS 587, and opening yet another school in the building. What will ensure that the new school will do any better?

**Table 2: 2011 Closing Schools**

School	Opened Under Bloomberg?
Academy For Scholarship And Entrepreneurship: A College Board School	YES (2005)
Academy Of Business And Community Development	YES (2005)
Aspire Preparatory Middle School	YES (2006)
Brooklyn Collegiate: A College Board School	YES (2004)
Frederick Douglass Academy IV Secondary School	YES (2002)

<sup>4</sup> Bloom, Howard, S., and Rebecca Unterman. 2012. *Sustained Positive Effects on Graduation Rates Produced by New York City’s Small Public High Schools of Choice*. New York: MDRC.

<sup>5</sup> The MDRC report states: “This sample includes special education students who can be taught in the regular classroom setting. Special education students classified by the DOE as requiring collaborative team teaching services or self-contained classes are not part of the sample.”

<sup>6</sup> List of closing schools: <http://gothamschools.org/2011/12/09/ten-more-struggling-schools-proposed-for-closure-or-truncation/>. Schools’ founding year: [www.insideschools.org](http://www.insideschools.org).

Gateway School For Environmental Research and Technology	<b>YES (2004)</b>
General D. Chappie James Elementary School of Science	<b>YES (2008)</b>
Grace Dodge Career And Technical Education High School	No
International Arts Business School	<b>YES (2003)</b>
J.H.S. 296 The Halsey School	No
Jane Addams High School For Academic Careers	No
Knowledge and Power Preparatory Academy VII MS	<b>YES (2007)</b>
Legacy School For Integrated Studies	No
Manhattan Theatre Lab High School	<b>YES (2004)</b>
Middle School for the Arts	<b>YES (2004)</b>
P.S. 14 Cornelius Vanderbilt	No
P.S. 161 The Crown	No
P.S. 19 Roberto Clemente	No
P.S. 215 Lucretia Mott	No
P.S. 22	No
P.S. 298 Dr. Betty Shabazz	No
Samuel Gompers Career And Technical Education High School	No
Satellite Three	No
Wadleigh Secondary School For the Performing and Visual Arts	No
Washington Irving High School	No

Mayor Bloomberg and the New York City Department of Education have known since as early as 2006 the steps necessary to both improve both graduation rates and meet the needs of overage and low-performing students; that year, The Parthenon Group commissioned by the NYC DOE issued a report that recommended specific steps for the reform of New York City's schools.<sup>7</sup>

The Parthenon Report found that school size and concentration of low-performing students, analyzed together, were strong predictors of school success. The report recommended breaking large high schools into smaller ones as one strategy to address this finding, but it also recommended reducing the number of low-performing students in large high schools by capping the concentration of low-proficiency students in any one school, and more equitably distributing those students across the entire system. The Parthenon Report also recommended a number of other strategies to increase schools' chances for success, such as expanded learning time, redesigning 9<sup>th</sup> grade, and partnering low- and high-performing schools to provide collaboration and support. Despite these recommendations from their own consultant,

---

<sup>7</sup> To download the report, go to <http://edvox.org/2011/02/18/the-story-behind-the-parthenon-report/>.

the DOE has continued to assign large concentrations of low-performing students to large struggling schools, without implementing these potential success strategies.<sup>8</sup>

**Table 3: Demographic Averages at Closing Schools vs. Citywide**

	<b>Overage</b>	<b>Special Education</b>	<b>8<sup>th</sup> Grade Proficiency Level</b>	<b>Free and Reduced Price Lunch</b>
<b>Closing High Schools</b>	23%	19%	2.65	79%
<b>Citywide High Schools</b>	6%	10%	2.94	74%

Closing schools have higher proportions of overage, special education and low-income students, as well as students who are less prepared for high school. This data obscures even greater extremes at many of the closing schools. For example, Samuel Gompers High School in the Bronx serves over 1,000 students, 25% of whom are in special education, and 21% are English Language Learners. In 2010, Gompers was identified by the State as a Persistently-Lowest Achieving School. However, despite these massive concentrations of high-needs students, last year the DOE assigned the school an incoming 9<sup>th</sup> grade class in which 31% of students were overage for their grade and the average 8<sup>th</sup> grade proficiency level was only 2.54, far below the citywide average of 2.94. According to the Parthenon Report, many of these students would be headed for failure.

As the Parthenon Report stated five years ago, schools with the highest-needs students are still at much higher risk for closure than schools that educate lower-needs students. In the chart below, we compare schools with the highest proportions of students with high needs (top %) and the lowest proportions of students with high needs (bottom %) and the corresponding percentages of these schools receiving a Progress Report grade that will flag the school for closing. We also consider this relationship for schools with the highest and lowest performing students in relation to 8<sup>th</sup> grade proficiency levels.<sup>9</sup> We found schools accepting high percentages of students who are eligible for free lunch are eleven times more likely to receive a failing grade—and thus be threatened with closure—than schools with the lowest number of such students. High schools that accept very high proportions of entering 9th graders who are overage are five times more likely to get a failing grade than schools that accept very low numbers of these students.

---

<sup>8</sup> NYC DOE. School Demographics and Accountability Snapshot (2010). CEP Data. Averages are weighted by total school enrollment. Overage: represents the number of entering overage students as a proportion of total school enrollment. Citywide averages for 8<sup>th</sup> grade proficiency: IBO (2011) "New York City Public School Indicators: Demographics, Resources, Outcomes." Special education: IBO (2011) "Demographics, Performance, Resources: Schools Proposed for Closing Compared with Other City Schools." Citywide Overage average falls to 5% when you exclude transfer high schools serving high proportion of overage students.

<sup>9</sup> We looked at the top 10% of all schools, but the top 25% of high schools in order to generate a large enough sample size.

**Table 4: Proportions of Schools with High vs. Low-Needs Students Receiving a Failing Grade<sup>10</sup>**

	Schools with a "D" or an "F" or 3 "Cs"	
<b>Special Education</b>		
Top 10% of Schools (N=131)	15%	High-needs schools 7 times more likely to be targeted for closure
Bottom 10% of Schools (N=131)	2%	
<b>Free Lunch</b>		
Top 10% of Schools (N=135)	11%	High-needs schools 11 times more likely to be targeted for closure
Bottom 10% of Schools (N=128)	1%	
<b>Overage</b>		
Top 25% of High Schools (N=84)	27%	High-needs schools 5 times more likely to be targeted for closure
Bottom 25% of High Schools (N=83)	5%	
<b>Average 8th Grade Proficiency Level</b>		
Top 25% of High Schools (N=82)	0%	High-needs schools 26 times more likely to be targeted for closure
Bottom 25% of High Schools (N=82)	26%	

Only one in four students in New York City schools graduate high school prepared for college. That rate drops to a dismal 13% for Black and Latino students. Sadly, only a handful of high schools in the city are successfully preparing most of their students for college. There are only 36 high schools in the city where the more than half of the students graduate college ready (and many of those schools are selective) but there are 307 schools where less than half of the students graduate college ready.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, there is an enormous gap among schools by race and income.<sup>12</sup>

- The high schools that fall in the top quintile (20%) with the highest proportions of Black and Latino students have a college readiness rate of 12%, while the high schools falling in the lowest quintile have a college readiness rate of 55%.
- The high schools that fall in the top quintile of the distribution for low-income students have a college readiness rate of 11%, while the high schools in the bottom quintile of the distribution have a college readiness rate of 48%.

With the vast majority of students graduating high school unprepared for college, can we say that the close-and-replace strategy – Bloomberg’s dominant strategy to improve struggling schools – is significantly improving academic prospects for NYC students? Or, is it largely moving the highest-needs students around in a shell game?

<sup>10</sup> NYC DOE. CEP. School Demographics and Accountability Snapshots (2010, 2011). NYC DOE. Progress Reports (2011). NYSED. School Report Cards (2010).

<sup>11</sup> NYC DOE. School Level Regents-Based Math/ELA Aspirational Performance Measure (2010).

<sup>12</sup> NYC DOE. 2011 Progress Reports. College Readiness Metric.

While it is unclear whether closing schools is having positive impacts on student achievement, a number of questions remain unanswered: What is happening to the highest-needs students who used to attend the large campus high schools, but do not attend the new small schools? What is happening to the students who give up on school altogether because their school is being closed?

What we do know is that the educational futures of many high-needs students are being neglected while the City doubles down on this damaging policy. It's time to change the game.

---

<sup>i</sup> Data analysis by Christina Mokhtar at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform.