

May 18, 2016

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Why New School Seats Aren't Keeping Pace With City's Housing Boom

By [Amy Zimmer](#) and [Nikhita Venugopal](#)

MANHATTAN — As residential construction booms across the boroughs, many parents worry that school construction isn't keeping pace.

The city's Department of Buildings authorized permits for more than 56,500 new residential units in nearly 2,000 buildings in 2015 — an almost 180 percent increase from the year before, according to a recent analysis from the [New York Building Congress](#).

“The number of residential permits issued in New York City last year was nothing short of epic,” Building Congress President Richard T. Anderson said, noting how the looming expiration of the state's [421-a tax](#) abatement in January of this year pushed developers to get permits approved in time to qualify.



Parents in Lower Manhattan have been calling on the DOE for y...

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While new development has since fallen precipitously after [421-a's demise](#) — the DOB approved only 453 units for construction in January, which was below the average number of permits issued during the height of the financial crisis, [the Real Deal found](#)— another surge of new construction is still on the horizon with [Mayor Bill de Blasio's pledge to build 80,000 units of affordable housing over 10 years](#).

Here's why many families are bracing for potential shortfalls of school seats across the city.

1. The Department of Education itself has acknowledged it's not funding enough seats.

The [DOE's 5-year capital plan](#), which spans 2015 to 2019, funds a total of 44,000 seats — 11,000 of which were added in a recent amendment that's expected to be voted on Wednesday by the Panel for Educational Policy.

The amendment brings the total amount spent on new capacity to \$4.5 billion.

DOE officials, however, had admitted they aren't funding the total number of seats that will be needed to meet future demand. For that, they'd need to fund about 38,000 more seats.

2. Even when DOE officials say they're meeting projected needs, the numbers show otherwise.

The most glaring disconnect between a rash of new development and the number of planned school seats is in [District 2](#)— which spans from TriBeCa and Greenwich Village to Gramercy and the Upper East Side. An estimated 7,300 additional elementary and middle school and nearly 3,000 more high school students are expected by 2019, according to an analysis from [Class Size Matters](#).

But the DOE's capital plan only funds 3,232 and claims those seats will meet 99 percent of the district's needs, noted Leonie Haimson, from the advocacy group.

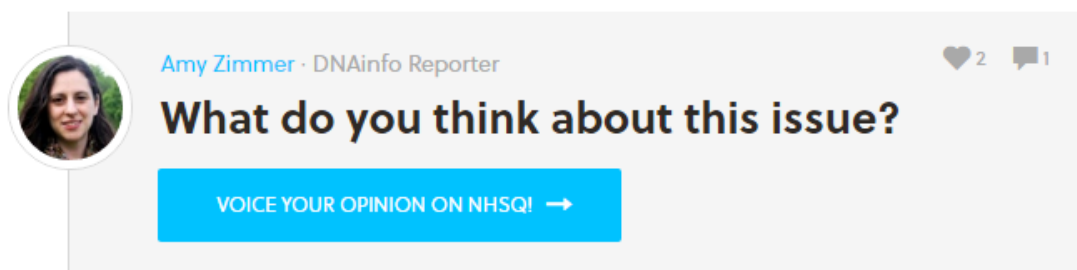
"We should require more accurate and transparent enrollment projections by independent experts, given the DOE claims that 3,232 seats in the capital plan in District 2 will meet 99 percent of the need, while housing starts data indicate this will likely meet less than half of the actual need," she said.

3. The city uses outmoded data for its projections, many say.

The DOE makes capital plans every 5 years, but often makes amendments annually. To make predictions of where seats will be needed, the DOE looks at housing permit data and household size data — [from the 2000 Census](#), which captures a different real estate landscape than today's, especially in Manhattan, where there's been a baby boom and a surge in new development with sprawling units [targeting families who want to stay in the city](#).

For Manhattan, the DOE uses a ratio of 0.12 pre-K-to-fifth grader for every new unit.

That's much lower than the ratio used for Brooklyn, which expects 0.29 pre-K-to-fifth graders for each new unit. The Bronx's ratio is 0.39 pre-K-to-fifth grader for every new unit.



Amy Zimmer · DNAINfo Reporter

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The expectation that Manhattan will have fewer students going to public schools might result in a “self-fulfilling prophecy,” worried [City Councilman Ben Kallos](#), whose Upper East Side neighborhood is short 2,000 pre-K seats, forcing many parents to commute with their 4-year-olds in the morning rush to free programs in Lower Manhattan or pay a high price for private programs nearby.

4. A school has to be significantly overcrowded before the years-long process of building a new one can begin.

The city won't consider building a new school until there's a 5 percent increase in an existing school's population, School Construction Authority president Lorraine Grillo told City Council members at budget hearings this week.

If a school is operating at 110 percent capacity — [which many are](#) — it won't trigger the DOE's radar for a possible new school until it's operating above 115 percent.

“By the time such increases happen, it's too late to start looking for a site to build a school,” said Shino Tanikawa, president of District 2's [Community Education Council](#), the parent-led group that reviews the district's needs and programs.

“It takes several years to a decade to get a school built. There is every reason to be proactive and forward thinking,” Tanikawa said.

Parents from District 2's Lower Manhattan community told the DOE and SCA in 2010 they needed a new school, but it wasn't until the spring of 2014 that the DOE finally agreed, said Tricia Joyce, a Downtown parent and the co-chair of [Community Board 1](#)'s Youth and Education Committee.

At that point, the DOE funded half of the seats needed.

It then took until the spring of 2016 to find a site for a new school — [which will be on Greenwich Place](#) — and it will take 3 more years to build it, Joyce said.

“The apartments which triggered this seat shortage were built and occupied in the fall of 2010 and yet the school will not open until [the fall of] 2018,” she said. “One can easily see that this is not a functional approach to school planning.”

5. Even when there is funding for new seats, the wait might still be long.

In the overcrowded area of Sunset Park, there's been funding for new seats in place almost every year for nearly a decade.

But the DOE and SCA — which Grillo said has three brokers casing the city — have had a hard time finding appropriate sites to house new schools.

Mimi Ferrer, PTA president at [Sunset Park's P.S. 169](#), has watched her school, which has a capacity for about 1,000 students, swell to house nearly 1,700.

The DOE, however, has rejected sites that locals have suggested for possible new schools, whether they're too small or won't work for other reasons.

“Talking to them is like talking to a wall,” she said. “‘We're trying, we're trying, we're trying.’ It's the same symphony they're playing over and over again.”

6. Parents want more accountability from the real estate community.

Besides wanting the city to ensure that the planning process for housing includes new schools, many want the real estate industry to assume more responsibility.

“I personally want to see an impact fee established in New York City,” Tanikawa said. “Why should these developers build residential units without ensuring their customers will have a school to send their kids?”

“They often use ‘zoned for P.S. XXX’ as a sales pitch, yet, they contribute nothing to infrastructure,” she continued. “Why shouldn't we hold the real estate development community accountable? They shouldn't get away with burdening our public infrastructure without contributing something.”