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Testimony before the City Council Education Committee concerning the Mayor's proposed budget cuts to education and the capital plan

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Good afternoon, Chair Joseph and members of the City Council. My name is Leonie Haimson and I'm the Executive Director of Class Size Matters, a non-profit organization that provides information on the benefits of smaller classes to parents and voters nationwide, and advocates for class size reduction in NYC public schools.

Yesterday we released a new report, entitled ***"What has happened to class size this year and what will happen to class size if the Mayor's cuts are enacted?"***¹ The full report is attached to this testimony.

Our analysis reveals substantial decreases in average class size this year citywide due to enrollment decline, yet significant disparities remain across school districts and grade levels.

We explain how Mayor Adams' proposed budget cuts to schools will likely cause class sizes to sharply increase to earlier and unacceptably large levels, despite the strong consensus among parents and teachers that smaller classes are even more important than ever before to support students and enable them to recover from the myriad academic disruptions and emotional stress caused by the Covid pandemic. ***The most likely impact of these cuts would be the largest increase in NYC class sizes since the Great Recession.***

The report discusses how the School Construction Authority has now substantially lowered classroom capacity standards in their annual School Enrollment, Capacity, and Utilization report (known as the "Blue Book") to be aligned to the smaller classes in the city's original reduction plan approved by the state in 2007 – that is, 23 students per class in grades 4-8th and 25 students per class in high schools. The standards were already aligned to class sizes of 20 in grades K-3, which were also the goals in that original plan.

Yet at the same time, the SCA has inexplicably proposed to slash new capacity by \$1.5 billion or 19 percent, compared to the capital plan adopted last June. This would include cuts of more than 10,000 new school seats, with especially large reductions in both the Bronx and Queens of more than 6,000 school seats.

¹ Posted at: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.31/3zn.338.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Class-size-brief-3.20.22-final-final.pdf>

Despite their implied claim that sufficient seats will be funded to meet the need to eliminate overcrowding and reduce class sizes to adequate levels, as embodied in their revised classroom capacity formula, we have no confidence that this is true.

Our doubts are exacerbated by the fact that the NYC Department of Education and the SCA have failed to provide their methodology for projecting seat needs, as required by Local Law 167 passed by the Council in 2018, which required this transparency. Nor have they disaggregated their seat-need projections by grade level, i.e., the need for seats for 3K and PreK classes, vs K-5th grade classes vs 6th -8th classes, as required by Local Law 167.

Neither the DOE nor the SCA has complied with Local Law 168 either, passed in 2018, that was supposed to create Task Force that would work together to analyze the suitability of city- and privately-owned empty lots for schools. This Task Force was supposed to release a report in July 2019, with results that would help counteract the delay often suffered by overcrowded communities in siting new schools.

In October 2019 we obtained a two-page report via a Freedom of Information request to the Council, that appears to have been written by the SCA, and which had input from several of the Task Force members according to their own statements, including the City Council appointee. This report contained a brief summary that ruled out hundreds for city-owned sites for unclear and apparently contradictory reasons. They have still not released any analysis of privately-owned sites.

Two weeks ago, along with the co-chairs of the Education Council Consortium Shino Tanikawa and NeQuan McLean, we sent a letter to the President of the SCA, Nina Kubota, asking what the revision of the Blue Book class size standards meant, and if this signified that all schools would have the space to lower class sizes to these levels by the end of the current five-year plan or by some future date. We also asked them when they would make the information required by Local Laws 167 and 168 available.

They sent a letter in reply on March 18, that was non-responsive to most of our questions. They claimed to have provided their methodology as well as most of the data already for their projections and added that they were now in the process of analyzing a list of privately-owned sites provided them by the Department of Finance. They gave no date by which this analysis would be complete, even though the legal deadline for this analysis was more than two years ago.

They also said that they had eliminated roughly 4,900 of the 22,065 privately-owned sites from a list provided by the Department of Finance (DOF), nearly a quarter of those listed, because they “*lack sufficient location information*,” though they did not explain why the DOF could not be asked to supply that information.² More discussion of all these issues, including links to all the relevant data and documents are in our report.

We urge the City Council to oppose the huge cuts to the seats proposed in the Capital plan, unless the SCA can clearly prove they are not needed to eliminate overcrowding and to lower class size to the

² The letter we sent to the SCA President is here:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1h9XLpapFgQrMS_vmQDzptEi8HVSLo_zT/view?usp=sharing

The SCA response, along with our comments is posted here: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1dVWmx_qi-8OD4AHBQwFZU_-mVUUiuvi/view?usp=sharing

levels outlined in the new Blue Book standards. To achieve this end, they should be required to provide their detailed methodology for projecting these needs, as well as all the underlying data.

We also urge the Council to resubmit and pass Int 2374-2021 in an amended form, by requiring the phase-in of greater classroom space requirements per student, to be accomplished over five years rather than three years, and differentiating the square footage by grade level, to be in alignment with the new class size capacity standards in the Blue Book. The original bill that contained uniform and stricter space requirements to be achieved in all grades over three years garnered the support of 41 out of 50 sitting Council Members last session, but never came to a vote.

Thanks for the opportunity to speak to you today.