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Testimony of Sarita Subramanian
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To the New York City Council Education Committee
On Overcrowding in the City's Public Schools and Plans for Increasing Capacity

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Good afternoon Chairman Dromm and members of the City Council Education Committee. My name is Sarita Subramanian and I am a senior education budget and policy analyst at the New York City Independent Budget Office. Thank you for your invitation to testify today on overcrowding in New York City's public schools and the Department of Education's (DOE) plans for new seat construction.

Overcrowding has been a persistent and well-documented problem in certain pockets of the New York City public school system for many years now. To alleviate overcrowded conditions, the School Construction Authority (SCA) dedicates a significant portion of its capital plan to adding new capacity each year either by new construction or leasing private space.

IBO examined the SCA's current plans for increasing capacity in each community school district for school years 2014-2015 through 2023-2024 in the context of the existing state of overcrowding in buildings in 2013-2014 plus the need for seats beyond what is currently planned. Since funding is limited, SCA must prioritize where to add capacity based on where it will be most needed. Residential development and expected enrollment growth are two of the factors that SCA takes into account when estimating the need for seats in the future. (Enrollment projections are provided by Statistical Forecasting, a consulting firm under contract to the SCA.) SCA acknowledges that with the resources available, its current five-year plan will not be sufficient to fund construction of all the seats its projections indicate will be needed, let alone to eliminate overcrowding entirely. To quantify these additional needs, SCA distinguishes between seats that are funded and those seats they project will be needed but are not provided for during the current five year planning period.

Our analysis identifies one district in Brooklyn (district 20) and three districts in Queens (districts 24, 25, and 26) that require the greatest number of seats to eliminate overcrowding. Two of those districts—20 and 24—are expected to receive the most new seats in the current capital plan, although both are projected to face significant need that is not funded in SCA's five-year plan.

Existing Overcrowding Conditions in 2013-2014

To put planned new capacity in the context of existing overcrowding conditions in public school buildings, IBO looked at the Enrollment, Capacity & Utilization Report, commonly referred to as the "Blue Book." The most recent version available is from the 2013-2014 school year. For overcrowded buildings, we calculated the number of additional seats a building would need to accommodate all of its students and still maintain a utilization rate below 102.5 percent. The total for each district is shown in column (1) of the attached table. In the table, we call attention to the five districts that require the greatest number of seats to eliminate existing overcrowding.

In 2013-2014 about 75,000 additional seats would have been needed to ensure that every building was at or below 102.5 percent of capacity. Looking forward, the number of seats needed is even greater because enrollment citywide is projected to grow by 5.7 percent from 2011-2012 through 2021-2022; enrollment in Queens is projected to grow nearly twice as fast, rising 10.4 percent. The SCA plans to increase capacity by 47,000 seats through 2023-2024 through its new capacity initiative. Despite this investment, a significant number of students would be left in overcrowded schools.

One of the largest impediments to alleviating overcrowding is managing the mismatch between where seats in overcrowded buildings are located and where unused seats are located. Some relief from overcrowding could be found in buildings where enrollment was below capacity in 2013-2014. There were over 156,000 unused seats across the city in 2013-2014, though a portion of those are already committed to schools that are in the process of phasing in.

There are several reasons why using those seats to alleviate overcrowding in other buildings is difficult. First, while the DOE could shift attendance boundaries and school admissions policies to redirect enrollment away from over-enrolled schools towards under-enrolled schools, this has proven to be politically contentious in the past. Moreover, given that much of the mismatch stretches across boroughs, the potential for reducing overcrowding by administrative changes is probably limited to a few areas of the city. Second, ongoing DOE initiatives—such as the expansion of prekindergarten and the phasing in of charter and other co-located schools in district school buildings—will continue to put pressure on existing space. As these schools add grades each year until they reach their full complement of grades, excess capacity in the system will decrease. Third, changes to the Blue Book’s definition of capacity based on recommendations by the Blue Book Working Group will likely reduce the measured capacity of the system, thereby increasing the number of buildings considered overutilized. Still, it will likely remain true that some unused seats can be used to alleviate overcrowding in other buildings.

New Capacity

SCA’s proposed first amendment to the five-year capital plan for school years 2014-2015 through 2018-2019, released in November 2014, allocates almost \$3.5 billion over the five years to new capacity. This is in line with the previous five-year capital plan’s allocation of roughly \$3.6 billion for fiscal years 2009-2010 through 2013-2014. Although the SCA allocates projects into five-year periods for planning purposes, planning and building a new school sometimes takes longer than five years from start to finish. As a result, in addition to the seats funded in the current plan, many seats that began the design and/or construction phase under the previous plan will become available from 2014-2015 through 2018-2019. Likewise, some of the seats funded in the current plan are not expected to be completed until 2020 or later.

IBO compiled a complete list of seats in newly constructed space or new lease facilities using the Blue Book (for seats that became available in fall 2014) and the proposed amendment to the capital plan, which reports seats expected to become available by 2023-2024. This information is reflected in column (2) of the attached table. All of the seats reported in column (2) have been funded either in current or prior plans. There are a total of 47,030 seats planned and funded by 2023-2024. Column (3) shows SCA’s estimate of the additional seats in each district that will be needed but which are not included in the current plan. There are a total of 13,759 such seats, or nearly a quarter of the total number of seats that SCA estimates need to be added if funding were not a constraint.

District-Level Analysis

The table shows that the four districts with the greatest number of seats required to eliminate current overcrowding (more than 5,000 seats in each district) are, in descending order of necessary seats: districts 20, 24, 26, and 25. The four districts are expected to receive new seats in the current capital plan, but also have significant additional need that cannot be met in the current capital plan, which suggests that overcrowding will likely persist.

District 20 in southwest Brooklyn, the district with both the greatest need for seats to eliminate existing overcrowding and the greatest expected enrollment growth, is expected to get over 4,500 new seats—second only to district 24. Most of the seats would come online by 2021-2022. However, the additional seats represent just 58 percent of the seats needed to eliminate the existing overcrowding identified by IBO in the district.

District 24 in western Queens, where more than 7,250 seats are needed to eliminate existing overcrowding, also has the most planned new seats in the SCA plan. More than 8,500 seats would come online by 2021-2022, more than sufficient to eliminate existing overcrowding in the district. But SCA projects that more than 4,400 additional seats will be needed due to the rapid increases in enrollment expected for prekindergarten through eighth grade.

Districts 25 and 26 in eastern Queens require more than 5,200 and 6,200 seats, respectively, to eliminate existing overcrowding identified by IBO and will gain fewer seats than necessary to do that. District 26 is only expected to gain 924 seats, falling more than 5,300 seats short of what would be needed to eliminate the current level of overcrowding. In district 25, the 2,280 planned seats will fall about 2,000 seats short of what would be needed to eliminate existing overcrowding. Additionally, both districts have some projected need that is not funded in SCA's current plan.

Finally, two districts with no planned new capacity could experience greater need as they were among the six neighborhoods targeted for increased residential units through upzoning under the Mayor's affordable housing plan. The targeted neighborhoods and their school districts are: East New York in Brooklyn's district 19 and East Harlem in Manhattan's district 4.

In conclusion, the SCA's capital plan for new capacity generally targets those districts with the greatest need due to existing overcrowding and future expected enrollment growth. While there are some districts in the city where planned new capacity would be sufficient to alleviate existing overcrowding, there are other districts where the anticipated new seats would fall short. Districts 20 and 24 have the greatest current and future need, but are also expected to receive the largest number of new seats in the current capital plan. Districts 25 and 26 are also among the districts that need the most seats to alleviate existing overcrowding, but are expected to receive significantly fewer new seats than districts 20 and 24. Given the high cost of constructing new capacity, the DOE will also have to continue to explore ways of using its excess capacity—currently 156,000 seats—whenever possible. In conjunction with adding new capacity to the system, the DOE should continue to encourage students to enroll in buildings with unused seats by placing attractive programs or schools in those facilities.

Thank you again for your invitation to testify and I would be happy to answer any questions.

District Level Existing Overcrowding Conditions Compared With Planned New Capacity				
	District	Overcrowding in 2013-2014	New Capacity	
		Number of Seats Required to Eliminate Overcrowding (1)	Total New Seats Expected 2014-2015 Through 2023-2024* (2)	Seats Identified by SCA as Needed But Not Funded in Plan (3)
Manhattan	1	167	0	0
	2	2,960	4,209	42
	3	1,310	692	0
	4	511	0	0
	5	79	0	0
	6	934	0	0
Bronx	7	477	456	0
	8	867	924	0
	9	2,067	0	0
	10	4,696	3,260	456
	11	2,481	1,943	0
	12	1,376	912	0
Brooklyn	13	1,170	1,090	0
	14	403	991	0
	15	3,315	3,281	2,154
	16	5	0	0
	17	1,338	0	0
	18	79	0	0
	19	400	0	0
	20	7,764	4,541	3,329
	21	2,323	912	0
	22	4,295	1,213	0
23	0	0	0	
Queens	24	7,252	8,512	4,425
	25	5,201	2,280	874
	26	6,273	924	172
	27	3,338	1,416	764
	28	4,408	2,325	418
	29	1,217	1,103	0
	30	3,401	4,345	941
Staten Island	31	4,696	1,701	184
Brooklyn	32	125	0	0
TOTAL		74,928	47,030	13,759

SOURCES: School Construction Authority's 2013-2014 Enrollment, Capacity & Utilization Report Book One (Target Calculation) and November 2014 Proposed First Amendment to the Five-Year Education Capital plan for 2015-2019.

NOTES: *New seats include seats in process and planned new capacity. Two new high school projects planned for Queens that are not yet sited are excluded from the analysis of expected new seats and need that is not funded because we do not know what districts those seats would be for.