

TESTIMONY of NEW YORK APPLESEED
THE NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL
COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION
Oversight of New DOE Admission Processes
January 25, 2023

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Nyah Berg and I am the executive director of New York Appleseed, a nonprofit organization that advocates for integrated schools and communities in New York City and State. Since 2012, New York Appleseed has been spearheading integration efforts across New York City, including providing research and recommendations on reforming particular student assignment policies that exacerbate segregation in NYC public schools.

For years, middle and high school admissions processes in New York City have been notoriously cumbersome, stressful, and complex.

The NYC high school application process is not unlike the process of applying to college. Students and families are asked to research a list of well over a hundred schools. They then must narrow that down to 12 choices by searching through an online platform (My Schools), attending tours, figuring out open houses, sometimes submitting auditions, and sometimes writing multiple personal essays. For the best “shot” at several of the most coveted schools, we require 7th-grade students to ensure they have at least a 90 or above with few exceptions. And we ask them to do all of these things with the expectation they can make sense of the system primarily in English and with the aid of a well-informed and available counselor. **In sum, we are often asking many students and families to navigate this process with resources they do not easily have, with time they cannot afford to lose, and with an assumption that this process is primarily for English-speaking, independent, non-disabled, housing-stable students with minimal outside needs.**

This is a simplified summary of where the high school application process is now and this is *still* leaps and bounds better than what it was several years ago. Students and families now enter a much more transparent and fair process, thanks to the following changes made in 2020 and 2021, that were further sustained for this admissions cycle:

- The standardization of selection criteria for the majority of screened high schools. Prior to this change, screened schools’ selection criteria was hard to find and rarely made public.
- The centralization of the ranking process within the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) so individual schools are no longer ranking students without any oversight.
- The elimination of discriminatory selection criteria such as state tests, punctuality, district priority, and attendance.

Additionally, the middle school admissions process, once made unnecessarily complex due to

rampant use of selection criteria to evaluate a 8 or 9 year old child's worthiness to attend public middle school, was paused for two years. This pause not only relieved an extreme burden from the shoulders of students and families, it also led to increases in access for students from low-income families and English Language Learners at several of the most sought-after schools.

The above policies, that led to promising increases in diversity in many of NYC's middle and high schools, serve as important prerequisites to building a more equitable and just admissions process. And while the NYCDOE sustained many of the above changes, there are other policy decisions from this year that call into question the the NYCDOE's commitment to outlined goals for equity and excellence.

One of the most egregious reversals was the allowance of screening at public middle-schools at the discretion of district superintendents. The reinstatement of middle-school screens flew in the face of years of advocacy by students and families, undermined statistics that showed within the first year of removing MS screens, 50 of the most selective middle-school programs saw an increase in offers going to students from low-income families and students learning English as a new language,¹ and ignored research and reports outlining the detrimental and segregative effects of competitive admission methods for young children.

New York Appleseed also holds deep concerns for the messaging that accompanied admissions announcements in which the NYC schools chancellor was quoted at an event defending changes stating:

"If you've got a child who works really hard on weekends, and putting in their time and energy and they get a 98 average — they should have a better opportunity to get into a high-choice school, then, you know, the child you have to throw water on their face to get them to go to school every day."²

This callous reasoning behind changes that affect hundreds of students and families is alarming. It lacks empathy for the daily lives of students, it lacks understanding of the influence systemic inequities have on students and traditional measures of achievement and it lacks awareness that many of our students are still reeling from trauma due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

All students regardless of income, language, race, ability or housing status deserve the opportunity to thrive in high quality public schools. Our enrollment policies should reflect that. Moving forward, we offer the following recommendations to further equitable admission methods in NYC public schools:

- Support under-resourced students and families in the high school admissions process

¹ Reema Amin, Big changes to this year's middle school admission process yielded modest demographic shifts, <https://ny.chalkbeat.org/2021/5/11/22431085/nyc-middle-school-offers-2021-integration> (May 11, 2021)

² Alex Zimmerman, NYC schools chief criticized for saying some kids deserve top schools more than others, <https://ny.chalkbeat.org/2022/10/13/23403030/david-banks-screened-school-admissions-nyc> (October 13, 2022)

by:³

- Developing 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.
 - Mandating and funding in all NYC after-school enrichment programs the skills, knowledge, and expert support that students, families and service providers need to effectively navigate the process.
 - Investing 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.
 - Making selection criteria available in print to provide alternate avenues of information for those who are unable to access digital platforms.
- Implement and set aside funding for Local Law 225 which states that every school district must have a diversity working group by 2024.⁴
 - Recommit to overseeing progress on the over 60 goals outlined on the NYCDOE's "Diversity in Our Schools" website page including goals set in the 2017 diversity statement.⁵

Segregation is an intentional choice and to dismantle it we must be just as intentional in our reforms. Our enrollment policies matter as they can be catalysts for integration or sustainers of segregation. We implore leadership to continue to center equity and diversity in policymaking to avoid the doomed alternative of trying to create separate but equal schools.

We thank the Committee on Education for having this important oversight hearing.

Respectfully,

Nyah Berg

³ Recommendations for resourcing students and families come from a longer brief drafted in partnership with Fordham Law School Feerick Center's High School Application Advisory Committee.

https://www.nyappleseed.org/wp-content/uploads/HSAACInfographic22_FINAL.pdf

⁴ See Local Law 225

<https://legistar.council.nyc.gov/View.ashx?M=F&ID=8041148&GUID=3BEAD9EC-5D23-4600-B515-A97E6F883835>

⁵ See Diversity in Our Schools website page

<https://www.schools.nyc.gov/about-us/vision-and-mission/diversity-in-our-schools>