Put to the Test: Choice and Representation in New York City’s Selective Exam Schools

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Introduction

New York City (NYC) is home to one of the most segregated school districts in the country: half of the city’s schools are over 90 percent Black and Hispanic, while many of the most sought after schools are almost entirely White and Asian (Boryga, 2018; Fessenden, 2012). In response to these inequities, the city has embraced a choice model that aims to empower families to leave segregated, low-performing neighborhood schools for better educational opportunities (Harris & Fessenden, 2017; Harris & Katz, 2018). At the elementary and middle school level, families may choose to leave their local school to attend charter schools, gifted-and-talented programs, arts programs, or traditional schools they are not zoned for (Harris & Katz, 2018). Furthermore, in 2004 NYC adopted a universal choice system for high school assignments, in which all eighth-grade students are required to submit ranked preferences for up to twelve high schools anywhere in the city (Whitehurst & Whitfield, 2013). These students are then matched to a high school using an algorithm that considers student preferences, school admission priorities, and (in some cases) schools’ rankings of applicants (Corcoran & Baker-Smith, 2018).

Contrary to the hopes of choice advocates however, these efforts have been unsuccessful in creating a more integrated school system; in fact, there is evidence that school choice programs in New York have allowed families to sort themselves into more, rather than less, segregated schools (Harris & Katz, 2018). A study of NYC elementary schools, for example, found that schools would be less segregated than they are now if all public elementary school students attended their local, zoned school (Mader, Hemphill, & Abbas, 2018). One mechanism that contributes to school segregation is the abundance of screened schools—those that use academic factors, like grades and test scores—as part of their admissions
criteria. These include test-in schools, or those that rely on an admissions exam. A recent New York Times report found that over 20 percent of NYC middle and high schools screen students for academic criteria, more than any other city in the country (Hu & Harris, 2018). White and Asian students are far more likely to attend these schools, while most Black and Hispanic students enroll in non-selective schools (Harris & Fessenden, 2017).

The selective high schools that garner the most public attention are the city’s elite specialized high schools—the oldest, largest, and most prestigious of which include Stuyvesant High School, Bronx High School of Science, and Brooklyn Technical High School (Silvers, 2018). Eight of these schools are required by state law to base admissions solely on applicants’ performance on the Specialized High School Admissions Test (SHSAT), in a process that runs in parallel with the traditional high school match (Corcoran & Baker-Smith, 2018). The ninth, the Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts, uses auditions and portfolios instead (Corcoran & Baker-Smith, 2018). These specialized high schools are far less diverse than the overall school district, with Whites and Asians overrepresented relative to Blacks and Hispanics. In this paper, I will explore how access to test-in schools like NYC’s specialized high schools is affected by race and class inequalities. I will also consider how debates over the merits of test-in schools are underpinned by differing conceptions of merit and meritocracy. Finally, I will conclude by discussing proposals for reforming the specialized high school system in NYC.

**Background: NYC Segregation and the Hecht-Calandra Act**

School segregation in NYC exists in a context of profound residential segregation: as of the 2010 census, New York had the second highest Black-White segregation index of any metro area in the country, only behind Milwaukee (Frey, 2011). This residential segregation has long-standing roots in federal housing policy and historical discrimi-
nation (Badger, 2018; A. S. Wells & Crain, 1997). The mandated-choice matching system for high schools was designed to, among other goals, decouple housing segregation patterns from school attendance. Indeed, high schools in NYC are somewhat less segregated than elementary and middle schools, which still rely on neighborhood zoning (Fessenden, 2012). Still, residential factors remain relevant even at the high school level. Screened, better-performing schools tend to reside in more affluent neighborhoods in Manhattan and Brooklyn, and are less likely to be found in the poorest neighborhoods in Queens and the Bronx (Harris & Fessenden, 2017; Hu & Harris, 2018). This creates additional time and transportation costs for low-income families seeking to exercise choice and leave their neighborhood schools. On the other hand, selective schools that happen to be in disadvantaged neighborhoods—like Bronx Science—might enroll few to no children from the nearby area, instead being composed almost entirely of children with greater resources from farther away (Boryga, 2018).

Some elements of the NYC school choice system, particularly screened and specialized schools, have historically intended to preserve patterns of segregation. In 1971, some activists began to challenge the admissions exam of the Bronx High School of Science for being “culturally oriented…to ‘screen out’ Black and Puerto Rican students who could succeed at the school” (Hammack, 2010). In response, White parents argued that math and science scores were not culturally biased, but rather an objective measure of “merit,” and they turned to state government to “protect the current status and quality of specialized academic high schools in New York City” (Hammack, 2010). The state legislature agreed, resulting in passage of the Hecht-Calandra Bill, which cemented a standardized exam as the only allowed criterion for admission to the three specialized high schools that existed at the time, as well as any future schools designated as specialized high schools (Hammack, 2010). Thus, the SHSAT exam was formalized in direct response to efforts to diversify the specialized high schools. The schools were seen by some White families as a safe haven in an otherwise unacceptable public school system, and resistance
to the possibility of losing that safe haven was fierce (Hammack, 2010). Even today, many observers credit screened schools as responsible for keeping White families within the NYC public-school system, unlike in other cities where they have so often fled to suburbs and private schools (Hu & Harris, 2018; Orfield & Eaton, 1996).

*Modern Inequities in Access to Specialized High Schools*

Today, the Hecht-Calandra Bill still stands, and admission to these specialized schools remains incredibly competitive. Out of the 80,000 eighth graders who apply to NYC high schools each year, about 25,000 take the SHSAT for admission to specialized high schools. Of these, about 5,000 are accepted (Corcoran & Baker-Smith, 2018). The demographics of these schools are far less diverse than the city overall. At the three largest and most selective specialized high schools, 64 percent of students are Asian and 22 percent are White (Corcoran & Baker-Smith, 2018). At the most selective high school, Stuyvesant High School, just 10 of the 900 incoming freshmen last year were Black (Dynarski, 2018). Meanwhile, New York public schools overall are 67 percent Black and Hispanic (Harris, 2018).

Recently, the specialized high schools have come under renewed attention as Mayor Bill de Blasio has announced his intention to increase diversity at the specialized high schools. He has proposed expansion of the Discovery Program, which allows low-income students falling just below the admissions cutoff to enroll in the specialized schools following completion of a summer program. He also announced a more radical proposal to eventually eliminate the SHSAT altogether, instead admitting the top seven percent of students in each middle school (Harris, 2018). The proposed changes would increase the proportion of Black and Hispanic students in these schools from 10 to 45 percent with minimal drops in average GPA of admitted students (Harris, 2018). The arguments in response have been rather similar to those put forward in 1972 during debate of the original Hecht-Calandra Bill: many believe that the SHSAT is
a fair and objective measure of merit, and worry that its elimination could weaken the academic rigor of the specialized high schools (Chin, 2018).

The problem is that while standardized tests may appear objective, they actually reflect complex systematic inequalities. For example, there are concerns that the SHSAT may reward intense test preparation rather than simply measuring academic preparedness. If correct, this would give an advantage to families with the disposable income to spend on test preparation materials and classes, some of which cost thousands of dollars (Zerba & Guz, 2018).

More fundamentally, opportunities earlier in life place students at very different levels of preparation for the exam by the time they reach the eighth grade. Factors like family income and parental education can have significant effects on educational outcomes (Altonji & Mansfield, 2011b; Davis-Keane, 2005). There are also school-level characteristics that likely play a role: attending schools with more affluent and educated peers has been shown to have positive academic effects (Altonji & Mansfield, 2011b; Parcel and Dufur, 2001). Finally, at the neighborhood-level, children raised in environments with lower levels of violent crime tend to have higher test scores (Altonji & Mansfield, 2011a). All of these different contextual factors, influence a student’s baseline level of preparation and their capacity to achieve a competitive score on the SHSAT.

This may help explain why there appear to be a relatively small group of middle schools that serve as pipelines into the specialized high schools. Some of these middle schools offer specific guidance on the specialized high school application process, and may even offer extensive test preparation assistance in school (Corcoran & Baker-Smith, 2018). In poor neighborhoods, gifted-and-talented programs used to play an important role in identifying competitive applicants and assisting them with the application process (Boryga, 2018). The prevalence of these programs declined in the 1990s as schools moved away from within-school tracking programs. Around the same time period, the specialized high schools began seeing large drops in the percentage of Black and Hispan-
ic students (Boryga, 2018). Today, over half of the students admitted to specialized high schools come from just five percent of the city’s middle schools (Corcoran & Baker-Smith, 2018). Part of this is presumably due to the unequal distribution of high-achieving students, but there is also data showing that school effects on likelihood of application to specialized schools persist, even after controlling for prior academic achievement (Corcoran & Baker-Smith, 2018).

We have seen when looking at other types of school choice that high-income, White parents are more likely to engage in school choice (Saporito, 2003), and it is reasonable to believe that similar factors might operate for specialized high school applications. Low-income parents are more likely to emphasize proximity, and to cite the importance of choosing a school where their child will feel comfortable (Fuller, Elmore, & Orfield, 1996). This may lead them to choose lower-achieving local schools over more distant, selective ones. Furthermore, the high school application process in NYC, largely as a result of the tremendous amount of choice that it offers to families, requires a significant investment of time and research (Harris & Fessenden, 2017). Not all families are likely to have the time and access to information necessary to build an optimal match list, while also attending to varying application requirements, open houses, and test preparation.

Students and families also may be self-selecting out of applying to specialized schools. It has been shown that families with lower baseline expectations of student achievement are less likely to engage with school choice opportunities (A. Wells, 1993). In NYC specifically, Black students tend to rank first-choice high schools that are, on average, lower-performing (Whitehurst & Whitfield, 2013). Otherwise, qualified applicants from disadvantaged schools may experience feelings of “academic inadequacy,” and, thus, are less likely to apply to specialized schools (Ebanks, Toldson, Richards, & Lemmons, 2012). Collectively, these factors may explain why even after controlling for prior academic achievement, Black and Hispanic students are less likely to apply to specialized schools (Corcoran & Bak-
Conceptions of Meritocracy and the Significance of Elite Schools

Some observers have pointed out that the emphasis on specialized schools seems misplaced, given that they enroll only about six percent of the NYC high school population (Fan, 2018). Indeed, it is true that diversifying these elite schools will not be enough to solve the much wider problem of school segregation in NYC. But while I have focused here on the specialized schools, it is important to remember that these trends of Black and Hispanic underrepresentation are characteristic of the city’s many screened schools (Fan, 2018).

Also, the debate over specialized high schools has important implications for discussions about what constitutes merit in education. Test scores are appealing because they are simple, quantitative, and blind to race, class, and other factors that don’t seem directly tied to ability (Zerba & Guz, 2018). It is important to remember, though, that there is nothing inherent about testing that makes it the most appropriate measure of merit. Grades, for example, have been found to be better predictors of future academic success than standardized testing (Hoffman, 2002). We have also seen that the SHSAT was selected as the sole admission criterion not because it was validated as an effective measure, but rather because it accomplished a political end (Hammack, 2010). Additionally, using test scores alone ignores the whole host of historical and contextual factors that affect which students are able to access elite schools. There may not be any definitive way to define exactly who should be able to access scarce educational opportunities, but it seems clear that the current specialized school application system fails to create equal access.

It is worth noting that the evidence for the causal impact of specialized high school attendance on educational outcomes is mixed. Dobbie & Fryer (2015), using regression discontinuity analysis of students just above and below the admissions cutoff, find that at least for the marginal applicant, enrolling in a specialized high school does not impact
college enrollment, graduation, or quality. An analysis of elite examination schools in Boston, however, has found that even though there is no impact of school attendance for marginal applicants, lower-achieving students may benefit from examination school attendance (Rokkanen, 2015). This is consistent with the evidence that low-income students benefit from attending schools with more affluent peers (Altonji & Mansfield, 2011a). Also, even though the evidence for long-term impacts of exam schools on life outcomes is weak, students do benefit from “social interaction and networking, academic rigor, and available resources” (Ebanks et al., 2012).

Given that admission to specialized high schools is a highly scarce, sought after resource, we should be extremely cautious about writing off systematic barriers to access as insignificant. Specialized high schools have graduation rates of 97 percent, compared to only 68 percent for unscreened high schools (Harris & Fessenden, 2017; Hu & Harris, 2018). While a large proportion of this difference is likely due to selection bias, the experience of attending one of these schools is certainly unique, and the schools will likely continue to serve as symbols of merit and achievement. By denying Blacks and Hispanics access to these schools, we imply that these groups fail to live up to societal conceptions of merit.

Reforms and Future Directions

Mayor de Blasio has proposed eliminating the SHSAT, instead admitting the top seven percent of each middle school class to specialized high schools. This policy takes advantage of existing residential segregation, using it to generate more integrated schools (Harris, 2018). This is similar to admissions systems that have been implemented elsewhere. Texas House Bill 588 (1997), for example, provides any high school student graduating in the top ten percent of their class automatic admission to any public state university (Niu and Tienda, 2010). Since we expect individual middle schools to be relatively homogenous, accepting students from every school helps ensure a diverse cross-section of the city’s eighth graders. This system also has the benefit of realigning the incen-
tives of highly motivated parents and families (Harris, 2018). Under the current system, parents who are motivated to get their children into the specialized schools are likely to seek out pipeline middle schools with test preparation resources and strong gifted-and-talented programs. Under the new plan, they might give more consideration to attending less advantaged schools, to increase their chances of admission. While this trend might undermine the diversity goals for specialized schools, it would help integrate the broader middle school system. Since desegregation is associated with improved educational outcomes for mid- and low-achieving students, this outcome would likely be net-positive for the district (Mickelson & Heath, 1999).

Elimination of the SHSAT at the original three specialized high schools will require action from state legislators in Albany, and it is unclear if that is currently politically feasible (Silvers, 2018). There are actions that the city would be able to take without state approval, however. Opponents of the SHSAT believe that the Mayor should be allowed to simply remove the “specialized” designation from the five most recent specialized high schools, though the city’s Department of Education claims that such a move would likely be challenged (Silvers, 2018).

A model that has been effective elsewhere for increasing diversity in selective education programs is universal screening. The current system requires interested students to voluntarily register to take the SHSAT, thus increasing the importance of factors like teacher and parent referrals, and access to information (Card & Giuliano, 2016). A study of a large Florida school district found that screening all second graders for admission to a gifted-and-talented program, rather than relying on parent and teacher initiative, led to large increases in the number of low-income and minority students that qualified for the program (Card & Giuliano, 2016). Universal screening does not solve the problem of inequities in resources and test preparation, but it would do a better job of identifying those students that meet exam cutoffs, but fail to apply for specialized high schools.
Conclusion

Moving forward, policymakers should carefully consider how different admissions systems may perpetuate or exacerbate existing inequalities. While a purely exam-based admissions policy has proved problematic, moving away towards more holistic factors might provide a vehicle for new types of discrimination. Teacher referrals to gifted programs, for example, have been shown to favor White and Asian students (McBee, 2006). Furthermore, given that the policy changes currently under consideration are expected to decrease Asian representation at specialized high schools, active effort should be made to engage community members in proposed changes. This is particularly important since Asians in the US have historically lacked political power (Fan, 2018).

The problems of examination schools are not evidence against school choice itself. Indeed, the mandated-choice system has given many students access to new opportunities, and has been associated with large increases in the NYC graduation rate (Whitehurst & Whitfield, 2013). Instead, the problems of test-in schools illustrate that that diversity is not a natural consequence of expanded choice. Choice can be a tool for families to exacerbate existing segregation and achieving diversity goals within a choice system will require deliberate effort.
References


Rurality and School Choice
Landon Mabe

School choice, the ability of families to enroll their children in a variety of public or private schools, has been lauded by advocates for its ability to foster innovation in schools and promote best educational practices (Fuller & Elmore, 1996). While the claim that school choice programs have a beneficial effect on school quality and student educational attainment has not been brought to bear by the research, the premise of school choice nevertheless largely rests on a set of assumptions that only fit cleanly in urban or suburban contexts (Cowen & Creed, 2017; Wells, 1993). Rural school districts, however, present realities that do not mesh with the underlying rationale of school choice and the supposed benefits that it brings. School choice policies, and the economic theory that undergirds them, are not viable solutions for many struggling rural school districts which face budgetary and geographic constraints that necessitate targeted policy intervention. This paper will begin with a look at the assumptions of school choice, followed by a discussion of the disadvantages rural school districts face in the context of inter-school competition, and will end with suggestions for alternative policy interventions.

The Assumptions of School Choice

Since its inception, school choice has come with a set of assumptions about its mechanism of action that do not always translate to reality. Central to school choice proponent’s argument is the idea that free market competition between schools will bring out the best in those districts which will then have to compete for their students (Wells, 1993). Following this line of thought, parents will choose to send their children to the school that will provide them the best educational outcome, thus promoting the best practices of the most successful schools and placing pressure on those with dropping enrollment numbers to innovate or close their doors (Fuller & Elmore, 1996). Issues have been raised with these