

Public Comment Analysis

Date: December 19, 2012

Topic: The Proposed Grade Expansion of Washington Heights Academy (06M366) from K-5 to K-8 Beginning in 2014-2015

Date of Panel Vote: December 20, 2012

Summary of Proposal

On September 20, 2012 the New York City Department of Education (“DOE”) proposed to expand Washington Heights Academy (06M366, “WHA”) to serve kindergarten through eighth grades. That proposal was scheduled to be considered by the Panel for Educational Policy (“PEP”) on November 8, 2012. However, that proposal was withdrawn from the PEP’s agenda in the wake of disruptions caused by Hurricane Sandy.

On November 5, 2012, the DOE reissued the proposal. The reissued proposal will be voted on at the December 20, 2012 meeting of the PEP.

WHA is an existing district elementary school serving students in kindergarten through fifth grades in building M263 at 202 Sherman Avenue, New York, NY 10034, in Community School District 6. WHA also offers a pre-kindergarten program.

WHA currently serves 353 students in kindergarten through fifth grade and pre-kindergarten. If this proposal is approved, students enrolled in WHA would be able to stay at the school through eighth grade. Beginning in the 2014-2015 school year, WHA would add one grade each year until 2016-2017, when it would reach full scale and serve students in kindergarten through eighth grades and pre-kindergarten. The DOE does not anticipate that the proposed grade expansion of WHA will affect the pre-kindergarten program at the school.

The M263 building has a capacity of 488 students and currently serves 353 students in pre-kindergarten through fifth grade, yielding a utilization rate of 72%. If this proposal is approved, the building would serve approximately 455 - 555 students and have a utilization rate of 93 – 114% in 2016-2017 when WHA reaches full scale. Although there may be a utilization rate above 100%, as discussed in section III.B. of the Educational Impact Statement, the building has sufficient space to provide WHA with at least its baseline room allocations. Therefore, the M263 building has the capacity to accommodate the proposed grade expansion of WHA.

The proposal to expand WHA initially came from the school community. In May 2012, a grade expansion team composed of WHA teachers, parents, staff, and administrators submitted a formal application to expand the grades served by the school. That application was supported by parents and the broader school community. This suggests a high level of satisfaction within the school and its parent body and strongly implies that an expanded WHA will suit the needs of the children in District 6. This grade expansion will allow WHA to serve elementary and middle school grades and a pre-kindergarten program at full scale.

If this proposal is approved, current fourth grade students will be able apply to attend middle school at Washington Heights Academy when they are in fifth grade through the District 6 Middle School Choice Process for the 2014-2015 school year. Students enrolled at Washington Heights Academy will have admissions priority if they wish to remain for sixth grade.

Other eligible fifth graders in District 6 will have the opportunity to apply to attend middle school at Washington Heights Academy should additional seats become available.

The Educational Impact Statement (“EIS”) can be found on the Department of Education’s Web site: <http://schools.nyc.gov/AboutUs/leadership/PEP/publicnotice/2012-2013/Dec2012Proposals.htm>.

Copies of the EIS are available in the main office of Washington Heights Academy (06M366).

Summary of Comments Received at the Joint Public Hearing

A joint public hearing regarding this proposal was held at Washington Heights Academy on December 12, 2012. At that hearing, interested parties had an opportunity to provide input on the proposal. Approximately 30 members of the public attended the hearing, and 10 people spoke. Present at the meeting were: Community School District 6 Superintendent Elsa Nunez; P.S. 366 Principal Renzo Martinez; P.S. 366 School Leadership Team (“SLT”) Representatives Dr. Akbar Herndon, Nicole Bonheur, Lourdes Hernandez, Grecia Tesalona; and Meera Jain from the DOE’s Division of Portfolio Planning.

Members of the Community Education Council 6 (“CEC”) were invited to participate and confirmed their availability, but did not attend the hearing.

The following comments and remarks were made at the joint public hearing on December 12, 2012:

1. Principal Renzo Martinez of Washington Heights Academy stated that:
 - a. This has been a collaborative process.
 - b. The school is finally at the stage to make a grade expansion happen.
2. Dr. Akbar Herndon, Washington Heights Academy SLT representative, stated that:
 - a. He wants the school to grow to K-8.
 - b. The DOE has been very supportive and collaborative during this process.
 - c. WHA provides a hands-on, student centered, social and emotionally rich environment.
 - d. An expanded WHA will allow not only our students, but students from other backgrounds to continue their middle school education.
3. Nicole Bonheur, Washington Heights Academy SLT representative, stated that:
 - a. There are amazing parents, students, and faculty at WHA.
 - b. She is excited to see the school grow to K-8.
4. Lourdes Hernandez, Washington Heights Academy SLT representative, stated that:
 - a. Today is a very joyful day and an opportunity for our voices to be heard.
 - b. WHA prepares our students academically and socially, and is committed to the growth of our students.

- c. We will not only serve students through fifth grade, but now through eighth grade.
 - d. Students and families will avoid transitioning to another school for middle school grades.
 - e. I am saddened that our founding families are not here because their children have already graduated from WHA.
5. Grecia Tesalona, Washington Heights Academy SLT representative, stated that:
 - a. When she was looking for an elementary school for her daughter, and was accepted elsewhere, she picked WHA because of the community feel to it.
 - b. She looks forward to seeing the school expand to eighth grade.
 - c. An expanded WHA will be great for the entire community.
6. Multiple commenters stated that they feel very comfortable with WHA because they know their children are safe and looked after.
7. Multiple commenters stated that it is important to expand WHA because they don't want to enroll their children in another school for middle school.
8. Multiple commenters expressed that their children are thriving at WHA and will continue to thrive if the school expands.
9. Multiple commenters expressed that the school feels like a second home.
10. Multiple commenters expressed that the WHA teachers do everything for their students, and are committed to their students.
11. One commenter expressed that Principal Martinez is doing his best to keep the educational component relevant.
12. Multiple commenters expressed that an expanded WHA will enable them to keep their children at the school, and avoid a social and emotional transition to another school.
13. One commenter stated that her son wants to stay at the school to continue building friendships.
14. One commenter stated the after-school program is an important part of WHA and has never seen such a commitment from the staff.
15. One commenter stated that there is a big loss when students transition to another school, and these changes can affect the dedication of children.
16. One commenter stated that these children are the leaders of the future and we don't want them to get lost.
17. One commenter stated that parents have shown tremendous support for this school.
18. One commenter stated that now, more than ever before, we are ready to grow to a successful K-8 school.
19. One commenter stated that WHA has gone through many changes and leaders, but under the current leader, WHA is ready to grow.

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

20. One comment was submitted at the hearing that stated:
 - a. It would be great to have the students continue with the same foundation that they know of.
 - b. Without a transition to another school, students will continue to thrive academically, socially and emotionally.
 - c. The focus will not be on fitting in at another school, but on the growing at WHA.
 - d. WHA can be an example of why it is better to keep children in the same school environment.

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

Comments 1-20 are supportive of the proposal, and thus do not require a response.

Changes Made to the Proposal

No changes have been made to the proposal in response to public feedback.