Department of Education
Cathleen P. Black, Chancellor

Public Comment Analysis

Date: January 31, 2011

Topic: The Proposed Phase-out of the Academy of Environmental Science Secondary High School (04M635)

Date of Panel Vote: February 1, 2011

Summary of Proposal

The Academy of Environmental Science Secondary High School (04M635, "AES") is an existing high school located at 410 East 100th Street, New York, NY 10029, within the geographical confines of Community School District 4 ("District 4"). It currently serves students in grades nine through twelve. The New York City Department of Education ("DOE") is proposing to phase out and eventually close AES based on its poor performance and the DOE's assessment that the school lacks the capacity to turn around quickly to better support student needs.

If the proposal to phase out AES is approved, AES would no longer admit new ninth-grade students after the conclusion of the 2010-2011 school year. Current students would be supported as they progress towards graduation while remaining enrolled in AES. In cases where students do not complete graduation requirements in time for the June 2014 closure date, the DOE would help students and families identify alternative programs or schools that meet students' needs so that they may continue their education after AES completes phasing out.

AES is located in school building M099 ("M099") and is currently co-located with another high school, Renaissance Charter High School for Innovation (84M433,"Renaissance Charter High"), and two DOE middle schools, Manhattan East School for Arts and Academics (04M224, "Manhattan East") and Renaissance School of the Arts (04M377, "RSA"). Renaissance Charter High is a new high school that began with its first cohort of ninth graders at the beginning of the 2010-2011 school year. Renaissance Charter High's phase-in plan calls for the school to continue adding one grade per year until it has a full cohort of grades 9-12 in the 2013-2014 school year. Both Manhattan East and RSA are already fully phased in to the building and serve students in grades 6 through 8.

In 2009-2010, building M099 had a target capacity to serve 1,269 students, and the building enrolled 797 students, yielding a utilization rate of 65% of target capacity. In 2010-2011, the

schools in the building are projected to serve 946 students—355 high school students at AES and 141 high school students at Renaissance Charter High, plus 250 students at Manhattan East and 200 students at RSA—yielding an estimated building utilization rate of 75% of target capacity. This means that the building is "under-utilized" and has extra space to accommodate additional students.

If this proposal is approved, the other schools located in the M099 building would continue serving their current students, with Renaissance Charter High adding grades as it continues to expand to full scale by 2013-2014. The DOE does not anticipate siting any additional schools on the M099 building at this time.

Summary of Comments Received at the Joint Public Hearing

A joint public hearing regarding this proposal was held at M099 on January 13, 2011. At that hearing, interested parties had an opportunity to provide input on the proposal. Approximately 60 members of the public attended the hearing, and 7 people spoke. Present at the meeting were: District 4 United Federation of Teachers ("UFT") representative Servia Silva, School Leadership Team ("SLT") representatives for AES Jesse Mechanick and Dan Dimoes, SLT representative for Renaissance Charter High School Pablo Torres, Superintendent Sara Carvajal, and Deputy Chancellor Marc Sternberg.

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

1. Dan Simoes and Jesse Mechanick of the AES SLT cited what they identified as some of the school's successes:
    a. School safety has improved by 19% over the past 2 years according to students. A majority of parents have reported that they are satisfied or very satisfied.
    b. Superintendent suspensions, principal suspensions, and gang-related incidents are down. Adding two full-time hallway monitors has helped.
    c. This year 12 students graduated early, up from 7 last year.
    d. Students are showing more of a concern for their grades, and striving to improve in all their classes.
    e. Teacher attendance is at an all-time high.
    f. Quality of instruction at AES is high. For example, there is a social studies team that meets several times a week to review student work, create common assessments, and find engaging curriculum for students.
    g. Administered mock Regents exams this semester, and will continue to do next semester.
    h. Facilitators from Divisions and other off-site organizations that provided PDs for differentiation and professional development.
    i. PLATO: a customizable computer software program that is accessible over the Internet so that students can make up credits that they have lost, either in school or at home. It can also be used for Regents preparation.
    j. Saturday Academy: in existence for the past three and a half years and is tailored to individual students needs.
    k. Marking periods now work on a cycle system so that students can earn credits faster.

l. Revamped academic intervention services.
m. Overall they have been working very hard in some ways that are not tangibly measurable to improve the school and student performance.

2. Servia Silva, District 4 UFT representative, asserted that safety really has improved, and bringing order to the classroom was an integral part of helping the learning environment.
3. One commenter expressed the opinion that the F grade AES received on the Progress Report is a reflection of the lack of support from DOE, dating back to 2006-2007.
4. One commenter asked the DOE to look beyond the graduation rates and safety issues to the incredible environmental programs, citing AES's partnership with OSHA Conservancy, a rooftop garden and successful participation in competitions and studies.
5. One commenter wondered why the DOE is proposing to replace the school with charter schools—they have different policies for admission and expulsion.
6. One student commenter said that teachers at the school are very helpful.

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

7. The DOE received a comment concerning all phase-out proposals calling for a moratorium on school closings, which stated that the DOE is the servant of the people and is not acknowledging the community's opposition to these proposals. The commenter suggested a facilitated discussion process which would work towards consensus.

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

With regard to comments 1(a-b) and 2: while safety at AES has improved over the past two years, it continues to be a concern at the school. On the 2009-2010 New York City School Survey, 21% of students reported feeling unsafe in the hallways, bathrooms and locker rooms at AES, down from 39% during the previous year. Parents also reported concerns about the safety of their children, with 16% indicating that they did not feel their child was safe at school, a slight improvement from last year's 19%. In addition, 61% of AES teachers reported that order and discipline are not maintained at the school, down from 72% during the previous year. Again, while some progress has been made to improve school safety, this continues to be a problem at the school. The DOE will continue to offer supports around safety and security to AES as it phases out.

With regard to comments 1(c-m) which point to the school's academic progress: AES' 4-year graduation rate dropped to 44% in 2009-2010 after being in the low 50% range for the prior two years. AES' 4-year graduation rate falls way below the Citywide average of 63%. This puts AES in the bottom 3% of all high schools for 2010, and in the bottom 2% of high schools in Manhattan with regard to graduation rates. In 2009-2010, only 59% of first-year students at AES earned at least 10 credits. Furthermore, AES students tend to fall further behind as they advance in grade level. Only 50% of second-year students and 51% of third-year students earned at least 10 credits in 2009-2010. As noted in the EIS posted on December 13, 2010 describing the proposal to phase out AES, the school earned an overall F grade on its 2009-2010 Progress Report, with an F grade on both the Student Performance and Student Progress sub-sections, and

a D grade for School Environment. This represents a continuing pattern of decline for AES, which earned an overall D grade on its 2008-2009 Progress Report and an overall C grade on its 2007-2008 Progress Report. In addition, AES was rated "Underdeveloped with Proficient Features" on its most recent Quality Review in 2008-2009.

After a careful analysis of data and community feedback, the DOE has determined that the school is ill-equipped to dramatically improve student outcomes within the current structure.

With regard to comment 3 related to the support and resources offered to AES: all schools receive support and assistance from their superintendent and Children First Network team, a group of educators who work directly with schools. This team helps schools identify best practices, target strategies for specific students in need of extra help, and prioritize competing demands on resources and time. Each school community chooses the network whose support best meets its needs, and each network works to improve student achievement in all of its schools.

The Educational Impact Statement ("EIS") describing the proposal to phase out AES delineates a range of instructional, operational, and leadership supports provided to AES. In addition, a number of resources were provided to support students' social/emotional and academic needs, particularly for struggling students. For more information, please see pages 5 and 6 in the EIS: http://schools.nyc.gov/community/planning/changes/manhattan/AES.

Given the school's lack of success despite supports—whether as part of a centralized effort to support all schools or individualized plans for AES—it is apparent that AES has not developed the proper infrastructure to meet the needs of its students and families. The school culture and conditions have not enabled increased student achievement. It is our belief that phasing this school out and bringing in higher quality schools will provide better options for the community and families in the future.

With regard to comment 4 related to the decision to phase out the school: deciding to phase out a school is the toughest decision the DOE makes. Every year, the DOE identifies which schools are having the most trouble serving their students. The DOE compiles a preliminary set of schools that could possibly be considered for intensive support or intervention by looking at all schools that receive a grade of D, F, or a third consecutive C or lower on the Progress Report, and schools that receive a rating below Proficient on the Quality Review. We also take into account how the State assesses the school's performance, by including schools identified as Persistently Lowest Achieving ("PLA") in this first group.

Elementary and middle schools that score higher than their district average in English Language Arts and math, high schools with graduation rates higher than the citywide average, schools earning a Well Developed or Outstanding score on the Quality Review, or schools receiving a Progress Report for the first time are removed from the list and not considered for significant actions.

With this smaller set of schools, the DOE engages in in-depth conversations with school communities and networks to get an even better sense of what is happening at this school, and

whether more significant action is needed. The DOE continues to consider performance data, school culture, and demand information. Eventually, the DOE identifies the set of schools that are not serving their students well enough and need more aggressive supports and intervention.

Based on an extensive review of data and community feedback, the DOE has determined that AES is unable to turn around and cannot provide a high-quality education to its students, notwithstanding its recent efforts to improve safety and security. The DOE believes that only the most serious intervention—the gradual phase out and eventual closure of AES—will address the school's longstanding performance struggles and allow for new school options to develop in building M099 that will better serve future students and the broader community. The DOE are proposing to phase out the school because it thinks it is the right thing for students.

With regard to the partnerships developed at AES, as described in the EIS, AES' partnerships would continue to support current students as AES phases out though it is possible that the nature and scope of those partnerships would change based on shifting need and resource availability as the school moves toward closure. The DOE would work with AES staff to enhance existing partnerships or develop new partnerships as the school phases out if specific, new student needs emerge during the phase-out period. For additional information on the impact of the proposed phase-out on AES' community partnerships, please refer to page 10 in the EIS: http://schools.nyc.gov/community/planning/changes/manhattan/AES.

With regard to comment 5 related to replacement options for AES: In New York City, we are striving to create a system of great schools. To accomplish this goal, we've replaced 91 of our lowest-performing schools with better options and opened 474 new schools. Of the 474, 365 are traditional public schools and 109 are public charter schools. As a result, we've created more good choices for families. In anticipation of the phase-out of AES, which was proposed and approved for phase-out last year, the DOE opened Renaissance Charter High in September 2010. Renaissance Charter High is a new charter high school that admits students through a lottery. Similar to AES, Renaissance Charter High offers admission priority to students who reside in District 4. Thus, District 4 students will continue to have admission priority to schools located in building M099.

We are not proposing any new schools for AES in 2011. Renaissance Charter High will continue to grow to serve grades 9-12 in 2013-2014.

With regard to comment 6 about AES's teachers and community: The DOE believes that the school community will continue to care for students as it phases out. In addition, the DOE believes that schools that students may choose to attend if they transfer out of AES will also provide strong communities.

With regard to comment 7, the central goal of the Children First reforms is to create a system of great schools. Every child in New York City deserves the best possible education. This starts with a great school – led by a dedicated leader with a vision for student success. To ensure that as many students as possible have access to the best possible education, since 2003 New York City has replaced 91 of our lowest-performing schools with better options and opened 474 new schools: 365 district schools and 109 public charter schools. As a result, we've created more high-quality choices for families.

Based on feedback from communities in 2009 and 2010, the DOE made improvements to its timeline and process for communicating with schools and families early and often throughout the investigation and decision making process. This year, we talked to school leadership, parents, SLTs, CECs, elected officials, and local CBOs about our ideas about how to improve struggling schools. We convened these meetings to discuss our proposals and to hear feedback and new ideas.

The Department developed and distributed "Fact Sheets" for each school we talked with. These fact sheets described proposals, the rationale behind them, included relevant data, and provided clear instructions for how to offer feedback. They were posted on our website and distributed at meetings.

When we announced the Department's recommendation to propose the school for phase out, dedicated teams of educators and engagement specialists spent several days back in these schools meeting with teachers, parents, and students.

In January, Joint Public Hearings were held for all proposals and public feedback was collected at these meetings and through dedicated email and phone numbers. The Department's analysis of public comment will be available on-line prior to the vote.

Changes Made to the Proposal

No changes have been made to this proposal as a result of public comment.