

How Crowded Are Our Schools?
New Results from a Survey of NYC Public School Principals

Prof. Emily Horowitz¹ (St. Francis College) & Leonie Haimson² (Class Size Matters)
October 3, 2008

Executive Summary

An updated survey of 38% of all New York City public school principals, at schools representing 41% of all NYC students, finds that the Department of Education data on school capacity is faulty.

Nearly half (49%) of our respondents said that the official utilization rate for *their own school* as reported in the Blue Book was *inaccurate*. 86% of principals said that their class sizes *were too large* to provide a quality education. Principals reported many other problems resulting from overcrowding, including unsafe conditions for students or staff, difficulty in providing the credits that students need to graduate on time, and intervention and special services being given in hallways and closets. One fifth of principals reported that their schools have *classrooms with no windows*.

Background

In October of 2007, we launched a survey of public school principals, focusing on school capacity, utilization and overcrowding. The purpose was to learn more about the relationship between the official estimates of school and classroom space employed by the New York City Department of Education and the School Construction Authority, in comparison to the daily realities faced by New York City educators and students. We released the preliminary results last spring, and now can report the responses from more principals --550 in all -- more than one third of all principals of NYC public schools.

The official figures on capacity and utilization are used by the Department of Education to assess how much additional school space should be created through the capital plan, to reduce overcrowding and allow for smaller classes. This survey represents the first effort to quantify the true extent of overcrowding in our schools, by asking principals throughout the city about their schools' actual capacity and needs.

The "Blue Book," the document produced annually by the School Construction Authority, assigns each school a figure in percentage form to represent school utilization. This figure is based on the official capacity of each school, according to the DOE, derived from their estimate of how many students the school should be able to hold and adequately educate. If the utilization figure is above 100%, this means that the school has more students than capacity -- and if it is under 100%, this means that there is extra space in the school.

According to the most recent "Blue Book" (2006-2007), 38% of New York City public school students attend schools in buildings that are above 100% utilization. 47% of elementary grade students are in schools that are overutilized, 19% of middle school students, and 51% of high school students.³ Over the years, there has been much anecdotal evidence about the inaccuracies of the official utilization data, and parents, teachers, and education advocates often report that their schools lack sufficient academic, enrichment, and administrative space despite being listed as underutilized.

¹ Prof. Emily Horowitz (Dept. of Sociology & Criminal Justice, St. Francis College) can be reached at ehorowitz@stfranciscollege.edu or 718-489-5446.

² Leonie Haimson (Class Size Matters) can be reached at leonie@att.net or 212-674-7320.

³ We are using target utilization rates, as reported in an Excel version (2006-7) of the Blue Book provided to us by the DOE.

While the DOE's official figures for the number of schools that are overcrowded are discouraging enough, the results of our principal survey reveal that *these figures significantly understate the actual level of overcrowding in the NYC school system*, for reasons explained below.

Respondents

550 principals completed our survey in full -- representing more than 38% of all NYC public school principals. Their schools contain about 397,000 students --or 41% of our total public school population. About 47% are elementary school principals, 29% from middle schools, and 23% from high schools, roughly in line with the distribution of all NYC public schools, with a smaller proportion of elementary school principals and larger proportion of middle school principals. (See Appendix.)

The distribution by borough of the schools represented in the survey is very close to that of the city as a whole. The average length of time our respondents have been principals is five and half years. Sixty-one percent of them prepare their school's "turn-around" document on which the official DOE utilization rates are supposedly based.

Their schools have significantly **lower** official utilization rates than schools in NYC as a whole. More specifically, 28% of respondents are at schools that the "Blue Book" reports as 100% or above, compared to 38% of NYC schools overall.

Results: DOE utilization rates are inaccurate

Nearly half (49%) of our respondents -- believe that the official utilization rate for *their own school* as reported in the Blue Book is **inaccurate**.

For principals of schools whose official utilization rates are reported as under 100%, slightly **more than half (51%)** said that the *DOE utilization rate was incorrect*, and understated the actual level of overcrowding at their own school.

Fifty-one percent of all principals said that the enrollment at their own school **was not capped** at a level to prevent overcrowding.

Overcrowding leading to unsafe and inadequate conditions

The most frequently cited comments as regards the effects of this overcrowding were the following:

- Slightly more than half of all principals (51%) said that overcrowding sometimes leads to **unsafe conditions** for students or staff; 43% said that overcrowding makes it difficult for students and/or staff to get to class on time.
- 43% of all principals said that their schools were too crowded to be able to provide important after-school programs or services, such as tutoring, sports, clubs and the like.
- More than one fourth (26%) of all middle and high school principals said that overcrowding sometimes makes it difficult for their students to receive the credits and/or courses needed to graduate on time.

Class sizes too large

86% of principals said that their class sizes were too large to provide a quality education.

While the “Blue Book” assumes target class sizes of 20 students per class in K-3, 28 students in 4-8th grades, and 34 students in high schools, most principals believe that classes in K-3 should be no larger than 20, 4-5th grade classes should be 23, and there should be 24 students per class in all other grades.⁴

- The most important factors that principals say prevent them from reducing class size to appropriate levels are lack of control over enrollment (45%), lack of space (44%) and lack of funding (35%).⁵

Loss of cluster rooms

The DOE capacity formula does not reflect the fact that many schools over time have lost cluster rooms (dedicated to art, music, science etc.) to regular academic classrooms, and that in fact, this process is ongoing.

One quarter of all principals (25%) reported losing their art, music or dance rooms to academic classroom space; 20% said they had lost their computer rooms; 18% had lost their science rooms; 14% had lost their reading enrichment rooms, and 10% had lost their library space.

As one principal noted, “*Over the years we have eliminated our art room & science room, and at-risk/intervention rooms. We are now going to request that our computer lab be converted to classrooms because we need another room for a class.*”

Lack of access to necessary facilities

The official capacity estimates do not consider whether the level of overcrowding prevents students from having regular access to the cafeteria, the auditorium, the library, and/or the gymnasium.

In fact at 17% of schools, students have no regular access to the school’s library; and at 29% of schools, lunch starts at 10:30 AM or earlier.

- Almost half of all schools (47%) have less than one hour of gym per week. In eleven percent of schools, students have no access to an auditorium at all.
- Many schools have no science labs. One principal observed: “*We have over 1000 students in this building, the overwhelming majority of whom are in high school, with only a partial science lab that seats 12.*”

Inadequate space for special education and intervention services

Many principals reported using inadequate space for remediation or special education services. For example: “*We are using closet space for speech, SETTS, and SPINS.*”⁶

Another: “*The classroom that we presently have our 12:1 is too small. It was the Dean’s office space that was for our SAVE Room detainees (total 8.) The students are sitting on top of each other. Our SAVE Room is desperately needed. Disruptive students are placed in another classroom or sit with the A.P. or Principal.*”⁷

⁴ This is the mean response of principals. The median and mode responses are reported in the appendix.

⁵ We asked principals to rank these factors in order, but several included more than one as the top reason.

⁶ SETTS is an acronym for Special Education Teacher Support Service – meaning special education services. We are not sure about the meaning of SPINS.

⁷ SAVE is the room reserved for students being disciplined—after the Schools against Violence in Education Act.

And yet another: ***“We lost our Science Lab and Art Studio. Most if not all of our AIS [Academic Intervention Services] Instruction is in our hallways and inappropriate offices in the Gym.”***

Substandard rooms and use of temporary spaces

Many schools have been forced to use non-standard space for classrooms, preventing their true capacity from being properly assessed by the standard DOE formula. For example, some principals said their schools had especially small rooms that cannot hold more than 25 students; others described classrooms with columns that obstruct the student’s view of the teacher or blackboard.

- In addition, 20% of principals reported that their schools have *classrooms with no windows*.

One example: ***“Our art lab and music room is in the basement. It was never suitable for classrooms.”***

- In our survey, 17 % of principals said that their schools had one or more temporary spaces (trailers, Temporary Classroom Units, or annexes).
- Several principals said that the DOE inaccurately describes their schools as underutilized – despite the fact that they rely on annexes and/or transportables to accommodate their students.

As one principal observed: ***“My school occupies two buildings due to overcrowding in the main building. We have an annex which is one mile away from the main building and students are bussed there by yellow shuttle buses. There are 4 portable classrooms in the schoolyard, however due to the way that the DOE calculates space utilization, it does not deem my building as overcrowded.”***

Conflicts with DOE over capacity ratings

17% of respondents said that their school’s official capacity had been increased by DOE in recent years – that is, the number of students that the DOE claims the school can safely hold and educate. In many cases, this increase in the school’s capacity occurred without any significant renovations or classrooms additions, leading many principals to distrust the results. As one principal observed, ***“The blue book estimates change annually based on the needs of our school system. Really has no bearing on reality.”***

Several principals reported ongoing battles with the Department of School Facilities over their capacity ratings. Asked whether they had had their ratings raised in recent years, one principal replied, ***“I have fought this off. We successfully had the capacity lowered from 1000 to 900 but only with 5 meetings that were very contentious. I believe NYC is the only city who expects students to do more with less--in this case less space and area for movement.”***

Battles with OSEPO

Many principals also expressed resentment at OSEPO (the Office of Student Enrollment, Planning, and Operations) for having assigned more students to their schools than they could reasonably hold; apparently this occurs more frequently when the principal attempts to reduce class size.

A typical comment: ***“Once OSEPO sees on ATS that a class has fallen below 30 they send another student.”***⁸

⁸ ATS stands for Automate the Schools, the school-based system which automates the collection and reporting of data for all NYC public schools.

Another: *“There is a problem when a school chooses to use their own money to lower class size (instead of an extra pullout or support position). Then DOE determines that you have space in the classroom and sends you extra students. You get punished for trying to lower class size.”*

Overcrowding made worse because of DOE policies and priorities

- 27% of principals responded that overcrowding in their schools had resulted from new schools or programs having been moved into their buildings in recent years.
- In addition, several principals reported that the situation had worsened because of DOE’s decision to add new grade levels to their schools, with the goal of creating more K-5, K-8, and 6-12 schools.

Other facility problems

Other pervasive problems with facilities were also commonly reported – in particular, 59% of principals said their schools lacked sufficient electrical power.

Conclusions

The thrust of the Department of Education’s current management system assumes that the educators at each school are primarily responsible for the success or failure of their students. Accordingly, the administration has devolved more responsibility and autonomy to principals to improve academic results, with the presumption that they have at their disposal most of the tools they need to succeed. *Yet principals say that they have no control over some of the most important factors determining the quality of their schools:* the allocation of space and the number of students assigned to their schools. These remain entirely within the control of the DOE. In the view of an overwhelming majority of principals, the resulting overcrowding prevents them from reducing class size to appropriate levels and being able to provide critical programs.

According to the results of this survey, current capacity and utilization figures are highly flawed and underestimate the actual level of overcrowding at many NYC public schools. We recommend that the formula used by the Department of Education to determine the actual level of school overcrowding should be significantly revised to take into account the need to ensure student and staff safety, reduce class size, provide necessary special education and intervention services, and improve access of students to gymnasiums, libraries, cafeterias, and auditoriums. The formula should also be adjusted to reflect the ongoing loss of cluster space, including art, music, and science rooms, and the existence of substandard and temporary spaces such as annexes, trailers and TCUs at many schools.

Acknowledgements

We received invaluable support from the chair of the New York City Council Education committee, Council member Robert Jackson, and the Council of School Supervisors and Administrators (CSA), both of whom reached out to principals to ask them to complete our survey, which was posted online on October 24, 2007. This summary reports on the results of the survey as of September 30, 2008. The survey is ongoing; principals and others can reach the authors at nycprincipalsurvey@gmail.com or 212-674-7320.

We also received help and advice on the survey’s overall design and methodology from the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition, the Office of the Public Advocate, St. Francis College, the United Federation of Teachers, members of Community Education Councils and several individual teachers and principals. Our thanks go out to all of them, as well as the hundreds of NYC principals who took the time to complete the survey.

APPENDIX

Survey Background

Borough	Our Respondents	All NYC Public Schools
Manhattan	20%	17%
Bronx	22%	23%
Brooklyn	31%	30%
Queens	21%	22%
Staten Island	5%	4%

School Level	Our Respondents	All NYC Public Schools
PS	47%	64%
IS	28%	17%
HS	23%	19%

Survey Details	
Principals represented out of all NYC principals	38%
Students represented out of all NYC public school students	41%
Principals in our survey at schools the Blue Book says are OVER 100%*	32%
Schools in all of NYC the Blue Book says are OVER 100%	39%
Respondents with 5 years or more experience	47%
Principals who believe official utilization rate is inaccurate	49%
Principals at schools under 100% who believe official utilization rate is inaccurate	51%
Principals who feel that enrollment is NOT capped at an appropriate level to prevent overcrowding	51%
Principals who say overcrowding always OR sometimes creates:	
unsafe conditions for students/staff	51%
difficulty for students/staff to get to class on time	43%
difficult to provide adequate after-school programs (e.g. tutoring, sports, clubs)	43%
difficulty for students to receive enough credits or courses needed to graduate	26%
Principals who say their class sizes are small enough for a quality education	14%
Reasons why principals have difficulty achieving classes of quality size:	
lack of control over total enrollment	44%
lack of space	44%
lack of funding	35%

Cluster rooms converted to general education / academic classrooms				
	computer/tech lab		20%	
	reading enrichment		14%	
	art, music, dance, drama, or foreign language		25%	
	science		18%	
	library		10%	
Schools where students have NO regular weekly library access			17%	
Schools that start lunch at 10:30 or earlier			29%	
Schools with LESS than 60 minutes of gym per week			47%	
Average minutes per week in gym class				
	elementary		60	
	middle school		60	
	high school		120	
Principals who say that their official capacity rating has been raised in recent years			17%	
Principals who say that they have had space taken away in recent years			18%	
Schools with no auditorium or no access to an auditorium			11%	
Schools that can't fit ALL students into the auditorium at one time			76%	
Schools with one or more academic classrooms with no windows			20%	
Principals who say that overcrowding has increased because of new schools or programs being added to their building			27%	
Schools without sufficient electrical power			59%	
Schools with one or more temporary spaces (trailers, TCU's, annexes)			17%	
What SHOULD class sizes be to provide a quality education?	K-3	4-5	6-8	9-12
Mean	20	23	24	24
Median	20	22	25	25
Mode	20	20	25	25