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Dear Commissioner Rosa,

On behalf of the Lower Hudson Education Coalition (LHEC), which is a joint project of the Lower Hudson Council of School Superintendents, Dutchess County School Boards Association, Rockland County School Boards Association and Westchester Putnam School Boards Association, this correspondence is to respectfully request that the New York State Education Department (NYSED) reinstate the Third-Party Review Program (TPR) for capital project submissions.

The benefits to school districts and taxpayers of an efficient avenue for timely reviews cannot be overstated. Over the past several years, the TPR program created an efficient and effective process that played a pivotal role in streamlining the project review process. Prior to the program's initiation, districts encountered significant delays in the review of capital projects resulting in escalated costs for taxpayers. The Third-Party Review process helped school districts create project timelines and develop accurate cost projections, allowing Boards of Education and Superintendents to maintain the trust of our taxpayers and hold ourselves accountable to the students and communities we serve.

The elimination of TPR is resulting in significant cost escalations and construction delays after capital budgets have already been presented to and approved by communities. Many districts may need to change the scope of our approved projects due to costs associated with these unanticipated permit delays.

The positive impact of the Third-Party Review process was evident in the expeditious review and approval of projects within a reasonable timeframe, typically ranging between 8 to 10 weeks. This not only contributed to the timely execution of essential educational initiatives but also alleviated financial burdens on the communities we serve. With the suspension of the TPR program in March 2023, we are now hearing from districts that they are experiencing reviews that take up to three times longer than when the process was in place. The TPR program also allowed NYSED's Office of Facility Planning to have a manageable review queue. The efficiency achieved through TPR facilitated better planning, budgeting, and execution of capital projects, ultimately benefiting the students and taxpayers of our districts.

Considering the benefits of the TPR program to school districts and taxpayers, we believe reinstating it would be judicious and responsible. A timely review allows school districts to address aging infrastructure, safety, and environmental needs with the immediacy our children deserve. The collaborative effort between educational institutions and the NYSED is crucial for the continued progress and enhancement of our educational infrastructure.

Sincerely,

The Lower Hudson Education Coalition