



Redefining High Performance
for Entrance into
Specialized
High Schools

MAKING THE CASE FOR CHANGE

Policy Recommendations by the
United Federation of Teachers
Specialized High School Task Force

March 2014



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Inequality is rising in New York City, where the gap between the rich and poor has never been greater. Our best public schools represent unique opportunities to level the playing field. Yet, if we are not careful, these institutions can serve the opposite role, increasing the gaps between those with the best educational opportunities and those without. (i)

Every child in every neighborhood and every borough deserves to go to a high-quality high school. Every student should have access to a high school that they feel good about. And the students performing at the highest levels naturally seek out and expect the most challenging academic experiences that will place them on the path to greater post-secondary achievement — most likely in a highly competitive environment. That is, certainly, the expectation of their parents.

The United Federation of Teachers Specialized High School Task Force believes that every child in our school system — all 1.1 million New York City students — deserves the highest quality, most diverse, state-of-the-art education available. Even with the excellent high schools that we currently have throughout our system, many are not neighborhood schools and many students do not have the opportunity to gain access to these schools. Hopefully, in the future this will be less of an issue as the quality of neighborhood high schools improves. For children who are entering or currently attending middle school, however, we can't afford to wait. Right now, for the coming school year, we believe the New York State Legislature, the New York City Department of Education and the existing group of Specialized High Schools can enact a series of changes to the admissions process that will extend opportunities across the city to a larger pool of deserving students, removing their barriers to access.

The Current Specialized High School Landscape

Each year, more than 75,000 8th-graders from across the five boroughs undertake a rite of passage by researching and selecting a high school to attend. There are almost 500 public high schools that students can choose from in the Department of Education's "School Choice" system.

Among those hundreds of high schools, a select group of nine makes up New York City's Specialized High Schools, long considered by many to be the city's elite public institutions. Those schools are the 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 Math, Science and Engineering at City College, High School of American Studies at Lehman College, Queens High School for the Sciences at York College, Staten Island Technical High School and Stuyvesant High School.

Competition is steep for a coveted seat in one of the city's Specialized High Schools, and with good reason — gaining admission to these highly regarded institutions can open doors of opportunity usually reserved for students in private schools. With an average of only 5,000 offers being given each year and a decreasing number of proven local options for excellence in all of New York City's neighborhoods, demand is extremely high.

Gaining entry to one of these prestigious schools is based on just one factor: scoring high enough on the Specialized High School Admissions Test (SHSAT). (ii) No other aspects of a student's academic record, including independent projects, leadership achievements or extraordinary academic success, are considered as part of the admissions process.

The SHSAT has deep roots in New York City. It was first put into state law for three schools — Stuyvesant, Bronx Science and Brooklyn Tech — in 1972 as part of the Hecht-Calendra Act. The other five schools use the exam as a matter of DOE policy established under the Bloomberg administration and are not bound by the law, based on an analysis conducted by the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. (iii)

The exam, which is typically administered in October, has two sections: verbal and math. Achieving a high score on the exam requires not only outstanding performance but an understanding of the mechanics and scoring of the test. Student scores are ranked from highest to lowest, and in descending order, students are offered seats in their preferred schools until each school has no more seats available.

The NAACP Legal Defense Fund (LDF) and its co-plaintiffs filed a federal civil rights complaint in September 2012 on the Specialized High School Admissions Test. (iv) A confluence of issues and emerging voices led to the LDF's decision to challenge the civil rights impact of the single-test admissions policy of New York City's Specialized High Schools. The widening gap between New York City's wealthy and poor, with the middle class regulated to a dwindling statistic, raises the stakes on equitable access to quality education. The strikingly low percentage of black and Latino students admitted to the schools in relation to the number of students who took the test compelled the group to investigate further. Questions arose about the single high stakes test as the sole determinant of entry. Specifically, were predictive validity studies ever conducted to validate that the tests were able to predict student performance? An investigation of other elite and highly rated schools in New York and across the country revealed that the city's Specialized High School peer group uses multiple pathways to define who merits a seat in the entering class. The overriding concern is whether barriers to entry that amount to exclusion have become the hallmark of the city's highly prized public high schools.

"There are so many students who could excel at our schools if they could just walk in the doors."

— Chanika Perry, English teacher, Brooklyn Latin School

Teachers Taking Action

Over the past 12 years, UFT educators, child advocates and elected officials have routinely confronted the negative impact that the city Department of Education's policies and practices have had on children who are struggling academically. From the viewpoint of many academic high school teachers, high achievers and gifted learners deserve the same diligence and attention to deepen and broaden their education experience. These students, too, have needs.

Teachers at the Specialized High Schools around the city began speaking with their colleagues at their home schools as well as with UFT peers. In both formal and informal settings, these educators gradually recognized that they had similar concerns and had noted anecdotally what a review of the data would later validate. The Specialized High Schools' decreasing racial and socioeconomic diversity, coupled with a rapidly expanding test-prep industry, seemed to grant greater access to students with greater economic advantages, while limiting access to those with the greatest need.

In the wake of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund's joint federal civil rights complaint against the use of the single admissions test for entrance into New York City Specialized High Schools in 2012, educators from eight of the city's Specialized High Schools were invited to participate in a task force to scrutinize the admission policies for their schools. A resolution passed by the UFT Delegate Assembly — the union's 3,400-member highest decision-making body — empowered the task force to offer solutions born from classroom experience to both lawmakers and the new administration as they grapple with issues of educational access and equity.

At the heart of the task force's work was to bring the educator's voice to the discussion of the impact of relying on one high stakes test and more broadly to redefine what constitutes a high-performing student who merits entry into our elite public high schools. From the outset, there were strong concerns that the Specialized High School system cannot rely solely on a test score, but must also credit additional measures including a student's dedication and commitment to academic achievement.

After an extensive effort that included engagement over the course of the 2012-13 school year through the fall of the 2013 with school-based members, Damon Hewitt and Rachel Kleinman of the LDF and with one another, the members of this UFT Task Force believe that the city Department of Education must revisit its admission policies for Specialized High Schools and create a system that fairly and equitably measures students' abilities and merit.

"This committee, bringing together the perspectives and experiences of educators in these schools, collaborated to create a proposal that would allow greater access of all of New York City's students to these schools. Achieving consensus after months of debate and conversation was challenging but was made possible by the investment of time and honest conversation each member of this committee made."

— Janella Hinds, UFT Vice President for Academic High Schools

Access and Opportunity Limited

Even a casual observer can see the profound inequity in the admissions demographics. The just-released data on the SHSAT results and admissions offers for the upcoming 2014-2015 school year showed that the number of the city's black and Latino students admitted to the Specialized High Schools was once again far lower than their share of the student population. In fact, according to one news report, "More black and Hispanic students took the entrance exam to get into the city's elite high schools this year, but their pass rates were as dismal as ever," officials said. "Of the 5,096 students accepted by eight specialized schools, just 5 percent were black and 7 percent were Hispanic." (v) According to *The New York Times*, the city Department of Education statistics revealed "that of the 28,000 students citywide who took the Specialized High School Admissions Test, 5,701 of them were offered seats. Asians were offered 53 percent of the seats, compared with 50 percent a year ago; whites were offered 26 percent of seats, compared with 24 percent a year ago." (vi)

There's virtually no change from the prior two years. For example, of the 967 8th-grade students offered admission to Stuyvesant High School for the 2012-13 school year, just 19 (2%) of the students were African-American and 32 (3.3%) were Latino. An even smaller number of these students eventually enrolled. (vii) Those numbers grew worse in the 2013-14 school year. Of the 830 8th-grade students offered admission, only nine were black and 24 were Latino, despite the fact that almost 12,000 black and Latino students took the SHSAT. (viii)

Diving further into the numbers, we find that for the 2013-14 school year, Brooklyn Tech offered admission to 110 black students and 134 Latino students from among the 1,660 students offered admission. Bronx Science offered admission to 25 black students and 54 Latino students among its 810 offers.

"I look at my honors physics class — 34 students fully booked to the maximum ...and you know what? One Hispanic girl... I cannot accept that only (she) is qualified to be in my class."
— Gary Hom, physics teacher, Bronx High School of Science

Despite these obvious warning flags, change does not seem possible under the current admissions system.

"I think I speak for just about all the teachers in my building when I say that we would want to opt for a system that was fairer in terms of admitting kids into our building."
— Mark Halperin, English teacher, Stuyvesant High School

For our teachers on the task force, the issue is far more complex and reaches beyond demographics. Talent and merit needs to be redefined. Talented students of all races and ethnicities are not being admitted because of lack of access and opportunity.

"Expanding admissions will increase diversity across the board; our schools will be more reflective of the city. Diversity increases the wealth of experiences our students have. It fosters cultural appreciation."
— Chanika Perry, English teacher, Brooklyn Latin School

Thinking Beyond "The Test"

Exhaustive research supports what educators in the classroom already know all too well — a single test result is not capable of capturing the totality of a student's skills and knowledge. Teachers have long lamented that the current exam doesn't even include an essay component that could help measure a student's technical or creative writing skills. Moreover, the cut score moves from year to year without an identifiable baseline standard.

To effectively judge a student's abilities, one must look beyond test scores at a wide spectrum of measures that illustrate high achievement and critical thinking. These measures include a student's grades, class work, essays, portfolios and projects, and factors such as top performing status that also show leadership and motivation.

In their February 2014 study, Bill Hiss and Valerie Franks tracked 123,000 students at 33 test-optional public and private colleges and universities for over eight years to determine the value of standardized

test scores as a predictor of college success. Hiss and Franks concluded, “Despite lots of discussions about high school grading we find high school GPA to be a broadly reliable predictor of college performance, and standardized testing to be very far from ‘standardized’ in its predictive value.” (ix)

In fact, elite colleges are moving away from single indicators such as the SAT exam for exactly that reason. As we write this report, the College Board has just announced sweeping changes for the SAT exam and the inclusion of additional supports for high-achieving low-income students. Rachel B. Rubin, PhD, surveyed admissions officers at more than 60 elite colleges and universities — mostly private — that accept only a small percentage of applicants and presented her work in 2012 at the American Educational Research Association. Rubin found that these institutions determine academic merit using formulaic approaches with multiple academic measures. While 21 percent of these schools make the first cut of students based on “institutional fit,” one of the most highly valued variables is exceptional talent. In short, talent and merit cannot be reduced to just one number. (x)

There’s concern among members of the task force that New York City may be missing some highly coveted opportunities for potential black and Latino graduates of its Specialized High Schools.

“Top colleges and universities compete for high-achieving high school graduates of color, positioning our city’s Specialized High Schools as a stronger recruiting source for these students.”

— Adam Stevens, social studies teacher, Brooklyn Technical High School

Redefining high performance as more than a score on a single test is also important because our experience has shown that a high score on the SHSAT is not necessarily indicative of a student’s preparedness or motivation in the classroom.

“The Intel (Science Talent Search) is an elite science competition (that) does not require that you do well on a test. It requires that you have passion, interests, dedication and research smarts to carry through a really high-level project. For a kid who spent three years test prepping and who thinks the test is the most important thing ... their capabilities or developmental interests are often diminished... Three years of test prep beats it out of them.”

— Pian Wong, English teacher, High School of American Studies at Lehman College

Motivation as a component for conscientiousness is explored in an evaluation by Angela Duckworth et al. of current research on personality and development, “Conscientiousness: Origins in Childhood.” The authors detail the fundamental elements of conscientiousness in adolescents as “self-regulation, academic motivation, and committed compliance and internalization of standards of behavior.” Based on the evidence, they conclude that these components are success drivers that “foster” conscientiousness in adulthood. (xi) These components have a positive impact on students who perform at high levels, yet they are part of the sphere of personal dynamics not captured on a single test.

In fact, a good test score can be more indicative of the number of SHSAT test prep courses a student receives. In its press release announcing the changes to the SAT, the College Board rebuked “one of the greatest inequities around college entrance exams, namely the culture and practice of high-priced test preparation.” (xii) Teachers have witnessed these selective schools become the province of students whose families can afford to pay for those intensive courses. The culture is pervasive.

"It is very hard to compete against the students who have, in some cases, had years of test prep. I've spoken to students in my school who have had three full years of test prep before they take the test."

*— Michael Sweiven, social studies teacher, Queens High School
for the Sciences at York College*

"The kids who haven't been prepped struggle to finish the admission test on time. The kids who have been prepped know to begin in their strongest section, and they know they have to pace themselves. They know the nuances of the questions, and you see them answering it differently."

— Pian Wong, English teacher, High School of American Studies at Lehman College

What's more, the SHSAT has not been validated to see if it, in fact, demonstrates what students need to succeed. The test should be validated to rule out bias and to authenticate that it can predict probable student performance. Essentially, teacher voice has been lost as test prep has gained traction. Task force members articulated that an admissions test, especially one with stakes this high, should be aligned with work that the students should be learning to perform at high levels in these competitive high schools.

"We are not opposed to tests as a component in gaining admission, but we want tests aligned to what our students should know... It has drifted away from what teachers want to measure to gauge our students' true learning."

— Rosanmi Campbell, Spanish teacher, High School of American Studies at Lehman College

Access for All Communities

Educators on the UFT Specialized High School Task Force are also seeing their new freshmen coming from an ever-smaller pool of the city's middle schools. While New York City has hundreds of middle schools, a small fraction of those are sending literally hundreds of their students to the elite high schools while others send a handful at best.

The numbers can be startling. In the 2011-12 school year, 226 of the 8th-graders at IS 187 in Brooklyn received offers from Brooklyn Tech and Stuyvesant High School alone. Nearly 200 8th-graders at Brooklyn's IS 239, also known as the Mark Twain School for the Gifted & Talented, were accepted at Brooklyn Tech and Stuyvesant in 2012. (xiii)

"Mark Twain could have their reunion in our gyms."

— Mark Halperin, English teacher, Stuyvesant High School

Teachers believe a major reason behind the disparity stems from the DOE's reluctance to properly promote the elite high schools to the vast majority of the city's 7th- and 8th-graders. This past fall, the DOE held its borough high school fairs — often the only chance parents have to get information — on Oct. 19 and 20, barely a week before the SHSAT admission test was given. (xiv) Students often find out about the test in an ad hoc fashion.

"They only tell you a few days before. One of my students told me that her guidance counselor signed her up and she just showed up and took the test, and luckily she did well on it. Nobody else in her school even took the test."

— Elizabeth Johnson, social studies teacher, Brooklyn Technical High School

The Specialized High Schools also do not use all of the available resources to attract and retain a more diverse student body. The Discovery Program, included in the state statute governing the SHSAT, is designed to provide students from lower-income neighborhoods with exposure and alternate pathways to admission in Specialized High Schools. Task force members were largely disappointed that most of their schools barely use the program and Stuyvesant and Bronx Science dropped it altogether.

The Meaning of Merit report cited the Beacon School as an example of a competitive and highly rated academic high school that doesn't rely on the SHSAT. The Beacon School created a screened process with multiple measures for selecting top-performing students—and the results are telling—the representation of black and Latino students at their school far outpaces most of the Specialized High Schools. Beacon created a two-week summer program, offering preparatory classes and supports to help entering students make the transition to the rigors of a Specialized High School academic experience. LaGuardia continues to rely on multiple measures for entrance; the school reviews student transcripts and the applicants are required to audition. As freshmen, Brooklyn Latin's first senior class did not take the SHSAT; they are currently a diverse group of seniors in college and are a model of the mix of students we seek to attract.

Moving Forward: Policy Recommendations

Changing course is seldom easy, especially when that change threatens longstanding policies or traditions. There are those who fear that changing the admissions policy to Specialized High Schools will lead to an influx of unqualified students gaining entry to these schools. Others fear a new admissions policy would lead to watered-down academic requirements and lower student achievement. Educators in these schools believe that nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, the overwhelming sentiment of our teachers was that they want the Specialized High Schools to remain elite, but by virtue of high student achievement by students from all of New York City's neighborhoods.

Change is needed so that students who have strong academic potential and a strong work ethic aren't locked out of these amazing opportunities just because they don't know about them or can't afford test-prep courses. The students who increasingly have predominated in these schools will also benefit from a more diverse student body.

"These are New York City public school students that largely don't have experience outside of their own communities. We seek a more genuine learning environment — a more authentic experiences for all our students than we find now."

— Morgan Elinson, social studies teacher, High School of American Studies at Lehman College

Our teachers want to expand access and draw from the vast array of communities, cultures and educational experiences in New York City — the students who have worked harder than the rest and who are hungry for more; the students who have true grit, tenacity and fortitude and who deserve the opportunities that an elite high school can offer.

Essentially, the task force members understand that while they're seeking a shift in the way that educators, parents, students and the community view the Specialized High School selection criteria, they must be mindful to keep a positive tone about the young people they're currently teaching and about the top performers at nontraditional or less prestigious schools whom they seek to attract.

“It’s through no fault of their own if they’ve come up in a system characterized by a growing reliance on high-stakes testing. We must believe that all young people can excel and achieve at the highest levels despite the current system.”

— Adam Stevens, social studies teacher, Brooklyn Technical High School

The UFT Specialized High Schools Task Force strongly endorses the following recommendations to expand and enhance the admissions policies of New York City’s Specialized High Schools:

1) Create a Top Performer Admission Path

Rather than rely on the outcome of a single test, the city Department of Education should create a pathway that would target the top-performing 8th-graders at each and every New York City middle school, with the goal of offering a proportional number of seats to these students depending on the size of the school. The “Top Performer” ranking would be determined by the grade point average. We propose limiting this pathway during the first year only to one child per middle school, roughly 500 8th-graders initially, according to DOE figures. We recommend expanding this pathway in subsequent years.

While we recognize the differences among schools, the committee strongly believes that students who end up at the top of their classes possess the skill, grit and perseverance necessary to be successful in a Specialized High School.

2) Create a Power Score Admission Path

The second pathway would consider students on the basis of a “Power Score” that combines the student’s grade point average, state standardized English Language Arts (ELA) and math tests, attendance record and a revised admissions exam aligned to the curriculum. The revised SHSAT should comprise no more than one-third of the Power Score. Students in honor societies and participating in advanced classes or part of student leadership committees should all be encouraged to apply.

“A test score is about one aspect of the child. We need to appreciate the students who work hard and do well on the test, but we want more than that. They are not just a number. They are human beings. They have wonderful gifts and abilities. They need to be recognized for those abilities as well, not just for a single test score based on one day — not even a full day, just a few hours.”

— Elizabeth Johnson, social studies teacher, Brooklyn Technical High School

3) Revise the Test

Rather than scrapping the SHSAT test altogether, it should be one of several measures used to determine entry into the elite high schools. However, moving forward, the test should be aligned to what students study in middle school and what they’re expected to achieve in Specialized High Schools.

4) Pre-Registration for All 8th-grade Students

All New York City 8th-grade students should be automatically registered in the admission process for the Specialized High Schools, with an easy opt-out clause for students who know that they do not want to attend these schools. That way, all students would receive information about these schools.

5) Free Online Prep Materials

Families without the financial means to enroll their child in a test-prep course should have access to free online prep materials for any redesigned admission test. Leveling the playing field is of the utmost importance to the task force. Preparation for testing isn't intrinsically unsound; it's the disadvantage that expensive test prep sets up for the students we want to provide with greater opportunity.

6) Timely Information and Fairs for Families and Schools

Students can't take advantage of opportunities if they don't know they exist. Every middle school and every middle school guidance counselor should receive information about the Specialized High Schools and the admissions process for each.

Fairs for high schools should also be moved up on the calendar to provide earlier access to admission information. What's more, students in 6th and 7th grade should be encouraged to attend the fairs as well to learn about their options before they reach the point where they need to decide.

7) Discovery Programs at Each Specialized High School

Each of the elite high schools should be required to have its own Discovery Program, tailored to its own specific academic offerings, and each school should reserve seats for admission through this program.

Closing Thoughts

It was prescient that the NAACP Legal Defense Fund brought greater scrutiny to quiet debates and discussions that had challenged educators in the Specialized High Schools around the city. In the face of an increasingly diverse public school population and as educators and trade unionists, we will no longer stand by without raising our voices for equitable access to our best public schools. Expanding educational opportunity benefits every constituency.

We emphatically propose our recommendations to change the admissions process to the Specialized High Schools not because we are reducing expectations or diluting the competitive standards, but because our expectation is that the outcome will be better.

"As we began to talk about some of the most creative kids — maybe they aren't the kids with the top score. Not that we are missing every creative kid in the system, but that there is a substantial group of kids who may be motivated in one particular area that does not translate on the test, but they could make a fantastic student. I think that's what we're missing."

— Jonathan Halabi, math teacher, High School of American Studies at Lehman College

We envision an ongoing review to ensure that as we expand access and opportunity, all of our children have successful outcomes. Ultimately, we aspire to reach parity of entering student admissions via

each of our recommended paths. We believe that offering admission to 50 percent of entering students via the Top Performers path and 50 percent via the Power Score is not only an achievable goal, but also a salient move toward equity. It is a challenging course that we're pursuing, but we believe our students and our great city are up to this challenge.

If we make these changes, we believe we cannot only make our Specialized High Schools stronger and more competitive, but also reflective of the dynamic and diverse student population of New York City.

UFT Specialized High School Task Force

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Michael Sweiven – Queens High School for the Sciences at York College

Vernon Tillman – Stuyvesant High School

Johnny Ventura – Brooklyn Technical High School

Pian Wong – High School of American Studies at Lehman College

ENDNOTES

(i) The Meaning of Merit: Alternatives for Determining Admission to New York City's Specialized High Schools, the Community Service Society and the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, October 2013, pg 1

(ii) With the exception of LaGuardia High School (which holds musical or theater auditions, reviews student transcripts and academic record), Fiorella H. LaGuardia School of Music & the Arts school portal,
<http://schools.nyc.gov/SchoolPortals/03/M485/AboutUs/Overview/Admissions+Overview.htm>

(iii) Analysis conducted by the NAACP LDF pg. 2, and 16

(iv) NAACP Legal Defense Fund, NYC Specialized High Schools Complaint:
http://www.naacpldf.org/files/case_issue/Specialized%20High%20Schools%20Complaint.pdf

(v) "Black & Hispanic pass rates drop in elite high school exam," New York Post, March 12, 2014

(vi) "Status Quo at Elite New York Schools: Few Blacks and Hispanics," New York Times, March 12, 2014

(vii) NAACP Legal Defense Fund: <http://www.naacpldf.org/case-issue/new-york-city-specialized-high-school-complaint>

(viii) SchoolBook: <http://www.wnyc.org/story/301978-high-school-admissions/> and NAACP Legal Defense Fund, pg 1: http://www.naacpldf.org/files/case_issue/CSS_MeaningOfMerit_finalWeb.pdf

(ix) Defining Promise: Optional Standardized Testing Policies in American College and University Admissions, William C. Hiss and Valerie W. Franks, February 5, 2014

(x) Inside Higher Ed: <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/04/09/new-research-how-elite-colleges-make-admissions-decisions>

(xi) Conscientiousness: Origins in Childhood?, Nancy Eisenberg, Arizona State University; Angela L. Duckworth, University of Pennsylvania and Tracy L. Spinrad and Carlos Valiente, Arizona State University, *Development Psychology*, The American Psychological Association, 2012

(xii) The College Board Announces Bold Plans to Expand Access to Opportunity; Redesign of the SAT, The College Board, Press Release, March 5, 2014

(xiii) <http://nypost.com/2012/11/29/best-of-middles-lead-to-top-hss/>

(xiv) Department of Education Announces Annual Citywide High School Fair:
http://schools.nyc.gov/Offices/mediarelations/NewsandSpeeches/2013-2014/highschoolfair_092613.htm

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