

## Public Advocacy



PHOTO COURTESY OF GLENN COOK

# Old Schools Never Die

Addressing the nightmare of closing schools

### CLOSING A NEIGHBORHOOD SCHOOL

is one of the most difficult and controversial decisions boards and superintendents make, even if doing so makes educational and financial sense. Community emotions run high before, during, and after the process, and the blowback is often fierce.

Take, for example, the Colorado Springs School District 11, which has seen a slow decline in enrollment for more than a decade. Located in the center of the city, about 60 miles south of Denver, District 11 is landlocked and surrounded by 17 school systems in the region.

In 2009, in the throes of a recession and with competition from charter schools, private schools, and growth

in the surrounding districts, the board opted to close nine campuses. All were in the southern part of the district, where the number of school-age children has declined most dramatically. As in many communities where neighborhoods have aged and the population has shifted, the area also has the district's largest percent-age of low-income students.

The tumult over the closures, not surprisingly, led to the ouster of a majority of the board, but the ongoing enrollment decline has forced still more changes. What makes this story remarkable — and replicable in other districts with similar circumstances — is how administrators and the new board learned from their

mistakes and worked with the community to not repeat them.

### CLOSURES COMMON

School closures happen more often than you might think. According to researchers Megan Gallagher and Amanda Gold at The Urban Institute, about 2,000 schools close their doors at the end of each year and don't reopen. The majority—53 percent—are in suburban school districts.

The institute's research shows that, in urban and suburban districts, closures disproportionately affect low-income and African-American students. As neighborhoods age, families often will move to other areas, resulting in declining enrollment.

That's what has happened in Colorado Springs, says communications director Devra Ashby, who grew up in District 11 and has worked for the school system for a decade.

"For us, it's been a perception issue, and the perception is that newer is better," says Ashby, noting that District 11's enrollment has declined by 300 to 500 students a year for more than a decade. "Newer schools, newer land, and newer properties that are cheaper than if you live in an urban school district. We have two neighboring districts that are growing by leaps and bounds because they have land to build on. We don't. We're landlocked."

In 2009, Ashby says, the board held a series of public forums "because they felt that was how the situation could best be handled." The forums, which often ran until 3 a.m., allowed residents to vent their frustrations, but did not change the outcome.

"What happened, I think, is that we did not engage the community in the ways we should by listening to them and working with them, so they could truly understand what we were doing and why," she says. "We weren't asking the questions

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*—Devra Ashby, Communications Director, Colorado Springs School District 11*

about how we can make this school into something else if the board decides to close it. We didn’t figure out how to work with the community, so this change is not detrimental to property values and also serves the community’s needs.”

**OLD SCHOOL; NEW BREWERY**

Last summer, my wife and I went to Colorado Springs. Having never been to the city, which is home to the U.S. Air Force Academy and is at the base of the Rocky Mountains and Pikes Peak, we asked locals for an interesting place to eat.

Given our ties to education, the place that caught our eye was the Ivywild School, which houses a brewery, bakery, espresso/cocktail bar, deli, and office space. The former elementary school, purchased in 2012 by two entrepreneurs who were born and raised in the neighborhood, is a spectacular example of adaptive reuse.

Located on the district’s southern border, Ivywild was one of two elementary schools that was closed and merged with a third in 2009. Driving through that area of town, you can see that it was the centerpiece of an aging neighborhood; people are quick to tell stories of how upset they were by its closing. Now, thanks to its reconfiguration, Ivywild is the showpiece for an area that is drawing millennials back into the city.

“Ivywild’s success has been central to the community becoming more involved. They set the standard, and it showed what happens when you have community partners who are dedicated to making the community a better place,” says Ash-

by, whose mother taught at the school. “As a school district, we can’t do much with the buildings, other than stipulate what can and can’t go into them. We’ve been fortunate to have partners who have been willing to step up.”

In 2013, the ongoing enrollment decline put one of the district’s high schools—Wasson—at risk. A former 2,000-student campus, Wasson was projected to have only 800 enrolled in 2013-14. Due to the previous backlash and a newly energized community, the board and superintendent opted to seek alternatives to closure.

The district’s solution was to merge seven nontraditional schools from throughout the city and put them under one roof at the Wasson campus. Today, the campus houses an early college high school, a digital high school, online education, adult and family education, vocational and technical training, and a night school. It has become a national model for adaptive reuse.

**ANOTHER DILEMMA**

In 2016, the district was faced with another dilemma. In 2009, the board opted to have students from Ivywild and John Adams Elementary attend the centrally located Helen Hunt Elementary. The Adams building was leased to a charter school that dissolved in 2015.

Hunt’s main building was constructed in 1902 and the school needed \$14 million in renovations to bring it up to safety standards. Adams was built in 1963 and required only \$7 million.

“The challenge for the current board

and administration was to acknowledge that Adams could be a viable option to remodel, but we would have to close Hunt,” Ashby says.

District 11’s board and staff held a series of public forums with the Adams and Hunt communities. Interpreters were brought in to work with the Hispanic population that had moved into the area. Comment cards and surveys collected information about “what would best serve the community and not be detrimental to property values.”

The board agreed to repurpose Hunt as a community center, to sell the property to the local Lane Foundation for \$1, and to renovate Adams. Today, five local organizations now make the school their home.

“You never want to close a school,” Ashby says. “I’d much rather talk about what our kids and staff are doing. But if you must do it, you want to do it the right way. You want to do what’s right for taxpayers and you want to do what’s right for kids, and we’ve done that over the last several years.”



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