

**TESTIMONY
ON THE ATLANTIC YARDS
DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT
September 18, 2006**

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My name is Mary-Powel Thomas, and I'm president of the District 15 Community Education Council, which is like the school board. Our district contains part of the Atlantic Yards site.

I'm worried about the impact of traffic, air pollution, noise, and shadows on our schoolchildren, but tonight I'm going to talk about building capacity. How much room do we really have in our public school buildings?

The environmental impact statement uses city figures to show that there's a lot of excess capacity, and even if Atlantic Yards is built, a new school won't be needed until 2016. But the latest figures available are two years old.

The Brooklyn High School of the Arts, for instance, is shown at 47% of capacity. But last year a middle school moved into that building. The high school is now bursting at the seams, with classes of 34 students. Some of the teachers don't even have their own classrooms, but travel from room to room like nomads, whenever there's another teacher on a prep. And of course, THAT teacher can't use his or her own classroom to do work.

The new middle school, Math and Science, currently has 400 students, but it's so popular that it's being expanded to 550. This year's 6th and 7th grades are over capacity, with 32 children per class.

Another high school in the study area, the Metropolitan Corporate Academy, is listed at 80% of capacity. But this year, the school's at 98% of capacity, with an average of 34 students per class.

And by the way, in the rest of New York State, the average high school class has about 21 students. We have 34. Same story in middle school and elementary school. We need to be aspiring to the state figures, not cramming our kids into every available space.

One suggested mitigation is to construct a new school as part of the project. I strongly agree with that, and I think more than one school would probably be necessary. But Building 5, which is mentioned as a possible location, is a highly INAPPROPRIATE site for a school. It's right in the middle of all the traffic, noise, and air pollution of Flatbush

Avenue, Atlantic Avenue, and 4th Avenue. Those streets separate Building 5 from most of the residential sites. Instead, I suggest putting the school or schools within the residential buildings, as far as possible from Flatbush Avenue.

The environmental impact statement also suggests sending children to schools farther out in Districts 13 and 15. But in District 15, at least, those schools are crowded too.

P.S. 261, which is one block out of the study area, is at 105% of capacity¹, with kindergarten classes of 25—even though the state target is 20, and the average in the rest of the state is 19.

The Children's School is two blocks out of the study area to the south. It's a very popular school, where students are admitted by lottery from throughout District 15—including part of the Atlantic Yards site. But the school's already full, and the principal tells me he really needs MORE space.

Even schools that do have room don't have as much as the city figures suggest. P.S. 38, for instance, is shown at 59% of capacity. But the school population has grown since then. The principal says she could still accommodate 60 to 100 new students, but that's nowhere near the 324 in the environmental-impact statement. And she'd have to go to four lunch periods, which would mean some kids would eat lunch as early as 10:30 or as late as 1:30.

The problem is that the city calculates capacity by square footage, not by how teachers and students actually use a school. Yes, it's POSSIBLE for an art teacher to carry her supplies on a cart from room to room. But it's much better for the children to come to an art room, with art on the walls and the materials all laid out for them. The way the city calculates things, an elementary school with 750² students is only allotted three rooms for things like art and music—that's one for every 250 students! For non-Title I schools (those with fewer than 60% of the children in poverty), the situation is even worse: They have to have 1,376 students before they get a fourth room for art or music, science or technology. Before that, they're allotted one such room for every 450 students.

In my testimony last fall, I urged the Development Commission to interview the principals of the nearby schools to find out what their true capacity was. This was obviously not done. I STRONGLY urge the Commission to do this research for all schools in the study area, rather than relying on two-year-old numbers that treat children like sardines.

Thank you.

¹ Blue Book, page 123 of 170 (building capacity) and conversation with school's parent coordinator 9/18/06 (school's current enrollment)

² Blue Book, 04-05, p. E-3.