



HIGH STAKES, LOW VALIDITY?



Black and Hispanic students comprise **nearly 70 percent** of the enrollment of New York City's public high schools. Yet they typically make up just 10 percent of the eighth graders admitted to the city's eight specialized high schools, which include **Stuyvesant** and the **Bronx High School of Science**. These schools are feeders to Ivy League colleges and other top universities.

Admissions decisions are currently based on a single exam, the **Specialized High Schools Admissions Test (SHSAT)**. But a **recent proposal** by New York Mayor Bill de Blasio seeks to diversify these specialized schools by replacing the SHSAT with a system based on middle-school class rank and scores on state tests. For the three largest specialized schools, this reform would require changes to a 1971 state law. Those changes could take time, if they occur at all. So de Blasio has also proposed setting aside 20 percent of seats in each school for low-income students who rank just below the cut score on the SHSAT. The mayor has estimated that, combined, these changes would increase the percentage of Black and Hispanic students to 45 percent.

Important concerns about the test and its use are explained by a 2008 **National Education Policy Center research brief** by **Joshua Feinman** that found deep flaws in the use of the SHSAT. Feinman's analysis showed that thousands of students who are admitted based on the exam earn scores that are statistically indistinguishable from the results of those who miss the cutoff.

Feinman identified other issues as well. The scoring system may advantage students who take pricey test prep programs. The city administers different versions of the exam to head off cheating, yet some versions are significantly more challenging than others, giving stu-

dents who took that version a leg up. Finally, the test has never been examined to determine whether it actually predicts success at the specialized schools. Nor has it been analyzed for signs of bias against students of different races or genders. This means that the exam may be systematically denying opportunity to the city's Black and Hispanic students.

“Without aggressive action, New York will continue to fail its Black and Latino students, a waste of their potential and its own,” concluded a *New York Times* editorial that mentioned Feinman's work (*It's time to integrate New York's best schools*).

Interested in learning more about the New York's specialized high school admissions exam and process? Feinman's report is available on our website:

Feinman, J. (2008). *High stakes, but low validity? A case study of standardized tests and admissions into New York City specialized high schools*. Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center.

Another important and useful analysis is from NEPC Fellow Sean Corcoran and his colleague:

Corcoran, S. & Baker-Smith, C. (2018). *Application, admission, and matriculation to New York City's specialized high schools*. *Education Finance and Policy*, 13(2).

NEPC Resources on High-Stakes Testing and Evaluation

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