

# All Work and No Play

A Survey of Access to Physical Activity in New York City  
Public Elementary Schools by the Office of the Public  
Advocate

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March 2004

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Obesity in children has reached epidemic proportions in America. With recent studies showing that 43 percent of our city's public school elementary children are either obese or overweight, New York City is indeed following the national trend. Aside from its associated serious long-term health consequences, obesity has been linked to depression and low self-esteem in young adults. Numerous not-for-profit and federal agencies therefore strongly encourage physical education, identifying it as one of the best opportunities for children to learn healthy habits and develop a lifelong commitment to fitness. Therefore, the New York State Department of Education Commissioner's Regulation mandates that all pupils in Kindergarten through third grade participate in a physical education program on a daily basis and that all pupils in grades four to six participate in a physical education program that meets no less than three times or 120 minutes per calendar week.<sup>1</sup>

In 2000, Educational Frameworks Inc. found that many of the City's public schools do not provide regular physical education classes for all their students. Since then, the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene conducted a study that found that 43 percent of New York City's public school elementary children are either obese (24 percent) or overweight (19 percent).<sup>2</sup> In light of the City's alarming obesity rates and state physical education mandates, the Office of the Public Advocate conducted a four-year follow-up survey of 100 public elementary schools to determine student access to physical education programs.

### FINDINGS

- Twenty percent of the public elementary schools surveyed lack regular access to physical education classes
- All elementary schools surveyed are in violation of New York State regulations requiring daily physical education for students in Kindergarten through third grade
- Three-quarters of the schools with students in grades four through six are in violation of New York State regulations mandating at least 120 minutes of physical education for those students
- Only four percent of all schools surveyed have an athletic team
- Only 10 percent have an after-school athletic program
- 14 percent do not have a physical education teacher

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The Public Advocate makes the following recommendations to the New York City Department of Education:

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<sup>1</sup> New York State Department of Education. <http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/ciai/pe/peqa.html>

<sup>2</sup> New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, "Obesity Begins Early: Findings Among Elementary School Children in New York City," June 2003 Volume 2, No.5

- Work towards complying with New York State regulations by offering at least two physical education classes per week
- Provide proper athletic facilities to promote a healthy school population
- Develop an effective physical education curriculum
- Recruit qualified physical education teachers

## **Introduction**

Childhood obesity has reached epidemic proportions in America. Children are spending less time outside playing and more time watching TV or playing video games. This decrease in physical activity has caused a significant increase in obesity rates among young children. A study conducted last year by the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene found that 43 percent of New York City's public school elementary children are either obese (24 percent) or overweight (19 percent).<sup>3</sup> New York City is part of a national trend of high obesity rates among elementary school age children. 15 percent of the country's children are overweight.<sup>4</sup>

The New York State Department of Education Commissioner's Regulation (NYCRR Sec. 135.4) requires all pupils in Kindergarten through third grade to participate in a physical education program on a daily basis and requires all pupils in grades four through six to participate in a physical education program that meets no less than three times or 120 minutes per calendar week.<sup>5</sup> A report conducted by Educational Frameworks Inc. in 2000 found that, despite this regulation, many of the City's public schools do not provide regular physical education classes for all their students.<sup>6</sup>

In light of the City's alarming rate of obesity among elementary-school-age children and existing state regulations regarding physical activity in City schools, the Office of the Public Advocate conducted a four-year follow-up survey to determine student access to physical activities in New York City public elementary schools.

## ***Dangers of Childhood Obesity***

According to both the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and the National Institute of Health (NIH), experts have linked obesity to a variety of health problems such as heart disease, type II diabetes, high blood pressure, and some types of cancer.<sup>7</sup> Some of these health problems, such as type II diabetes, were originally only found in adults but are now commonly found in obese

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<sup>3</sup> New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, "Obesity Begins Early: Findings Among Elementary School Children in New York City," June 2003 Volume 2, No.5

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/pubs/pubd/hestats/overwght99.htm>

<sup>5</sup> New York State Department of Education. <http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/ciai/pe/peqa.html>

<sup>6</sup> Educational Frameworks Inc., "Hit or Miss: Fitness & Sports Opportunities in the New York City Public Schools," 2000.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/obesity/consequences.htm>

children.<sup>8</sup> In addition, there is a 70 percent chance that an obese child will grow into an obese adult.<sup>9</sup> Obesity has also been linked to depression and low self-esteem in young female adults.<sup>10</sup>

### ***Physical Activity in the Schools and its Benefits***

The Surgeon General attributes obesity in children to factors such as lack of physical activity and unhealthy eating habits and recommends frequent physical activity as a way to prevent weight gain.<sup>11</sup> Besides preventing obesity, research links numerous other benefits to physical activity. The California Department of Education correlates higher academic performance with physical activity in school.<sup>12</sup> Exercise enhances both mental and emotional health, improves social development and self-esteem, raises levels of good cholesterol (HDL), and reduces blood pressure.<sup>13</sup>

Numerous non-profit and federal agencies strongly encourage physical fitness because of its health benefits. The American Heart Association recommends performing at least 30 minutes of vigorous physical activity three to four times a week to achieve and maintain a good level of cardio respiratory (heart and lung) fitness.<sup>14</sup> The Surgeon General recommends that schools require daily physical education for Kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade and provide adequate funding, equipment, and supervision of programs that meet the needs and interests of all their students.<sup>15</sup> The Presidential Council on Physical Education and Sports states that physical education in school is the best opportunity for children to learn and develop lifelong health and fitness skills.<sup>16</sup>

### **Methodology**

The Office of the Public Advocate conducted a random survey of 100 public elementary schools, 20 in each of the City's five boroughs. Posing as parents, surveyors collected information from employees from each school's administrative office on the number and types of after-school athletic programs and sports teams available. Surveyors also asked employees to state the number of physical education classes available per week for students in the third and fourth grades. The survey was conducted from October 23<sup>rd</sup> to 27<sup>th</sup>, 2003.

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<sup>8</sup> National Institutes of Health, Word on Health, "Childhood Obesity on the Rise," June 2002.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/cgi/reprint/105/1/e15.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/topics/obesity/calltoaction/fact\\_adolescents.htm](http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/topics/obesity/calltoaction/fact_adolescents.htm)

<sup>12</sup> California Department of Education. <http://www.cde.ca.gov/news/releases2002/rel37.asp>

<sup>13</sup> American Heart Association. <http://www.americanheart.org/presenter.jhtml?identifier=4596>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> [http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/topics/obesity/calltoaction/fact\\_adolescents.htm](http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/topics/obesity/calltoaction/fact_adolescents.htm)

<sup>16</sup> [http://fitness.gov/Reading\\_Room/PE\\_Statement.jpg](http://fitness.gov/Reading_Room/PE_Statement.jpg)

## **Findings**

### ***Twenty percent of the surveyed schools lacked regular access to physical education classes.***

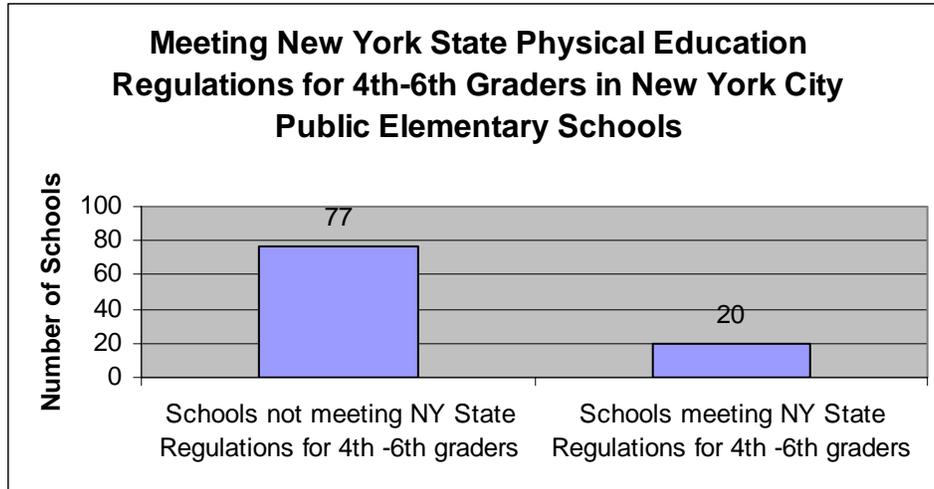
- Of the 100 schools surveyed, three were unable to provide us with the number of gym classes each grade receives.
- Of the 97 schools that did provide answers, 20 (20.6 percent) lacked consistent access to physical education classes.
  - Twelve reported not having any gym classes at all.
  - Eight schools reported not having a regular gym class. Some schools stated that the decision to provide gym is determined by individual teachers, and other schools rotate physical education classes on a semester or weekly basis.
- In some schools that have physical education classes, not all students are able to participate due to lack of available space or lack of gym teachers. For instance, not all students enrolled in either PS 127 and PS 108 in Queens are able to participate.

### ***All elementary schools surveyed are in violation of New York State regulations requiring daily physical education for students in Kindergarten through third grade***

- Of the 97 schools that responded, none were fulfilling the New York State regulation that requires school to provide daily physical education to students in Kindergarten through third grade.
- 69 schools had one physical education class per week, 20 lacked consistent access to physical education classes and the remaining eight offered two physical education classes per week.

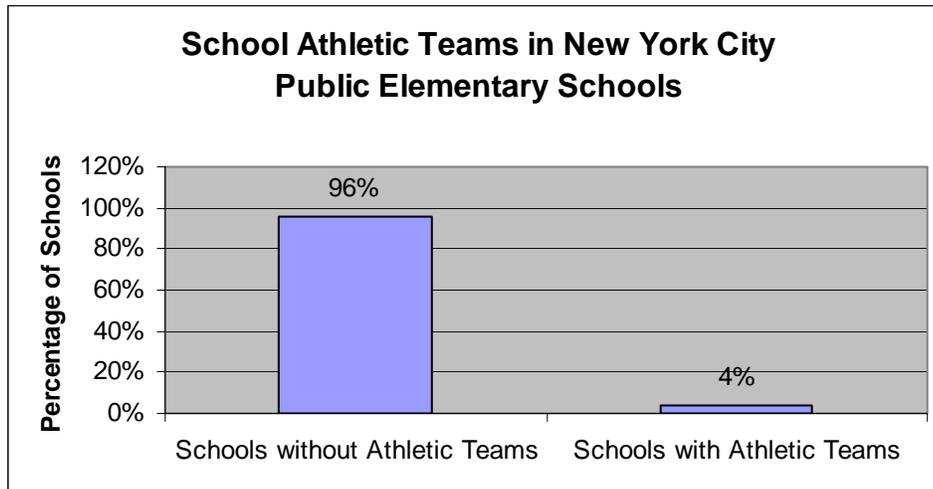
### ***Three-quarters of the schools with students in grades four through six are in violation of New York State regulations mandating at least 120 minutes of physical education for those students***

- Of the 97 schools that provided answers, 77 (79.3 percent ) were found to be in violation of New York state law mandating at least 120 minutes of physical education.
  - 57 reported having only one gym class for fourth through sixth graders, in violation of the New York state mandate to provide a minimum of three gym classes or 120 minutes of physical education per week.
  - 20 schools surveyed did not provide consistent access to gym classes.



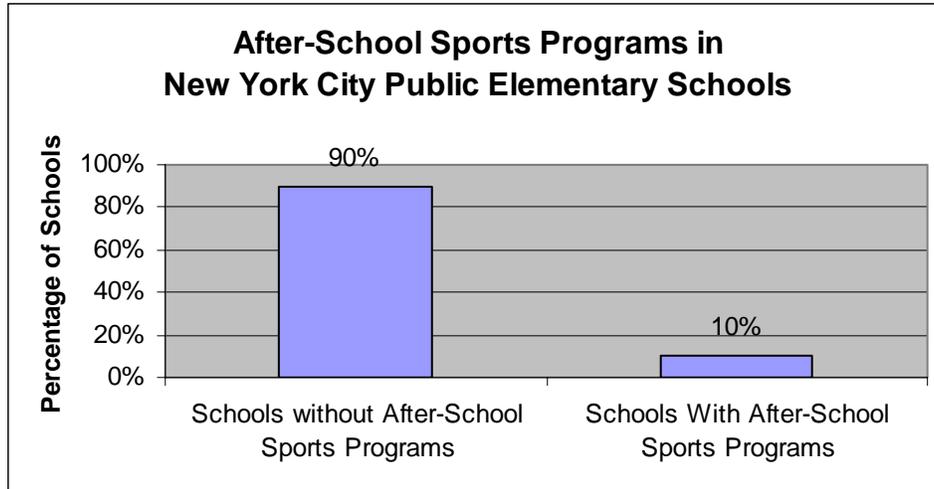
*Only four percent of all schools surveyed have an athletic team*

- Surveyors made calls to one hundred schools and found that only four schools—PS 149 in Brooklyn, PS 150 in Queens, PS 121 in the Bronx, and PS 57 in Manhattan—had athletic teams. All were basketball teams that met twice a week.



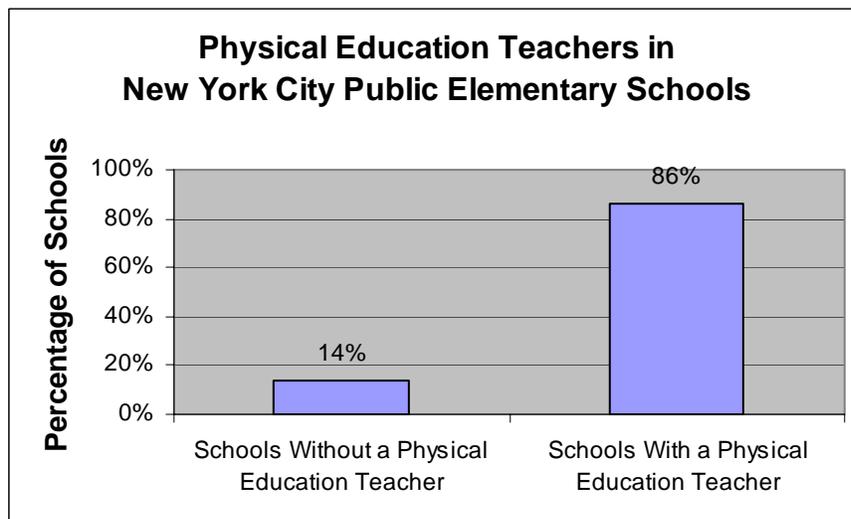
*Only ten percent of the schools surveyed have an after-school athletic program.*

- Of the one hundred schools surveyed, only ten percent have an after-school sports program.



*14 of the schools surveyed do not have a physical education teacher.*

- 14 of the schools surveyed reported not having a physical education teacher, either as a result of the recent budget cuts or inability to recruit a gym teacher.
- Five schools have no gymnasium at all. Three of these schools are located in Staten Island, two in Queens, and one in Brooklyn. Schools that lack gymnasiums often have to resort to using the cafeteria as a gym, as in the case of PS 108 in Queens.



## **Recommendations**

The Public Advocate makes the following recommendations to the New York City Department of Education:

### ***Work towards complying with New York State Regulations by offering at least two physical education classes per week.***

The New York State Department of Education Commissioner's Regulation requires students in Kindergarten through third grade to engage in a physical education program on a daily basis. All students in grades four through six must engage in at least three physical education classes for a minimum of 120 minutes per calendar week. The New York City Department of Education must work towards complying with state regulations to provide daily physical education classes for students in Kindergarten through third grade by offering at least two physical education classes per week. The DOE should follow these guidelines to ensure that all public schools, at every grade level.

### ***Provide proper athletic facilities to promote a healthy school population***

The New York City Department of Education's proposed 2005-2009 capital plan calls for \$331.9 million in funding for the upgrade and renovations of physical fitness facilities.<sup>17</sup> The Department of Education must provide children with the opportunity to take part in constructive physical education programs to ensure a healthy school population.

### ***Develop an effective physical education curriculum***

The City Department of Education must work with teachers to develop a physical education curriculum that is consistent with high standards and provides each student with a physical education experience that is conducive to good health. The Department of Education must provide support for physical education instruction with in-service training, program evaluation, and sufficient resources.

### ***Recruit qualified physical education teachers***

The Department of Education must ensure that physical education classes are taught by qualified teachers, who are certified to teach physical education.

## **Conclusion**

With 20 percent of schools surveyed unable to provide regular access to physical education classes and only ten percent able to offer an after-school sports program, New York City public elementary school students have very few in-school physical fitness opportunities. Even more troubling is that none of the schools surveyed were able to meet New York State Education regulations requiring daily physical education classes for students in Kindergarten through the

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<sup>17</sup> New York City Department of Education, "Children First Ten-Year Needs Assessment and Proposed 2005-2009 Five-Year Capital Plan," November 2003.

third grade. In addition, three-quarters of the schools surveyed were unable to meet state mandates for fourth through sixth graders. Reasons for inability to comply include a lack of athletic fields and gymnasiums and a lack of qualified physical education teachers. The lack of access to physical activities in our schools may also be a side effect of the increased emphasis on high stakes testing and the new reading and math curricula. With so much of the day spent on reading and mathematics, other programs like music, arts, and physical education have suffered. Although the lack of access to physical activity is not the only factor responsible for alarming rates of childhood obesity in New York City, it is a contributing factor that cannot be ignored.

## Appendix A: Survey Questions

1. Hello, my name is -----.
2. I am new to the neighborhood and am going to register my son and daughter for school soon. They are in the third and fourth grades.
3. My children are very athletic and I wanted to find out the kinds of school sports programs available at your school.
4. How many and what are they?
5. Do you have sports team my kids could join?
6. How many gym classes are there each week for the third and fourth grades?
7. If no gym classes are available, what is the reason?

**Appendix B: New York City Public Elementary Schools and Physical Education**

<b>Borough</b>	<b>School</b>	<b>School Athletic Team</b>	<b>After-School Sports Programs</b>	<b>Physical Education Classes</b>	<b>No. of Physical Education Classes per week for Third Graders</b>	<b>No. of Physical Education Classes per week for Fourth Graders</b>
Manhattan	PS 7	No	No	Yes	1	1
Manhattan	PS 83	No	No	No	0	0
Manhattan	PS 101	No	Yes - ice hockey	Yes	1	1
Manhattan	PS 196	No	No	Unable to Answer	Unable to Answer	Unable to Answer
Manhattan	PS 290	No	No	Yes	1	1
Manhattan	PS 206	No	No	Yes	1	1
Manhattan	PS 184 M	No	No	Yes	1	1
Manhattan	PS 183	No	Yes - track	Yes	1	1
Manhattan	PS 134	No	No	Yes	1	1
Manhattan	PS 96	No	No	Yes	1	1
Manhattan	PS 50	No	No	Yes	1	1
Manhattan	PS 77	No	Yes	Yes	1	1
Manhattan	PS 64	No	No	Yes	2	2
Manhattan	PS 57	Yes - basketball	No	Yes	1	2
Manhattan	PS 3	No	No	No	0	0
Manhattan	PS 109	No	No	Yes	1	1
Manhattan	PS 153	No	No	Unable to Answer	Unable to Answer	Unable to Answer

Manhattan	PS 194	No	No	Yes	1	1
Manhattan	PS 175	No	No	Yes	2	1
Manhattan	PS 140	No	No	Yes	1	1
Bronx	PS 21	No	No	Yes	1	1
Bronx	PS 67	No	No	Yes	1	1
Bronx	PS 160	No	No	Yes	1	2
Bronx	PS 130	No	No	Yes	2	2
Bronx	PS 121	Yes - basketball	No	Yes	1	1
Bronx	PS 57	No	No	Yes	1	1
Bronx	PS 119	No	No	Yes	1	1
Bronx	PS 106	No	No	Yes	1	1
Bronx	PS 212	No	No	Yes	1	2
Bronx	PS 83	No	No	Yes	1	2
Bronx	PS 68	No	No	Yes	1	1
Bronx	PS 105	No	No	Yes	1	2
Bronx	PS 100	No	No	Yes	1	1
Bronx	PS 197	No	No	No	0	0
Bronx	PS 140	No	No	Yes	1	1
Bronx	PS 214	No	Yes	Yes	1	1
Bronx	PS 178	No	Yes - dance program for girls	Yes	1	1
Bronx	PS 234	No	No	Not Consistent	Unable to Answer	Unable to Answer

Bronx	PS 691	No	No	Yes	1	1
Bronx	PS 175	No	No	Yes	1	2
Queens	PS 150	Yes - basketball & step	No	Not Consistent	Unable to Answer	Unable to Answer
Queens	PS 108	No	No	Yes	1	1
Queens	PS 45	No	No	Yes	1	1
Queens	PS 47	No	No	Yes	1	2
Queens	PS 65	No	No	Yes	1	1
Queens	PS 69	No	No	Yes	1	1
Queens	PS 71	No	No	No	0	0
Queens	PS 111	No	No	Yes	1	1
Queens	PS 88	No	No	Yes	2	2
Queens	PS 112	No	No	Yes	2	1
Queens	PS 150	No	No	Yes	1	1
Queens	PS 148	No	No	Unable to Answer	Unable to Answer	Unable to Answer
Queens	PS 128	No	No	No	0	0
Queens	PS 127	No	No	Not Consistent	Unable to Answer	Unable to Answer
Queens	PS 113	No	No	No	0	0
Queens	PS 229	No	No	Not Consistent	Unable to Answer	Unable to Answer
Queens	PS 153	No	Yes – tag, football, golf	Yes	1	1
Queens	PS 148	No	No	Yes	1	1
Queens	PS 166	No	No	Yes	1	2

Queens	PS 95	No	No	Yes	1	1
Brooklyn	PS 245	No	No	No	0	0
Brooklyn	PS 207	No	No	Not Consistent	Unable to Answer	Unable to Answer
Brooklyn	PS 18	No	No	Yes	1	1
Brooklyn	PS 15	No	No	Yes	1	1
Brooklyn	PS 130	No	No	No	0	0
Brooklyn	PS 256	No	Yes – basketball, karate, cheerleading, dancing	Yes	1	1
Brooklyn	PS 282	No	No	Yes	2	2
Brooklyn	PS 335	No	No	Yes	1	1
Brooklyn	PS 243	No	Yes – basketball, karate, cheerleading, dancing	Yes	2	2
Brooklyn	PS 328	No	No	Yes	1	1
Brooklyn	PS 345	No	No	Yes	1	1
Brooklyn	PS 89	No	Yes	No	0	0
Brooklyn	PS 184	No	No	Yes	1	1
Brooklyn	PS 150	No	No	Yes	1	2
Brooklyn	PS 149	Yes - boys & girls basketball	Yes	Yes	1	1
Brooklyn	PS 332	No	No	Yes	1	2
Brooklyn	PS 298	No	No	Yes	1	1
Brooklyn	PS	No	No	Yes	1	2

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Brooklyn	PS 174	No	No	Yes	1	2
Brooklyn	PS 184	No	No	Yes	1	2
Staten Island	PS 26	No	No	Not Consistent	Unable to Answer	Unable to Answer
Staten Island	PS 8	No	No	Not Consistent	Unable to Answer	Unable to Answer
Staten Island	PS 11	No	No	Yes	2	2
Staten Island	PS 41	No	No	Not Consistent	Unable to Answer	Unable to Answer
Staten Island	PS 20	No	No	Yes	1	1
Staten Island	PS 19	No	No	Yes	1	1
Staten Island	PS 57	No	No	Yes	1	1
Staten Island	PS 52	No	No	Yes	1	1
Staten Island	PS 39	No	No	No	0	0
Staten Island	PS 35	No	No	No	0	0
Staten Island	PS 38	No	No	Yes	1	1
Staten Island	PS 60	No	No	Yes	1	1
Staten Island	PS 69	No	No	Yes	1	1
Staten Island	PS 36	No	No	Yes	1	2
Staten Island	PS 18	No	No	No	0	0
Staten Island	PS 4	No	No	Yes	1	1
Staten Island	PS 38	No	No	Yes	1	1
Staten Island	PS 42	No	No	No	1	1
Staten Island	PS 29	No	No	Yes	1	1
Staten Island	PS 57	No	No	Yes	1	1