Closing Schools Without Breaking Trust

Best Practices for California School Districts Facing Declining Enrollment

White Paper

Executive Summary

Across California, many public school districts face a difficult reality. Declining enrollment, underused facilities, staffing challenges, aging campuses, and budget pressures are forcing leaders to consider closing or consolidating schools. These decisions are among the hardest any school board can make. A school is not just a building. It is a neighborhood anchor, a family routine, a place of identity, and sometimes a community's emotional center.[1]

Because of this, school closures almost always generate opposition. Even when the financial and educational reasons are real, families may experience the process as a loss, a threat, or a betrayal. The political difficulty often leads districts to delay action for years. But delay is not neutral. When districts operate too many under-enrolled schools, students suffer from fewer programs, unstable staffing, limited enrichment, reduced access to counselors and specialists, and facilities dollars spread too thin.

The central question, then, is not whether school closures can be made painless. They cannot. The question is whether districts can make closure and consolidation decisions in a way that is transparent, equitable, educationally grounded, legally careful, and worthy of public trust.

This paper argues that California districts should treat school closure not as a last-minute budget maneuver, but as a long-term educational redesign process. The best processes begin long before a district is in crisis, before specific schools are named, and before trust has collapsed. They start with developing an educational vision, establishing public criteria, publishing data before recommendations, evaluating multiple scenarios, conducting equity analyses early, engaging labor and community partners, and providing detailed transition guarantees before any final vote.

The goal is not to eliminate disagreement. In most school closure processes, disagreement will remain. The real test is whether even a parent who opposes the final decision can still say: **"I understand exactly how they got there."** That standard captures the heart of a legitimate process: transparency does not require universal agreement, but it does require visible reasoning, honest tradeoffs, and public accountability.

---

[1] This report covers the school closure process. The re-use of closed school properties is an important, but separate, process with its own advisory committee, legal, criteria and process requirements.

I. Why School Closures Are So Difficult

School closure decisions are different from ordinary budget decisions because schools carry meaning far beyond their operational function. For students, a school represents friendships, routines, trusted adults, and a sense of belonging. For parents, it may be the place where they built community, volunteered, watched their children grow, or trusted that their child was known. For staff, it is a professional home. For neighborhoods, a school is civic institution. Families build their daily routines around the location of, and transportation of students to, their existing schools. Closing schools upends these routines and removes these community centers.

The California Department of Education recognizes this reality in its school closure guidance, noting that school closures affect students, parents, staff, neighborhoods, daily routines, and the broader community. The guidance emphasizes that closure decisions require careful planning and communication, not merely administrative action. (California Department of Education)

This emotional reality does not mean districts should never close schools. It means they should stop treating closure as only a facilities, budget, or enrollment issue. School closure is also a civic trust issue. If the process feels hidden, rushed, predetermined, or inequitable, the district may be unable to persuade the public even when the underlying facts are strong.

Many districts make the mistake of leading with the financial problem: "We have too many schools and not enough students." While that may be true, it is rarely enough to build legitimacy. Families need to understand not only what the district is trying to save, but what students are expected to gain. A closure process framed only around money can feel like abandonment. A process framed around educational quality, program access, staffing stability, and long-term sustainability has a better chance of being understood. The message can be positive, with a focus on creating the best possible schools for today and for the future.

II. Why Avoidance Can Harm Students

Because school closures are politically painful, districts often postpone them. This is understandable. Board members are elected by the affected communities. Superintendents may fear losing credibility. Staff may worry about transfers, layoffs, or disruption. Families may organize quickly and passionately against any proposed closure.

But avoiding the question does not protect students from harm. In districts with declining enrollment, keeping every school open can create a slow erosion of quality. Small schools may lack enough enrollment to support robust staffing. Students may lose access to art, music, science, counselors, nurses, intervention teachers, librarians, and after-school programming. Combination classes may increase. Specialized programs may become harder to staff. Facility needs may go unaddressed because limited dollars are spread across too many campuses.

In other words, a district avoiding the political pain of closure may quietly allow educational opportunities to shrink. That is not necessarily more equitable or more humane. It may simply make the harm less visible.

This distinction matters. The purpose of a best-practice closure process is not to promote closures as an inherent good. The purpose is to help districts determine, honestly and publicly, whether consolidation would produce stronger schools for students than maintaining the current system. If the answer is no, the district should not close schools. If the answer is yes, the district has a responsibility to make the case clearly, transparently, and early enough for the community to understand the tradeoffs.

III. The California Context: Law, Equity, and Declining Enrollment

California districts operate within a legal and equity context that requires particular care. Declining enrollment is not simply a technical budget problem. It often intersects with housing costs, demographic change, neighborhood displacement, long-standing segregation, and uneven access to high-quality school facilities and programs.

Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) has warned that school closures can disproportionately affect low-income students and students of color, and that local decision-makers should use inclusive, transparent processes; ensure displaced students have access to high-quality educational opportunities; and develop longer-term plans to address underlying conditions contributing to disproportionate closures. (EdPolicy Institute)

The California Attorney General issued statewide guidance on school closures, emphasizing that closure decisions must guard against discrimination and support meaningful partnership with school communities. The Attorney General's guidance follows the Assembly Bill 1912 requirements for financially distressed districts considering school closures, mergers, or consolidations, including attention to equity impacts. (California DOJ)

Although not every district is legally subject to the same statutory process as a financially distressed district, the broader principles should guide all districts. The public expects more than legal minimum compliance. Districts should be able to show that they considered who would be affected, how they would be affected, what alternatives were evaluated, and what steps would mitigate harm.

The lesson for California districts is clear: equity cannot be added after the closure list is already public. Equity must shape the criteria, the data, the scenarios, the analysis, the public engagement, and the transition plan from the beginning.

IV. The Core Standard: Legitimacy, Not Popularity

A school closure process should not be judged by whether the final decision is popular. That standard is too low and too unrealistic. Some families will oppose closure regardless of the process because the loss is real. A better standard is legitimacy.

A legitimate process has these characteristics:

- The problem is named early.
- The criteria are public before schools are evaluated.
- The data are visible before recommendations are made.
- Multiple scenarios are compared.
- Equity impacts are analyzed before decisions are narrowed.
- Public input is documented and shown to matter.
- The final recommendation is accompanied by a detailed transition plan.
- The elected board takes ownership of the final vote, while acknowledging the difficulty of making that decision.

This does not eliminate grief or anger. But it changes the nature of the disagreement. Instead of asking families to trust a conclusion, the district shows the reasoning that produced it.

The strongest closure process is one where a family may still say, "I disagree with this decision," but cannot fairly say, "They made the decision before listening," or "No one can explain why our school was chosen."

V. Best Practice 1: Start with the Educational Vision, Not the Closure List

The first mistake many districts make is beginning with the wrong question. They ask, "Which schools should we close?" That question immediately creates fear, defensiveness, and political organizing. Every school community begins fighting for survival.

The better opening question is: **What should every student in this district have access to?**

Before any school is named, the district should define the educational conditions it believes every student deserves. This might include:

- Every student should attend a school with stable staffing.
- Every student should have access to counselors, nurses, and student support services.
- Every student should have access to art, music, science, physical education, and enrichment.
- Every student with disabilities should have access to appropriate services without unnecessary disruption of their learning.
- Every English learner should have access to strong language development and bilingual supports.

- Every school should be large enough to offer a full educational program.
- Every school should be safe, well-maintained, and able to support modern instruction.

This step matters because it changes the public conversation. The issue becomes not "whose school loses," but "what kind of schools do we want all students to attend?"

The San José Unified School District (K-12) example is useful here. One of the strongest aspects of its process was that the district first used an advisory committee to define the characteristics of a strong elementary school before moving into implementation discussions about consolidation, boundaries, and program relocation. That sequence is important. A district that starts with the desired educational model has a better chance of explaining why consolidation may be necessary.

VI. Best Practice 2: Create the Rules and Decision Criteria Before Naming the Schools

Trust collapses when families believe the district already chose the schools and then built a process to justify the result. For that reason (and to ensure compliance with AB 1912), districts should adopt and publish evaluation criteria before any specific school is recommended for closure.

The purpose of the list of criteria is to make the district's reasoning visible. Families and staff should be able to understand why certain options advanced, why others were rejected, and how the final recommendation connects to the district's stated goals. The process should not ask the public to trust conclusions without seeing the evidence and reasoning behind them. The criteria should be broad enough to reflect the real complexity of the decision. A narrow focus on enrollment or on facility cost alone may produce an outcome that appears efficient but is inequitable, disruptive, or educationally weak.

A strong California closure process should include, at a minimum, the following criteria:

- Enrollment trends over multiple years
- School capacity and utilization
- Projected future enrollment
- Facility condition and modernization needs
- Operating cost per student
- Educational program access
- Staffing stability
- Special education program impact
- English learner and bilingual program impact
- Geographic distribution of school facilities and of students
- Transportation distance and traffic impact
- Feeder pattern continuity
- Neighborhood and community impact

- Demographic and equity impact
- Receiving-school capacity
- Potential reinvestment of any savings into student services

The district should also state what the criteria are *not* designed to do. For example, closure criteria should not punish a school for serving high-need students. Criteria should not use test scores as a simplistic proxy for school value. They should not treat smallness as automatically bad if a small school is intentionally designed, academically strong, and financially sustainable. The district must distinguish between schools that are small by design and schools that are small because of long-term enrollment decline.

A clear criteria framework also helps protect against the perception that decisions were made first and justified later. When the district identifies the criteria early, publishes the supporting data, evaluates multiple options, and explains the tradeoffs, the public can follow the path from problem to recommendation, even if they disagree with the final outcome.

The rule should be simple: **no closure list before public criteria.**

VII. Best Practice 3: Publish the Data Before Publishing the Recommendation

One of the most common sources of distrust is that families see the conclusion before they see the evidence. A district announces that certain schools are being considered for closure, and only afterward do families begin asking: What data did you use? Why this school? Why not that school? How were the numbers calculated? What assumptions were made?

A better process reverses the order. The district should publish a public data dashboard before any specific closure recommendation is made.

The dashboard should include, for every school:

- A 10- to 20-year enrollment history
- Future enrollment projections
- Building capacity
- Current and Projected Utilization rate
- Facility condition
- Estimated modernization needs
- Staffing allocations
- Program offerings
- Special education programs
- Bilingual or dual-language programs
- Student demographics

- Socioeconomic indicators
- Foster youth and homelessness data, where appropriate and legally permissible
- English learner data
- Transportation distances
- The geographic distribution of students' residences
- Walkability and traffic considerations
- Estimated savings or reinvestment potential

This dashboard should be available in plain language, translated into the major languages spoken by families, and accompanied by downloadable data files. Families, staff, unions, community groups, and journalists should be able to inspect the same information the district is using.

This does not mean everyone will interpret the data the same way. They will not. But it creates a common factual foundation. Without that foundation, the public conversation becomes a battle of suspicion.

Outside consultants can facilitate or otherwise assist with the creation, modification, and comparison of scenarios, while also bringing a sense of "independent experts" to the process. It is very important, however, for the consultants to be neutral and objective throughout the process of helping the district reach decisions.

VIII. Best Practice 4: Release Multiple Scenarios at the Same Time

A district should avoid presenting one closure proposal as though it is the only possible answer. When one scenario is released first, the public often assumes it is the district's preferred outcome and that all later engagement is performative.

Instead, the district should release multiple scenarios at the same time. Each scenario should be complete enough for the public to compare.

For example:

Scenario A: Minimal Disruption of Affected Students
Prioritizes keeping students closest to home and reducing transportation changes but may produce smaller savings or fewer program improvements.

Scenario B: Educational Program Expansion
Prioritizes creating schools large enough to support specialized staffing, enrichment, and student services, but may require more attendance boundary changes.

Scenario C: Facilities Efficiency
Prioritizes closing or consolidating campuses with the highest facility costs or lowest utilization but may raise equity or transportation concerns.

Scenario D: Equity Protection
Prioritizes minimizing disproportionate impact on historically underserved students, even if the financial savings are less.

Scenario E: Fewer Closures
Closes fewer campuses but may leave some under-enrolled schools operating with limited program access.

Scenario F: Greater Consolidation and Reinvestment
Closes more campuses, but results in more funding for receiving schools, student support, and facility improvements.

Each scenario should include maps, school-by-school impacts, enrollment projections, program impacts, transportation analysis, estimated savings, reinvestment plans, and equity analysis.

This approach helps the public see that there is no painless option. It also gives the community something more meaningful to respond to than a single closure list.

IX. Best Practice 5: Make Equity Analysis Central, Not Decorative

Equity analysis should begin before a shorter list of schools for possible closure is released, not after. If a district waits until the end to analyze equity, the public may reasonably believe that equity language is being used to defend a decision already made.

A strong equity impact analysis should answer at least the following questions:

- Which students would be displaced under each scenario?
- What are the racial, ethnic, income, disability, foster youth, homeless, and English learner characteristics of affected students?
- Are any protected or high-need groups disproportionately affected?
- Would affected students travel farther than other students?
- Would students lose access to special programs, bilingual programs, or trusted service providers?
- Would receiving schools offer more, equivalent, or fewer educational opportunities?
- Would closure disrupt wraparound services or school-based neighborhood supports?
- What mitigations are proposed?
- Which scenarios were rejected because of equity concerns?
- How will the district monitor outcomes after closure?

The California Attorney General's statewide school closure guidance specifically emphasizes preventing discrimination and supporting equal partnership with school communities in closure decisions. (California DOJ) PACE similarly recommends that districts use inclusive and transparent processes and ensure that displaced students have accessible, high-quality educational opportunities. (ERIC)

X. Best Practice 6: Involve Communities Before Scenarios Are Drafted

Many districts say they engaged the community because they held public meetings after announcing possible closures. That is engagement, but it is late engagement. By that point, families are reacting to a threat.

The stronger model is to involve communities before options are formed. Early engagement should ask:

- What values should guide consolidation decisions?
- What would make a receiving school provide better opportunities?
- What unique community assets deserve extra consideration?
- What transportation burdens are unacceptable?
- What special programs require continuity?
- What would families need to trust the process?

Districts should avoid relying only on the families who can attend evening board meetings. Engagement must include multilingual meetings (where appropriate), school-site conversations, parent focus groups (small group or individual conversations are often the best way to engage traditionally un-engaged parents), student voices, staff input, surveys, community-based organizations, and targeted outreach to families who are less likely to participate in formal public meetings.

The goal is not to give every stakeholder veto power. The goal is to ensure that the district understands the ~~lived~~ consequences of its options before narrowing them.

XI. Best Practice 7: Engage Labor Early and Honestly

The role of teachers and classified staff is often decisive. If families and labor unions unite against a closure plan, boards may find it nearly impossible to proceed. If labor leaders understand the educational rationale and believe staff will be treated fairly, the process has a much greater chance of moving forward.

Districts should engage labor unions early around:

- The "no change" scenario (possible State receivership, combination classes, fewer electives, etc.)
- Staffing guarantees
- Transfer rights

- Seniority and placement procedures
- Layoff avoidance or layoff minimization
- Class-size protections
- Specialist staffing
- Counselor, nurse, librarian, and intervention positions
- Classified staff impacts
- Receiving-school staffing plans
- Professional development for transition
- Labor-management transition committees

Labor engagement should not be treated as a side negotiation. It is central to the educational credibility of the plan and must be part of the process from the very beginning.

XII. Best Practice 8: Publish the Transition Plan Before the Vote

Families should never be asked to accept a closure decision based on vague promises that details will come later. The transition plan should be public before the board votes.

For each school affected in each scenario, the district should publish:

- The assigned receiving school or schools
- Boundary maps
- Transportation eligibility
- Bus routes or transportation supports
- Walkability and traffic analysis
- Projected class sizes
- Projected staffing levels
- Special education service continuity
- Bilingual and English learner program continuity
- After-school and other enrichment options
- Counseling and mental health supports
- Support for students with disabilities
- Support for foster youth and homeless students
- Sibling placement policies
- Priority transfer policies
- Timeline for family visits to receiving schools
- Facility improvements at receiving schools
- Safety and supervision plans

- How school identity, history, murals, archives, and traditions will be honored
- "Grandfathering" policy: which, if any, students have the option to finish their time at their current school

The transition plan should also identify the direct supports families will receive during the move, including a designated point of contact or "concierge" service for affected families, pre-transition visits to receiving campuses, student welcoming activities, family orientation events, and support for participation in athletics, clubs, performing arts, leadership programs, and other extracurricular activities. This is especially important for students moving from smaller schools to larger schools, where access to teams, programs, or leadership opportunities may become more competitive.

A school closure without a transition plan may appear to parents to be abandonment. A school closure with a detailed transition plan still is painful, but it tells families the district has thought about their children, not only about the dollars and cents.

Too often, school closure decisions are only about cutting spending. The transition plan should also include a positive financial plan. If the district says consolidation will improve educational opportunities, it should show how financial savings will be reinvested. Families should be able to see what will be added, improved, protected, or expanded because of the decision.

XIII. Best Practice 9: Show How Public Input Changed the Plan

Public meetings are not enough. Districts should show how community input affected the decision.

A best-practice process includes a public decision log. The log should track:

- What the district heard?
- Which concerns were repeated across communities?
- Which assumptions were changed?
- Which scenarios were changed?
- Which options were eliminated?
- Which new scenarios were added, and why?
- Which transition supports were added?
- Which issues did not change the recommendation and why not?
- What questions remain unresolved?

This is one of the simplest ways to build trust. People do not need to win every argument to feel respected. But they do need evidence that the district listened.

A district that cannot show how public input influenced the process should not claim the process was meaningfully participatory.

XIV. Best Practice 10: Keep the Board Accountable

Advisory committees can play an important role, but they should not be used to shield elected officials from responsibility. The board must remain accountable for the final decision.

A strong governance structure separates the roles clearly:

- The board names the problem and approves the process.
- The board adopts criteria and timeline.
- Staff provide technical analysis.
- Advisory committees review data and scenarios.
- The public responds to options.
- The Advisory Committee makes a recommendation.
- The board debates and votes in public.

Committees can study the issue, weigh the data, and produce recommendations, but the elected board must make the final decision.

This matters because closure decisions are democratic decisions. They affect neighborhoods, families, and public assets. Advisory committees can deepen legitimacy, but they cannot replace public accountability.

XV. Best Practice 11: Monitor Outcomes After Closure

The process should not end when the board votes or when the campus closes. A school closure is part of a transition period that must be actively managed. Students and families should not be left to navigate the change on their own.

Districts should monitor outcomes for at least three years after implementation.

Post-closure monitoring should include:

- Academic performance
- Student discipline
- Student belonging and climate surveys
- Family satisfaction
- Special education service continuity
- English learner progress
- Transportation time and reliability
- Participation in after-school programs
- Class sizes
- Access to counselors, nurses, specialists

- Access to art, music, sports, and other enrichment programs
- Facility improvements promised and completed
- Actual savings compared with projected savings
- Reinvestment of savings

The district should report annually on whether affected students are adjusting academically, socially, emotionally, and extracurricularly. If the data show problems — such as increased absenteeism, transportation difficulties, reduced participation in activities, service disruptions, or students' weakened sense of belonging — the district should provide additional support.

Closure and consolidation should be judged not only by whether the district balanced facilities or budgets, but by whether affected students were better served after the transition.

XVI. Recommended Timeline for a Strong Closure Process

Districts often compress school closure timelines because budget deadlines are real. But compressed timelines increase distrust, especially when families first learn that their school may be affected late in the process. Whenever possible, a district should begin the process 12 to 18 months before implementation. The advisory committee should be formed early, after the district has publicly named the problem, but before any school closure scenarios or school lists are developed.

<u>Months 1–2: Name the Problem Publicly</u>

The district should begin by explaining the enrollment, budget, facilities, staffing, and program-access challenges that require public discussion. At this stage, no schools should be named. The purpose is to establish the need for a districtwide review, not to defend a predetermined outcome.

During this phase, the board should also announce the creation of an advisory committee and clearly define its purpose, membership structure, scope, and timeline. The district's message should be: "We are not starting with a closure list; we are starting with the question of what kind of school system our students need".

<u>Months 2–3: Form the Advisory Committee</u>

The advisory committee should be appointed or approved before closure options are developed. Its membership should be broad enough to reflect the whole district community, including parents, teachers, classified staff, administrators, labor representatives, community members, and, where appropriate, students. The committee should also include representation from different geographic areas, school levels, student populations, and communities most likely to be affected by declining enrollment or consolidation.

<u>Months 3–4: Define the Educational Vision</u>

The advisory committee's first task should be to help define the educational vision that will guide the process. Before discussing individual schools, the district should ask: what should every student have access to in a strong, sustainable school?

Months 4–5: Adopt Criteria and Prepare the Data

After the educational vision is defined, the district should develop proposed evaluation criteria. The advisory committee should endorse the criteria before they are adopted by the board. The final criteria should be approved publicly before any school is evaluated for possible closure.

During this phase, staff should also begin preparing the school-by-school database or dashboard that will be used throughout the process.

Months 5–6: Publish the Districtwide Data Dashboard

The district should publish the data before issuing any scenarios. The dashboard should include the information needed for the public to understand the condition of every school, including enrollment history, enrollment projections, capacity, utilization, facility needs, staffing, program offerings, demographics, transportation considerations, and estimated operating costs.

The advisory committee should review the data in public meetings and ask questions, identify missing information, request corrections, and test assumptions. This is an important trust-building step. The committee should not merely receive and evaluate scenarios; it should be able to examine the facts from which those scenarios were developed.

Months 7–9: Develop and Review Multiple Scenarios

Using the board-approved criteria and published data, staff should develop multiple closure, consolidation, boundary, or program-relocation scenarios.

This should be the advisory committee's most active phase. The committee should review each draft scenario, ask for revisions, request additional analyses, compare assumptions, and consider whether the scenarios are consistent with the adopted criteria and educational vision. The committee should be able to request new scenarios if it feels the initial options do not adequately address equity, transportation, program continuity, receiving-school capacity, or other essential metrics.

Months 9–10: Conduct Community Review of Scenarios

Once multiple scenarios are available, the district should conduct broad community review. This should include districtwide meetings, school-site meetings, multilingual outreach, staff engagement, student input where appropriate, surveys, and targeted outreach to communities less likely to participate in formal board meetings.

The advisory committee should participate by listening to feedback, identifying recurring concerns, and helping the district understand how each scenario would affect families and school communities. The committee should not replace public engagement. Rather, it should help make sense of the feedback and ensure that public concerns are considered before options are narrowed.

Months 11–12: Revise Scenarios and Develop a Committee Recommendation

After community review, the advisory committee, with staff assistance, should revise scenarios and publish a decision log that explains what changed, what did not change, and why. xx

The advisory committee should then recommend either a preferred scenario or a ranked set of options for the superintendent and board to consider. A ranked recommendation is often stronger than a single option because it allows the committee to explain the tradeoffs among alternatives. The recommendation should include the committee's reasoning, the criteria applied, the equity considerations reviewed, and any unresolved concerns.

Months 13–14: Release the Final Recommendation and Transition Plan

The superintendent should release a final recommendation, along with the criteria framework, equity impact analyses, rejected-options memo, transportation analyses, receiving-school capacity plan, and transition plan for every affected school.

If the superintendent's recommendation differs from the advisory committee's recommendation, the district should explain why.

A transition plan should be released before the board vote. Families should know where students would go, what transportation would be provided, how special education and bilingual programs would continue, what after-school supports would be available, what staffing levels are expected, what improvements will be made at receiving schools, and how students will be supported socially and academically during the transition.

Months 15-16: Board Deliberation and Vote

The board should deliberate and vote in public only after the final recommendation, supporting analysis, and transition plan have been available for public review. Board members should explain their reasoning and address the major tradeoffs, including educational quality, equity, transportation, cost, program continuity, and community impact.

The board may accept, modify, or reject the recommendation, but it should do so transparently. The final decision should be tied back to the educational vision, adopted criteria, public data, equity analysis, community input, and transition commitments.

Months 16–18: Transition Implementation

After the vote, the district should immediately shift from decision-making to transition support. Families should receive clear communication about assignments, transfers, transportation, program continuity, after-school care, special education services, and receiving-school visits.

Receiving schools should receive the staffing, resources, and facility support promised in the transition plan. Students and their families should have opportunities to visit their new campuses, meet staff, and participate in orientation activities. The district should also preserve the history and identity of closed schools through archives, ceremonies, murals, memorabilia, or other community-designed practices.

Years 1–3: Monitor Outcomes After Closure

The district's obligation does not end when students move. For at least three years after implementation, the district should publicly monitor the effects of closure and consolidation. This post-closure monitoring allows the district to determine whether consolidation demonstrably improved student opportunities. This monitoring also holds the district accountable for the promises made before the vote.

XVII. A Model Transparency Package

Every California district considering school closures should publish its standard transparency package. This package should be easy to find, translated, and updated throughout the process.

The package should include:

- The educational vision for strong schools
- A plain-language explanation of why closures or consolidations are being considered
- A timeline for the decision process
- Board-approved criteria
- An explanation of how each criterion will be considered
- School-by-school data dashboard showing current and forecasted enrollment, capacity, utilization, facility condition, demographics, transportation, staffing, and program information
- Financial analyses
- Multiple closure/consolidation scenarios as they are developed
- Scenario comparison chart
- Maps showing boundary lines under each scenario
- Equity impact analyses
- Transportation analyses
- Special education continuity plan
- English learner and bilingual program continuity plan
- Labor and staffing impact plan
- Receiving-school capacity plan
- Transition plan for each affected school
- Reinvestment plan
- All meeting materials (posted in advance)
- Meeting videos and summaries

- Decision log showing how public input changed the process
- Rejected-options memo
- Frequently asked questions
- Transition assistance plan
- Post-closure monitoring plan

This is what transparency should mean in practice: Not simply "we held public meetings," but "the public can see the full decision-making process."

XVIII. Political Lessons for District Leaders

School closure is one of the most politically difficult responsibilities in public education. District leaders should not enter the process expecting gratitude. Even a clear, well-planned process will be criticized. Even a necessary decision will be painful.

But leaders can avoid several common mistakes if they thoughtfully follow the process laid out in this report and:

- Present the "make no changes" scenario
- Do not wait until the district is in fiscal crisis
- Do not begin with a list of schools targeted for closure
- Do not release conclusions before data
- Do not use equity language without equity analyses
- Do not ask families to trust promises that are not written down
- Do not treat public input as a formality
- Do not pretend there are no tradeoffs
- Do not treat the board vote as the end of the obligation

A strong process requires courage, but also humility. District leaders must be willing to say: this is hard, this is painful, these are the facts, these are the choices, these are the tradeoffs, and this is how we will protect students if we move forward.

The political goal should not be to avoid anger. The political goal should be to ensure legitimacy. Legitimacy comes from making it clear that student well-being, not cost, is driving the process.

XIX. Conclusion

California districts facing declining enrollment need a clearly defined, equitable model for school closure decisions. Too often, closures are delayed until the district is under severe financial pressure, then rushed through a process that families experience as sudden and predetermined. That approach damages trust and may deepen inequity.

The better model is clear. Begin with the educational vision. Create the rules before naming or speculating about any schools. Publish the data before stating the recommendation. Show the tradeoffs. Release multiple scenarios. Emphasize equity throughout the process. Engage labor unions early. Provide transition guarantees before the vote. Show how public input changed the plan. Keep the board accountable. Monitor outcomes after closure.

School closures will never be easy, and they should not be. The loss of a school is a serious public act. But districts can and should make these decisions with honesty, transparency, and care.

The best standard is not whether everyone agrees. The best standard is whether the community can understand the full path from problem to decision to post-decision evaluation.

A district has done the work well when even those who oppose the outcome can understand the reasoning, see the evidence, recognize the tradeoffs, and know exactly how students will be supported afterward.

This is what it means to close schools without breaking trust.

If we can assist your school district, contact NDC via our website (NDCresearch.com or demographers.com), or by email: info@NDCresearch.com.