

# The Problem with NYC High-School Admissions? It's not Just the Test

By Gail Robinson | February 8, 2016



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*On a recent Saturday, Michael Mascetti Executive Director of The Science School Initiative, teaching mathematics to a group of 7th graders at the Brooklyn Technical High School.*

*He was teaching mathematics for the National Grid sponsored Brooklyn Tech Alumni Foundation's STEM Pipeline Program.*

Quiet for most of the week, the nondescript brick building in Sunset Park comes alive on weekend mornings. Children pour in, packing into small, spare classrooms. In one, seventh graders discuss what constitutes formal writing. "Poetry from back when," one boy offers. "So modern poetry isn't formal?" teacher Stephanie Baynes asks.

This is A+ Academy, one of many weekend and late afternoon schools that have sprouted up in Asian communities around New York City. Lulu Zhou, whose family started A+, says it provides "supplemental education," not test prep. But such schools are widely viewed as one reason so many Asians gain admission to specialized high schools, such as Stuyvesant and Bronx High School of Science. These eight academically elite schools choose students entirely on the basis of a multiple-choice exam. Asians account for 60 percent of the students at these schools, blacks for only 5 percent. Overall, about 16 percent of city public school students are Asian, 26 percent are black.

A+ parents focus on specialized schools, Zhou says, partly because getting admitted to other selective public high schools is so complicated. The specialized high schools, she says, are "easier to understand... There's one test that, if you pass, you get into eight school that are among the best in the city."

For years, a debate has swirled over whether specialized schools should expand their admissions criteria. But that discussion has largely ignored how the Department of Education (DOE) selects students for its other more than 400 high schools, a system that, as Zhou says, is anything but easy to understand.

Every school has its own rules and procedures, creating a patchwork that tends to favor children who live in certain neighborhoods, grew up in English-speaking families, attended good elementary and middle schools and, perhaps above all, have parents with the ability and the fortitude to negotiate a very complicated process.

Students "often have a more difficult time" getting into a selective high school that is not specialized—what the city calls a screened school—than a specialized high school, says Mike Mascetti, executive director of the Science Schools Initiative, which helps low-income students with high-school admissions. Take Beacon, a popular Manhattan high school that emphasizes student projects over standardized tests. With 5,596 applicants for 310 slots in 2015, it selects students on the basis of multiple criteria, including middle school grades, a portfolio of their work and interviews with current students as well as staff. "You would think a kid from East Harlem would have an easier time getting into Beacon than Stuy but that's not necessarily the case," Mascetti says.

"New York is unique in having this system where all the schools have different admissions procedures," says Sean Corcoran of the Research Alliance for New York City Schools, who has studied high school admissions.

Curtis Chin, who made *Tested*, a documentary film about high school admissions in New York, describes the process as "an obstacle course with a lot of twists and turns." "I don't know how parents are able to navigate all of it, particularly if you are an immigrant or a single parent or work multiple jobs," he says.

### **Choosing choice**

For years, most New York City teenagers went to neighborhood public schools. But during the Bloomberg administration, the city switched to a choice system, requiring everyone who wishes to attend a city public high school to apply. In the fall of eighth grade, they rank up to 12 schools they would like to attend. A mysterious process then matches students with schools, with most children ending up at the highest ranked schools that admitted them.

Schools use a variety of methods to make that match. The specialized schools, except for Fiorello LaGuardia, an arts school, use only the test. Some schools, like Beacon, rely on multiple criteria, including academics. Then there are schools that require auditions, some that basically take anyone and others that use a complicated formula designed to insure a mix of students.

While the city has many good options, it also has a lot of mediocre and even bad ones. Natalie Cox of Breakthrough New York, which works with high-potential students, says her group considers 40 of 462 high schools to have true college-preparatory programs with another 30 on the verge of being college prep.

As evidence that the system works, DOE has pointed to the high percentage of eighth graders admitted to one of their top choices. Those numbers, though, do not take into account whether children are applying to the schools that will best serve them. Experts fear they are not. A 2013 Research Alliance Report, for example, found that 53 percent of what it defined as low-achieving students were placed in their first choice school between 2007 and 2011, about the same as for other students. It also found, that the schools that those students ranked first had substantially lower graduation rates—73 percent versus 83 percent—than schools picked by stronger students.

Geography, a lack of information and resources and poor preparation in middle and high school all pose high, if not insurmountable, barriers.

### **In the zone**

Former Schools Chancellor Joel Klein often said a student's future should not be determined by his ZIP code, that students should not have to attend poor schools just because they are nearby.

In theory the choice system has addressed that. But some ZIP codes are more equal than others. And the most privileged ZIP codes are in Manhattan south of 97th Street. Several schools in that area give priority to students who live or attend middle school in District 2, which includes many of the city's whitest and most affluent blocks. With large numbers of

district students applying for these schools, few applicants from outside the district get in and those who live outside the borough have no chance. District 2 is the only one in the city that gives such a preference to eighth graders who live within its boundaries.

One of the most desirable District 2 schools, Eleanor Roosevelt High School, is 61 percent white and only 4 percent black. Experts disagree over how influential the District 2 priority is in shaping that student body; the school also considers grades and attracts huge numbers of applicants, so it would be difficult to get into even without the preference. But to parents in adjacent areas, the District 2 preference is, at the very least, an irritant.

The city created "ElRo," as Eleanor Roosevelt High is known, as a neighborhood school in 2001, at a time when it was abandoning neighborhood schools elsewhere in the city. According to a *New York Times* account, Upper East Side politicians, including Rep. Carolyn Maloney and Eva Moskowitz, then the chair of the City Council Education Committee and now head of the Success Academy charter school network, "lobbied hard for the creation of the school" At the groundbreaking for the school in 2002, Moskowitz, according to a press release, hailed the schools as "a true victory for middle class parents and students of all races and ethnicities."

"It would be naïve if we didn't recognize there was some social and political capital involved when these schools were formed," says Maurice Frumkin, a former DOE official who is now president of NYC Admissions Solutions, a private company that help parents with high school admissions. "DOE's excuse for not addressing these concerns is it's a big issue... and there's nothing we can do about it but that's where the political and social capital comes in."

DOE spokesperson Harry Hartfield said in an email that the administration has "made an aggressive effort to encourage all families – no matter where they live – to apply to screened and specialized high schools, and that effort will continue. We are reviewing a variety of methods to achieve the critical goal of fostering greater diversity in our schools whether selective or not."

The city has preserved some so-called zoned schools mostly in Queens and Staten Island. While area students do not have to attend these schools, they will be admitted to them if they apply. But tens of thousands of eighth graders have no zoned school to fall back on.

### **The information gap**

DOE recognizes the system is complicated. To help families it publishes a high-school directory and holds an array of school fairs and information sessions. The department also says it has taken steps to make the process more transparent, requiring schools to reveal so-called rubrics explaining how they weigh the various factors they take into account for admissions decisions. In some communities, parents avidly swap tips and intelligence, and Inside Schools and other organizations try to provide parents with information.

But this information exists against a confusing backdrop, with six different selection methods encompassing schools that have dozens of children vying for every seat as well as those facilities that struggle to find anyone who wants to attend.

Overall, parents say DOE needs to do more. Many say the rubrics do not exist for many schools or are difficult to find.

"No one mentioned any such thing, and we were all over the process. I literally never heard of it," one parent of an eighth grader says.

"Information is so decentralized and so incorrect in so many places. There's a lot of secrecy involved, a lot of shrouded information," says Cox. And, she believes, that hurts the students her organization works with. "College-educated parents are primed to go through this," she says.

Almost everyone agrees few adolescents can handle this on their own. "The screened high

school process ... requires a pretty good amount of executive functioning. It is a very rare middle schooler who has it at that level. Some kids do, but mostly it is their parents who are competing on that skill," one parent, who has gone through the process twice, wrote in an email.

Much of the burden to cut through the process falls on middle-school guidance counselors. But counselors can be overwhelmed leaving parents largely on their own.

"We like to think the system is fair and equitable, that everyone has equal access but that's the furthest thing from the truth. ... A lot of it can come down to the support that you're getting," says Frumkin.

Parents also need time. The fall calendar is packed with high-school open houses, information session and tours. For parents who can't afford to miss work or who have other children to care for, attending all those events can be difficult. Despite that obvious obstacle, the city has a whole raft of schools that give preference to applicants who attend its information sessions.

### **How to screen**

Whatever one thinks of the specialized high-school admission process, the test that governs admission to elite schools like Stuyvesant and Bronx Science, at least it is objective. Because of that, its supporters see the test as evidence that if children work hard, they can get into a top school despite coming from an immigrant family where the parents work multiple jobs to earn \$30,000 a year. Critics counter that relying entirely on one test is too limited and denies opportunity to thousands of smart, talented students. They have proposed a number of alternatives, including considering grades and attendance as well as the test. In other words, they advocate making the selection process for the specialized high schools similar to what already exists for the other selective schools, the so-called screened schools.

Research raises doubts about whether such a change would address the racial imbalances. Overall, Corcoran says, "a lot of these [screened] schools are a little more diverse than the top specialized schools," and some make an effort to have a mixed student body: "They have a mission to look for diamonds in the rough." (Officially schools are not allowed to consider race in admissions but with multiple measures they can do it surreptitiously.)

Yet many screened schools show a heavy preponderance of one ethnic group or another. A study by Corcoran and Christine Baker-Smith of the Research Alliance found that considering grades and attendance as well as the test for admissions, something akin to what many screened schools do, would increase the number of Latinos and whites admitted to the specialized schools and decrease the number of Asians. It would not increase the number of black students admitted and could even decrease it.

Some of the screened schools consider only so-called objective criteria, such as grades. Others, though, also weigh subjective criteria, such as interviews, essays and portfolio. This, some say, introduces another set of biases.

"Lower-income kids are not as good at interviewing. They're not as used to speaking around the dinner table with well-educated adults. Particularly if English is their second language, that can be a challenge," says Mascetti.

Laura Zingmond, senior editor of Inside Schools, notes that such requirements may favor students who went to certain middle schools. "A lot of kids don't have anything to submit for a portfolio. They don't go to a middle school that does projects," she says. And while some middle schools require students to write essays, others do not.

That is another fact-of-life in the high school admissions process: Going to certain middle schools gives students a huge advantage. While figures are not available for the selective high schools, Corcoran and Baker-Smith found that, for the specialized high schools, between 2005 and 2013, 5 percent of city middle schools accounted for about 50 percent of

children admitted..

And the middle schools that feed the selective high-schools aren't necessarily the ones nearby. The study also found that, among students from the 30 schools that had the most students admitted to a specialized school, 87 percent were in a gifted-and-talented middle school or one that screened its students. Cox says many of these schools do a better job with their students than other schools. "Our kids are the top performers in their middle schools but almost all of them walk into a rigorous high school" and see other kids are better prepared," she says.

Corcoran, though, believes that while some of these middle schools are high quality, they also have top students to begin with.

Indeed, the advantages that some middle-schoolers have at getting into the best high schools reflect privileges they gained remarkably early in their lives. A lot of the students who go to a selective middle school first attended a top elementary school or a gifted-and-talented program. And they qualified for that advantage by scoring high on a test they took when they were five years old. Although DOE says it is taking steps to expand gifted programs, there currently are none in many poorer neighborhoods. So the deck becomes stacked early in a child's career, setting the pattern for the school he or she will attend nine years later.

"DOE needs to do its job in making sure there are programs in these districts to meet the needs of kids who want to be challenged," Mascetti says. "It's sad when everyone knows that the problem is and no one is willing to do anything about it."

