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Desegregation Plan: Eliminate All Gifted Programs in New York

A group appointed by Mayor Bill de Blasio proposed seismic changes to the nation's largest school system.



By **Eliza Shapiro**

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For years, New York City has essentially maintained two parallel public school systems.

A group of selective schools and programs geared to students labeled gifted and talented is filled mostly with white and Asian children. The rest of the system is open to all students and is predominantly black and Hispanic.

Now, a high-level panel appointed by Mayor Bill de Blasio is recommending that the city do away with most of these selective programs in an effort to desegregate the system, which has 1.1 million students and is by far the largest in the country.

Mr. de Blasio, who has staked his mayoralty on reducing inequality, has the power to adopt some or all of the proposals without input from the State Legislature or City Council. If he does, the decision would fundamentally reshape a largely segregated school system and could reverberate in school districts across the country.

The mayor will now be thrust into the center of a sensitive debate about race and class at home, even as he is straining to stand out in a crowded field of Democratic contenders for president.

He risks alienating tens of thousands of mostly white and Asian families whose children are enrolled in the gifted programs and selective schools. If a substantial number of those families leave the system, it would be even more difficult to achieve integration.

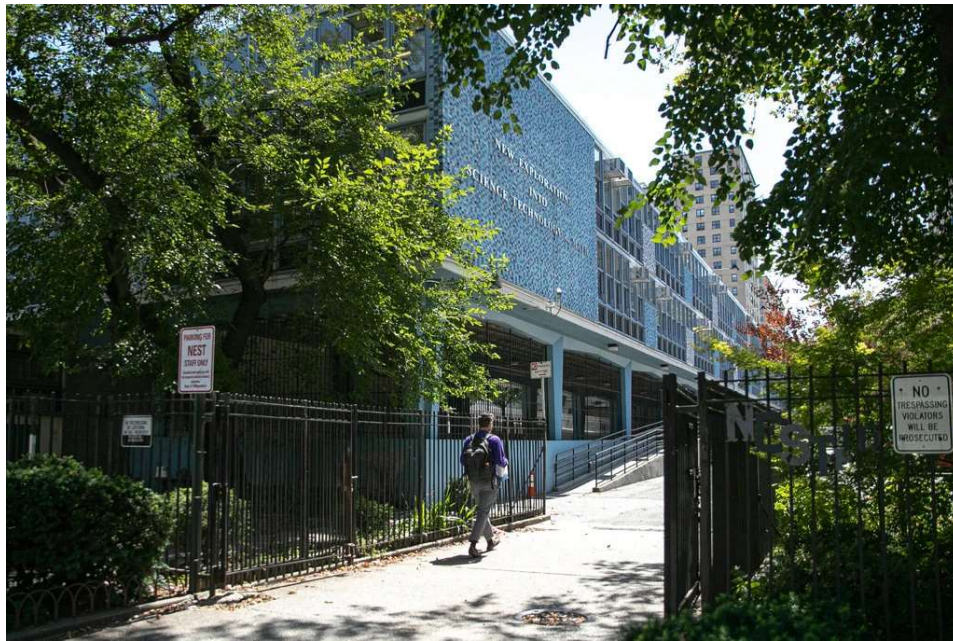
The proposals, contained in a report to be released on Tuesday, may also face opposition from some middle-class black and Hispanic families that have called for more gifted programs in mostly minority neighborhoods as a way to offer students of color more access to high-quality schools.

Still, the plan could resonate with black and Hispanic families who believe that these selective programs unfairly divert money and attention from neighborhood schools.

The plan includes all elementary school gifted programs, screened middle schools and some high schools — with the exception of Stuyvesant High School and the city's seven other elite high schools, whose admission is partially controlled by Albany.

Gifted programs and screened schools have “become proxies for separating students who can and should have opportunities to learn together,” the panel, made up of several dozen education experts, wrote in the report.

About a quarter of the city's middle and high schools require that students be screened — through exams, attendance rates and grades — for admission. New York screens more students for its schools than any other city in the country, and those screened schools tend to have a disproportionately white and Asian enrollment.



NEST+m is one of New York City's most popular gifted and talented programs. Students need to score 97 percent or above on a standardized exam to be eligible.
Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

Mr. de Blasio has been criticized by some on the political left for not demonstrating a willingness to implement major desegregation policies.

But Richard A. Carranza, the schools chancellor, made desegregation his signature issue when he took the job in 2018, denouncing racial inequality and promising sweeping action. He has specifically questioned whether too many students were being labeled “gifted.”

Mr. Carranza did not develop any significant integration policies of his own during his first year on the job, and his input on the proposals will be a definitive test of his willingness to push for disruptive and unpopular change in order to desegregate schools.

Still, the mayor has final say over whether to approve the recommendations.

The panel's report, obtained by The New York Times, amounts to a repudiation of former Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg's education agenda, which reoriented the system toward school choice for families, including more gifted and screened schools, to combat decades of low performance.

Some of those policies deepened inequality even as student achievement rose. Mr. de Blasio has been sharply critical of his predecessor's philosophy on education, but must now decide whether to dismantle some of the structures that Mr. Bloomberg helped to build.

The panel recommended that the city replace gifted and screened schools with new magnet schools — which have been used in other cities to attract a diverse group of students interested in a particular subject matter — along with enrichment programs that are open to students with varying academic abilities.

If the mayor adopts the recommendations, elementary and middle schools would no longer be able to admit students based solely or largely on standardized exams or other academic prerequisites, and high schools would have diversity requirements.

Alternative means of admission should be decided by the Department of Education and individual districts, the panel found.

Though it may be months before the mayor issues a decision, the release of the recommendations is likely to set off an intracity battle in a public school system that is nearly 70 percent black and Hispanic and mostly low-income.

Mr. de Blasio, shown with his wife, Chirlane McCray, has expressed skepticism about the viability of citywide integration. James Estrin/The New York Times

Even a partial rollback of selective academic programs would have a profound effect on many of the city's 1,800 schools.

Last year, New York's elementary school gifted classes enrolled about 16,000 students and were nearly 75 percent white and Asian. Black and Hispanic enrollment in the programs has plummeted over the last decade, after Mr. Bloomberg's attempt to diversify them by creating a test-based threshold for admission backfired.

Still, the so-called School Diversity Advisory Group acknowledged that the city would have to take pains to prevent middle-class families from fleeing the system.

If those students decamp to private schools or to the suburbs, "it will become even more difficult to create high-quality integrated schools," in New York, the report said. The panel wrote that "high-achievement students deserve to be challenged," but in different ways.

The mayor and chancellor were both noncommittal in statements.

"I thank the School Diversity Advisory Group for all their hard work to promote equity and excellence across our system, and I look forward to reviewing their recommendations," Mr. de Blasio said. Mr. Carranza vowed to "take action to ensure all students have access to a rich and rigorous education."

The panel presented the mayor and chancellor with a rough blueprint for overhauling its selective academic offerings, but left many details up to the city.

The city should get rid of the standardized admissions exam for elementary school gifted programs, which is offered to prospective Kindergarten students and has sparked a cottage industry of expensive test preparation for toddlers, the panel said.

Mr. de Blasio should also place a moratorium on new gifted programs, stop most grouping by academic ability and phase out existing gifted classes by not admitting new students, the panel said. If the recommendations are accepted, New York would shed its current gifted offerings within about five years.

In order to integrate high schools, the panel recommended that the city not open any new screened high schools, eliminate geographic zones as a criteria for admission and should not consider lateness or attendance in evaluating prospective students.

The city should also redesign its competitive high school admissions process to ensure that high schools reflect the racial and economic make up of their boroughs, the panel found.

Richard Carranza has vowed to tackle segregation in city schools, but has not yet announced significant new integration policies. Spencer Platt/Getty Images

The widely varying quality of the city's neighborhood elementary schools, which have become increasingly segregated since the 1970s, is the public school system's most intractable problem.

Though Mr. de Blasio has vowed to create a school system where the idea of "good schools" and "bad schools" becomes obsolete, dozens of schools are extremely low-performing, and many more are struggling.

As the city has tried for decades to improve its underperforming schools, it has long relied on accelerated academic offerings and screened schools, including the specialized high schools, to entice white families to stay in public schools.

But at the same time, white, Asian and middle-class families have sometimes exacerbated segregation by avoiding neighborhood schools, and instead choosing gifted programs or other selective schools. In gentrifying neighborhoods, some white parents have rallied for more gifted classes, which has in some cases led to segregated classrooms within diverse schools.

The application system for gifted classes, which can begin when a child is 4, tends to favor savvy parents who have the flexibility to visit schools and, in some cases, the money to spend on test preparation.

Gifted education has long been seen as a third rail issue in New York. Mr. Carranza's pronouncements about gifted education have already made some parents skittish, and a single Brooklyn school's recent decision to scrap its gifted program made headlines.

If the last few years are any indication, the push to eliminate the screening process is also sure to encounter fierce opposition.

Only one of the city's 32 school districts — Brooklyn's District 15, which includes Park Slope — has scrapped academic screens for middle school enrollment, opting instead for a lottery system. The Upper West Side's District 3 has reserved seats at top middle schools for low-performing students.

But it took years of often bitter debate for those politically progressive and racially diverse neighborhoods to finally adopt those plans.

Outside of those corners of the city, black and Hispanic children are more likely to be enrolled in schools with low test scores and scarce resources.

After only seven black students got into the city's most elite public high school, Stuyvesant, some black and Hispanic alumni and elected officials called on Mr. de Blasio to expand gifted classes into poor and minority neighborhoods.

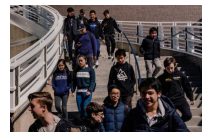
Research has found that some schools in poor and minority neighborhoods that use academic screening can provide crucial opportunities for underserved children, and the panel stressed that it wanted to maintain admissions policies that help identify and enroll vulnerable students in high-quality schools. Programs for students learning English and students with special needs should be largely maintained, the panel found.

Still, the report said, a system that relies heavily on sorting students according to academic ability "is not equitable, even if it is effective for some."

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A Shadow System Feeds Segregation in New York City Schools June 17, 2018



The Broken Promises of Choice in New York City Schools May 5, 2017



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