

TESTIMONY submitted by KEMALA KARMEN on 2/28/2020  
For CITY COUNCIL EDUCATION COMMITTEE HEARING ON CLASS SIZE

My children attended a wonderful Brooklyn elementary school. It used a “progressive,” inquiry-based approach to education, with plenty of hands-on projects and lots of opportunities for experiential learning. The only thing that *wasn't* great about the school was the class size. Every single class was at the contractual limit. For the most part, my children’s teachers were smart, creative, and nurturing, but with classes that large it’s not surprising that they sometimes lost their cool.

It’s difficult to imagine how enormous class size could be of benefit to any school, but it’s definitely onerous for schools that use an experiential learning model where students take frequent field trips. I remember chaperoning a 3rd grade trip where we had to walk a few blocks from the subway to our destination. At every intersection we got honked at because there were so many children and accompanying grownups (teachers, paras, chaperoning parents) that we couldn’t get across the street before the light changed. To be frank, it didn’t feel completely safe--although please don’t conclude that the solution to that precarity is to limit trips. Trips are great, especially in a city like ours, with so many natural and cultural riches. But they would be even better if the number of students was small enough that they could all cross the street uneventfully.

I wasn’t the only one in our family cognizant and concerned about class size; my children were as well. Although they enjoy a snow day as much as the next kid, they didn’t grumble that much when I sent them to school on those borderline days where a snow day wasn’t called. Why? Because on those days, some parents kept their kids home anyway, making the classrooms less crowded than usual. On these occasions my girls remarked on how much more pleasant the day was; the teachers seemed less stressed, there was less squabbling among the kids, and they felt like they got more attention from the teacher.

When it came time for my older daughter to apply to middle school, the uncharacteristically small class size at one school earned it a lot of check marks on the “pro and con list” we drew up to help us rank schools on the application. She was eventually matched to that school, which her younger sister now attends. I think one of the reasons that the transition to middle school from elementary was unremarkable for my children was due precisely to its small class size. It facilitated their getting to know the other new 6th graders and meant the teachers and even the principal got to know them well early on.

But their school’s ability to preserve small class size has come at a price--in order to limit class size the administration has to divert *nearly all available resources* to that endeavor. That means, among other things, that there isn’t enough money to hire sufficient office staff. So don’t expect anyone to pick up the phone if you call. They save some money by making the school camping trip shorter by a day than the elementary school’s camping trip. And don’t get me started on the dire state of the school’s physical plant. You’d think that a school shouldn’t have to choose between a decent

student-teacher ratio and a ceiling intact enough not to shower plaster on the head of some unsuspecting kid.

I know that keeping classes small takes money, and that the state isn't giving NYC's public schools what they need and are legally owed. We need to keep fighting the state for that money. But that's not the only reason we don't have smaller classes. It's simply not a priority for the NYCDOE--and that needs to change. When this committee met in September, DOE's Linda Chen announced that students would have to take an additional standardized assessment, later revealed to be the computer-based MAP. She also spoke about a new "protocol," Edustat, modeled on COMPSTAT. Who knows if these things will work to drive student achievement? But we do know, from research, that lowering class size will. So, let's invest in the proven reform of class size reduction; we can scrap the MAP and Edustat.