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Gale A. Brewer, Borough President

TESTIMONY BEFORE CITY COUNCIL COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION
NOVEMBER 23, 2015 OVERSIGHT: DOE'S EFFORTS TO HELP STRUGGLING SCHOOLS

MANHATTAN BOROUGH PRESIDENT GALE A. BREWER

My name is Gale A. Brewer and I am the Manhattan Borough President. Thank you to Chair Dromm and the Committee on Education for holding this very important hearing and for the opportunity to testify.

In November 2014 Mayor DeBlasio unveiled the School Renewal Program, a strategy to turn around struggling schools, rather than closing or phasing them out, as was the practice under the prior administration. The Department of Education (DOE) identified 94 Renewal Schools to receive additional funding and be transformed into a Community School, in partnership with a community-based organization (CBO), to enable them to offer new services that support children and families, as well as their mental health and physical well-being. Today's hearing will examine DOE's School Renewal Program (SRP) and other efforts to help struggling schools improve.

I am a big proponent of the School Renewal model, and feel that we are finally asking the right questions about why students and schools are persistently struggling, and we have finally committed to giving these schools the tools to achieve success. That said, while the Program is well intentioned, we have failed to ask deeper questions about what is needed to make sure the Renewal School Program is not only implemented, but also implemented in a way that systemically improves the Renewal schools. For this to happen we need to address the Blue Book and the picture it paints of school utilization and school climate and its role in creating socio-emotionally safe spaces where students have the tools to succeed both academically and socially.

I keep in contact with the Blue Book Working Group and it is clear that at the very core of the success of the School Renewal Program is the question about space. While schools, and especially schools that are a part of the SRP need support, services and partnerships, they also need the necessary space inside their buildings for these services to take place. The DOE has been under fire for years about the inaccuracy of the Blue Book, and its space utilization formula, and even with the DOE adopting many of the Bluebook Working Group's first set of recommendations this past summer, the city did not align class sizes in Blue Book with the goals set forth in the state-mandated Contracts for Excellence plan of 23 students per class in grades 4-8 and 25 in high school. While in their response to the public comments on their 2014-2015 C4E plan, the DOE wrote that the C4E's class size reduction plan would focus on the 94 schools in the School Renewal Program, according to the DOE's latest class size statistics, as of October 31st, 2015, "class size grew by 0.1 from 26.4 students per class in 2015" and there is no apparent systemic class size reduction plan in place for the renewal schools. Without the proper class size alignment, we have no way of knowing what services any school

can reasonably accommodate without encroaching on classroom space.

I also want to draw attention to the lack of conversation about creating an appropriate school disciplinary culture in the city's Renewal Schools. Recently the Mayor and the DOE announced their *Roadmap to Reduce Punitive School Discipline* aimed at creating safer schools, while reducing student arrests, and disciplinary punitive measures. I commend the administration and the DOE for the formation of the School Climate Leadership Team and their leadership in bringing together a diverse team of advocates, organizers, young people, and the NYPD and DOE to imagine and ultimately actualize what safer schools that respect students' dignity need to look like. In my conversations with Renewal School principals and guidance counselors it has come to my attention that that school climate has not been a focus in the RSP, as it has been in some schools. This is highly misguided, and in my opinion leaves a huge gap in what is needed to create safe and supportive schools.

It is my hope that the DOE not only works toward addressing school climate concerns in the renewal schools by providing training and funding for restorative justice practices for school staff, but in the long term engages in a conversation about the role of the police in our schools. As you are aware in 1998 then Mayor Giuliani entered into a Memorandum of Understanding with the NYPD that transferred school safety responsibility from the DOE to the NYPD. While the intention was to ensure the effectiveness of school safety practices, instead we are witnessing the increased militarization of our schools. Normal school interactions, like small fights which rightly used to be under the purview of the Department of Education are now being handed over to the NYPD to be treated as criminal infractions. It is important to note that the DOE spends between 360 and 400 million dollars annually on school safety, and the DOE currently has over 5400 School Safety Agents throughout the public school system, and only 3600 guidance counselors. If the DOE is serious about investing in young people's future, the DOE must take a long hard look at that statistic and actively invest in education of our young people to work to flip the ratio.

As our city comes together to support some of our schools and students who are most in need, it is important that we constantly ask what we can do better, and where the gaps are.

I commend the Committee and Chair Dromm for holding this hearing today and look forward to working with the Council and the Department of Education in continuing to support the Renewal School Program.