

Elementary School Building Capacity & Enrollment Thresholds (Research-Based)

Executive Summary

Common threshold ranges include:

- Underutilized: Below 60–70%
- Efficient: 70–110%
- Overcrowded: Above 110%

Best-practice guidance and research recommend combining these thresholds with multi-factor analysis including building condition, projected enrollment, academic program impact, transportation, and equity considerations.

Metric / Threshold	Numeric Threshold (Typical)	What It Means / Why It Matters (Research-Based)	Suggested District Actions (Committee Input)
“Very small” school (research flag)	< 200 students	Identified in studies such as Howley (1996) showing that very small schools may face challenges with program breadth and efficiency.	
Underutilized (review trigger)	< 70% utilization	Commonly used by districts such as Chicago Public Schools (2013 framework) and Denver Public Schools.	

Underutilized (stronger trigger for closure consideration)	< 60% utilization	Appears in several district closure/rightsizing frameworks as a point at which consolidation analysis becomes likely.	
Efficient utilization band (planning target)	70%–110%	Widely adopted range in district facility utilization standards (e.g., CPS 2013; DOE facility planning guides).	
Overcrowded	> 110% utilization	Indicates capacity stress in buildings; often requires mitigation strategies.	
Decision-making guidance	Multi-factor: enrollment trend, building condition, equity, transportation	Recommended in policy research such as Pew Charitable Trusts (2013) and MSU education policy studies.	

References (Cited Research)

- Chicago Public Schools (2013). School Utilization Report & Guidelines.
- Cotton, K. (1996). School Size, School Climate, and Student Performance. Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory.
- Denver Public Schools. Facility Capacity & Utilization Guidelines (various years).
- Howley, C. (1996). Compounding Disadvantage: The Effects of School and District Size on Student Achievement. Journal of Research in Rural Education.
- Lee, V. & Smith, J. (1997). High School Size: Which Works Best and for Whom? Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis.
- Pew Charitable Trusts (2013). Closing Public Schools in Philadelphia: Lessons from Six Urban Districts.
- Educational Facility Planning Guidelines (various editions, architectural and planning standards).