

## **Need for a Commission on School Siting and Planning**

A Commission or Task Force appointed by the NYC Council and the Mayor to improve the efficiency of school siting and planning should be created. More than 500,000 students are sitting in overcrowded schools, according to the DOE's own calculations. The city's failure to plan, site and build sufficient school space is a long term problem that is worsening because of the rapid pace of housing development.

We propose that the Council negotiate for and/or establish this Commission in conjunction with their negotiations over rezoning.

If new rezoning proposals are adopted, intended to accelerate the construction of affordable and market-rate housing, school overcrowding already at critical levels in many communities will likely grow even more severe, unless there are significant reforms to the planning process and the capacity of the city to build schools along with housing.

There clearly needs to be more funding in the capital plan but without a more efficient planning and siting process these funds could go unspent for years. For example: The latest capital plan the DOE increased their estimate of total need for seats to 83,000 from 50,000 just a few months ago; but they had not updated their estimates since November 2013. These estimates should instead be done on an annual basis or semi-annual basis.

Moreover, DOE is currently funding only 49,200 of those seats, or 54% percent of those they admit are needed – including mostly unspecified seats in the “class size reduction” program. An even smaller percentage are in scope and design – 11,165 seats --meaning that sites have been acquired and schools in the process of being designed; which is only 15% of the need, compared to 22.7% previously.

Our estimate of the actual seats needed is more than 100,000, based on existing DOE overcrowding data and future enrollment projections from housing starts and their consultants' own demographic projections. There clearly needs to be more funding in the capital plan but without a more efficient planning and siting process these funds could go unspent for years

Currently, there are overcrowded communities that have waited over a decade for a school to be built, even when funds have been sitting in the capital plan allocated for that purpose. The process of identifying and acquiring appropriate schools sites must be made more efficient.

In conversations with the SCA, they revealed that they have only three people on staff citywide looking for sites, and only one real estate firm on retainer per borough. They also say they never “cold call,” which is standard procedure for developers looking for sites; and never consider acquiring commercial sites via eminent domain unless that property has recently been on the market. They also say they will never consider acquiring residential properties via eminent domain for schools in any instance.

More evidence of planning failures on the part of the DOE is the fact that the last two amendments of the five year capital plan, in May 2015 and January 2016, were months overdue.

Also, in February 2014 they allocated \$490 million to create an additional 4900 seats under a new “class size reduction” program. It has taken them two years to identify any projects for this program; even as the vast majority of students throughout the city are still subjected to overly large classes, with at least 350,000 students sitting in classes of 30 or more this year.

Still, after two years only three school expansion projects are identified under this category, without specifying how many seats these three projects will add or whether this will allow these schools or others nearby to actually reduce class size. This goal appears unlikely since in July 2015, the DOE rejected the recommendations of the Blue Book Working Group appointed by the Chancellor to align the school capacity formula to smaller classes.

Other issues the Commission could consider include changes to CEQR formula used to project the impact on enrollment from housing starts, now based upon outdated census data; how the entire process of enrollment projections should be revamped to become more accurate and more transparent; and whether impact fees and other reforms to the zoning and ULURP process should be adopted to ensure that sufficient school space is created along with residential development.

*Analysis by Leonie Haimson, Class Size Matters, Jan. 28, 2016*