

Study simulates changes to admissions criteria for NYC's specialized high schools

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New York City's eighth graders are anxiously waiting to find out which high school they'll be attending in the fall. Six percent of students will end up at one of the city's eight specialized high schools, known for their elite academics—and controversy around their lack of diversity. Female and, most starkly, Black and Latino students are all underrepresented at the schools.

A new report from the Research Alliance for New York City Schools examines students' pathways from [middle school](#) to matriculation at a specialized [high school](#), and simulates the effects of various admissions criteria that have been proposed as alternatives to the current policy - which uses students' performance on the Specialized High School Admissions Test (SHSAT) as the sole determinant of admission.

The study found that admissions rules based on criteria other than the SHSAT - including state test scores, grades, and attendance - would moderately alter the demographic mix of the specialized schools without significantly lowering the [academic achievement](#) levels of incoming students. But the rules would not substantially improve the schools' diversity, particularly for Black students, whose numbers would actually decrease under several of the proposed rules.

"While there is a clear pattern of unequal access at the specialized schools, our findings suggest that a narrow focus on the SHSAT is unlikely to solve the problem," said Sean Corcoran, associate professor of educational economics at NYU's Steinhardt School of Culture,

Education, and Human Development and the report's author.

"Unfortunately, the disparities at these schools are symptomatic of larger, system-wide achievement gaps."

In a typical year, about 25,000 of New York City's 80,000 eighth graders take the SHSAT, and 5,000 are offered admission to a specialized high school. In their study, Corcoran and coauthor Christine Baker-Smith sought to understand what role the SHSAT plays in racial and gender disparities at specialized high schools. Analyzing data from 2005 to 2013, they found that while the SHSAT is (by design) the single most important factor determining who attends the specialized high schools, it is not the only factor. Many students—including many high-achieving students—do not take the SHSAT at all, and some of those offered admission decide to go to high school elsewhere.

Even when comparing students with the same level of prior academic achievement (based on seventh grade New York State English language arts and math tests), the researchers documented disparities at each stage of the pathway into a specialized school:

- Application: Girls, students eligible for free lunch, and Latino students were less likely to take the SHSAT; Asian students were substantially more likely to take the test.
- Admission: Girls, students eligible for free lunch, and Latino and Black students were all less likely to receive an offer of admission, while Asian students were more likely to receive an offer.
- Accepting an offer: Girls who received an offer to attend a specialized school were less likely to accept it, while students eligible for free lunch and Asians students were more likely to accept an offer when given one.

"Our analysis suggests there is room to increase the number of well-

qualified students who successfully navigate the pathway into a specialized school," said Corcoran. "Strategies that encourage top students to take the test, for example, or provide high-quality SHSAT preparation hold promise for improving access."

The researchers also noted that more than half of students admitted to a specialized high school came from just 5 percent of the city's middle schools. However, when controlling for students' prior achievement, the middle schools that students attended had little effect on their likelihood of admission to a specialized school. This suggests that the concentration of offers in a small number of middle schools is less about the schools themselves and more about the uneven distribution of students across the system—that is, the sorting of higher- and lower-achieving students that takes place before they get to middle school.

Critics of SHSAT-only admissions have offered ideas for different admissions criteria, and selective high schools in other cities use a variety of rules to admit students. But little information exists about how proposed changes would affect New York's specialized high schools. To address this, Corcoran and Baker-Smith simulated what would happen if new admissions criteria were in place, in lieu of the SHSAT. Key findings include:

- Admissions based on state test scores, grades, and attendance would increase the share of Latino and White students and reduce the share of Asian students, but generally would not increase the share of Black students admitted. The same admissions criteria would tip the gender balance in favor of female students.
- More than half of the students who would receive offers based on state test scores, grades, and attendance would also be admitted based on SHSAT scores, suggesting that there is considerable overlap among students who would be admitted

under existing and proposed criteria.

- The only simulated admissions rule that substantially changed the demographic mix of specialized high schools was guaranteed admission to all New York City students in the top 10 percent of their middle [school](#). While this would have a large impact on diversity, it would also reduce the average academic achievement of incoming students, particularly in math.

"The real take-away here is that the lack of diversity in the specialized schools is a much bigger problem than 'to test or not to test?'" said James Kemple, the Research Alliance's executive director. "We need to think more broadly about how to reduce inequality in New York City's schools - identifying strategies that create opportunities for traditionally disadvantaged [students](#) will be a primary focus of the Research Alliance's work in coming years."

More information: Click here to access Pathways to an Elite Education: Exploring Strategies to Diversify NYC's Specialized High Schools: steinhardt.nyu.edu/research_al...o_an_elite_education

Provided by New York University

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