

Nothing fair about it

That sound you hear is the New York City Board of Education letting the other shoe drop in its revised capital spending plan. On Friday, the board approved an amendment to the five-year capital construction plan that eliminates the funding for the proposed new intermediate school in New Springville along with 10 other new schools around the city.

The new school, designated IS 43, was intended to relieve severe overcrowding at both Laurie Intermediate School (IS 72), also in New Springville, and Markham Intermediate School (IS 51) in nearby Graniteville. Laurie is at 112 percent of capacity, and some classes have to be given in the auditorium, while Markham, at 119 percent of capacity, has been forced to go to a split schedule to accommodate all of its students. Borough President Guy Molinari had managed to get the Board of Ed to commit to the new intermediate school based on that middle school overcrowding, after his earlier success in already getting several new elementary schools for the borough.

Now, with the Board of Education facing a \$2.4-billion shortfall in its current five-year capital spending plan, IS 43 was identified early on as a likely casualty. And on Friday, the board formalized that in its vote.

The new plan does include funding for 21 new schools around the other four boroughs, however, with a majority of them in Queens, which, it is generally agreed, has the most severe overcrowding problems in the city.

Schools Chancellor Harold Levy said that the decisions as to what schools would go forward and what ones would be pushed into the next five-year plan, or postponed indefinitely, were made on the basis of utilization rates in the various districts.

"It's fair to say Queens has the most severe problem in the city," Mr. Molinari said. "But you are talking about adding 13,805 new school seats in the city and not one on Staten Island."

He added, "I think time will show that this will be a terrible mistake."

Staten Island Board of Education member Jerry Cammarata said that the Board of Education underestimates overcrowding problems on Staten Island, in part, because it is such a large school dis-

trict. As a district, according to the board's figures, Staten Island is at 94 percent of capacity, even though schools in some sections, including the Mid-Island area, are desperately overcrowded.

He said that the board considers an underutilized school on one end of Staten Island and an overcrowded school on the other to be within the same district, and therefore students from the overcrowded school could be shifted to the underutilized school, in theory at least. In practice, because the schools are separated by miles, it's a different story.

"The Island is so big that the cost to the Board of Education to do transportation there is incredible," he said. "To make an argument that Staten Island is under capacity is a false argument."

Chancellor Levy has proposed extending the elementary schools through the eighth grade to alleviate overcrowding in the middle schools. In the Mid-Island region, however, the elementary schools that feed Laurie and Markham are themselves overcrowded, so that proposal wouldn't work.

Board president Ninfa Segarra said she proposed a plan whereby the funding for IS 43 would have been preserved while funding for a new high school in Queens would be postponed. In the end, however, that alternative proposal was turned back in favor of the more lopsided one that was adopted.

"The capital plan has always been a political exercise. The plan at the end was not based on need. It was based on getting the fourth vote," Ms. Segarra said.

Chancellor Levy, putting an improbable spin on it, said "The plan that we have before us doesn't begin to meet the needs [of the entire system]. What we're doing today is taking our best shot at fairness."

Only in the universe of the Board of Education would the allocation of nearly 14,000 new school seats, but none on Staten Island, be considered fair.

As Mr. Molinari said, "They can sugar-coat this all they want, but the fact of the matter is, Staten Island got screwed."