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Public Advocate Report Advises Mayor about Steps Required for Reform in School Construction

Public Advocate will sponsor City Council legislation to assure that demographics not politics dominate new school construction

(City Hall, June 17, 2002) Completing a 5-month investigation of problems in school construction in New York City, Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum released her report on the practical steps the Mayor must take now that he has captured control of school construction through last week's legislation in Albany.

Gotbaum said, "The high cost of school construction in New York City reduces the number of new schools that can be built, directly resulting in the current classroom crowding crisis. My investigation into the problem has continually led back to a faulty management structure that leaves no single entity in charge of the construction process from beginning to end. Mayoral control is a good first step, but unless we implement the reforms detailed in this report, our children will continue to learn in overcrowded schools."

Gotbaum also said, "In addition to making management changes, we need to be certain that demographics--not politics--dominates school construction. We have to build new schools in districts where overcrowding is most severe. Under the newly-adopted school legislation, the City Council must approve the 5-year plan for school construction. I will sponsor legislation in the Council which insures that population analysis is the leading factor in approving locations for new schools and school expansions."

The report from the Public Advocate argues that the exceedingly high cost of school construction and renovation has forced the City to scale back plans to build necessary seating capacity. The resulting classroom-crowding crisis has lowered the quality of public education

across the five boroughs. The goal of the report is to bring about a reconfiguration of the school construction process that will allow schools to be built within a reasonable budget and time frame.

The report shows that no central person or office is currently involved in the school construction process from planning through construction to completion and evaluation. The agencies that dominate the process—the Board of Education (BOE) and the School Construction Authority (SCA)—have a hostile working relationship. Together the BOE and the SCA have generated an inefficient, waste-laden process in which cost overruns and construction delays are the norm.

The new schools legislation give the Mayor control of the BOE and the power to appoint all three member of the SCA's governing Board of Trustees. The report recommends that rather than try to repair the relationship between the two agencies, the Mayor should fold the BOE's Division of School Facilities' planning, demographic analysis and budgeting units into the SCA, creating one organization responsible for the school construction process. Unless this recommendation is implemented, meaningful reform in school construction will be difficult.

The Public Advocate's Office believes that this reform in management will enable other necessary changes (detailed in the report) to move forward. For example, recent investigations have identified outdated school construction standards and regulations that must be overhauled if the system is to operate efficiently. A strong, centralized agency that monitors the entire building process can rewrite these standards to suit the 21st century. Further recommendations outlined in the report show how all agencies and officials involved in school construction—including the Mayor, the Office of Management and Budget and local elected officials—must work together to make these changes.

The new school governance overhaul gives the City Council approval of the capital plan. To ensure that the Council discharges the responsibility without favoring pet projects that stall the process and increase cost, Public Advocate plans to introduce legislation to mandate that school district allocation is based solely on government-commissioned demographic analysis.

Doing Less With More Summary

Background:

I. Overcrowding in New York City public schools has reached unprecedented levels. By one count, 38% of all public students learn in overcrowded classrooms.

II. Prohibitively expensive construction results in a widening gap between classroom seats we need and those we have.

Key Findings:

I. No central person or office is currently involved in the school construction process from the planning phase through the construction phase to completion and evaluation.

- II. Though the Board of Education is intended to serve as a client of the School Construction Authority (SCA), these two entities have developed a contentious relationship that has generated an inefficient process in which cost overruns and construction delays are the norm.
- III. Newly granted mayoral control over the SCA and BOE will bring more accountability to the process but simply designating a Deputy Mayor to oversee construction will not solve the problem.
- IV. The Legislature has given the City Council the responsibility of approving the five-year capital plan. Too many officials and agencies already influence decisions about new school construction. This trend could worsen if we do not take action to ensure that the City Council does not abuse its new responsibility by favoring pet projects.

Key Recommendations:

- I. One entity alone should be responsible for planning and execution of the five-year capital plan. This alone will streamline the process.
- II. All school-construction-related units of the Board of Education's Division of School Facilities should be folded into the SCA.
- III. The Public Advocate will be introducing legislation into the City Council that assures that demographic analysis will be the leading factor in determining which school districts receive new classroom seats in the five-year capital plan.