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SENATOR THOMAS K. DUANE

29th SENATORIAL DISTRICT • NEW YORK STATE SENATE



**STATEMENT BY NEW YORK STATE SENATOR THOMAS K. DUANE
BEFORE THE NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
REGARDING THE FRANK MCCOURT HIGH SCHOOL
FOR COMMUNICATIONS AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT
ON BRANDEIS HIGH SCHOOL'S CAMPUS
(145 WEST 84 STREET, MANHATTAN, NY 10024)**

December 8, 2009

My name is Thomas K. Duane and I represent New York State's 29th Senate District, which includes the Brandeis High School campus ("M470"). I thank the New York City Department of Education ("DOE") for hosting tonight's hearing on the proposed Frank McCourt High School for Communications and Civic Engagement ("Frank McCourt High School") in the M470 building at 145 West 84th Street in Manhattan. As we move forward in this process, it is paramount that we include as many community voices as possible, including members of the Community District Education Councils ("CEC"), parents, advocates and other community members.

This is a unique opportunity to create a school that overcomes the geographic, economic and racial divisions that have regrettably existed in Upper Manhattan and elsewhere in the City for decades. One of my priorities in education—one that is shared by many public school parents—has always been diversity. I am therefore very excited by this proposal to establish an exceptional school that would draw a diverse body of students, from Washington Heights, Harlem, the Upper West Side and beyond, and that would encourage collaboration between English Language Learners, bilingual students and English dominant students.

The parents, education advocates, District 3 CEC members, elected officials and other community leaders who developed this proposal are committed to deliberate admissions policies and practices to ensure diversity. It is our vision that students would be screened based largely on portfolios, on-site writing samples (evaluated using a culturally sensitive rubric), middle school transcripts and interviews. A vital prerequisite to this school realizing its full potential is for New York State Education Department test scores to be subordinate to the previously mentioned criteria in the consideration of applicants. As you know, these tests measure neither applicants' passion nor their talent for the communication arts at the heart of the school's curriculum. The Frank McCourt High School must not become a one-size-fits-all school. On the contrary, I am perhaps most excited by the school's promise to offer an education with an emphasis on dynamic writing and language skills to those whose gifts may not have been previously recognized or cultivated.

This college preparatory high school would partner with local institutions like Symphony Space and the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism and feature writers-in-residence to promote creative and expository writing, reporting, literary criticism, and other communications arts in the context of the digital age. The rich curriculum would include substantial writing, not only in English but also in Spanish and/or French, and would explore the arts and literature of Spanish and French speaking countries as well. It would provide an innovative and academically rigorous option both for my Senate district's growing school-age population and for students citywide.

My only objection to the proposal as described in the DOE's Educational Impact Statement is its Projected Enrollment at Scale. DOE plans to include a fifth school in this building, and has consequently limited the capacity of the Frank McCourt High School to between 400 and 440 students. There is an enormous need for another challenging, creative high school in northern Manhattan and I therefore feel very strongly that this school should be designed to hold a projected enrollment of approximately 800 students. A larger enrollment would enable the school to serve a greater number of students from the neighborhoods that previously fed into Brandeis High School as well as those from the immediate vicinity, and allow for a greater number of foreign language options and special programs. I urge DOE to reconsider this issue.

I am grateful to all parties involved for engaging in a productive and collaborative conversation regarding newly available space at M470. The Frank McCourt High School is a thoughtful and forward-looking proposal, and that is why it has earned the support of a wide variety of parents and education leaders across New York City. I am proud to have been among its planners and I offer my endorsement of this plan.

Thank you for considering my comments.