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Gale A. Brewer, Borough President

TESTIMONY BEFORE THE SUNY CHARTER INSTITUTE
NOVEMBER 19, 2018 PUBLIC MEETING

MANHATTAN BOROUGH PRESIDENT GALE A. BREWER

My name is Gale A. Brewer and I am the Borough President of Manhattan. Thank you for the opportunity to testify at tonight's public hearing for the Success Academy Charter School – Upper West application to renew enrollment. I am here to express my concerns regarding the current application before the SUNY Charter School Institute. Based on the concerns expressed by my constituents, current research on charter schools, and the history of this particular charter network, I strongly oppose the expansion of Success Academy Charter School – Upper West into the high school grades.

A long-standing criticism of charter networks like Success Academy is the fact these schools do not serve all students. Instead, they choose which students are admitted as well as which ones get to stay. For example, this year, Success Academy celebrated its first graduating high school class – sixteen students and all are college-bound. I congratulate those students and wish them the utmost success, but I cannot help but wonder about all the former Success Academy students who missed that celebration. The original cohort size for that graduating class was 73! Seventy-three students started their educational journey at Success Academy, together, and at the end only 16 remained¹. This means that during their academic careers, 57 students were pushed out or felt they had to leave Success Academy. Is this the sort of educational practice that should be expanded and applauded – a mere 22% graduation rate?

This low graduation rate issue is further compounded by a documented and well-known attrition rate of special needs students, in what appears to be a trend of ‘counseling out.’ Students who are seen as problematic, whether it is for discipline reasons or academic ones, are far too frequently pushed out of Success Academy and assigned to their local neighborhood public school. In particular, Success has a history of taking punitive disciplinary measures against students with behavioral issues, and creating “got to go” lists of students who require extra time, support and attention. Whereas district schools strive to serve all students, no matter their needs or academic performance, Success Academy makes no effort to do the same. These are unsustainable education practices that serve the few at the expense of many.

To their credit, Success Academy Charter Schools are often praised for their high performance on standardized exams. However, since the current application is for a renewal in 2021, there is

¹ Veiga, C. (2018) “Success Academy graduates 16 students at its inaugural commencement,” <https://www.chalkbeat.org/posts/ny/2018/06/07/success-academy-graduates-16-students-at-its-inaugural-commencement/>

no way to determine whether or not the school will deserve this renewal on the basis of merit. So, we are left to determine the validity of the application with what we do know. Should we support this application given the likelihood that future cohorts will be appallingly small, just like the one that graduated this year? Should we support the renewal given that it will mean more students are forced out of Success Academy after their aspirations and academic careers are squandered? I know my answer. It is illogical to make a decision on the expansion of this school without first having data on how it has performed.

In addition to the issues with its academic practices, the expansion of this school will work directly against the recent plans to desegregate schools in District 3. Very difficult and important conversations took place this past spring – conversations that illuminated the opportunity to desegregate schools here. My office was a part of those conversations, as were the offices of several other elected officials, representatives from the NAACP, and of course from the New York City Department of Education. However, Success Academy was not at those public hearings. Given the recent findings about how charter schools like Success Academy exacerbate segregation in New York City, I find this especially worrisome². To this point, I challenge everyone here to take a look at the data on Success Academy and compare it with the District trends in demographics. You will see that over the last 5 years, Success Academy – Upper West has steadily increased its number of students of color and decreased its population of white students whereas district schools have done the opposite – further evidencing the claims that charter schools exacerbate racial isolation and segregation.

Finally, it is worth noting that the network administration of Success Academy has a documented history of non-cooperation with their co-located school communities. Schools on the former Brandeis campus already have limited space and are burdened with the seizure of classrooms, the inability to coordinate lunchroom schedules or share facilities as needed, as well as the displacement of students with mandated special services to improper settings. There is simply no more room for Success Academy to grow on this campus. If there is room for schools to grow, it is with the district schools that have been thus far shunned by the Office of Enrollment and the New York State Department of Education.

I know that the district schools on this campus have united and put together a letter expressing their concerns regarding the application for renewal. I want those principals to know that they have my full support. It is simply too impractical to have such a large expansion when space is already a concern and the future academic performance of Success Academy is unknown.

So, once again, thank you for allowing me to speak today and I urge SUNY not to approve this renewal.

² Ahmed, B. (2018) “Report: School Choice Makes NYC Schools More Segregated,” <https://www.wnyc.org/story/report-school-choice-makes-nyc-schools-more-segregated/>