

Reginald Mayo, Ph.D  
Superintendent

# New Haven Public Schools

April 2, 2007

Mr. David Wedge, Manager  
Bureau of School Facilities  
State Department of Education  
P.O. Box 2219  
Hartford, CT 06145

**Re: Questions Concerning Project No. #093-0338, Celentano School**

Dear Mr. Wedge:

I write in response to your contact with Susan Weisselberg of the School Construction Office, regarding questions from state auditors concerning Celentano School, Project No. 093-0338. This letter and the attachments should answer their questions.

The school opened in late August, 2005. We renovated a former Yale observatory building and built a new pre-K-8 school building adjacent to that. In addition, Yale University donated an adjacent house that was in the path of the school foundation and exit drive, and we moved it out of the way. Our plans have been to renovate the house; the bids were quite high, and only a month ago the Board of Aldermen approved additional funding to do so.

The October 1, 2005 enrollment for Celentano, shortly after opening, was 386. The October 1, 2006 enrollment for Celentano was 433. We are phasing in additional enrollment, totaling 610 by October 1, 2007 or, at the latest, 2008.

Celentano School has had an unusual history and took a circuitous route to its current existence as a pre-K-8 school. Some discussion of that history follows, along with original material and an outline of our future plans.

### **Background and Project History**

For several decades, Celentano School served as a citywide school for a wide range of special needs students, ages 3-21. That changed in the late 1990s, after the U.S. Office of Civil Rights (OCR) found New Haven Public Schools in violation of certain laws protecting children with disabilities. OCR was particularly concerned that the special education population at Celentano was isolated from the students' non-disabled peers. Therefore, the School District instituted changes in the student population, decreasing the number of special education students accepted into Celentano and introducing more regular education students.



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OCR urged the district to file a school construction project for Celentano, putting it on a par with other schools for a physical plant and in terms of curriculum. The school construction project application to the State Department of Education was filed in June, 2000 (*see attached*).

As of October 1, 1999, the school had an enrollment of 210 students ranging from pre-school through grade twelve and ages 3-21. The school still served special needs students from throughout the City in that age range and had an "inclusive" regular K-2 program with one classroom per grade. One regular education classroom was added each year after that.

Today the school is a pre-K-8 facility, with two or more classes per grade and only one self-contained special education classroom. Otherwise, special education students are mainstreamed and provided additional pull-out services as necessary.

### **Implementing Final Plans for Celentano**

From the start of design in 2001 to the present, there were numerous iterations for the design and planned use of the space, including the observatory. Much of this was due to the many changes in its mission for special education students (*see attachment*). The design itself contained additional classrooms, some originally for self-contained special education. In addition, the enrollment in each classroom varied.

Since the school opened in September, 2005, we have been reviewing the school's experience with enrollment, school usage and demand, and the observatory. We have concluded that the observatory, while a wonderful space for a museum studies program (and one pull-out Talented and Gifted classroom for eighth graders), is underutilized. At the same time, our school readiness program is expanding, and there is a waiting list for pre-K in that part of the City. Therefore, effective in September, 2007, we plan to utilize the observatory for additional pre-K classrooms. The small classrooms will mean small class size for the pre-kindergarteners while meeting NAEYC certification requirements: eight students per classroom, four classrooms per floor, for a total of 64 pre-K students. Two larger pre-K rooms will remain in the main school building, while a pre-K office will move into the observatory, where there will be room for staff meetings with pre-K parents.

The museum studies program (which does not have enrollment attached to it) will move into some freed-up space within the main school building. The eighth-grade TAG program will move to another school. With the demand for enrollment in that part of the City, we will add a third classroom at two grade levels (there are three first grades at Celentano now), taking advantage of classrooms formerly intended for self-contained special education. Given the ongoing enrollment demands in that neighborhood, adding more classes and slightly increasing class size to 24 (except for the self-contained special education room and pre-K) make sense.

In terms of pre-K for the School District, please note that we have been building many schools with two pre-K rooms, but the demand is higher than that. We have several buildings that provide extensive pre-K/K services, with two more coming on-line in September, counting the observatory as one of the two.

We will be filing an ED049R to reduce the highest projected enrollment to 614, and, as we phase in the plan above, we believe we will meet it or come close to meeting it.

### **Enrollment Projections for School District, Including Celentano School**

As you know, the New Haven Public Schools has conducted several enrollment projections and revised its comprehensive facilities (master) plan several times. In 1996-1998, the master plan was compiled (by Jeter Cook and Jepson) and adopted; the enrollment projection was by a consultant (*see attached*). In 2000, the master plan was updated (by Fletcher Thompson and the School Construction Program); the enrollment projection was by Dr. Peter Prowda of the State Department of Education. *A copy is provided of the full projection from the report and a briefer projection from the executive summary.* In 2003, the enrollment projection again was by Dr. Peter Prowda (*see attached*). In 2005, the School Construction Program revised the master plan and updated the 2003 enrollment projection, based upon enrollment experience and additional pre-K enrollments (*key sections attached*). Early this year, we requested an updated enrollment projection from Dr. Peter Prowda. My staff has been working with City staff, on housing demographics as well as birth data and our ongoing enrollment experiences. We expect to receive that updated enrollment projection next week and will be happy to share it with you.

As has been discussed with you, our practice throughout this process has not been to develop enrollment projections for each school, but to look at our projections for the district overall and then make sure we have enough space for the students, with some extra space should there be enrollment increases. Therefore, the comprehensive facilities plan needs to make sure each school building can match the model planned enrollment for that school, and that we have enough room – capacity, if you will – in the district overall to accommodate the mobility we experience and potential enrollment increases such as those we have been seeing much of this decade. Since our sites cannot accommodate modulars we must make sure our buildings overall can accommodate our student enrollment.

Not only do cities such as ours have relatively low homeownership and high migratory patterns, but our choice program makes the movement of students that much more challenging. Ten years ago, New Haven had many vacant, boarded up housing units. Today, very few rental units are vacant. Housing authority projects are reopening. Market rate housing is being approved and opening, the latest one (293 one and two bedroom market rate rental units in Westville) slated to open later this year and more in the planning stages. Some have children who enter the school system, some do not. New Haven is becoming a popular housing market, and we need to make sure we have the capacity to accommodate the housing.

With all of this, our experts have advised us to make sure we have some excess capacity, in the range of 10%, as discussed in the 2005 master plan. And, some of the schools built in the first half of our program have been built with a higher capacity than those now in design. This is particularly helpful as we deal with enrollment “bubbles” in transitioning many schools to two classes per grade, pre-K-8. Long term, there will always be a need for some extra classrooms in some schools in the district, as there will always be some enrollment “bubbles” at some grade ranges that need to be accommodated.

We believe that the master planning and enrollment projections we have conducted, with a planned capacity systemwide, in fact should be data acceptable to the Commissioner of Education under Conn. Gen. Stat. Sec. 10-286(a)(1), and that this data is more useful as a planning tool than school-by-school projections. We suggest that this be adopted as a Department policy. Moreover, this type of comprehensive facilities planning was encouraged by a previous Commissioner.

We are mindful that your guidelines note that if “the projected enrollment for a school deviates significantly from the actual enrollment listed in the *Connecticut Education Directory* and the Educational Specifications fail to provide sufficient justification for the difference, SDE may request additional documentation in support of a district’s projected enrollment,” and that the Department does not consider building capacity to be the same thing as projected enrollment. Nonetheless, we do believe that, as discussed above, the Department needs to acknowledge that it is appropriate for a School District such as New Haven to plan for accommodations for its highest projected enrollment systemwide, and that that planned capacity is a valid consideration as projected enrollment.

We also believe that our early projects have challenges in reaching the highest projected enrollment in eight years from notification of a project. We provided proposed legislation on this to you, to Mark Stapleton, and to some legislators, and hope the time will come when solutions are implemented.

Clearly, urban school districts offering many choice programs, as we do, in fact are different in terms of enrollment and enrollment projections. Much of our school population is highly mobile. Many of our schools are not “neighborhood” schools per se, but are magnet schools and choice schools, with themes. Many of our sites are constrained in size when the demand for enrollment exceeds the capacity, and thus we must build the capacity, without relying on modular units for extra classrooms.

We believe that all of these factors need to be taken into consideration when reviewing the enrollment experience and projections for Celentano and for all our schools.

We will be submitting revised Educational Specifications for Celentano to reflect the changes we have discussed here, along with an ED049R on the enrollment.

Thank you. We would be happy to review our response and material further with you and other staff.

Sincerely yours,



Dr. Reginald Mayo  
Superintendent of Schools

#### **Attachments**

cc: Mark Stapleton  
Thomas Rogér  
Susan Weisselberg  
Robert Lynn

### *Additional Background Information on Celentano School*

At the time of the school construction project application in 2000, plans were to provide regular education grades pre-K-8 and to continue to serve special needs students and offer more inclusion opportunities. The projected enrollment of 634 included more special education space for older students, particularly in the observatory, which was to contain life skills and other training components, or in the house.

In mid-2001, School Construction began meeting with the School District's special education supervisors, who laid out a plan for two classes per grade, pre-K-8, of regular education with mainstreaming, and seven self-contained special education classrooms (one was a pre-K), mostly in the new school building. Two were for up to 35 older students, located elsewhere, in the observatory or house. Class sizes were limited to 20 students for regular education and 15 for special education students. There were to be four resource rooms. Planned enrollment was 488 students.

Since then, the State Department of Education ruled that Celentano School could not provide space for special education students past eighth grade or 15 years of age but that they needed to be with their age appropriate peers. Rather than convert the entire building to a high school, the older Celentano students were placed with their age-appropriate peers at various New Haven high schools. The school building's design also included some self-contained special education classrooms and resource rooms. Originally, it also included physical therapy facilities (including a therapy pool), vocational classrooms and a catering kitchen (some of this was to be within the observatory or house).

The original highest projected enrollment was 634; in 2001 it was estimated at 488. In July, 2002, plans for the school included two classes of regular education per grade, K-8, two pre-Ks, and special education programs. The planned enrollment was for 465 students:

- 375 students, regular education, grades pre-K-8
- 60 students, special education, grades pre-K-8
- 30 students, special education, ages 15-21 (students who needed to remain at Celentano full or part time, rather than transition to high school like their non-disabled peers)

The adjacent house was acquired from Yale in 2003, and the highest projected enrollment was increased to 654.

It should be clear from the above that, for years, we struggled with the school's highest projected enrollment, planned enrollment that included a smaller class size, and the special education offered at the school. Certainly the school's capacity was, and is, higher than the 2001 and 2002 planned enrollment. We have revisited the highest projected enrollment several times, most recently in March, and believe that the number as discussed in the following sections below is realistic, for the school and for the district. We await Dr. Prowda's latest projections next week for further evaluation of district enrollments.

With the State's rejection of older special education students at the observatory, its use was re-examined. The building, a former Yale observatory dating from the 1880s, is a contributing building in a national historic district. Demolition was not a viable option. Renovation posed other challenges, since the structural walls meant the rooms were small – none over 350 square

feet. It had worked for small classes for special education, but the rooms were too small for many other classroom functions. As the school continued to evolve, it developed a museum studies program, partnering with Yale's Peabody Museum. The observatory renovations were meant to enhance that program, and the smaller rooms became advantageous for that use.