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Approved by Oregon PTA Board of Directors, October 18, 2025

Introduction

This document was created by a group of Oregon PTA volunteers with input from educational stakeholders with the intent

- To help families understand why a district might consider school closures[1]
- To summarize research around the impact of school closures
- To provide guidance to families and districts about factors and processes to be considered for potential school closures.

While an inclusive community engagement process is essential, in the end there is no objectively correct method to decide between different school consolidation options. Final decision-making will depend on local preferences and, realistically, the influence of various stakeholders. Oregon PTA believes that all parents and families should be equally empowered to advocate within a consolidation process, and districts and all participating stakeholders should take extra care to ensure that the process is inclusive and allows for equitable input from diverse groups.

This document discusses:

1. The context of school consolidations
2. The impacts of school closures on districts' budgets and on academic achievement
3. The process of school consolidations, including 11 recommendations for districts and communities.

In accordance with PTA bylaws,[2] this guidance recognizes that the legal responsibility for decision-making on school closures rests with school districts and their boards. The guidance is an advisory aligned with PTA's mission to

"Make every child's potential a reality
by engaging and empowering families and communities
to advocate for all children."

Oregon PTA encourages its members and families across the state to proactively, respectfully and collaboratively engage with their districts and with elected officials on issues affecting their children and their communities including the case of school consolidations.

[1] This paper uses the terms "school consolidation" and "school closure" interchangeably.
[2] "The organization shall work with the schools and community to provide quality education for all children and youth and shall seek to participate in the decision-making process establishing school policy, recognizing that the legal responsibility to make decisions has been delegated by the people to boards of education, state education authorities, and local education authorities." (Article IV(b), Oregon PTA Bylaws)

1. The context of school closures/consolidation

When student enrollment keeps declining in a district, eventually there will be far fewer students than schools were built to hold - leading to excess space capacities.[3] Additionally, revenues tend to decline as enrollment declines, causing financial shortfalls. In these situations, districts will consider reducing faculty, staff and underutilized space by closing/consolidating schools.[4]

Among reasons for declining enrollment in Oregon:[5] lower birth rates, increasing housing costs for families, gentrifying neighborhoods, and parents deciding to look for alternatives to public schools.[6] Yet despite the dropping enrollment, the number of schools in Oregon increased by 42 between 2013 and 2023, according to US Census data.[7]

When enrollment declines unevenly in a district, it becomes challenging to maintain equitable and fair resource distribution among schools or to even decide what these are. A district might want schools to have similar numbers of students so it's easier to share resources in a way that feels fair. But it should also be considered that different student groups or communities within a district might benefit from or prefer different types of school settings. [8]

To minimize the negative impact of school closures, the district and all stakeholders need to approach the process transparently and collaboratively looking for proactive and creative solutions that minimize harm and enhance outcomes for students. When handled poorly, school closures disrupt the school community[9], leading to mistrust and potentially a spiral of declining enrollment and additional school closures as parents decide to move their children out of the public school district.

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[3] Zalaznick, M. (2023, October 31). Closing schools: How K12 leaders can promise value and equity. District Administration.

[4] - PACE, Hahnel, C., & Pearman, II, F. A. (2023, September 1). Declining Enrollment, School Closures, and Equity Considerations. ERIC.
- Bellwether. (2025, April 1). Navigating Declining Enrollment. Navigating Declining Enrollment.
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[5] Silverman, J. (2025, February 18). Oregon public school enrollment levels off, with no sign of rebound from deep post-pandemic losses. The Oregonian.

[6] Oregon Department of Education, Jacoby, I., & Stalcup, R. (2022, December 1). Falling Enrollment During the COVID-19 Pandemic. Oregon.gov.

[7] National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Common Core of Data (CCD)

[8] Hanover Research. (2015, January). Impacts of School and Class Size on Student Outcomes.

[9] Berkhalter, D. L. Without Ongoing Community Engagement, School Closures Can Devastate.

2. Impacts on budgets and on academic achievement

A. Minimal impact of school closures on operational budgets unless accompanied by staff reductions

Research shows that closure of a school by itself (without reductions in overall staff positions) typically achieves only minimal operational savings if positions are simply redistributed to other school sites.[10] Closures generally go together with staff reductions, they are not a path to avoid them.[11]

Closing schools can make it easier to reduce staff over time, since open positions can be filled by employees from closed schools instead of hiring additional staff from outside the district:

> For example, the principal of school A which is closing might take over school B where the current principal is retiring. Without the school closures, the district would have had to fill the principal position at school B with a new hire.[12]

Examples of school consolidation with and without a focus on financial savings

- **Focus on financial savings:** School districts that must reduce staffing due to budget shortfalls might consider focusing these reductions on specific sites (ie. closing entire schools) instead of distributing staffing cuts across multiple sites. Again, operational cost savings are mainly achieved through reductions in staff, not reduction of school sites.
- **Focus on financial reallocations:** Districts might also consider consolidating schools (without reductions to staffing) to improve programming at the remaining sites - which typically does not result in significant cost savings.

Research seems mixed on whether smaller or larger neighborhood schools attract more families to enroll their children in a district compared to other schooling options.[13]

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[10] Closing Public Schools in Philadelphia: Lessons from Six Urban Districts. (2011, October 19). The Pew Charitable Trusts.

[11] See e.g. the broad foundation School Closure Guide [Closing Schools as a Means for Addressing Budgetary Challenges] for detailed examples of calculating financial savings.

[12] Roza, M., & Dhammani, A. (2024, March 3). Closing schools: How much money does it save, and is it worth it? EdSource.

[13] See e.g.
- Leithwood, K., & Jantzi, D. (2007, August 1). Review of Empirical Evidence about School Size Effects.
- School Size Effects: Review and Conceptual Analysis. (2014). In School Size Effects Revisited: A Qualitative and Quantitative Review of the Research Evidence in Primary and Secondary Education.
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B. Impact on low performing students

Some argue that "underperforming" schools i.e. schools where students show low levels of academic achievements should be closed to improve results for students. But research shows that such school closures rarely improve outcomes for the specific students affected as they typically either maintain their academic trajectory at their new school or suffer even further because of the disruption to their education.[14]

C. Impacts on capital budgets (facilities)

Due to the current tax structure and school funding situation in Oregon, many school districts don't have sufficient funds to maintain their school facilities. By closing individual schools, a district might attempt to reduce maintenance costs, to avoid costs for necessary upgrades such as installing air conditioning or in extreme cases to close buildings that are unsafe and failing especially since these buildings can significantly impact a district's cost of insurance coverage.

Given that building conditions can be decisive criteria in determining candidates for school closures, districts and communities need to carefully consider path-dependencies in long-range facility planning. It is helpful for districts to undertake significant community engagement efforts for its long-range planning as it would for school consolidations.

[14] - Stanford, L. (2024, June 18). The Harm of School Closures Can Last a Lifetime, New Research Shows. Education Week.
- Kim, J. (2004, May 1). The Long Shadow of School Closures: Impacts on Students' Educational and Labor Market Outcomes. EdWorkingPapers.com.
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D. Trade-offs to consider regarding school consolidation (examples)

Advantages of larger schools	Advantages of smaller schools
• A larger school might be able to offer music and visual arts while a smaller school might offer only one of these. • A counselor that is present every day in a larger school might have to split their time when serving two small schools. • A small school might be forced to implement blended classrooms while combined schools can offer single grade-level instruction.	• Small schools tend to foster more personal connections. • Especially in rural areas, school consolidation can lead to significantly longer distances between home and school.

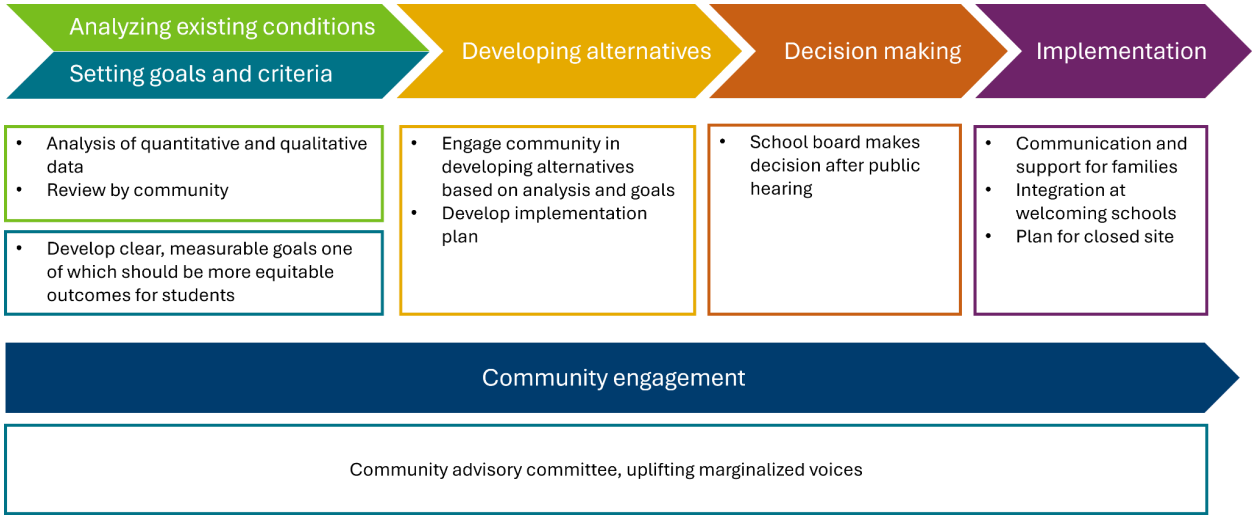
E. Short- vs. long-term impacts

There also needs to be a distinction between the negative impacts to the current students and families affected immediately by a school closure (e.g. losing established connections) and to balance those with potentially positive impacts for future incoming students and families.



3. Process around school closures

The following highlights the perspective of Oregon PTA on important steps to take during a school consolidation process and provides some recommendations for districts and the community. In line with the mission of Oregon PTA "to empower families to advocate for all children", the recommendations are mostly focused on family and community engagement.



For more comprehensive guidance on school consolidations, we recommend consulting guidance such as

- Bellwether: *Navigating Declining Enrollment. Navigating Declining Enrollment*
- Hahnel, C., & Marchitello, M.: *Centering equity in the school-closure process in California*
- California Department of Education: Best Practices Guide for Potential School Closure
- Office of the Attorney General, State of California: Guidance Regarding Laws Governing School Closures and Best Practices for Implementation in California
- the broad foundation: *School Closure Guide*

Any school consolidation will require initial investments to manage the process, including providing analysis, community engagement and implementation.[15]

Equitable processes and outcomes are important, while inequities in the process could violate students' civil rights.[16]

[15] the broad foundation. (2009, September 15). School Closure Guide [Closing Schools as a Means for Addressing Budgetary Challenges].

[16]

A. Timeline

Typically, budgetary constraints that lead to the discussion of school closures don't develop suddenly. School districts should allow ample time to plan and discuss school closure options.[17]

Operational funding

The majority of a district's revenue in Oregon comes from state sources which are set in a two-year cycle. At the end of even-numbered years the Governor proposes a state school budget, which most districts use for their preliminary budget planning; in the following, odd-numbered year, the legislature adjusts and approves the final state school budget typically in June.[18]
Most of the state funding is distributed among districts based on enrollment numbers and enrollment typically doesn't fluctuate significantly suddenly; drops (or increases) are rather the results of long-term, multi-year trends that are studied through so-called enrollment projections.

Capital funding

Typical major maintenance needs can be estimated fairly well multiple years in advance. Revenue for capital upgrades tends to come from voter-approved bonds which also span multiple years. Because decisions about capital funding - like which schools get HVAC or seismic upgrades - can strongly influence future school closures, families should closely follow the district's long-term facility planning. When a district believes that certain funding choices might lead to closing specific schools in the future, it should engage the community just as it would during school consolidation discussions.

Catastrophic events

Catastrophic events such as wildfires, earthquakes or storms might damage school buildings to the extent that a building suddenly becomes unsafe for students, and a closure is required.[19]

- Office of the Attorney General, State of California & Bonta, R. (2023, April 11). Guidance Regarding Laws Governing School Closures and Best Practices for Implementation in California. Office of the Attorney General.
- Blad, E. (2024, June 5). When Does a School Closure Become Discriminatory? Education Week.
- Cohen, R. M. (2016, April 22). The Devastating Impact of School Closures on Students and Communities. Popular Democracy / The American Prospect. (Blad, 2024), (Cohen, 2016)

[17] (the broad foundation, 2009)

[18] Exceptions to this cycle can be triggered if the state economy enters a recession and the state's budget needs to be adjusted with a biennium. In these cases, the state should be able to access its reserve funds to reduce impacts to schools. And even so, a temporary recession is typically not good reasoning for permanent school closures.

[19] School closures because of catastrophic events are technically and financially complex because of e.g. insurance coverages or state/federal emergency funding that comes into play and cannot be adequately discussed in this document.

Best practices

Best practices show that a timeframe of about 7-12 months is necessary for adequate community engagement, analysis and planning. When a school consolidation process is extended for too long it can lead to prolonged phases of uncertainty and anxiety which are detrimental to the affected school communities.

> **RECOMMENDATION 1:**
> To allow for adequate data collection, meaningful community engagement, thorough analysis, and future planning, the formal decision-making process for a school closure based on best practices should be expected to last between 210 and 360 days.

B. Community Engagement

Community engagement should be early and proactive while options are still available. Meaningful engagement - which requires resources - improves outcomes and strengthens communities. Some districts have chosen to develop formal school closure policies to guide them.[20]

To ensure equitable and transparent community engagement, school districts need to take extra care that voices of all families and especially families of historically marginalized groups are heard in the process. This can for example be achieved through targeted outreach to these communities. Without proper preparation and guidance, district-led community meetings tend to have a power imbalance that affects community engagement negatively.

> **RECOMMENDATION 2:**
> At the onset of the discussion, the district should lay out transparently all major steps that will be taken before a decision is reached.
>
> **RECOMMENDATION 3:**
> Districts should appoint a community advisory committee to lead the school closure discussion that is representative of the whole community and especially marginalized communities. This committee will then issue a report and recommendation to the governing board of the district.
>
> **RECOMMENDATION 4:**
> To address existing power imbalances, the district should set aside resources to lift up marginalized voices (e.g. active outreach, translation services, meetings in the community instead of the district office, stipends).

[20] E.g. Portland Public Schools. (2003, June 16) "6.10.030-P School Initiation and Closure"

C. Analysis of existing conditions

School closures and changing enrollment zones are about more than just financial impacts or student assessment scores. Friendships held since kindergarten can get broken up, access to a neighborhood playground might be lost, relationships between families and teachers get severed. Schools serve as important community hubs and sources of identity. These are important realities to acknowledge when understanding community reactions to school closure discussions.

Examples of quantitative data to consider

- Student demographics
- Staffing
- Transportation costs
- Programming offered by the district (both curricula and extra-curricular)
- Student Educational Equity Development (SEED) survey results
- Community programming (after school-programs and other uses)
- Building conditions and recent investments

Caution when evaluating current building conditions

As the review of building conditions discloses recent facilities investments made, there should be transparent discussion whether and how these past investments should influence consolidation strategies. Districts often consider closing schools that need the most repairs or upgrades. However, this can upset communities that were already overlooked for improvements in the past, amplifying frustrations.

Also, a school in a wealthier area might be able to raise funds from their community for upkeep and beautification projects that are impossible to raise for other communities. Using these community investments as a justification for keeping one school open and closing another can easily lead to inequitable outcomes.[21]

> **RECOMMENDATION 5:**
> A transparent analysis of existing conditions at the outset of the process can build understanding in the community about the various schools potentially affected by a consolidation process. The analysis should incorporate quantitative criteria as well as qualitative data.

[21] (Zalaznick, 2023)

> **RECOMMENDATION 6:**
> A draft of the situation analysis should be shared with the community in order to provide an opportunity to the community to correct, contextualize and complement the analysis before finalization.

D. Goal setting

School consolidations can be approached from various perspectives (e.g. financial, academically, facility). Without a clear purpose and vision, the process will easily be de-railed as the discussion becomes unstructured and unfocused due to the complexity and competing interests of the stakeholders involved.

Goals should be detailed enough to be realistically evaluated. Among the goals could be (non-exhaustive list):

- Cost savings
    - Staffing
    - Facility operational costs
    - Facility capital costs
    - Impact on transportation costs

- Capacity levels
    - Class sizes (averages, min/max)
    - Capacity of classrooms
    - Capacity of school spaces (gym, cafeteria, other common spaces)
    - Capacity for growth in the future
    - Differentiated by school level (elementary, middle, high school)
- Academic programming and supports
- Possible use of surplus building
    - Mothballing (potential to cause blight)
    - Leasing it out (e.g. to city or county services)
    - Sale
- Impact on legal obligations (e.g. Division 22 standards)
- Impact on school community
    - Disruption of community networks
    - Length of transportation routes

RECOMMENDATION 7:
The community committee in collaboration with the district should develop clear, measurable goals for the school consolidation. These should be used to develop and assess various alternatives.

RECOMMENDATION 8:
Creating more equitable outcomes for students should be one of the goals.

E. Development of alternatives

After goals have been developed and approved, the district together with the community and stakeholders should develop a number of alternatives to achieve those goals. Presenting only one option as viable shuts down community engagement.

These alternatives could include different options on which and how schools are consolidated but also other options that would not fully close individual schools such as

- Soft boundaries - overlapping school assignment zones that assign students based on an algorithm considering e.g. proximity, enrollment balancing[22]
- Blended classrooms
- Cross district cooperation/boundary changes
- Leasing out parts of buildings

All alternatives then need to be assessed for their financial impact (e.g. cost for curriculum adaptation for blended classrooms), and against the stated goals and the status quo.

To build and maintain trust with the community, at least one alternative that doesn't include closing a school should be developed.[23]

RECOMMENDATION 9:
The district should engage the community in developing a variety of options which should include at least one alternative to fully closing schools.

[22] The Soft Neighborhood Model for Portland Public Schools.
[23] ACTION KIT -STOP CLOSING PUBLIC SCHOOLS. Advancement Project.

F. Decision-making

After the community committee has developed its recommendation and forwarded it to the school board, the school board will be responsible for making the difficult decision whether and how to consolidate schools.

Unfortunately, many community members will only become activated at this last decision point in the process. By following the process outlined above, the district and school board should have ample documentation for the reasoning behind the recommendations and visibility of the community engagement opportunities.

Nevertheless, some community members might have lacked the resources or time to participate in the overall process earlier on and they should also be given the chance to be heard - without delaying the decision-making process unnecessarily - before a final decision is made. The timeline needs to be clear as leaving the community in limbo would drain energy that will be essential for a stellar implementation of the decision. The recommended timeline below aims to balance these two different objectives.

> **RECOMMENDATION 10:**
> The school board should hold a public hearing on the recommendations from the community committee before making a final decision at a separate board meeting.
> The public hearing should be notified 30 days in advance and allow for the submission of written comments.
> There should be at least 7 days but not more than 14 days between the public hearing and the final decision making.

G. Implementing the decision

Just as important as the decision-making process is implementing that decision with care and intention.

The needs of families and staff at both schools, the ones being closed and the ones welcoming those students, will need to be considered and support needs to be offered.

It will take effort and resources to integrate the students and to meet their academic as well as their social-emotional needs.

Lastly, plans for the closed school site(s) - be it mothballing, leasing it out, or selling the property, need to be executed in a timely manner to preserve the value of the property and avoid it becoming blight that causes more harm in the already affected community.

RECOMMENDATION 11:

As part of the consolidation decision, the district shall develop a written plan for how the decision will be implemented. This should at the minimum include

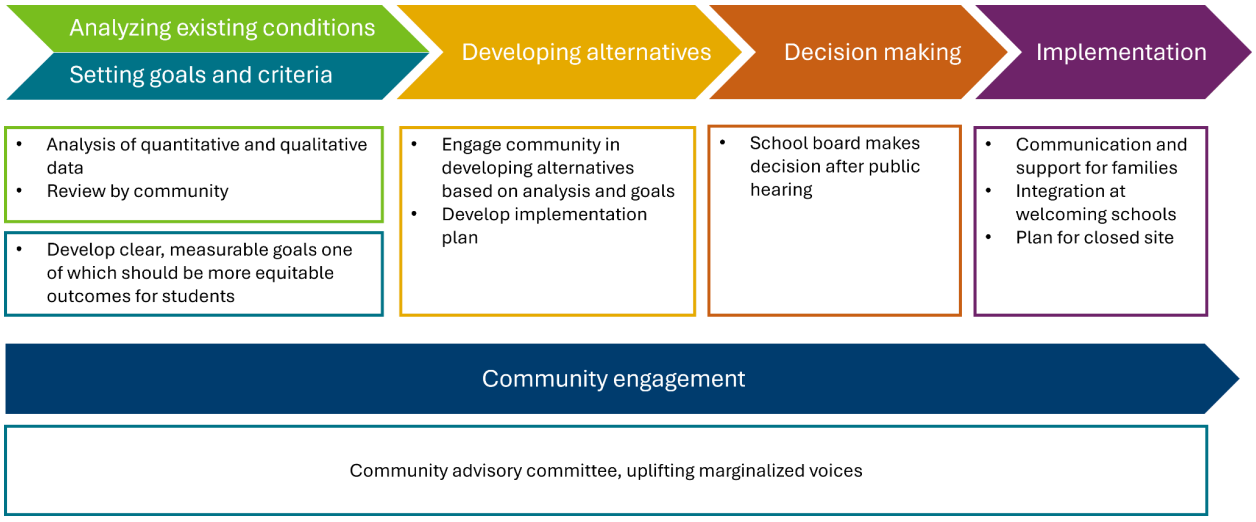
- Communication and support for the families at any school that is closed
- Communication and support for the families at any welcoming school
- Plan for integration of students and families at the welcoming school
- Plan for the closed site



Summary of process and recommendations

Oregon PTA encourages its members and families across the state to proactively, respectfully and collaboratively engage with their districts and elected officials around issues affecting their children and their communities including the case of school consolidations.

Oregon PTA acknowledges that the implementation of the recommendations in this advisory guidance requires resources and Oregon PTA calls upon the state legislature and state agencies to provide grant funding and technical assistance to districts undergoing school consolidation as necessary.



RECOMMENDATION 1: To allow for adequate data collection, meaningful community engagement, thorough analysis, and future planning, the formal decision-making process for a school closure based on best practices should be expected to last between 210 and 360 days.

RECOMMENDATION 2: At the onset of the discussion, the district should lay out transparently all major steps that will be taken before a decision is reached.

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RECOMMENDATION 8: Creating more equitable outcomes for students should be one of the goals.

RECOMMENDATION 9: The district should engage the community in developing a variety of options which should include at least one alternative to fully closing schools.

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