

Jamaica High School PTA-UFT
167-01 Gothic Drive
Jamaica, NY 11432

September 25, 2011

John B. King, Jr.
Commissioner of Education
State Education Department
80 Washington Avenue
Albany, New York 12234
Via Fax (518) 473-4909 and Certified Mail

Dear Commissioner King:

We are writing as two of the three core members of the Jamaica High School Leadership Team. We are deeply troubled by the lack of resources that are being provided to the students at Jamaica High School. On January 19, 2011, the Department of Education (DOE) put out an Educational Impact Statement (EIS) proposing to phase out this storied 119-year-old institution. As part of their plan, the DOE stated unequivocally that the students who remain in Jamaica High School during the phase out period would be supported. The DOE has consistently failed to honor its commitment to Jamaica High School, as delineated in the EIS, so we are appealing to you for redress.

On page one, the January 19, 2011 EIS concerning Jamaica High School states: "Current students would be supported as they progress towards graduation while remaining in Jamaica High School." The support is further clarified on page 10 of the EIS where it says, "Jamaica High School offers four academic programs open to students both in and outside the school's residential zone. They are: Finance Institute and Business Institute; Law Studies Institute; Pre-Engineering/Computer Science Institute and Gateway Medical/Science Honors Institute. Students who are already enrolled in Jamaica High School through those programs, with the exception of the Gateway program, as well as students enrolled through the zone program would continue to have access to the academic classes they need to complete their program requirements."

Yet the students do not have access to many of the classes that are required to complete their programs. This is educationally unsound and a violation of the Educational Impact Statement. We believe it also deprives these pupils of the sound basic education that is their constitutional right in New York State.

Specifically, two of the classes needed to complete the Finance Academy program are called World of Finance and Money and Banking. These courses are listed in the official Jamaica High School Handbook. They are no longer offered at Jamaica High School. Any student in this program is being deprived of the opportunity to complete the program requirements.

According to the official Jamaica High School Handbook, pupils in the Pre-Engineering Institute should be offered courses called Electric Circuit in the fall and Auto Cad in the spring of their sophomore year. These classes are not given. In the junior year, these pupils should take Electric Circuit 2 or Basic Electronics, Principles of Structural Engineering and Programming (C++) and Chemistry or Physics. None of these courses are offered at Jamaica High School. When they are seniors, pupils are supposed to take Robotics, AP Calculus or Pre Calculus. These classes are not offered as of today. These are not electives but requirements of the Pre-Engineering Institute.

Students in the Computer Science Institute are required to take Computer Application in their sophomore year, Computer Application and Chemistry or Physics in their junior year, Pre-Calculus or AP Calculus and Computer Application in their senior year. None of these courses are offered in this school and the students to the best of our knowledge have not been given an alternative location where they can take these classes that are required so that they can complete their programs. The DOE pledged in their EIS that students would be permitted to complete the requirements of their programs and they have not abided by their own EIS.

Furthermore, as of today there are no honors courses at any level or in any subject which is a disservice to pupils who seek a more challenging course of study. The School Leadership Team was assured in June by administration that they would attempt to create honors classes but in September we were told that there was no money available to offer them.

On page 10 of the EIS the DOE says, "As appropriate, the DOE would work with Jamaica High School to ensure that students continue to have opportunities to pursue elective academic coursework through collaborative offerings with other schools in the building, online coursework, or in partnership with higher education institutions in the City." We understand that the College Now program still exists but this only accommodates a limited number of pupils. We are not aware of any elective courses offered through other schools in the building or online coursework. In fact, some of the school's computers are so old as to be obsolete.

The Jamaica High School building currently does not have a librarian so none of the students in this building has access to the library. Instead, subject classes have been held in the library this semester due to space limitations caused by co-locating four new schools in this building. This room is not conducive to full time teaching.

In addition, we presently have nine social studies classes that are taught either by teachers who do not have any social studies certification or the classes have no teacher at all as they have remained on the school program as vacancies.

The DOE also claims on page 10 of the EIS that they will assist the staff in the following ways: “Providing teacher training around issues including curriculum planning, improving teacher practices and tailoring instruction to individual student needs.” Teachers have received no professional development in these areas that we are aware of.

The EIS continues by stating that the DOE will be, “Fostering opportunities for teachers and administrators to connect with colleagues in other more successful schools, allowing them to learn from one another, improve teaching and better support students.” To the best of our knowledge, none of this has been implemented in the past and it is not taking place currently.

The EIS on page 9 says, “Current tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grade students who are on track to graduate would complete high school at Jamaica High School if they continue to earn credits on schedule. As the school becomes smaller, students would receive more individualized attention through graduation to ensure they are receiving the support they need to succeed. Students would also be encouraged to meet with their guidance counselor to discuss all of their options.” Where is this individualized attention supposed to come from?

Two of the three guidance counselors in the general education program are no longer working in this school. The lone remaining general education guidance counselor has a caseload of over 600 pupils and cannot do much more than respond to emergencies and fill holes in programs of pupils who do not have their mandated seven classes. The coordinators for the Law Institute, the Finance Academy and the Pre-Engineering-Computer Science Institute have been sent to other schools and no teacher here has been given compensatory time to replace them.

Furthermore, even with a lower student population, the DOE still permitted Jamaica to open the school year with 35 oversize classes. Class sizes were only reduced by dropping students who were absent from subject classes the first week. As many of these pupils have subsequently returned to school, they need seats in required classes.

It is clear to anyone who examines the EIS and then looks at the reality of what is occurring at this school that these students are not being given the supports that the DOE promised, and is their right to receive. Their ability to go onto college and/or be ready for a career has been seriously compromised. This cannot be allowed to continue for another day. What is the point of producing EIS's if they are to be flouted? The DOE has betrayed the hopes and dreams of Jamaica students, and gone back on their promises.

Last year and this year, during the mandated Education Law 2950-h(2-a) school closing process, we were repeatedly assured by DOE officials that our students would get the resources they needed, despite the phase out. We were skeptical then and our biggest fears have been realized. Students who are enrolled in this school are being forced to settle for an inadequate high school experience.

We ask you to investigate this matter and nullify your approval of the phase-out plan for Jamaica High School. The Educational Impact Statement is not being adhered to by the DOE and it should be voided. Our children deserve better.

Sincerely,

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Jamaica High School

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C. Dennis Walcott-Chancellor NYC schools
Senator Tony Avella
Councilman Mark Weprin
Cathy Nolan- Chairperson NYS Assembly Education Committee
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