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Should a Single Test Decide a 4-Year-Old's Educational Future?

The admissions process for gifted programs in New York City has led to a debate over how to desegregate the nation's largest school system.



By **Eliza Shapiro**

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To get into a gifted and talented elementary school program in New York City, children must ace a single, high-stakes exam — when they are 4 years old.

This admissions process is now a flash point in an escalating debate over how to desegregate the nation's largest school district.

Although New York's school district has mostly black and Hispanic students, the city's gifted classes are made up of about three-quarters white and Asian students. Experts say the single-exam admissions process for such young children is an extremely unusual practice that may be the only one of its kind nationwide.

Every January, roughly 15,000 4-year-olds walk into testing centers across the city. On the exam, they are asked to finish patterns: For example, if children are shown a triangle, a square and a triangle in sequence, they are asked to name what shape comes next. They are also asked to solve simple arithmetic problems and define words.

Children have to score at least in the 90th percentile on the exam to be considered for a gifted program in their neighborhoods. Because of the high demand, students typically have to score in the 99th percentile to qualify for one of five even more selective programs, which are among the best-performing schools in the system. Each year, around 3,600 students are eligible for one of the roughly 80 gifted programs in total.

The future of New York's gifted programs was thrown into question last week, when a panel appointed by Mayor Bill de Blasio to study the issue recommended that the city scrap its current gifted classes along with the entrance exam.

Mr. de Blasio immediately distanced himself from the panel's proposals after they were released, and has not taken a position on the admissions process. Jane Meyer, a spokeswoman for the mayor, said on Tuesday that there would be no changes this year to gifted programs. She added that the exam is "under review" but declined to comment on the mayor's position on the test.

Read more about the proposal to eliminate gifted programs in New York.

Politically, changing the admissions practice may be an appealing middle ground on a polarizing issue.

Even proponents of gifted education say New York's current admissions system is flawed and offers advantages to parents who have the savvy and the resources to navigate the confusing process.

“New York has had one of the worst histories on this issue,” said Gary Orfield, a prominent researcher on school segregation and the co-director of the Civil Rights Project at the University of California, Los Angeles. “If you want to do anything except give special advantages to people who already have special advantages, tests aren’t the way to do it.”

Mr. de Blasio’s school diversity panel recommended that the city replace its elementary gifted programs with magnet schools and enrichment programs that do not require exams for entry. The city should also scrap most academic prerequisites for admission into middle schools, the group said.

It may take the mayor months to issue a decision on the proposal. But even if he doesn’t eliminate gifted classes altogether, which would amount to a seismic change for the district, he almost surely will face pressure to change how young children gain entry into the programs.

Mr. de Blasio has spent much of the last year railing against the city’s practice of using a single standardized test to determine entry into its elite high schools, which enroll tiny numbers of black and Hispanic students.

Though the specialized school exam has kindled a fiery uproar about race, class and opportunity in New York, the more obscure test that sorts 4-year-olds each year into gifted schools could force a broader reckoning.

The city’s current gifted enrollment system was developed by former Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg in an attempt to help diversify schools.



Four-year-olds must usually score in the 99th percentile on an exam to be considered for entry into a gifted school, like the Anderson School on Manhattan’s Upper West Side.
Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

But the plan backfired, resulting in the closing of many gifted classes in black and Hispanic neighborhoods as fewer students of color met the new requirements.

Read about how black and Hispanic enrollment in New York’s specialized schools has plummeted over the last 40 years.

That process has set New York apart from school districts across the country. Most prominent cities and counties nationwide no longer rely on a single exam for such young children.

“It’s not as if, in moving away from the test for 4-year-olds, New York City will be joining a brave new world for public education,” said Richard Kahlenberg, a senior fellow at the left-leaning Century Foundation and one of the diversity panel’s members. “New York City will just be joining the rest of the United States.”

The districts around the country that have maintained their gifted classes while integrating them share practices that New York has not embraced.

Students in other districts are often not tested until at least kindergarten, and sometimes not until third grade.

Children who are assessed for gifted classes are given multiple tests or graded on several criteria. And many districts test every student, not just those who apply.

Without that approach, wide disparities are all but inevitable, experts said.

In New York, nearly 1,800 4-year-olds in Manhattan’s largely white and wealthy District 2 took the gifted entrance exam earlier this year. Only 66 students in District 7, an overwhelmingly low-income black and Hispanic neighborhood that includes the South Bronx, took it.

After the city’s kindergarten gifted classes are filled, only a small number of seats are available in later grades for students to enter the programs.

Only a tiny number of black students were offered admission to New York’s most elite high schools this year.

Sally Krisel, president of the National Association for Gifted Children, remembered that when she started working in Hall County, a suburban district north of Atlanta, an official said he would remove the district’s exam for gifted admissions “only over his dead body.”



Richard A. Carranza, the city's schools chancellor, said on Tuesday that the current gifted admissions system "leaves out students." Gabriela Bhaskar for The New York Times

Two decades later, Ms. Krisel has helped create a system that uses several measures, including classroom performance along with some tests, to assess giftedness. The number of Hispanic children in the gifted classes ballooned to 534 children in 2017, from 120 in 2007.

Ms. Krisel, who believes New York should change its admissions process, said she "did not know of another place in this country" that also relies on one standardized measure to assess 4-year-olds.

Aurora, Colo., a largely low-income suburb of Denver, saw its gifted programs look much more like the school district itself after officials started assessing more children for gifted classes.

Last year, some of Aurora's schools participated in a program testing all students above second grade for giftedness. The top scoring students on the first exam from each school then took a second exam to qualify, which led to a boost in black and Hispanic representation in gifted programs of between eight and nine points each. White representation in gifted programs fell, and is now closer to white enrollment in the district overall.

In addition, the district's gifted programs now include more girls, more students with disabilities and more students learning English.

As part of a wide-ranging integration plan, San Antonio now assesses all of its students for gifted instruction at multiple grades up to 5th grade, using several measures. But the district has mostly moved away from selective schools, and has instead created more magnet schools.

The city's gifted students can get some separate instruction throughout the day.

"What we don't do is create an entire school or floor where they are just hanging out by themselves, away from everyone else," said Mohammed Choudhury, the district's chief innovation officer, referring to gifted students. San Antonio was named a model district by Mr. de Blasio's school diversity group.

Montgomery County in Maryland also began screening all of its third-grade students — about 12,000 children — for gifted classes last year.

The large, mostly high-performing district also now relies more on classroom performance and less on exams to determine giftedness. Those programs, which are no longer officially called schools for the "highly gifted," now enroll significantly more students of color and low-income children.

Here are 5 takeaways from the plan to eliminate New York City's gifted programs.

Even cities that use a test as the sole means of admissions have methods of attracting diverse student bodies. Chicago fills about a third of its kindergarten gifted classes with the children who scored highest on an exam, and then selects the top performers from four different socio-economic tiers.

New York does have a small pilot program, created by Mr. de Blasio's former schools chancellor, Carmen Fariña, which uses several criteria to enroll students from mostly black and Hispanic neighborhoods into third-grade gifted programs. While those classes are diverse, they only enroll about 370 students from third through fifth grade.

It is not clear if the city will expand that program.

In the meantime, thousands of parents are preparing for this winter's exam — some at a huge cost.

One center located on Manhattan's Park Avenue advertises "early test preparation" for children as young as 18 months, followed by as many as 16 tutoring sessions for the kindergarten gifted exam at a cost of up to \$4,000.

Mark Miller, a Brooklyn parent whose two children attend gifted and talented classes, said he supports the programs, but he called the test "absurd."

Joyce Szufliata, a New York schools consultant who talks to groups of parents about gifted admissions, said many families are fed up with the high-stress process.

"When I say testing 4-year-olds is idiotic, the entire room erupts in laughter and applause," she said. "Everyone knows this is crazy."

Jeffery C. Mays contributed reporting.

Correction: Sept. 4, 2019

An earlier version of this article referred incorrectly to the administration of gifted instruction tests for students in San Antonio. Students there are tested at multiple grades up to fifth, not starting at third grade.

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