

Draft Op Ed to the West Side Spirit From Community District Education Council 3 Regarding a New School at the Riverside Center Project

Note to the City Department of Education and to Extell from Parents Re Riverside Center: We Need More Classrooms!

I write for and on behalf of Community District Education Council 3 (CEC3), and the 16,000 kids and 20,000+ public school parents whom we were elected to represent.

As is well known, the entirety of Community School District 3 - stretching from Lincoln Center to Central Harlem - faces a serious schools overcrowding crisis. In 2010 District 3 had two of the top ten most overcrowded school zones in the city, with 8 of its 9 public elementary schools on the Upper West Side alone operating at or above capacity. While the crisis is projected to severely impact every one of the District's 32 elementary and middle schools within the next 24 months, the epicenter of the problem lies in the West 60's, 70's and 80's just North of the planned Riverside Center project.

This is not a coincidence. For years, Extell and other developers have marketed our public schools as an amenity, pouring kids into our schools up and down District 3, without taking any responsibility for the overflow or providing a single new seat. A direct result of this development – most prominently including Extell's Riverside South project - has been severe overcrowding.

Sadly, the developers' partners in driving this overcrowding have been the New York City Department of Education, and its Schools Construction Authority. The DOE and the SCA have been unable or unwilling to recognize simple demographics for years, consistently overstating capacity and underestimating demand for our schools in an effort to ignore the problem. In 2006, they failed to take up the option for a developer-provided new school site at Riverside South, just as the numbers were beginning to take off. In 2008 they recommended increasing the size of the PS 87 district for the 2010/2011 school year, the next year that district became the most overcrowded school zone in the city. And last year – while steadfastly refusing to recognize any overcrowding in D3 in every planning document and public statement – they were forced to open the new elementary school PS 452 at the 11th hour after the parents' demographic projections and protests were proven out by enrollment numbers. But rather than invest any dollars in new construction, the DOE opened the PS 452 in an already overcrowded MS 44 building on West 77th Street, squeezing the existing schools there and mortgaging the District's sorely needed middle school seats.

During these overcrowding discussions, and our expose of massive future overcrowding, the DOE constantly cited the safety valve of a large new school to be built by Extell as part of Riverside Center. But only a few short months later we are left to ask “where is that school?” and, as important, “who is going to pay for it?”

Unfortunately, instead of pushing for the needs of the community and demanding that the developer return some of the huge benefit it will, and already has, received from our district's public schools, the DOE and the City have sided with the developer and left our kids and community out in the cold. The DOE's Memorandum of Understanding with the developer for a 75,000 square foot school will at best only accommodate the students living within the new Riverside Center project and won't begin to address the area's larger overcrowding issues. Worse, the DOE/Extell MOU only requires Extell to pay for the new school's walls and floors, leaving the rest of us to foot much of the bill for what essentially will be a private school for the developer.

Is this fair? Is this representative of what the community wants? And just whose needs are the DOE and the City representing in this process when they propose to give away hundreds of millions in land use benefits to the developer and then not only fail to demand fair school investment in return, but in fact give the developer additional taxpayer benefits in the form of a new school?

It's time to stop kicking the education can down the road. Time to stop saying we prioritize education, and then force parents and the community to demand even the most basic accommodations by the City, the DOE and the development community for our kids.

Community District Education Council 3 joins Community Board 7, Borough President Stringer, State Senator Tom Duane, Council Member Gale Brewer and others in demanding that the City and the developer begin to do their part to meet our Community's education needs:

First - Building the entire 150,000 square foot school our community needs must be a requirement for any approval of this project.

Second - the school must be among the first buildings built in the project.

Third - the school must be fully paid for by the developer.

We urge Council Member Brewer's colleagues in the City Council to demand these changes as well. And to leave no doubt that they, as we, are willing to stand up for our children and our community.

Noah E. Gotbaum is President of Community District Education Council 3 (CEC3)..