



class size matters

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**Testimony of Leonie Haimson, Executive Director of Class Size Matters
Before the Cuomo Commission on Education Reform**

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I want to thank the members of the Commission for holding this hearing today, so that parents and other members of the public can provide input on how our schools should be improved. My name is Leonie Haimson and I am the Executive Director of the non-profit parent advocacy group Class Size Matters.

On Monday, the DOE released the latest results of the learning environment surveys. These surveys have been given since 2007, and every year, public school parents have responded that their top priority for their children's schools would be smaller classes. This choice outstrips the nine other others offered by far, every year.¹

This is no surprise. New York City has consistently had the largest class sizes in the state, and in the Campaign for Fiscal Equity case, the state's highest court concluded that NYC children were deprived of their constitutional right to an adequate education in large part because of excessive class sizes:

- *"Plaintiffs presented measurable proof, credited by the trial court, that NYC schools have excessive class sizes, and that class size affects learning."*
- *"Plaintiffs' evidence of the advantages of smaller class sizes supports the inference sufficiently to show a meaningful correlation between the large classes in City schools and the outputs...of poor academic achievement and high dropout rates."*
- *"[T]ens of thousands of students are placed in overcrowded classrooms.... The number of children in these straits is large enough to represent a systemic failure."²*

The Institute of Education Sciences cites class size reduction of one of only four reforms that have been proven to work through rigorous evidence, and numerous studies reveal that smaller classes narrow the achievement gap between racial and economic groups.³ After controlling for demographic

¹ NYC DOE, "School Survey Citywide Results," July 2012, 2012, <http://goo.gl/DQGbz>, accessed 7.23.12; See also "School Survey Citywide Results," June 2011 at <http://goo.gl/H23f4>, accessed 5.11.12. See Appendix for chart.

² *Campaign for Fiscal Equity, Inc., et al. v. State of New York, et al.*, 100 N.Y.2d 893, 911-12 (2003).

³ Institute of Education Sciences, US Department of Education, "Identifying and Implementing Educational Practices Supported by Rigorous Evidence: A User Friendly Guide," Dec. 2003; at http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/evidence_based/evidence_based.asp, accessed 7.23.12. Examples of the many studies showing that class size reduction narrows the achievement gap, see Alan B. Krueger, "Economic Considerations and Class Size," *The Economic Journal*, February 2003; Jeremy D. Finn, "Small Classes in American Schools: Research, Practice, and Politics,"

background, children who are placed in smaller classes are more likely to graduate from high school, go to college, and own their own home more than twenty years later.⁴ In a survey of New York City principals co-sponsored by the City Council, 86 percent said that they were unable to provide a quality education because of excessive class sizes.⁵

The settlement of the CFE case led to the passage of a state law in 2007, called the Contracts for Excellence. One of the provisions of this law was to require that the city lower class size in all grades in return for receiving additional state funding.⁶ In November 2007, a plan was approved by the state that obligated the city to reduce class size over five years to a citywide average of no more than twenty students per class in grades K-3, 23 students per class in grades 4-8 and 25 students in high school.⁷

Since 2007, NYC has received more than \$2 billion cumulatively in additional state aid through this program. Yet despite this fact, and despite the decision of the state's highest court, average class sizes have risen sharply for four years in a row at all grade levels, and are now the largest in 13 years in the early grades.

More than 85 percent of all students in grades K-3 exceed the level of twenty that the city promised to achieve by 2012 in their Contracts for Excellence plan, and more than half of all students in middle school and high school are being taught in classes of thirty or more. (See Appendix for charts).

These class size increases have been caused by the following factors: increases in enrollment, repeated budget cuts to public schools even when state aid and spending on overall education spending was increasing, and a vast disinvestment in the classroom, reflected in a sharp reduction in the number of teachers while thousands of out-of-classroom positions were added.⁸

In addition, city officials made two crucial policy decisions: they eliminated the early grade class size reduction funding that had existed since 1999, despite their promise that they would retain this program as part of the Contracts for Excellence plan, and they decided to ignore their commitment to cap class sizes at 28 in grades 1-3 as part of a side agreement with the UFT. As a result, class sizes in these

Phi Beta Kappan, March 2002, and Jeremy Finn et.al., "Small Classes in the Early Grades, Academic Achievement, and Graduating From High School," *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 2005.

⁴ Raj Chetty et. al. "How Does your Kindergarten classroom affect your earnings? Evidence from Project Star," NBER Working Paper 16381, <http://www.nber.org/papers/w16381>; accessed 7.23.12.

⁵ Emily Horowitz and Leonie Haimson, "How Crowded Are Our Schools? New Results from a Survey of NYC Public School Principals," October 3, 2008; <http://goo.gl/bii5J> accessed 7.23.12.

⁶ NYS Education law § 211-D Contract for Excellence; posted at http://law.onecle.com/new-york/education/EDN0211-D_211-D.html; accessed 7.23.12.

⁷ NY State Education Department, "Contracts For Excellence Approved for 55 School Districts," November 19, 2007; posted at <http://www.oms.nysed.gov/press/C4ERelease.htm> and NYSED, Citywide Class Size Reduction Five-Year Plan, Five-Year Plan Executive Summary; November 8, 2007; posted at http://eservices.nysed.gov/c4e-public/reports/2007/NYC/Other/NYCDOE%20CSR%205YR_11%208%2007_FINAL.doc, accessed 7.23.12.

⁸ These positions included additional principals, secretaries, APs, literacy coaches, etc. Jennifer Medina, "With More Money, City Schools Added Jobs," *NY Times*, June 30, 2009.

grades in many schools have grown to levels unprecedented since the 1980's, with the number of general education students in first through fifth grade classes of 30 students or more tripling from FY09 to FY12, with over 31,000 students now in such classes.⁹

A different sort of evidence is provided by last week's release of the state test results. The highest achieving charter schools in the city were the Icahn chain of charters, which cap class sizes in grades K-8 at 18.¹⁰ The Harlem Children's Zone charters, led by one of the members of this Commission, also caps class sizes at very low levels.

One more important point: Over the last decade we have seen a ramping up of high-stakes accountability, online learning and privatization policies in NYC. Our children have been held back, our schools have been graded and/or closed, and our teachers evaluated in large part on standardized test scores. At the same time we have seen the most rapid expansion of charter schools in the state, with more than a hundred new charters opening up over the last decade, in large part because the city has provided them with free space and services. Finally, online learning has also rapidly been expanded, with hundreds of millions of dollars spent on technology and free laptops.¹¹

And yet sadly, student achievement has lagged. When the city's results on the most reliable assessments -- the national exams called the NAEPs -- are analyzed, by averaging the gains since 2003 of all six major economic and ethnic/racial subgroups, including White, Asian, Hispanic, Black, poor and non-poor students, NYC comes out next to last among the ten largest school districts in the nation in terms of the progress we've made.¹² Asians were the only subgroup to increase their relative ranking at any level or in any subject compared to their peers in other cities.

In addition, we are the only city tested in which non-poor students have lower average NAEP scores now than in 2003. Finally, the achievement gap has not narrowed significantly between any economic or racial group. I caution this Commission from simply recommending more of the same for the state as a whole.

If we truly want to fundamentally improve results for our schools, we should heed the words of the state's highest court, the results of rigorous research, and the priorities of parents, and demand that NYC comply with the law and provide the smaller classes that are necessary for our public schoolchildren to receive their right to an adequate education.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today.

⁹ Office of CM Brad Lander, "Number of Elementary School Students in Very Large Classes Has Skyrocketed Since 2008," March 2012, at <http://bradlander.com/largeclasses>, accessed 7.23.12.

¹⁰ Geoff Decker, "For some charters, 2012 reading test gains began with a struggle," GothamSchools, July 18, 2012. For the small class sizes at the Icahn charters see Yoav Gonen, "Kids are Bronx tale of success," NY Post, October 19, 2009.

¹¹ Sharon Otterman, "A Closer Look at the City's Online Learning Contracts," NY Times, March 30, 2011.

¹² See Class Size Matters, "NYC second to last among cities in student progress on the NAEPs since 2003," Jan. 9, 2011 at <http://goo.gl/UINEm>, accessed 7.24.12