

Lessons From the Best High School Rankings for the Debate About "The Test."

May 21, 2015

By Larry Cary

Last week's rankings by U.S. News & World Report of the "Best High Schools" in the country offer surprising support for the advocates of keeping the SHSAT – the Specialized High School Admissions Test – as the sole criteria for selecting students for admission to eight of the 400 public high schools and 700 high school programs serving the children of New York City. The test-in schools are, with rare exception, the highest academically ranked schools in New York City.



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While City Schools Chancellor Carmen Fariña was right to say that the "U.S. News rankings showcase some of our many excellent high schools," (Daily News 5/12/15), analysis of the rankings and the methodology used to create the list supports continuation of the test-in only system at these schools— a subject hotly debated since critics filed an administrative complaint three years ago with the federal Department of Education suggesting it's use discriminatorily impacted admissions by African American and Latino students. Under this legal theory intentional discrimination is not alleged. Instead, discrimination is alleged to be an unintended consequence of using the test.

Because correlation does not prove causation, proving disparate impact requires a careful analysis of the possible reasons for the disparity. If there are other valid explanations for the differences in the results, it cannot be said that the test is the cause. There is no doubt that offers of admission for African American and Latino students at the specialized high schools is significantly less than what should be expected given the large numbers of students from these communities in the public schools. While some critics of the SHSAT contend it is the fault of the test, advocates for the test point to the lack of gifted & talented programs and enriched educational opportunities in the City's elementary and middle schools serving the African American and Latino communities as the real reason for these children not doing better than they do on the test. No one – including critics of the test - doubts that these communities suffer from educational inequality.

Other critics of the test argue the test should be eliminated for pedagogic reasons and multiple criteria substituted simply because no single measure can capture everything about a child's academic promise. They argue that the truly best children should be selected for admission to the specialized schools and often point to Harvard's use of "holistic" criteria as a source of inspiration. They argue that if holistic criteria is good enough to be used by Harvard, it should

be good enough to use at the City's high performing high schools.

Relying on Harvard and the other Ivy League colleges as the embodied example of all that is good in a multiple criteria admissions system may be misplaced. An Asian American coalition just recently filed its own administrative claim with the federal government contending that Harvard's use of its "holistic" admissions criteria has an unlawfully disparate impact on Asian American applicants. They point to research showing that Asian Americans must score much higher on the SAT than other groups to have the same likelihood of being offered admission. More importantly to the issue of using a test or not in the City's specialized high schools, is Harvard's admission in another law suit that it consciously takes into account the race of the applicants when deciding admission – a standard the City's school system says is not and will not ever be used.

In any event, U.S. News's top ten list clearly shows that the test-in approach produces superior academic outcomes. A test-in school was ranked the best in New York State. Six of the eight specialized schools – 75% - were in the top ten, while only three of 103 selective high schools in the city using multiple criteria – less than 3% - were on the list. And 100% of the test-in schools were among the top 20 schools in the state, while the City's 103 selective high schools fared no better when the cohort was expanded to this size.

Analysis of the rankings also suggests using the test promotes racial diversity rather than hampers it. Among the top ten, two schools offer the same coursework qualifying students to receive the International Baccalaureate Diploma, which is widely regarded around the world as one of the most rigorous and comprehensive courses of study at the high school level. Since one uses the SHSAT and the other does not, we can make an "apples to apples" comparison to see if the test discriminates against African American and Latino applicants. It does not in this example.

Brooklyn Latin, the test-in school, has a greater percentage of African American and Latino students than does the Baccalaureate School for Global Education, which looks at applicants' grades in academic courses, the scores on the state's math and English standardized tests, and attendance and punctuality to decide admissions. Brooklyn Latin has half of the white students as a percentage when compared with BSGE. (Brooklyn Latin's student body was 16% white vs. 34% for BSGE.) Brooklyn Latin also had many more African American students as a percentage. (Brooklyn Latin's student body is 27% African American vs. 2% for BSGE.) Economic diversity at Brooklyn Latin was also much better. At Brooklyn Latin 70% of the students were poor enough to qualify for free or subsidized lunch. By contrast, BSGE students are wealthier since less than half qualify for the lunch program.

To be sure there may be factors other than the admissions system which could account for these differences. For example, Brooklyn Latin is located in Brooklyn and BSGE is located in Queens. BSGE also prefers to admit students continuing from its lower grades and students residing in Queens. The use of so-called "preferences" is one of the "dirty little secrets"

unspoken about in the debate over keeping the test. While the specialized schools do not discriminate among applicants based on where they live, or anything else, many of the academically high performing selective high schools, especially among those located in Manhattan, do intentionally discriminate against applicants from the "outer" boroughs. A kid from Brooklyn does not have much of a chance getting into BSGE because of its geographic preference while a kid from Queens has the same chance of being admitted to Brooklyn Latin as any kid coming from Brooklyn or any other borough.

Townsend Harris, another school on the top ten list using the same multiple criteria as BSGE, is also located in Queens. It also discriminates based on geography, but in a different way from BSGE. Where BSGE discriminates against students not residing in Queens, Townsend discriminates among Queens residents in order "to build an incoming 9th grade class that is representative of the entire borough," according to its website. Despite this effort Townsend's student body is far from representative of the entire borough. Townsend Harris students are 56% Asian American, 7% African American, 13% Latino and 23% white. By contrast, according to the City, the student population of Queens is about 28% Asian American, 20% African American, 37% Latino and 13% white.

The third City school not using the test (and ranked number 2) on the top ten list is the High School for Dual Language and Asian Studies, which, as the name implies, requires students to learn and speak both Mandarin and English. Not surprisingly the student body is overwhelmingly Asian American. It was also overwhelmingly economically disadvantaged with 88% of its student's qualifying for lunch.

Looking at the "best" schools in the city using multiple criteria makes a couple of points. None of them closely mirror the demographic breakdown of the student body when considering the city's public school system as a whole. This is relevant to the debate about the test because critics constantly point to the disparity between the demographic makeup of the specialized schools and the percentages of African American and Latino students in the system as a whole. The truth is the City would be hard pressed to identify a high performing high school that closely mirrors the ethnic breakdown of the system as a whole. Ironically, the most integrated high school in the City identified a few years ago was a test-in school, the High School for Math, Science and Engineering at CCNY, which, according to U.S. News, has a student body that is 29% Asian American, 12% African American, 23% Latino and 27% white. Fifty percent of its student body is also economically disadvantaged.

Critics of the test also argue that since they are not named in the state law mandating a test, the Mayor should exercise the power he has to take five of the specialized high schools out of the test-in system: first ranked American Studies at Lehman College, third ranked Queens High School for the Sciences at York College, fourth ranked Brooklyn Latin, sixth ranked Staten Island Technical, and tenth ranked High School for Math, Science and Engineering at CCNY. This argument overlooks not only that these schools are among the very best

performing high schools in the system according to U.S. News, but also overlooks, with the exception of American Studies at Lehman and Staten Island Tech, that most of the students at these schools (like the big three, Bronx Science, Brooklyn Tech, Stuyvesant) are not white. In Staten Island Tech's case, it was far less diverse before it was made a specialized high school subject to using the test as the only criteria for admissions.

Rankings of the so-called "Best High Schools" should always be cautiously relied upon in deciding where to send one's child and the same can be said for making public policy. The methodology used to create the rankings may reveal as much as it hides about the relative performance of each school. U.S. News uses a three step process to construct its ranking. First, it looks at the reading and math proficiency results for all students within a state and then factors in "the percentages of economically disadvantage students – who tend to score lower – enrolled at the schools to identify schools performing much better than statistical expectation." For those making the cut, the second step involves assessing "whether their disadvantaged students – black, Hispanic and low-income – were outperforming disadvantaged students in the state." Schools performing better than the state average for these students then made the second cut. On the third step, these schools are then compared using a "college readiness score" based on "the number of 12th-grade students in the 2012-2013 academic year who took at least one AP or IB (International Baccalaureate) test before or during their senior year, divided by the number of 12th-graders – and how well the students did on those tests."

The first glaring issue in the methodology used by U.S. News is their definition of "disadvantaged" not including Asian American students. While census data shows that nationally Asian American households have a higher median income than all other groups, in New York City a different picture exists. According to the Center for Economic Opportunity, 46% of New Yorkers are barely making ends meet, with the Asian American poverty rate in New York City being higher than all other groups. By not including Asian Americans within their definition of disadvantaged, the U.S. News rankings may underreport how well schools in New York City with large Asian American student bodies are doing when compared to schools in the rest of the state and country. The second glaring problem with the rankings has to do with the underreporting of economically disadvantage students at Brooklyn Tech and Stuyvesant. According to the magazine, only 7% and 21%, respectively, of the students attending Brooklyn Tech and Stuyvesant qualified for free or subsidized lunch. In reality, according to the City, 61% and 47% of Brooklyn Tech and Stuyvesant's students, respectively, qualified for lunch. The third problem with U.S. News's methodology is that by only counting whether a student took an AP or IB exam as opposed to how many such exams were taken relative to the size of the student body, schools like Brooklyn Tech and Stuyvesant may not receive the full recognition they deserve. In addition, by only counting

AP or IB exams the rankings fail to reflect academic programs, like Brooklyn Tech's, which have coursework too advanced to be tested. Brooklyn Tech has 16 majors selected by students for their Junior and Senior years. Many AP classes are simply prerequisites for taking more advanced courses that do not have an AP exam to take.

Public policy makers should be reluctant to eliminate the test-in system used by a small number of high schools in New York City. They clearly are among the best performing schools in the City and have the added advantage of offering an equal chance to all residents of the City, regardless of where they live, of gaining admission. To be sure, the results on the test reflect educational inequality within the New York City school system with students from the African American and Latino communities not being given the preparation they deserve and need to perform not only well on the test but also at any high school they decide to go to. The City needs to take responsibility for correcting this situation and should not look to "scape goat" the test.

Larry Cary is the president of the Brooklyn Tech Alumni Foundation. He is also a partner at Cary Kane LLP a labor law firm representing unions, employees and benefit plans.