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**Testimony of George Sweeting, Deputy Director
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To the New York City Council Committee on Education
Hearing on the Education Department's
Enrollment, Capacity, and Utilization Report**

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Good afternoon, Chairman Jackson and members of the Education Committee. My name is George Sweeting, and I am Deputy Director of the New York City Independent Budget Office. Thank you for the opportunity to testify about Intro 155 which would overhaul the Department of Education's (DOE) Enrollment, Capacity, Utilization report which is often referred to as the "ECU report," and for those of us with long histories in this field sometimes as the "Blue Book" in honor of the cover on the old hard copy version.

In my testimony, I will discuss some benefits that would result from the enactment of the Intro, but also mention some concerns and some suggestions for additional items to consider for the enhanced report. These include more information on the type of school, the physical capacity of school buildings and the specific grades served in a school.

Requiring the DOE to provide timely and scheduled releases of the annual Blue Book makes sense. Although in recent years the DOE has done a better job in releasing the report early in the subsequent school year—for example the report for the 2008/2009 school year was released in September 2009—there have been times when the report was delayed, particularly in years when a new five-year education capital plan was under development. Legislating an annual publication date should avoid such problems in the future. In addition to ensuring that capacity and enrollment data are available when reviewing the five-year plan and the subsequent annual amendments, having this information routinely available for guides and school choice Web sites helps to inform families' school application decisions for the following fall.

Intro 155's goal of improving the quantity and quality of the information included in the annual ECU report is also important. Council Members and their staff, along with IBO and other policy researchers routinely encounter limitations and inconsistencies in the data when using the Blue Book. Having a more comprehensive report would make it easier to analyze where school overcrowding is a problem and to help identify possible solutions.

However, our review of Intro 155 found some potential problems and shortcomings in the proposal which the Council might want to consider as the Intro moves through the legislative process. The core of Intro 155 is a requirement that DOE report on space that had not originally been used to house regular classroom instruction such as cluster rooms, specialty rooms, gymnasiums, auditoriums, libraries, and lunchrooms that have been converted to classroom use.

The Intro would also require the DOE to provide detailed data on many other converted school spaces that might not be as pertinent to understanding capacity—including teachers lounges, locker rooms, rooms to provide special education related services, and occupational or physical therapy rooms. Although it is generally better to require more detail to understand how programming at a school effects the use of school space, if the Blue Book becomes bogged down with too much detail it may become less useful.

Having noted the potential for data overload, we nevertheless have suggestions for additional data items to consider adding to the report that IBO believes would enhance understanding of school and building capacity. The existing report's capacity measures are heavily dependent on how a school is programmed. Currently, when looking at year-to-year changes in capacity at school organizations, some of the observed changes are actually the result of changes in programming from one year to the next rather than changes in physical capacity. For example, the Blue Book measure of capacity at an elementary school would increase from one year to the next if the principal had more fourth grade classes and fewer kindergarten classes than the year before. Because the assumed class size for kindergarten classrooms is 20 students whereas the assumed class size for fourth grade classrooms is 28 students, the Blue Book capacity measure would show an increase in capacity from the previous year, although the number of classrooms did not change. To deal with this problem, IBO suggests requiring an additional measure of capacity that is only dependent on the physical space available—such as the total number of classrooms.

When high schools utilize programming that is not typical—such as longer school days or multiple sessions—it can also provide a misleading measure of capacity. The capacity measure does not take this programming into account, because it assumes the same level of efficient programming, whereby regular classrooms are used seven out of eight periods a day, or 87.5 percent of the time. Therefore, the utilization rate may be well over 100 percent even though students are not all attending school at the same time. Contrasting these schools with other schools that have similar utilization rates but no programmatic changes to remedy the overcrowding can result in an apples to oranges comparison. To avoid such confusion, it would be helpful if the Blue Book identified schools that use an alternate schedule for programming classes.

The Blue Book currently identifies the building level, but it would be useful to also know the organization level. Organization level is important in cases where organizations are placed in buildings whose level differs from its own level such as when an elementary school is placed in a middle school building. Furthermore, with the recent trend away from the more traditional DOE nomenclature for schools it is more difficult to separate schools by school type and grades provided. Since the Blue Book calculates capacity differently for schools depending on which grades they serve, it would be helpful to know the actual roster of grades and number of classrooms assigned to each grade for each school. At a minimum, a more detailed school level identifier could be used such as the following: primary school (PS), middle school (MS), primary/middle school (PS/IS), high school (HS), or middle/high school (IS/HS).

Finally, it would be helpful to have charter schools co-located in DOE buildings clearly identified in the report. The charters should have an appropriate indicator of their status when reporting the capacity measures, the count of classrooms as suggested by IBO, and when

identifying which school organizations have access to gymnasiums, lunchrooms, and other facilities when they share a building.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.