



## **Discriminatory Admissions at Elite High Schools**

By David R. Jones  
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Entry to eight of New York City's elite public high schools is based solely on the [Specialized High Schools Admissions Test](#) (SHSAT) – a two and a half hour multiple choice test - and nothing else. No matter if a student has straight A's from kindergarten through 8<sup>th</sup> grade, the test is the only thing that matters for admission to these schools. Yet the Department of Education has never conducted a study to show there is any relationship between test results and learning standards.

These schools should be open to the city's brightest children no matter what their race. But at Stuyvesant High School, probably the best known of the eight testing schools, 2.4 percent of the students are Latino.

A likely reason for the extreme racial and ethnic imbalance is the intensive tutoring services that families of means secure for their children, services that are financially out of reach for poorer families - private tutoring (cost: up to \$300 an hour) and classroom tutoring (cost: anywhere from \$800 to \$1,200 for the course). Once again, the application of a public policy comes to down to a matter of money.

Something is wrong here. But this state of affairs is not going unchallenged. The Community Service Society (CSS) has joined a group of plaintiffs in an administrative complaint against the New York City Department of Education. We charge that an admissions process that relies solely on the SHSAT has resulted in keeping youngsters of color out of the city's elite testing schools. We call upon the Department of Education to make significant changes that will desegregate these schools.

Other organizations in the complaint include the New York City Coalition for Educational Justice; La Fuente; the Alliance for Quality Education; and Make the Road New York. Our attorneys in this matter are the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, LatinoJustice PRLDEF and the Center for Law and Social Justice at Medgar Evers College.

The complaint, filed with the Office for Civil Rights of the U.S. Department of Education, charges that the testing schools' admissions policy violates Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 - a federal law requiring that recipients of federal financial assistance not exclude

students from participation in their programs or activities on the basis of race, color, or national origin.

The test itself may or may not be culturally biased – that’s not yet clear. But what is clear is that expensive test preparation courses are important for determining who gets into these schools.

There certainly are less discriminatory alternatives available. The Thomas B. Fordham Institute, an education policy group, looked at 165 selective high schools around the country and found that only New York City used a single test as the sole criterion for admission. Others selective schools supplemented testing with grades, essays, teacher recommendations, and interviews.

Other top-rated schools in New York City already use admissions procedures that rely on a variety of measures to yield classes that meet high standards of academic excellence and are generally more diverse than the overall student demographics of the testing schools. These include two Bard Early College High Schools (one in Manhattan, the other in Queens) and Hunter Science High School.

Mayor Bloomberg sees no need to change the admissions policy. But generations of students of color are systematically being denied the opportunity for an elite education. A degree from one of the city’s stellar testing schools can be the key to a brilliant future. We should be ensuring that this key is duplicated for as many deserving children as we can. The Department of Education must implement admissions policies and practices that fairly evaluate children using multiple measures, giving real opportunity to all.

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*David R. Jones is president and CEO of the Community Service Society (CSS), the leading voice on behalf of low-income New Yorkers for over 168 years. For over 10 years he served as a member of the board of directors of the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund. The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer.*