

SHSAT: A Dangerous Cycle

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Caption: The % Blacks & Hispanics has steadily decreased in all three of the original specialized high schools over the course of the last decade (1999-2008). Light green = Tech, Cyan = Bronx Science, and Dark Blue = Stuyvesant

This article is Part I of a 3-part series on the origins of overrepresentation of Asians in Specialized High Schools, and the measures being taken to increase diversity in these Specialized HS.

Every system begins as a cycle. NYC's education system is no different. The excessive Asian population of Specialized High Schools exists only because of the populations of the middle schools that feed it. It's a dangerous cycle that begins at the elementary level, and propagates throughout the education system, affecting over a million students. But like every cycle, it survives only because of its most faithful participants: the feeders.

It begins in 6th grade, when parents compete to place their students at the best middle schools, over 37% of which require screened admissions. The most selective of these schools, duly termed feeders, make a majority of the specialized high school offers, and their populations disseminate into that of Specialized High schools. As expected, the average black & hispanic population of the top 28

feeders is only 23%, less dramatic than the Specialized High Schools' 10%. These feeders are much like monopolies: the top 28 of them account for half of specialized school offers. The top 100 feeder schools account for over 85% of specialized school offers. The other 522 middle schools in NYC receive only a marginal 15% of offers, according to the New York Times. But these feeder schools are the products of a faulty education system in which even meritocratic admissions exams are skewed by the advantage of tutoring granted to rich students. But it wasn't always like this. Prior the faulty legislations, flawed policies and rash budget cuts, the Specialized High Schools were reflective of NYC's diversity and intellectual capability.

The Specialized High Schools of the '90s were much more diverse: Tech and Bronx Science had a black and hispanic population of 37.3% and 11.8%, respectively. Middle schools at the time were not overflowing with Asians, partly because the 1965 Immigration and Nationality act hadn't been enacted yet. Instead, middle schools used diversity to their advantage by pooling talented students of all ethnicities into Honors classes, a process termed "tracking". But as lower-performing students became increasingly isolated, tracking fell out of favor and was phased out in the mid '90s, concurring with the enactment of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality act. Immediately, asian populations skyrocketed, especially in Specialized High Schools, where the meritocratic admissions process seemed to work in their favor. But this was only the beginning of the end of diversity in the Specialized High Schools.

By 2001, the legislations of NYC mayor, Rudy Giuliani, had reduced the education budget by \$2 billion, resulting in underfunded schools lacking the teachers, and funding to recruit, tutor, or identify talented students. The economic and intellectual gap between elite middle schools and underfunded, zoned middle schools increased in 2004 with Mayor de Blasio's School Choice initiative. The School choice initiative enabled parents to send their children to any school in the city, instead of their zoned school. As parents competed to send their children to the best schools around the city, zoned schools became increasingly underfunded and under enrolled. Parents were now essentially tracking their children *between* schools, in comparison to the previous tracking within schools during the '90s. This interschool tracking resulted in elite middle schools with overwhelmingly white & asian populations, and zoned schools with mostly black and hispanic populations. The growth of these underfunded (many of them zoned) middle schools were stagnated by NYC's fair funding initiative of 2007. From 2011-2012, the fair funding initiative budget allocation formula

caused middle schools serving students below academic standards to receive less funding, effectively stagnating their growth.

The SHSAT is championed by many of its supporters as a meritocratic system that provides the economically disadvantaged access to a world-class education. But what about Tech students? Tech students vigorously support the SHSAT. Eson Zheng '21 is one of the many supporters of the SHSAT, stating "The SHSAT is fair, as it's based on test score, not just grades". Kevin Bernstein '21, agrees, "The SHSAT is a fair system, because the students who work the hardest achieve their goal".

The lack of diversity in Specialized High Schools is the product of a dangerous cycle, initiated by a series of flawed legislations. It began with the termination of tracking programs in middle school, a decision whose consequences exploded with the passing of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality act. Giuliani's \$2 billion budget cut, de Blasio's school choice initiative, and a mismanagement of funds due to the fair funding initiative all duly contributed to the diversity problem we now see in Specialized High Schools. The SHSAT is a complex problem, founded on decades of incompetent policy decisions, flawed legislations, and complex historical events. As such, it makes sense to approach the solution carefully, taking into consideration the validity of the SHSAT as a standardized test, as well as the admissions process of middle schools, and the lack of honor programs in underfunded middle schools.

Sources:

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