



class size matters

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Testimony before the City Council's Park committee on the proposed 30 year lease of sports fields on Randall's Island to private schools

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. My name is Leonie Haimson and I'm the Executive Director of Class Size Matters, a parent advocacy group with more than 2000 parents and subscribers from throughout New York City.

I am also speaking as a mother with one child in public school, and another in a private school which would be given unfair access through this proposed contract. I am ashamed that the city would ever countenance such a deal, and I hope that you do everything in your power to reject it.

While the city intends to spend \$70 million to renovate these fields, and then lease 80% of them during after school hours to a set of twenty private schools, public schoolchildren from all the surrounding boroughs will be limited to sharing the remaining 20%.

While Parks Department officials argue that these fields are currently used primarily by private schools, what they fail to mention is that this access is up to the discretion of the city on an annual basis, whereas the proposed contract would lock out our public schoolchildren for more than a generation. Park officials also claim that they "serve all NYC children; privately and publicly schooled alike."

I wish this were true. If so, they would grant access to these fields to the more than 1.1 million public school children, proportional to their numbers, as compared to the 700 private school students who will use them. We are due to receive a multi-billion dollar windfall in school aid as a result of the CFE case. If the Department of Education is not prepared at this time to help public schools pay for the cost of transportation, let the private schools pay \$2.5 million annually to help finance the renovation of these fields, but this should be regarded as an annual user fee that could be terminated at any time by the city.

On October 12, following news reports about this contract, parents approached Chancellor Klein, who was still unaware that it had occurred. Obviously, no one had checked with him to see if perhaps he might favor a better deal for public school children. Since then, parents have emailed him with their concerns. I would like to quote briefly from one of the standard responses, from his assistant, Claire Anderson.

"Since Department of Parks and Recreation is the lead agency on this project, I have spoken with personnel there, specifically Aimee Boden, Director of the Randall's Island Sports Foundation..."

Here is an open acknowledgement that the Executive Director, as well as other staff of the contracting party, the Randall's Island Sports Foundation, are actually employees of the Parks Department, as their email addresses would indicate. Their offices are also located in the Arsenal, at the parks Dept. headquarters.

Adrian Benepe, the Parks Commissioner himself, sits on the board of the Foundation – all of which appears to create a tangled web with multiple conflicts of interest.

I would like to quote briefly from a few of the outraged emails we have received about this terrible plan, from principals and teachers alike:

From Judith Menken, a principal of Muscota New School in Manhattan:

"We all know the shortages and obstacles that are regularly thrown up to public schools being able to fully support their kids' needs - there is more to a fully educated person than the academic skills under such scrutiny from NCLB. Physical development is a critical piece of a healthy childhood experience. Private schools understand this - that is why you see them in public spaces so regularly. In the past, I have complained that we have had our space curtailed skating at Lasker Rink in the afternoons as private schools use one of the rinks for their hockey program. I have not been successful in even getting a response from parks officials.

Private school students should have access to public parks as well as public school students - the adults all pay their share of taxes to support our wonderful parks system - but not exclusively – public schools need the support of services that the city does have to offer. Our students represent the needier portion of the city population."

A teacher in Brooklyn:

I have been teaching in NYC public schools since 1987 and every year there is another layer of inequity added to the system. This proposed deal for private schools to take sole possession of valuable public land is now just another layer. My students at Paul Robeson don't have access to a field--for track (we have an excellent team) or football (which we can't afford but our students constantly ask for.) So once again are you going to sell them out, or take the higher ground and protect public land for the public so that everyone wins?

Not only our children, but our grandchildren will be prevented from using these fields if this deal goes through. I ask you to do everything in your power to see that this does not occur.

Thank you for this opportunity.