

February 20, 2019

The Honorable Richard Carranza, Chancellor
The New York City Department of Education
Tweed Courthouse
52 Chambers Street
New York, NY 10007

Re: *InsideSchools Report on Screened Schools*

Dear Chancellor Carranza:

We appreciate the opportunity to write to you about an important matter relating to the integration efforts in New York City where you have exercised true leadership. As a result, we suspect that you may share in our dismay over the new report from InsideSchools (the "Report") muddying the waters on an issue entitled to moral clarity from proponents of *Real Integration* - the imperative of removing competitive admissions from middle schools. We write to contextualize many of the claims made in the Report in hope that our analysis may be helpful to you and the rest of the Department as you address important questions about competitive access to public middle schools.

As a preliminary matter, we wish to clarify that Appleseed has called for elimination of most forms of competitive admissions to middle school.¹ We have not called for the elimination or reduction of "screened language" programs or screens based on demonstrated competence in the arts.

¹ Our 2014 briefing [Within Our Reach: Segregation in High Schools and What We Can Do About It](#) also calls for a "significant" reduction in the number of screened high schools.

Research or ideology?

The Report states that “research” has led InsideSchools to conclude that preserving some competitive admissions at many schools is preferable to eliminating them (15). We have struggled to find any evidence for this claim in the Report. Although the Report contains some helpful quantitative summaries of available data, there is no analysis whatsoever attempting to compare the potential effects of removing competitive admissions to existing conditions.

Instead the Report’s narrative is mostly a series of opinions and unsubstantiated statements with a few “examples” enlisted for each sweeping claim. Representative is the following: “In [high-poverty Black and Hispanic] neighborhoods, screened schools don’t serve the function of ‘hoarding privilege’.... Rather screened schools may serve as a critical pipeline for low-income children to gain admission to academically challenging high schools and universities” (5). Descriptions of two middle schools follow, neither of them containing information as to the extent of privilege hoarding or as to whether these schools serve as critical pipelines in their neighborhoods. We are asked to assume that residents of high-poverty Black and Latinx neighborhoods do not - like the rest of us - enjoy some forms of privilege and that the other schools in these neighborhoods do not and cannot adequately prepare students.

Similarly, the Report’s recommendations section sets up a stark and improbable contest between “small, unscreened [high] schools that help students who are far behind in their studies” and “schools that that limit admissions to students who are ready for high-school work” (as if this were the universe of high schools), concludes with no evidence that eliminating screens at the latter would not increase opportunities for low-income children, and then leaps to a sweeping recommendation to expand enrollment at all “successful” screened schools -both middle and high (15-16).

When the authors invoke the interests of low-income children of color - in this instance as throughout the Report- it is not clear whether they are referring to those who are fortunate enough to gain entry to these “islands of opportunity” or to low-income children across the board. This is of course the excruciating tension that has dogged InsideSchools since its inception as a tool to assist parents in identifying and choosing superior schools and has plagued school-choice regimes in general. It is also the tension that Real Integration seeks to resolve once and for all.

Harm to other schools and other students

This tension comes into further relief in the Report’s final section when the authors acknowledge the previously unaddressed conundrum at the very center of the issue. The Report notes that expanding unscreened schools “is less likely to leave other schools with

disproportionate numbers of high-needs students” (17). Similarly, the authors temper their recommendation to expand screened programs with an extraordinary caveat: DOE “should take care not to siphon off the most successful students, leaving other schools with disproportionate numbers of struggling students” (18). The Report here asks the DOE to do the impossible, since this is the essential function of competitive admissions and the reason they are in fundamental tension with Real Integration.

The “critical pipeline” and the siphon are one and the same tool. What has changed is perspective: the authors finally consider what competitive admissions look like from the perspective of the great majority of students and schools who do not benefit from them. How do the authors reconcile their statements that screened schools represent “islands of opportunity” with their apparent acknowledgment that some high-performing students need to be prevented from attending them so as to bolster the unscreened schools?

If expansion of screened schools presents such dangers to other schools, then the current manifestations of screened schools do as well; “other schools” are *already* disproportionately burdened by the presence of screened schools. It is arbitrary to distinguish between the segregating effects of an existing program and those of its expansion.²

Conflating issues pertaining to middle schools and high schools

Middle-school admissions and high-school admissions present distinct issues of equity, geography, and pedagogical justification and should be treated separately. Although purporting to address all screened schools, the Report couches most of its arguments in terms of high schools and asks us to assume that they apply with equal force to middle schools.

While Appleseed has serious concerns about the use of competitive admissions for high schools, we nevertheless observe important differences. First, if screened *high schools* are in fact the “islands of opportunity” the Report claims them to be, the argument becomes even stronger for removing screens from *middle schools* in order to level the playing field as much as possible for students as they approach high school. Second, pertinent to the issue of harm to other schools, middle schools, as the Report notes, typically exist in relatively closed systems of student assignment (CSDs), so the danger of direct effects on other schools is far more pronounced than with high schools, which usually operate in a citywide context. Finally, whatever one’s views

² The fixes the Report offers for this problem only create additional conundrums, since they mostly appear to involve converting the screened schools into “Hybrid” schools with multiple programs. It is unclear how DOE would reconcile this recommendation with other statements in the Report such as “there is a place for schools that limit admissions to students who are ready for high school work” (15) while simultaneously heeding the advice to “avoid internal tracking” that “segregates students by ability within a school building” (20).

on tracking, it seems indisputable that the argument for segregating children by ability becomes stronger as they become older and the accumulated effects of their earlier school experiences become more salient.

We do not find the Report helpful or relevant to formulation of student-assignment policy for middle schools.

The benefits to Black and Latinx students

The closest thing offered in the Report to quantitative support for the idea that competitive admissions benefit low-income Black and Latinx students is the finding that many of them attend screened schools. We do not dispute this finding, but we believe its significance is overstated.

A careful reading of the Report reveals that most of its analysis ignores screened programs within schools (what the Report calls Hybrid schools) and focuses only on 110 fully screened middle schools. This is unfortunate since these 75 middle-school programs are critical to a comprehensive understanding of the costs and benefits of competitive admissions. Data presented in a 2018 article in the *Times* demonstrated that several of the top 15 middle schools (in terms of offers to specialized schools) were such Hybrid schools.³

What is more, as the Report notes, many of the “screened” schools serving significant portions of Black and Latinx students are not competitive in practice and cannot even fill their seats. Related to this point, a large proportion of the screened middle schools serving higher numbers of Black and Latinx students are in districts with an unusually high rate of middle schools with competitive admissions - namely districts 1, 2, 3, 4, 13, and 15. Black and Latinx students attending screened schools in such districts were most likely to have been *excluded* from the true “islands of opportunity” in these districts. Since most of these districts also have significant numbers of white and affluent residents, the fact of high numbers of Black and Latinx students attending a single school may tell us more about the harms of competitive admissions than their benefits.

³ Winnie Hu and Elizabeth A. Harris, “A Shadow System Feeds Segregation in New York City Schools,” June 17, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/17/nyregion/public-schools-screening-admission.html>.

The time is now to eliminate competitive admission to middle school

The Report positions itself as a data-driven and “nuanced” alternative to the presumably ill-informed and headlong proposals of advocates. If anything, the opposite is true: the Report requires its readers to accept its central arguments on faith, fails to resolve core conundrums, and offers no evidence to support its primary recommendation. Moreover, its recommendations require the DOE to walk some very fine lines indeed (distinguishing between “reasonable” (expand) and “unreasonable” (discard) screens, treating “more prosperous” CSDs differently from low-income communities, and all the while avoiding siphoning off the most successful students while preserving and expanding schools that do just that).

What is needed at this moment is not intellectual contortion, but the kind of clear moral leadership that you have consistently demonstrated since taking office. Deciding the life chances of students based on their academic performance and behavior in the first nine years of their lives is inappropriate in a public school system of any kind - let alone one with a troubling history and current reality of racial hierarchy.

With respect to middle schools, we respectfully urge you to avoid entering the rabbit hole offered by the Report and act decisively to eliminate competitive admissions from all middle schools in New York City.⁴

Yours sincerely,

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Enclosures:

- Matt Gonzales and David Tipson, “[Equitable Admission to High Schools Must Start with Middle School](#),” *CityLimits*, Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, 2019.
- New York Appleseed Advocacy Briefing [Student Assignment to Public Middle Schools in New York City](#), January 2019.

⁴ Subject to the exceptions we identified at the beginning of this letter.

⁵ Orrick has generously provided pro bono services to further New York Appleseed’s advocacy for integrated schools since 2010.