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HEADLINE: **HANDS OFF OUR SCHOOL! Bid to save E. Side complex**

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BODY:

CRITICS RAILED yesterday against plans to tear down an upper East Side school that's undergone \$15 million in renovations as officials defended plans to put up a college science center on the site.

Students at the Julia Richman Education Complex would be moved to a new, state-of-the-art school at 25th St. and the FDR Drive, under the controversial proposal.

"What's better? An 83-year-old building that's going to continue to have maintenance issues, or a brand-new building that we can provide for them?" asked Jamie Smarr, an aide to Schools Chancellor Joel Klein. "These are really modern facilities. That's the most important thing."

But the Richman school, on 67th St. and Second Ave., is a beloved community institution whose supporters have vowed to do everything from lawsuits to protests to prevent its demolition to make way for a Hunter College science center.

Supporters say the building, once known as Julia Rikers for its dangerous reputation, has reinvented itself as a home for six notable schools, including a performing arts high school, a school for autistic children and a school created to serve children of people who work in the area. Their objections were highlighted yesterday by Daily News columnist Juan Gonzalez.

School officials have put \$15 million into renovations since 1995, and supporters say treasured features like its sweeping auditorium cannot be re-created.

"Do you think you could take Carnegie Hall and transport it to Queens?" asked Ann Cook, the principal of Urban Academy, one of the schools in the building. "Would it have the same character? The same history?"

In exchange for the upper East Side location, Hunter offered a new school on land the college is selling at 25th St. near the FDR Drive.

"It's a brand new, state-of-the-art facility at no cost to the taxpayer," said Hunter spokeswoman Meredith Halpern. "It's an exciting opportunity, both for the folks at Julia Richman as well as for Hunter. . . . Our upper East Side location is a key advantage in competing for federal grants."

Julia Richman won't be torn down until the new school opens in 2010 or 2011.

The new building - which Smarr says will cost an estimated \$130 million and serve 2,200 or 2,300 students as opposed to the 1,700 now at Julia Richman - will be the work of whoever buys the massive 25th St. site Hunter plans to sell. The sale would require the buyer to build the new school and find a new home for 600 Hunter students currently living in a dorm on the site.

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