

Leonie Haimson, Class Size Matters
Testimony at NYSED ESSA hearings
June 6, 2017

Good evening, Regent Cashin, and members of the State Education Department. My name is Leonie Haimson and I'm the Executive Director of Class Size Matters, a non-profit organization dedicated to reducing class size in NYC and the nation at large. We belong to the coalition called NYS Allies for Education, and I was also a member of the NYSED ESSA working group assigned to provide input on the state's accountability plan.

Congress passed ESSA to move away from the high-stakes testing regime of NCLB towards a more holistic and equitable vision of school quality that would allow children and their teachers to focus on real learning and positive change. Yet I fear that this proposal will not move us in this direction.

When NYSED surveyed parents and the public at large about what additional indicators they believed should be used to assess schools other than test scores and graduation rates, the most popular responses by far were factors related to the opportunity to learn, including small classes and access to art, music, science, and physical education and more. This is most critical to emphasize in NYC, where more than 350,000 students continued to be crammed into classes of 30 students or more, and where thousands of students do not receive the minimally required coursework in art, music and physical education as mandated by state law and regulation. Yet the current proposal ignores the need to include these factors.

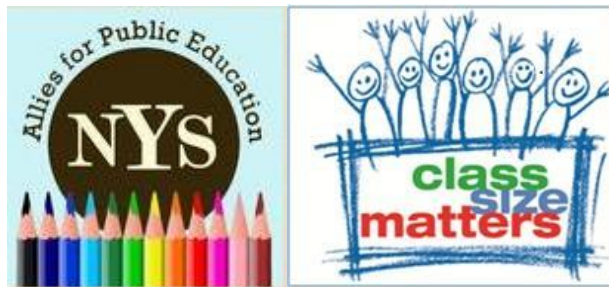
As you have heard tonight from all these eloquent high school students, how important it is that their transfer schools had small classes, make them feel like they are known, and gave them the support that allowed them to thrive. Wouldn't it be even better if **all NYC schools** were places where students feel truly cared for and receive the attention they need, and do not have to first drop out of school to find a place where they know they matter.

As others have pointed out, using chronic absenteeism as the single additional school quality indicator for elementary and middle schools will unfairly penalize schools with large populations of disadvantaged, homeless, or immigrant students, or those with chronic illnesses. Using absenteeism as the **sole high-stakes indicator of school quality** would not only unfairly penalize these schools, but may also lead to unintended consequences, including such students to be ostracized, excluded or pushed out.

For high schools, the additional factor proposed along with absenteeism is something called college, career and civic readiness, as defined primarily by advanced coursework. This could incentivize schools to provide more AP classes – even as most private schools are moving away from AP because of their superficial nature -- at the potential risk of further narrowing the curriculum and reducing access to art, music, physical education, and more.

I urge the Board of Regents to revise this proposal and ensure that it includes a wider range of evidence-based Opportunity to Learn factors, proven to improve student outcomes, as enumerated in the attached document. Some of these factors such as class size reduction has been shown to provide more equity by narrowing the achievement gap for disadvantaged children. The more factors that are included in the accountability system will also lessen the risk that one indicator will distort incentives and cause schools to game the system in ways that would be damaging for children. Not coincidentally, as mentioned previously, these factors were also those that ranked the highest in the NYSED survey.

One more word about the way opt out students will be counted: If NYSED is determined to go ahead and count opt out students as level 1 in calculating a school's academic indicator, the accountability system will implode and sacrifice its credibility, as the lowest ranking schools will be those on Long Island and elsewhere where the opt out rates are 50-80%. Parents cannot be forced to make their children take the state tests and will not do so until they believe the exams are shorter, less stressful, more reliable and usefully diagnostic, and with high stakes removed. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today.



Include an Opportunity to Learn Index in the NYS Accountability System

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The new federal education law called ESSA (Every Student Succeeds Act) allows states to design a new accountability system that include school quality indicators, in addition to strictly academic measures such as student test scores and graduation rates.

New York State's accountability system must reflect a strong commitment to learning experiences and opportunities that align with the cognitive, social, and emotional needs of students. The addition of an Opportunity to Learn Index will ensure that all children and youth from prekindergarten through 12th grade have equitable access to a rich education that sparks their curiosity and imagination, and equips them with the essential 21st-century skills of problem-solving, collaboration, communication, and civic leadership.

NYS Allies for Education and Class Size Matters urge the Board of Regents and the Commissioner to incorporate an Opportunity to Learn index in the new NYS accountability system. Such a system would include the following essential, measurable and evidence-based factors:

1. Programs

- Whether the school offers prekindergarten (and whether full or half-day);
- Whether the school offers full-day Kindergarten;
- Average class sizes by grade (which in turn affect student achievement, achievement gaps, school safety and discipline, student engagement, teacher attrition rates etc.);
- How much arts education is offered and whether this meets the state requirements;
- How much physical education is provided and whether this meets the state requirements;
- The extent to which recess aligns with the recommendations of the American Academy of Pediatrics guidelines.
- Whether the school uses and documents social-emotional supports, restorative practices or other proven positive behavior interventions;

- The number and percentage of students who are not receiving their mandated services, including special education services, ENL/ESL and bilingual classes;

2. Staffing

- The number and percent of teachers in the school who have completed a four-year teacher education program;
- Teacher attrition rate and average years of experience;
- The ratio of counselors per student and in high schools, the ratio of college advisors per student;
- Number of school based team/school psychologist, social worker and/ or designated full-time specialized staff per students with IEP's;
- Number of qualified nurses per student;
- Number of full time librarians and whether there is a library;
- The experience level of administrators (principals, APs, and department chairs) as administrators and as teachers;
- Number of teachers (special education and non-special education) and administrators who have received a full complement of training in evidence-based interventions (such as Orton-Gillingham and others) for children identified with serious reading, writing and math disabilities.

3. Parent involvement

- Whether the school has an active PTA and a School Leadership Team or School-based Management committee that includes parents, with regular trainings and meetings; as verified by the district;
- Whether the school gives annual surveys to students, parents, and teachers, and considers the results for school improvement. (The survey results themselves should not be factored into the accountability system, but to inform administrators and the school-based management committee of how to improve the school environment.)

4. Other Critical Factors

- The availability of data regarding use of police or law-enforcement surrogates in schools
- Whether the school tracks the types and number of interventions provided to students identified as at risk of dropping out;
- The attendance rate of students and percent of students who are chronically absent.
- Student attrition, discharge, suspension and expulsion rates.

Selected References in Support of Opportunity to Learn Index Indicators

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