

# Overemphasizing a Test, Oversimplifying Our Children: An APA Perspective on Specialized High School Reform towards Educational Equity

*Coalition For Asian American Children and Families*

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## **Background: SHSAT and the history of segregation in NYC public schools**

For years, education advocates and researchers have argued that the Specialized High School Admissions Test (SHSAT) as the only measure for admissions into the City's most coveted public high schools is unfair and poses a major barrier to diversity in those schools. Diversity in schools includes race as well as socioeconomic status, culture, gender, sexuality, religion, differing abilities, language, and all other categories under the Dignity for All Students Act. Ultimately, integrated schools would not only reflect the diversity of our City, but would also provide inclusive and equitable learning environments that embrace and support the full participation of all students.

In New York City, specialized high schools reflect larger systemic issues that contribute to a lack of diversity and integration, and ultimately to segregation and inequity in schools. For example, in 2018 only 10 percent of offers from New York City's eight specialized high schools went to Black and Latinx students. Of the City's hundreds of middle schools, only 21 middle schools were represented in nearly 50 percent of specialized high school seats. Also in 2018, only one (1) student out of nearly 16,000 students across ALL specialized public high schools in New York City is classified by the

Department of Education as an English language learner (ELL).

Since 1971, the New York State law known as the Hecht-Calandra Act mandated that the entrance to the three oldest and largest specialized high schools - Stuyvesant High School, Bronx High School of Science, and Brooklyn Technical High School - must be determined by a single exam.<sup>[1]</sup> The legislation was created as a means to preempt efforts to diversify the Bronx High School of Science, which used a single test for entry and was at the time estimated to be 90 percent white.<sup>[2]</sup> As then-New York City Schools Chancellor Harvey Scribner sought to investigate complaints of discrimination in admissions processes, concerns of those interested in maintaining the status quo were brought directly to the NY State legislature and the Hecht-Calandra Act was passed, creating the State mandate for using a single exam to determine entry into specialized high schools.<sup>[3]</sup>

New York's schools are some of the most segregated schools in the entire nation.<sup>[4]</sup> The City's specialized high schools are a severe reflection of this segregation, and maintaining the single exam perpetuates that segregation. In order for New York City schools to move towards providing a more inclusive and equitable education for all, the City must address inequitable admissions policies and practices for its specialized high schools.

We cannot define a child by a moment. That is not a comprehensive assessment of a child's ability, nor is it a humane way to treat children.

*Hira Bokhari, The Bronx High School of Science, Class of 2010*

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### CACF's Stance on SHSAT Reform

The Asian Pacific American (APA) community is incredibly diverse and vast, consisting of groups from East Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, the Indo-Caribbean and Pacific Islands. Contrary to the stereotype of the model minority myth, too many APA families and children continue to struggle to succeed. According to the latest report from the Mayor's Office of Economic Opportunity, APAs have the highest rate and intensity of poverty among all racial/ethnic groups, as well as intensity of poverty in New York City.<sup>[5]</sup> Many in our community are struggle approaching systems and services. Over 85 percent of the APA community is foreign-born and 42 percent of households speaking Asian and Pacific Island languages are linguistically isolated, the highest rate for any group in the City.<sup>[6]</sup> APA students often face language barriers and are the first-generation in their families to attend American schools and pursue higher education. Nearly 25 percent of all English-language learners in New York City schools are APA.

As the nation's only pan-Asian policy advocacy organization for children and families, CACF has a responsibility to the Asian Pacific American (APA) community to advocate for educational policies and practices that are fair and beneficial to all APA students, including and especially those most marginalized. We believe that current admissions processes to specialized high schools contribute to the problems of segregation and inequity in NYC public schools. CACF stands in support of eliminating the SHSAT (or any single test) as the sole measure for gaining admission to New York City's specialized public high schools. CACF supports shifting to the utilization of multiple measures in any school admissions process.

As a single determinant for admissions to the specialized high schools, the current exam is not only shown to be an invalid admissions measure, but it is also discriminatory and detrimental to the long-term success of all students, including APA students. We stand firmly with our position taken in 2012 when CACF signed on in support of the NAACP Legal

Defense Fund's complaint against NYC schools, stating clearly our belief in promoting equity and inclusion in the specialized high schools, which the single-test measure helps to prevent.

At the same time, CACF does not necessarily support Mayor Bill de Blasio's specific proposal and plan for reform and we remain highly critical of the processes that he and the Department of Education have taken in crafting and releasing those proposals to the public. The Mayor's plan for reform, as many educational policy-level decisions continue to do, leave out the voice and input of the APA community - a diverse community that largely cares about school reform and issues of equity and inclusion in education. Further, through the release of the proposed changes and the ensuing media coverage, marginalized communities and communities of color have been pitted against each other, regardless of the intent. We see this as a perpetuation of the model minority myth - a harmful and divisive stereotype.

### Overview of Proposed New York City and State Reforms

In early June 2018, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio publicly proposed replacing the current single-measure admissions policy for the all eight specialized high schools across New York City with a multiple measures-based admissions process, although this requires State-level legislation change for three of those schools. The proposed reform is part of the administration's larger plan of addressing ongoing segregation in New York City's public school system.

The Mayor's reform is a 2-part plan consisting of the following:

- The Discovery Program, which offers admissions to low-income students who score just under the cutoff score, would be expanded to 20% of seats at each specialized high school. This Discovery Program expansion would target students from high-poverty schools across NYC. The expansion would be implemented for two years, beginning with the September 2019 admissions.
- A phase-out of the SHSAT over a period of three

years. The proposed multiple-measures method would consider both grades and state test scores. Based on this criteria, the top 7% of students in each middle school across the city who are also in the top 25% citywide would be offered a seat.

At the New York State level, a bill sponsored by New York State Assemblymember Charles Barron and Senator Kevin S. Parker was introduced in the 2018 State legislative session to include the reforms in the Mayor's announced proposal.

## How Eliminating the SHSAT Benefits Asian Pacific American Students

### *A majority of APA students in NYC do not attend specialized high schools*

CACF's report entitled *We're Not Even Allowed to Ask for Help* finds that, "tens of thousands of APA students share schools with other students of color that are over-crowded, underresourced, and subject to increasingly test-driven accountability measures and declining resources... A desk at Stuyvesant or Bronx Science or Harvard is not in the future of most APA students in New York City."<sup>[7]</sup> According to the most recent data from the New York City Department of Education, only 18% of all APA students across the City attend a specialized high school.<sup>[8]</sup> While the SHSAT issues have spurred unprecedented public engagement from the APA community around education, advocacy should not be limited to the specialized high schools.

### *Integration and equity in education benefit all students, including APA students.*

A growing body of research worldwide strongly and clearly demonstrates the benefits of diversity in education. Research on efforts to desegregate schools in Hartford, Connecticut shows that more racially diverse schools exhibit smaller test score gaps between students from different racial and socioeconomic groups.<sup>[9]</sup> Additionally, recent studies on diversity and inclusivity in education show that a more representative and diverse body of peers cultivates an increasingly positive and healthier learning environment.<sup>[10]</sup> Racial diversity in school settings fosters better implementation of policies that improve academic achievement and intergroup engagement, and brings about positive long-term social outcomes.<sup>[11]</sup> Immersing students in an environment with others from backgrounds and with experiences different from themselves has been shown to improve cognitive skills such as critical thinking and problem-solving.<sup>[12]</sup>

### *Racially segregated learning environments pose serious potential harms to students' development.*

The American Psychological Association points out the most salient effect of lack of access to sufficient racial diversity is the "persistence of implicit bias," which can lead to long-lasting discriminatory behaviors.<sup>[13]</sup> Implicit bias fosters a stereotyping cognitive process, and conditions students to favor members from their same racial group and to stigmatize those who are different.<sup>[14]</sup> Such social assessments can academically and developmentally harm students from all backgrounds.

*Currently, the student populations of the specialized high schools do not reflect the diversity of NYC and exclude Black and Latinx students. The following chart provides an overview of the demographics of the eight specialized high schools.*

Specialized High School Name	Total Enrollment (#)	Female (%)	Male (%)	Asian (%)	Black (%)	Latinx (%)	White (%)	Students w/ disabilities (%)	English language learners (%)	Poverty (%)
Stuyvesant High School	3,336	42.8	57.1	73.5	0.7	2.8	17.8	0.4	0	44.3
High School for Mathematics, Science and Engineering	500	34.4	65.4	36.2	9.6	15.6	27.2	4.8	0.2	42.6
The Bronx High School of Science	2,995	41.0	59.0	65.6	2.5	6.2	23.3	1.2	0	44.2
High School of American Studies at Lehman College	400	49.8	49.8	22.0	3.5	11.5	58.5	2.3	0	20.3
Brooklyn Technical High School	5,838	40.4	59.6	61.3	6.4	7.1	23.3	1.3	0	60.8
The Brooklyn Latin School	678	45.1	54.9	51.5	12.8	11.1	13.9	2.4	0	61.7
Queens High School for the Sciences at York College	473	44.2	55.8	81.0	4.2	4.2	5.9	0.4	0	60.5
Staten Island Technical High School	1,320	44.7	55.3	48.4	0.8	2.7	44.8	1.2	0	40.8
All 8 SHS	15,540	42	58	62	4	6	24	1	0	50.1
All NYC High Schools	275,543	48	52	18	26	40	14	17	13	61.3

Source: New York City Department of Education, 2013-14 to 2017-18 Demographic Snapshot.

Many of us came to conflate not only our potential for success, but our worth, on testing.

*Silvena Chan, Stuyvesant HS, Class of 2005*

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When comparing the demographic makeup of all NYC public high schools to that of the specialized high schools, it is clear that specialized high schools are not equally accessible to the diverse communities across the city. Specialized high schools are not even equally accessible within the APA community.

The disparity paints a picture of race and class divides which, as has been done in the history of segregation, is used to erroneously show that success and opportunity in education are only obtainable by certain groups over others -- *a racist lesson that we do not want APA or any other youth to learn.*

Additionally, considering the charged discussions around affirmative action in higher education, how APAs fit in the larger fight of educational equity has been fraught with misconceptions. *Contrary to the Model Minority Myth, APAs have benefitted and continue to benefit from affirmative action programs.* APAs continue to face harmful stereotypes not just in education, but also later on in their professional lives. For example, APAs are least likely to be promoted to managerial positions in the workforce.<sup>[15]</sup> Policies aimed at improving diversity help address the harmful stereotypes that bar individuals from advancing both academically and professionally.

### Recognizing concerns within the Asian Pacific American community about eliminating the SHSAT

#### *How do we as a community look at school success?*

For many in the APA community, admission to one of the specialized high schools is seen as one of the only pipelines to long-term success, beginning with college acceptance. However, 'selection bias' may account for college admissions rather than anything extraordinary about a specialized school education. Students who scored right above the SHSAT cutoff do not have better outcomes in college attendance, college selectivity or college graduation compared to students who attended other high schools after narrowly missing the SHSAT cutoff.<sup>[16]</sup>

Diversifying the specialized high schools through an expansion of admission criteria may result in the decrease in numbers of some APA students. However, it would also mean that previous barriers to entry would be eliminated, thereby increasing accessibility to students from various underrepresented APA groups, ELL backgrounds, low-income families, and those attending a broader selection of middle schools.

As mentioned previously, a vast majority of APA students in public schools are in fact not attending specialized high schools. There are many other high school options that provide quality education and ultimately success for our youth. Our communities should be able to explore and understand the variety of high school options for their children (see CACF Recommendations). Language access and access to teachers would help ELL and new immigrant parents unfamiliar with the DOE system and opportunities. Currently, too many families are reliant on private tutoring centers that provide expensive in-language support, but that are incentivized to uphold a paying customer base who are preparing for the SHSAT.

Additionally, teaching to a single test hurts our middle schoolers at a critical and pivotal age. Rigorous tutoring and exam prep often contribute to high levels of stress, isolation, and shame that young students do not yet have the social skills to manage independently. It also diminishes the capacity to foster more holistic learning among our youth. Further, the emphasis on a high-stakes single test sends a message that a student's worth as a 9th grader has already been defined by a single number, even before they start high school. This can foster unhealthy learning environments for many students that can have a negative impact on their mental health and learning abilities and outcomes.

#### **PERSPECTIVES FROM SPECIALIZED HS ALUMNI:**

Many students felt that the school prioritized high achievement rather than mental health, which was seldom addressed. It was normal to see people in the halls, stressed out about having more than one exam per day or having many large assignments due, or



about the high standards that their own parents had placed on them. Between school and home, it almost felt as if there was no safe place for them.

- *Shabeela Islam, The Bronx High School of Science, Class of 2016*

I was one of a handful of students from my junior high school who tested into the specialized high schools, specifically Bronx Science and Brooklyn Tech, but not Stuyvesant. When I told my parents I did not test into Stuyvesant, they told me that this was failure. I can see how damaging the over-emphasis on high stakes testing such as the SHSAT truly is for young people and their families, who feel like these tests are the only way to achieve the American Dream.

- *Jason Wu, Brooklyn Technical HS, Class of 2003*

Many of us came to conflate not only our potential for success, but our worth, on testing. Students who performed well often developed condescending and judgmental ways of relating to those who did not. It was an environment that encouraged individualism and a harmful belief in bootstrap mentality, making us especially vulnerable to depression and anxiety. We obsessed over grades and proving our intelligence, fearful of being on the wrong end of our classmates' condescension. These dynamics continue to harm students long after high school.

- *Silvena Chan, Stuyvesant HS, Class of 2005*

### ***The validity of the SHSAT is in question.***

The SHSAT is misperceived as an objective, and 'colorblind' tool to measure merit. However, an expansive body of research reveals that school screening policies that do not consider race or socioeconomic status do not reduce, but rather contribute to further "stratification by race and ethnicity across schools and programs."<sup>[17]</sup> Conversely, race-conscious school choice policies cultivate diverse, high-quality public schools as well as a more equal education system.<sup>[18]</sup>

In the field of testing, known as psychometrics, a single measure like the SHSAT violates the universally accepted norm and consensus in favor of multiple measures.<sup>[19]</sup> Having a single-test as the admission policy in no means takes into account the wide range of diverse experiences of all students and their families in New York City. Further, a single measure of a student's academic potential taken at one particular point in time can be imprecise. Using multiple criteria reduces the risk that a school admissions decision is based on an

erroneous measurement. Almost all US academic institutions employ multiple-measure admissions policies.<sup>[20]</sup>

By itself, the SHSAT has not proven to be a valid admissions tool.<sup>[21]</sup> Because no test is free from flaws, predictive validity studies measure admissions criteria against their "specific, quantitative objectives (like future student performance)."<sup>[22]</sup> A case against the SHSAT, and for replacing it with multiple measures, has emerged. Predictive validity research finds that school grades predict the variance in future student performance far better than the SHSAT.<sup>[23]</sup> Other efforts to subject the SHSAT to predictive validity testing have met with mixed results. In a Metis Associates study commissioned by the DOE, the SHSAT did demonstrate some basic predictive validity. But another study questions the SHSAT's ability to even differentiate students, in that thousands of students' scores near the admission/rejection line (for students both admitted and rejected) are statistically indistinguishable from each other.<sup>[24]</sup>

### ***PERSPECTIVES FROM SPECIALIZED HS ALUMNI:***

As an educator, I know that a single test offers us only a single data point, and our children deserve a fuller evaluation if we are to take their futures seriously. A common test score should be only one of several components we use to decide a child's place in a learning community. Overemphasizing a single test score is not only oversimplifying our own children, but it violates a fundamental role of schools to develop children into citizens.

- *Toby Wu, Stuyvesant HS, Class of 2005*

### **CACF Recommendations: SHSAT and Beyond**

The specialized high schools are only one piece in a large NYC public school system. The segregation we see in specialized high schools reflects a systemic problem of inequity in NYC schools that begins well before high school.<sup>[25]</sup> There needs to be a number of additional educational policy changes to ensure that all students have a fair and equitable chance at high-quality education. Although addressing the inequity and lack of diversity in specialized schools is a small step towards school desegregation, it is a step that needs to be taken.

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At the same time, CACF remains highly critical of Mayor Bill de Blasio's specific proposal and plan for reform. We take issue with the processes that he and the Department of Education took in crafting and releasing those proposals to the public. Following are some of our larger recommendations, beyond SHSAT reform. **CACF is committed to helping the APA community engage in productive dialogues around reform that can help move the City's public school system towards equity for all.**

**1. Provide opportunities for stakeholders, families and students, policy makers and advocates, and educators from APA, Black, and Latinx communities to be involved when critical decisions are being made about public schools.** These opportunities for involvement must include the space and time to have hard but necessary conversations about race, gender, sexual orientation, class, immigration history, and ability.

**2. Better inform families around high school choice.** There must be more effective outreach efforts to families in languages spoken in APA communities, beyond distributing overwhelmingly thick high school directories and requiring attendance at high school fairs. Language accessible and culturally appropriate outreach efforts will help ensure that families are not only informed about high school options, but that they feel secure about the options that best meet the needs of their children.

**3. Build more high schools in northern Queens and southern Brooklyn.** A large number of students from Queens and Southern Brooklyn commute outside of their boroughs to attend high school. There are simply not enough high schools in the borough to meet the demand, especially in northern Queens. Public high schools must be able to accommodate the rapidly

growing APA population in Queens and Brooklyn.

**4. Reform admissions processes at all schools and grades.** During the Bloomberg administration, reports indicate that school choice processes exacerbated segregation in NYC public schools and gave preference to white, middle-class families in the public school system.<sup>[26]</sup> For example, the lack of diversity in Gifted and Talented (G&T) programs across the City<sup>[27]</sup> and the 'gerrymandered' Community Education Council District 2 zoned schools are the two products of the policies from this era. Reform must address admissions and go beyond by increasing the number of seats in elite programs, districts and the specialized high schools.

**5. Improve neighborhood or 'zoned' schools.** A major reason that the competition for limited spots at specialized high schools exists is because of the lack of investment in neighborhood schools, particularly in Queens and Brooklyn. Neighborhood schools are often overcrowded and under-resourced, and must be improved in order to create quality high school options for families.

**6. Develop and provide resources for system-wide strategies to address inequity.** While reforming the specialized high schools is a step in the right direction, it is a very small step towards addressing the larger inequities across the system. SHSAT reforms can serve as a model for integration efforts in schools across the city. The NYC Department of Education has assembled a citywide School Diversity Advisory Group that is tasked with developing recommendations to address inequities. These recommendations should include the DOE prioritizing diversity and integration in schools by providing both benchmarks AND resources to ensure implementation at the district and school levels.

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