

THE SHSAT – DISPARITIES IMPACTING DIVERSITY, OPPORTUNITY AND ACHIEVEMENT IN NYC PUBLIC SCHOOLS: A COMPREHENSIVE ACTION PLAN FOR CHANGE

BROOKLYN TECH ALUMNI FOUNDATION

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Of New York City's 439 public high schools, only nine are characterized as "specialized". Admission is granted to eight of these highly sought-after schools based solely on students' scores on the Specialized High Schools Admissions Test or the SHSAT, seat availability, and student preference. (A ninth specialized school uses an audition and review of student work instead of the SHSAT to determine admission.)

Thirty years ago Brooklyn Tech's student body was 51 percent Black and Latino. Ten percent and 22 percent, respectively, of the students attending Stuyvesant and Bronx Science were Black and Latino. Today, 15 percent of Brooklyn Tech's students are Black and Latino, and Stuyvesant and Bronx Science have much smaller percentages.

This paper explains the reasons for this dramatic shift, primarily over time the steady erosion of Gifted & Talented (G&T) and other honors coursework in the primary grades serving these communities. Not only were enriched classes eliminated but Black and Latino parents were deliberately steered away from enrolling their children in then existing advanced learning opportunities. This history also demonstrates that there were significant pockets of resistance where dedicated school leaders increased not only average reading and math skills in the district but successfully strove to send Black and Latino students to specialized high schools as a measure of being an educationally successful district.

The specialized schools continue today to produce exceptional academic outcomes and are recognized as among the very finest high schools in the entire country and our state. They

New York City's Nine Specialized High Schools

- Bronx High School of Science
- Brooklyn Latin School
- Brooklyn Technical High School
- Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts*
- High School for Mathematics, Science, and Engineering at City College
- High School of American Studies at Lehman College
- Staten Island Technical High School
- Queens High School for the Sciences at York College
- Stuyvesant High School

* SHSAT not required for admission

provide a free, first-rate education that would otherwise be unattainable to thousands of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, serving as a ladder up and out of poverty. Students attending the specialized schools are not privileged; 45 percent are near or at the poverty line. Four of them are ranked among the best 10 schools in the country serving a disadvantaged student body.

The four-year graduation rate at the eight high schools that use the SHSAT range close to and at 100 percent. Similarly, their four-year college readiness index ranges close to and at 100 percent.

By contrast, this paper makes it clear that because of the absence of G&T and other enhanced learning opportunities in the schools serving the city's Black and Latino communities, who constitute a majority of the public school population, the DOE is failing to properly educate large numbers of students and prepare them for college and to do well in life.

DOE data show that:

- Less than a third of the students enrolled today in G&T are Black and Latino.
- Black and Latino students are concentrated in failing primary schools while white and Asian students are concentrated in high performing primary schools.
- This shows up in disparate results on the state assessment tests. By the 7th grade – the year before sitting for the SHSAT – for example, only 4 percent and 6 percent, respectively, of Black and Latino students scored above grade level on the math test. By comparison, 40 percent of Asian and 28 percent of white students were above grade level.
- A small number of higher achieving middle schools send most of the students to the specialized high schools. Black and Latino students are underrepresented at these middle schools and Asian and white students are overrepresented when compared to the total populations of each group in the city's school system.
- Highly performing screened high schools also display demographic disparities. Black and Latino students are underrepresented in these schools as well.
- High School graduation rates and college readiness rates show disparate results. Black and Latino students graduate at rates that are 30 points below Asian and white graduation rates. College readiness rates are also lower. More importantly, while the overall rates for graduation and college readiness have gone up, they have declined in the past ten years for schools serving the Black and Latino communities.

The Test is not the reason for the demographic results. It is a symptom of the real problem.

- The test has been proven to be a reliable and valid predictor of future performance.

- Disparate preparation in the classroom determines disparate results on the test. With Asian students having the biggest percentage of above proficient scores on the 7th grade assessment tests, it is likely that they would do better as a group than others.
- The private schools also contribute to the demographic disparity of the specialized schools in unexpected ways. Catholic schools, which enroll large numbers of Black and Latino students, have declined significantly over the past 10 years and are sending the specialized schools fewer students. Beginning 20 years ago, the independent private schools are actively recruiting Black and Latino 5th graders with demonstrated potential and preparing them for admission in the 9th grade at one of their schools. Were this not the case, the number of Black and Latino students attending the specialized schools may be double what it is today.

The bill would eliminate the SHSAT and replace it with multiple subjective criteria and have many significant unintended consequences. The bill:

- Calls for the elimination of the SHSAT and the use of multiple measures including grades and state test scores.
- Guaranteed admission to the top 3% and by 2021 to the top 7% of each middle school. To receive guaranteed admission, the student must also be in the top 25% of the City.
- Religious and private schools are not included in the pool of guaranteed admission but could register to back-fill any seats left open.

Consequences of the Bill

- Most multiple measures are subjective and can be easily manipulated. Ranking may be open to unfair improper manipulation.
- Chancellor authorized to assign different weights to different measures which will only fuel uncertainty and contribute to a lack of transparency.
- State tests are at the center of the Opt-Out of Tests movement and scoring frequently changes from one year to the next. Participation is voluntary, but bill would make it mandatory to take the state assessment tests if one desires admission to a specialize school.
- Bill's language could override state's previous ban on using state test scores as primary tool for deciding admissions.
- Discrimination built into the bill against religious and private schools may fuel litigation and the courts may wind up deciding admission policies.
- According to independent review, the bill guarantees admission to hundreds of students who scored lower than proficiency on the state assessment tests while blocking admission of 1,000 students with proficient and above scores on the tests.

- According to independent sources, remedial courses will become necessary as some middle school preparation is so inadequate that being in the top 7 percent is no guarantee that students can do the college level course work required at the specialized schools.
- The 7% admissions cap imposed on a school will exclude many advanced students with no comparable place to go. Their applications to screened schools will displace those who ordinarily would have received offers to those schools. In turn, the displaced students will have to displace others at less selective screened schools.
- Because of geographic admissions priorities in many high performing Manhattan high schools, displaced students from Brooklyn and Queens will be hard pressed to gain admission to a high academically performing screened school.
- The mayor's proposal has met with great opposition from students and alumni, and from the City's Asian community who make up most of the student body of the specialized high schools.
- Pits poor members of different minority groups against each other.

Conclusion – Defeat the Bill and restore enhanced academics/accelerated learning opportunities from elementary through middle school in Black and Latino communities where they have been eliminated.

- The Bill should be defeated not only because of subjective measures being introduced for admissions but because it fails to provide any direction and vision for the NYC Public Schools. It does nothing to improve any school in the system.
- Restore enhanced academic programs/accelerated learning opportunities in underrepresented communities. Students from underrepresented communities once succeeded on the test and in the schools when they were given the appropriate tools and resources. They can do so again if these tools are restored.
- It is not sufficient to simply desegregate primary and middle schools, which is a difficult task in any event. Enhanced academic programs/accelerated learning opportunities must be implemented at every school, especially in the Black and Latino communities, if every student is to have the opportunity to take advantage.

Solution

At the end of the day, this issue is about strong leadership, great teaching, excellent resources and tools provided across all communities.

1. Address disparities in educational opportunities from day one through gifted and talented/accelerated learning programs in every community.

First and foremost, we believe that the City must do more to prepare students in underrepresented communities from day one of their educational journeys to gain

admittance to—and succeed in—not only the specialized high schools, but any high-performing public middle school or high school. This should include:

- Mandatory gifted and talented/accelerated learning screening at the earliest levels, with an “opt-out” option rather than a requirement for parents to “opt-in.”
- A requirement that every elementary school in New York City offer some form of gifted and talented/accelerated learning programming, with test score cut-offs determined locally on a district-by-district basis to ensure that high-potential students are identified in every neighborhood. The enrichment resources provided to G&T/accelerated learning participants will absolutely begin to build a new “pipeline” of high achieving students from all communities.
- These G&T/accelerated learning programs must run from Kindergarten through the 3rd grade, as disparities in performance have strongly emerged on the 3rd-grade state assessment tests.

2. Create new “middle school achievement academies” to build on G&T/accelerated learning and move high-achieving students into the middle school pipeline.

While it is true that middle schools play a key role in preparing students for specialized or selective/screened high schools, (with many middle schools now playing an early role as “feeders” for high achieving students) we must focus additional resources immediately before middle school age as well. We propose identifying the top 7 percent of 4th-graders across New York City—through a combination of state test scores and grades—and providing them with additional enrichment opportunities at “Middle School Achievement Academies” across the public-school system. These “academies” need not be physical structures—these could simply be additional enriched classroom work, pull-out programs or after-school programming—but the key is again identifying and nurturing the abilities of students in every community at numerous stages throughout their educational life. As students in subsequent grades show promise on the state tests and in their course grades, they would be admitted to the Academy to enhance their coursework. (And, for example, at every middle school in the City there must be the opportunity to take algebra and an enriched English class in the 7th grade.)

3. Provide a pre-SHSAT exam to further identify and support high-achieving students in advance of middle and high school.

As those on both sides of the admissions conversation rightly point out, there are high-achieving students across New York City who can succeed in the specialized high schools. However, identifying these students at an early age and providing them with the targeted support and enrichment they need is key. Therefore, we propose offering 6th-graders the opportunity to take a “Pre-SHSAT” exam—like the PSAT—with results that can serve as a clear diagnostic tool for students in middle school. It will not only identify students with strong academic potential, but it will literally provide a

map/action plan of individual strengths and deficiencies for students to address in the 7th and 8th grades.

4. Additional immediate diversity initiatives should continue.

While the longer-term goals of better preparing students from underrepresented communities is key, there are still shorter-term actions that can be undertaken by the City of New York. These include:

- Continued evaluation of the fairness and efficacy of the SHSAT itself and changes if necessary.
- Expanded outreach to students and families in underrepresented middle schools and communities to ensure that there is an understanding and knowledge of the specialized high schools and the SHSAT.
- Expansion of the Dream Program to provide free test preparation to every student who wants it, especially those students from underrepresented communities.
- Continued evaluation of the criteria for the Discovery Program and additional changes be made if the City's recently proposed amendments do not work.
- Administer the SHSAT during the school day at every middle school, with voluntary opt-out from the exam.

For more information, please contact the
Brooklyn Tech Alumni Foundation, 718-797-2285
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