

Is the Test the Problem?

Maintaining Rigor and Improving Access at NYC's Specialized Schools

Introduction

Of the 700 programs in New York City's 400 public high schools,¹ eight are categorized as "specialized" schools, where admission is based solely on students' performance on the Specialized High School Admissions Test—or "SHSAT".² These specialized schools produce exceptional academic outcomes and are recognized as some of the finest high schools in the entire country. They provide a free, first-rate education that would otherwise be unattainable to many students from disadvantaged backgrounds. More than half the student body at these schools is poor, many are from immigrant families and three quarters are from minority groups.³

In spite of this diversity, questions have been raised about the underrepresentation of African American and Latino students at the specialized schools, and about the use of a single test to determine admissions. Indeed, while over 1900 African American and Latino students currently attend these schools,⁴ at some of them, African American and Latino enrollment is exceedingly low. In response, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund filed a complaint with the U.S Department of Education in 2012, alleging that the admissions policy at the specialized schools has a discriminatory impact. While the Department of Education has not yet made a determination about the complaint, the public policy debate around specialized schools continues to evolve.

This position paper seeks to inform that debate at an important moment—as Mayor de Blasio assesses the City's policy on specialized schools and New York State legislators consider

¹ Nathanson, Lori, Sean Corcoran and Christine Baker-Smith. April 2013. *High School Choice in New York City: A Report on the School Choices and Placements of Low-Achieving Students*. The Research Alliance for New York City Schools.

² A ninth specialized school, Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts, uses an audition and review of student work instead of the SHSAT to determine admission.

³ Data are for 2013-2014 school year, from the NYC Department of Education (NYCDOE). Accessed on May 25, 2014, from <http://schools.nyc.gov/Accountability/data/default.htm>.

⁴ Ibid.

changes to the law that governs the schools' admissions process.⁵ It answers several key questions that, in our view, have received far too little attention to date. These include:

- What are the benefits of the specialized schools as they are currently configured?
- What are the causes of the disparities in specialized school admissions and enrollment?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of the SHSAT-based admissions process?
- How viable are the proposed alternatives to the SHSAT?

Based on the answers to these questions, the position paper concludes with a set of recommendations aimed at maintaining the many benefits and unique character of the specialized schools *and* increasing the enrollment of African American and Latino students.

What Are the Benefits of NYC's Specialized High Schools?

The academic outcomes of NYC's specialized schools are unsurpassed by any other school in the City's system. In 2014, U.S. News and World Report ranked all eight of the specialized schools among the top 200 high schools in the country.⁶ The three oldest specialized schools, Stuyvesant, Bronx Science and Brooklyn Tech, have together graduated 14 Nobel Prize winners, more than most nations.⁷ Bronx Science counts eight alumni as winners of the Nobel Prize, six as winners of the Pulitzer Prize, eight who received a National Medal of Science, and 29 who are current members of the National Academy of Science.⁸ Stuyvesant boasts four Nobel Laureates among its graduates, as well as a host of leaders in science, mathematics, government, law,

As seen below, in 2014, NYC's specialized high schools were all ranked in the top 30 in New York State, according to *U.S. News and World Report*. Six were in the top ten.

| Ranking (of 1,147 high schools in NY State) | School |
|---|---|
| #1 | High School of American Studies at Lehman College |
| #2 | Bronx High School of Science |
| #3 | Brooklyn Latin School |
| #6 | Staten Island Technical High School |
| #8 | Queens High School for the Sciences at York College |
| #10 | Brooklyn Technical High School |
| #12 | Stuyvesant High School |
| #30 | High School for Mathematics, Science, and Engineering at City College |

⁵ For example, see Darville, Sarah, March 11, 2014. "Few Black and Hispanic students Admitted to Top High Schools, Adding to Calls for Admissions Rules Changes." Chalkbeat. Accessed May 25, 2014, from <http://ny.chalkbeat.org/2014/03/11/few-African-American-and-hispanic-students-admitted-to-top-high-schools-adding-to-calls-for-admissions-rules-changes/>

⁶ U.S. News and World Report. "Best High Schools." Accessed on May 25, 2014, from <http://www.usnews.com/education/best-high-schools>.

⁷ "Nobel Prize Laureates by Secondary School Affiliation." Accessed May 25, 2014, from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nobel_Prize_laureates_by_secondary_school_affiliation.

⁸ The Bronx High School of Science Alumni Foundation and Endowment Fund. "Notable Alumni." Accessed May 25, 2014, from <http://alumni.bxscience.edu/?page=NotableAlumni>.

the arts, and music.⁹ Brooklyn Tech has produced two Nobel Laureates; graduates of the school also invented the digital camera, developed the GPS system, piloted the space shuttle Challenger, discovered proof of the big bang theory of the universe, developed cleaner gasoline for automobiles, and worked on mass production of penicillin—to name just a few of the many accomplishments of specialized school alumni.

A substantial body of research has demonstrated the value of tailoring instruction for high-achieving students.¹⁰ Finn and Hockett found that the benefits of selective academic environments are far-reaching, with important advantages for both individual students as well as the broader learning community. Selective environments allow students to undertake an entire course of study at a high level (rather than the isolated AP classes that are available in most high schools), and they are incubators for new and improved pedagogy and instructional tools.¹¹ In addition, selective schools provide a group of peers that both challenges and supports gifted students, allowing them to feel a sense of inclusion and belonging that can be critically important for adolescents. Studies have shown that adolescents are likely to emulate not only their peers' academic performance, but also *how they think* their peers are performing.¹² This explains, in part, the power of NYC's specialized schools, where academic achievement is highly valued and highly visible.

These strengths notwithstanding, the underrepresentation of African American and Latino students at the specialized schools is a concern. Overall, in the 2013-2014 school year, just 6 percent of students at the specialized schools were African American and 7 percent Latino, while 60 percent were Asian and 24 percent White.¹³ By comparison (though individual schools in New York City usually *don't* reflect the ethnic breakdown of the system as a whole), the total NYC student population was 28 percent African American, 40 percent Latino, 15 percent Asian and 15 percent White.¹⁴

⁹ Stuyvesant High School. "History of the School." Accessed on May 25, 2014, from <http://www.stuy.edu/>.

¹⁰ For example, see Reis, Sally M., March 2, 2008. "Research That Supports the Need for and Benefits of Gifted Education." The National Association for Gifted Children. Accessed on May 25, 2014, from http://www.nagc.org/uploadedFiles/Information_and_Resources/Research%20Support%20for%20GT.pdf.

¹¹ Finn, C. E. Jr., & Hockett, J. A. 2012. *Exam Schools: Inside America's Most Selective Public High Schools*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

¹² Jones, M. H., Audley-Piotrowski, S. R., & Kiefer, S. M. 2012. "Relationships Among Adolescents' Perceptions of Friends' Behaviors, Academic Self-Concept, and Math Performance." *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 104(1), 19-31.

¹³ NYCDOE. Accessed May 25, 2014 from <http://schools.nyc.gov/Accountability/data/default.htm>.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* Note that the system-wide figures are somewhat skewed by the large number of White students who attend private school.

It is important to note that the enrollment picture actually looks quite different across the specialized schools. Media attention has focused on the schools where African American and Latino enrollment is lowest—for example, Stuyvesant, where just 3 percent of students are African American or Latino. Other specialized schools, however, are much more diverse. At Brooklyn Tech, by far the largest of the specialized schools, 16 percent of the school's 5,000-plus students are African American or Latino. Brooklyn Latin has a student body that is 40 percent African American or Latino. And, in 2012, *The New York Times* called the specialized High School of Math, Science and Engineering at the City College the most racially integrated high school in the city.¹⁵

The specialized High School of Math, Science and Engineering at the City College was named the *least segregated* school in New York City.

While it is problematic that specialized high schools, on the whole, are not more representative of all NYC students, this does *not* mean the students at specialized schools are generally highly privileged. In fact, at least half of those attending specialized schools are eligible for free or reduced price lunch—meaning they live near or below the poverty line.¹⁶ This number has increased as the percentage of Asian students, including many immigrants, has grown. For example, at Stuyvesant, about three quarters of the students are immigrants or children of immigrants.¹⁷ In truth, NYC's specialized high schools serve thousands of students from disadvantaged backgrounds every year, providing an education of unparalleled quality and serving as a ladder up and out of poverty for countless young people.

What Are the Causes of the Disparities in Specialized School Admissions and Enrollment?

African American and Latino students are underrepresented both among those taking the test and among those who score high enough to gain admission to one of the specialized schools. While African American and Latino students constitute nearly 70 percent of NYC students overall, only 45 percent of students taking the SHSAT for admission to the 2012-13 freshman class were African American or Latino. Specifically, African American students comprised 23 percent of test takers, and only 6 percent of those who received admissions offers. Latinos comprised 22 percent of test-takers, and just 8 percent of admitted students. By contrast, Asian American students accounted for 26 percent of test takers and 47 percent of admissions

¹⁵ *The New York Times*. May 11, 2012. "A Portrait of Segregation in New York City's Schools." Accessed May 25, 2014, from <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2012/05/11/nyregion/segregation-in-new-york-city-public-schools.html>.

¹⁶ NYCDOE. Accessed May 25, 2014, from <http://schools.nyc.gov/Accountability/data/default.htm>.

¹⁷ Santos, Fernanda. "To Be Black at Stuyvesant High." February 25, 2012. *The New York Times*. Accessed May 25, 2014, from <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/26/education/black-at-stuyvesant-high-one-girls-experience.html>.

offers, while White students were 15 percent of test-takers and 23 percent of admission offers. Put another way, the acceptance rate for Fall 2011 test takers was about 19 percent overall, but only 5 percent of African American test-takers and 7 percent of Latino test-takers. Acceptance rates for Asian and White test-takers were 35 percent and 31 percent, respectively.¹⁸

So, why are fewer African American and Latino students taking the test, and why are they so much less likely to obtain a high score? The reality is that disparities in academic outcomes start very early on. By first grade, on average, African American and Latino students in NYC score 25 to 30 percent below Asian and White students on the state standardized English and math tests, a gap that persists through 8th grade and presages disparities in high school graduation rates.¹⁹ African American and Latino students are also more likely to be overage for their grade, suggesting many start school late or are held back at some point. By 8th grade, nearly a third of African American and Latino boys are overage.²⁰ Past research suggests these gaps are due, at least in part, to unequal access to high-quality preschool.²¹ They may also stem from higher rates of absentee-ism among African American and Latino students,²² which in turn likely results from inadequate health care and higher rates of some chronic health problems, particularly asthma.²³

Disparities in educational outcomes start early on.

The elementary and middle schools that students attend also greatly impact their odds of being well prepared to take the SHSAT. African American and Latino students are underrepresented in the City's gifted and talented programs. In many neighborhoods with large concentrations of African American and Latino residents, there is no such program available.²⁴ Increasing access to gifted and talented programs in the early grades and offering enrichment programs at the middle school level would create a better, more diverse pipeline into the specialized high schools.

¹⁸ NAACP Legal Defense Fund Complaint, Submitted to the U.S. Department of Education on September 27, 2012. Appendix A. Accessed June 6, 2014, from http://www.naacpldf.org/files/case_issue/All%20Appendices.pdf.

¹⁹ Villavicencio, Bhattacharya, and Guidry. 2013. *Moving the Needle: Exploring Key Levers to Boost College Readiness Among African American and Latino Males in NYC*. Research Alliance for NYC Schools.

http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/research_alliance/publications/MovingtheNeedle_July2013#.U0qYTdfD_IU

See Table 4.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Sadowski, Michael. 2006. "The School Readiness Gap." Harvard Graduate School of Education. Accessed May 25, 2014, from http://hepg.org/hel-home/issues/22_4/helarticle/the-school-readiness-gap.

²² Villavicencio, op cit.

²³ NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. July 2012. "Preventing and Treating Childhood Asthma in New York City." Accessed May 25, 2014, from <http://www.nyc.gov/html/doh/downloads/pdf/survey/survey-2012childasthma.pdf>.

²⁴ Garland, Sarah. March 14, 2013. "Ending Racial Inequality in Gifted Education." The Hechinger Report. Accessed May 25, 2014, from http://hechingerreport.org/content/ending-racial-inequality-in-gifted-education_11468/.

About 20 percent of the eighth-grade students who sit for the SHSAT each year are enrolled in private middle schools.²⁵ Private Catholic schools have a long tradition of serving African American and Latino students living at or near the poverty level, but these schools are in decline. In the last decade in NYC, many Catholic schools have closed, and overall enrollment in Catholic elementary schools fell by 43 percent.²⁶ Apart from the Catholic school system, there are an array of expensive “independent” private elementary and middle schools. Many of these schools have made efforts to increase diversity in recent years, but their student population is still overwhelmingly White.²⁷

The other 80 percent of SHSAT test takers are students in NYC’s public school system. Analysis shows that a disproportionately large number of students who gain admission to the specialized high schools come from a small number of these public middle schools. According to a New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) report, “although the [specialized high school] system does not explicitly consider the student’s middle school, 15 percent of the middle schools accounted for 85 percent of [the] offers” made for the 2012-2013 school year.²⁸ This means only about 75 of the city’s 500 middle schools account for most of the demographic makeup of the specialized schools. The New York Post reported in 2011 that “nearly all the top feeder [middle] schools for Stuyvesant, Brooklyn Tech, Bronx Science and LaGuardia high schools are selective entry schools themselves.”²⁹

The impact of these feeder middle schools on the racial make-up of the specialized high schools should not be underestimated. For example, during the 2013-2014 school year, Christa McAuliffe, which had nearly 65 percent of its eighth grade class accepted to a specialized high school, was 22 percent White, 74 percent Asian, less than 1 percent African American and 4 percent Latino. Mark Twain, which had 54 percent of its eighth-graders accepted to a

²⁵ “In 2005 and 2006, between 25,000 and 27,000 eighth graders (including 4,500 to 5,000 private school students), took the SHSAT for admission to the ninth grade at the specialized public high schools.” Feinman, J. 2008. *High Stakes, but Low Validity? A Case Study of Standardized Tests and Admissions into New York City Specialized High Schools*, Boulder and Tempe: Education and the Public Interest Center & Education Policy Research Unit.

²⁶ Vitello, Paul. January 12, 2009. “Brooklyn Diocese Moves to Shut 14 Schools.” *The New York Times*. Accessed May 25, 2014, from <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/13/nyregion/13close.html?pagewanted=all>.

²⁷ 70 percent in 2012, according to Anderson, Jenny. October 19, 2012. “Admitted, but Left Out.” *The New York Times*. Accessed May 25, 2014, from <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/21/nyregion/for-minority-students-at-elite-new-york-private-schools-admittance-doesnt-bring-acceptance.html>.

²⁸ NYCDOE, Citywide Council on High Schools. Annual Report 2012-2013. Accessed May 25, 2014, from [http://www.cec3.org/www/cec3/site/hosting/Reports/CCHS%20Annual%20Report%202012-13\(12-11-13\).pdf](http://www.cec3.org/www/cec3/site/hosting/Reports/CCHS%20Annual%20Report%202012-13(12-11-13).pdf).

²⁹ “Best of Middles Lead to Top HS’s.” November 29, 2012. *New York Post*. Accessed May 25, 2014, from <http://nypost.com/2012/11/29/best-of-middles-lead-to-top-hss/>.

specialized high school, had a student body that was 30 percent Asian, 53 percent White, 10 percent African American and 6 percent Latino.³⁰

One final issue that may be playing a role in reducing the number of African American and Latino students attending specialized schools relates to the recruitment efforts of elite private high schools. The percentage of minority students at the City's private schools has increased in the last ten years.³¹ And there have been reports that these schools are increasingly targeting well qualified African American and Latino students who might otherwise go to the specialized schools.³² Our calculations show that in 2012 there were approximately 1,600 more students belonging to minority groups in NYC's independent private high schools, compared with 2002.³³ If only half of the increase in minority enrollment at these schools came from African American and Latino students who would have otherwise attended a specialized school, adding that number alone to the current attendance figures would boost the percentage of African American and Latino students in the specialized schools from the present 13 percent to 18 percent of the student body.

Space in this paper permits only a cursory review of the many factors accounting for the underrepresentation of African American and Latino students in the City's specialized schools. What is clear is that there are multiple and complex underlying causes of this problem—most of which are at play long before students take the SHSAT.

What Are the Advantages and Disadvantages of the SHSAT-Based Admissions Process?

Any student in the eighth grade residing in NYC may take the SHSAT.³⁴ They simply need to contact their middle school guidance counselor and sign up to receive a ticket for the exam. They then rank in order of their preference which of the eight specialized high schools they wish to attend.

The SHSAT is a timed, multiple-choice test with two sections, verbal and math, which must be completed in a total of two and a half hours. Students' scores for each section are "scaled"—or standardized—and then added together to create a composite score, which the NYCDOE uses

³⁰ NYCDOE. Accessed May 25, 2014, from <http://schools.nyc.gov/Accountability/data/default.htm>.

³¹ Anderson, op cit.

³² Santos, op cit.

³³ Author calculations based on the following: The New York Times reports that 28.9% of students at private schools are now members of minority groups, up from 21.4% 10 years ago (Anderson, op cit). There are about 21,495 students attending private high schools in the City, according to [highschools.com](http://high-schools.com/new-york/new-york.html). Accessed December 28, 2013, from <http://high-schools.com/new-york/new-york.html>.

³⁴ A small number of students also take the test in the ninth year for admission in the tenth grade.

to make offers of admission. Students with a sufficiently high composite score get their first choice of school; lessor ranked students may get their second, third or fourth choice. Each year, about 28,000 students sit for the test, to compete for 3,800 available seats across the eight schools.³⁵

Using the SHSAT to determine admission has several advantages. It is a simple process that students and families can easily understand, unlike the complicated maze of requirements and admission criteria in evidence in some of the City's other academically selective schools. The opportunity to take the test is available to any student, regardless of race, gender, immigrant status, neighborhood, etc. The use of a single test completely eliminates subjectivity from the admissions process—meaning personal judgments, relationships, and biases have no role in admissions decisions. The test also may give a “second chance” to students who have had past problems with attendance, behavior or academics (which would eliminate them from consideration at other academically selective schools).

Still, critics of the test have raised serious questions about its validity and reliability³⁶ (does it identify the most qualified students? do different versions of the test produce similar results?), as well as possible bias—that is, does the test itself have a discriminatory effect against lower-income, African American and Latino students?

“Just because test scores differ across gender and ethnic groups doesn't necessarily mean that a test is biased or of limited utility.”

The contract between the NYCDOE and the vendor that develops the SHSAT requires that individual test questions be vetted with sample test takers, and the vendor must certify that the questions used “are free from sex and ethnic bias.”³⁷ In the past, New York City education officials have pointed to the superior academic outcomes of the specialized schools as proof that the test predicts performance,³⁸ but, as some critics of the test have pointed out, no predictive studies have been done to determine whether the test overall skews results based on the gender or ethnicity of the test taker. As one noted critic, Joshua

³⁵ Many students who receive offers of admission do not accept them and instead attend private school or a non-specialized public school. Thus the number of students offered admission is larger than the number of available seats.

³⁶ Herszenhorn, David. “Admissions Test's Scoring Quirk Throws Balance Into Question.” *The New York Times*. Accessed May 25, 2014, from <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/12/nyregion/12exam.html?pagewanted=all>.

Also, Feinman, op cit.

³⁷ Op Cit. NAACP Complaint. Appendix F. Requirements Contract between NYC Board of Education and American Guidance Service, Inc., dated March 14, 1989.

³⁸ Baker, Al. September 27, 2012. “Charges of Bias in Admission Test Policy at Eight Elite Public High Schools.” *The New York Times*. Accessed June 6, 2014 from <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/28/nyregion/specialized-high-school-admissions-test-is-racially-discriminatory-complaint-says.html>.

Feinman has explained, “Just because test scores differ across gender and ethnic groups doesn’t necessarily mean that a test is biased or of limited utility. From a psychometric perspective, the key is whether the predictive validity of a test varies across groups. If the given test score predicts different things for different groups, the test is said to exhibit “prediction bias,” which diminishes its usefulness.”³⁹

We believe a predictive validity study would be helpful, and has potential to improve the test. Yet, as shown above, the SHSAT is certainly *not* the major cause of the disparities seen in specialized schools admissions. The real problem is rooted elsewhere.

How Viable Are the Alternatives to the SHSAT?

Many have suggested that the NYCDOE should stop relying solely on SHSAT scores to determine admissions to the specialized schools and instead use “multiple criteria.” In effect, this would eliminate the unique character of the specialized high school system and add these schools to the ranks of NYC’s “screened” high schools. There are currently 103 such schools, which select students based on “... grades from the prior school year, reading and math standardized test scores, and attendance and punctuality,” as well as, in some cases, an interview and/or essay.⁴⁰ These schools have the authority to “adjust” their selection criteria based on their applicant pool, and some have additional admissions priorities, such as those that give preference to students from a certain geographic area.⁴¹

There are a surprising number of challenges associated with screening. Compared to specialized schools, where the system for gaining admission is straight-forward (any student wanting to take the test can do so, and admission is determined by their score), the system at screened schools is an uncoordinated patchwork of details, requirements and tasks unique to each school. Students and their parents must navigate a difficult and complex maze to identify schools of interest and successfully apply. The screening process is expensive for schools to implement and much more subjective than reliance on the SHSAT. There is a risk of favoritism or arbitrariness in any system using multiple criteria, particularly if there is insufficient oversight for the process. Indeed, a recent audit conducted by the NYC Comptroller’s Office found serious flaws in the screening procedures used at four of five screened schools it audited, concluding:

³⁹ Feinman, op cit.

⁴⁰ NYCDOE. *Directory of NYC Public High Schools*. Accessed December 21, 2013, from <http://schools.nyc.gov/NR/ronlyres/6C650E9E-C2B6-4B78-9D4F-927DF94E4012/0/Introduction.pdf>.

⁴¹ Ibid.

“...we do not have reasonable assurance that the possibility of inappropriate manipulation of the student ranking, favoritism, or fraud is being adequately controlled.”⁴²

Perhaps most notable is that multiple-criteria screening does not necessarily produce a more diverse student body. To assess the possible impact of converting the eight specialized high schools into screened schools, we identified the eight highest-achieving screened schools (based on 2013 composite SAT scores) to serve as a comparison.⁴³ We found that, while there are somewhat higher percentages African American and Latino students at the screened schools, these students are still underrepresented compared to their numbers in the system overall. When looking at the total minority population, we see that only 60 percent of students at the screened schools are students of color (compared with 76 percent in the specialized schools). These data show that a White student is significantly more likely to be attending a top-performing screened school than a specialized school.

Furthermore, just 38 percent of students in the eight screened schools are poor or working class (compared with over 50 percent of students in the specialized schools).⁴⁴

Another alternative suggested for increasing enrollment of African American and Latino students is for the NYCDOE to simply reserve a “small” portion of admissions slots for the top-performing students at every public middle school in the City. This proposal is unrealistic for a number of reasons. For one thing, it ignores the vast academic differences between middle schools and would result in better prepared students being excluded while admitting less prepared students. It is also mathematically troublesome: Even if only the top two students from each of the City’s 500-plus middle school programs were granted automatic admission, far from it being a small portion of admissions, more than a quarter of the 3,800 available seats in the specialized school’s freshman class would be filled.

Costs to Taxpayers

NYC average cost per student =
\$18,598 per year

Vs.

Cost per student at Brooklyn Tech,
Stuyvesant and Bronx Science =
\$12,982, \$12,930 and \$12,211,
respectively.

Costs to Students and their Families:

\$40,000 at elite private schools

Vs.

FREE at specialized schools.

⁴² City of New York, Office of the Comptroller. June 13, 2013. “Audit Report on the New York City Department of Education’s High School Application Process for Screened Programs.” Management Audit MH12-053A.

⁴³ The schools are Baccalaureate School for Global Education, Bard Early College, Bard Early College-Queens, Beacon, Eleanor Roosevelt, Millennium, NYC Lab for Collaborative Studies, and Townsend Harris.

⁴⁴ Based on percentage eligible for free and reduced price lunch. NYCDOE. Accessed May 25, 2014, from <http://schools.nyc.gov/Accountability/data/default.htm>.

NYC has a large, diverse portfolio of public high schools. The eight specialized schools serve a unique and important purpose in the context of that portfolio—providing a challenging, academically advanced environment for high-achieving students, most of whom could not afford a selective private institution.⁴⁵ Eliminating reliance on the SHSAT runs the risk of erasing what is different about the specialized schools and making them look like others in the system. We believe this is the wrong direction. Yet, there *are* steps that hold promise for sustaining the quality of the specialized schools and enhancing their diversity. Some of these are outlined below.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Increasing the enrollment of African American and Latino students in NYC's specialized schools is important. To make it happen, we must recognize the real root causes of the problem. The SHSAT is not the fundamental reason why African American and Latino enrollment in these schools is lower than it otherwise should be. Gaps in opportunity and achievement are evident from the earliest grades. African American and Latino students have lower attendance rates and test scores, and are poorly represented in many of the middle schools that serve as "feeders" for the specialized high schools.

To maintain the curricular integrity and rigor of the specialized schools *and* increase access for African American and Latino students, we offer the following recommendations:

- *Don't simply scrap the test.* While seemingly an easy prescription for solving a very large and complex problem rooted elsewhere, doing so would hurt specialized schools and is unlikely to have the desired effect (i.e., making schools more diverse). Using the SHSAT to determine admissions is a straight-forward process that families can understand; the test offers an objective way to identify high-achieving students.
- *Make the test as good as it can be.* Invest in research that helps strengthen the test—so we can be confident it that it reliably identifies the most qualified students and that it is equally effective for all groups of students, regardless of race and gender. Any changes to the test should be thoroughly vetted and analyzed before implementation.
- *Ensure that all students have adequate time and resources to prepare for the test.* Share more information about the test with middle school families as they enter the sixth or

⁴⁵ In an article about the best fifteen high schools in New York City appearing in *CitiesJournal*, all eight of the specialized schools are included along with such elite and expensive private high schools in Manhattan as Dalton. Accessed June 1, 2014 from <http://www.citiesjournal.com/15-best-high-schools-in-new-york/>.

seventh grade and repeat distribution of this information earlier in the year that the test is taken (e.g., the SHSAT handbook, minus the admissions information, could be made available year round). It is also crucial that students have access to tutoring and test preparation. Very successful tutoring efforts designed to increase the numbers of underrepresented students have been undertaken by alumni at Stuyvesant, Bronx Science and Brooklyn Tech.⁴⁶ The NYCDOE should support and build on these efforts.

- *Consider ways to strengthen the Discovery program.* Discovery, which already exists in the law, is an alternative path to admission for disadvantaged students just missing the cutoff score. The DOE should look carefully at the population of students who would be impacted if Discovery were reinstated at all specialized schools. Would this change increase the numbers of African American and Latino students? Could Discovery be retooled to make more of a difference for these underrepresented groups?
- *Cultivate more—and more diverse—feeder middle schools.* This strategy is well aligned with the NYCDOE's current focus on strengthening middle schools and expanding out-of-school-time opportunities for middle school students. We believe offering more rigorous middle grade coursework and providing free SHSAT preparation during and after-school in communities with high percentages of African American and Latino students are critically important for increasing access to specialized high schools.
- *Make informed decisions about any changes to the specialized school admissions process.* Solicit input from a range of stakeholders, including educators, parents and alumni organizations from specialized schools. Make sure decisions are based on a thorough analysis of data about changing patterns of admission in both the specialized high schools and other selective schools in the City.
- *If research shows that the requirements for specialized school admission should be changed, ensure that:*
 - The adopted criteria are objective;

⁴⁶ The Science School Initiative, developed by Bronx Science and Stuyvesant alumni, is a year-long free tutoring program one afternoon a week. Of the 53 students who were in the program and sat for the SHSAT in 2010, 31 were Hispanic, 12 were Asian, 7 were African American and 3 were White. Of that group, 45 percent received admission offers to a specialized school—a very high success rate. The Brooklyn Tech Alumni Foundation, with the financial support of National Grid, is in its first year of a similar effort, which aims to create a STEM pipeline for students in Brooklyn communities that are underrepresented at Brooklyn Tech. The program targets rising 7th graders and their parents, and seeks to generate interest in Brooklyn Tech and STEM education, with the ultimate goal of helping students succeed in college and careers. The first cohort consists of 37 students; half are underrepresented minority students and two thirds are girls. See Phillips, Anna. October 11, 2011. "Alumni Tutoring Effort Strives to Raise Diversity at Elite Public Schools." *The New York Times*. Accessed on May 25, 2014, from <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/12/nyregion/graduates-of-elite-new-york-city-public-schools-tutor-students-seeking-admission.html>.

Issued by:
The Brooklyn Tech Alumni Foundation

- The SHSAT still has the greatest weight among the factors considered;
 - The NYCDOE manages the system, rather than the individual schools; and
 - Any changes apply simultaneously to all specialized schools.
- *Invest in long-term strategies* that will better prepare larger numbers of African American and Latino students for the SHSAT—and the rigors of the specialized schools. These strategies may include universal pre-K, gifted and talented programs in schools that serve high proportions of African American and Latino students, and various community supports for students and schools.

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The mission of the Foundation is to support Brooklyn Technical High School as *the* premier specialized high school for science, technology, engineering and mathematics in the Nation by harnessing the intellectual and financial power of 80,000 Tech alumni. Since our founding, we have raised \$30,000,000 to support educational excellence at Brooklyn Tech.

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