



Public Comment Analysis

Date: November 16, 2011

Topic: The Proposed Truncation of P.S. 117 from a K-6 to a K-5 school

Date of Panel Vote: November 17, 2011

Summary of Proposal

P.S. 117 J. Keld/Briarwood School (28Q117, “P.S. 117”) is an existing zoned elementary school located in building Q117 at 85-15 143rd Street Queens, NY 11435, in Community School District 28. It currently serves students in kindergarten through sixth grade and offers a full-day pre-kindergarten program. P.S. 117 is currently the only school located in building Q117.

The New York City Department of Education (“DOE”) is proposing to implement a “grade truncation,” meaning that the school would no longer enroll sixth grade students after the current 2011-2012 school year. If this proposal were approved, all fifth and sixth grade students at P.S. 117 who meet promotional standards at the close of the 2011-2012 school year would attend middle school. During the 2011-2012 school year, P.S. 117 fifth and sixth students would participate in the Middle School Choice Process. In September 2012, P.S. 117 fifth and sixth grade students who are promoted from P.S. 117 would enter middle school as sixth and seventh graders, respectively. Beginning in September 2012, P.S. 117 would only serve students in kindergarten through fifth grade and would continue to offer a pre-kindergarten program (subject to funding and demand).

Prior to June 2010, students in District 28 could attend their zoned middle school, or they could apply to middle schools that managed their own admissions processes on a school-by-school basis. In June 2010, the District 28 Community Education Council voted to adopt “Middle School Choice.” Students still have priority for admission to the zoned school in the zone in which they reside. Students are also eligible to attend a zoned school outside of the zone in which they reside, to the extent that space is available after students within the zone in which the school is located have been admitted. Students are also eligible to attend non-zoned schools.

Many P.S. 117 students are zoned to J.H.S. 217 Robert A. Van Wyck (28Q217, “J.H.S. 217”) for middle school. Currently, fifth or sixth grade students who attend P.S. 117 and are zoned to J.H.S. 217 are given priority to J.H.S. 217. Similarly, students attending P.S. 117 who are zoned to other District 28 middle schools are given priority to their respective zoned middle school. This would continue to be true if this proposal is approved. P.S. 117 students may also apply to other middle schools within District 28 through the Middle School Choice process, or they may apply to borough-wide or citywide options that are available to D28 students through the choice process.

The DOE strives to ensure that all students in New York City have access to high-quality schools at every stage of their education. The proposed grade truncation offers significant benefits to the students currently

in fifth grade at P.S. 117.

Middle schools typically enroll students beginning in sixth grade, and P.S. 117 students already have the option to apply to middle school as fifth graders. However, P.S. 117 students who wait until sixth grade to apply to middle school are limited to those schools that still have available seventh grade seats. In particular, there are several un-zoned choice middle schools in District 28 that rarely have open seventh grade seats because seats become available only if sixth grade students leave the school. As a result, students who remain at P.S. 117 through sixth grade and wish to attend a choice middle school have fewer options than their peers who start middle school a year earlier.

This proposed grade truncation would provide P.S. 117 students access to the same range of middle school options as their peers throughout District 28. In addition, it addresses problems that exist for middle school students and the middle school as a whole when students start middle school through multiple entry grades (sixth and seventh).

Further, the proposal addresses some disadvantages that students may be experiencing while they remain at P.S. 117 for sixth grade after their grade size has been reduced by the number of students who exercised the option to enter middle school in sixth grade. Also, by entering middle school in sixth grade rather than seventh grade, students at P.S. 117 will have more opportunities to take advantage of the enriching, high-school preparatory experiences offered at middle schools.

Finally, changing P.S. 117's grade span from K-6 to K-5 would reduce the school's enrollment by approximately 162 students, freeing up additional space that P.S. 117 could use to accommodate lower-grade students or to meet other needs (e.g., art room, resource center, etc). P.S. 117 is also overcrowded, and truncating P.S. 117's sixth grade will reduce the building's utilization rate and alleviate enrollment pressures.

Summary of Comments Received at the Joint Public Hearings

A joint public hearing regarding this proposal was held at P.S. 117 on November 10, 2011. At that hearing, interested parties had an opportunity to provide input on the proposal. Approximately 25 members of the public attended the hearing, and 3 people spoke. Present at the meeting were District 28 Superintendent Beverly Ffolkes-Bryant; District 28 Community Education Council President Sandra Clarke-Williams; P.S. 117 Principal Paula Cunningham; members of the P.S. 117 School Leadership Team including Sindy Soleymanzadeh, David Martin, Ruth Bowman, Howard Slewett, Catherine Plasencia and Victoria Confolte; and Drew Patterson and Rebecca Rawlins from the Division of Portfolio Planning.

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

Principal Cunningham spoke of the school leadership team's ("SLT") decision to support the truncation proposal, emphasizing their belief that truncation would be best for the students of P.S. 117.

SLT member Howard Slewett voiced his support for the truncation proposal, specifically citing P.S. 117's struggle with enrollment pressures that would be alleviated by the school's truncation.

Speaker 1 delivered a petition from P.S. 117 parents opposing the truncation proposal and voiced his opposition to the proposal, citing specific concerns about overcrowding at J.H.S. 217, the middle school to which most students at P.S. 117 are zoned.

Speaker 2 voiced her opposition to the truncation proposal, stating that she would like to keep her two children at P.S. 117 for sixth grade.

Speaker 3 voiced her opposition to the proposal and said it was a matter of preserving choices for P.S. 117 parents. Her primary concern is that truncating P.S. 117's sixth grade would eliminate one choice that P.S. 117 families can currently exercise – to keep their children in P.S. 117 for sixth grade. Speaker 3 also expressed a concern about protocol, noting that the SLT voted to support the truncation proposal with three vacant seats, indicating that the vote was not necessarily representative of the entire parent body.

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

A statement submitted by District 27 CEC President Sandra Clarke-Williams cited the following concerns about the proposal to truncate P.S. 117's sixth grade:

- a) Ms. Clarke-Williams asked how P.S. 117's SLT could make the decision to truncate the school when the SLT elections had not yet occurred.
- b) Ms. Clarke-Williams notes that the EIS does not include the number of fifth grade students who applied to choice schools but were matched to their zoned middle school.
- c) Ms. Clarke-Williams also inquired about the process for sixth grade students wishing to apply to middle schools in District 28.
- d) Ms. Clarke-Williams questioned the number of students by which P.S. 117's enrollment would be reduced as a result of the truncation proposal.
- e) Ms. Clarke-Williams expressed concerns about overcrowding at J.H.S. 217 and asked that the DOE address that issue before proposing the truncation of P.S. 117.

Analysis of Issues Raised, Significant Alternatives Proposed

Principal Cunningham's comments and SLT member Howard Slewett's comments express support for the proposal and do not require a response.

In response to the concerns expressed by speaker 1 and Ms. Clarke-Williams regarding overcrowding at J.H.S. 217, the truncation of P.S. 117 is not expected to have a significant impact on J.H.S. 217. Currently, most of J.H.S. 217's available sixth grade seats are filled by out-of-zone students (during the 2011-2012 school year, 21% of the students enrolled at J.H.S. 217 came from outside of the zone). Nonetheless, even though most seats are filled in sixth grade, J.H.S. 217 must accommodate zoned students who elect to stay at their elementary school for sixth grade and enroll in middle school for seventh grade – a pattern that creates enrollment pressures for J.H.S. 217 in seventh and eighth grades. With P.S. 117 students arriving at J.H.S. 217 in sixth grade rather than seventh grade, fewer seats would be available for out-of-zone students, mitigating the enrollment pressures the school currently experiences at seventh grade. Additionally, around 30% of P.S. 117's students elect to go to schools other than J.H.S. 217. We expect this trend to continue, further mitigating the effect of P.S. 117's truncation on enrollment at J.H.S. 217.

In response to speaker 2's comments and speaker 3's concerns about preserving choices for families at P.S. 117, the DOE recognizes that some families would prefer to keep their children at P.S. 117 for sixth grade. However, we also recognize that enrollment pressures at the school impact learning conditions for all children in every grade. We believe that all P.S. 117 students will benefit from the additional space

that would be freed as a result of P.S. 117's truncation. Additionally, differentiating instruction for elementary and middle school students places a strain on the P.S. 117 administration. Truncation would allow the administration to place their entire focus on providing sound elementary instruction for the students of P.S. 117.

In response to the concerns expressed by speaker 3 and Ms. Clarke-Williams regarding the SLT's role in the truncation process, we would emphasize that no chancellor's regulations require that a school's SLT vote in favor of truncating in order for the DOE to move forward with a truncation proposal. However the DOE believes that engagement with school leadership is beneficial to the process and to that end, staffer members from the Office of Portfolio Management met with the school's SLT and community during P.S. 117's Coffee and Conversation series to discuss the implications of truncating and to listen to feedback on the proposal. The DOE maintains the final decision on the matter, subject to PEP approval, but we do carefully consult with the Principal and the school community. Ultimately, the Principal will work closely with the SLT and school community to make a decision that is in the best interest of students.

In response to Ms. Clarke-Williams' second point, we do not include in the EIS the number of students who apply to a choice school but are matched to their zoned school because, for the purposes of understanding enrollment trends at J.H.S. 217, the ranking of the school among zoned students who attend the school is irrelevant. Whether a student ranks J.H.S. 217 first (i.e. the student elects not to rank any choice schools above J.H.S. 217) or last among all of their possible options, that student still contributes to the percentage of zoned students attending J.H.S. 217.

In response to Ms. Clarke-Williams' question regarding the process for sixth graders wishing to apply to middle schools, sixth grade students entering middle school for seventh grade maintain their priority to their zoned middle school and participate in the Middle School Choice Process, albeit with fewer options than fifth grade students participating in the process. Most choice middle schools admit students in the sixth grade and their seat availability for incoming seventh graders is contingent on sixth grade students electing not to return for seventh grade. This issue is discussed at greater length in the EIS in Section IIA, which details the impact of the proposal on P.S. 117's students.

In response to Ms. Clarke-Williams' concern about the number of students by which P.S. 117's enrollment would be reduced as a result of the truncation, the number provided in the EIS is equal to the number of sixth grade students projected to attend P.S. 117 during the 2011-2012 school year. The projected enrollment for P.S. 117 in the 2012-2013 school year, if we account for a truncated sixth grade, is described as a range, with a low estimate and a high estimate provided. These estimates attempt to account for annual fluctuations in enrollment. At the low end of the projected range, P.S. 117 would enroll even fewer students in 2012-2013 than predicted in the EIS. At the high end of the projected range, P.S. 117 would enroll more students in 2012-2013 than predicted in the EIS, but still fewer than the school enrolls in 2011-2012.

Changes Made to the Proposal

No changes were made to the proposal to truncate P.S. 117 from a K-6 school to a K-5 school.