

Why NYC's push to Change School Admissions will punish Poor Chinese Asians New York City's Specialized High Schools

A friend of mine from our Chinatown past sent me this article by Dennis Saffran entitled "**Why NYC'S push to change school admissions will punish poor Asians**" An interesting read for me to compare my own early experiences and those of my fellow classmates back in the mid 1950's with the current environment of Chinese Asian kids preparing for the merit based entrance exams to the top specialized academic high schools. Today, there are many more Asians in the 3 competitive schools numbering in the 60-75% population range at Stuyvesant, Bronx High School of Science, and Brooklyn Technical High School compared to when I was a student at Stuyvesant in the mid 1950's **And they are now co-ed!**

However, the recent political atmosphere is once again threatening the merit based entrance examination to a easing of requirements for a holistic approach to allow for more diversity to reflect the ethnic and racial population mix of New York City. What will this mean for the successful gains of Chinese Asian students who have worked and studied hard for acceptance to these top schools to acquire a high level challenging education which will prepare them for college and a rewarding career in the professional world of business, medicine, science, and technology' industries. The present day Asian students at the specialized high schools are also immigrants or children of immigrants as we were back then and are not from rich and affluent families. They will assimilate, as we did into American society and contribute to the economic, social, and political fabric of this great country of ours for years to come. Our parents made huge sacrifices and often worked two jobs to ensure that their children received a quality education that they never had the opportunity to acquire. The educational and social circumstances are similar today with these new immigrants as they were when I was growing up in Chinatown in the mid 1940's to 1950's.

The difference may be that our 1950's Chinese Asian population at the specialized high schools were smaller in numbers and didn't attract that much attention compared to today where one may consider that there is a growing concern and contempt among some groups at the success and large number of Asians dominating these specialized schools. A radical change is suggested from the merit based **objective** Specialized High School Admissions Test (SHSAT), as the sole means of acceptance, to a **subjective** holistic method based on the following parameters: student's middle school attendance; GPA; ethnicity; extra-curricular activities; and recommendations. It may provide a means for achieving the desired racially diversified student distribution vs. the difficult straight forward competitive knowledge based criteria's of "logical thinking and high ability in English & Mathematics" based on the test requirements of the SHSAT.

In order to compete on the national and worldwide stage, America must be competitive in mathematics, science, business, and technology. Even at this young age in transition to high school, our youth must face competitive challenges to sharpen their knowledge and life skills needed to be productive citizens. "**Competition is Reality**" Develop a winning competitive posture by engaging in it to reach your goals.

Does this remind one of a biased quota system? As of 2015, there is widespread dissent among Asian Americans who account for 2/3 of the students at the 3 top specialized high schools. If NY State and NYC change the admissions method for the specialized high schools, then it is **outright raw discrimination against Asian Americans for the sake of political correctness and diversity with other minorities.**

In a conversation where education has always played a significant and important role for success in life, especially among the Chinese Asian immigrants, Mr. Saffran's article led my friend to simply ask me the following question:

***What can the Chinese Asians do collectively to maintain the same standards for qualification?
Any ideas or suggestions are appreciated.***

An excellent serious consequential question and it is a complicated one to answer. But first we need to get a perspective on her question as we read Mr. Saffrans article. An attempt at answering her question with comments based upon my experiences as a student, engineer, and adjunct professor will be made following the article on "**Why NYC's push to change school admissions will punish poor Asians**"

Daniel (Dan) Lee, PE...09/01/2016

Why NYC's push to change school admissions will punish poor Asians

By [Dennis Safran](#)

July 19, 2014

I can't help but find the movement to change the admissions criteria to the NYC specialized schools (Bx Sci, Stuy, Bklyn Tech) upsetting.

Perhaps a better solution would be to offer more free SHSAT prep classes for those Hispanic and black students who are interested in attending the specialized schools?

We need to let Sheldon Silver know!

from <http://nypost.com/2014/07/19/why-nycs-push-to-change-school-admissions-will-punish-poor-asians/>



Photo: Daniel Shapiro

In 2004, 7-year-old Ting Shi arrived in New York from China, speaking almost no English. For two years, he shared a bedroom in a Chinatown apartment with his grandparents — a cook and a factory worker — and a young cousin, while his parents put in 12-hour days at a small laundromat they had purchased on the Upper East Side.

Ting mastered English and eventually set his sights on getting into Stuyvesant High School, the crown jewel of New York City’s eight “specialized high schools.”

When he was in sixth grade, he took the subway downtown from his parents’ small apartment to the bustling high school to pick up prep books for its eighth-grade entrance exam. He prepared for the test over the next two years, working through the prep books and taking classes at one of the city’s free tutoring programs. His acceptance into Stuyvesant prompted a day of celebration at the laundromat — an immigrant family’s dream beginning to come true.

Ting, now a 17-year-old senior starting at NYU in the fall, says of his parents, who never went to college: “They came here for the next generation.”

The plot against merit

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Bronx High School of Science Photo: Robert Kalfus

New York's specialized high schools, including Stuyvesant and the equally storied Bronx High School of Science, along with Brooklyn Technical High School and five smaller schools, have produced 14 Nobel laureates — more than most countries.

For more than 70 years, admission to these schools has been based upon a competitive examination of math, verbal and logical reasoning skills. In 1971, the state legislature, heading off city efforts to scrap the merit selection test as culturally biased against minorities, reaffirmed that admission to the schools be based on the competitive exam.

But now, troubled by declining black and Hispanic enrollment at the schools, opponents of the exam have resurfaced. The NAACP Legal Defense Fund has filed a civil-rights complaint challenging the admissions process. A bill in Albany to eliminate the test requirement has garnered the support of Sheldon Silver, the powerful Assembly speaker.

And new mayor Bill de Blasio, whose son, Dante, attends Brooklyn Tech, has called for changing the admissions criteria. The mayor argues that relying solely on the test creates a “rich-get-richer” dynamic that benefits the wealthy, who can afford expensive test preparation.

As Ting's story illustrates, however, the reality is just the opposite. It's not affluent whites, but rather the city's burgeoning population of Asian-American immigrants — a group that, despite its successes, remains disproportionately poor and working-class — whose children have aced the exam in overwhelming numbers.

And, ironically, the more “holistic” and subjective admissions criteria that de Blasio and the NAACP favor would be much more likely to benefit children of the city's professional elite than African-American and Latino applicants — while penalizing lower-middle-class Asian-American kids like Ting. The result would not be a specialized high school student body that “looks like New York,” but rather one that looks more like Bill de Blasio's upscale Park Slope neighborhood in Brooklyn.

Asian-American success

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Brooklyn Technical High School, Brooklyn Technical High School Photo: Dylan Wilson

There is no dispute that black and Latino enrollment at the specialized schools, while always low, has steadily declined since the 1970s.

Blacks constituted 13% of the student body at Stuyvesant in 1979, 5% in 1994 and just 1% the last few years, while Hispanics dropped from a high of 4% to 2% today.

Similarly, at Bronx Science, black enrollment has fallen from 12% in 1994 to 3% currently and Hispanic enrollment has leveled off, from about 10% to 6%. The figures are even more striking at the less selective Brooklyn Tech, where blacks made up 37% of the student body in 1994 but only 8% today, while Hispanic numbers plunged from about 15% to 8%.

These declining minority numbers have not been matched by a corresponding increase in whites, however. In fact, white enrollment at Stuyvesant, Bronx Science and Brooklyn Tech has plummeted as well, dropping from 79%, 81% and 77%, respectively, in 1971 to just 22%, 23% and 20% today.

Rather, it is New York City's fastest-growing racial minority group, Asian-Americans, who have come to dominate these schools. Asians, while always a presence in New York, didn't begin arriving in the city in large numbers until immigration restrictions were lifted with passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, championed by Sen. Edward Kennedy.

Since then, their proportion of the city's population has increased from less than 1% to about 13%, and their share of the specialized school population has skyrocketed. Asian students constituted 6% of the enrollment at Stuyvesant in 1970 and 50% in 1994; they make up an incredible 73% of the student body this year.

The story is similar at Bronx Science, where the Asian population has exploded from 5% in 1970 to 41% in 1994 to 62% today, and at Brooklyn Tech, where their presence increased from 6% to 33% to 61%.

The 'rich' fallacy

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Fiorello LaGuardia High School for the Performing Arts in the Upper West Side is another of NYC's Specialized High School's Photo: Kevin P. Coughlin

Asians in New York are overwhelmingly first- and second-generation; some three-quarters of the students at Stuyvesant are immigrants or the children of immigrants.

They're hardly affluent, notwithstanding de Blasio's implication that families who get their kids into the specialized schools are "rich."

True, Asians nationally have the highest median income of any racial group, including whites — and in New York City, their median household income ranks second to that of whites and well ahead of blacks and Hispanics.

But Asians also have the highest poverty rate of any racial group in New York, with 29% living below the poverty level, compared with 26% of Hispanics, 23% of blacks and 14% of whites. Poor Asians lag far behind whites and are barely ahead of blacks and Latinos. Thus, the income spectrum among Asians in New York ranges from a surprisingly large number in poverty, through a hardworking lower middle class, and on to a more affluent upper middle class.

It might seem reasonable to assume — as de Blasio and others apparently do — that the Asian kids at the specialized schools come largely from families at the top of this pyramid. But this isn't the case.

Half the students at the specialized high schools qualify for free or subsidized school lunches, including 47% at Stuyvesant and 48% at Bronx Science — figures that have increased correspondingly with Asians' rising numbers at these schools. Based upon these figures, Stuyvesant and Bronx Science (as well as four of the other six specialized schools) are eligible for federal Title I funding, given to schools with large numbers of low-income students.

Think about that: two public high schools that, along with half their students, are officially classified as poor by the federal government rival the most exclusive prep schools in the world.

The poor students get into such schools through hard work and sacrifice — both their own and that of their parents. The students typically attend local tutoring programs, which proliferate in Asian neighborhoods, starting the summer after sixth grade and for several days a week, including weekends, during the school year prior to the test. The costs are burdensome for poor and working families, but it's a matter of priorities.

A liberal nightmare

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Stuyvesant High School Photo: Helayne Seidman

All this once would have been the stuff of liberal dreams: a racial minority group historically victimized by discrimination begins coming to America in greater numbers because of an immigration reform sponsored by Ted Kennedy. Though many in the group remain in poverty, they take advantage of free public schools established by progressive New York City governments. By dint of their own hard work, they earn admission in increasing numbers to merit-based schools that offer smart working-class kids the kind of education once available only at Andover or Choate.

To modern “progressive” elites, though, the story is intolerable, starting with the hard work. These liberal elites seem particularly troubled by the Asian-American work ethic and the difficult questions that it raises about the role of culture in group success.

While the advancement of Asian students has come overwhelmingly at the expense of more affluent whites, it has also had an undeniable impact on black and Latino students, whose foothold at these schools, small to begin with, has all but vanished.

Alarm at this development has triggered a new wave of assaults upon the entrance exam — now known as the Specialized High School Admissions Test (“SHSAT”). — and the law that mandates its use.

In September 2012, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund filed a complaint with the US Department of Education, which dispenses federal educational funding to the city, charging that use of the SHSAT as the sole basis for admission violates Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which prohibits racial discrimination by federal aid recipients.

The complaint does not allege that the exam intentionally discriminates against black and Hispanic students. Instead, citing statistics regarding declining black and Latino enrollment and SHSAT pass rates, the LDF bases its argument entirely on the theory of “disparate impact” — that is, that discrimination should be inferred merely from racial differences in test scores.

In the complaint and in a subsequent report released last fall to coincide with Mayor de Blasio’s election, the LDF argues for replacement of the SHSAT with a “holistic” admissions process — one that would consider “multiple measures” of academic potential, “both quantitative and qualitative,” including not only grades but also such subjective indicators as interviews, recommendations, “portfolio assessments,” “proven leadership skills,” and “commitment to community service.”

Other factors could include applicants’ “backgrounds and experiences” and the “demographic profile” of their schools and neighborhoods. To the extent that a test would be allowed at all, it would merely “supplement” these other criteria. The LDF also called for guaranteed admission for valedictorians and salutatorians, and perhaps other top students, at each public middle school program — a proposal that sounds modest but would actually require a set-aside of at least 1,000 of the 3,800 seats in each class.

Subjective backfire

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Such subjective admissions criteria would be likelier to favor the kids of New York's professional class than children from less affluent backgrounds.

De Blasio suggested, for example, that a student's extracurricular activities should be one of the selection factors. But as a past president of the Stuyvesant Parents Association noted, "the kids that have the best résumés in seventh and eighth grades have money."

A Chinese student like Ting Shi who has to help out in his parents' Laundromat is not going on "service" trips to Nicaragua with the children in de Blasio's affluent Park Slope neighborhood. The LDF's suggested admissions criteria — student portfolios, leadership skills, and community service — are all subject to privileged parents' ability to buy their children the indicia of impressiveness.

Ironically, eliminating the SHSAT would magnify the role of what progressives call "unconscious bias" — the idea that we have a preference for those who look like us and share our backgrounds. Subjective evaluation measures like interviews and portfolio reviews are much more susceptible to such bias than is an objective examination.

Sure, the decision makers will do their best to admit a few more black and Latino kids (especially those from the same upper-middle-class backgrounds), but the primary beneficiaries will be affluent white students who didn't study hard enough to perform really well on the test but seem more "well-rounded" than those who did. As always, the losers in this top-bottom squeeze will be the lower middle and working classes. Among the applicant pool for the specialized high schools, that means Asians.

Comparing the specialized schools with other selective city high schools that don't use the SHSAT bears this out. These "screened" high schools are, to varying degrees, more selective than regular neighborhood high schools; they choose students using the multiple criteria supported by SHSAT critics.

A comparison of the eight most selective screened schools with the eight specialized schools shows that the screened schools, while more heavily black and Latino, are also considerably whiter and more affluent — and considerably less Asian.

Remember that the specialized schools are 13% black and Hispanic, 24% white and 60% Asian. The top screened schools are 27% black and Hispanic, 46% white and only 26% Asian. And while 50% of the students at the specialized schools qualify for free or reduced-price lunches, only 37% of the students at the top screened schools do.

Subjective selection criteria also inevitably favor the affluent and connected — as a comptroller's audit of the screened-school admissions process revealed. The study found that most of the schools examined did not follow their stated selection criteria and could not explain the criteria that they actually did use.

There is also a big difference between evaluating 17-year-old college applicants and 13-year-old high-school applicants. The younger candidates have had far less opportunity to distinguish themselves on such vague qualities as "character" and "leadership." A selection process based on these intangibles can easily fall prey to arbitrariness, prejudice and parental gamesmanship.

Critics of the SHSAT will reply that something must be done about declining black and Hispanic enrollment at the specialized high schools. The answer, however, can never be to lower objective standards.

Adopting this cynical approach would do no favors for black and Latino children, while opening the door to discrimination against Asian kids like Ting. It is not the specialized schools' emphasis on merit, but rather the advocates' defeatist worldview that is truly — and tragically — wrongheaded.

Dennis Safran is an appellate attorney and was recently the GOP candidate for the city council seat representing District 19, in Queens. This article is adapted from the Summer 2014 issue of City Journal.

An Excellent Serious Consequential Question: What can the Chinese Asians do collectively to maintain the same standards for qualification? Any ideas or suggestions are appreciated.

(The simple answer is to keep the merit based SHSAT system and the Chinese Asians will do just fine)

Complications: A brief background check of a complicated charged political, educational, and social environment will help to further understand the dynamics of America's minority groups, no matter what the answer may be. I can only speak from my personal, professional, and educational frame of reference.

Political: The NAACP is at it again after an attempt several years earlier to change the merit based admissions requirements. The city subsequently opened free tutoring services for the Black and Latino students who were interested in prepping for the entrance exam. However, the Whites and Asians claimed discrimination against them with the end result being that the prep courses had to be opened to all interested parties. Guess which group had the largest number of attendees?...Chinese Americans! When our 8th grade students took the entrance exams for Stuyvesant, Bronx Science, and Brooklyn Tech (back in the 50's each school had their own test & only Bronx Science was co-ed), there were no prep courses that we were aware of and if they were available...we probably could not afford the cost anyway.

Educational: The city school system has the local neighborhood/district high schools, screened high schools (Magnet) and the 9 specialized high schools. No doubt that the Asian students aspired to attend the best & competitive schools and continue their quality education in college to achieve the American dream by working hard and preparing themselves for the challenge in this competitive world. Collectively, the Chinese/Asians families have always believed in education as the means and pathway to success.

Social: At one time Stuyvesant and the other specialized high schools were dominated by Jewish students and many of the other Caucasian immigrant groups (1st & 2 generations). The Asian population was about 1 % so we were in the noise level but the teachers did recognize and acknowledge that the Chinese group was on the move intellectually, even with the small numbers. In summary, it was only a matter of time before the numbers grew as there were more kids coming of age coupled with the 1965 Immigration Reform Act that the Asian population in the specialized high schools would increase and in time may even exceed the Caucasian, Black, and Latino student population.

An attempt to answer your question...not in any order of priority....

Publicity...Advocacy...Lobbying...Political Influence. Get the word out to municipal, state, and even congressional representatives about the need to maintain high educational standards to prepare our youth to compete domestically and internationally on the universal worldwide academic scale.

Need to develop a factual script of why any lowering of **Objective Standards** would do more harm to Blacks & Latinos in the long run for achieving academic excellence. Lowering standards would also destroy the excellent storied reputation of these specialized high schools which are known for having the best & brightest students. ie. Stuyvesant is well known all over the United States and worldwide.

One of the root causes, if not the main one, is the absence of a family foundation in some of the minority groups. There is a lack of a role model and parental guidance which is essential to a young growing mind. A reason for academic failure among these groups can be traced to frustrations at the local school and lower grades where the essential fundamentals of English and Math are not learned at an early age. There is also outside peer pressure which can be a distracting influence on being a super cool dude and not studying. One can only imagine the frustration when an attempt is made to study the prep course material for the SHSAT during the 7th & 8th grades by these kids. My heart goes out to these kids in the tough neighborhoods since many of us growing up in Chinatown were very fortunate to have a family unit, dedicated teachers, strong Christian fellowship, and smart classmates & friends to drive the academic & social competition to a higher level in a similar tough environment on the lower East Side of Manhattan.

A sad example is "**Open admissions**" policy at various colleges which have experienced high dropout rates because the minority students were not prepared to handle the academic work load. The same predicament and outcome would occur at the specialized high schools, even if the standards were lower.

Relative to the movement by some groups' efforts to remove the specialized high school's admission criteria of "**Objective Standards**" to a set of "**Subjective Standards**", attempts have failed in the past and the Asian enrollment has steadily risen in the specialized high schools. Hopefully, the NAACP's efforts will fail again and the NY educational system will realize that the Asians, through sacrifice & hard work have earned the right to attend these merit based specialized high schools. "**Objective Standards**" are based on one's passing an exam no matter who you are; whereas: with "**Subjective Standards**", one can hide behind a variety of factors including "unconscious bias" where there may be preferences for certain ethnic groups and political correctness which will diminish the high standards of these schools.

However, I hold this belief that the Chinese have gone through so much in the America's and overseas, as witnessed by their successes in Southeast Asia and the world, that it is inherent in our heritage and DNA where we can overcome any obstacles through education, risk taking, and strong family values. I am confident that as poor Asian students of yesterday we/I overcame many challengers and now living the American dream. The poor Asian students of today and tomorrow will achieve their respective goals through education be it...a NYC specialized high school or some other creditable high school, throughout the NYC & NY/NJ metropolitan areas as evidenced by many of my successful friends & family in the past.

An example is my children who grew up in the quiet suburban town of Murray Hill/New Providence NJ (bedroom community of NYC professionals and home of Bell Laboratory) where they went to school with the children of Bell Lab's scientist & engineers and other professionals. The local high school resembled a mini--competitive NYC's specialized high school in scholastic and college advance placement courses. The Chinese American students were always ranked in the top 10% of the class and had valedictorians over the years when they were there. My children are graduates of Duke, Johns Hopkins, Princeton, and the University of Virginia. Even on Saturdays, the Central New Jersey Chinese community rented space at the high school to teach Chinese language, history, and culture classes for the Chinese American kids.

Over the years via business, education, travels, teaching, religious faith, and life experiences, I can truly appreciate our NYC's Chinatown community and the foundation developed there through education, hard work, intense competitive drive, and tenacity to succeed to be the best you can be in this great country. Great family support, disciplined religious teachings, and Chinese pride were essential psychic drivers. We are blessed that America is still the land of opportunity, achievement, and success if you want it bad enough and work hard to achieve it even in today's chaotic societal environment of a poor economy; no jobs; massive entitlements; no respect for the law; government corruption; huge national debt (\$20T); and a drive towards redistribution of wealth; *yours & mine..* "The *Chinese word* for **Crisis** is also **Opportunity**"

"The poor Asian students of yesterday made it and succeeded...In spite of the raw discrimination against Asians for the benefit of diversity with other minorities, the poor Asian students of today & tomorrow will make it and succeed even if the merit based acceptance criteria's are changed,"
Daniel (Dan) Lee, PE...09/01/2016

***Hello Dan,
Thank you for your objective and subjective information on our generation of Chinese (Cantonese) Americans and their accomplishments. I totally agree with you and probably can add many more people professionally accomplished Chinese Americans during that period. Your knowledge and details of the Chinatown community in our generation and earlier are impressive and if not documented via a published documentary book would be a shame. It can also be in a novel form as an alternative.***

I feel you will do a great service for the current and future Asian and non-Asian public in educating us on the when, why, and how we are what we are today. Of course, focusing on the Cantonese Chinese. Definitely, your communicating skills are already in place. Good luck and will keep in touch....HSC