In recent years, some schools, such as P.S. 41 in Manhattan have become increasingly crowded.

This week parents and officials from lower Manhattan announced the area would soon get another elementary school, the third new school recently slated for the area.

But parents in other sections of the city have less reason to applaud. An amendment to the city's five year capital plan for the Department of Education, to be voted on by the Panel for Education Policy on Wednesday, calls for a major rollback in plans for new school design and construction between now and 2014, with some sections of the city set to get thousands fewer seats than they had anticipated.

Overall, the department anticipates building 19 fewer schools than it did just a year ago, a reduction of almost 10,000 seats. Just one community education district -- 30, which includes Jackson Heights, Long Island City and Sunnyside -- stands to lose three schools with 1,744

places.

Although these cuts have attracted far less attention than the city's intention to lay off more than 4,000 teachers, they have raised concern among advocates who see the reduced plan as a recipe for more school overcrowding and larger classes. City officials blame the scaling back on proposed changes in the way the state reimburses the city for school construction.

The Capital Plan

The administration proposes to reduce the $11.3 billion capital spending plan for 2010 to 2014, which was amended last February, to $9.3 billion. Only five months ago, in November, the city envisioned a much more ambitious program , never officially approved, totaling more than $16 billion.

The city attributes much of the cutback to an anticipated loss of state money. In 2010, the city expected the state to ante up $5.7 billion over five years. It now sees that dropping to $3.5 billion. The city has cut its anticipated spending by slightly over $100 million since the plan was approved last winter. To put it another way, the March plan saw the state putting up 49 percent of the money; the latest plan has the state contributing only 37 percent.

Much of the reduction will come in spending for new capacity, which was set at $4.0 billion in March 2010 and comes in at a bit under $1.8 billion now. The plan includes much smaller cuts in replacement capacity -- finding a new home for a school in a leased space -- and mandated expenses, such as improvements needed to comply with building codes.

Despite the anticipated cuts in state support, the city Department of Education still plans to provide $210 million to help charter schools build new facilities. In the budget plan, the department praises the partnership with charters and says it brings in "valuable private sector resources," with the education department having to pay only 73 percent of the cost of the new facilities for charters.

The latest plan also calls for an increase of $486 million to fund technology improvements, including those needed for new student assessments. Some of this money will go to accomodate the Innovation Zone program , an ambitious though still largely unrealized and untested plan to increase on-line learning and explore new approaches to the school day. This

brings the amount slated for the iZone program next year alone to $542.25 million, according to Leonie Haimson of Class Size Matters .

Some believe said this money could be better spent elsewhere. Haimson said, "This an extraordinarily large amount to be spending in any one year, especially given the city's (and the DOE's) shaky record in investing in technology projects."

Contending there is no evidence that the iZone works, Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer said in an emailed statement, "The DOE should either publicly release empirical data that justifies the large amount of funding it plans to dedicate to the iZone, or turn back to the basics and prioritize building school seats for our students who desperately need them now."

Finally, the plan calls for $141 million for efforts to increase energy efficiency "while simultaneously addressing the environmental issues associated with older lighting systems," as the education department put its -- in other words removing toxic PCBs from hundreds of school buildings across the city.

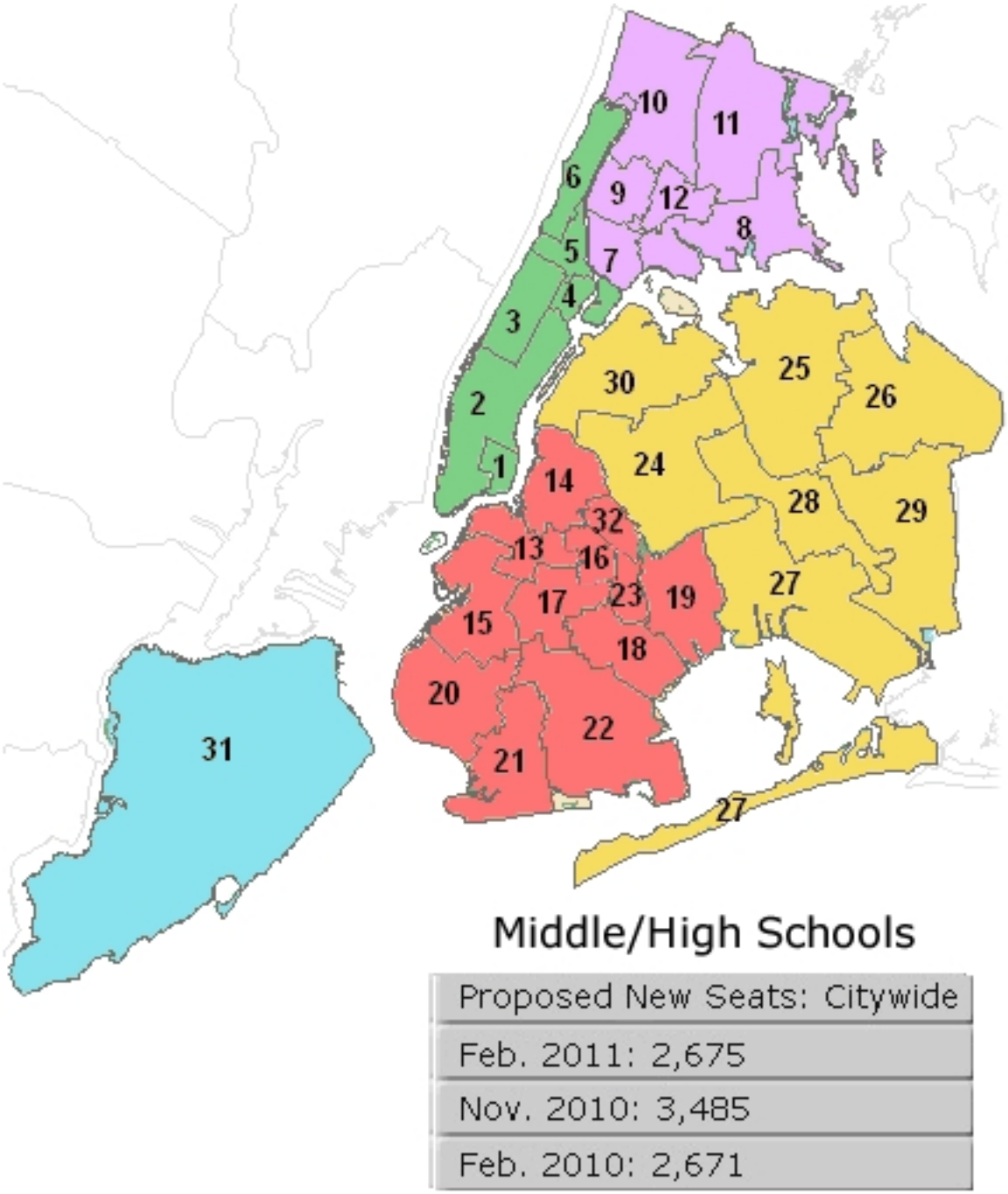
Jammed Up

The school crowding issue made headline earlier this year when School Chancellor Cathie Black famously quipped that birth control might be the best solution to the school system's capacity problems. But the shortage of space has been a persistent issue in many part of the city despite the addition -- completed or in progress -- of some 55,000 slots under the previous capital plan.

Although the system may not be above capacity overall, the department's figures show half of the city's children attend overcrowded schools, according to Helaine Doran of the Campaign for Fiscal Equity
. That estimate, she said, is low because it does not include schools that uses trailers as classroom or students who have to be sent away from their neighborhood school.

One study found that more than half of all the city's high school students attend overcrowded schools. A report by the city comptroller's office in 2009 cited widespread overcrowding and stated, "The new capacity projected to be completed by 2012 will fall far short of the amount required to end overcrowding in primary and primary/intermediate schools in the following

communities where enrollment exceeded capacity."



The latest capital proposal from the Department of Education scales back the number of new seats to be added by 2014, essentially reversing a November 2010 proposal to substantially increase capacity and building fewer schools than the city proposed a year ago.

The crowding is not spread evenly throughout the city. While the Department of Education maintains that some schools have far fewer students than they can accommodate, others are packed. The Upper West Side has twice as many young children now than it did in 2000,

creating a squeeze in schools there. According to the education department's own figures, P.S. 236 in the Morris Heights section of the Bronx had almost double the number of students it should have.

"In districts all over the city enrollment has been increasing, especially in the early grades," said Haimson.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg has widely touted the jammed classrooms as proof that his school policies work. Earlier this week, he cited the shortage of classrooms as one of the "problems of success" that "Buffalo would love to have." Schools have improved, his reasoning goes, enough so that parents who once might have fled to the suburbs now remain in the five borough and send their children to the public schools.

Others additional explanations, including the shutting of parochial schools. Haimson of Class Size Matters believes that some of the mayor's own policies -- notably the closing of big schools and replacing them with small ones and the placing of charter schools in some district school buildings -- have contributed to the space crunch.

Some observers point out that New York, unlike many other cities, does not require builders of major new residential projects to somehow provide for new schools in the area. Such new homes have certainly fueled the space problems in Tribeca and the Upper West Side, forcing the city to play catch up after the developer's work is done.

Funding the Space

Large class size and jam-packed classrooms plaguing city schools were key issues in the Campaign for Fiscal Equity lawsuit challenging school financing. As a result of the case -- though not as part of an actual legal settlement -- Gov. Eliot Spitzer agreed to fund about 50 percent of capital construction in the city.

The state no longer wants to adhere to that. For most years of the plan, the city will see between $500 million and $600 million in funds from the state -- down from the slightly more than $1 billion a year the city anticipated under the old plan.

Since the settlement of the suit, things have changed. "Both the state and the city have made major investment in education -- billions of dollars in increasing capacity. It's important to recognize that," said Morris Peters, a spokesman for the state Division of the Budget .

The state has aid the city can have up to $1 billion in what it consider allowable expenses annually, with the state reimbursing over 60 percent of that, for a maximum of around $600 million. In addition to a smaller pool, Gov. Andrew Cuomo has proposed changing the system for distributing money, Peters said. It would set priorities for which projects to fund, focusing first on those that address health and safety concerns, then ones that correct overcrowding and so on down a list.

The reimbursement formula also considers the fiscal status of the district. Until now, Peters said, districts could choose a year, going back to the 1980s, that would put them at the best advantage. Under Cuomo's changes, they could no longer do this.

However the state determine's the city's allotment, the Bloomberg "administration understands that our school system needs more investment than that, which is why the city's relative share of this capital plan would actually skyrocket should Albany cap building aid," Department of Education Jack Zarin-Rosenfeld said in an email.

While some advocates say the city wants to lobby Albany for more funds, the Bloomberg administration so far has been relatively quiet on this issue, preferring to press its campaign to end the last in, first out system for laying off teachers.

The mayor did, however, discuss the proposed cuts in testimony before the legislature this year.

"The courts have ruled that class size is too great as it is. Just imagine what would happen if the state does cut its support for school construction by 67 percent. It would be a huge setback -- and make it much harder for us to relieve the pockets of overcrowding that exist," Bloomberg said.

He also criticized prosed changes in the state system for evaluating capital projects, calling it "a recipe, if I've ever heard of one, for bureaucratic inaction and delay [that] would also make it harder for local elected officials, and community leaders, to make their voices heard on projects in their districts."

In a joint statement issued yesterday City Council speaker Christine Quinn and Robert Jackson criticized the state for proposing a plan that they said "would force the DOE to scuttle its plans to add 36,000 new school seats." The two council members said they are "pushing hard to reverse this plan."

At least up until now, advocates have not focused on the capital spending either. "The cut is so big on operations," said Doran. "How many pieces can you go for?"

Haimson, though, believes the administration could find money to build schools. "The city has never put any effort into increasing capacity," she said. "There are plenty of capital funds available. They don't want to spend it on schools."

"Kindergarten waiting lists, which we've never had in this city, and overcrowded schools are going to be this mayor's legacy," she said.

Winner and Losers

A few districts do fare better in this year's plan than last year's. The Upper West Side, for example, which had no new space under the February 2010 amendment now is set for 480 new seats.

The Corona section of Queens, widely seen as among the city's most overcrowded, will add room for 3,123 more students -- a slight increase over the amount in last year's plan.

On the other side of the ledger, Chelsea/Midtown West drops 800 seats. A new, unnamed school slated for District 8 in the Bronx is gone. In another part of the Bronx, District 10, which

was supposed to get there new schools, will now only have one. The Van Nest/Pelham Bay section will lose almost half of its anticipated seats.

In Brooklyn, all 612 planned new slots in Williamsburg/Greenpoint have been deleted. A new school for Carroll Gardens and Red Hook is also off the table. Last year, District 20 in Bay Ridge could look forward to six schools with 3,046 seats; that's been cut to two schools with room for 1,075 students.

Bayside, Howard Beach and Hollis are no longer slated for new schools. Staten Island lost one school, in the New Dorp section.

In deciding which projects to drop, the education department said it considered a few factors.

"We study data by neighborhood so we can ensure our investments are going directly to the areas of the city that need the most new school seats. That means, by definition, our new construction investments are going into the neighborhoods with the most need," said Zarin-Rosenfeld. "In putting together this latest amendment, any project that is already in construction or has a site identified remained in the plan. Other projects were shifted to 'design only' for this five-year plan, while the remaining projects were deferred until the next plan."

Many of the projects being abandoned were in early stages of development without locations or advanced design plans. Department of Education documents identified most of them only by borough and number.

(Correction: This article originally attributed all $86 million for technology programs to spending on the Innovation Zone. Instead, according to the education department, that money will go for a number of programs, including the iZone and redesigned student assessments. The story has been corrected.)