Department of Education
Cathleen P. Black, Chancellor

Public Comment Analysis

Date: January 18, 2011

Topic: The Proposed Grade Truncation of the Secondary School for Law (15K462) to a 9-12 School

Date of Panel Vote: January 19, 2011

Summary of Proposal

The Secondary School for Law (15K462) is an existing 6-12 school located at 237 7th Avenue, Brooklyn, NY 11215, in Community School District 15 in Building K460. The Secondary School for Law is co-located in Building K460 with two other 6-12 schools, the Secondary School for Research (K464), the Secondary School for Journalism (K463), and an Alternative Learning Center ("ALC"). "Co-located" means that two or more school organizations are located in the same building and may share common spaces like auditoriums, gymnasiums, and cafeterias.

On December 3, 2010, the Department of Education ("DOE") issued a proposal to implement a "grade truncation," meaning that the Secondary School for Law would no longer serve grades 6-8, and would begin phasing out one grade each year, beginning with the sixth grade. In the 2011-2012 school year, the Secondary School for Law would serve students in grades seven through twelve. In 2012-2013, it would serve students in grades eight through twelve, and in 2013-2014 and in future years, it would only serve students in grades nine through twelve.

This proposal is not expected to impact current middle school students enrolled at the Secondary School for Law, with the possible exception of students who do not meet promotion requirements at the end of the proposed truncation. Under this proposal, at the close of the 2010-2011 school year, all eighth graders who meet promotional standards would transition to the ninth grade from the Secondary School for Law, and students in the sixth and seventh grades who meet promotion requirements would remain at the school until the completion of the eighth grade.

District 15 students have the opportunity to select from a variety of academically challenging, instructionally sound middle school programs through the Middle School Choice process. Fifth grade students who meet promotional standards and live within the district are eligible to apply to any District 15 middle school of their choice. Included in the options available to District 15 students are a number of secondary schools, which serve students in grades six through twelve,

and typically enroll the majority of their students in the sixth grade. The hope is that by retaining middle school students through high school, secondary schools ensure a seamless transition for students moving from eighth to ninth grade, and work towards building and maintaining a strong school culture that drives student performance.

Currently, the Secondary School for Law provides two entry points at which students can enroll. Fifth grade students may apply for admission to the sixth grade through the Middle School Choice process. Once enrolled in the middle school, students who wish to continue their studies at the Secondary School for Law in the ninth grade are given priority to attend, but must still submit a high school application. The second point of entry, in the ninth grade, enables eighth grade students throughout the City to apply for admission to the Secondary School for Law through the Citywide high school admissions process. Admission to the ninth grade is open to any student who meets the school's selection criteria, pending the availability of high school seats.

The majority of students attending the Secondary School for Law enter in the ninth grade through the high school admissions process. Only a small number of students who attend middle school in grades 6-8 at the Secondary School for Law historically transition to the high school. Between 2007 and 2009, approximately 84% of incoming ninth graders did not attend middle school at the Secondary School for Law. Only 21% of eighth grade students at the Secondary School for Law have opted to remain at the school for the ninth grade since 2007.

The Secondary School for Law has been unsuccessful in recruiting and retaining middle school students. The number of students attending the school each year has substantially declined. The school has experienced difficulty attracting new students and families, which has resulted in a 64% decrease in the number of sixth-grade students enrolled at the Secondary School for Law over the last five years. During the 2008-2009 school year, 149 students were enrolled in grades 6-8 with only 36 students enrolled in sixth grade. During the 2009-2010 school year, 120 students were enrolled in grades 6-8, with only 32 students in the sixth grade. Middle school enrollment continued to decline this year with only 77 students on the register as of November 1, 2010 in grades 6-8. Only 19 of these students are in the sixth grade. As a result, the school has faced a number of instructional and operational challenges, which will likely remain should the school continue on its current trajectory.

Approximately 65% of students who attend elementary school in District 15 enroll in a District 15 middle school. However, very few of the students that wish to attend middle school in District 15 rank the Secondary School for Law on their middle school application. This raises serious concerns around the school's ability to draw students and families from the surrounding community. Declining enrollment at the middle school level suggests that District 15 families are seeking other options better matched to their interests and needs. In 2010, the Secondary School for Law was among the group of schools that received the lowest number of sixth grade applications in District 15. In addition, only 11 students ranked the Secondary School for Law as their first choice through the middle school selection process, and 71 students ranked the school within their top three choices.

Middle schools typically have extremely varied and rich instructional offerings, especially in the sciences and languages, as well as extra-curricular activities. As enrollment continues to dwindle at the Secondary School for Law, the school will lose the resources necessary to sustain a high-functioning learning environment. It would become extremely challenging to align teacher and student schedules, effectively program students, offer a wide variety of classes and enrichment activities, and focus on building strong school culture. As a result, the learning outcomes for students in the building could be severely compromised.

The DOE strives to ensure that all students in New York City have access to a high-quality school at every stage of their education. Continuing to allocate space and resources to a school that does not attract students is neither efficient nor equitable. It is critical to assess each school's capacity to serve the needs of its students when making decisions regarding space and facilities. This truncation proposal, if approved, would ensure that available resources are better aligned to students' needs.

Summary of Comments Received at the Joint Public Hearing

A joint public hearing regarding this proposal and the proposal to truncate the Secondary School for Journalism was held at the John Jay Campus on January 12. At that hearing, interested parties had an opportunity to provide input on the proposal. Approximately 8 members of the public attended the hearing, and one person spoke. Present at the meeting were District 15 Superintendent Anita Skop; Community Education Council President Jim Devor; Secondary School for Journalism Principal Abbie Reif; Secondary School for Law Principal Oneatha Swinton.

The following comments and remarks were made at the joint public hearing:

1. Principal Abby Reif stated that she initially proposed this grade truncation for the Secondary School of Journalism and for the Secondary School of Law. She further stated that she supports the proposal because the waning enrollment and matriculation patterns for the schools has depleted funding available to the schools, making the continuation of middle school grades unsustainable.

The DOE received comments at the Joint Public Hearing which did not directly relate to the proposal.

1. CEC 15 President Devor expressed his belief that it is disrespectful for decision makers in the Department of Education to not sit in front of the audience at a controversial hearing to face questions and criticisms about the proposals.
2. City Councilman Brad Lander stated that he had previously testified at the hearing for the Millennium Brooklyn proposal the night before and was available to hear what anyone had to say about the proposals.

Summary of Issues Raised in Written and/or Oral Comments Submitted to the DOE

No written or oral comments in regard to this proposal were submitted to the DOE.

Analysis of Issues Raised, Significant Alternatives Proposed and Changes Made to the Proposal

Comment 1 expressed support for the proposal and does not require a response.

Changes Made to the Proposal

No changes in the proposal were made in response to public feedback.