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**Written Testimony for New York City Council Joint Hearing
for Committees on Education and Finance**
School Planning and Siting for New Capacity

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The announcement of a Council working group on school planning and siting for new capacity is a relief for communities experiencing the effects of projected rezoning under the Mayor's Housing Plan. My local Community District in East Harlem spans both CSD 4 and CSD 5. As a member of the Land Use and Zoning subgroup of the East Harlem Neighborhood Plan, I advocated to ensure that the following recommendation be included under the Land Use and Zoning section:

Recommendation 3.2

Require the Department of City Planning, the Department of Education, ACS and School Construction Authority to adequately project the impacts of new development on school seat requirements and establish opportunities for new early childhood education and school facilities to be built in the base of new developments. Approaches for making student projections should include detailed analysis, such as the clear definition of school building capacities based on current surveys. Require coordination around and appropriate timing of development of school facilities as units are developed.

In East Harlem, we are currently inundated with new land use and community development projects in addition to a proposed neighborhood rezoning. Recently, Lexington Gardens II on East 118th Street was voted through to bring 390 units onto one city block. The Co-op Tech mixed-use residential proposal plans to bring 1,100 units, again onto one city block. The Bus Depot and African Burial Ground mixed-use has also been recently certified for ULURP with a worst case development scenario of up to 1000 units. Just announced at East 111th Street a mixed-use residential development there projects 655 units.

Not all of these projects will merit environmental review individually for impacts on the local school district. While we expect a full environmental review through the neighborhood rezoning, there is still concern about what has happened in other neighborhoods — use of insufficient and incorrect demographics data, miscalculated growth projections, poor building surveys lead to overcrowding in classrooms, unsafe buildings at over 100% utilization, poor alternatives like trailers and multi-use rooms and the rise of charter schools overtaking traditional public school space. The CEQR threshold is too high, leaving private developers off the hook for mitigation for increased school seat generation. To improve significantly, CEQR methodology needs to be updated; input data on demographics and housing starts require updating; and assumptions of smaller class sizes are necessary, as consistently shown by Class Size Matters.

The process of developing better school planning and siting needs to involve community members and education advocates. A review process with a local Community Education Council and using the CEC to identify local needs has not been sufficient for many neighborhoods. In East Harlem, CEC4 has not had the capacity to address any of these needs in the past years, either through studies or planning for the district. CEC4 consistently holds meetings without sending out agendas or engaging with the greater community. DOE and SCA cannot call discussing with CECs at empty meetings as vigorous community engagement. During the East Harlem Neighborhood Plan process, public school teachers, parents and families were also not engaged sufficiently as the schools and education subgroup was led by and focused on charter schools. No surprise that school seating and capacity and mitigation of the impacts of a neighborhood rezoning did not come up as an issue in this subgroup. Without consistent consideration of traditional public schools in new development, we will be left with old school buildings, which, instead of being rehabilitated to return to the public school portfolio, are now housing for artists or converted into luxury condos.

Community engagement is necessary to coordinate studies and solutions that are meaningful for upzoned communities. For example, while the Educational Construction Fund proposes new school buildings for Co-op Tech, the Heritage School and Park East High School. No one can answer questions about what will happen to the city-owned building and site at Park East High School. The community should have input on what will become of the Park East HS building. At my daughter's school, the addition of a new pre-K class with no discussion or notice to the greater community required that a school that existed only on one floor to knock down a wall over the summer, relocate a library space and the principal's office and negotiate the next year with other entities in the building to bring the library space back down to the school's floor so that elementary school students would not have to walk between floors to access the school library. We have schools, like many other neighborhoods such as The Youth Women's Leadership School that is home to one of the famed gymnasiums. Shared, multi-use space cannot be a continued trend in traditional public school buildings. This is not community-based, intelligent planning, especially not for progressive education schools that envision low class sizes as a part of the philosophy and curriculum.

When decisions like the above can be made without real community engagement, it is clear that the recently announced working group needs to engage communities slated for rezoning to ensure that no rezoning goes ahead without the proper planning for new school seats. All communities scheduled for upzoning need to be ensured that there will be enough school seats to accommodate the expected increased residential density. In these areas, like East Harlem, we have the most vulnerable populations in the public school system. In East Harlem, most schools have a large percentage of homeless students in both CSD 4 and CSD 5, according to the Institute for Children, Poverty & Homelessness. Coordination between residential development, schools and transitioning homeless children and families into permanent housing must be the highest priority for areas targeted for rezoning, like my neighborhood in East Harlem. We are looking forward to hearing the working group plan for community engagement that involves East Harlem residents, families, children, local community-based organizations, education activists, as well as data and demographic experts.

Respectfully,

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