

Testimony of Leonie Haimson before the NYC Council Education Committee

On the Renewal Schools

November 23, 2015

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. My name is Leonie Haimson; I run Class Size Matters, a citywide advocacy group devoted to providing information on the benefits of smaller classes to NYC parents and concerned citizens nationwide.

Since last year, the Department of Education has repeatedly claimed in their Contract for Excellence presentations that they would focus their state-mandated efforts to reduce class size on the 94 Renewal Schools. This claim was made in December 2014, in their response to public comments to last year's (2014-2015) Contract for Excellence plan, and in two presentations, in the spring of 2015 and this fall, for this year's (2015-2016) C4E plan, posted online and provided at borough hearings and Community Education Council meetings.

"To better align with the Chancellor's priorities, C4E's class size reduction plan will now focus on the 94 schools in the School Renewal Program. For more information and for a list of Renewal Schools please visit:<http://schools.nyc.gov/AboutUs/schools/RenewalSchool>. [1]

A link is provided to the School Renewal page where no mention of class size can be found.[2]

This fall I received complaints from parents and CEC members about the increase in class sizes at their schools, including PS 111, a Renewal school in District 30 Queens where Kindergarten class sizes increased to 27 and first grade class sizes to 31. Though the CEC co-chair communicated with the Aimee Horowitz about this, the Executive Superintendent of the Renewal Schools, Ms. Horowitz refused to express any view or to take any action to lower them. [3] On October 19, the UFT also reported that there were hundreds of classes in Renewal schools that violated the union contractual limit of 34 students per class in high schools, and 30 in Title I middle schools. [4]

This fall, Class Size Matters and parents have repeatedly asked DOE officials at CEC meetings and by email for the list of Renewal Schools in which class size has been lowered, what funds are being used to accomplish this goal, and what oversight DOE is exercising to see that this goal is accomplished.[5]

On November 12, I attended an hour long briefing at City Hall by Ms. Horowitz about the various programs the DOE was implementing in the Renewal schools. She made no mention of class size. When I asked her specifically which Renewal schools had reduced class size, and what funding and strategies were employed to accomplish this, she said that all 94 Renewal schools were expected to have "proper" class sizes through the use of their additional Fair Student Funding. [6] When I followed up with an email asking what the definition of "proper" class sizes was, I received no response.

After the DOE released their annual class size reports on November 15, we analyzed the average class sizes at the 94 Renewal schools this year compared to last year. We found that 36 out of 94 schools (about 38 percent) did NOT reduce average class size this year.^[7] The highest rates of non-compliance were in Queens, where 50 percent of Renewal schools failed to reduce class size, and in the Bronx, where 40 percent of schools failed to reduce class size. We further found that 56 schools (about 60 percent) had at least some classes at 30 or more, and only seven schools (about 7 percent) capped class sizes at the C4E goals of 20 students per class in grades K-3, 23 per class in grades 4-8, and 25 in core high school classes.^[8]

In June 2003, in the Campaign for Fiscal Equity case, the state's highest court wrote that "[T]ens of thousands of students are placed in overcrowded classrooms ... and provided with inadequate facilities and equipment. The number of children in these straits is large enough to represent a systemic failure."^[9] The Court of Appeals said that our students were deprived of their constitutional right to a sound basic education because their class sizes were too large, and yet class sizes have not decreased significantly since then.

In fact, class sizes in grades K-3 have significantly increased since 2003 – and are more than 14 percent larger than when that decision was written. This year there are over 48,000 K-3 students in classes of 30 or more, and more than 351,776 students in classes that large overall – more than one third of all NYC public school students in general education, inclusion and gifted classes.^[10]

Though all students need and deserve smaller classes, students in the struggling schools should receive them first.^[11] We strongly urge the DOE to adhere to their promises to parents and the state, and ensure that students in the Renewal schools receive the support they need to succeed by capping class sizes at C4E levels. There is no other education reform that has as strong an evidence base as class size reduction, which has been shown not only lead to better grades, higher test scores, more student engagement and improved graduation rates, but fewer student disciplinary referrals and lower teacher attrition rates as well.^[12]

Thank you for your time.

^[1] NYC DOE Assessment 2014-2015 Contracts for Excellence Public Comment, December 30, 2014, p. 4 at:<http://schools.nyc.gov/NR/rdonlyres/AF304521-9C1 E-4EA6-B694-5F9CC80487E9/175614/C4EPublicCommentAssessment20142015FINAL.pdf>

See also DOE Contracts for Excellence Proposed FY 2016 Citywide Plan – (Borough Wide Presentation), July 2015, slide 14 at: <http://schools.nyc.gov/NR/rdonlyres/26881653-C4C8-4ACC-AD13-537D6B93B486/184676>

/2016C4EBoroughPresentation071515FINAL.pdf and DOE Contracts for Excellence Proposed FY 2016 Plan (CEC presentation), July 2015, slide 14 at: <http://schools.nyc.gov/NR/rdonlyres/26881653-C4C8-4ACC-AD13-537D6B93B486/187463/2016C4ECECPresentation.pptx>

[2] <http://schools.nyc.gov/AboutUs/schools/RenewalSchool>

[3] Letter from Aimee Horowitz to Valerie Lamour, October 07, 2015.

[4] See <http://nycpublicschoolparents.blogspot.com/2015/10/are-5485-classes-this-fall-that-violate.html> and the list of Renewal schools with the most class size violations as of October 19 below.

[5] See <http://www.classsizematters.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/C4E-questions-10.12.151.pdf>

[6] For more on this see, <http://nycpublicschoolparents.blogspot.com/2015/11/my-frustrating-thursday-does-evasions.html>

[7] DOE data for school specific class sizes as of Oct. 30, 2015 by grade and subject area can be found here: <http://schools.nyc.gov/AboutUs/schools/data/classsize/classsize.htm> We averaged the sizes of general education, inclusion and gifted classes at each school. As middle schools report class size two ways, by grade and subject area, we averaged the schoolwide data across both those categories.

[8] The DOE does not report on the distribution of class sizes at individual schools, only the largest class sizes, so we cannot ascertain through the data alone how many classes of 30 or more are at the Renewal schools.

[9] Court of Appeals decision, Campaign for Fiscal Equity, Inc., et al. v. State of New York, et al., 100 N.Y.2d 893, 911-12, June 2003.

[10] Class Size Matters, “Summary of 2015 Class Size data,” Nov. 16, 2015, at <https://shar.es/1cpXyu> See also: Ben Chapman and Lisa Colangelo, “More NYC public elementary school students in overcrowded classes, study reveals”, NY Daily News, Nov. 21, 2015.

[11] Leonie Haimson, “Real Solutions to the Scandal of Struggling Schools,” Gotham Gazette, Aug 17, 2015.

[12] Institute of Education Sciences., [Identifying and Implementing Educational Practices Supported by Rigorous Evidence: A User Friendly Guide](#), 2003. See also fact sheets at <http://www.classsizematters.org/fact-sheets-on-the-benefits-of-class-size/>