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Public Comment on School Planning and Siting Process

Submitted to the NYC Council Working Group on
School Planning, Siting, and Overcrowding

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Thank you for the opportunity to submit comments. The mission of the Citizens Budget Commission (CBC) is to achieve constructive change in the finances and services of the New York State and New York City governments. CBC has conducted research on capital planning for schools that suggests changes should be made to the School Construction Authority's five-year capital plan.

The School Construction Authority (SCA) February 2017 amended five-year capital plan totals \$15.5 billion for fiscal years 2015 to 2019. Of this total, \$5.4 billion (35 percent) is for state of good repair projects and \$5.9 billion (38 percent) is for system expansion. The remaining 27 percent includes 18 percent for emergency, unspecified, and miscellaneous costs, 8 percent for educational enhancements, and 1 percent for safety and security. Investment in schools makes up 18 percent of the city's overall capital plan during these years.

In September 2016 CBC published a policy brief titled [5 Myths about School Crowding in New York City](#) that analyzed the SCA's 2014-2015 *Enrollment, Capacity, and Utilization Report*.ⁱ Based on an updated analysis of the 2015-2016 *Enrollment, Capacity and Utilization Report*, CBC offers two recommendations for improving the school planning and siting process: maximize use of existing capacity, and target new capacity to areas with the highest need.

Maximize use of existing capacity

Our analysis found that as of the 2015-2016 *Enrollment, Capacity, and Utilization Report*, 785 public school buildings were overcrowded with 104,717 students over capacity. However, 681 schools had unused space, with available seats for 151,148 students. Citywide, there are 46,000 seats of extra capacity, and 46 percent of school buildings have unused capacity.ⁱⁱ

This available capacity can be utilized to alleviate crowding both within and across districts. Only 11 districts have more students than total capacity. In the 21 districts with available capacity, steps should be taken to match student enrollment to space across these districts' buildings. Significant reductions in crowding could be achieved by shifting students to different schools or moving schools to different buildings. Altering school

zone boundaries is often politically difficult, but it can save the city unnecessary capital expenditure at a time when the city's debt service is growing rapidly.

Target new capacity to areas with highest need

CBC's analysis finds SCA's demographic projections forecast enrollment declines over the capital plan period in 15 of the 21 districts currently under capacity, while enrollment in 8 of the 11 over-capacity districts is projected to grow further, exacerbating the problem. These 8 districts will receive 52 percent of the new seats. At the same time, 25 percent of seats in the plan are located in 9 districts that are currently under capacity and projected to decline in enrollment. For example, in District 13 in Brooklyn, current enrollment is at 85 percent of capacity, and enrollment is projected to drop by 44 percent by the end of the capital plan. However, the plan funds more than 2,500 new seats in this district at a cost of \$251 million.

New school sites may be most difficult to find in already-crowded areas, but these areas should be prioritized. Constructing new capacity where it is less needed, without redistributing students from crowded schools, is an inefficient use of capital funds.

A number of factors, including the commitment to remove Transportable Classroom Units and the universal pre-kindergarten initiative, have increased pressure on the Department of Education's existing school capacity. This amplifies the need for an efficient space management approach that takes advantage of available space and carefully targets new capacity to best serve the 1 million students in the city's public schools. Thank you for considering CBC's recommendations. Our staff is happy to answer any questions.

ⁱ Citizens Budget Commission, *5 Myths About School Crowding in New York City* (September 2016), <https://cbcny.org/5-myths-about-school-crowding-new-york-city>; New York City School Construction Authority, *Enrollment, Capacity and Utilization Report 2014-2015: Classic Edition (Target Calculation)* (October 2015), pp. 1-222, www.nycsca.org/Community/Capital-Plan-Reports-Data#Enrollment-Capacity-Utilization-69.

ⁱⁱ CBC staff analysis of New York City School Construction Authority, *Enrollment, Capacity and Utilization Report 2015-2016: Classic Edition (Target Calculation)* (November 2016), pp. 1-233, <http://www.nycsca.org/Community/Capital-Plan-Reports-Data#Enrollment-Capacity-Utilization-69>.