The Extinguishment of the Test-only Policy

In this day and age, we have all been the innocent victims of standardized testing and its faults. While some may agree that this form of assessment is great for improving the education system in America, there are many shortcomings to this type of evaluation. Many schools in America hold different standardized test policies and New York City’s assessment procedure has raised many eyebrows. The NYC Specialized High School Admissions Test (SHSAT) is the only standard for admission to the three biggest public high schools in NYC (Stuyvesant High School, the Bronx High School of Science, and Brooklyn Technical School). This test-only policy is a contentious issue because this policy has further limited a large population of Black and Hispanic students with its extremely high test score cutoff range, which has caused a large number of students who are not financially stable to struggle with the means to prepare for these examinations. For this very reason, many of these students do not make the cut. In order to see changes in the system, a two-part plan must be enacted to help adjust the achievement gap as well as diversify the student body population. This plan includes broadening admission measures as well as the establishing and revamping academic enrichment programs to help these lacking groups of students earn better scores.

There is a great mismatch in the demographics of the students represented in the NYC school system. Black and Latino students make up roughly seventy percent of all kids in the public education system, however, when it comes to the three biggest high schools, these groups
are a small portion of the masses. They are severely underrepresented and although many claim that the system is incredibly diverse, the truth of the matter is, it is not. Just recently, the Department of Education (DOE) released the numbers of students who won admission to the specialized high schools and the figures look identical to those of the previous year. About twenty seven thousand students took the exam last fall and of this number, only five thousand received offers to these schools. The competition is tough, but has it become too tough? According to the DOE, five percent of offers went to Black students while seven percent were given to Hispanic students (Darville). The number of Black students who applied to the specialized high schools dropped by three hundred students and they accounted for nearly twenty three percent of all test-takers (Brody). The largest shares of acceptances were from an Asian student population who held fifty two percent of seats followed by Whites with twenty eight percent. Additionally, these numbers report that at Stuyvesant high school, only ten Black students out of nine hundred and fifty three seats were admitted to what is historically known as the hardest public school to get into (Harris). These numbers are incredibly alarming considering the city’s middle school demographics as seventy percent of the city’s public school system are made up of Black and Latino students (Baker). The numbers speak for themselves as they clearly illustrate a necessary change in diversifying the student body population. This has furthermore caused the urgent need for advocacy and modification in this system.

One important thing to consider when tackling the admissions issue of NYC specialized high schools is the academic history of the students who are currently attending these schools. A comparison of those who have made the cut and those who have not, can give substantial insight into what is effective in broadening the admissions measures. In her article, “How to Solve the Diversity Problem at NYC’s Elite Public Schools,” Alia Wong reports that the racial
discrepancies illustrated through the specialized high schools are in relation to the middle
schools that these children are coming from. According to Wong, more than half of students
admitted to the specialized high schools come from five percent of the city’s middle schools.
This number is incredibly small in comparison to the number of middle schools within the city,
which is a total of over seven hundred (“New York Public School Statistics”). One study argues
that the middle school that a student attends prior to taking the SHSAT does not have an effect at
all on whether or not the student is admitted to the specialized high school. I strongly disagree
with this case. Although these specialized high schools do not give special treatment to the
middle schools to which students come from, it is still extremely important for these students to
be from a school that has a strong academic background because this will help to further prepare
them to gain admissions into these highly selective schools. Apart from this, another issue with
the middle schools lies in the distribution of students within these schools. According to Wong,
among students who came from the top “feeder” middle schools, nearly fifty eight percent were
involved in some type of enrichment program that required an admissions test, while twenty nine
percent were in schools that admitted these students based on exam scores. This piece of data
demonstrates that many of these students came from strong academic backgrounds and their
middle school environment has helped prepare them for the test setting, which is expected at
these specialized high schools.

Following the release of these numbers was a report from the Research Alliance for New
York City Schools, which indicated that certain factors like state test scores, class grades, and
attendance would not increase the diversity in these schools considerably (Weinstein). So in
broadening the admission measures of specialized high schools, there needs to be more inclusive
factors that will help to cover more than one aspect of a student’s capabilities. This report sought
to see what would happen to the demographics of the student body population if there were to be a better screening of high schools, which would include other factors like attendance and grades when making an admission decision. Many wonder if this test encourages a culture of exclusivity? The researchers of this report sought to answer this question and they found that by using other admissions criteria, more girls as well as White and Hispanic students would increase the admission figures dramatically. However, abolishing the test all together would result in fewer Asian and Black students in total. So the consequence is double sided; while one group may gain an advantage in admission, another group may become disadvantaged as a result of a change in policy.

This report sheds light to an important idea – there needs to be more programs that can encourage students who are naturally high achievers and intellectually curious to seek admission into these elite high schools. The report found that among students who have done well on state test scores in seventh grade, Latinos, students eligible for free lunch, and girls are all likely to take the SHSAT, which is a free examination. Of those who do, many are much less likely to accept it (Weinstein). This brings into question what factors are discouraging students who have potential to go after these distinguished schools? Finding a way to inspire and motivate these underrepresented groups to claim seats is key. Perhaps pushing faculty and staff at these schools with high achievers to support the top ten percent of their students who qualify to apply for specialized high schools may do the trick. The extra push is needed and can further generate a positive effect in the achievement gap.

The test-only policy has existed for years and there have been so many complaints about how this policy is effecting minority enrollment. When Michael R. Bloomberg was still in office as mayor of the city, he saw no need to change state law as he said: “There’s nothing subjective
about this. You pass the test, you get the highest score, you get into the school — no matter what your ethnicity, no matter what your economic background is. That’s been the tradition in these schools since they were founded, and it’s going to continue to be” (Baker). Unlike Bloomberg, Mayor Bill de Blasio is in support of opening up the measures for admissions for specialized high schools; however, he has yet to do so. Last April, de Blasio said, “We cannot have a dynamic where some of our greatest educational options are only available to people from certain backgrounds.” De Blasio along with Schools Chancellor Carmen Fariña have been in the hot seat for their power to help change the policy but failure to do so. Collectively, we need to get on our legislators and policymakers and push them to make a change because they have the power. Within in the last few years, this issue has been brought to the hands of the people. In 2012, civil rights and education organizations filed a complaint with the DOE and said that the NYC test-only procedure was a violation of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Advocates for this argument say that the admissions process must be changed to something that is nondiscriminatory and inclusive for all students. Although this case is still under investigation, the principle behind it is valuable. A single test is not a fair evaluation of a student’s talents and does not fully assess the student’s abilities.

Just like the supporters who argued in the case of civil rights, many other people are also in support of extinguishing the test-only policy. These advocates have suggested improving an already existing program known as the Discovery Program. The Discovery Program allows disadvantaged candidates who have just missed or have fallen short of the cutoff score to be admitted into these specialized high schools (Taylor). This program is great, however, it needs to be reinvested in and redesigned. As it stands now, not everyone is eligible for the Discovery Program. Those who are must have scored close to the lowest qualifying score on the SHSAT, be
certified as “disadvantaged” by certain criteria, and have a recommendation from a local school demonstrating that the student has potential. The basic outline of eligibility is reasonable because it is not excluding a large group considerably. The only issue with these guidelines may be in the requirement that the student may have to come from a “disadvantaged” background. Ideally, on the surface, this may be to the exclusion of students from upper class families. However, what about students from middle class families? According to the 2014-2015 Specialized High Schools Student Handbook, the Discovery Program’s considerations for “disadvantaged” all seem to classify under lower class and this in itself is problematic (19). In order to extend these qualifications so that it can apply to many more deserving students, the definition of “disadvantaged” needs to be further developed so that students from middle class families would not be neglected. This new change would classify middle class families in NYC as families earning anywhere from $40,000-$115,000 a year. These students, along with those from lower class families, will still have part of their admission selection be merit-based, so not only to judge on financial circumstances and to also maintain a high level of academic rigor.

Whether a student gets into the specialized high school depends solely on a two and a half hour multiple-choice test. The admission process fails to include applications, interviews or transcripts. This “all-or-nothing” priority that this testing policy stresses is extremely damaging to students who can showcase their skills beyond a closed exam (Demby). In her article, “Research Alliance Study Simulates Changes to Admissions Criteria for NYC’s Specialized High Schools,” Debra Weinstein addresses the different admissions criterion that has been proposed to help provide substitutes to the current test-only policy. One possible proposal that can be addressed to educators is to have the SHSAT function in the same way for the public school system that the SAT does for college admission. Ideally, these two exams do have their
own weaknesses, however, much can be learned through one of these examinations to help improve the other. For many colleges and universities, admission committees do not only look at the test scores of the applicant, and the importance of test scores varies from institution to institution. Basing the SHSAT on the SAT can help to broaden the admissions measure, as many other factors will now play a significant role into whether or not a person is granted admittance into a school. Some of these components include an application (which can consist of various essays and short responses), an admission test/other required tests, recommendation letters, and interviews. All of these factors need not work in conjunction with the admission test to give students seats into these schools but the test policy alone is not a fair enough judgment as to whether or not a student is deserving to be in such a school.

Now that the issue of different admission policies has been addressed, there is another component that must also be tackled: enrichment programs. There needs to be more test preparation programs to help aid students get into these schools because the reason why many Black and Latino student are not claiming the seats that are available to them goes far beyond face value; it is an economic problem. The socioeconomic status to which many of these families come from, add to the complexities and hurdles that some of these students must triumph over. The Research Alliance for New York City Schools’ based their study of the specialized high schools on gender, race and poverty level. This study examined students’ achievements to see if they were more or less likely to apply, be admitted or accept an offer given to them by a specialized high school and found interesting distinctions at each stage. For example, during the application stage, girls, Latinos, and students eligible for free lunch were less likely to take the exam while Asians were more likely to do so. The same idea was true for the admission stage, as more Asian students were more likely to receive an offer of admission than the other groups.
Interestingly enough, when it came to accepting the offer, girls were less likely to accept while Asians and students eligible for free lunch were more likely to accept. What does this all mean? Essentially, this study demonstrates the room for improvement in the system and also shows that it is possible to increase the number of students from underrepresented groups into the specialized high school system (Corcoran).

More students from these underrepresented groups need to have test prep in order to fill the gap that they have had in their education as well as sharpen their skills so that they may increase their scores as a whole. To help these students get a leg up on the exam, an institution of a six-week summer program to help students who have had a history of doing poorly on these exams would be necessary. This six-week enrichment program would offer workshops and guidance to the students and parents on the high school placement process so that they are conveniently informed of their roles in this undertaking. Providing families with more information about the specialized high schools and the SHSAT will help increase the interest. It is important to stress show the parents need to think about high school placement early – not only when their children are in the eighth grade. Students need to start preparing as early as the sixth grade if they are looking into applying for these specialized high schools. This program would also provide accelerated classes, test prep, and tips for these students who seek admission into these schools. The funding for this program would stem from the DOE whose operating budget is $20.6 billion (DOE Overview: Funding Our Schools”) and would work in conjunction with the Discovery Program. Part of the DOE’s operating budget goes to standardized tests and after school programs, and although the amount attributed to each is disclosed, reducing non-DOE costs ($676.9 million for School-Age special education services) in the operating budget
may allow for the extra money that can be placed into developing more programs and revamping old ones like the Discovery Program.

The tricky part about abandoning the test-only policy is that we leave room for the possible decline in the high standards and reputation that these schools are known for. Some say that the test is a form of egalitarianism and eliminates favoritism. The fear that many critics have is that once we grant greater access for students to come to these elite schools, the teaching standard will fall and these schools would no longer be considered “extraordinary.” Many people worry that the quality of education will be negatively impacted if the measures of admission were to be broadened. However, there are ways to help students achieve academic goals while also maintaining a great school environment with challenges and rigorous curriculums. This has been executed effectively through A Better Chance (ABC), an academic enrichment program in NYC that caters to people of color. ABC helps promising, low-income students of color and is known for sending these students to highly selective high schools. Their goal, “to serve as a wedge that would pry open the doors to these institutions for Black and other students of color,” can easily be substituted into the specialized high school equation (Griffin 73). Examining their principles shown and borrowing them can help promote student success and be useful in providing information as to how to further bridge the gap among those who are on the top and those who are not. Having our newly instituted programs function in the same that ABC is one step in the right direction.

Similar to ABC, another program that is working towards the inclusion of underrepresented students in the school system is the Harlem Children’s Zone (HCZ). The Harlem Children’s Zone is a non-profit organization that is serving to provide educational services to low-income families. This is crucial to the success of these students because it is one
thing to help the student, but it is another thing to aid the families of these students. Supporting these families with resources and making available opportunities for them will grant greater success among students from these populations. Many people believe that a school neighborhood has an effect on the educational achievement among students and the Harlem Children’s Zone was built under the assumption that this was so. This social experiment proved that good students could do well academically despite their socioeconomic background and area that they grew up in (Dobbie). Programs like ABC and HCZ are necessary in order to invoke the change needed to diversify the system as well as empower students to reach high levels of academic achievement and establishing more programs such as these through the funding of the DOE can help our students make the necessary cut into these highly selective high schools.

The role the SHSAT plays in racial and gender disparities in public schools is great. Because of the achievement gap that is clearly illustrated through this case, it is pivotal to help reduce the inequality presented by such a policy and further create opportunities for disadvantaged students. Many people support the test-only criteria for admission into these schools while others are in a deep opposition. A number of conflicts have risen because of this issue; some question if it is possible to ensure high academic standards while also diversifying the student population. The underlying issue of the SHSAT exam lies in the fact that this sole assessment is crippling deserving students. The system as it stands now is problematic in the demographic shares of students that are being admitted. Although there are many perspectives on the effects of eliminating the test-only policy and different viewpoints, allowing deserving and academically talented, underrepresented students high quality SHSAT preparation and alternative factors to the test-only procedure will hold promise for improving success among these groups.
Works Cited


