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Documentary Focuses on Entry Barriers to Elite New York City Schools

by FRANCES KAI-HWA WANG

About 30,000 New York City eighth graders last Saturday took the Specialized High Schools Admissions Test (SHSAT), the only way to gain admission into one of New York City's eight elite public high schools, especially Stuyvesant, Bronx Science, and Brooklyn Tech.

"WE HAVE TO FIX THE SYSTEM SO THAT ALL STUDENTS WILL GET A GREAT EDUCATION."

For many students, this exam is their ticket to a better education and a path out of poverty. However, this testing process has come under fire because although African Americans and Hispanic Americans make up 70 percent of New York City's school-aged population, they represent less than 5 percent at the city's most elite public high schools, while Asian Americans make up as much as 73 percent.

Filmmaker Curtis Chin's new documentary, "Tested," follows a dozen eighth graders from different racial, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds as they prepare for the exam and compete for a spot at one of these elite high schools. The film talks to education experts like Pedro Noguera and Diane Ravitch, and it explores issues such as access to a high-quality public education, affirmative action, and the model minority myth.

"Tested" will make its world premiere on Nov. 15 at the DOC NYC documentary film festival in New York City, followed by a special screening at the White House three days later.

Chin is currently a visiting scholar at NYU, and has won awards from the National Endowment for the Arts, New York Foundation for the Arts, and the San Diego Asian American Film Foundation.

NBC News caught up with Chin in between international sneak peeks of "Tested" to discuss the documentary.

Congratulations on your world premiere at DOC NYC and your special White House screening of "Tested." How did you get selected for the White House? Do you know who is going to be there?

We're very excited. The film screening is being hosted by the White House Initiative on Educational

Excellence for African Americans. Their Deputy Director, Khalilah Harris, heard about the film and approached us. We're not sure who from the administration will be attending, but we're looking forward to engaging the audience on the critical issues raised by "Tested."

Why did you decide to make "Tested"? What are the issues you are trying to examine?

The situation in New York City's public schools seemed like the perfect story to explore issues that matter to those working to improve America: racial equality, social justice, income inequality, and the model minority myth. I'm hoping this film will bring people together to discuss these issues and come up with solutions.



"Tested" follow a dozen New York City eighth graders as they try to gain admission into one of New York City's eight elite public high schools. Courtesy of Curtis Chin

What does the film reveal about the Asian-American community and its relationship with the Hispanic and African-American communities?

When it comes to education, the stereotypes of Asian Americans are starkly different than those applied to African Americans and Hispanics. By following a diverse group of families as they all pursue educational opportunities for their children, I'm hoping that the film will dispel these stereotypes and encourage all communities to approach each other as allies, rather than as competitors.

You have been screening select sneak peeks of the film at conferences and universities around the country and abroad. What has the response been like? What are some of the conversations you

have been having?

So far, the response to "Tested" has been amazing, particularly among educators. For instance, we did a sneak peek at Duke University for an education class. The following day, the professor told us they were now planning to do a study trip to New York City next semester. We've also been approached by teachers unions, teacher prep programs, and parenting groups about hosting screenings. Often, the conversation focuses on the families and the pressure the students are under, the pros and cons of testing.



The cast of Curtis Chin's new documentary film "Tested," at a special cast and crew screening of the film. Courtesy of Curtis Chin

What are some of the national ramifications of what you found in "Tested"? What message do you hope to get out?

While the film focuses on New York City, the issues of diversity, access and testing are quite national, and even international. We've had invitations to screen our film from educators as far away as South Africa, New Zealand, and Romania. Our main message for the film is the need to

provide a good education for all kids. Regardless of what you think about an admissions policy that is test-only, there are still tens of thousands of other kids in the school system who are going to bad schools. We have to fix the system so that all students will get a great education.

What's next?

In addition to the screenings at DOC NYC and for the White House initiative, we've got more screenings this fall, including my alma mater, the University of Michigan. After that, like most independent films, we're just hoping to get the film out to as wide an audience as possible. I'll be touring the film for most of next year, so hopefully people will be able to catch it.

Filmmaker Curtis Chin will premiere his new documentary film, "Tested," at DOC NYC documentary film festival on Nov. 15, 2015. Courtesy of Curtis Chin

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

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