



MANHATTAN COMMUNITY BOARD SIX

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State Senate Democratic Conference Task Force on NYC

School Governance
CUNY Graduate Center
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Testimony regarding the City Education and Reform Accountability Act of 2002.

Chairs Huntley, Dilan, and Connor, Senator Krueger, Senator Perkins, and members of the Task Force.

I welcome the opportunity to speak to you today.

My name is Paula Schaeffer. I am currently the Co-Vice Chair of the Education and Youth Services Committee for Community Board 6. I am also a retired elementary school teacher employed by the Board of Education of the City of New York for 34 years. I shall speak to you in both voices which will eventually become one voice.

I began teaching in 1957 at PS 83 located at Schenectady Avenue and Dean Street in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn. The school was old, dilapidated, and severely overcrowded. The school was on double session for Kindergarten and First Grades with early session classes starting at 7:30AM. There were three overlapping lunch hours. The then centralized Board of Education, recognizing a dire need, built two state-of-the-art elementary schools within a relatively short period of time. PS 289 opened in March of 1959. PS 243 followed a few years later. PS 83 was condemned and totaled to the ground. I had been transferred to PS 289.

In 1965 I applied for a transfer to PS 208 located at Avenue D and East 49th Street in the East Flatbush section of Brooklyn. This was the receiving school for the Gifted and Talented for the Borough of Brooklyn. I hit the jackpot!

1969 signaled the emergence of decentralization and the formation of Community School Boards. This event had very little or no impact on my daily life in the classroom until approximately 1974.

Two life-changing events occurred: There was a huge influx of Caribbean immigrants into East Flatbush, and New York City went bankrupt. This situation created severe overcrowding at the school. There were three overlapping lunch hours beginning at 10:50 AM. The Gifted Program was discontinued. The Community Superintendent stated that the school would not be considered overcrowded until every room was used as classroom space. He would not consider capping or re-zoning as a relief. The

conditions were not improved when I retired in 1991. In 1965 the school was ranked in the top ten in NYC. By 1991 it was somewhere in the 200's.

Fast forward to September, 2008 and conditions at PS 116 located at East 33rd Street between 2nd and 3rd Avenues in the Murray Hill section of Manhattan. This area now has the largest incoming population of children ages 0-5 years in NYC. As of July, 2008 the school was at 113% of capacity with overlapping lunch hours starting at 10:30 AM. There was an expectation that lunch hours would have to begin at 9:30AM at the start of the school year in September.

At meetings at the Tweed Court House this summer, we were informed that the Gifted Program was to be removed, and that the school was not to be considered overcrowded until every room was used as classroom space.

We had been informed by DOE officials at various meetings at CB 6 that capping and re-zoning were not options. Does all of this have a familiar ring? Is there an echo somewhere?

Here is the point---In 1957, the old, reviled, hated, despised centralized Board of Education did what was necessary. They built two schools.

The School System is not a multi-national corporation operating from the top down. The schools are structures built and operating from the bottom up. The bottom line—classroom conditions.

“I don't care who sits in the chair”; whether it's the Mayor, the Chancellor, the Superintendent, the Chair, the CEO, the King, the Queen, the Emperor, or the Empress. This is what needs to be done:

Every teacher needs a well-ventilated room, unbroken furniture, adequate books and supplies, a reasonable class register, a universal curriculum, and paper towels and toilet paper. (I am not being sarcastic, I am not kidding!)

The Community School Boards didn't work, and this governance is not much better. We do not need a convoluted chain of command that does not adequately serve everyone's needs. I do not want to see PS 116 meet the same fate as PS 208, but it will—eventually.

The New York City Public School System needs space, supplies, and trained personnel—children first. Whatever governance accomplishes this is the governance that is correct.

Respectfully submitted

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