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HEADLINE: **CITY'S BAD LESSON ON A REVITALIZED SCHOOL**

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BODY:

THE JULIA RICHMAN Educational Complex on the upper East Side has long been considered a shining example of how to turn around failing public schools.

By the early 1990s, the former Julia Richman High School at E. 67th St. and Second Ave. was so dysfunctional and violent that school system veterans were calling it Julia Rikers.

Officials finally closed the school in 1995 and replaced it with six autonomous experimental schools, all operating in the same building. With new educators and a new, smaller-is-better approach, student performance skyrocketed.

The change was so astounding that the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation quickly labeled the new Julia Richman a national model for urban educational reform, and experts flocked there from all over America to study its methods.

So what has been the response of Schools Chancellor Joel Klein to one of his system's biggest success stories?

Demolish it.

Earlier this year, Klein gave the green light to a proposal by nearby Hunter College to take over the site, raze the building and replace it with a Hunter science center and a new CUNY Graduate School of Public Health. In exchange, Hunter College has offered Klein a site on its auxiliary campus at E. 25th St. and the FDR Drive, where the six displaced schools would be housed in a new state-of-the-art facility.

But parent leaders and teachers at Richman say they love their current building just fine, thank you.

Relocating their students more than 2 miles away from their current site will destroy the close relationship their small schools have nurtured with the local community.

Even worse, they say school officials, in typical Bloomberg administration style, never asked their opinion on the sale and demolition of their schools.

One possible casualty is an extraordinary program known as the 226 School for Autistic Children. Another is the Ella Baker Elementary School, which takes in students whose parents mostly commute to work on the upper East Side.

Gail Ford is one of those parents. Every morning, she commutes from Brooklyn to her job at New York-Presbyterian Hospital Weill Cornell, and drops off her two sons, one a third-grader and the other a seventh-grader, at Ella Baker.

"Right now, many of us [parents] are able to leave work during lunch hour and visit the school," Ford said. "The staff always welcome us, so we are very involved in what goes on. That will all be lost if the school is moved so far away."

"This would kill me," said Diane Elsayy, who commutes to work each day from the Bronx and drops off her son Ahmed, a second-grader, at Ella Baker each morning.

But the Hunter project would take years to complete, college spokeswoman Meredith Halpern said yesterday.

"None of the students who are currently there now will be affected," Halpern said. "Once the new school is built at 25th St., then the Richman students would be moved."

Elsawy added, "If Hunter needs space, why don't they move their own elementary and high school? They act like their kids are everything and our kids are nothing."

She was referring to the elite Hunter College High School and Elementary School that the college has operated for decades on E. 94th St. Hunter's public schools, Halpern said, are too far away from the college's main campus on E. 68th St.

"Science students and researchers and faculty would benefit tremendously with being in a facility adjacent to the main Hunter Campus," Halpern said.

In other words, the need for Hunter's adult college students to be within walking distance of all their facilities is a greater public good than any inconvenience that could result to autistic children and second-graders and parents of Ella Baker.

As for the amazing community that has been fashioned by Julia Richman through years of hard work, Klein and his many educators believe that can be replicated in any environment.

"This is a special place that kids feel is a wonderful facility," said Ann Cook, co-director of the Urban Academy, one of the high schools in the complex.

"We have an art gallery, a minitheater, a 1,500-seat auditorium with marvelous acoustics. We have terrific relations with the community for our autistic children to work with organizations. What's to guarantee that will stay the same?"

School officials who met this week with City Councilman Robert Jackson (D-Manhattan), the chairman of the Council's Education Committee, and a group of angry parents tried to tell them no final decision has been reached on the proposal. But over at Hunter, they're acting like the deal is done.

Someone needs to teach Klein some basics of education: You don't break things you've already fixed.

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