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MICAH Z. KELLNER
65th Assembly District

Testimony of Assembly Member Micah Z. Kellner

Before the New York City Council Committee on Education and Subcommittee on
Landmarks, Public Siting and Maritime Uses
Public Hearing on Addressing School Overcrowding
Friday, October 3rd, 2008

My name is Micah Z. Kellner and I represent the 65th Assembly District in Manhattan, including parts of the Upper East Side, Yorkville, and Roosevelt Island. Thank you to Chairperson Robert Jackson and Chairperson Jessica Lappin for the opportunity to testify today.

As everyone is well aware, school overcrowding is a complex and growing problem through out New York City. Since my election in 2007, I have advocated for a solution to this problem but my words and the pleas of other elected officials, school advocates and City residents have repeatedly fallen on deaf ears. The numbers for the new school year are in and they clearly show that school overcrowding is not going anywhere anytime soon and the New York City Department of Education and the Mayor have yet to succinctly address the problem with viable solutions.

For example, PS 158 in my district has been forced to start the year with seven kindergartens in order to maintain only 24 children per class—at the risk of having to end their pre-kindergarten program. My district is also home to Manhattan’s second most overcrowded school—PS 290. Last school year, capacity reached 151% which meant that a school that was built to hold 433 students was actually housing 671 students. Kindergarten enrollment at PS 290 was also up this year, continuing the trend of ever-growing kindergartens as more and more people move into the Upper East Side and choose to enroll their children in our public schools.

I visited several schools in my district, including PS 158 and PS 290, over the last two weeks to promote A Better Capital plan for our students. At each school I was met with parents who are desperate to do something about the sizes of their children’s classes. Each of these schools is facing increasing class sizes and parents looking to school officials and their representatives in Albany and the City Council for solutions.

I support the ABCs of A Better Capital Plan campaign, but most importantly it is crucial that a new elementary school be created on the Upper East Side. Ever since I took office I have advocated for the creation of a new elementary school on the Upper East Side to relieve overcrowding at the public schools in my district. This need is further exacerbated by the fact that the closure of PS 151, a former elementary school in my district, has still not been adequately dealt with.

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In 2000, PS 151 was closed without an appropriate plan to relocate its students. Instead, every school year, these students and their families are left in limbo until the Department of Education finds space for them in surrounding schools. It is now going on 9 years since PS 151 closed and the City has yet to address the problem. Councilwoman Lappin and I have worked to see that a new elementary school is created for the Upper East Side to house these students and others from the surrounding overcrowded schools. We have both dealt personally with the unique problems that PS 151 zone parents face, from trying to enroll their children in kindergarten to seeking to transfer into public school system in higher grades. The new five year capital plan provides an excellent opportunity to reward the parents and students of the PS 151 zone for their patience and I urge the City to take this chance to start building a concrete solution to this problem.

Every day on the Upper East Side construction continues on new high-rise apartment towers which are more than double the size of the buildings that they replace. The City has allowed for this construction to continue while turning a blind eye to the fact that these 2 and 3 bedroom apartments are attracting families with school age children. Each of these new buildings means new students for our district schools and the New York City Department of Education needs to take these increases into consideration.

The new five year capital plan gives New York City the chance to correct the problems of school overcrowding. This hearing comes at an opportune time to hear the concerns of New Yorkers about the state of our schools. I hope that the City Council takes the needs of my district and its students into consideration and goes to the Mayor and the Department of Education with a comprehensive recommendation to curb the problem of overcrowding.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today.