

April 15, 2021

Version 2, updated PortSide New York testimony re: April 15 Joint Public Hearing: Proposed Grade Reconfiguration of P.S. 676 from an Elementary school a Middle School Beginning in the 2022-2023 School Year and Future Re-Siting

More info on the hearing (that includes a link to this testimony in [this blogpost](#))

PortSide New York is an award-winning, maritime nonprofit founded in 2005 and based in Red Hook, Brooklyn. Creating and providing educational programs is a key part of our work.

Our educational programs have served elementary to graduate school and professional education for teachers. We have worked with public schools, private schools, charter schools, students from every Red Hook school in some kind of way, USA schools outside of NYC and even students from overseas. The teachers and staff have praised ALL PortSide educational programs; we have never received a bad review.

In terms of the topics to be covered in the DOE hearing on April 15, 2021, we focus on the PS 676 maritime story as that relates to our work, mission and role in the history leading up to this hearing:

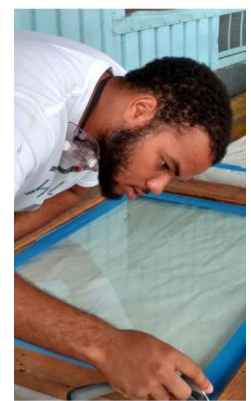
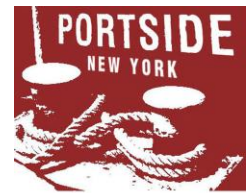
- ❖ PortSide was the only maritime program partner for PS 676 during the school year 2018 to 2019, and our programs prompted the DOE so suggest to 676 that the school shift to a maritime theme.
- ❖ More on our relationship with PS 676 in [this blogpost](#)
- ❖ More about PortSide's education programs with other schools and age ranges on [this webpage](#)

PortSide supports PS 676 adopting the maritime theme (we call them WaterStories) because it relates to local Red Hook resources (our neighborhood's physical waterfront and the multiple and diverse maritime businesses and nonprofits located here), AND because PortSide sees maritime-themed and place-based education as engaging, inspiring and impactful for the following reasons:

The waterfront is a complex and changing place (and thus exciting to students) where nature and man-made co-exist and collide. The waterways are NYC's largest open space.

It's not the same every class. Ships, birds, fish, dramatic weather come and go, all of them teaching moments.

PortSide New York, aboard the tanker MARY A. WHALEN
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Our ship rises and falls – learn about tides! Boats and waterways inspire feelings of exploration, and that’s what education is all about. The sky is huge, the sea is vast; they help the soul escape urban pressures, and they open the mind.

The water is full of fascinating creatures. STEM topics are all around (boats are a concentration of STEM systems). Our waterfront is a place rich in history of evolution, ships and shipping, industry, immigration, culture. Waves of immigrants and visiting sailors hit these shores; that’s many layers of human history on top of the original Native American layer. Hurricane Sandy is a starting point for lessons about shoreline change, climate change, resiliency. Our e-museum Red Hook WaterStories has content about all of that to support lesson plans. Our ship MARY A. WHALEN is compelling, has a long Red Hook history and all those STEM systems.

Award-winning PortSide NewYork is uniquely positioned to play a leading role in shaping the direction of the new middle school because of:

1. Our knowledge of Red Hook residents and their needs and strengths
2. Our gift for creating new educational experiences and programs
3. Our 15 years’ experience developing compelling educational programs for students of diverse ages and backgrounds. The fact that we have programmed for students both younger and older than middle school means that we can help design middle school programs that fit in an educational continuum.
4. Our expertise with diverse maritime topics and large pool of supportive advisors
5. Our strong relationships with Red Hook maritime businesses AND maritime entities all over the harbor including business, government/regulatory entities, advocacy groups and nonprofits
6. PortSide physical assets: our historic ship Mary A. Whalen, a floating dock, rowboat, kayaks, oyster basket, marine science equipment and more
7. PortSide’s digital assets:
 - our virtual museum [Red Hook WaterStories](#) that covers Red Hook maritime and water topics past and present. This growing resource has proved a rich source of curriculum content and informs our own development of curricula, field trips, partnerships etc. This resource connects educational content to the home neighborhood of the students which makes it more relevant and helps bring concepts to life, eg, this helps the whole learning process.
 - PortSide [African American Maritime Heritage](#) program. Most Red Hook residents are Black, so this resource represents their heritage and can engage them in a maritime present.

Recommendations

1. PortSide stresses that the development of the maritime middle school needs to be done thoughtfully and be led by content experts about maritime. The NYC DOE has no other maritime middle school, so this is new work; and we encourage the DOE to use a transparent, inclusive process in designing the new school building and curriculum.
2. PortSide stresses that curriculum design needs to lead planning the maritime middle school design/construction. Curriculum development needs to be very advanced before construction starts. A standard school design would be an impediment. It is important to offer physical experiences when teaching STEM topics; this calls for shop and lab spaces. To do a good job of teaching maritime topics you need spaces for things like a wet lab/aquarium or boat building and space to store and use lots of physical stuff. Teaching maritime is much more dependent on the use of objects than teaching literature, English or math.
3. PortSide stresses that to make this maritime middle school serve the Red Hook community, robust outreach should be offered to Red Hook NYCHA adults (the majority population in Red Hook, which is majority Black) so they know what maritime is and means and can be for their children. We say this is because we see that few local NYCHA residents use Red Hook's waterfront amenities; and our prior outreach, surveys and programs suggest that maritime topics are not familiar territory for them. We say this because the maritime industry in NYC is a very white space (except for staffing of the NYC Ferry), as is recreational boating, as is maritime history as it is conventionally taught (which is NOT how PortSide teaches the heritage). PortSide proposes to help develop and deliver outreach and community engagement events to connect Red Hook NYCHA residents with the maritime theme so that that the middle school enrollment is not dominated by privileged students from outside Red Hook.
4. Development of an outreach team and strategies for messaging about upcoming meetings in this process. We are concerned that we do not detect much Red Hook community chatter about this hearing. We do recognize that it is challenging to communicate to and in Red Hook, a place fraught by the digital divide, community diversity, community silos and other issues – and things are more fraught now by the disruptions of the pandemic - however, this is the local reality. If PortSide received so few messages about this hearing, how much reached others who are less connected to the issues? We say this as PortSide is a significant educational player for one issue being covered tonight since our programming inspired PS 676 to adopt a maritime focus, and we received no info from PS 676 staff about this hearing.
 - We request that the DOE communicate info about such meetings to PortSide directly by emailing chiclet@portsidenewyork.org.

Request for more info about PS 676 recent history:

Declining enrollment means there are management problems (from curriculum to administration). Shutting a school does not reveal why parents/families took their kids out of a school. To understand educational issues and patterns in Red Hook and what parents/families are fleeing and seeking, and to create and ensure better educational service in response, more info about recent years at PS 676 would be helpful. We ask for the following info to understand past parent/family choices so that we can all work to meet those needs and concerns:

1. A year-by-year breakdown of PS 676's declining enrollment since 2015 to better understand the "since the 2015-2016" statistic on page 3 of the Educational Impact Statement (EIS): "P.S. 676 has served fewer than 200 students for the last six school years, and enrollment has declined by 51% since the 2015-2016 school year."
2. Are there any exit interviews or anecdotes that explain the declining PS 676 enrollment? Do you have info from families explaining why they left the school? Do you have info about what new schools they chose for their children? Declining enrollment can mean parent/family education concerns that need to be addressed, and PortSide wants that information and the community deserves it.
3. Info on the residential location of PS 676 students during the period 2015 to now. How many each year lived in Red Hook? How many lived in shelters? How many moved out of Red Hook? This is to help assess if residential stability is part of PS 676's declining enrollment story or not.
4. What info do you have on PS 676 successes and problems during the period 2015 to now, including the new/current management of the school? Qualitative info like this helps develop solutions to problems and understand what's successful.

PortSide NewYork looks forward to working on improving educational options in and for Red Hook.

Sincerely,



Carolina Salguero
Executive Director
PortSide NewYork