

Public Comment Analysis

Date: February 23, 2016

Topic: The Proposed Closure of M.S. 596 Peace Academy (13K596) in Building K117 at the End of the 2015-2016 School Year

Date of Panel Vote: February 24, 2016

Summary of Proposal

On January 8, 2016, the New York City Department of Education (“DOE”) issued an Educational Impact Statement (“EIS”) describing a proposal to close M.S. 596 Peace Academy (13K596, “Peace Academy”), an existing district middle school serving students in sixth through eighth grades in building K117 (“K117”), located at 300 Willoughby Avenue, Brooklyn, NY 11205 in Community School District 13 (“District 13”). Peace Academy is currently co-located in K117 with Brooklyn Community High School of Communication, Arts and Media (13K412, “BCAM”), a high school serving students in ninth through twelfth grades; a transfer high school, Brooklyn High School for Leadership and Community Service (13K616, “LACS”); and P369K@I596K (75K369, “P369K@I596K”), one site of 75K369, an existing multi-sited District 75 program serving students in sixth through eighth grades. A “co-location” means that two or more school organizations are located in the same building and may share common spaces such as the auditorium, gymnasium, library, or cafeteria.

The DOE is proposing to close Peace Academy based on its persistently low enrollment, low performance, and lack of demand by students and families. At Peace Academy, these ongoing challenges have contributed to a loss of per-pupil and state funding, high staff turnover, and fewer extracurricular and athletic opportunities—all of which have negatively impacted the school’s ability to improve student achievement. Student learning experiences are limited in variety beyond core subjects. Additionally, teachers have few opportunities for instructional collaboration with colleagues as they are often the only staff member teaching a particular subject area.

Peace Academy has struggled with persistently low enrollment, low performance, and lack of demand by students and families, despite multiple prior interventions such as changes in programming, leadership, and name. During the 2010-2011 school year, Peace Academy served 178 students in sixth through eighth grades. In the current 2015-2016 school year, Peace Academy is serving fewer than 50 students, which represents a nearly 75% decline in enrollment in five years. The school had only 1.6 applicants per seat for the 2015-2016 school year, compared to the district median of 2.5 applicants per seat, with only 14% of applicants ranking Peace Academy as their first choice. In 2014-2015, only 2% of students at Peace Academy were proficient in ELA, compared to 30% citywide, and 7% of students were proficient in Math, compared to 31% citywide. The school is currently on the New York State receivership proposal list and is labeled persistently dangerous.

Peace Academy is one of a cohort of 94 schools that have been designated by the DOE as Renewal Schools. Schools selected to be Renewal Schools were assigned a “Priority” or “Focus” accountability status by the New York State Department of Education (SED), demonstrated low academic achievement (in 2012, 2013, and 2014), and scored “Proficient” or below on their most recent Quality Reviews. (In four instances, schools were selected to be Renewal Schools per the Chancellor’s discretion). Peace Academy has a “Priority” accountability status and received a score of “Developing” on its most recent Quality Review. Despite programmatic, leadership and structural interventions, Peace Academy continues to struggle with enrollment, performance, and demand. Consequently, the DOE is proposing that Peace Academy close at the end of this school year.

If this proposal is approved, Peace Academy will close at the end of the 2015-2016 school year and will no longer exist as a middle school option beginning in the 2016-2017 school year. DOE staff will work individually with current sixth- and seventh-grade students, as well as eighth-grade students who are not on track to graduate, to ensure that those students are offered seats in other district middle schools. Current eighth-grade students who are on

track to graduate and meet promotional criteria will complete middle school at Peace Academy at the end of the 2015-2016 school year, and can apply to high school through the high school admissions process.

There is sufficient capacity in middle schools throughout District 13 to accommodate current Peace Academy students, as well as future students who might have attended Peace Academy if it remained open as a middle school option. If the proposed closure of Peace Academy is approved, all current sixth- and seventh-grade students and eighth-grade students who do not meet graduation requirements will receive individualized enrollment support from the superintendent's staff and Family Welcome Center counselors, focusing on each student's interests to find a seat that is aligned to his or her needs. All students will receive alternative options for enrollment in District 13 and their zoned middle school district (if different) before being discharged from Peace Academy.

The details of this proposal have been released in an EIS which can be accessed here:

<http://schools.nyc.gov/AboutUs/leadership/PEP/publicnotice/2015-2016/February242016SchoolProposals> .

Copies of the EIS are also available in the main offices of Peace Academy, BCAM, LACS, and P369K@I596K.

Summary of Comments Received at the Joint Public Hearing

The DOE held a Joint Public Hearing regarding this proposal at K117 on February 9, 2016. At that hearing, interested parties had an opportunity to provide input on this proposal. Approximately 20 members of the public attended the hearing, and there were five speakers. Also present at the meeting were: Deputy Chancellor of School Support, Dorita Gibson; District 13 Superintendent, Barbara Freeman; Executive Director of the Office of School Design and Charter Partnerships, Julian Cohen; Community Education Council 13 ("CEC 13") Second Vice President, Ben Greene; BCAM Principal and representative of the BCAM School Leadership Team ("SLT"), James O'Brien; Peace Academy Principal and representative of the Peace Academy SLT, Samantha Exantus; LACS Principal and representative of the LACS SLT, Georgia Kouriampalis; and Kizhaya Roberts, Yael Kalban, and Greg Whitten from the DOE.

1. Principal James O'Brien commented as follows:
 - a. He has been in K117 for 11 years and is currently serving as an advisor to Principal Samantha Exantus, who founded BCAM with him.
 - b. This year, Peace Academy has seen improvements in attendance, teacher accountability, and student excitement. Parents are more engaged and students are more engaged. There is a culture shift that has taken place throughout the year and professional staff have remained committed to the school despite increased pressure from city and state accountability.
2. Ben Greene commented as follows:
 - a. CEC 13 does not have a prepared statement for tonight. They are here to listen to the community. If there is an injustice, they will fight it; if the community supports this proposal, the CEC will support this proposal.
 - b. He does not want a charter school coming into this space as a result of the closure.
3. Principal Samantha Exantus commented as follows:
 - a. This has been a good year for Peace Academy, despite challenges and added pressures. The culture has changed, and though the school is small, staff have helped children academically, socially, and emotionally throughout the year.
 - b. She agrees with Ben Greene that if the school closes she does not want a charter school coming into the space.
4. A commenter stated as follows:
 - a. She stated that the auditorium is so empty because parents are "beaten down" and cannot trust the DOE.
 - b. She stated that enrollment is down because the enrollment office is turning people away people.
5. A parent of a Peace Academy student commented as follows:
 - a. She did not want her son to attend Peace Academy. She received a letter from the Superintendent telling her not to enroll her son in the school. Enrollment is down because of the letters that the Superintendent sent out regarding enrollment.
 - b. Her son does not want the school to close.
 - c. She questioned whose decision it is to close the school.

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

The DOE received zero (0) voicemails through the dedicated phone number for this proposal.

The DOE received zero (0) emails through the dedicated email address for this proposal.

Analysis of Issues Raised and Significant Alternatives Proposed

Comments 1(b) and 3(a) highlight achievements and growth that Peace Academy has made during the 2015-2016 school year, and comment 5(b) expresses desire for Peace Academy to remain open.

The DOE recognizes the praise for Peace Academy and commends Peace Academy's principal and school community for their hard work and dedication. That said, the DOE has chosen to propose the closure of Peace Academy due to persistent difficulties that the school has faced, namely:

- An enrollment decline of almost 75% over a five-year span (178 students in the 2010-2011 school year versus less than 50 students in the 2015-2016 school year);
- Low enrollment demand (For the 2015-2016 school year, Peace Academy had only 1.6 applicants per seat compared to the district median of 2.5 applicants per seat for District 13 middle schools); and
- Low academic proficiency (In the 2014-2015 school year, only 2% of Peace Academy students were proficient in ELA, compared to 30% citywide, and 7% of students were proficient in math, compared to 31% citywide).

If this proposal is approved, the DOE will work with current Peace Academy sixth- and seventh- grade students and eighth-grade students who do not meet graduation requirements to find a middle school seat that is aligned to his or her needs and interests. All students will receive alternative options for enrollment in District 13 and their zoned middle school district (if different) before being discharged from Peace Academy. The DOE looks forward to finding ways to continue to work with and support students, families, and other individuals that are a part of the current Peace Academy community in the future.

Comment 2(a) expresses CEC 13's commitment to support, advocate for and serve the community it represents.

The DOE commends CEC 13's commitment to advocate for and best serve the District 13 community. The DOE looks forward to continuing to work with CEC 13 in strategically planning for and serving the diverse needs of the District 13 community.

Comments 2(b) and 3(b) express general opposition to a charter school filling the space that would be vacated if the proposal to close Peace Academy is approved.

The DOE understands that members of the public have a wide range of opinions with regard to the use of charter schools as alternative learning environments offered in conjunction with traditional district public schools. Charter schools became a component of New York State's public education offerings with the enactment of the New York State Charter Schools Act of 1998. Charter Schools in New York City are authorized by three entities, the Chancellor of the NYC DOE, the New York State Department of Education, and the SUNY Board of Trustees. The New York Charter Schools Act guides the accountability for charter schools.

As previously noted, the current proposal to close Peace Academy is due to the difficulties and challenges that the school has faced in providing a competitive and viable middle school option for students in District 13, as highlighted by the data mentioned previously in this Public Comment Analysis. If this proposal is approved, K117 is projected to serve 610-708 students in the 2016-2017 school year, yielding a projected utilization rate of 58%-67%; therefore, K117 will be considered "under-utilized" and will have excess space available. The DOE may issue a separate proposal involving K117 in the future, which may involve a charter school. The DOE understands that community members may disagree with any given proposal, and as such, any proposal pursued would follow the public review, engagement, and voting process as prescribed in Chancellor's Regulation A-190, which governs the use of any proposal related to significant changes in school utilization.

Comment 4(a) expresses that community members have difficulty trusting the DOE.

The DOE regrets that some families may feel that they cannot trust the DOE with regard to its decision making or planning for schools and students. The DOE seeks to continuously provide a transparent, accountable, and trustworthy environment, and will continuously seek to improve the trust amongst all families and individuals within the DOE. For all proposals related to a significant change in school utilization, the DOE offers multiple opportunities for community engagement, including opportunities mandated by Chancellor's Regulation A-190 (making the proposal available, providing notice of the Joint Public Hearing and Panel for Educational Policy ("PEP") vote, holding a Joint Public Hearing, and collecting public comments concerning the proposal), as well as additional opportunities such as offering each impacted school an optional community meeting. For the current proposal to close Peace Academy, the DOE offered the following opportunities for engagement:

- Calls were made to families in both the morning and afternoon of Monday, December 14, 2015 in both English and Spanish to notify them of the proposed closure and the community meeting scheduled for December 17, 2015;
- Letters notifying families of this proposed closure and the December 17, 2015 community meeting were backpacked home with students;
- The Superintendent, along with key support from Central offices, held a community meeting on December 17, 2015 to answer any questions families had;
- The DOE offered an optional community meeting to all impacted school communities prior to the Joint Public Hearing for this proposal; and
- The DOE held a Joint Public Hearing for this proposal on February 9, 2016.

Comments 4(b) and 5(a) express that enrollment at Peace Academy is low because the DOE has turned people away from the school and sent home letters advising people not to enroll in the school.

The DOE refutes the charge that it turned students away from Peace Academy or advised families to not enroll in Peace Academy. Pursuant to requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, prior to the commencement of the 2015-2016 school year, the DOE sent a letter to all families of students enrolled in schools labeled as "Persistently Dangerous," including Peace Academy families, advising them of the opportunity to request a transfer to a school that is not labeled as "Persistently Dangerous." That letter was sent to families of students attending Peace Academy on August 24, 2015. The Office of Student Enrollment offers transfer programs to all students enrolled in schools that are identified as "Persistently Dangerous." In addition, the letter notifies families that schools identified as "Persistently Dangerous" must present a plan to the State Education Department for reducing incidents and increasing safety. For families that do not choose to transfer, the DOE supports that decision and supports each family in seeking the best educational opportunity for their child.

Comment 5(c) questioned whose decision it is to approve the proposal to close Peace Academy.

The proposal to close Peace Academy has been presented in accordance with Chancellor's Regulation A-190. As with all proposals governed by Chancellor's Regulation A-190, the final determination of whether or not to approve this proposal is left to the PEP. The PEP is expected to vote on this proposal and others at its upcoming February 24th meeting, scheduled to take place at High School of Fashion Industries, located at 225 West 24th Street, New York, NY 10001.

Comment 1(a) speaks to Principal O'Brien's history with BCAM, his advisory role to Peace Academy Principal Samantha Exantus, and his history in K117, and as such, does not relate specifically to this proposal. Consequently, this comment does not require a response.

Changes Made to the Proposal

No changes have been made to this proposal.