

End Racial Bias in Admissions at Elite High Schools

Eight of New York City's elite public high schools grant admission based solely on the Specialized High Schools Admissions Test (SHSAT). Yet the Department of Education has never conducted a study to show if the test is a valid tool, whether 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, 1.2 percent of the students are black. In this year's freshman class of 967, 19 black students were offered admission.

A likely reason for the testing schools' extreme racial 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. It's shameful that 58 years after the Supreme Court issued the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision we're still in this place. 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 black youngsters 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; Black New Yorkers for Educational Excellence; 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.

Entry to these elite schools is based completely on the 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 8th grade, the test is the only thing that matters for admission to these schools. This policy gives no credence to academic merit.

Civil Rights Violation

Our complaint, filed with the Office for Civil Rights of the U.S. Department of Education, charges that the testing schools' admission 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.

There has been a decades-long downward trend in black student enrollment at the testing schools overall. At Stuyvesant, black student enrollment fell from 12.9 percent in 1979 to 4.8 percent in

1994-95 and eventually to a meager 1.0 percent during the 2010-11 school year. The percentage of black students enrolled at Bronx Science, another prominent testing school, dropped from 11.8 percent in 1994-95 to 3.0 percent in the 2010-11 school year.

The testing schools admissions policy has resulted in a severe disparate impact on black students. 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.

Alternative Practices

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.

The two Bard Early College High Schools (one in Manhattan, the other in Queens) both require a grade point average of 85 or better in middle school, scores of 3 or 4 on standardized English and math exams and an exemplary attendance record. Applicants who meet these criteria are invited to take a school-specific entrance exam and then are interviewed by school personnel.

Hunter Science High School takes into consideration an applicant’s grade point average in English, math, science, and social studies; scores on standardized English exams; middle school attendance records; and a school-specific application, which includes a writing sample.

Mayor Bloomberg has responded to our complaint with the cliché “life is unfair.” He sees no need to change the admissions policy. This won’t do. Generations of students of color are systematically being denied the opportunity for an elite education with all that that implies for their future and that of their families and communities.

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.

David R. Jones, Esq., is President and CEO of the Community Service Society of New York (CSS), the leading voice on behalf of low-income New Yorkers for over 168 years. The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer. The Urban Agenda is available on CSS’s website: www.cssny.org.

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