

## Background

The primary focus of the Yonkers Joint Schools Construction Board (YJSCB) is administering the planning, design and construction of three new schools that are entitled to receive double the maximum cost allowance (MCA) in building aid from New York State as part of the enabling legislation known as the Yonkers City School District Joint Schools Construction and Modernization Act (chapter 355 of the Laws of 2016). The YJSCB generated, through its consultants, the Yonkers Joint Schools Construction and Modernization Plan which outlines the three new school projects plus proposed improvements to existing District facilities to be funded under the Act.

The first of these new schools, the Justice Sonia Sotomayor Community School (CS35), is now under construction. This new Pre-K through 8<sup>th</sup> grade school is built on the site of the former St. Denis Parochial school, rectory and convent in southwest Yonkers with the total site utilized of approximately 1 acre. After assessments of the viability of rehabilitating the structures into a public school culminating with a determination not to do so, and the appropriate environmental and State historic reviews, the three existing buildings were purchased by Yonkers Public Schools (YPS) and have been demolished. The new school with 3 sections for grade levels K-8 and 4 sections of Pre-K will have a capacity to accommodate approximately 675 students. The building is configured as a community school with common areas accessible after school hours without providing access to the academic facility. These common areas, which can be available for community use, include the cafeteria and kitchen, a health clinic and a multi-purpose room / gymnasium (with HS regulation basketball court) and locker rooms. This configuration results in a four-story Academic building (with partial basement) of approximately 82,000 gross square feet with a one-story connection to the Community building (with basement) of approximately 14,000 gross square feet. The new school has many sustainable features including an all-electric heat pump heating and cooling system (no carbon fuels), photo voltaic solar panels on the roof, a partial green roof, extensive daylighting, low water usage plumbing fixtures and low VOC and recycled materials.

The building is now under construction with an expected completion date in phases starting in early 2024. The new construction portion of the project had a delayed start due to unforeseen conditions during the demolition phase and there is a lively, ongoing discussion with the construction team as to the viable completion dates. The bids received for the building project were within the project budget and with all of the incidental expenses the total project budget remains at \$80 Million Dollars. While the overall project budget increased due to additional incidental costs, the sharp escalation of the State Construction Cost Index, which is used to calculate State building aid, offset this increase and as a result the local share of the overall cost is below the initial projections.

The Modernization Plan adopted in 2020 also included the construction of two additional PK-8 schools of similar size and capacity to the Sotomayor School. These were intended to provide some additional capacity for an overall school system in Yonkers that showed a significant gap between the functional capacity of the existing facilities and the projected District enrollment of approximately 4,400 students. The remainder of the capacity shortfall in the initial Plan was to be provided by additions to existing buildings. In the years since the original 2020 Plan was formulated the District, like many across the country, experienced an out-migration of students due to the global pandemic. The District leadership

believes this to be a temporary aberration that will correct itself in a few years but the Modernization Plan Update is obligated to utilize the updated enrollment projections. As a result, the updated Plan still proposes two new school buildings: one new Pre-K – 8 building similar to the Sotomayor School and replacement of Gorton High School. The replacement of Gorton High School has been in the YPS facilities plans for many years and was recommended by multiple architectural firms and confirmed during a visit by the State Education Department. The Plan Update includes fewer additions to existing schools and some of the oldest and least popular schools are proposed to be de-commissioned once the new construction program is complete to more closely align the overall capacity with the updated post-pandemic projected enrollment. Even after this is accomplished the overall capacity of the District's facilities will exceed the projected enrollment. If that comes to realization in a few years the District will reduce the capacity of all buildings still in service to match the actual enrollment. This will keep the remaining buildings in service which are vital to the neighborhoods that they serve and preserve these facilities for when the enrollment returns to pre-pandemic levels. This proposed reduction in capacity would be spread over 30 existing, older buildings averaging only 20 students per building (one classroom) and accounts for 4% of the overall PK-8 enrollment. If the enrollment does return to the pre-pandemic trends which showed significant increases then the projects that provide additional capacity will be re-introduced in subsequent updates to the Plan.

## Plan Update

This update to the Yonkers Joint Schools Construction and Modernization Plan is intended to incorporate several changed conditions since the original plan was drafted and submitted to NYSED (2019 – 2020). There has been no substantive shift in Yonkers Public Schools educational approach since the original plan was completed so that portion of the Plan remains consistent.

The construction of the new Justice Sotomayor Community School is now well underway which begins to address the need for additional capacity district wide. Additional opportunities to provide increased capacity have also been approved in concept by YPS and NYSED for proposed additions to the Kahlil Gibran School (28) (PreK - 8) and a lease of the Biondi School.

Since the last plan was submitted, YPS has completed a new Building Conditions Survey (BCS) and also commissioned updated enrollment projections. The last few years have also seen an almost unprecedented increase in construction costs which will impact the overall cost of implementing any proposed Plan.

The 2020 Building Conditions Survey included comprehensive site inspections of each of the YPS facilities and updated the list of infrastructure needs for the buildings district wide. The intent of this survey is to identify what is required to return the buildings to overall good condition so it should be viewed as a minimum standard. While YPS has been accomplishing significant capital projects valued at approximately \$20 Million during the last five years, the District's buildings are aging faster than they are being rehabilitated. This is primarily due to the age of the original buildings and decades of under-investment in major updates to the District's school buildings. The BCS lists a total of \$519 Million of investment needed to update the infrastructure of the District's facilities.

# Yonkers Joint Schools Construction + Modernization Plan Update

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The Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting shutdown of schools and businesses was a major disruption across communities whose effects are still being felt. The enrollment study completed by the District's consulting demographer for this Update projects an unanticipated accelerated decline in school enrollment that is no doubt related to the disruptions of the pandemic. While some of this trend was anticipated earlier, the reduction in school attendance during the pandemic set a lower starting point for the ongoing enrollment declines. As a result, the difference between the earlier projection and the current study is significant and is not accepted by YPS leadership as a valid planning tool.

In fact the preliminary BEDS data for 2022 (24,127) is higher than anticipated in this recent study which is further indication that its projection (23,811) may not be properly predicting future enrollment. Further, the overall population of Yonkers is increasing, resulting in it becoming the third largest City in the State after the most recent Census, yet the latest study projected the school population to decrease. Nonetheless it is the only data available for planning purposes. Since the reasons behind this change are unique and may soon be reversed, only the five year projections are utilized in this Plan Update.