



THE COUNCIL OF
THE CITY OF NEW YORK

CITY HALL
NEW YORK, NY 10007

August 3, 2012

Chancellor Dennis Walcott
NYC Department of Education
Tweed Courthouse
52 Chambers Street
New York, NY 10007

Dear Chancellor Walcott:

We are writing to seek further information about the physical education program in New York City schools. The City Council shares the Bloomberg administration's goal for a healthier New York. We recognize that the mayor has implemented several health initiatives to address New York City's growing obesity epidemic and its related illnesses. Childhood obesity is particularly troublesome, laying the groundwork for weight-related illnesses later in life. With all of the public discussion about the Mayor's proposed ban on the sale of large sugar-sweetened beverages, we cannot neglect the critical role that physical activity plays in reducing obesity. After reviewing troubling statistics about access to adequate physical education (PE) classes in many of our public schools, we are concerned that too many of our children are not experiencing the benefits of exercise during the school day.

As you know, childhood obesity is a serious challenge in our city. Mirroring the national epidemic, 27 percent of children attending Head Start in NYC are obese. Among elementary school children, the obesity rate is 24% citywide, and 18% among younger adults aged 18 to 44. Low-income communities of color such as the South Bronx, East and Central Harlem, Bedford-Stuyvesant and Bushwick (which make up the City's three District Public Health Office, or DPHO, neighborhoods) are disproportionately impacted by higher rates of obesity, diabetes, heart disease and other related illnesses. In fact, according to a 2008 Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) report, about one in three teens in DPHO neighborhoods is overweight or obese (32%–38%), compared with about one in four teens in non-DPHO neighborhoods (27%).

In spite of these troubling obesity statistics, residents of these same DPHO neighborhoods are also less likely to receive adequate PE. In fact, according to the DOHMH, "teens in East and Central Harlem are nearly three times less likely to attend a daily PE class (16%) than teens in the non-DPHO neighborhoods (45%)."

Despite the overwhelming evidence that PE reduces obesity and improves academic performance, recent reports indicate that a disturbing number of NYC schools are not meeting state and national physical education standards. As you know, the New York State Education Department requires that physical education classes be held every day for students in grades K to 3, and three times a week for grades 4 to 6, for a minimum of 120 minutes a

week; and at least 90 minutes a week for grades 7 and 8. Three gym classes a week are required for grades 7 through 12 in one semester, and twice a week in another.

However, according to a recent *New York Times* article, 20.5 percent of city high school students report having no gym class in an average week, compared with 14.4 percent a decade earlier. An audit by the City Comptroller last year found that none of the 31 elementary schools visited by the Comptroller's Office was meeting the New York State requirements for physical education. And a 2012 study conducted by the NYC Strategic Alliance for Health found only 6 out of 74 elementary schools studied were meeting the state physical education mandate of 120 minutes per week.

Co-located schools, which have expanded significantly under the Bloomberg administration, face even greater barriers to providing their students with physical education, as four or five schools often share one gymnasium. Budget cuts, a lack of gym teachers, and an overemphasis on high-stakes test prep have all served to undermine physical education in our schools.

At a time when our city is focusing so much attention on efforts to combat obesity, we feel that the issue of our schools' PE program has been largely absent from the debate. We hope to work with you to expand PE offerings and provide students with the in-school exercise that they need and deserve. We would greatly appreciate if you can provide us with more information on the DOE's current PE program as well as what the DOE is doing to track PE offerings and hold schools accountable for meeting PE standards. In particular we request that you provide:

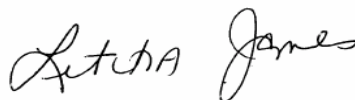
- Reports on average PE class time, broken down by school district, or school;
- Clarification on PE policy for co-located schools;
- Information related to the DOE's strategy for improving the quantity and quality of physical education instruction in our schools, and for ensuring that schools meet State mandates; and
- Information related to the DOE's plan to address the disparities between schools that have quality physical education programs and those that do not (particularly those in low-income communities of color).

Our schools can provide a unique environment to teach children about active living and to lay the foundation for healthy lifestyles at an early age. We are certain that you share our goals to bring all schools up to the appropriate PE standards and we look forward to working with you to achieve these objectives. Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Melissa Mark-Viverito
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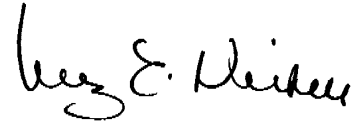
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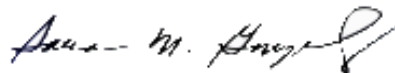
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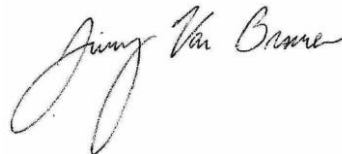
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