

De Blasio's other education-logistics challenge

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By [Eliza Shapiro](#) 5:12 a.m. | Jul. 31, 2014 [follow this reporter](#)

The de Blasio administration is facing a second [formidable](#) education challenge, in addition to its signature pre-kindergarten expansion in the fall: its plan to roll out 40 new "community schools".

Officials will have to read hundreds of applications and match schools with community-based organizations by October when the schools—characterized by wraparound health and social services—begin operation.

During the mayoral campaign, Bill de Blasio vowed to open 100 community schools by 2018 after touring the widely respected community schools of Cincinnati. The short timetable has left the Department of Education hustling to get the program up and running just a few weeks after 53,000 toddlers begin their first day of pre-K.

"There is an enormous amount of work to be done," said Sheena Wright, president and C.E.O. of the United Way, the nonprofit group that provided [a \\$52 million, five-year grant](#) to help operate 40 of the community schools.

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"It's a huge, huge, huge lift," she said.

Some members [of a new advisory board](#) of 50 educational experts who asked not to be identified told Capital the administration is still struggling to reach its own definition of what a community school is, despite the fact that they're

about to open. The members say there's still only a vague sense of what New York's brand of community schools will look like, and that it's yet to be determined how these schools prioritize academic performance, parent engagement and in-school social services.

The D.O.E. and United Way have identified 700 already operational schools with chronic absenteeism issues, which makes them eligible to apply to become community schools. Charter schools are also eligible to apply to become community schools.

Wright noted that absentee rates are a proven metric to determine which schools are most in need of community-based assistance.

In the next two months, the D.O.E. and United Way must sift through applications from hundreds of schools and community-based organizations hoping to be involved in the effort, and whittle down the group to about 40 schools and twelve C.B.O.s, Wright said. The schools and C.B.O.s submitted their applications on Monday.

Wright said the United Way will narrow down the number of possible schools by August 8, then align them with C.B.O.s offering such services as health, dental and mental health counseling. Eighty-seven C.B.O.s applied to partner with schools, according to the United Way; the D.O.E. did not provide figures about how many of its schools applied. Each of the dozen C.B.O.s ultimately selected will be expected to provide services to several community schools. Each C.B.O. will be awarded about \$300,000 annually.

The two agencies must also match the prospective schools with interested C.B.O.s that can offer a needed service, and help create a blueprint for how the community schools should function. The D.O.E. is planning on releasing a white paper sometime in September outlining the city's community schools

philosophy and operational plan, a department spokeswoman confirmed. Then, Wright said, “we’ll be off to the races.”

The city has arranged for relatively little organized input on how those schools should look. The 50-member advisory board has met once in its entirety, and has no scheduled follow-up meeting, several members told Capital.

Community schools in New York City have been created on an “ad hoc...haphazard” basis thus far, Wright said, and streamlining the process will present its own challenge, she conceded.

Several board members also expressed concerns that the administration may be taking on too large of a load with the dual community schools and pre-K initiatives.

City officials say the schools will be ready.

“Fortunately, the resources, personnel and sequencing of major undertakings like pre-K, after-school and community schools are all very different,” Richard Buery, the deputy mayor overseeing both pre-K and community schools said in a statement. “We’ll be able to move all the trains on different tracks, and ensure initiatives like community schools are brought to fruition as promised.”