



Class Size Matters
124 Waverly Pl., New York, NY 10011
Phone: 917-435-9329
info@classsizematters.org
www.classsizematters.org

Class Size Matters Testimony on the Budget Cuts to Schools

June 24, 2022

Thank you, Chair Joseph and Brewer and members of the Education and Investigation Committees, for holding these important hearings today. My name is Leonie Haimson and I'm the Executive Director of Class Size Matters. Since February, when the Mayor's preliminary budget was released, we have been warning that the budget cuts planned for our schools would cause the sharpest class size increases since the 2017-2018 Great Recession.¹ Sure enough, this is what is likely to happen if these cuts are not restored.

The preliminary and executive budget projected that the \$375 million slashed from Fair Student Funding would lead to the elimination of over 3,227 teaching positions; with vacancy reductions of another 104, the total is 3,426 lost positions.²

Even with the \$160 million in federal stimulus funds used to initially lessen the sting, the Independent Budget Office estimated that the cut of \$215M would lead to a loss of at least 1,449 teaching positions – though the number of school staff excessed appears to be larger than this already.³

Yet based on the school-based Galaxy budgets available on June 12 and June 13, we found that the cuts totaled more than \$1.7 billion, far larger than previously reported.⁴ Our analysis revealed that 98% of schools or 1,535 lost funding, while only 29 schools gained funding. The average cut per school was \$1.1 million, or 13.9%.

Although DOE may add more funding over time to these budgets, the additional funds are supposed to be used for specialized purposes rather than staffing. The Council ought to demand that DOE provide the spreadsheet of total cuts to school budgets as of this week, as well as how much will be added and for what purposes over the next few weeks. If they do not provide this data, the Council should use their subpoena power.

In addition, there is the recent revelation that the average general education elementary student allocation in the Fair Student Funding formula has actually been cut by over \$25.⁵ As a result, cuts for those students who are struggling, those with special needs or English Learners will be larger, with as much as three times this amount cut for certain high-need categories.

What makes these cuts so outrageous is, unlike the sharp cuts to schools in 2017-2018, the city is flush with cash.

¹ See for example our March 20, 2022 testimony here: <https://classsizematters.org/our-testimony-at-todays-education-budget-hearings/>

² <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/omb/downloads/pdf/peg4-22.pdf>

³ <https://ibo.nyc.ny.us/iboreports/fewer-students-fewer-dollars-doe-savings-plan-phases-out-school-budget-cut-forgiveness-available-during-the-pandemic-fopb-march-2022.pdf>

⁴ <https://classsizematters.org/galaxy-budget-cuts-to-schools-at-more-than-1-7b-far-larger-than-reported/>

⁵ <https://nypost.com/2022/06/22/nyc-quietly-cuts-per-pupil-funds-under-controversial-formula/>

According to the City Comptroller, the Department of Education has nearly five billion dollars in unspent federal Covid relief funds meant for our schools. In addition, the city has a reserve fund of \$8.3 billion, and an expected surplus next year of over \$3 billion.⁶ Not to mention the fact that the schools are due to receive \$1.3 billion in additional Foundation Aid as a result of the settlement of the Campaign for Fiscal Equity settlement.⁷

Finally, we just obtained a leaked DOE budget document showing that as of this week, \$1.1 billion in unspent funds that had been allocated to schools in FY 2020 and FY 2021 remains unspent. DOE has asked schools to cancel these allocations immediately, as “These are real dollars that could be used for other purposes.”⁸ The Comptroller’s office had now confirmed to us that these dollars are in addition to the as of yet nearly five billion dollars in unspent federal relief funds.⁹

The Mayor seems to be defending this budget by saying that he is still fully funding Fair Student Funding. What has not been sufficiently discussed is that the Fair Student Funding formula has never been either fair or sufficient – and this is especially so now, given the critical situation our schools are in after two and half years of Covid.

Indeed, there is nothing sacrosanct about this formula, developed by Chancellor Joel Klein in 2007. When it was first developed, many experts warned that it would cause class sizes to increase to unacceptable levels, by imposing a rigid formula that funded schools by the number of students they had rather than the class sizes they need.

Noreen Connell of the Educational Priorities Panel was quoted in the NY Times article that “**the funding proposals have the potential to do lasting damage for decades to come.**”¹⁰ More specifically, she warned that by not allocating funding according to a particular staffing ratio, the system would lead to sharp increases in class sizes when budgets were cut—and principals would have no choice but to increase class size, off load their experienced teachers, or both.

According to a survey sent to principals by the FSF Taskforce in 2019, *nearly 80% of the principals identified large class sizes as a consequence of the FSF formula.*¹¹ Some principals have said that the formula when fully funded is aligned to class sizes of 28 or more.

Many parents, teachers, and principals agree that this year for the very first time, students were provided with the smaller classes and the individual attention they needed to succeed. The reason: DoE released schools from the handcuffs of the FSF formula. That, together with enrollment decline, has provided schools with a unique opportunity to provide the small classes that many administrators and teachers had known for years would offer NYC children with a better opportunity to learn, and a better opportunity for teachers to get to know each student well enough to support their academic growth and emotional health.

Class Size Matters undertook an online survey and conducted individual interviews with parents, teachers, and principals about the conditions in their schools this past year. Many responded that despite the controversies over mask-wearing, the Omicron surge, and all the other disruptions of the past year, this year had been exceptionally meaningful because class sizes were small enough in many schools to provide students with the individual support and attention they had long needed.

A Kindergarten teacher assigned to a class this year of 19 rather than 25 students in past years reported, “the environment is so much calmer and more relaxed. We can give each child individualized attention and care each day.... I am able to

⁶ <https://www.thecity.nyc/2022/6/10/23163313/mayor-speaker-adams-nyc-budget-deal> and <https://ibo.nyc.ny.us/iboreports/continued-but-tempered-growth-in-delicate-times-a-reestimate-of-the-mayors-executive-budget-may2022.pdf>

⁷ <https://ny.chalkbeat.org/2021/4/7/22372087/nyc-schools-to-get-billions-of-new-dollars-under-state-budget-deal>

⁸ <https://classsizematters.org/1-1-billion-in-unspent-funds-by-doe-for-fy-2020-and-fy-2021-making-cuts-to-schools-even-more-outrageous/>

⁹ Email to Leonie Haimson from Lara Lai of the Comptroller’s office, June 24, 2022

¹⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/25/nyregion/25schools.html>

¹¹ <https://nycpublicschoolparents.blogspot.com/2021/11/why-fair-student-funding-task-force.html>

support and work with more students individually and in small groups. The classroom is less chaotic and loud and there are less behavior problems and disruption with a smaller class size, leading to better learning outcomes and the children's ability to self-regulate and focus while I am teaching.”

A fourth-grade teacher told us, “This year, there are 19 kids in my class and the difference is stark. We can give each kid tons of attention. Some of them have made 1.5 to 2 years of growth in reading already...we can give each child individualized attention and care each day.”

Similarly, a parent of a middle school student said, “This is the first year (after being in NYC public schools for seven years before this) that the teachers are able to provide individualized attention to my child’s social and emotional needs. Her teachers all know her really well for the first time.”

Several teachers noted how these smaller classes were more critical than ever given the two years of the pandemic. As one teacher put it, “All kids are needier than ever, whether simply needing attention and feedback from teachers or grappling with real trauma.”

One principal said publicly: “What is devastating about the recent budget cuts is that 2021 felt like the first time in my 16 years in the DOE where we were getting close to being able to provide all kids with the supports and opportunities they deserved.”

I urge the Council to do everything you can to ensure that these budget cuts are restored, especially as after two plus years of pandemic, smaller classes are more critical than ever before to give the in-person support NYC kids require. Students need to make closer connections with their teachers and peers— connections that can only exist in smaller classes.

As I’m sure you’re aware, a few weeks ago the State Legislature passed a law, A10498/S09460 with a vote of 59-4 in State Senate; 147-2 in the Assembly.¹² This bill requires NYC to be phasing in smaller classes over the next five years. Annual progress towards these goals is mandated to be achieved starting in September, or the state can hold back funds. As I have briefed reporters, parents, CEC members, elected officials, and the Chancellor, the average class sizes this year are close to the caps specified in the law and are both achievable and affordable – as long as the DOE does not increase class sizes next year.

According to Politico, Gov. Hochul is likely to sign this bill, yet as the article also points out, the Mayor has no plan to achieve the goals in the bill, and with these cuts, seems to be playing chicken in hopes that she does not.¹³

As teacher and public-school parent and teacher Gilly Nadal wrote, “I know the transformative difference a smaller class makes. With each additional student, there is an exponential rise in the noise level, the number of hands in the air, the number of interactions everyone has, and the inputs the brain has to deal with. Children who have already experienced a lot of stress find this additional brain load overwhelming. They are more likely to shut down or become explosive — and that triggers other students to misbehave....New York City students have been deprived of their educational rights for decades. The state has finally come through with its legal responsibilities, and now it is time to hold the city to its side of the bargain.”

¹² <https://nyassembly.gov/leg/?term=2021&bn=A10498> ; <https://legiscan.com/NY/bill/S09460/2021>

¹³ <https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/2022/06/adams-doesnt-have-a-plan-for-states-class-size-mandate-00041469>