



Stuyvesant High School Parents' Association

Executive Board of the Stuyvesant High School Parents' Association
December 2018

Statement Regarding Proposed Changes to New York City Specialized High School Admissions

- 1) An intense debate has been taking place since the referral to the floor of the New York State Legislature in June 2018 of a bill (A10427A/S08503-A)¹ that would change the admissions process for New York City's specialized high schools by amending the section of the New York State Education Law (§2590G, Subdivision 12) that is commonly referred to as the "Hecht-Calandra Act."² Under the proposed legislation, for which the stated purpose is increased diversity in the specialized high schools, the Specialized High School Admissions Test (SHSAT) would be phased out entirely over a period of three years as the means of admitting applicants to the specialized high schools and would be replaced by an admissions process that would make offers to the top 7% of students from each New York City public middle school.³
- 2) The Executive Board of the Stuyvesant High School Parents' Association recognizes and respects the strongly held opinions that accompany this debate on all sides of the discussion. We support the goal of expanded diversity at Stuyvesant and the other specialized high schools, including increasing Black and Latino/a enrollment. However, we oppose Bill A10427A/S08503-A as a means to accomplish that goal, based on concerns that have been raised as part of the public discussion. We support an admissions process for New York City's specialized high schools that is fully objective and transparent, that ensures fair and equitable treatment of all New York City students, and that enables those schools to maintain the academic standards and successes that characterize them today.
- 3) As the representative of an already diverse community of parents and guardians, who trace their origins to myriad countries across the globe and many of whom speak languages other than English at home, the Executive Board of the Stuyvesant High School Parents' Association strongly supports diversity of all types in all of our schools. At Stuyvesant, our children benefit from working and collaborating with peers who bring perspectives unique to their varied ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds to everything in which they participate at school. In addition, as part of a school community in which at least 42% of the students qualify for free and reduced-price lunch, our children also experience and observe, on a daily basis, the ability to excel in and outside of the classroom independent of socio-economic status. We welcome thoughtful, well-articulated initiatives, which are proposed, discussed and implemented in a transparent manner, in support of increased diversity, including the admission of more Black and Latino/a students, at Stuyvesant and all of our specialized high schools.

¹ https://assembly.state.ny.us/leg/?default_fld=&leg_video=&bn=A10427&term=0&Summary=Y&Text=Y

² This Section of the Education Law provides that "*Admissions to The Bronx High School of Science, Stuyvesant High School and Brooklyn Technical High School and such similar further special high schools which may be established shall be solely and exclusively by taking a competitive, objective and scholastic achievement examination, which shall be open to each and every child in the City of New York in the eighth or ninth year of study, in accordance with the rules promulgated by the N.Y.C. Board of Education, without regard to any school district wherein the child may reside. No candidate may be admitted to a special high school unless he has successfully achieved a score above the cut-off score for the openings in the school for which he has taken the examination.*"

³ For an extended description of this proposal, please refer to the DOE document: *Specialized High Schools Proposal, Making Admissions to the Specialized High Schools More Equitable for All Students*, Office of Student Enrollment, New York City Department of Education. While the bill provides that offers would be made to the top five to seven percent of eighth graders at each public middle school, the DOE document indicates that the number would be seven percent. New York City children who attend parochial or private middle schools would have different admissions criteria and would be selected by lottery to fill a much more limited, but currently unknown, number of seats.

- 4) Our children live and will need to be prepared to function in the 21st century's technologically connected and highly competitive global environment. They also live in a diverse and vibrant New York City, which is seeking to strengthen its role as a leader in job-creating enterprises that are driven by technology and innovation. As a result, our city continues to attract people and businesses from across the country and around the world, as it has since its founding. For over 100 years, Stuyvesant has developed what has now grown into a globally recognized tradition of excellence in preparing students, many the children of recent immigrants, to play leadership roles in confronting the challenges of their times. Exposing students to diversity of all types has been, and will continue to be, an important element of that preparation.
- 5) We believe there are other approaches beneficial to New York City's children that should be explored as an alternative to the current proposed legislation.
 - a) We support maintaining the Hecht-Calandra Act as it is currently written—and administration of the SHSAT as the sole means of admission—unless an alternative is presented to and thoroughly discussed with communities across the city that addresses the concerns that have been raised regarding the current proposed legislation.⁴
 - b) We believe that the people of New York City and its public school system would be best served by diversity initiatives that begin with a focus on addressing the systemic failures and barriers to equitable education that have existed for far too long in far too many of our city's elementary and middle schools in historically underserved communities.
 - c) Initiatives designed to give educationally challenging opportunities to children in all of our elementary and middle schools should include:⁵
 - i) Substantial funding to establish, support and expand accelerated learning programs and opportunities in every community, particularly underserved communities, including establishing gifted and talented or other enriched learning opportunities from kindergarten through third grade in every elementary school.
 - ii) Creation of new "middle school academies" in historically underserved communities, beginning in fourth grade, to help students reach their full potential with accelerated learning as they move through the middle school pipeline. These academies do not have to be "physical structures" but rather, driven by local needs and resources, could take the form of special classes as well as after-school or enrichment programs.
 - iii) Additional, readily implementable diversity initiatives, including administering the SHSAT exam at every middle school with the option to "opt out" (instead of "opt in").
 - d) Were a superior, transparent alternative to be presented, it would have a significant impact on thousands of families across our city. Because of the extent of that potential impact, we support a two-year development period that will assure the participation of educators, parent leaders, elected officials and students at every grade level across New York City. This process, in which we urge Stuyvesant parents, guardians and students to participate, should have two connected objectives:

⁴ Most of those concerns are articulated in the comprehensive report issued by the Brooklyn Tech Alumni Foundation: *The SHSAT—Disparities Impacting Diversity, Opportunity and Achievement in NYC Public Schools: A Comprehensive Action Plan for Change*, October 2018.

⁵ For a discussion of these and related proposals, please see the Brooklyn Tech Alumni Foundation Report, referenced above.

- i) An open, transparent dialogue, over the two years, to explore the development of a transparent, objective alternative that is superior to the current admissions process and the proposed legislation and that addresses the many concerns that have been raised about the legislation.⁶
 - ii) The immediate identification of resource allocation priorities and program initiatives, such as those referenced above, to address the systemic failures and barriers to equitable education in historically underserved communities. These priorities and initiatives would be designed for immediate implementation, well before the end of the two-year period.
- 6) The Department of Education's current plans for increasing diversity in the specialized high schools include expanding the Discovery Program. The Discovery Program is a "summer enrichment program" for eligible rising ninth grade students who are "disadvantaged based on their household income, housing situation, or English Language Learner Status...[and who]...attend a high-poverty school."⁷ Students who meet the above criteria and who, after taking the SHSAT, "score right below the cutoff score"⁸ for admission to a specialized high school may be eligible to participate in the Discovery Program. Upon successful completion of the Program, these students are eligible for admission to a specialized high school to which they had applied but been denied admission based on their test scores. The Department of Education has announced that it will expand the program to 20% of seats at each specialized high school.⁹ That change would result in a very large increase in admissions through the Discovery Program process. At Stuyvesant High School, if admissions through the Discovery Program were to reach 20% as proposed,¹⁰ approximately 170 students who would have qualified based on the SHSAT would be displaced in favor of students who score significantly below the school's lowest cutoff score each year.¹¹
- a) While we believe that the Discovery Program could be an effective way to help a more diverse pool of "high-performing, disadvantaged students gain admissions to a specialized high school," we are concerned that the plan to expand the Program, as presented to the public thus far,¹² lacks transparency to the extent that it is impossible to assess its impact on the academic standards of individual schools. Among other things, the DOE has not provided to the public a clear accounting of the number of students admitted today under the Program nor has it provided to the public any analysis of what the proposed expansion will mean for each school.
 - b) Because the Discovery Program is of potential value to our specialized high schools as well as to the city as a whole, we request that the DOE, before implementing the plan, turn over responsibility for developing the details of any expansion of the Discovery Program at each specialized high school to the leadership of that school. This will allow school leadership to make recommendations to the DOE

⁶ Community Education Councils across the city have been hosting representatives of the DOE on an ongoing basis in forums that have generated robust feedback from parents, guardians and students on the proposed legislation. As an example, please see the Resolution passed by District 20's Council: <https://www.cec20.org/resolutions.html>. In addition, the report prepared by the Brooklyn Tech Alumni Foundation (referenced above) details many of the concerns that have been raised.

⁷ A "high poverty school" is defined as a school whose families meet the DOE's criteria for an Economic Needs Index of at least 60%. For a description of how the Economic Needs Index is calculated, please see <https://www.schools.nyc.gov/docs/default-source/default-document-library/diversity-in-new-york-city-public-schools-english>, page 4.

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Specialized High Schools Proposal, Making Admissions to the Specialized High Schools More Equitable for All Students*, Office of Student Enrollment, New York City Department of Education, p. 5.

¹⁰ See <https://www.schools.nyc.gov/enrollment/enrollment-help/meeting-student-needs/diversity-in-admissions>.

¹¹ See Hu, Winnie (2018, August 13). Elite New York High Schools to Offer 1 in 5 Slots to Those Below Cutoff. *The New York Times*. <http://www.nytimes.com>.

¹² *Specialized High Schools Proposal, Making Admissions to the Specialized High Schools More Equitable for All Students*, Office of Student Enrollment, New York City Department of Education, p. 5.

regarding how to expand the Discovery Program in the context of a detailed and transparent review with parents, guardians and school staff concerning the impact of the expanded program at each school.

- 7) The Executive Board of the Stuyvesant High School Parents' Association urges concerned parents to get informed and voice their opinions.
 - a) It is likely that the proposed legislation, as currently constructed, will be considered in the legislative session that will commence in January 2019, and the bill could end up before the Governor for signature into law by June. We therefore urge all Stuyvesant parents and guardians to educate themselves regarding the proposed legislation and, regardless of their views, to contact their respective Assembly Members and State Senators, as well as the Governor, to express their opinions of the proposed legislation, in person or via letters, e-mails or phone calls.
 - b) To learn more:
 - Read the bill itself: *New York State Assembly Bill Number A10427A: An act to amend the education law, in relation to admission to the specialized high schools in the city of New York*.
 - Review materials presented in support of the proposed legislation, such as the presentation by the Department of Education (DOE): *Specialized High Schools Proposal, Making Admissions to the Specialized High Schools More Equitable for All Students*, Office of Student Enrollment, New York City Department of Education, referenced above.
 - Review critiques of the proposed legislation, such as the one prepared by the Brooklyn Tech Alumni Foundation: *The SHSAT—Disparities Impacting Diversity, Opportunity and Achievement in NYC Public Schools: A Comprehensive Action Plan for Change*, October 2018, referenced above.
 - Attend one or more of the many forums and information sessions across New York City related to school diversity and specialized high school admissions, some of which have been taking place for several years, including:
 - Sessions organized by nearly all of the local Community Education Councils, with presentations by the DOE's Office of Student Enrollment, to receive feedback on the legislation
 - Sessions organized by Diversity Committees of Community Education Councils in multiple school Districts
 - Sessions organized by the elected officials, local Community Boards and interest groups, either in support of or opposition to the legislation
 - Engage in dialogue about the bill with parents and guardians across the city through social media.
 - Check the Stuyvesant High School Parents' Association for links to events and information: www.stuy-pa.org.
 - c) To find out how to contact your elected officials:
 - For members of the State Assembly: <https://nyassembly.gov/mem/>
 - For members of the State Senate: <https://www.nysenate.gov/find-my-senator>
 - For the Governor's office: <https://www.ny.gov/agencies/office-governor>