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Chancellor

Public Comment Analysis

Date: January 15, 2013

Topic: The Proposed Grade Truncation of P.S. 126 Dr. Marjorie H. Dunbar (09X126) to a K-5 School Beginning in 2013-2014

Date of Panel Vote: January 16, 2013

Summary of Proposal

P.S. 126 Dr. Marjorie H. Dunbar (“P.S. 126”) is an existing zoned elementary school located in building X126, at 175 West 166th Street, Bronx, NY 10452, in the Highbridge neighborhood of Community School District 9. It currently serves students in kindergarten through sixth grades and offers a full-day pre-kindergarten program. P.S. 126 is currently the only school located in building X126.

On November 29, 2012, the New York City Department of Education (“DOE”) issued an educational impact statement (“EIS”) describing a proposal to implement a “grade truncation,” whereby P.S. 126 would no longer enroll sixth graders after the current 2012-2013 school year. If this proposal is approved, at the close of the 2012-2013 school year, all fifth- and sixth-grade students who meet promotional standards will graduate from P.S. 126. During the 2012-2013 school year, P.S. 126 fifth- and sixth-grade students will participate in the Districts 9 and 10 Middle School Choice Process. In September 2013, P.S. 126’s current fifth- and sixth-grade students will enter middle school elsewhere as sixth and seventh graders, respectively. Beginning in September 2013, P.S. 126 will only serve students in kindergarten through fifth grades and will continue to offer a pre-kindergarten program (subject to funding and demand).

Middle schools typically enroll students beginning in sixth grade, and P.S. 126 students already have the option to apply to middle school as fifth graders. However, P.S. 126 students who wait until sixth grade to apply to middle school are limited to those schools that still have available seventh-grade seats. There are several middle schools in Districts 9 and 10 that rarely have seventh-grade seats open because those seats become available only if sixth-grade students leave the school. As a result, students who remain at P.S. 126 through sixth grade have fewer options than their peers who start middle school a year earlier.

The DOE strives to ensure that all students in New York City have access to high-quality schools at every stage of their education. Having elementary schools that end in different grades (i.e., K-5 versus K-6) creates unequal levels of access to middle school for students based simply on the year they exit elementary school.

This proposed grade truncation will help standardize middle school application and entry grades in

District 9, giving all P.S. 126 students access to the same range of middle school options as their peers throughout the District. Additionally, having students start middle school through multiple entry grades (sixth and seventh) creates challenges for students and the school as a whole. P.S. 126 students who start middle school in seventh grade may face transitional challenges related to entering middle school a year later than most of their classmates. They remain in their new middle school for only two years before moving on to high school, leaving them with less time to adjust to a new school environment and new academic expectations before facing another transition and adjustment. Multiple transitions in such close succession can have the effect of depersonalizing the school experience at a time when adolescents tend to need the most personal and supportive environments. Having students enter in multiple years is also challenging for middle school teachers and leadership from an instructional perspective.

Changing P.S. 126's grade span from K-6 to K-5 will reduce the school's enrollment by approximately 20-80 students, freeing up additional space that P.S. 126 could use to accommodate additional lower-grade students or to meet other needs (e.g., art room, resource center, etc.).

In addition to this proposal, the DOE anticipates opening a new middle school in District 9's Highbridge neighborhood in September 2013. The New Middle School (09XTBD) will begin to serve sixth-grade students in 2013-2014 and scale up one grade per year until it serves students in grades 6-8 in the 2015-2016 school year. This new school will be housed in building X285, a new construction with a capacity of 391 students which is located at 200 West 167th St., approximately 0.3 miles away from P.S. 126. This new middle school will admit students via the Districts 9 and 10 Middle School Choice Process, giving priority to students from several Highbridge area elementary schools, including P.S. 126, thereby providing a new option for students who would have otherwise attended sixth grade at P.S. 126.

Summary of Comments Received at the Joint Public Hearing

A joint public hearing regarding this proposal was held at the X126 building on January 3, 2013. At that hearing, interested parties had an opportunity to provide input on the proposal. Approximately 15 members of the public attended the hearing, and 5 people spoke. Present at the meeting were Chancellor's Designee Meg Barboza; Community Education Council 9 ("CEC 9") President Marilyn Espada and First Vice President Nora Mercado along with CEC 9 member Carmen Ramos; P.S. 126 School Leadership Team ("SLT") representatives Francia Svelty, Rosalie Peña, William, Brown, and Andrea Rankin along with P.S. 126 Principal Nadine Kee Foster; Network Leader Marlene Wilks; and Henry Bluestone Smith and Meera Jain from the Division of Portfolio Planning.

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

1. Andrea Rankin, a member of the P.S. 126 School Leadership Team, noted that while the school had fought to retain its sixth grade in the past, it is now ready to support the proposal.
2. Nadine Kee Foster, the principal of P.S. 126, welcomed the public to the hearing and expanded on Mrs. Rankin's comments. She noted that the school's main objection to truncation in the past had been based on the lack of nearby middle school options for students and the perceived safety issues associated with sending students from Highbridge to other parts of the District for sixth grade. Now that a new middle school is set to open in the neighborhood, Ms. Foster stated that the staff and school leadership are ready to support the truncation proposal.
3. Marilyn Espada, the President of CEC 9, asked why students from District 10 are able to apply to the New Middle School (09XTBD).

4. Robert Powell, a member of the Panel for Education Policy, asked if this proposal would lead to a decrease in building utilization and, if so, what the DOE plans to do with the extra seats in the building.
5. Andrea Rankin, a member of the P.S. 126 School Leadership Team, asked what time of day the New Middle School (09XTBD) might let out in the afternoon and if there was any consideration of safety concerns in the area. She asked this question in the light of the fact that the New Middle School is located near a men's shelter.
6. Robert Powell noted that there were not many parents in attendance at the joint public hearing and asked how the meeting had been publicized.
7. William Brown, a member of the P.S. 126 School Leadership Team and President of the Parents' Association, responded to Robert Powell's question about parental involvement. He noted that posters had been put up around the school, flyers were circulated, and informational pamphlets had been distributed to children on three separate occasions. He stated that he felt confident that parents in the P.S. 126 school community were well-informed about both the proposal and the hearing.

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

The DOE received no written comments and no oral comments through the dedicated Web site and phone line for this proposal.

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

Comments 1 and 2 express support for the truncation proposal and do not require a response.

Comment 3 inquires as to why District 10 students are eligible to apply to the New Middle School (09XTBD).

The DOE seeks to offer all students a wide range of high-quality educational options. Community School Districts 9 and 10 share a middle school choice application process so that students in both districts can choose to apply to middle schools in either district that meet their personal needs. As a result, students in District 10 have the opportunity to apply to and enroll in any District 9 middle school that participates in the choice process. While the New Middle School (09XTBD) will be an option for District 10 students, it will also give priority enrollment to students who attend or reside in the zones for any of the four nearby elementary schools: P.S. 126 Dr. Marjorie H. Dunbar (09X126), P.S. 11 Highbridge (09X011), P.S. 73 Bronx (09X073), and P.S. 114 Luis Llorens Torres (09X114). So while District 10 students will have the opportunity to apply to the New Middle School, students from nearby elementary schools like P.S. 126 will be given priority in admissions.

Comment 4 concerns the impact that this proposal will have on the enrollment at P.S. 126 and the utilization of the X126 building.

Currently, there are 746 students enrolled in P.S. 126 which yields a building utilization rate of 79%. Based on the DOE's enrollment projections, if this proposal is approved, enrollment at P.S.

126 would decline by between 20 and 80 students next year, which would yield a building utilization rate of 71%-77%.

It is important to note that the overall enrollment impact of this proposal may be as small as 20 students. The kindergarten, first, and second grade cohorts at P.S. 126 are significantly larger than the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth grade cohorts. In the coming years, as these younger cohorts articulate up, enrollment at the school will likely approach its current level even though there will no longer be a sixth grade.

At this time, the DOE does not have plans to create additional educational options in the X126 building. Any further significant changes in school utilization will be described in an EIS and subject to approval by the Panel for Educational Policy.

Comment 5 concerns the New Middle School's (09XTBD) school day schedule, and more generally safety considerations in connection with the new school's location near a men's shelter.

The DOE does not mandate a specific start or release time for middle schools and expects that these decisions will be made by school leaders who are best positioned to shape an educational program that will meet the needs of their school community.

With respect to the proximity of the New Middle School (09XTBD) and the men's shelter located at 1260 Sedgwick Avenue, it should be noted that the Office of Safety and Youth Development will work with the New York Police Department to design a safety plan for the X285 building. In the past, DOE schools situated near men's shelters have been afforded additional school security agents during drop-off and release times, and these schools have not reported any ongoing security issues presented by those shelters. This same approach may be used at the New Middle School (09XTBD) when it opens in September 2013. Regardless of which specific security provisions are implemented, the DOE feels confident that the new school will be a safe and comfortable learning environment for students.

Comments 6 and 7 concern the manner in which parents and community members were notified of the proposal and joint public hearing. The DOE issued the EIS describing the truncation proposal on November 29, 2012 by posting it on the Department website and sending hard copies to the P.S. 126 School Leadership Team, CEC 9 and impacted community boards. Shortly thereafter, a joint public hearing notice and a parent letter were backpacked home with students advising families of the EIS and that a joint public hearing would be held on January 3, 2013. Parents were further advised that they could obtain a copy of the EIS on the DOE's website or in the main office of P.S. 126. Additionally, parents were informed that they could provide comments on the proposal via a dedicated email address or phone line, as well as at the Panel for Educational Policy meeting on January 16, 2013.

The DOE shares the School Leadership Team's belief that the proposal and potential impact of the proposal has been consistently and effectively communicated to the students and parents at P.S. 126.

Changes Made to the Proposal

No changes have been made to the proposal.