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Testimony on the New Department of Education Five-Year Capital Plan

Submitted to a Joint Hearing of the City Council Committees on Education and Finance and Subcommittee on the Capital Budget

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Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony.

The \$17 billion proposed Department of Education (DOE) Capital Plan for fiscal years 2020-2024 contains \$8.76 billion to fund 57,000 new K-12 seats and additional pre-K and 3-K capacity. This plan follows an extraordinary level of investment by New York City in the last 12 years to build new school facilities. As of September 2018, \$9.1 billion has been spent since 2005 to construct more than 98,000 seats. Despite this enormous expense, crowding has not been eliminated; growing enrollment and policy choices have offset new seats. City officials cannot continue to expect the City can build its way to a solution; making real progress will require implementing operational strategies that alter the use of space and redirect students to facilities with capacity.

School crowding is not a problem in every area of the city. As of the 2016-2017 school year, there is a citywide surplus of 55,000 seats in DOE school buildings. The problem is most acute in Queens, which has a shortage of 21,500 seats; the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Manhattan have a surplus, and Staten Island has a modest shortage of 1,000 seats.

High schools (20,000 seats) and middle schools (34,000) generally have excess capacity. However, the City lacks sufficient seats in elementary schools. Citywide there are 10,400 fewer seats than there are students in elementary schools, and 57 percent of elementary schools exceed their capacity.

These problems persist despite the major investments in capacity made in recent capital plans. Since 2005, the NYC School Construction Authority (SCA) has implemented three capital plans totaling \$40.4 billion. About one-third, \$13.8 billion, was committed for new seats. Through September 2018, \$9.1 billion of the \$13.8 billion has constructed 98,302 seats—approximately 9 percent of total enrollment. However, many districts that were near or over capacity a decade ago are still suffering from crowding.

New capacity has been offset by continued enrollment growth as well as policy choices that reduce space available for classroom use. The universal pre-kindergarten program

presented a new demand on school space; the push for smaller schools co-located in a single building resulted in significant space allocated to duplicative administration functions in each building; and the decision to eliminate Transportable Classroom Units (TCUs) increased reported utilization in many facilities.

The cumulative impact of these policy choices on available classroom capacity is significant. If the City remains committed to these choices and enrollment growth continues, reducing school crowding will require implementing operational strategies, not just continued construction.

Operational strategies should be directed at three goals:

- Improving the efficiency of space usage within buildings,
- Reducing intake in crowded buildings, and
- Shifting enrollment to underutilized buildings.

At the middle and high school level, crowding can be fully addressed by capping enrollment at crowded buildings, implementing grade truncations or extensions, and using space efficiently within buildings.

At the elementary level, more aggressive school rezonings that alter “catchment zones” for enrollment are necessary. Historically, DOE has pursued rezonings only when needed to accommodate the opening of a new building; however, in recent years DOE has begun pursuing rezonings with the goal of balancing enrollment across buildings, as well as rezonings that cross district lines to shift students from crowded districts into schools in districts with available space. In half of the city’s 32 community school districts, there is sufficient elementary school capacity within the district, and overcrowding in specific schools can be addressed in large part by rezoning within those districts. Furthermore, several of these districts are adjacent to districts without enough elementary school capacity and could potentially absorb students from those crowded districts. DOE should continue and increase its rezoning efforts.

In addition to rezonings, DOE can increase utilization of available space by reconsidering the grades and programs served in its buildings. First, programs that attract many out-of-zone applicants, such as bilingual schools and gifted and talented programs, should be sited in underutilized buildings to attract enrollment away from crowded schools. Second, grade extensions and truncations should be considered. This would entail changing the grades at a particular school building, such as by shifting fifth grade students to a middle school building with surplus capacity. This would impact the existing application and enrollment structures and may need to be explored one neighborhood at a time.

With growing public school enrollment and rising construction costs, continued emphasis on new construction to address crowding is not a sustainable solution. The proposed five-year capital plan should be revised to focus on elementary schools, where crowding is highest, and to limit new capacity to those neighborhoods where operational strategies are not sufficient to address crowding.