

Why Do Local Communities Continue to Use Closed Schools?

A Structural Comparison Between Kyoto, Japan; New Taipei, Taiwan; and Chicago, USA.

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Research Overview

This study investigates why local communities continue to utilize closed school facilities. It draws on literature reviews and interviews across cases in Japan, Taiwan, and the United States. Key factors include pre-closure community relationships and post-closure facility strategies aligned with community revitalization goals.

• Purpose of Study

Declining birthrates are driving the closure of elementary and middle schools worldwide. Whether due to rural depopulation or urban hollowing-out, fewer children have forced schools to downsize, resulting in mergers, consolidations, and closures.

The relationship between schools and their communities varies by educational system and governance structure. In Japan, approximately 96% of public elementary and junior high schools are established by local governments (MEXT, 2025). However, residents often contributed land and assets and participated in public school operations. Consequently, schools in Japan have been understood not only as educational institutions for children but also as “belonging to the community (Wakabayashi, 1999).”

This study examines post-closure conditions to analyze the relationship structure between schools and their communities. In Japan, approximately 300–500 public elementary and junior high schools close annually, yet about 74% of existing closed schools are repurposed (MEXT, 2024). While some cases involve community-led utilization, others involve the participation of private capital. Regardless, strong community involvement characterizes the process and institutional arrangements of reuse (Gon, 2012).

Existing research on the reuse of closed schools has focused primarily on architecture (Yatsenko et al., 2024). Although school buildings present constraints and opportunities for adaptive reuse, the post-closure uses of closed schools are typically determined through community interaction and consensus rather than top-down decisions. It is necessary to examine the reuse of closed schools as an educational issue while considering the roles schools play within their local communities. This study investigates whether Japan’s sustained use of closed schools is distinctive or more general among local communities by comparing cases in Japan, Taiwan, and the USA.

• Research Methods

This study uses a qualitative research approach across three cases. Kyoto City serves as the primary case and is compared with cases in Taiwan and the United States and to analyze structural differences. The researchers conducted site visits to local facilities and analyzed administrative and regional data. Interviews with city officials and community organization representatives are planned as a next phase of data collection. Data will be analyzed thematically to identify structural patterns and contrasts across the three cases.

• Results and Discussion

In Kyoto City, elementary schools have long functioned as both historical and community institutions. Declining birthrates have led to numerous closures, with facilities repurposed as museums, arts centers, and luxury hotels. A distinctive feature is that local residents continue to engage with these facilities as community hubs, suggesting that the community's sense of ownership over school spaces persists beyond institutional closure. In New Taipei City, located on the outskirts of the capital, Taipei, aging populations and low birthrates have also led to closures. These facilities have been repurposed to support community revitalization, guided by codified policies with clear post-closure strategies. In Chicago, large-scale school consolidations often resulted in property sales, with many closed schools sold or disposed of entirely. This study examines the Aspire Center, which was redeveloped with community engagement as a core principle within a local revitalization plan—demonstrates that community-centered reuse is achievable even in contexts where market-driven disposals are the norm.

Three structural factors emerge consistently across the cases. First, schools that had cultivated long-term collaborative relationships with their communities—where residents participated in school governance and educational activities prior to closure—were better positioned to negotiate and sustain meaningful post-closure use. Second, while declining birthrates represent a significant challenge for local school systems, policy frameworks that reframed closure as an opportunity for community development and revitalization enabled more constructive responses. Third, repurposed facilities that incorporated essential community functions—including disaster risk management, social cohesion, and resident empowerment—remained vital to local life.

These preliminary findings suggest that the continued use of closed schools reflects not only local sentiment but a structural alignment among community identity, policy design, and facility function. This has implications for education policy and community development across diverse national contexts, bridging local innovations in Japan, Taiwan, and the USA with broader global visions for sustainable community education.

Keywords

Declining Birthrate, School Consolidation, School-Community Relation,
Education Policy, Community Empowerment