



Testimony Of
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Good afternoon. I am Charles Brecher, Director of Research, at the Citizens Budget Commission. The Citizens Budget Commission is a nonpartisan, nonprofit civic organization devoted to influencing constructive change in the finances and services of New York City and New York State government.

Following the June 26, 2003 decision by the New York State Court of Appeals that the State had failed to meet its constitutional obligation to provide the children of New York City a "sound basic education," the Commission decided that there is no more important issue confronting the State. Accordingly, the Commission has undertaken research into the issues related to achieving successful reform of the public school system in New York.

While there is considerable debate about how much money is required, there is agreement that the remedy will require the expenditure of significant additional public money on public education. The Commission's concern is somewhat different: whatever sums are ultimately required, money alone will not provide a sound basic education. The mandate imposed upon the State of New York by its Constitution will not be carried out unless the money is well and wisely spent. Public education will not be improved to the standard set by the Court of Appeals unless the new money—and the old money, too—are raised and spent in a different manner than they have been in the past.

Accordingly, the CBC has sought not only to identify how added funding might best be raised, but what other changes are essential to providing a sound basic education. Our analysis and recommendations are available in a report released just two weeks ago, *Can New York Get An A In School Finance Reform?* The report addresses multiple issues relevant to this Commission including teacher pay and accountability systems. The report is accompanied by six working papers providing supporting analysis for the recommendations in the report. I hope the Commission and its staff will consider all of the work of the CBC. But today I will focus only on our ideas regarding capital facilities, which are summarized in the report and are the subject of a more detailed working paper, *Finding Space For A Sound Basic Education*.

One key component of a sound basic education is adequate classroom space. Public schools in New York City fall short of this standard because classrooms in some schools now are over capacity, some classrooms are in temporary structures that are substandard, and space is not readily available for expanded enrollment for pre-kindergarten classes.

As part of its “costing out” study, the CFE examined the capital needs of the New York City public schools. They found that \$14.7 billion (in 2003 dollars) was needed to provide New York City students with the facilities needed for a “sound basic education” as defined by their panel of experts.¹ Of the total, \$12.3 billion is for new construction. This includes \$3.9 billion to build new capacity to accommodate 68,200 students projected to be in overcrowded classrooms, and \$2.7 billion as part of a five-year program to provide space for classes smaller than current sizes, but still less than the CFE’s requirements for a “sound basic education”. Another \$5.7 billion is for new capacity to accommodate more than 93,900 students who would require new classrooms for pre-kindergarten classes and new classrooms in order to allow a maximum class size of 16 in grades K through 5. The CFE does not recommend that the latter \$5.7 billion investment be made until after the other projects are funded, a delay of at least five years.

The CFE’s analysis is reasonable in assessing the needs relative to its standards, but its two-stage recommended capital program is deficient in two ways. First, it delays achieving the conditions for sound basic education too long. Its program would not begin to establish some standards for at least five years. It is unlikely there would be adequate space for pre-kindergarten classes and smaller elementary school classes until another decade has passed. Second, it is far more expensive than is necessary. There are more efficient ways to provide the needed space, and these options should be endorsed by the City Council and its CFE Commission.

The two options are redistricting schools and operating schools on year-round schedules. Rezoning would permit more complete use of existing capacity and provide classroom space for about 136,000 students. Changes in the school calendar in order to use school buildings 12 months per year would generate space for another 135,000 students. Together these strategies more than address the long-term shortage of 216,000 seats identified by the CFE, and would do so in a more timely manner and at less cost. These strategies deserve careful attention, even if social or political barriers make full implementation difficult.

The nature and implications of rezoning are described in the CBC working paper, and I will not dwell on them in this testimony. Instead, I will focus on the second major option – year round education.

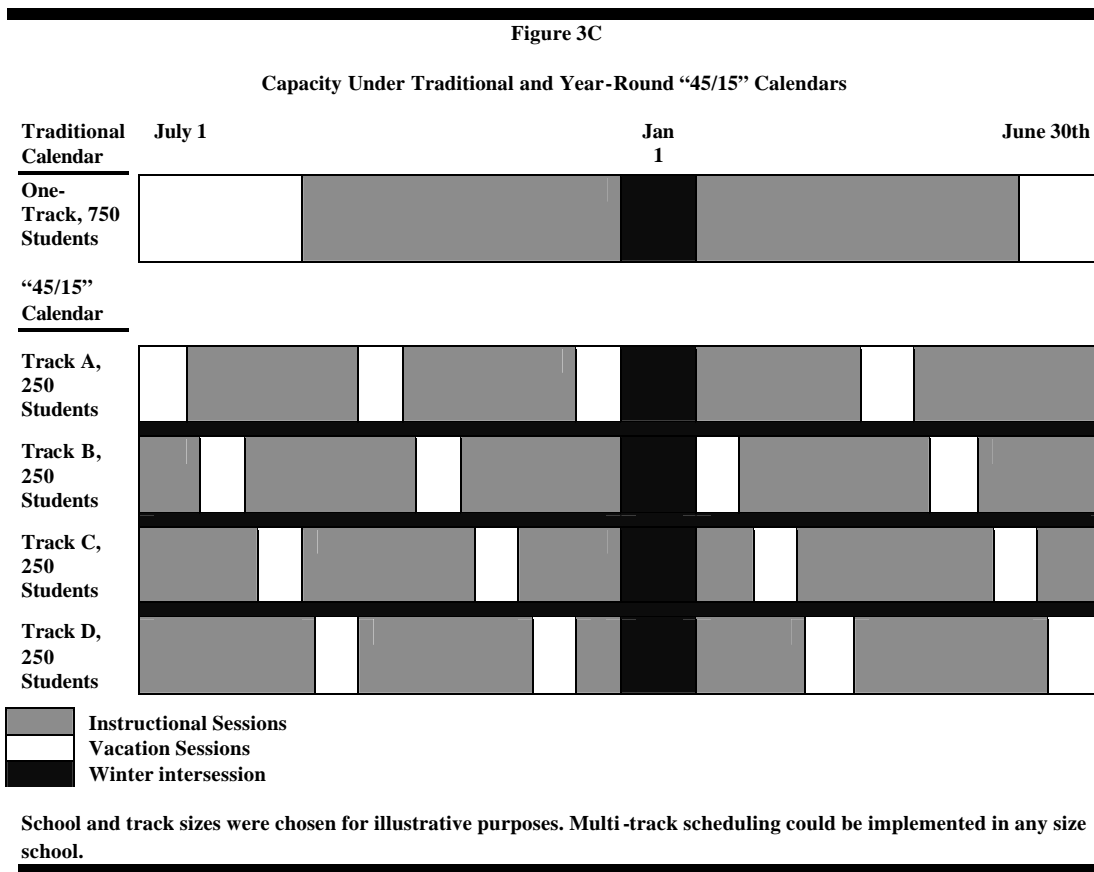
The current school calendar in New York City, and many other public schools nationwide, schedules classes for about 180 days per year between Labor Day and late June. During this “school year” there are several holidays of varying length and no regular classes are scheduled during July and August. In the summer months some schools are used for remedial instruction.

Deviations from this conventional model of several types have been implemented in school districts around the country. One variation keeps the number of required school days at about

¹ Campaign for Fiscal Equity, *Making the Right to a Sound Basic Education a Reality: Final Report of the Sound Basic Education Task Force*, “Part II: Building Aid Reform, Adequate Facilities for All,” April 13, 2004.

180, but spreads them over the entire calendar year and eliminates the conventional summer vacation. This model is often combined with staggered calendars in which all students do not attend the same specific 180 days. Instead, four different cohorts of students are scheduled, with only three of the four attending school on any particular day. This combination of staggered schedules among different groups of students spread over all 12 months is what I shall call "year-round education" (YRE).

YRE can be structured in a variety of ways, but a common schedule, known as the 45/15 plan, is illustrated in Figure 1. Students attend school for 45 days (9 weeks of five days) followed by a three week break. In the illustration, 1,000 students are enrolled in the school. They are divided into four cohorts of 250 each. Each cohort follows a staggered 45/15 schedule, so only 750 students are using the school on any given day. In this way, YRE increases the capacity of the school by one-third (from 750 to 1,000). YRE is a more efficient way to use school capacity than the conventional school calendar.



Although YRE is most often initiated as a way to cope with crowding in rapidly expanding districts, it has other benefits. One of the main educational reasons for YRE is the widely held assumption that students with shorter breaks between grades (that is, the 15-day vacation rather than the full two summer months) retain more of the learning from the previous grade and require less review time at the start of the school year.

YRE is not simply a hypothetical model. In the 2002-03 school year, YRE was in effect for 2.3 million students at 3,181 schools in 565 districts and 46 states. In the last decade, the number of students in YRE has grown nearly 50 percent.

The gross increase in capacity from YRE is one-third, but it is important to make two adjustments. First, a portion of the current capacity is temporary buildings that would not be suitable for more intensive, permanent use. Second, some capacity is needed for remedial instruction that now takes place in the summer; some classrooms would just not be available for YRE. Once these adjustments are made, YRE would increase capacity by 134,928 from the current 1,133,646 to 1,268,574.

The expanded capacity from YRE and rezoning is more than sufficient to accommodate the expansion needs identified by the CFE. (These include space for all current students in permanent facilities, space for reduced class sizes required for a "sound basic education" as specified in the CFE's initial five-year program (called the BRICKS program) and its longer run program, and the added space for pre-kindergarten programs in the CFE's longer run program. The total capacity required to meet all these needs, space for an estimated 1,225,145 students, is less than the capacity available from YRE and full use of capacity through rezoning (space for 1,268,574 students).

Compared to new construction, the savings that these strategies offer - in time and in money - are compelling. But neither is without practical difficulties.

Implementing the schedule changes necessary for YRE would place significant demands on school administrators, families, and social service institutions. Air conditioning would be required throughout the school system if instruction is extended through the summer months. The calendar for teachers and other personnel must be adjusted to reflect the schedule changes. Parents, whose schedules and childcare arrangements now are designed to accommodate a conventional school schedule, would have to alter those arrangements. Families and administrators would have to collaborate to coordinate the schedules of siblings in different schools in order to avoid unnecessary difficulties in arranging childcare, vacation and recreational activities. After-school programs, conducted both in the schools and by outside agencies, may need to be augmented to assist parents in their adjustment to the new calendars.

These concerns are not inconsequential. However, schools on year-round schedules have developed strategies to address the social impact of changing from the traditional calendar. Implementing schedule changes on a district-wide basis reduces the difficulties in coordinating vacation and childcare faced by families with children in different schools. Converting the entire school system to the same calendar also provides an incentive for other social institutions (day camps, employers, etc.) to alter their operations to accommodate the change. Allowing teachers to opt to teach sessions when they are off-track permits them to augment their pay by serving as substitute teachers in their field and often is seen by them as an improvement over the practice of temporary summer employment.

The political and administrative complexities of implementing YRE and rezoning are formidable, but should not prevent their adoption. The alternative is to spend billions that could

be used effectively elsewhere on avoidable new construction and to delay for perhaps ten years providing a substantial share of the more than one million schoolchildren the space necessary for a sound basic education. The City Council and its Commission should not dismiss policy options that use existing facilities wisely, thereby promptly providing children a seat in a structurally sound and well-equipped school – without the delays or costs that accompany new construction.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I would be pleased to answer questions.