

Legislation Text

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Calling upon the School Reform Commission, Superintendent William Hite, and the School District of Philadelphia to address widespread overcrowding in Philadelphia schools by enacting a lower class size in kindergarten through third grade, and ending the practice of split-grade classrooms unless specifically designed for pedagogical purposes.

WHEREAS, Philadelphia's severe budget cuts and teacher vacancy crisis have resulted in widespread overcrowding in Philadelphia public schools, exemplified by a February report from the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers ("PFT") documenting more than 500 overcrowded classrooms in Philadelphia elementary, middle and high schools that exceed contractual maximums outlined in the teachers' contract; and

WHEREAS, News reports throughout the year documented examples of extreme overcrowding, such as 77 students in a physical education class at Mastbaum High School; and

WHEREAS, The PFT documented more than 200 overcrowded classrooms at the elementary level and more than 360 overcrowded classrooms at the high school level; and

WHEREAS, The School District of Philadelphia is in clear violation of the teachers' contract regarding class size in schools; and

WHEREAS, Widespread overcrowding has also resulted in the implementation of split grades across the School District, which is the practice of merging students of different grades together when the District does not hire or pay for a full-time teacher and commit to a lower class size; and

WHEREAS, The School District of Philadelphia has not been timely and transparent in reporting the number of split-grade classrooms, however the PFT had identified dozens of split-grade classrooms impacting hundreds of students in February 2016; and

WHEREAS, Under the Paul Vallas and Arlene Ackerman administrations, the School District of Philadelphia had abolished the practice of split-grade classrooms, deeming those created by budget austerity to be pedagogically flawed and highly disruptive to learning; and

WHEREAS, The current administration of the School District of Philadelphia testified in 2016 that while split-grade classrooms could be considered best practices if employed with pedagogical purpose, the District could not identify any schools in which split-grade classrooms were used for specific pedagogical reasons and acknowledged that split-grade classrooms were not ideal learning conditions; and

WHEREAS, The School District of Philadelphia has established as one of its four anchor goals the promise that every 8-year-old will be on grade level reading; and

WHEREAS, Mandatory state testing requires that students meet specific grade level standards; and

WHEREAS, The City of Philadelphia is committed to investing heavily in Universal Pre-K expansion over the next several years as a major anti-poverty initiative and to help give young children a head start on improving their educational outcomes; and

WHEREAS, Students in kindergarten through third grade who end up in overcrowded classrooms and split grades face additional hurdles in meeting grade-level requirements that runs counter to the spirit of the City's efforts around Universal Pre-K outcomes and directly impacts the District's ability to meets its own goals as well as state mandates; and

WHEREAS, Principals and school-based administrators face difficult choices given budget allocations which also impact the ability to control for class size and split grades unless the School District of Philadelphia makes lower class size and an end to split-grade classrooms a specific mandate; and

WHEREAS, The School District of Philadelphia has proposed to eliminate split grades at some undetermined future point in time, and has indicated it will make hires to reduce but not eliminate the number of split-grade classrooms in the District; and

WHEREAS, This effort is acknowledged but not deemed sufficient given the District's stated goals and spending priorities; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, BY THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA, That Council does call upon the School Reform Commission, Superintendent William Hite, and the School District of Philadelphia to address widespread overcrowding in Philadelphia schools by enacting a lower class size in kindergarten through third grade, and ending the practice of split-grade classrooms unless specifically designed for pedagogical purposes.