PHYSICAL EDUCATION
ACCESS AND INFRASTRUCTURE:
BUILDING THE FULL PERSONHOOD OF NEW YORK CITY’S STUDENT POPULATION
BACKGROUND:
The positive connection between physical fitness and learning is well documented. Students who eat healthy and exercise have better focus and more energy. Access to healthy environments is a critical component of any education system and upgrading our gym spaces must be a part of all future capital allocations.

The mayor’s announcement in 2017 dedicating $385 million in capital funding to gym space creation was an encouraging start toward addressing this space availability crisis across New York City, as was his decision to make the 200 schools in New York City that do not have gym space at all the first priority to receive this investment. However, the announced funding only addresses the needs of 76 of those schools and we must be vigilant in tracking the progress of all schools going forward.

In order to fully understand the space crisis facing schools in Brooklyn, we developed a survey and sent it to every school in Brooklyn. In addition, we spoke directly with some schools and sports groups that use, or would like to use, school facilities. This report is the result of these efforts.

OVERVIEW OF SURVEY RESULTS:
Recognizing the importance of physical activity and education to both educational and health outcomes, the Office of Brooklyn Borough President Eric L. Adams conducted a gym survey of all Brooklyn public schools during July 2018. There are 573 schools in Brooklyn and 307 schools responded to the survey, a 53.6 percent response rate.

When schools were asked if they had dedicated space to use as a gymnasium — defined as space primarily used as a gym and meant to be used as a gym — 83.1 percent of respondents said yes, leaving 16.9 percent of schools reporting no dedicated gym space. Of those schools that responded affirmatively in having dedicated gymnasium space, more than half, or 51.1 percent of respondents, indicated their gym space was shared with another school. Nineteen schools reported using their cafeteria as their gym space while 18 reported using converted classrooms and multipurpose rooms as their primary gym space.

The final survey question attempted to generate additional input from respondents and simply asked if there was anything else the Office of the Brooklyn Borough President should be aware of relating to their gym space. This question elicited a series of diverse and varied responses that showed that this is a topic that has been ignored for far too long and demands immediate and increased attention. Responses from this broad question included:

- Buckling gymnasium floors
- Gym spaces with large support pillars in them
- Lack of air conditioning in gym spaces
- Many spaces that are used as multi-purpose areas (thus limiting gym use), brittle backboards, and more
- Overcrowded buildings with no option for converting classrooms
- Padded classrooms
- Underserved special needs children who require adaptive physical education and cannot be properly accommodated at the school

Even schools with existing dedicated gyms often mentioned the lack of space for the size of the student body. Drawing from this survey, as well as a focus group conversation with several sports organizations that currently work with schools, school athletics directors, and others with knowledge in the area, several recommendations were generated to truly tackle the issue of limited school space and athletics programming in schools.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Appoint a dedicated, high-level schools sports czar within the New York City Department of Education (DOE) or Mayor’s Office who can work with schools to ensure that physical fitness is a priority and that schools have the proper infrastructure and space they need for physical education. Previously, this position was under former Chief Executive Officer of the Office of School Support Services Eric Goldstein, who also oversaw school bus and school food policy. The position should be one that is dedicated solely to school athletics. This position could be responsible for:
   - Advocating for transparency and reform in the space/field permitting process
   - Connecting PSAL programs to each other and to schools that want them
   - Putting together an executive committee of industry experts to suggest new policies going forward

2. Prioritize capital funds for gym space at a greater level than already announced.
   - Include updates to current spaces that have not been renovated in years. The current funding levels only address a small portion of the schools in need. There must be a specific plan put in place now to fill this gap by 2028.

3. The DOE should develop public-private partnerships to further athletics in schools.
   - For schools with no dedicated gym space, identify existing, underutilized spaces within a quarter-mile of schools that could work as temporary school sports facilities while new physical education space construction occurs.

CONCLUSION:
Addressing the challenges schools face regarding physical fitness cannot be done in an ad hoc manner. The City and the DOE must develop a long-term plan and dedicate significant resources to ensure that all New York City students have access to appropriate, dedicated gymnasium space. This cannot happen if the person charged with the task is also in charge of several other major divisions within the DOE. A single point person will be able to provide the focus this issue demands. Given that this issue will require significant capital and time, there is real urgency to act now to ensure a healthier future for every New York City child.