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Gale A. Brewer, Borough President

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Testimony for Department of Education (DOE) Hearing on Proposed Smart Schools
Bond Act Investment Plan
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My name is Gale A. Brewer and I am the Manhattan Borough President. This hearing is mandated by law, but I thank the Department of Education for the opportunity to testify today, I have long been a proponent of bringing our schools into the 21st century, and the \$783 million Smart Schools Bond Act (SSBA) investment in our schools will go a long way to help finance educational technology and infrastructure needs to improve learning for students. That said, the lack of public engagement, transparency, and strategic planning around the Smart Schools Bond Act Investment Plan is concerning to me.

On the process front, my office sent a letters and we have followed up with DOE staff multiple times over the past few months asking for more details about the SSBA investment plan, and failed to receive a response to any of our inquiries. The letter is attached to this testimony. Further, there was no room for public scrutiny prior to the contract details being made public on March 4th, 2016 and even more troubling is that the Panel for Education Policy (PEP), the governing body of the DOE, was given no information before March 4. Even before this hearing, PEP members were only given a short briefing, and many of their questions remained unanswered. Finally, this is the only scheduled public hearing on the investment plan ahead of the April 20th PEP meeting and vote. If substantive concerns are raised, how will these be incorporated into the investment plan and what will the process be for updating the public on the amendments? These process concerns continue despite promises from the Department of Education and the Administration over the past year that much more would be done to meaningfully engage with all stakeholders.

In terms of distribution of the SSBA funds, I know that the investment in pre-kindergarten and the removal of Transportable Classroom Units (TCUs) are necessary, but I have concerns that while over \$300 million is going to TCU removal, there is no indication of the subsequent immediate impact on students, schools, and districts. What is the plan for addressing the lack of space in schools when the TCUs are removed? With schools already filled to the UFT contract class sizes, and changes still needed in the way

that the City calculates school utilization via the Bluebook, how can we ensure that schools are not suddenly faced with having to convert cluster rooms and closets into classroom space?

I am very interested in the technology funding allocation that this Bond Act is supposed to support. In 2014, I urged New York City voters to support the Bond Act because we understood that there would be funds to upgrade tech in schools. I look forward to answers about the following:

1. I am interested in the types of equipment that will be covered by SSBA funds, specifically what types of tablets and computers will be purchased for the prices outlined in the proposal (\$1100/desktop, \$1000/laptop). These outlined prices are comparable to market rate Apple product prices, and with the DOE purchasing bulk quantities, I'm wondering why the prices are still so high.
2. I also note that according to the investment plan, the City will be purchasing almost 25,000 tablets at \$632/tablet. I have been advocating for tablet purchasing to be allowed under Reso A funding for years, but the NYC Comptroller directive prohibits the purchasing of tablets from Reso A funds. If tablet purchasing is being allowed under SSBA, the DOE purchasing guidelines need to be updated. Last year (FY 2016), I allocated more than \$6 million in city capital investment for technology in our schools. For your information, the funding was available July 1, 2015 but the principals were not notified of the opportunity to access the money until February 2016. Principals come to me all the time sharing stories about how charter school students in their building are carrying around the latest tablet, and their students have to wait for updated equipment. We must ensure schools have the ability to apply for tablet purchasing through Reso A grants, and on a timely basis.
3. Finally, I am interested in what will be done with the old equipment. There are companies, such as local Manhattan-based startup Neverware, whose tools can extend the life of computers for school communities by installing new software, which makes older computers run efficiently. With so many older computers in DOE schools, will the DOE commit to helping repurpose older computers using services like Neverware?

From my visits to schools on a weekly basis, I also know that schools need access to fast bandwidth, and access to faster connections to the internet in the classroom. Resources available online are essential to both students and teachers, and are an integral component in many STEM lesson plans- which must then be altered due to connectivity issues, disrupting the students' focus and understanding of the curriculum. Though this is a widely discussed problem, there does not seem to be an accurate and consistent measure of bandwidth speed. Bandwidth data provided to me last year by the DOE for schools that I had given capital funds to show that most schools have bandwidth provisions between 10-40 Mbps, which is horribly slow. However, the bandwidth speed numbers at the schools do not match what is listed in the Smart Schools Bond Act Investment Plan. As per the investment plan, many of these same schools are listed as

having a burstable speed of 72 Mbps, and so according to the DOE they need no additional investment in technology infrastructure upgrades.

In order for us to address the bandwidth speed in our schools and classrooms, it is of utmost importance that we obtain a clear picture of what the current reality is. We must understand why these discrepancies exist and figure out how to achieve the most consistent speed measures before allocating technology and infrastructure spending to specific schools. In Manhattan, 135 of the school buildings ?? meet the standard bandwidth speed, while 69 do not, but even these numbers are questionable given the discrepancy I noted above. Further, as the plan explains, schools not currently meeting the standard will be improved in 3 phases based on need. I would like to know how need is determined and which schools are included in each implementation phase.

Further, the draft plan also envisions the rollout of Bluecoat caching devices in schools, which would limit the bandwidth requirements of loading locally stored content. What is the impact of these devices on schools? Are these Bluecoat devices only going to schools that do not currently meet the current 100 mbps/1,000 students protocol? I continue to have concerns about the available bandwidth at all NYC schools, even those who purport to have 'adequate' broadband capacity.

Finally, for the past year and a half principals have been looking forward to the allocation of SSBA money, and have been thinking about what it will mean for their schools and students. In my office, I have been meeting with our Education Technology Task Force to talk about how to bring our schools into the 21st century. We were excited about the \$472 million technology contract that was voted on and passed by the PEP in January of this year. We thought with that contract, and this Smart Schools Bond Act money, together, we could make a meaningful impact in many of our city's schools.

Yet I recently found out that 80 percent of the \$383 million technology SSBA money will be used to offset costs of that technology contract. What was originally thought to be an influx of new money coming into our schools is just money we have already accounted for through other contracts.

A lot of questions about implementation of the Smart Schools Bond Act Investment Plan remain, such as where are the funds that NYC schools were promised.. I look forward to working with the Department of Education during both the allocation and spending of Smart Schools Bond Act money to address broadband accessibility and infrastructure needs in schools.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.