

## Testimony of Prof. Jacqueline D. Shannon in support of Intro 2374-2021 and the need to reduce class size

October 30, 2021

Thank you for holding hearings on Introduction 2374-2021 to provide members of the public an opportunity to comment on this important bill. My name is Jacqueline Shannon, and I am an Associate Professor and the Department Chair of Early Childhood Education and Art Education at Brooklyn College of the City University of New York.

In 2014, I helped write a letter to then-Chancellor Farina, warning her that the increases in class size that had occurred since 2007 in NYC public schools, particularly in the early grades of K-3, threatened to undermine the gains one might otherwise expect from the expansion of prekindergarten across the city.

This letter, which is attached to my testimony, was signed by over 70 professors of education, psychology, and sociology.<sup>1</sup> Sadly, we received no response from the Chancellor.

Since we sent this letter more than seven years ago, the city has made very little progress in lowering class sizes, which are still far larger than they were in 2007 (except for last year during the start of COVID), especially in the early grades.

Kindergarten through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade are those very years where the research is most crystal clear and convincing that class size has a strong determining effect on learning, especially for disadvantaged children and students of color. And yet the number of children in Kindergarten in classes of 25 or more has risen by 68% since 2007, and the number of 1<sup>st</sup> through 3<sup>rd</sup> graders of thirty or more has increased by nearly 3000%.<sup>2</sup>

Luckily, class sizes are strictly limited by state law for Pre-K and now 3-K; but none when they enter Kindergarten.<sup>3</sup> The only limits on class size are the UFT contractual limits, which are far too large, and only inconsistently enforced.<sup>4</sup>

One of the best experimental studies of Pre-K recently concluded in Tennessee. Researchers from Vanderbilt University followed a thousand randomly selected, economically disadvantaged children from Pre-K through third grade, and compared them to a control group who did not attend Pre-K. Not only did children who missed Pre-K catch up within a year

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.classsizematters.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Letter-Reducing-Class-size-to-Farina.pdf> See also the oped here: Jacqueline Shannon and Mark Lauterbach: *Mayor De Blasio Must Put Reducing Class Sizes at Top of His Agenda.* SchoolBook, Nov. 6, 2014; <https://www.wnyc.org/story/opinion-de-blasio-must-put-reducing-class-size-first/>

<sup>2</sup> See the data summarized at <https://www.classsizematters.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/citywide-class-size-updated-2.17.20.pptx>

<sup>3</sup> The maximum legal size of preK classes in NY State is 20. In classes with 18 students or less, one teacher and one paraprofessional are required; for 19 or 20 students, there must be one teacher and two paraprofessionals assigned to each class.

<http://www.p12.nysed.gov/upk/documents/151-1.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> The UFT class size limits are: 25 students per class in Kindergarten, 32 in elementary grades, 33 in middle schools (30 in Title 1 middle schools), and 34 in high schools. See <https://www.uft.org/teaching/new-teachers/your-rights-new-members/class-size>

or two, but the children who attended Pre-K had fallen behind their peers on many achievement measures by the third grade.<sup>5</sup>

The lead researchers of this Vanderbilt study were surprised. They have speculated about why the program failed to produce positive results. As co-investigator Dale Farran concluded:

*Pre-K is a good start, but without a more coherent vision and consistent implementation of that vision, we cannot realistically expect dramatic effects...Too much has been promised from one year of preschool intervention without the attention needed to the quality of experiences children have and what happens to them in K-12."*

The other co-investigator, Mark Lipsey, pointed out that the study raises important questions about what was happening in the other early grades to cause these students to fall behind:

*"The biggest mystery here is what in the world is going on as these kids hit kindergarten, first, second, third grade, that is not building on what they seem to have come out of pre-K with?"<sup>6</sup>*

There is no mystery as to what hits NYC children as they enter Kindergarten in our public schools. As we wrote in our letter to the Chancellor, in words that still hold true today:

*New York City schools have the largest classes in the state and among the largest in the nation. We believe strongly that more equitable outcomes depend on more equity in opportunity. We commend you for your commitment to expanding prekindergarten programs, but as you know, early childhood education does not begin and end at age 4. We urge you now to focus on lowering class sizes in all grades, which will improve teaching and learning in our public schools.*

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this critical bill—Intro 2374-2021. Its passage is essential to our city's children and students' success academically and emotionally as well as to their overall health and safety.

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September 22, 2014

Cc: Mayor de Blasio

Dear Chancellor Fariña:

We, the undersigned, professors and researchers, urge you to put forward an aggressive but practicable plan to reduce class size in NYC public schools. Last school year, class sizes were the largest in 15 years in grades K-3, and the largest since 2002 in grades 4-8. More than 330,000 children were sitting in classes of 30 or more, according to DOE data.

As you know, robust research shows that class size matters for all students, but particularly students at-risk of low achievement, including children of color, those in poverty, English language learners, and students with special needs. This is why class size reduction has been shown to be one of the few reforms to narrow the achievement gap.

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<sup>5</sup> Mark W. Lipsey, Dale C. Farran, Kerry G. Hofer, "A Randomized Control Trial of a Statewide Voluntary Prekindergarten Program on Children's Skills and Behaviors through Third Grade," Peabody Research Institute of Vanderbilt University, 2015. [https://peabody.vanderbilt.edu/research/pri/VPKthrough3rd\\_final\\_withcover.pdf](https://peabody.vanderbilt.edu/research/pri/VPKthrough3rd_final_withcover.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Blake Farmer, "Vanderbilt's Unflattering Pre-K Study Strikes A Nerve, But What Does It Really Say?" Nashville Public Radio, September 28, 2015. <http://nashvillepublicradio.org/post/vanderbilt-s-unflattering-pre-k-study-strikes-nerve-what-does-it-really-say#stream/0>

Smaller classes have also been shown to increase student engagement, lower disciplinary referral and drop-out rates, and reduce teacher attrition. No teacher, no matter how skilled or well prepared, can be as effective in the large classes that exist in many of our city's public schools.

We believe that the benefits of many of the other positive reforms that the city is pursuing, such as increasing access to Universal prekindergarten, establishing community schools, and inclusion for students with disabilities, may be undermined unless the trend of growing class sizes is reversed and class sizes are lowered in the city's public schools.

In particular, placing students with special needs into classes of 25, 30 or more will not work to serve their individual needs, no less the needs of the other students in the class.

New York City schools have the largest classes in the state and among the largest in the nation. We believe strongly that more equitable outcomes depend on more equity in opportunity. We commend you for your commitment to expanding prekindergarten programs, but as you know, early childhood education does not begin and end at age 4.

We urge you now to focus on lowering class sizes in all grades, which will improve teaching and learning in our public schools.

Yours sincerely,

Jacqueline D. Shannon, Chair, Dept. of Early Childhood and Art Education, Brooklyn College

Diane Ravitch, Research Professor of Education, New York University

Barbara Schwartz, Clinical Professor, Dept. of Teaching and Learning, NYU Steinhart

Sonia Murrow, Associate Professor, Brooklyn College

Mark Alter, Professor of Educational Psychology, Programs in Special Education, New York University

Xia Li, Assistant Professor, Undergraduate Deputy, Dept. of Early Childhood and Art Education, Brooklyn College

Barbara Rosenfeld, Assistant Professor, Dept. of Childhood, Bilingual, and Special Education, Brooklyn College

Sharon O'Connor-Petruso, Assistant Professor, Dept. of Childhood, Bilingual, and Special Education, Brooklyn College

Carol Korn-Burztyn, Ph.D., Professor, Dept. of School Psychology, Counseling, and Leadership, Brooklyn College & Ph.D. Program in Urban Education, Graduate Center, CUNY

Karen Zumwalt, Evenden Professor Emerita of Education, Department of Curriculum and Teaching, Teachers College, Columbia University

Beverly Falk, Ed.D., Professor/Director, Graduate Programs in Early Childhood Education, The School of Education, City University of NY

David Bloomfield, Professor of Educational Leadership, Law and Policy, Brooklyn College & CUNY Graduate Center

Jessica Siegel, Assistant Professor, Education, English and Journalism, Brooklyn College

Barbara Winslow, Professor, Secondary Education, Brooklyn College

Diana B. Turk, Ph.D., Associate Professor and Director, Social Studies Education, Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development, New York University

Peter Taubman, Professor Secondary Education, Department of Secondary Education, Brooklyn College

James E. Corter, Prof. of Statistics and Education, Dept. of Human Development, Teachers College, Columbia University

Jeanne Angus, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Childhood, Bilingual & Special Education Head, Graduate Program in Special Education Co-Director, Brooklyn College

David Forbes, Associate Professor, Brooklyn College

Fabienne Coucet, Ph.D., Associate Professor and Program Leader, Program in Childhood Education, Dept of Teaching & Learning, NYU Steinhardt School of Culture, Education and Human Development

Laura Kates, Associate Professor, Deputy Director, Education Program, Kingsborough Community College, CUNY

Eliza Ada Dragowski, Ph.D., Faculty Graduate School Psychology, Counseling, and Leadership, School of Education, Brooklyn College

Nancy Cardwell, Assistant Professor, Graduate Program in Early Childhood Education, The School of Education, City College of NY, CUNY

Mark Lauterbach, Assistant Professor, Dept. of Early Childhood and Art Education, Brooklyn College

Robert Lubetsky, Ed.D., Associate Professor, Director, Educational Leadership Program, Dept. of Educational Leadership & Special Education, School of Education, City College of New York

Anna Stetsenko, Ph.D., Professor, Ph.D. Program in Developmental Psychology, The Graduate Center of The City University of New York

Katharine Pace Miles, Dept. of Early Childhood and Art Education, Brooklyn College

Daniel S. Katz, Ph.D., Director, Secondary/Secondary Special Education, Seton Hall University

Nancy Leggio, Education Program Faculty, Kingsborough Community College

Tovah Klein, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Psychology, Director, Barnard Center for Toddler Development, Barnard College, Columbia University

Rosalie Friend, Adjunct Associate Professor, Educational Foundations, Hunter College

Gigliana Melzi, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Dept. of Applied Psychology, New York University

Daisy Edmondson Alter, Ph.D, Center for Advanced Study in Education, CUNY Graduate Center

Jacqueline Hollander, Substitute Instructor, Dept. of Early Childhood and Art Education, Brooklyn College

Dr. Johnny Lops, Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist

Marshall A. George, Ed.D., Professor and Chair, Graduate School of Education, Fordham University

Helen Freidus, Ed.D., Bank Street College of Education

Barbara Barnes, Adjunct Associate Professor, School of Education, Brooklyn College

Hugh F Cline, Adjunct Professor of Sociology and Education, Teachers College, Columbia University

Gil Schmerler, Director, Leadership for Educational Change, Bank Street College

Elsie Cardona-Berardinelli, Resource Specialist, Fordham University

Lulu Song, Assistant Professor, Dept. of Early Childhood and Art Education, Brooklyn College

Jennifer Astuto, Ph.D., Director of Human Development and Social Intervention, NYU Steinhardt

Rena Rice, Graduate School Faculty, Bank Street College of Education

Mary Mueller, Ed.D., Seton Hall University

Beth Ferholt, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Early Childhood and Art Education Department, Brooklyn College, CUNY

Juan Morales-Flores, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Early Childhood Education, Kingsborough Community College

Robin B. Smith, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Special Education, SUNY New Paltz/Educational Studies

Mary DeBey, Associate Professor, Dept. of Early Childhood and Art Education, Brooklyn College

Susan Riemer Sacks, Ph.D., Professor of Psychology, Director of Education Initiatives, Barnard College

Jeremy D. Finn, Ph.D., SUNY Distinguished Professor, Graduate School of Education, University of Buffalo-SUNY

Diane Howitt, Resource Specialist, NYS/NYC RB-ERN Fordham University, Graduate School of Education, Center for Educational Partnerships

Fran Blumberg, Associate Professor, Division of Psychological and Educational Services, Fordham University

Diana Caballero, Ed.D., Clinical Professor, Fordham University, Graduate School of Education, MST Programs in Early Childhood and Childhood Education

Gay Wilgus, Ph.D., Assistant Professor. Graduate Program in Early Childhood Education. The City College of New York

Joshua Aronson, Ph.D., Applied Psychology, New York University, Director of Center of Achievement Research and Evaluation

Florence Schneider, Associate Professor, Dept. of Behavioral Sciences & Human Services, Kingsborough Community College

Christina Taharally, Ed.D., Associate Professor & Coordinator, Early Childhood Masters Programs, School of Education, Hunter College, CUNY

Merle Keitel, Ph.D., Professor, Graduate School of Education, Fordham University

John Craven, Ph.D., Science Education, Fordham University

Patricia M. Cooper, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Program Coordinator of Early Childhood Education, Queens College, CUNY

Linda Louis, Associate Professor, Associate Professor, Dept. of Early Childhood and Art Education, Brooklyn College

Herman Jiesamfoek, Associate Professor, Associate Professor, Dept. of Early Childhood and Art Education, Brooklyn College

Edwin M. Lamboy, Associate Professor, Secondary Spanish Education Program Director, City College of New York, CUNY

Florence Rubinson, Professor of School Psychology, Dept. of School Psychology, Counseling, and Leadership, School of Education, Brooklyn College

Lisa S. Fleisher, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Educational Psychology, Programs in Special Education, Department of Teaching and Learning, New York University

Nataliya Kosovskaya, Graduate School of Education, Fordham University

Martin Simon, Professor of Mathematics Education, New York University

Maris H. Krasnow, Ed. D., Clinical Associate Professor of Early Childhood and Early Childhood Special Education, New York University

Yoon-Joo Li, Assistant Professor, Dept. of Childhood, Bilingual, Special Education, Brooklyn College

Paul C. McCabe, Ph.D., NCSP , Professor & Program Coordinator, School Psychologist Program , Dept. of School Psychology, Counseling, and Leadership, Associate Editor, School Psychology Forum, Brooklyn College

Meral Kaya, Ph.D Assistant Professor, School of Education, Dept. of Childhood, Bilingual, Special Education, Brooklyn College

Laurie Rubel, Ph.D., Association Professor, Dept. of Secondary Education, Brooklyn College

Geraldine Faria, Assistant Dean, School of Education, Brooklyn College