

Focus on Fairness: Supporting Under-Resourced and Historically Marginalized Students and Families in New York City’s Middle and High School Admissions Process

Recommendations In Brief High School Application Advisory Committee (HSAAC)¹ Convened by Fordham Law School Feerick Center for Social Justice June 17, 2022

Introduction

An unfair process cannot yield fair results. New York City’s middle school (MS) and high school (HS) application processes entrench inequity by reinforcing disparities that exist and creating new barriers for under-resourced students and families. The application process enhances the known segregative effect of admissions policies like academic screening by adding yet another barrier to accessing highly sought after high school programs.

This brief offers clear, feasible recommendations to begin dismantling these barriers—recommendations that the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) can and should adopt for the 2022-2023 school year.

Recommendations

I. Timing, Transparency, and Technical Assistance

Fundamentally, the admissions process is unfair to under-resourced students and families. NYCDOE can and must do better in supporting students and families by implementing changes that support the three T’s: Timing, Transparency, and Technical Assistance. Specifically, NYCDOE must provide students and families *timely, accurate, and accessible information with sufficient time and support to use it*.

Goal 1. Information must be timely and students need ample time to digest and use it. The following policy changes would help implement this goal:

¹ The High School Application Advisory Committee (HSAAC) run by Fordham Law School’s Feerick Center for Social Justice has been providing critical feedback, analysis, and recommendations on the high school admissions process since 2012. In November 2021, the HSAAC released a report titled “*The Next Step*,” which details the policies and practices New York City must put in place in this unprecedented moment to provide students equal access to public middle and high schools and which we encourage the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) to revisit. (Report available at https://www.fordham.edu/download/downloads/id/15937/the_next_step_report.pdf.) It is with our unique expertise and longstanding knowledge of reforms to the high school admissions process that we offer the recommendations herein to improve the admissions processes in New York City for 2022-2023.

- A minimum of **10 full weeks** are provided for students to complete applications beginning on the date NYCDOE announces applications are open.
- Admissions criteria are set prior to the open application period. Admissions criteria are made public two weeks prior to the opening of the application period.
- Admissions criteria are fixed once they are made public. Neither individual schools nor NYCDOE should make any changes to admissions criteria after this time.

Goal 2. Transparency and Accessibility of Information: NYCDOE is the primary source of information for under-resourced students and families. Better resourced families can fill information gaps through networks and paid providers. Information is a key component of successfully navigating the application process. The policy recommendations below are not new, but should be in place by the 2022-2023 admissions cycle.

- NYCDOE should collect all information from schools regarding open houses, both in-person and virtual, and make that information accessible online immediately via a central open house calendar, which is kept up-to-date on an ongoing basis.
- NYCDOE must ensure that open houses are happening once families can access selection criteria by school and that families can access those open houses fairly, especially those that are in person.
- Schools and NYCDOE must provide accurate and clear information about selection criteria that is accessible to ALL families, including in multiple languages, in MySchools, school websites, through guidance counselors, in Family Welcome Centers, and by telephone as needed. Schools should provide selection criteria to anyone who requests it, whether students, families, or members of the public, upon request by email or telephone.
- Selection criteria must be made available in print to provide alternate avenues of information for those who are unable to access digital platforms.

Goal 3. Technical Assistance: As long as the HS application process continues to be complex, New York City government and NYCDOE need to prioritize funding to support and co-create programming that supports students, families as well as DOE employees critical to supporting navigation of admissions.

- Develop a standardized curriculum to be integrated into middle schools, after-school enrichment programs, and community based organizations to strengthen students' and family's ability to participate meaningfully in the HS admissions process. Current organizations that run HS admissions programs can serve as partners in developing this curriculum.
- Mandate and fund in all NYC after-school enrichment programs the skills, knowledge, and expert supports students, families and service providers need to effectively navigate the process.

- Invest in guidance counselors, professional development, and community-based programs like the Middle School Student Success centers that work to close access gaps for families and students.
- Revise College Access For All (CAFA) to include a standardized curriculum that focuses on the HS admissions process.

II. Prioritizing Equity in Admissions Policy

It has been a well-documented fact that selection criteria such as attendance, state test scores, student grade point average, and district (and other geographic) priority have fueled the continuation of school segregation in NYC. At both the MS and HS level selection criteria, commonly referred to as screens, exclude Black and Brown students, students from low income families, students in temporary housing, English Language Learners, and students with disabilities. Incremental changes to MS and HS admissions have fostered a fairer and more inclusive process for marginalized students, who make up the majority. Their voices and interests should not be drowned out by a strident minority arguing for regressive policies and practices.

The data reflect the benefits of these changes to admission policy and it behooves NYCDOE to stay the course. 91% of MS students received an offer to one of their top three choices and 75% of HS students received an offer to one of their top three choices—both data points reflect an increase in comparison to last year and indicate that an overwhelming majority of students received one of their top choices. Above all, several of the most in-demand, selective (previously screened) high schools saw significant increases in offers to Black and Latinx students, as well as increases in offers to students from low-income families.

The NYCDOE must implement inclusionary policies that prioritize equity and recovery in admissions for both MS and HS.

Middle school admissions: *Make the elimination of MS screens permanent and encourage initiatives to support diversity.*

- There is no justification for bringing back an exclusionary process that made the application process to attend a public middle school burdensome and stressful. It is wrong to measure the "worthiness" of a 9 year-old student to attend a public middle school by judging their capacity to learn on their academic record up to that age.
- Encourage middle school programs that previously screened to implement a Diversity in Admissions program.
- Provide professional development and other supports to school communities experiencing demographic shifts to ensure their school climate is inclusive and uplifting for students and families from all races, ethnicities and backgrounds.
- Talent tests at the MS level for admissions can be exclusionary. MSs focused on the arts provide students with an opportunity to discover and nurture their talents prior to HS.

If NYCDOE permits schools to require a talent test, audition requirements and evaluation must be inclusive of students who have not had the means to attend private lessons in such subjects such as drawing, painting, dance, music, etc.

High school admissions: Sustain changes made during the pandemic to HS admissions that increased equity and transparency and continue to urge high schools to end exclusionary screening practices.

- HS admissions must remain centralized and standardized by NYCDOE for all HS programs that utilize screens to prevent a reversion to the opaque ranking process by individual schools that was widespread prior to the pandemic.
- Make unscreened admissions the default and require every program that wishes to screen to opt in to screens standardized by NYCDOE. Any schools that insist upon additional screens outside the standard must provide an educational purpose to justify the screens to be approved by NYCDOE.
- If student grades remain part of NYCDOE's standardized screening rubric, sustain the cut-off score from last year that allows students with a grade point average of 85 or above to receive first priority to academically screened programs.
- Inequitable selection criteria such as state test scores and attendance must remain eliminated.
- Provide professional development and other supports to school communities experiencing demographic shifts to ensure their school climate is inclusive and uplifting for students and families from all races, ethnicities and backgrounds.

Conclusion

MS and HS admissions reinforce significant barriers for under-resourced and marginalized students and families. Desegregative policies and practices must be implemented this year. In consideration of recently published admissions data and multiple past reports exposing the discriminatory effect of screening, any reversion to past exclusionary admission policies would be unfounded. Furthermore, any policy changes that protect past advantages that previously prevailed would only serve as proof that this administration would rather protect an unequal status quo than invest in a system that uplifts marginalized students, and by doing so uplifts all.

It is with our unique expertise and longstanding knowledge of reforms to the MS and HS admissions process that we submit the above recommendations and offer our assistance on follow-through of the above guidance.

Signed by:

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