

BEST PRACTICES FOR SUPPORTING STUDENTS DURING SCHOOL CONSOLIDATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

A Hanover Research (Hanover) member district is undergoing significant organizational changes including school consolidations and reconfigurations, particularly affecting elementary schools. The district has been planning and undertaking multiple work sessions and listening sessions to gather input and make informed decisions, ahead of a school board decision on specific consolidation plans. The district has also conducted preliminary research and data analysis to support the changes. Given these expected consolidation efforts, to prepare well in advance, the member has partnered with Hanover to provide secondary research on school consolidation strategies and transition plans that are most effective in supporting K-12 students.

In this report, Hanover identifies best practices for supporting students during school transitions. The member can use the results of this research to affirm current strategies and develop additional strategies to prepare students for transition, support them during the transition, and maintain support following the transition to their new consolidated school setting throughout the school year. This report includes the following sections:

- **Section I** reviews best practices for supporting students during transitions caused by school consolidations.
- **Section II** reviews strategies for ensuring student supports during transitions are equitable for diverse students, including Indigenous student populations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on our findings, Hanover suggests that districts consider the following recommendations:



Create transition teams to oversee the logistics at the closing and receiving schools. The physical process of closing a school and moving inventory is physically and emotionally challenging and requires strong district leadership. Transition teams should ideally include district and school leaders, facility and maintenance staff, teachers, office staff, parents/guardians, and students. Together, the team can work on specific requirements, such as ensuring safe transportation options and planning field trips for transitioning students and can support the long-term process of ensuring that parents/guardians, students, and staff are well acclimated to a new school environment.



Ensure a positive and welcoming school environment. Teachers can experience a sense of shared ownership through transparent communication and collaborative activities such as PLCs and critical friends groups (CFG). CFGs are a form of a PLC that serves to develop personal connections and trust between and among teachers. At the classroom level, teachers should engage students in community-building activities, such as community-building circles, advisory classes, and organized partner work to support student relationships with peers. These efforts can also expand opportunities to address gaps in academic and enrichment programming and to effectively support students from merging school communities.



Use culturally responsive teaching to create an identity-safe learning environment for all students. Culturally responsive teaching elevates diversity as a resource for learning, allowing students from all backgrounds to feel emotionally or psychologically safe at school. When supporting students with different demographic characteristics, Districts can incorporate the many culturally responsive strategies cited in this report.

KEY FINDINGS



Districts can use school consolidation to promote equity by providing students with high-quality learning opportunities. Closing schools creates economies of scale that districts can use to provide students with additional programming and more modern facilities. This process can involve expanding academic and enrichment programs one school already provides or implementing opportunities neither school currently offers. Merging schools also requires affirmations of students' individual identities, backgrounds, and cultures through identity-safe learning environments. Schools should adapt culturally responsive pedagogy to reflect the specific backgrounds of their students.



Providing high-quality learning experiences at receiving schools may require investments in resources such as professional development and additional staff. Districts can fund these supports by reinvesting a portion of the cost savings realized through consolidation. For example, District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) reinvested \$11 million of the \$19.5 million in anticipated cost savings from school consolidation into receiving schools to support transportation routes to receiving schools as well as improvement in academic programs with a focus on core reading instruction, world languages, and library services. A substantial body of research finds that outcomes become more equitable when funding increases for schools serving high populations of low-income students.



Ensuring all students have safe transportation options to their new school is an essential element of the planning process for school consolidations. Districts should carefully examine resources to support transportation at receiving schools, such as bus loading and drop-off areas, and traffic patterns to ensure they are adequate to support increased enrollment. Where possible, districts should invest in safe walking and biking routes to school to reduce transportation costs and improve student health.



Precise transportation plans adopted by consolidating districts vary due to local district contexts and student needs. For example, Chicago Public Schools invested in a Safe Passage program that hired crossing guards to monitor designated walking routes. DCPS opted to combine walking routes with busing to ensure all students could reach their new schools safely and efficiently. District leaders decided to offer bus transportation for all students in closed schools that were more than 0.5 miles away from their receiving schools, and some students whose route to school would require crossing heavily trafficked streets or other geographic impediments.



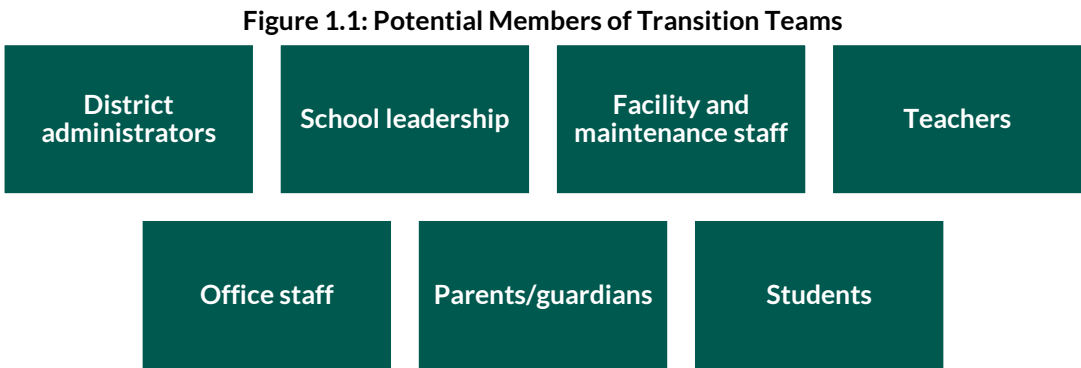
Without sufficient supports for a welcoming school climate, school closures can result in students, teachers, and families experiencing a sense of marginalization at their new schools. To prevent marginalization and create a welcoming climate for all students, teachers and staff from each school should work together to “shape core values for a joined school community.” At the classroom level, teachers should engage students in community-building activities such as community-building circles, advisory classes, and organized partner work to support student relationships with peers.

SECTION I: SUPPORTING STUDENTS DURING TRANSITIONS

In this section, Hanover reviews general best practices for supporting students during school transitions caused by school consolidation. This section begins with a brief review of best practices for managing the logistics of transition. Then, Hanover reviews best practices for creating a welcoming school climate at receiving schools.

MANAGING THE LOGISTICS OF TRANSITION

The physical process of closing a school and moving inventory is physically and emotionally challenging and requires strong district leadership. The California Department of Education recommends school districts create transition teams to oversee this process at both closing and receiving schools. Transition teams can include the members listed in Figure 1.1.



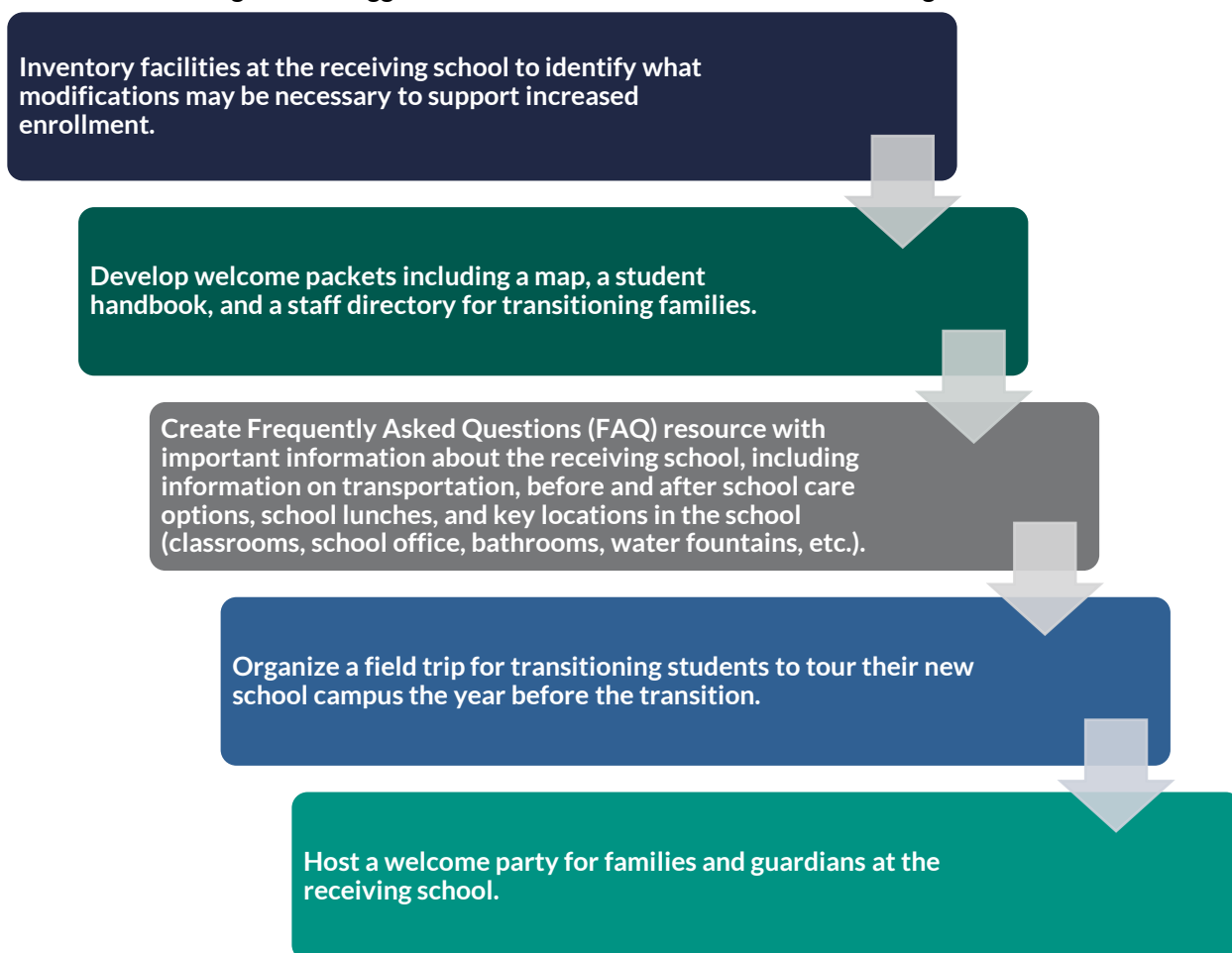
Source: California Department of Education¹

At closing schools, transition teams carry out such activities as coordinating the reallocation and movement of textbooks, furniture, equipment, and instructional materials. Team members identify any equipment or materials purchased with federal grant funds to ensure these materials are distributed in compliance with federal regulations. At receiving schools, transition teams should complete the steps listed in Figure 1.2.²

¹ Chart contents taken verbatim from: “Best Practices Guide for Potential School Closure.” California Department of Education, August 28, 2024. p. 16. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/fa/sf/schoolclose.asp>

² Ibid.

Figure 1.2: Suggested Transition Team Activities for Receiving Schools



Source: California Department of Education³

Transition teams should continue to work with receiving schools following the initial transition to support the long-term process of acclimating to a new school environment. Transition teams should, for example, continuously check in with constituents to identify support needs. The California Department of Education recommends transition teams reflect on the guiding questions listed in Figure 1.3.⁴

Figure 1.3: Guiding Questions for Transition Teams

Have we confirmed that all families have been informed?

Do we have a clear transition plan for reassigned students and staff?

Do we have a proactive plan to welcome students and staff to their assigned schools?

Do parents/guardians and staff have a designated contact for questions?

Did we provide support for district staff impacted by the decision?

Source: California Department of Education⁵

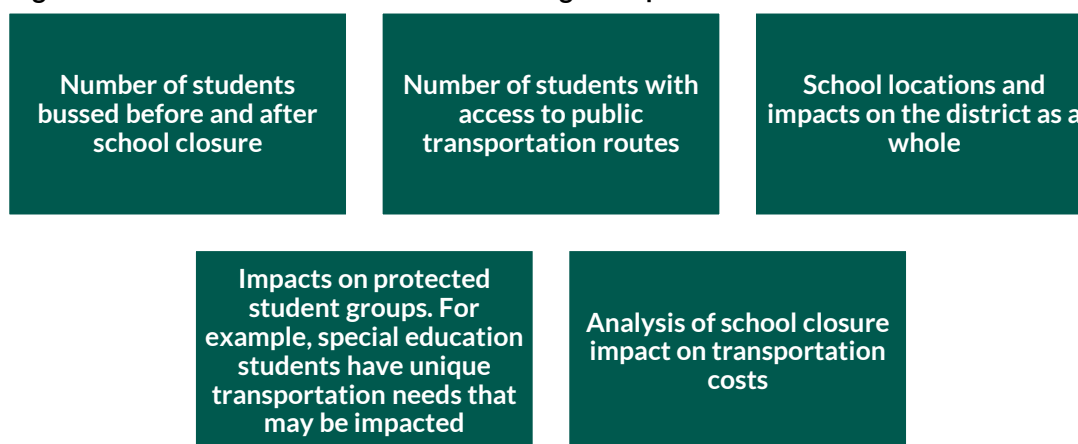
³ Chart contents adapted from: Ibid., pp. 16–17.

⁴ Ibid., p. 17.

⁵ Chart contents taken verbatim from: Ibid.

Ensuring all students have safe transportation options to their new school is an essential element of the planning process for school consolidations. Districts should carefully examine resources to support transportation at receiving schools, such as bus loading and drop-off areas, and traffic patterns to ensure these are adequate to support increased enrollment. Schools may need to change procedures for student drop-off and pick-up to ensure all students are safely and efficiently accommodated. Where possible, districts should invest in safe walking and biking routes to school to reduce transportation costs and improve student health.⁶ District leaders can also collaborate with municipal leadership to expand transportation access using bicycle and walking routes and public transportation.⁷ The California Department of Education recommends districts consider the data points presented in Figure 1.4 to plan transportation changes after school consolidation.⁸

Figure 1.4: Data Points to Consider for Planning Transportation after School Consolidations



Source: California Department of Education⁹

Precise transportation options adopted by consolidating districts vary depending on the local district context and student needs. For example, Chicago Public Schools invested in a Safe Passage program that hired crossing guards to monitor designated walking routes.¹⁰ DCPS opted to combine walking routes with busing to ensure all students could reach their new schools safely and efficiently. District leaders decided to offer bus transportation for all students in closed schools that were more than 0.5 miles away from their receiving schools, and some students whose route to school would require crossing heavily trafficked streets or other geographic impediments.¹¹

CREATING A WELCOMING SCHOOL CLIMATE

In addition to resources, school districts should engage staff and students at both closing and receiving schools to ensure a positive and welcoming school environment for transitioning students. A study of Chicago Public Schools' 2013 school closings found that students and staff in both closing and receiving schools faced challenges building a shared school community because of differing cultures and expectations across schools. In many cases, students and teachers from closed schools reported feeling they were not welcome in their new schools. This sense of marginalization led to an increase in fights and bullying in the year after the

⁶ Ibid., pp. 11, 16.

⁷ Hahnel, C. and M. Marchitello. "Centering Equity in the School-Closure Process in California." Policy Analysis for California Education, 2023. p. 28. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED633115>

⁸ "Best Practices Guide for Potential School Closure," Op. cit., p. 11.

⁹ Chart contents taken verbatim from: Ibid.

¹⁰ Gordon, M.F. et al. "School Closings in Chicago: Staff and Student Experiences and Academic Outcomes. Research Report." University of Chicago Consortium on School Research, 2018. pp. 3–4. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED589712>

¹¹ "Better Schools for All Students: DCPS' Consolidation and Reorganization Plan." District of Columbia Public Schools, January 2013. p. 7. <https://dcps.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/dcps/publication/attachments/Consolidation%20Plan.pdf>

transition.¹² Similarly, families at merged schools in New York City have expressed concerns that the unique identity and culture of smaller schools are lost when these schools are merged into larger ones.¹³

COLLABORATION AMONG TEACHERS AND STAFF

To prevent marginalization and create a welcoming climate for all students, teachers and staff **from each school should work together to “shape core values for a joined school community.”**¹⁴ This ensures the school will have a strong foundation of shared beliefs that guide decision-making in the best interest of students, families, and communities. Figure 1.5 provides an outline of reflection questions crafted by Boston Public Schools for each school to consider individually, and collectively, in defining joint core values that adequately represent the existing identities of each community.¹⁵

Figure 1.5: Core Values Reflection Questions

☒	What do we want for our students?
☒	What do we believe all students should have?
☒	What are the assets of our community?
☒	What do we value?
☒	If our new combined school community gave students everything they needed to be successful, what would that look like?
☒	What are our shared values, principles, and beliefs?

Source: Boston Public Schools¹⁶

Shared teacher ownership is crucial for any major change, including school consolidation. Shared teacher ownership encourages teachers to engage in a collective commitment to achieve school goals and support the academic success and wellbeing of students.¹⁷ Districts and schools should develop a comprehensive strategy for promoting shared teacher ownership that involves transparent communication, shared decision-making, individualized professional learning, data-driven insights, and acknowledgment of achievements as shown in Figure 1.6.¹⁸

¹² Gordon et al., Op. cit., p. 4.

¹³ Shen-Berro, J. “What Happens after Schools Merge? One Manhattan Middle School Works to Mix Its Communities.” Chalkbeat, February 15, 2024. <https://www.chalkbeat.org/newyork/2024/02/15/how-lafayette-academy-is-faring-after-school-merger-with-west-side-collaborative/>

¹⁴ “School Committee Merger Proposal Overview and Journey to a Joined School Community.” Boston Public Schools. <https://www.bostonpublicschools.org/cms/lib/MA01906464/Centricity/Domain/162/School%20Committee%20Merger%20Proposal%20Overview%20and%20Journey%20to%20a%20Joined%20School%20CommunityFINAL.pdf>

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Figure text taken verbatim from: Ibid.

¹⁷ [1] “Shared Leadership + Ownership.” Center for Whole-Child Education. <https://turnaroundusa.org/toolbox/wcdesign/slo/>
[2] Chau, V. “Fostering Shared Ownership.” Leading Educators, December 6, 2023. <https://leadingeducators.org/blog/shared-ownership-matters/>

¹⁸ Chau, Op. cit.

Figure 1.6: Strategies for Developing Shared Ownership

Open and Transparent Communication

- Establish a clear and open line of communication with all education partners. Encourage feedback, questions, and suggestions. Hold regular meetings and forums where all voices are valued. Speak plainly and openly about what is changing, staying the same, and why. Ground decisions in evidence and strategy.

Collaborative Decision-Making

- Define clear roles and methods for involving education partners in the decision-making process. When making key decisions, seek input from teachers, administrators, and community members. Invite them to take part in shaping the strategies and solutions that will drive the vision.

Professional Learning

- Invest in professional learning opportunities for teachers and administrators. Equip them with the knowledge and skills to contribute effectively to the instructional vision. This builds their confidence and empowers them to take ownership of their roles.

Ownership Through Data

- Share relevant data and insights with education partners. Help them understand the current state of affairs, the challenges at hand, and the potential impact of the instructional vision. When education partners see the data and its implications, they are more likely to take ownership of the solutions.

Affirmation

- Acknowledge and celebrate achievements along the way. When milestones are reached, whether they are student improvements, successful initiatives, or collaborative efforts, recognize and appreciate the contributions of all education partners. This fosters a sense of pride and ownership.

Source: Leading Educators¹⁹

Collaboration is a key component of developing shared ownership, as well as facilitating the school consolidation process.²⁰ Teacher collaboration can create space for sharing best practices, creating a positive learning environment, and building a sense of community.²¹ The benefits associated with collaboration may be particularly valuable to teachers coming together from different schools. Figure 1.7 provides potential collaboration structures for school mergers. However, districts and schools should not limit collaborative efforts to these models. Collaboration may also include in-classroom collaboration efforts (e.g., parallel teaching, team teaching) and informal avenues of trust and relationship-building (e.g., establishing traditions, celebrating accomplishments, and recognizing individual contributions).²²

¹⁹ Figure text taken verbatim with modifications from: Ibid.

²⁰ "Intentional and Inclusive School Mergers." Office of the New York City Comptroller Brad Lander. <https://comptroller.nyc.gov/reports/intentional-and-inclusive-school-mergers/> [2] "What Happens after Schools Merge? One Manhattan Middle School Works to Mix Its Communities." Chalkbeat, February 15, 2024. <https://www.chalkbeat.org/newyork/2024/02/15/how-lafayette-academy-is-faring-after-school-merger-with-west-side-collaborative/>

²¹ [1] "The Importance of Teacher Collaboration." School of Education American University, May 13, 2023. <https://soeonline.american.edu/blog/teacher-collaboration-importance/> [2] "Building Teacher Collaboration School-Wide." AMLE, June 4, 2020. <https://www.amle.org/building-teacher-collaboration-school-wide/>

²² "The Importance of Teacher Collaboration," Op. cit. [2] "Building Teacher Collaboration School-Wide," Op. cit.

Figure 1.7: Teacher Collaboration Models to Support School Consolidation

COMMON PLANNING TIME
Common planning time enables teachers to collaborate on instructional strategies and address student-related matters. It allows grade-level teachers to jointly prepare lesson plans and discuss student performance. Including teachers from various disciplines like art, music, physical education, and special education provides a broader understanding of student behavior, interests, and abilities.
PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES (PLCs)
A PLC is a team of educators who collaborate to address specific educational issues. They analyze student data in relation to school initiatives, identify key challenges, and devise solutions. While each member has a unique role, the PLC operates on the principle of mutual learning and contribution.
CRITICAL FRIEND GROUPS (CFGs)
A CFG is a form of PLC structured to develop personal connections and trust between and among educators. Up to 12 members, often randomly assigned without regard to grade level or content area, CFGs meet regularly to discuss class and student concerns, brainstorming with each other to create thoughtful solutions.

Source: American University School of Education²³

COMMUNITY BUILDING FOR STUDENTS

In supporting students’ sense of belonging, schools should prioritize intentional community-building activities that actively support student relationships with peers.²⁴ Districts and schools might consider practices that build trust and connection, such as community-building circles, advisory classes, and organized partner work (e.g., turn to your partner, partner clocks).²⁵ In addition, schools may consider setting up shared physical spaces that fulfill specific community-centered needs (e.g., whole-group meeting spots, displays for student work, cool-down/conflict-resolution areas).²⁶ Figure 1.8 provides a sample of practices for schools to consider in building community among students in the classroom.

Figure 1.8 Community-Building Activities

→ Whiteboard Question By posting a question in a visible place for students to answer upon entering class, this strategy transforms the whiteboard into a dynamic student space for engagement, starting with lighter topics and progressing to deeper questions as comfort grows, allowing students to build on each other's responses and even contribute their own questions, fostering a sense of ownership and community.
→ Walk and Talk Teachers invite students to connect with two peers and answer questions geared toward social connection before engaging with curricular content. The first person a student connects with should be someone whom they feel comfortable with and speak to often, and the second person should be someone with whom they rarely interact. Over time, students form larger groups, indicating successful relationship building.
→ Tiered Mini-Interviews At the start of the year or after breaks, structuring a relationship-building activity like tiered mini-interviews helps students assess their familiarity with peers through a worksheet and encourages them to

²³ Figure text taken verbatim with modifications from: “The Importance of Teacher Collaboration,” Op. cit.
²⁴ De Forest, J. and K. Vanausdal. “Five Ways to Help Students Feel Connected at School Again.” Greater Good Magazine, August 22, 2022. https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/five_ways_to_help_students_feel_connected_at_school_again [2] “Community-Building.” CASEL Guide to Schoolwide SEL. <https://schoolguide.casel.org/focus-area-3/classroom/a-supportive-classroom-environment/community-building/>
²⁵ [1] “Community-Building Circles.” Casel Schoolguide. <https://schoolguide.casel.org/resource/community-building-circles/> [2] “Partner Clocks.” Casel Schoolguide. <https://schoolguide.casel.org/resource/partner-clocks/> [3] “Turn to Your Partner.” Casel Schoolguide. <https://schoolguide.casel.org/resource/turn-to-your-partner/> [4] “Community-Building,” Op. cit. [5] “Five Tips for Teaching Advisory Classes at Your School.” Greater Good. https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/five_tips_for_teaching_advisory_classes_at_your_school
²⁶ “Community-Building,” Op. cit.

introduce themselves to less-known classmates, fostering new connections in a structured yet personal way.

→ **Digital Quizzes**

Digital quizzes, comprising questions related to each student, serve as an engaging activity to start a class after a break or before a review, fostering familiarity among students and allowing the teacher to assess their knowledge of each student, with the added excitement of real-time scoring through online quiz platforms.

→ **Community Building Circles**

Regular class meetings, often in a circle, help foster belonging and trust, introduce academic content, and can be adapted for various educational levels and occasions, with consistent scheduling enhancing their effectiveness through continuous relationship and skill development.

→ **Advisory Classes**

Advisory is a practice implemented in schools to foster meaningful relationships between teachers and students, providing a dedicated time for social and emotional learning. It varies in frequency and structure across schools, but at its core, it aims to increase students' sense of belonging, improve relationships, and prepare students for life outside of school by teaching non-traditional academic or social-emotional skills, often with room for innovation and flexibility in its curriculum.

→ **Organized Partner Work**

The "clock partners" method facilitates student collaboration by pairing them with various peers through a clock drawing, enriching learning with diverse viewpoints and fostering respectful communication, while also incorporating teacher-assigned partnerships for strategic collaboration.

The "Turn to Your Partner" procedure promotes students' learning by facilitating discussions between pairs, enhancing their communication and idea-sharing skills, and fostering a respectful, collaborative classroom environment.

Source: Multiple²⁷

While in-class community-building is critical, less-structured, non-academic social activities remain important in building connection and belonging. Creating groups or clubs that reflect student interests, providing peer mentorship opportunities, and organizing events such as "school dances, concerts, theater performances, sports games, school trips," all serve as mechanisms for the development and maintenance of community for students.²⁸ In addition, schools can provide students with agency and a sense of ownership in developing new ideas for community-building events.²⁹

In the classroom, teachers can build community by facilitating the co-creation of shared agreements that define the collective values, norms, and rules that impact students' day-to-day instructional experiences.³⁰

Creating a sense of community, classroom shared agreements "reflect students' shared understanding of how they wish to be treated and will treat one another, and connect to the school's vision and schoolwide norms."³¹

Figure 1.9 provides guidance on helping students define these shared values and norms, and how they should be exercised in practice.

²⁷ Figure text taken verbatim with modifications from: [1] "Strengthening Peer Relationships in the Classroom." Edutopia. <https://www.edutopia.org/article/positive-student-student-relationships/> [2] "Partner Clocks," Op. cit. [3] "Turn to Your Partner," Op. cit. [4] "Five Tips for Teaching Advisory Classes at Your School," Op. cit.

²⁸ De Forest and Vanausdal, Op. cit.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ [1] "Community-Building," Op. cit. [2] "Establishing Classroom Norms to Enhance Students' Collective Efficacy." Edutopia. <https://www.edutopia.org/article/creating-classroom-norms-students/> [3] Chance, T. "Developing Classroom Values Collaboratively with Students." Edutopia. Developing Classroom Values Collaboratively with Students

³¹ "Community-Building," Op. cit.

Figure 1.9: Strategies for Defining and Exercising Shared Student Values

Initiate the collaborative process by asking reflective questions	Consider questions such as: How do you know that a class is successful? How do you want to feel when you walk into a class? How should people be treated in class?
Define and select class values	Introduce the concept of values with examples like grit, growth mindset, and respect. Collaboratively choose class values, aiming for a diverse yet concise list that reflects the collective vision. Ensure that class values mirror and align with broader school values.
Display class values	Create a prominent display of the agreed-upon values where all students can see, reinforcing their importance and presence in the classroom.
Daily engagement with values	Encourage students to select and focus on a class value each day, including reflection on how they embodied this value, to foster personal growth and improve the class environment.
Celebrate value demonstration	Implement a daily shout-out routine to recognize and celebrate students who exemplify class values, enhancing motivation and acknowledging progress.
Use values for restorative practices	Employ class values as a basis for addressing and correcting problematic behaviors through private conversations and reflective tasks, focusing on growth rather than punishment.
Foster a democratic learning environment	Allow the practice of collaborative class values to transform teaching and the student experience, enabling students to actively shape their learning community based on chosen values.

Source: Multiple³²

³² Figure text taken verbatim with modifications from: [1] Chance, Op. cit. [2] "Community-Building," Op. cit.

SECTION II: ENSURING EQUITABLE STUDENT SUPPORTS

In this section, Hanover reviews strategies districts can use to ensure supports for students during the transition process are equitable. Nationally, research suggests school closures disproportionately affect students of color and students from low-income households and can exacerbate inequities already faced by these students. To prevent school closures from contributing to inequitable outcomes, districts need to intentionally center equity in the decision-making process and implementation of supports for transitioning students.³³ In this section, Hanover describes strategies districts can use to support equity by providing high-quality learning opportunities for all students and using culturally responsive instruction to support a sense of safety in the classroom.

PROVIDING HIGH-QUALITY LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

An equitable school consolidation process includes a strategy to provide students transitioning to new schools with high-quality learning opportunities. Because most schools are funded using per-student funding formulas, closing underenrolled schools creates economies of scale districts can use to provide additional programming and supports.³⁴ **Merging schools can also serve as an opportunity to address gaps in academic programming and develop strategies to better support students from both communities.**³⁵ When schools serving large numbers of historically marginalized students close, these economies of scale create opportunities to improve equity by providing these students with additional programming and more up-to-date facilities. For example, Austin Independent School District (AISD) in Texas focused school closures on older buildings in high-poverty areas of the city, replacing consolidating schools with new, more modern buildings.³⁶ A substantial body of research finds that outcomes become more equitable when funding increases for schools serving high populations of low-income students.³⁷

Providing students with high-quality learning opportunities can involve expanding academic and enrichment programs one school already provides or implementing opportunities neither currently offers.³⁸ A 2023 report on school closures prepared by the research organization Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) recommends district leaders implement the strategies presented in Figure 2.1.

³³ Hahnel and Marchitello, Op. cit., pp. 2–4.

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 4, 19.

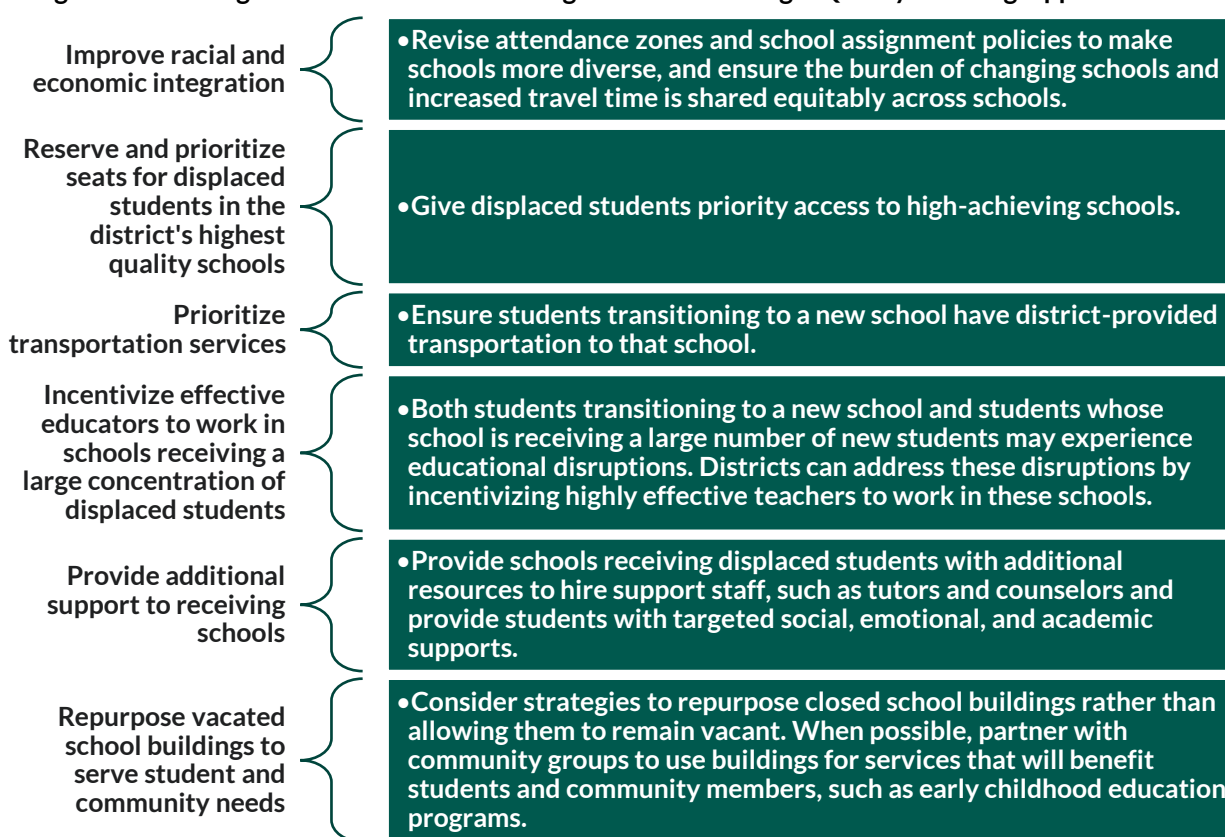
³⁵ “School Committee Merger Proposal Overview and Journey to a Joined School Community,” Op. cit.

³⁶ McInerney, C. “‘Equity’ Keeps Coming Up In Austin’s School Closure Conversations. But What Does It Mean?” KUT Radio, October 18, 2019. <https://www.kut.org/education/2019-10-18/equity-keeps-coming-up-in-austins-school-closure-conversations-but-what-does-it-mean>

³⁷ McKillip, M. and T. Luhm. “Investing Additional Resources in Schools Serving Low-Income Students: Evidence for Advocates.” Education Law Center, April 2020. p. 3. https://edlawcenter.org/assets/files/pdfs/publications/Investing_in_Students_Policy_Bri.pdf

³⁸ [1] “School Committee Merger Proposal Overview and Journey to a Joined School Community,” Op. cit. [2] “What Does It Take to Make a School Merger Work? Shaw Teachers Share Their Story and Their Worries.” Medium, March 14, 2023. <https://schoolyardnews.com/what-does-it-take-to-make-a-school-merger-work-shaw-teachers-share-their-story-and-their-worries-72ed3a0e8df2>

Figure 2.1: Strategies to Provide Transitioning Students with High-Quality Learning Opportunities



Source: Policy Analysis for California Education³⁹

Providing enhanced learning opportunities successfully may require targeted hiring, restructuring, or professional development.⁴⁰ For example, if one school has a special education model in which students with special needs learn alongside their peers, general education teachers from the second school that does not offer this model may require additional professional development and support to ensure a smooth transition.⁴¹

Districts can fund these supports by reinvesting a portion of the cost savings realized through consolidation. When DCPS consolidated schools in 2013, district leaders decided to invest \$11 million of the \$19.5 million in anticipated cost savings into receiving schools. This funding supported transportation routes to receiving schools, as well as improvement in academic programs with a focus on core reading instruction, world languages, and library services.⁴²

In addition to cost savings from reduced spending, districts can repurpose closed facilities to provide revenue or directly support new learning opportunities.⁴³ For example, Denver Public Schools in Colorado repurposed a closed elementary school to house a program that supports students with severe behavioral or social-emotional challenges.⁴⁴ Austin Independent School District converted two closed schools into office space

³⁹ Chart contents taken verbatim from: Hahnel and Marchitello, Op. cit., pp. 25–26.

⁴⁰ “What Does It Take to Make a School Merger Work?” Op. cit.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² “Better Schools for All Students: DCPS’ Consolidation and Reorganization Plan,” Op. cit., p. 6.

⁴³ Beach, P., C. Hahnel, and T. Kodali. “Navigating Change: Strategies to Strengthen California High Schools Amid Declining Enrollment.” Bellwether Education Partners, September 2024. p. 20.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

for district staff and leased one school to a community partner as space for an early childhood education program.⁴⁵

Districts can also consider partnering with community organizations to fund support services, such as counselors and mental health services. Figure 2.2 presents recommendations for partnering with community organizations to improve learning outcomes in the context of school closures.⁴⁶

Figure 2.2: Recommendations for Community Partnerships to Improve Learning Opportunities

Utilize non-education funding streams to provide behavioral health and wraparound supports.

Share facilities, staff, and other resources with other agencies.

Leverage partnerships to provide academic and extracurricular activities and supports.

Invest in staffing and knowledge management systems to help sustain community-school partnerships across time.

Form cross-district partnerships to share resources and programming, especially in rural and small districts.

Collaborate with employees to design community partnerships and ensure employee protections.

Provide district support and training on how to braid and blend funding sources to create coherent local programming.

Source: Bellwether Education Partners⁴⁷

Districts should ensure investments in receiving schools are sustained over time to promote long-term positive outcomes. For example, Chicago Public Schools invested additional resources in schools that received additional students as a result of school closures in 2013, including welcoming activities and additional support staff. However, because the funding increase was only sustained for one year, many schools were unable to retain additional support staff. Schools were more likely to retain specialized programs, such as STEM or International Baccalaureate programs.⁴⁸

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE INSTRUCTION TO AFFIRM STUDENTS' IDENTITIES

Creating a positive and accepting student climate within merged schools requires affirmation of students' individual identities, backgrounds, and cultures.⁴⁹ Schools should adapt culturally responsive pedagogy to

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Beach, Hahnel, and Kodali, Op. cit., p. 4.

⁴⁷ Chart contents taken verbatim from: Ibid., p. 20.

⁴⁸ Gordon et al., Op. cit., pp. 3–4.

⁴⁹ [1] "The Importance of Student Sense of Belonging." Institute of Education Sciences. <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/rel/regions/midwest/pdf/RELMW-6-2-3-4-StudBelong-508.pdf> [2] "Student Sense of Belonging in Schools: Predictive Factors." Oregon Department of Education. [3] "'I Hate It Here': How Minoritized Youth Perceive School and Social Belonging in Contested Racial Climates of Public Schools | NYU Steinhardt." <https://steinhardt.nyu.edu/metrocenter/i-hate-it-here-how-minoritized-youth-perceive-school-and-social-belonging-contested> [4] Darling-Hammond, L. and J. DePaoli. "Why School Climate Matters and What Can Be Done to Improve It." https://nasbe.nyc3.digitaloceanspaces.com/2020/05/Darling-Hammond-DePaoli_May-2020-Standard.pdf

reflect the specific backgrounds of their students. Identity-safe learning environments allow students to feel emotionally and psychologically safe, as teachers foster “[appreciation] and [understanding] of students’ experiences, assets, and backgrounds...in ways that counteract societal stereotypes.”⁵⁰ This approach involves elevating diversity as a resource for learning, meaning that teachers implement culturally responsive teaching that celebrates students’ identity-based differences and integrates them into the learning process.⁵¹ A substantial body of research, summarized in **Figure 2.3**, finds culturally responsive teaching benefits students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Figure 2.3: How Culturally Responsive Teaching Benefits Students

	Motivating and Engaging Students Connecting academic concepts to the everyday lives of students makes learning more meaningful, engaging, and effective. ▪ A 2016 quantitative study of three high schools that piloted culturally responsive curriculum for Grade 9 students demonstrated a statistically significant increase in students’ GPAs, attendance, and credit earned.⁵² ▪ A 2014 study of five African American students who participated in culturally relevant mathematics preferred the method to traditional teaching methods, citing class feeling more like home, increased confidence in math skills, and enjoying the opportunity to participate more.⁵³
	Cultivating Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving Skills Engaging students in social justice issues through investigations of meaningful, open-ended problems inspires students to analyze content, formulate questions, and generate solutions to challenging and authentic problems. ▪ A 2003 study of one math teacher and their majority Latino Grade 6-8 students’ test scores and observational data showed that math projects that integrated real-world problems increased students’ sense that mathematics was a worthwhile tool and changed students’ views of math.⁵⁴ ▪ A 1995 case study demonstrated how students used mathematical modeling to describe and take action on social issues that were important to them.⁵⁵
	Strengthening Students’ Racial and Ethnic Identities Centering students’ identity in daily lessons, thereby increasing students’ pride in who they are and where they come from, leads to increased student engagement, interest in learning, and grades. ▪ A 2016 quantitative study of how 315 Grade 6 through Grade 12 students of White, Latino, African American, and Asian decent viewed culturally relevant teaching demonstrated that culturally relevant teaching is significantly associated with both positive academic outcomes and positive identity formation.⁵⁶

⁵⁰ Hernández, L. and L. Darling-Hammond. “Creating Identity-Safe Schools and Classrooms.” Learning Policy Institute, 2022. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/wce-identity-safe-schools-classrooms>

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Dee, T. and E. Penner. “The Causal Effects of Cultural Relevance: Evidence from an Ethnic Studies Curriculum.” *Stanford Center for Education Policy Analysis*, 2016. <https://cepa.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/wp16-01-v201601.pdf>

⁵³ Hubert, T.L. “Learners of Mathematics: High School Students’ Perspectives of Culturally Relevant Mathematics Pedagogy.” *Journal of African American Studies*, 18:3, 2014. Accessed from: Springer.

⁵⁴ Gutstein, E. “Reading Diversity: A Tool for Selecting Diverse Texts.” *Teaching Tolerance*, 2015. <https://www.tolerance.org/sites/default/files/2017-10/Teaching-Tolerance-Reading-Diversity-Extended-Edition-2016-VFF.pdf>

⁵⁵ Tate, W. “Returning to the Root: A Culturally Relevant Approach to Mathematics Pedagogy.” *Theory Into Practice*, 34, June 1, 1995. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/254314972_Returning_to_the_root_A_culturally_relevant_approach_to_maths_pedagogy

⁵⁶ Byrd, C.M. “Does Culturally Relevant Teaching Work? An Examination From Student Perspectives.” *SAGE Open*, 6:3, 2016. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2158244016660744>

- A 2011 study of 406 ethnically diverse Grade 9 through 12 students demonstrated a positive correlation between culturally competent school culture and positive student racial and ethnic identity formation.⁵⁷



Promoting a Sense of Safety and Belonging

Ensuring students feel safe, supported, and a sense of belonging is critical to students' ability to learn and absorb information, and increases student overall wellbeing in school.

- A 2004 qualitative study of Grade 10 students that included interview data and four-year outcome data demonstrated that students feel included and safe at school when participating in culturally responsive math.⁵⁸
- A 2004 qualitative study of thirteen Grade 1 through Grade 12 teachers showed that showing care, encouraging groupwork, building trusting relationships with students helps increase students' sense of belonging.⁵⁹

Source: New America and *Embedded Sources*.⁶⁰

Figure 2.4 provides an outline of culturally responsive practices for supporting students' sense of belonging. These practices are relevant in the school consolidation process if merging student populations possess different demographic makeups.⁶¹

Figure 2.4: Strategies for Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

	Educators can be culturally responsive and learn about their students' backgrounds through home visits, conversations with parents and students, community walks, journaling, and community meetings.
	Educators can create learning experiences that enable young people to explore their own identities through self-exploration and pursuit of community issues from a social justice perspective. For example, in a Grade 9 ethnic studies course at Social Justice Humanitas Academy near Los Angeles, students engage in projects that help them learn concepts and skills through an analysis of their multifaceted identities.
	Educators can provide opportunities for student voice and agency. For example, reality pedagogy allows students to take ownership of their learning by co-teaching each other and building from their cultural and home life contexts by sharing relevant artifacts.
	Educators can ensure students have rich learning experiences using culturally responsive content and materials that respect the legitimacy and accomplishments of different cultures; empower students to value all cultures; incorporate cultural information into the curriculum, instead of simply adding it on at the margins; and relate new information to student's life experiences.
	Educators can build bridges between students' experiences and school content. For example, the use of rap songs to illustrate symbolic meanings in literature can help a culturally responsive teacher carry student insights into the study of more formal canonic texts.

Source: Learning Policy Institute⁶²

⁵⁷ Borrero, N. and C. Yeh. "The Multidimensionality of Ethnic Identity Among Urban High School Youth." *Identity: An International Journal of Theory and Research*, 11, 2011.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/232859303_The_Multidimensionality_of_Ethnic_Identity_Among_Urban_High_School_Youth

⁵⁸ Rodriguez, J.L. et al. "Promoting Academic Achievement and Identity Development Among Diverse High School Students." *The High School Journal*, 87:3, 2004. Accessed from: Muse.

⁵⁹ Brown, D.F. "Urban Teachers' Professed Classroom Management Strategies: Reflections of Culturally Responsive Teaching." *Urban Education*, 39:3, 2004.
https://achieve.lausd.net/cms/lib08/CA01000043/Centricity/Domain/173/Brown_on_Classroom_management.pdf

⁶⁰ Figure content adapted and verbatim from Muniz, J. "5 Ways Culturally Responsive Teaching Benefits Learners." New America, 2019. <http://newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/5-ways-culturally-responsive-teaching-benefits-learners/>

⁶¹ "Intentional and Inclusive School Mergers," Op. cit.

⁶² Figure text taken verbatim with modifications from: Hernández and Darling-Hammond, Op. cit.

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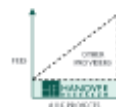
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