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Tough Subject for Two Schools in Brooklyn

Parents wary of rezoning plan that would send children to poor area in district



Timothy Castanza of the education department addresses an auditorium of parents at P.S. 307 in Brooklyn on Wednesday night. PHOTO: MARK ABRAMSON FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By **LESLIE BRODY**

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Wendy Sasser moved to Brooklyn's Dumbo neighborhood to send her children to P.S. 8, a popular school for kindergarten through eighth grade. But if the city's proposal to redraw zone lines is approved, they won't be able to go there.

And so she joined a group of parents touring P.S. 307 this week to see firsthand the elementary school where her children would be reassigned.

Parents in both schools—which have starkly different demographics and test scores—fear the rezoning plan might hurt their children's educations.

- Rezoning Plan for Two Brooklyn Schools Riles Up Parents (<http://www.wsj.com/articles/rezoning-plan-for-two-brooklyn-schools-riles-up-parents-1442968919>) 9/22/15

controversy echoes tensions that arise in districts around the country when rezoning or population shifts change the racial or socioeconomic mix of students.

The city Department of Education says the proposal is a practical solution to severe overcrowding in P.S. 8. The school's students are mostly white and few are in poverty. At P.S. 307, which has empty seats, city data showed last year that 85% were poor and 87% were black or Hispanic.

Ms. Sasser, who said she was often the only white girl in classes when she grew up in Alabama, said she wasn't worried about the racial makeup of P.S. 307. Her trepidations stemmed from the troubled reputation of some public housing projects. Many students come from the Farragut Houses across the street.

After an hourlong visit to the school, she said she was impressed by small class sizes, the way teachers gave preschoolers a mix of freedom and guidance, and an enthusiastic pitch from a member of the Parent Teacher Association.

"As far as public school goes I can't imagine something looking that much better," said Ms. Sasser, who has a 4-year-old and a toddler. "They seem to recognize that play-based learning is where it's at with early childhood."

Andrew Lee, another parent who took the tour, said he would consider sending his son there. "I was pleasantly surprised at how well equipped the school was for music and science," he said. He attributed much of the conflict over rezoning to "fear of the unknown."

At one point Tuesday morning, about 20 visiting parents sat in P.S. 307's large auditorium as staff members talked about its dual language classes in Mandarin for early grades and after-school art, games and chess. One teacher described its federally funded science magnet program, intended to boost diversity, that has children do hands-on projects like dissecting fish.

Its new principal, Stephanie Carroll, cited what she called a good indicator of school quality: Several staff members enrolled their children at P.S. 307.



Larry McKenna and his 20-month-old daughter, Alice McKenna, who live in the P.S. 8 zone, stood outside the auditorium of P.S. 307 where a Community Education Council meeting about a proposed rezoning was taking place Wednesday night. *PHOTO: MARK ABRAMSON FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

Human beings are naturally inquisitive but sometimes the education system “can squash that curiosity,” she said. “That’s not the case here.”

That same auditorium had a more tense atmosphere Wednesday night, when hundreds of people packed a Community Education Council meeting about the proposed rezoning. Timothy Castanza, a department of education official, added a twist by saying the plan also included moving a small middle school, now on the third floor of P.S. 307’s building, to a new site on Dock Street.

Mr. Castanza asked the audience to do its best to “persevere in the face of challenges.”

Council member Maggie Spillane said she thought rezoning had to happen but the department sought community input way too late in the process. Council member Rob Underwood said that until there is a detailed plan for a new middle school, he couldn’t

vote yes on a rezoning.

The proposal would take a large swath of P.S. 8's zone, including Dumbo and parts of Vinegar Hill, and switch it to P.S. 307. The city Department of Education wants the council in District 13 to approve the rezoning in November so it can take effect for new students in 2016-17.

The principal at P.S. 307 said in an interview that one of her charges was to improve test scores, and professional development would be important. Ms. Carroll said she saw strength in diversity, noting that her mother was French and her father from Senegal.

At P.S. 8 last spring, 63% of students passed state tests in math in grades 3 to 8, almost double the city's proficiency rate. At P.S. 307, 20% passed in math. The disparity was wider in language arts.

Some parents at P.S. 307 have balked at the rezoning proposal, saying the community spirit would change if an influx of wealthy families came and tried to take over.

Tiara Puglisi, a member of the Parent Teacher Association who drives her 5-year-old son from Bedford-Stuyvesant for kindergarten, wants to see their school grow. An advertising professional, she said the PTA had worked hard to improve the school and was reaching out for new members. She said parents grew defensive when others in the rezoning debate "threw stones."

"It's like two parents are fighting and forget what's most important—your kids," she said.

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