

THE NEW YORK TIMES, SATURDAY, OCTOBER 13, 2001

Disaster Relief for the Schools

Count the New York City school system among the victims of Sept. 11. Already struggling before the terrorist attack, the schools have been rocked by disaster-related expenses that have further undermined the system's ability to provide the basic education that the city's children are entitled to under the law.

The New York City Board of Education began this school year under a "bare bones" state budget that provided less than a third of the assistance that the State Board of Regents said was necessary to provide students around New York with the books, teachers and buildings they need to meet the new standards and requirements laid out in state law. Schools Chancellor Harold Levy responded to the dismal situation by drawing up plans to cut music and art classes, after-school programs and guidance counselors. The prospect of cutting guidance counselors seems unacceptable now that traumatized school children need them more than ever.

The collapse of the World Trade Center forced the Board of Education to close seven buildings and shift nearly 6,000 students to other schools around the city that were already overcrowded and understaffed. Some schools in lower Manhattan are expected to remain closed for a month or longer, while the children attend class in split sessions elsewhere around the city. Attendance plummeted just after the disaster, causing students to lose valuable instructional time and endangering state school aid that is based in part on attendance figures.

The dislocation and tumult has extended well

beyond a few schools in Lower Manhattan. Chancellor Levy estimates that children throughout the system have lost a minimum of two weeks of instructional time because of the trauma associated with the terror attacks. The lost time looms especially large for fourth and eighth graders, who must take state English and math tests in December. While the school system's financial resources are shrinking, no one has suggested reducing the increasingly high standards its students must meet to pass from grade to grade and graduate from high school.

Mr. Levy has applied for federal disaster aid to pay for the cleanup, lost equipment, relocation costs, lost instructional time and counseling that many children and teachers will need. It is unclear whether the federal government will cover these costs. The costs connected with this disaster could eventually exceed \$200 million — a great deal of money for a gravely underfinanced system.

The Legislature rationalized the inadequate budget it passed this summer by suggesting that it would revisit the school funding issue when it reconvened this fall. The prospect of more state aid for education seems remote given the economic climate at the moment. However, the Legislature could temporarily revise the education aid formula that it passed this summer, when it dramatically increased statewide school building funds and directed the money disproportionately to affluent communities. Whatever the route, the Legislature's response to the terrorist attack must begin with helping the city schools recover.

CITY_21MC100_011830959