

SHS Testimony
May 20, 2019

We thank the Assembly Standing Committee on Education for inviting us to submit expert testimony for the Specialized High Schools hearing held on May 10th, 2019. Our written testimony comes from our combined research scholarship on school choice, high stakes testing, tracking/detracking, urban youth, teacher research, and gifted and talented admissions.

Our primary assertion in this testimony is that expanding Gifted and Talented (G&T) programs in New York City is unlikely to improve racial/ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity in the city's Specialized High Schools, as G&T programs serve to reinforce and reify educational inequalities, not interrupt them.

We argue that given the fact that the current New York City public school system systematically segregates students into specialized programs at every grade level, and that these programs and schools reflect a student's racial/ethnic, socio-economic and linguistic background, policymakers must directly challenge and transform the structures that sustain the reproduction of inequalities. In particular, our research-based recommendations, described below, call on the Chancellor and Mayor to phase out G&T programs and replace them with equitable and integrated desegregated schools and classroom settings with culturally responsive and sustaining curriculum. We also strongly recommend that the city eliminate test-based enrollment screens at the elementary, middle, and high schools across the city and replace them with a more holistic approach that includes diversity targets.

Admissions at New York City's Specialized High Schools (SHS) is fiercely debated. One proposal for addressing the dismal percentage of Black and Latinx students admitted to these schools is to expand the number of G&T programs in elementary and middle schools. Supporters offer this solution in contrast to the mayor's proposal to diversify the SHS with guaranteed spots for a set percentage of high achieving students from middle schools across the city.¹ They hope that expanding the number of G&T seats will help Black and Latinx students compete for admission into selective middle and high schools—essentially diversifying the G&T to SHS pipeline.

What these pro-G&T advocates are overlooking, however, is that Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein already tried that approach back in 2008, and their measure failed, largely because in adopting a single test for admissions they traded one inequitable method for another.² Research has shown a tight correlation between test scores and socio-economic status (SES).³ It should come as no surprise, then, that test-based admissions systems achieve segregation, especially in school systems like New York City where race and class are tightly intertwined. Predictably, year after year, the G&T student population is disproportionately White and Asian

¹ Roda, A. & Potter, H. "To Diversify Schools, Reimagine G&T", August 5, 2018, available at <https://www.nydailynews.com/opinion/ny-oped-to-diversify-schools-reimagine-gt-20180803-story.html>

² Ravitch, D. 2010. *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education*, Basic Books, (2010)

³ Duncan & Murnane (Ed.), *Whither Opportunity: Rising Inequality, Schools, and Children's Life Chances*, available at <https://www.russellsage.org/publications/whither-opportunity>

with approximately 70 percent testing into G&T while only comprising 30 percent of the overall public school population. Meanwhile, 30 percent of Black and Latinx students are enrolled in the G&T programs, compared to 70 percent of students citywide.⁴

Diane Ravitch, historian of New York City schools, wrote about the G&T admissions change to a single test score in 2008: “Any education researcher could have predicted this result, because children from advantaged homes are far likelier to know the vocabulary on a standardized test than children who lack the same advantages.”⁵ Yet other methods of admissions to G&T programs are equally problematic. Indeed, the Bloomberg/Klein shift to using a standardized test for access to G&T programs was in response to inequalities in G&T admissions that existed at the time, which used a variety of criteria, including teacher recommendations and private (and expensive) psychological evaluations. A recent study found that nationally Black students with high standardized test scores are less likely to receive G&T services than White students with similar scores, and suggests that teacher discretion (and teachers’ racial background) explains some of this difference.⁶ Ultimately, what seems like a commonsense solution to diversify the G&T to SHS pipeline, by prepping and testing all children, is actually not going to have the desired effect of increased diversity in SHS, because G&T programs suffer from the same segregating forces as the SHS.

Attempting to expand and diversify G&T programs also does not address the core problem of separating students into ‘dual school systems’ operating at the curricular level within public school settings.⁷ Instead of public schools becoming the ‘great equalizer’ in society, through G&T tracking, city schools are labeling some students as more likely to succeed than others, and that label is disproportionately being given to White and Asian students coming from families with advantaged backgrounds. Critics of G&T tracking bring attention to the academic and social harms of segregation, including achievement and opportunity gaps and negative stereotypes. According to Karolyn Tyson, professor at the University of North Carolina, racialized tracking exists because of the stubborn achievement gaps between racial and SES groups of students that districts and schools use to “justify the segregation.”⁸ Tracking persists despite legal challenges and reams of social science evidence that have found this practice to be

⁴ Philissa Cramer, As New York City makes limited changes to gifted programs, the regular admissions process yields predictable results, *ChalkbeatNY*, April 16, 2019, available at <https://www.chalkbeat.org/posts/ny/2019/04/16/as-new-york-city-makes-limited-changes-to-gifted-programs-the-regular-admissions-process-yields-predictable-results/>

⁵ Diane Ravitch, 2013, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education*, 89.

⁶ Specifically, the researchers found that “Black students with a Black teacher are significantly more likely to be assigned to gifted services than Black students without Black teachers”. Jason Grissom & Christopher Redding, 2016, “Discretion and Disproportionality: Explaining the Underrepresentation of High-Achieving Students of Color in Gifted Programs” *AERA Open*, available at DOI: 10.1177/2332858415622175, 10.

⁷ Whitney Pirtle, The Other Segregation, *The Atlantic*, April 23, 2019, available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2019/04/gifted-and-talented-programs-separate-students-race/587614/>

⁸ Karolyn Tyson, *Integration Interrupted: Tracking, Black Students, and Acting White After Brown*, Oxford University Press, (2011), 6.

unconstitutional due to academic and social stigmas, and differential access to advanced curricula and high achieving peers.⁹

Another proposal put forth to diversify G&T programs, and SHS, is to prep and test more students. However, during Chancellor Carranza's testimony on the SHS admissions he reported that even as more Black and Latinx students were prepped for the test, and a higher number of students took the test last year, the number of Black and Latinx students who qualified for SHS did not increase. This is because prepping and testing more students does not mean more students will pass the cutoff score. In fact the cut-off score needed for admissions to the SHS is a moving target based on who else took the test and how they scored. The SHSAT is norm-referenced; it compares test-taking students to each other, not to some set of curricular standards, and because there are a discrete number of seats available, increasing the number of students who take the test merely drives acceptance rates down.

As with G&T programs, the Bloomberg administration's answer to the problem of Black and Latinx students' gross underrepresentation in SHS was to expand the number of seats available by creating/designating five new Specialized High Schools that are not technically beholden to New York State's Hecht-Calandra law but nonetheless use the same single exam for admissions. The result is today's status-quo: While some of these newer schools admit slightly higher percentages of Black and Latinx students, the overall rate of admissions of Black and Latinx students to the SHS remains unacceptably low. We would expect the same general trend for expanded G&T programs.

Not only will G&T expansion not address racial and ethnic segregation in the SHS, but G&T programs will serve to increase segregation at the primary school level, further limiting educational opportunities for Black and Latinx students. Historically, G&T programs and other "advanced" curricular offerings grew during the desegregation era as a way for more affluent white families to secure additional resources and maintain segregation.¹⁰ Like Advanced Placement or Honors courses, housing separate G&T programs within schools that also contain Gen Ed programs is a form of **tracking** because students are separated for the entire day to receive different instruction. Yet, research evidence overwhelmingly points to the benefits of de-tracked classrooms and desegregated schools – for all children.¹¹ De-tracked classrooms with heterogeneous ability groups have been shown to dramatically close achievement and opportunity gaps.¹²

Offering a dual system of G&T programs within public schools is also a form of **school choice** because the system relies upon parents as gatekeepers to the program. In most suburban

⁹ Examples include *Hobson v. Hansen*; *People Who Care v. Rockford Board of Education*; *Moses v. Washington Parrish School Board*; *McNeal v. Tate County School District*.

¹⁰ Sarah Garland, *Divided We Fail: The Story of an African American Community that Ended the Era of School Desegregation*, Beacon Books, (2013)

¹¹ Roslyn Mickelson, NCSD Research Brief, (2016) available at <https://school-diversity.org/pdf/DiversityResearchBriefNo5.pdf>; Rucker Johnson, *Children of the Dream: Why School Integration Matters*, Basic Books, (2019)

¹² Carol Burris & Kevin Welner, Closing the Achievement Gap by Detracking, *Phi Delta Kappan*, available at https://www.colorado.edu/education/sites/default/files/attached-files/Burris%20%26%20Welner_Closing%20the%20Achievement%20Gap.pdf (2005)

districts, elementary school G&T programs are pullout programs in which “G&T” students are given access to G&T curriculum outside the regular classroom for a set number of hours per week.¹³ The remainder of the time students identified as G&T are educated alongside their general education peers. Yet in New York City, G&T programs are full-time, school-within-school models used alongside General Education. The G&T and General Education curriculum is the same. Therefore, G&T programs are less about merit and more about deregulated parental school choice which undermine the importance of school integration.¹⁴

Ultimately, when G&T is used as a form of tracking and school choice, it leads to increased segregation by race/ethnicity, socio-economics and achievement. University of North Carolina professor Roslyn Mickelson and colleagues explain, “Choice options designated for gifted students, particularly schools that require a certain test score to enter, will by design resegregate students by achievement. And because achievement is correlated with race and SES, [G&T] students tend to be disproportionately White, Asian, and middle class.”¹⁵ Research by Molloy College professor, Allison Roda has shown how New York City G&T programs create status distinctions between schools and programs, further exacerbating inequalities. Parents are allowed to use school choice to get their children into G&T programs by prepping and tutoring for the G&T tests. These structures in the system set parents up to make difficult decisions that by necessity result in winners and losers.¹⁶ Roda stated, “Using G&T programs to attract White families into the public school system can, by default, desegregate schools, but can also result in racialized tracking, academic and social stigmas, marginalized parent communities, and a divisive school culture between the haves and have-nots.”¹⁷ Our position is that even with expanded G&T testing, the most advantaged parents will secure seats for their children at the expense of others because they have the resources to do so. Overall, while 40 percent of all kindergarten students in New York City attend schools outside of their zone, White and Asian students are more likely than their Black and Latinx counterparts to do so in order to enroll in a school with a G&T program; this is true even as a greater percentage of Black and Latinx families exercise school choice at the kindergarten level.¹⁸

¹³ Mara Sapon-Shevin, *Playing Favorites: Gifted Education and the Disruption of Community*, State University of New York Press, (1994).

¹⁴ Janelle Scott, “School Choice as a Civil Right: The Political Construction of a Claim and Its Implications for School Desegregation” In *Integrating Schools in a Changing Society: New Policies and Legal Options for a Multiracial Generation*, (2013), 32-52.

¹⁵ Roslyn Mickelson, Martha Bottia, & Stephanie Southworth, “School Choice and Segregation by Race, Class, and Achievement,” *Education Policy Research Unit*, available at <https://nepc.colorado.edu/sites/default/files/CHOICE-08-Mickelson-FINAL-EG043008.pdf>, (2008), 268.

¹⁶ Allison Roda, *Inequality in Gifted and Talented Programs: Parental Choices About Status, School Opportunity and Second-Generation Segregation*, Palgrave Macmillan (2015); Parenting in the Age of High-Stakes Testing: Gifted and Talented Admissions and the Meaning of Parenthood, *Teachers College Record* (2017) available at <http://www.tcrecord.org>

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 155.

¹⁸ Nicole Mader, Clara Hemphill, & Quasim Abbas, “The Paradox of Choice: How School Choice Divides New York City Elementary Schools”, *Center for NYC Affairs*, available at <http://www.centernyc.org/the-paradox-of-choice> (2018), 12; One critique of these data is the need to disaggregate by racial and ethnic subgroups (this is especially true when it comes to the “Asian” category in NYC, given disparities within the category and conflation of white and Asian).

This year, New York State Education Department published the “Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Framework” or CR-S which is “grounded in a cultural view of learning and human development in which multiple expressions of diversity are recognized and regarded as assets for teaching and learning.”¹⁹ Developed by a team of experts and headed by Dr. David Kirkland from New York University, the framework is designed to assist districts and schools, who for decades have, as the NYSED report states: “struggled to meet the diverse needs of American children and families” because of “a complex system of biases and structural inequities...deeply rooted in our country’s history, culture, and institutions.”²⁰ The report goes on to say that “this system of inequity — which routinely confers advantage and disadvantage based on linguistic background, gender, skin color, and other characteristics — must be clearly understood, directly challenged, and fundamentally transformed.”²¹

Today, we have city leaders with progressive education agendas. Mayor DeBlasio and Chancellor Carranza have signaled their willingness to change current admissions policies that rely on standardized tests and we urge state lawmakers to allow them to do so. We call on city and state leaders to listen to our recommendations explained above by making equitable choices for *all children* educated in New York City schools. Leaders in diverse school systems have the power and agency to promote a culture of inclusion rather than exclusion that celebrates and encourages all families to bring their unique experiences and contributions to schools.

Through our advocacy, research and practitioner-based work with education stakeholders across the city, we know that some elementary school leaders have already phased out G&T, or are currently making plans to eliminate their G&T programs. Most have replaced G&T with Joseph Renzulli and Sally Reis' schoolwide enrichment model, or SEM. This approach to gifted education is based on the philosophy that all children have unique gifts and talents—not just the students who score well on standardized tests. Research on the SEM has shown positive academic results for low-income students of color.²² In the SEM, “traditional academic gifts are developed using curriculum compacting, acceleration, differentiated instruction and various forms of academic enrichment [which] ...enables children to work on issues and areas of study that have personal relevance to the student and can be escalated to appropriately challenging levels of investigative activity.”²³ Districts must provide more resources into schools in low-income communities to make sure all students have access to enrichment opportunities and challenging curriculum. Ultimately, schools with G&T programs need top-down district policies that would require:

1. Elimination of the test-based admissions system to K-3 G&T programs that previous administrations have put into place.
2. Phase out plans for current district G&T elementary school programs.
3. Resources and support for integrated classrooms using the SEM approach.

¹⁹ NYSED, “Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Framework, available at <http://www.nysed.gov/crs/framework> (2019)

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Schoolwide Enrichment Model (SEM), available at https://gifted.uconn.edu/schoolwide-enrichment-model/about_sem/#

²³ Sally Reis & Joseph Renzulli, *The Schoolwide Enrichment Model: A Focus on Student Strengths & Interests*, *LPI Learning*, available at <http://lpilearning.org/wp-content/uploads/The-Schoolwide-Enrichment-Model.pdf> (2005), 2.

New York City students, parents, teachers and advocates are telling policymakers that it's time to #RetireSegregation. G&T programs are currently being used as tools for segregation. Our current call for desegregated schools and classrooms builds upon the long movement led by poor and working class communities of color who have fought for educational equity and access. We also stand with the New York City Alliance for School Integration and Desegregation, also known as ASID, and their recommendation to phase out district G&T programs. The mission of ASID is “to advocate for racial and socioeconomic city-wide school desegregation and integration as a means to uprooting white supremacy; preserving and spreading the rich culture of marginalized communities, and upholding the principles of democracy, equality, and human dignity that segregation curtails.”²⁴ We stand with the New York City Bar Association which represents a group of over 24,000 lawyers and their recommendation to “eliminate competitive admission to NYC public elementary and middle schools.”²⁵

The Civil Rights Project's most recent report confirms that New York's schools are among the most segregated in the nation.²⁶ As the debate over SHS and G&T admissions rages on, the time is now to show New York City students and families, other major U.S. cities, and the world that the state and city are serious about rectifying decades of inequities. All students — even gifted ones — develop critical thinking skills and reduce prejudices by interacting with diverse peers of all abilities.²⁷ Expanding G&T programs that are already separate and unequal will only create more segregation. Instead, the district should use the CR-S framework that NYSED published:

to help education stakeholders create student-centered learning environments that affirm cultural identities; foster positive academic outcomes; develop students' abilities to connect across lines of difference; elevate historically marginalized voices; empower students as agents of social change; and contribute to individual student engagement, learning, growth, and achievement through the cultivation of critical thinking.²⁸

The best way to do this culturally responsive-sustaining education work is for the city to tackle diversity in specialized high schools and integrate academic programs citywide, across all grades.

²⁴ NYC ASID and their recommendation to eliminate G&T programs, available at <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5afd4002f7939252a8566b77/t/5b12afe1575d1fa70d2320ca/1527951378397/%23theagendaFINALFINAL.pdf>, 11.

²⁵ NYC Bar Association, “Eliminate Competitive Admissions to NYC Public Elementary & Middle Schools”, May 2, 2019 available at

<https://www.nycbar.org/member-and-career-services/committees/reports-listing/reports/detail/eliminate-competitive-admissions-to-nyc-public-elementary-and-middle-schools>

²⁶ Erica Frankenberg, Jongyeon Ee, Jennifer Ayscue, & Gary Orfield, Harming Our Common Future: America's Segregated Schools 65 Years after Brown, *Civil Rights Project*, available at <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/23j1b9nv> (2019)

²⁷ Allison Roda & Halley Potter “To Diversify Schools, Reimagine G&T”, *NY Daily News*, August 5, 2018 available at <https://www.nydailynews.com/opinion/ny-oped-to-diversify-schools-reimagine-gt-20180803-story.html>

²⁸ NYSED, “Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Framework”, available at <http://www.nysed.gov/crs/framework> (2019)

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