Annenberg Institute
BROWN UNIVERSITY

EdWorkingPaper No. 25-1327

Schools Never Die: Toward a Dynamic Systems Theory of School Closure

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Educational researchers and policymakers typically treat school closures as discrete administrative decisions with clear endpoints. This paper challenges that assumption by applying Dynamic Systems Theory to school closure policy and research. We argue that schools function as adaptive ecosystems embedded within broader networks of relations that span social, cultural, political, and economic dimensions. When districts close schools, many underlying systems—relational networks, cultural practices, institutional memories, and financial governance—persist and adapt rather than disappear, rendering true "closure" illusory. This contradiction—between dynamic systems and discrete closure—explains why closure effects often confound policymakers' predictions, why communities mount fierce resistance even to seemingly justified closures, and why impacts can reverberate through communities for years. We argue that adopting a perspective that "schools never die" can improve school closure policy and research by grounding school closures in the reality that schools are embedded within and comprised of systems that shift and reconfigure over time. We conclude by outlining specific recommendations for how DST principles can reshape researchers' analytical approaches to the study of school closure.

VERSION: November 2025

Suggested citation: Pearman, Francis A., and Amanda Lu. (2025). Schools Never Die: Toward a Dynamic Systems Theory of School Closure. (EdWorkingPaper: 25-1327). Retrieved from Annenberg Institute at Brown University: https://doi.org/10.26300/8623-nx79

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Abstract: Educational researchers and policymakers typically treat school closures as discrete administrative decisions with clear endpoints. This paper challenges that assumption by applying Dynamic Systems Theory to school closure policy and research. We argue that schools function as adaptive ecosystems embedded within broader networks of relations that span social, cultural, political, and economic dimensions. When districts close schools, many underlying systems—relational networks, cultural practices, institutional memories, and financial governance—persist and adapt rather than disappear, rendering true "closure" illusory. This contradiction—between dynamic systems and discrete closure—explains why closure effects often confound policymakers' predictions, why communities mount fierce resistance even to seemingly justified closures, and why impacts can reverberate through communities for years. We argue that adopting a perspective that "schools never die" can improve school closure policy and research by grounding school closures in the reality that schools are embedded within and comprised of systems that shift and reconfigure over time. We conclude by outlining specific recommendations for how DST principles can reshape researchers' analytical approaches to the study of school closure.

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Keywords: school closure, dynamic systems theory, educational policy.

1. Introduction

In the early hours of a chilly February morning in Oakland, California, Moses Omolade and Andre San-Chez gathered outside Westlake Middle School. It was 2022, nearly a century after the school was named—a nod to its location at the northwest edge of Lake Merritt, in the heart of the city. Today, Westlake, which touts itself for "high academic achievement" and "serving the whole child," enrolls, like many of its neighboring schools in the district, a diverse mix of students, most of whom are Black and Brown, and many of whom receive free lunch.

Omolade and San-Chez, two educators at Westlake, did not gather that morning to start their workday or attend a school event. Instead, they were embarking on a hunger strike, a seeming last attempt to save their school from closure. For nearly three weeks, Omolade and San-Chez refused to eat, taxing their bodies and risking hospitalization to protest their district's plan to close or merge nearly a dozen schools (McBride, 2023). They believed the closures would devastate their community, displace hundreds of students, and sever bonds that had held together for years neighborhoods that were already struggling to stave off waves of gentrification that had reshaped Oakland's sociopolitical and demographic landscape for a generation. Oakland, as they say, is Black no more (Levin, 2018).

The extreme measures taken by these educators reflect a broader trend affecting many U.S. school districts, including Oakland. The challenges of dealing with the district's $50 million budget shortfall—the catalyst for the closure threats these teachers were protesting—have been rippling across an increasing number of U.S. school districts, large and small—from San Francisco Unified across the Bay to districts in Philadelphia, Louisville, and rural West Virginia—all grappling with the crippling convergence of declining enrollment, fiscal instability, and budget cuts (Hahnel and Pearman, 2023). Schools, as a result, have become expendable

casualties in unavoidable budget cuts and reorganizations. But to many students, teachers, and families, schools slated for closure are just the opposite—priceless (e.g., Green, 2017; Ewing, 2018, Syeed, 2019)—and, in the case of Westlake Middle School, worth risking their lives to save.

This marked difference in how schools are conceptualized and understood highlights a profound disconnect that plagues many districts in their attempts to "right size" themselves in the face of new budgetary and enrollment realities. What one might call a "mechanistic perspective," which has long dominated educational policy and research (e.g., Engber et al., 2012; Steinberg and MacDonald, 2019), has treated school closures as discrete administrative events with clear beginnings and endings. Districts announce closure decisions, buildings are shuttered, students are reassigned, and the policy process shifts focus. This mechanistic view assumes that closing a school, despite the challenges leading to the closure, can be reduced to simply locking the doors—an unfortunate but straightforward administrative decision with predictable effects.

In this paper, we challenge this mechanistic perspective and offer a new theoretical framework for understanding school closure. Drawing on Dynamic Systems Theory (DST)—a framework that originated in mathematics and biology to model the behavior of complex adaptive systems—we argue that schools function not as isolated administrative units, but as adaptive ecosystems embedded within historically contingent, multi-scalar networks of social, spatial, and institutional relations. In education research, DST has been previously taken up in fields like language learning, where both the learner and the language are understood as dynamic, evolving systems shaped by continual interaction with their environments (e.g., Bot et al., 2007). Similarly, when viewed through a dynamic systems lens, true school "closure" becomes illusory. Rather than disappear when buildings are shuttered, many aspects of schools,

including their networks of relationships, cultural practices, institutional memories, and material resources, reconfigure and persist, ultimately reshaping the system within which its shuttering emerged.

We argue that this contradiction—between dynamic systems and the policy premise of discrete closure—explains many puzzling aspects of closure policies: why their effects often confound policy makers' predictions, why communities resist closures so fiercely even when a school is labeled failing or underenrolled, and why closure impacts can ripple through neighborhoods for years or decades. We acknowledge that our contribution builds from a long history of critical scholarship that exposes how racialized histories of dispossession shape school closures as acts of community erasure (e.g, Green, 2017; Ewing, 2018, Syeed, 2019). While race and anti-blackness remain foundational to many of the core critiques animating critical school closure scholarship (e.g., McWilliams and Kitzmiller, 2019; Pearman and Greene 2022), our framework is general: a DST approach to school closure research applies just as readily to scholars examining how a school closure in a Chicago neighborhood relates to the displacement of Black residents as it does to those studying how a closure in a predominantly White rural Oklahoma town relates to the loss of a corner store or the election of a new mayor. More generally, DST compels researchers to think beyond "loss" and in terms of possibilities and emergence in the wake of a closure. Throughout, we argue that adopting an organizational perspective on school closure rooted in Dynamic Systems Theory—that *schools never die*—opens possibilities for more expansive research and more thoughtful, equitable, and responsive school closure policy.

2. Challenging Current Assumptions About School Closure

Contemporary school closure policies rest on three fundamental assumptions that shape decision-making and evaluation processes. These assumptions influence everything from budget calculations to community engagement strategies. Together, these core assumptions create a coherent but limiting framework for understanding school closure processes and impacts, obscuring the complex, interconnected nature of schools as living systems embedded within broader networks of relations that shift and reconfigure over time.

2.1. The Discrete Event Assumption

Most policy frameworks treat school closures as bounded events with identifiable beginnings and endings—discrete interventions that can be inserted into evaluation models and policy timelines. This assumption underlies evaluation research that compares before and after conditions, econometric analyses that attempt to isolate effects from causes, budget analyses that calculate immediate cost savings, and implementation timelines that specify when closure processes are begun and completed (Engberg et al., 2012; Kirshner et al., 2010; Richards et al., 2020). Implicit in all of these approaches is the assumption that school closures function like mechanical switches: a school is open until the switch is "flipped," after which the closure event is complete and its consequences measurable.

Yet this temporal and conceptual boundedness fails to account for the lived reality of schools as evolving institutions embedded within broader social and relational ecologies. Schools do not emerge fully formed at ribbon-cutting, nor do they vanish when their doors are boarded shut. Instead, they are built—and unbuilt—through layered, recursive processes, through the forging of intergenerational relationships, the accumulation of institutional memory, the evolution of shared cultural practices, and the embedding of the school into the spatial and civic fabric of a community. When a school closes, these elements do not evaporate; they persist,

migrate, and reorganize. Treating closure as a momentary administrative act erases these continuities and obscures the deeper systemic processes at work.

The discrete event assumption narrows the imagination for both policy and research. It encourages policymakers to focus on a visible decision point—when the vote is taken, the budget is cut, the doors are locked—while neglecting the extended temporal arc through which closure is experienced, contested, and absorbed. It likewise privileges short-term outcomes over delayed, diffuse, or emergent effects. Moreover, this assumption lends a false sense of control: it implies that closure impacts are bounded in space and time, when, in reality, they often ripple across neighborhoods, generations, and institutions. By conceiving of school closures as discrete events, we fail to recognize what they actually are: intensive moments of systemic disruption in longer processes of reorganization and adaptation.

2.2. The Building-Equals-School Assumption

A second pervasive assumption equates schools with their physical buildings, suggesting that closing a facility effectively terminates the “school” and its functions within the community. This assumption appears in policy language that refers to "shuttering" schools, budget documents that treat buildings as discrete assets that can be eliminated, and community engagement strategies that focus on the fate of physical structures. The building-as-school assumption overlooks how schools exist as much in networks of relationships and cultural practices as in brick and mortar (Ewing, 2018; Tieken & Auldridge-Reveles, 2019). When districts close buildings, they cannot close the webs of connection linking students, families, and educators; the pedagogical traditions that teachers carry from one institutional setting to another; the community organizing capacity that emerges from advocacy efforts; or the collective memories that shape how neighborhoods understand educational quality and institutional commitment.

The building-equals-school assumption leads to policy decisions that focus on facility management rather than relationship stewardship. It encourages administrators to believe that providing displaced students with seats in other buildings addresses their primary needs, while overlooking how the closure process affects the variety of situated identities, community support mechanisms, and institutional cultures that cannot be transferred along with enrollment records. This assumption also blinds policymakers to the ongoing influence that closed buildings continue to exert through their symbolic presence. That is, a closed school, in its absence, can nonetheless still exert an effect on a community that is both visible and tangible.

2.3. The Atomized Impact Assumption

A final assumption of contemporary school closure policy and research is what we might call the "atomized impact assumption"—the belief that closure effects can be understood by examining isolated variables and outcomes rather than systemic change across interconnected domains. This assumption appears in the limited interest of closure research on displaced students' test scores, policy discussions that emphasize immediate budget savings, and evaluation frameworks that treat academic achievement as the primary measure of closure success or failure (Caven, 2019; Engberg et al., 2012; Vaughan & Gutierrez, 2017; Schott Foundation, 2013; Popular Democracy, 2016).

This assumption obscures how closures generate cascading effects across interconnected networks that extend far beyond any single outcome measure. These effects include: long-term impacts on attainment and well-being in adulthood; community-level changes in civic engagement, social cohesion, and neighborhood identity; impacts on receiving schools' culture and instruction; changes in district political dynamics as communities mobilize around closure processes; shifts in local economic conditions; changes in family mobility patterns and

residential choices; and teacher recruitment and retention (Green, 2017; Brazil, 2020; Steinberg et al., 2019; Pearman, 2020; Schott Foundation, 2013; Popular Democracy, 2016).

Simply put, the atomized impact assumption leads researchers to miss the forest for the trees. It encourages policy makers to focus on measurable, short- to moderate-term outcomes while overlooking the longer-term role that closures play in systemic change. Most problematically, it treats schools as service delivery mechanisms rather than recognizing them as nodes in complex ecological networks whose disruption reverberates in ways that exceed the boundaries of any one school.

Taken together, these assumptions construct what we call a mechanistic policy imagination – one that treats schools as machines to be switched off and on rather than as living systems embedded within broader networks of interdependence, feedback, and emergence. In contrast, Dynamic Systems Theory (DST) offers a fundamentally different way of seeing. It reveals school closures not as discrete administrative decisions but as systemic inflection points – moments of concentrated reorganization whose effects unfold through complex interactions across time, space, and scale. The following section elaborates how DST reframes closure as a dynamic and adaptive process rather than a terminal event, illustrating why schools, in a very real sense, never die.

3. Dynamic Systems Theory and the Study of School Closure

Dynamic Systems Theory (DST), originally from the physical and biological sciences, offers a valuable framework for understanding the complex dynamics of school closures. Within educational research, DST rejects the notion that school systems function like machines, with predictable, proportionate responses to disruptions or changes within them. Instead, DST invites us to see school systems as interdependent relational networks: adaptive, historically shaped, and

composed of actors whose interactions with each other and with the system itself create outcomes and eventual inputs that no single entity controls or is responsible for.

DST suggests that what we often treat as discrete organizational events – in the case of the current paper, school closures – are in fact moments of intensive reorganization across wide-ranging networks of relations – social, institutional, spatial, and cultural. This perspective shifts our analytical focus from individual schools to the webs of connection they anchor; from discrete policy aims to feedback and adaptation; from isolated outcomes to evolving trajectories. In what follows, we explore how DST reorients closure research across three dimensions that emerge from core dynamic systems principles: seeing the network, disrupting the network, and reorganizing the network.

Before any closure decision is made, a DST lens foregrounds schools as embedded in thick networks of mutual dependence – across space, time, institutions, and people. Seeing the network means recognizing that schools are not bounded autonomous units; rather, schools are situated entities whose meaning and function emerge from their coupling with other elements – families, educators, neighborhoods, governance structures, and histories. In DST, these couplings are not incidental; they are constitutive. Change in one part of the network – a new housing development, a transportation policy, a decline in enrollment – can ripple through and reconfigure the rest. To see a school dynamically means understanding that institutional practices are shaped not just by internal conditions, but also by their connections to changing social, political, and spatial contexts. This perspective also incorporates path dependence, the idea that present-day relations are shaped by prior decisions and accumulated institutional histories (Tieken & Auldridge-Reveles, 2019; 2and Greene, 2023; Hahnel & Pearman, 2023 Morris, Parker, and Negrónm, 2022).

Though closure decisions may seem targeted, their consequences often spiral outward, triggering responses beyond individual schools. From a DST perspective, closure decisions are better understood as disruptions within a complex web of relationships, where even small changes can trigger significant and unpredictable effects. This is the essence of nonlinearity in DST: the relationship between cause and consequence is not stable or proportionate, and even modest interventions can reorganize large portions of the surrounding network. At the same time, DST emphasizes feedback, wherein the effects of a decision loop back into the system itself and reshape the very conditions that produced the decision in the first place. These loops can be reinforcing (exacerbating instability or disinvestment in a particular school) or balancing (generating resistance that stabilizes a school or district), and they often evolve over time in subtle ways.

In addition to situating schools in broader networks of relations and providing a framework for understanding how the effects of closures ripple throughout systems, the final insight of DST is that networks adapt. DST holds that complex systems are not passive in the face of change; they respond, reorganize, and often generate new structures and meanings through processes of emergence and self-organization. When a school closes, the relational networks in which it was embedded—families, educators, community organizations, routines of care—do not simply dissolve. Instead, they adjust. New alliances form, political identities sharpen, and alternative institutional forms may take root. Some adaptations are immediate and organized; others are gradual, improvised, and distributed across time and actors. DST invites us to interpret these responses not as exceptions or anomalies but as evidence of an underlying adaptive capacity within social systems.

Taken together, these three dimensions—seeing, disrupting, and reorganizing the network—illustrate how Dynamic Systems Theory reframes school closure as a dynamic, system-wide process rather than a bounded administrative event. Schools, according to this perspective, are living systems embedded within interdependent networks whose disruption and adaptation unfold across social, spatial, and temporal scales. The next section builds on this theoretical foundation to explore how a DST perspective reshapes the design, scope, and methodological aims of school closure research. In particular, what it means, in practice, to study schools as living systems.

4. Implications for Closure Research: Seeing Schools as Living Systems

We have argued that a perspective on school closures rooted in Dynamic Systems Theory, the idea that "schools never die," fundamentally shifts the underlying questions, scales, and purposes of school closure research. Whereas the conventional 'mechanistic perspective' treats closures as bounded administrative acts with measurable effects, DST encourages researchers and policymakers to consider the dynamic and interdependent aspects of closure decisions across years and different spatial scales. This reframing repositions closure research from a project of understanding how closures affect students and schools to one of a study of how school systems and their constituent parts reorganize before, during, and in the aftermath of closure, and what that reorganization reveals about access, opportunity, and the distribution of educational goods across the system.

For researchers, the most immediate implication concerns the unit of analysis itself. School closure research, informed by a DST perspective, begins by assuming that a school is situated as a node in a web of interdependence that includes other schools, community organizations, local economies, civic groups, cultural practices, housing markets, transportation

routes, and political coalitions, to name a few. That is, the analytic frame required to understand school closure expands from the school to the system. To study school closure in one neighborhood means studying how it alters enrollment dynamics in other neighborhoods, the political mobilization of parent networks, or even the municipal budget priorities of the city. Rather than simply documenting that these types of cascading effects exist, the motivation is to map, measure, and examine these effects systematically, identifying the nodes and networks of relations most vulnerable to disruption as well as the conditions that contain, amplify, or mitigate disruption and its effects across institutional, social, cultural, and political boundaries. Moreover, such a perspective allows for race to be studied as an organizing property of the system: segregation, housing markets, policing, and gentrification pattern the ties through which students, resources, and institutional memory flow. Mapping those racialized ties clarifies how closures reorganize (or deepen) barriers of opportunity within and across communities (e.g., Ewing, 2018; Tieken & Auldridge-Reveles, 2019; Morris et al., 2022).

Equally crucial to a DST perspective is the temporal dimension. DST-informed research foregrounds the importance of capturing system dynamics that precede and contain the closure decision, the processes that characterize it, and the forms of emergence and reorganization that take place both within and to the system itself. For instance, a high school that loses or adds advanced coursework five years after the closure of a feeder school should not be treated as a separate policy matter but understood, from a DST perspective, as a potential part of the extended life cycle of a school closure. Likewise, political coalitions that emerge in response to closures, such as those that grew from the hunger strike in Oakland, may evolve into influential actors shaping seemingly unrelated district policies years later. The methodological challenge lies in building longitudinal designs—archival, ethnographic, quantitative, or mixed—that can

understand these slow-burning trajectories while distinguishing them from other sources of change operating over similar or even longer timescales.

The broader timescale that a DST perspective encourages is mirrored by a broadening of what research might consider as an outcome. Current school closure research privileges student-level outcomes (e.g., performance, on-time promotion, behavior) as well as school-level effects (e.g., achievement levels, school culture). These effects, while important, capture only a fraction of how school closures impact systems and fail to consider how networks of relations, even those that were previously "contained" in the closed school, evolve past closure. DST invites impact analyses on outcomes such as social capital, civic engagement, organizational capacity, neighborhood identity, and institutional memory. Moreover, because these relational currencies are historically racialized, DST implies we should measure for potential racial differences explicitly—e.g., trust in district institutions, parent network reach, transportation and safety constraints—in order to detect race-conditioned pathways through which closures (and their afterlives) matter at the individual and community level. By broadening the normative outcomes associated with school closures and developing and validating measures for doing so, school closure research will be better positioned to capture the chorus of closure effects and its echoes across space and time.

Within a broadened set of outcomes that a DST perspective brings into focus is the adaptive capacity of the system itself: namely, that stakeholders are not acted upon during school closure proceedings but rather they adapt themselves in the lead-up to, during, and in response to closure decisions. In quantitative terms, these adaptive capacities could be analyzed as outcomes themselves, such as the impact of school closures on students' political orientations or civic engagement, measured by students' advocacy work to prevent a closure; as mediators, which are

factors that may partially explain later outcomes (e.g., a coalition of parents that unsuccessfully prevented a closure but organized to ensure that the eventual school their children attended had a desirable transportation schedule); and as moderators, which are factors that change the direction or magnitude of a later outcome (e.g., a group of business leaders who formed to help the school district reorganization plan, resulting in a closure that changed commercial development in the city, impacting affordability patterns and eventual enrollment in other schools in the district).

The nature of this research requires interdisciplinary and methodological creativity. For example, network mapping might be combined with oral histories to understand both the structural and lived realities of navigating and responding to closure decisions. Mobile device data or geolocated social media activity could complement ethnographic observation in tracking how students' daily mobility patterns change after a school closure. Agent-based modeling might simulate how individual responses to closure aggregate into system-wide patterns, while spatial econometric methods could quantify spillover effects across neighborhoods. The conceptual and practical range of DST-informed tools for analyzing how closures ripple through broader systems and reconfigure the networks of relations within them is necessarily and understandably broad.

Moreover, these methodological considerations speak to a broader shift in the role of research in the policy process. Much of the research on closures has focused on documenting harms, tradeoffs, benefits, and unintended consequences after decisions are made. A DST approach encourages researchers to also work upstream, using system mapping and scenario modeling to anticipate likely pathways of disruption before closures occur. This might mean identifying which schools, if closed, would trigger the most extensive network reconfigurations, or modeling alternative reorganization plans to minimize harm while maximizing adaptive

capacity. Critically, these system maps should feature and interrogate race and class dynamics to ensure potential closure scenarios avoid deepening inequities in the system (see also Ewing, 2018; Morris et al., 2022). By integrating such work into decision-making stages, research can shift from reactionary assessment toward proactive design.

Finally, the theoretical and methodological implications of foregrounding DST in school closure research extend to other topics in the field of education. For example, the study of interdependence, cascading disruptions, and uneven adaptive capacity may very well apply to other matters in K-12 settings, including the adoption of school choice policies, the creation of teacher accountability systems, efforts to improve teacher retention, or the rollout of advanced placement coursework. By clarifying generalized principles of DST within school closure research and across other domains of interest in K-12 settings, educational research can contribute to broader organizational theory and help clarify how complex systems absorb, resist, and transform when changes occur within them.

Viewed through Dynamic Systems Theory, school closure is not an instrumental administrative decision with predictable, containable effects but a systemic inflection point whose effects and afterlives unfold across networks, places, and time. Our claim is not a moratorium on closure, nor a promise that DST empowers communities to prevent it; rather, it is a call for humane, equity-aware policies that recognize schools as living systems of relationships, memory, and meaning. A DST research agenda maps and measures these cascades and afterlives, tracing how people, resources, practices, and meanings reassemble through longitudinal, spatial, and network-based methods. If schools never die, the task before us is to govern and study their reconfiguration with care, so that when closures occur, systems adapt in ways that protect and expand opportunity, honor community, and make both costs and possibilities visible.

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