

**Testimony of Sean Walsh, President, Queens Civic Congress
on the NYC Board of Education five-year capital plan
presented by Ed Westley, Vice President and Education Committee Chair
prepared by Corey Bearak, Vice President for Public Affairs
March 2, 1999**

On behalf of the Queens Civic Congress, thank you for this opportunity to testify on the Board of Education's five-year capital plan. The Queens Civic Congress represents a coalition of more than 90 civic and community organizations which span the borough of Queens.

It has been said a society can be judged by how well we treat our children. If we use our Queens public schools as a measure, then it must be said we are not doing very well. Overcrowding remains a constant. New school construction rarely occurs— despite the best efforts of many – commensurately with the need. Maintenance lags well behind the need.

However, we just begin to see some progress. This includes a new primary and intermediate school under construction in Jackson Heights and a school being built in Richmond Hill. Our neighbors in eastern Queens find encouragement by the availability of space at Creedmoor, which has prompted consideration of campus with a new high school, a new primary school and a new middle school.

At a QCC Education Workshop, January 25, 1999, Queens Board of Education Member Terri Thompson reported on the impact of the five-year capital budget on Queens schools. Let's look first at the Queens School District capacities for 1997 and the projections for 2007. The Queens Civic Congress notes that the Board of Education's own statistics find most districts at or exceeding in 1997. Things get worse in 2007.

District	1997	2007
24	119%	168%
25	98%	116%
26	96%	138%
27	110%	152%
28	105%	117%
29	113%	135%
30	109%	141%
78 *	123%	123%

(*high schools citywide)

The Board's own statistics project a need of 53,550 seats in 2002. Regrettably, the plan only provides about 32,000 new seats. Thus, Queens faces a shortfall of some 21,000. In reality, the Board should project a shortfall of 29,000 since it based some of the seating on year round use of some schools (involving 8,800 additional seats). Year round schooling remains uncertain as a means to address capacity.

In addition, the Queens Civic Congress notes further shortchanging for our high school students. The Board determines Queens High school capacity based on schools operating for 10 periods. In the other borough schools operate based on eight periods. The extra periods affect school's ability to offer extracurricular programming and opportunities for students to intern or get jobs after school. The need may exist for so-double sessions, but it makes sense to plan to avoid it. The plan must be amended to reflect this need. No reason exists to not show how real the problem is based on a model school day.

These numbers demonstrate a need to treat Queens schools more fairly. According to the figures used in the Board's capital budget plan, overcrowding will be worse in Queens schools in 2007. Even though Queens has the fastest growing population of the City's five boroughs, the capital budget plan fails to reflect the need to stay even with the growth. As Borough President Shulman called for during her State of the Borough speech, New York needs a "Marshall Plan" to provide the capacities needed to relieve school overcrowding.

The Board's capital budget plan must identify the true needs for school capacity and repair. This helps to galvanize the public – and public officials and policy makers – to find a solution that works.

We keep hearing the mantra: New York needs to keep its middle class. Absent intelligent policies embodied in the City budget -- this includes enough school seats in a safe environment, that middle class family the city covets often leaves and may be harder and harder to replace.

The Board must look at innovative policies to meet needs not addressed by the plan. Possible options include:

- ⇒ Leasing sites now. Work with Borough organizations such as the Queens Civic Congress and our member civics, community boards and community school boards and local elected officials to identify appropriate locations.
- ⇒ Do not tolerate any siting of administrative offices of any kind in a school. This includes school district and special education offices. Move these non-classroom uses to offices or other suitable spaces.
- ⇒ Look at alternative funding streams. If business improvement districts – BIDS – work, why not look at some form of analogous *School Improvement Districts* – SIDS.
- ⇒ Funding for the SIDS could come from a variety of sources, including:
 - ✦ earmarking future increases in real estate tax revenues that result when neighborhood property values increase – after all, the quality of schools impacts on property values; and
 - ✦ payments from a developer in lieu of providing new school capacity as part of zoning plan approvals.

The Queens Civic Congress also finds another concern with the structure of the five-year plan. It also appears to favor maintenance over capacity if so called medium and high risk (of funding) projects do not get funds. As a result, Queens faces an inequitable burden of the loss of 70% of its funding for capacity if high and medium risk projects do not get funding to proceed. Maintenance remains important but the plan should provide for students' needs fairly, and in proportion to the need.

In closing, the Board must lobby our federal, state and city officials to accord education the same priority for funding given to public safety. All New Yorkers who care about quality education must redouble their efforts to secure broad community support for educating our children. Thank you.