

The Stuyvesant Controversy and the Lose-Lose Fight over Educational Access

by [Joyce Li](#)

It takes some tugging to get the heavy metal doors of Stuyvesant High School to budge, but if you're persistent, they'll open to a blast of air-conditioning and a sense of disbelief that you are looking inside a public high school. Two sleek black columns shoot up from the lobby toward the tenth-floor ceiling, flanked by twin marble staircases sweeping up to the second floor. As you ascend those stairs, you'll find the 1,600-seat, two-tiered, high-tech auditorium that houses Stuyvesant's many performing arts clubs, including a Renaissance choir, symphonic band, 100-piece symphonic orchestra, and several chamber ensembles; two gyms and a 25-yard competition swimming pool to accommodate over forty athletic teams; and a cafeteria with a balcony looking out over New York Harbor. Every aspect of the school, down to its centralized AC system, feels like a luxury – a reward, perhaps, for making it through its brutally competitive application process.

Former mayor Mike Bloomberg referred to Stuyvesant students as “the best and the brightest,” and it's not hard to see why (Bloomberg qtd. in Baker). Stuyvesant is one of New York's most distinguished and selective public high schools, ranked third in the state by *US News* and first in the city by *Niche*. One of the city's nine specialized high schools, it emphasizes science, technology, and mathematics, as evidenced by its top-ranking math team and twelve pristine, fully-equipped laboratories, and also offers a wide range of electives, Advanced Placement classes, and extracurriculars, including a debate team that regularly places first at national tournaments (“Admissions”). However, the most compelling justification for Stuyvesant is what the school, with the wealth of resources at its disposal, promises its students. An op-ed published in the *Stuyvesant Spectator* found that in 2017, 17.8% of the Stuyvesant graduating class – a total of 146 students – were accepted into either Stanford, MIT, UChicago, or an Ivy League university, and judging from the school's impressive roster of alumni, ranging from Nobel laureates to Oscar winners, a Stuyvesant student's success continues for long after higher education (“Go College Crazy”).

But how does one go about joining the ranks of the “best and brightest”? As it turns out, all it takes is a test. Like eight of New York’s nine specialized high schools, Stuyvesant’s admissions process is based solely on the notoriously difficult Specialized High School Admissions Test, or SHSAT. This straightforward application process was once a point of pride for Stuyvesant. One *Spectator* op-ed claims that the school admits students “on a purely meritocratic basis,” and the school website boasts that “from its inception, it has been a school which serves an immigrant population” (“Leaving Legacies Behind”; “History of the School”). Indeed, the student demographics at Stuyvesant are notably different from the predominantly white and upper-class student body typical of top-ranked universities: 81.1% of Stuyvesant students identify as racial minorities (“Stuyvesant High School”).

Yet Stuyvesant has come under fire because of these very demographics. Although the school consists predominantly of minorities, three quarters of the students are Asian, with Black, Hispanic, and Native students making up only a tiny fraction of the student body (“Stuyvesant High School”). Stuyvesant’s dismal acceptance rate of Black students has received particular attention in recent years, with the *New York Times* calling it out in 2019 for accepting only seven Black students out of 895 spots, a number that hardly budged in 2021, when eight were accepted (“Only 7 Black Students”; “Only 8 Black Students”). These numbers feel even more disproportionate when one considers that Black students make up 18% of specialized school applicants and 26% of New York City’s public school student body (“Only 7 Black Students”; “School Diversity in NYC”).

Consequently, the past decade has seen a push to abolish the SHSAT. In 2012, a coalition of educational and civil rights advocacy groups filed a federal complaint with the United States Education Department, accusing the single-test admittance policy of having a racially discriminatory impact on Black and Latino students (Baker). Supporters of admissions reform argue that the SHSAT puts Black and Latino students at a disadvantage because they tend to have less access to resources to prepare for the test. This has led many to assume that the converse is also true. In an interview with the *New York Daily News*, Mayor Bill de Blasio asserted that the SHSAT creates a “rich-get-richer phenomenon,” since, as the article goes on to explain, “wealthy parents can afford expensive test preparations for their children” (Monahan). Former New York City schools chancellor Richard Carranza went as far as to call the specialized schools the “epicenter of privilege” (Carranza qtd. in Rong).

The implication of this belief is clear: the majority-Asian populations at schools like Stuyvesant are primarily wealthy. However, currently 43% of the school’s students qualify for the free or reduced lunch program (a measure of poverty in schools), a number that has corresponded with the school’s growing number of Asian students (Stuyvesant High School; Saffran). In fact, while Asian students make up 74% of

Stuyvesant, they represent more than 90% of its economically disadvantaged students (Tso). The truth is that Asian Americans in New York City have the highest poverty rate out of all ethnic groups, and most students from Asian American communities are able to prepare for the SHSAT not through private tutoring afforded by family wealth but through the group test prep centers concentrated in the Asian enclaves of neighborhoods like Flushing and Sunset Park, usually held in cramped, repurposed offices above souvenir shops and bubble tea stores. According to journalist Alice Yin, test prep classes have become “a coming-of-age tradition in Asian immigrant communities,” with eighth-graders spending around three hours every weekday in class during the summer.

Test prep businesses have come to occupy such a central role in Asian immigrant communities because they are perceived as bridges to upward mobility. Though supplemental classes can be expensive – a summer course costs around \$1,400 – underprivileged Asian families will sacrifice for them (Yin). With names like “GPS Academy,” “Success Prep Education Center,” and “The Ivy Key,” these institutions promise a path to success. According to Jennifer Lee, a professor of sociology at Columbia, as “a demographic that lacks networking connections and has long been imagined to be uncreative or submissive,” Asian Americans tend to struggle to achieve recognition and management positions later in their careers (Yin). Thus, Asian immigrant parents tend to view their children’s future through a narrow lens: one in which they score well on tests, get into a top university, and are propelled to success by their impressive credentials and connections. As evidenced by their strong demand for and faith in test prep centers, this is particularly the case for lower-income parents. Most, having obtained a higher education either in their country of origin or none at all, have few professional connections and little knowledge of the American college admissions process (Yin). For them, test prep centers and, by extension, standardized testing, allow them to play an active role in their children’s success and, in doing so, maintain some level of control in a social and financial landscape in which they are largely powerless.

It’s easy to see how Stuyvesant came to be such an essential part of the perceived path to success for New York’s Asian communities – its top-tier resources all but guarantee upward mobility for its students. And because admission to schools like Stuyvesant is so prioritized, it may seem natural to members of these communities that such a large proportion of students at New York’s specialized high schools are Asian. Some of the loudest voices against abolishing the SHSAT are Asian American advocacy groups, who believe that the SHSAT represents “a merit-based system that rewards hard work,” and that this meritocracy “reflects the American Dream” (Rong). These activists argue that Asian students, many of them poor, came to represent a majority at schools like Stuyvesant because their parents “dedicated their limited resources to ensuring that their children can take advantage of every opportunity” (Rong). They do not, as Mayor de Blasio seemed to believe, benefit from generational wealth and class privilege;

rather, they manage to excel in the SHSAT despite their poverty through cultural values prioritizing hard work and education.

Though these groups speak for only a minority of Asian Americans, they perpetuate an idea that is pervasive in conservative and liberal circles alike, within and outside of Asian communities: that of Asian exceptionalism. Implicit in the rhetoric of these groups is the assumption that the current demographics of New York's specialized high schools – both the overrepresentation of Asian students and the underrepresentation of Black ones – are the result of a completely objective process. However, as William Lohier, one of the few Black students at Stuyvesant, tells the *New York Times*, “I have so much trouble believing that of all of the top students in New York City who are able to change the world, and are able to perform the best in this really rigorous environment, that only seven of them are Black” (Lohier qtd. in “How the Few Black and Hispanic Students”). To pronounce these disproportionately low acceptance rates as ‘fair’ is to accuse Black students of being responsible for their own underrepresentation, an accusation steeped in the anti-Black notion that these students and their communities are less hard-working, don't prioritize education, and are overall not as deserving of a place at a specialized high school. To accept the SHSAT as an objective measure of merit disregards the myriad outside factors that could affect a demographic's average score, and the long history of standardized testing as a racially-biased assessment tool.

The truth is, standardized testing in the United States traces its origins back to the turn of the 20th century, when American cognitive psychologists misappropriated the IQ test, which was originally developed in France to test young children for mild developmental disabilities, to use it to sort and rank demographics along the lines of race, ethnicity, gender, and class (Au). Their results would be used to provide evidence for “the inherent inferiority of Black people, specific ethnicities, and the poor” (Au). Robert Yerkes, who was among the psychologists leading these studies, would adapt the IQ test for educational use in 1919, and by 1932, the majority of large city school systems were using standardized tests to sort students, supposedly by ability. The lower scores of Black students were frequently used to help white teachers “explain away any difficulties they might be having with Black students in their classrooms,” or to “track Black students into vocational education” (Au).

Because it had the support of leading psychologists, standardized testing came to be seen as a fair and objective measure of individual effort and ability, one which supposedly neutralized factors like race and class privilege. However, instead of giving all individuals an equal chance at achieving success, standardized testing only served the ideological purpose of buttressing structural inequality. Supposedly objective tests still used today like the SHSAT fail to take into account the lingering effects of institutional racism. For instance, historically redlined, primarily Black and brown neighborhoods continue to receive less public school funding and see worse

educational outcomes (Lukes and Cleveland). With the most segregated public school system in the country, New York likely experiences the worst of these issues (Gould). Furthermore, although Asian Americans in New York are disadvantaged economically, they benefit from what Jennifer Lee calls “ethnic capital.” Due to the United States’ hyper-selective immigration policy, the majority of Chinese immigrants have college degrees, which creates a collection of knowledge and resources that can “trickle down” in immigrant communities through social, religious, and educational institutions, benefitting less wealthy or established families (Yin). Test preparation centers are a manifestation of an ethnic capital that many Black communities don’t have access to. Taking these factors into account, it’s clear that although most of the activists opposed to admissions reform are fighting for meritocracy in good faith, their actions come at the cost of hurting Black communities pushing for equity in education in New York.

As journalist Tiffany Diane Tso writes, “Asian Americans are finding ourselves at a political impasse – it seems like our choices are to either fight for the success of our own, or the success of others.” In 2018, Mayor De Blasio proposed a plan to replace the SHSAT with an evaluation of students’ grades, state assessment scores, and rankings within their middle schools, which the New York City Independent Budget Office predicted would decrease the Asian American population at specialized high schools to 31%, increase the number of Black and Hispanic students to 46%, and keep the proportion of white students roughly the same (Rong). While this plan would be a huge step forward in the desegregation of the specialized schools, it’s hard not to view it as a loss for Asian American kids whose chances at overcoming their circumstances through an elite education would be more than halved.

The question is whether specialized high schools will continue to monopolize New York’s educational pathway to upward mobility. At a Queens town hall in 2019, responding to a question about replacing the SHSAT, Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez asked, “Why isn’t every public school in NYC a Brooklyn Tech-caliber school?” (Ocasio-Cortez qtd. in Featherstone and Blatt). At the time, many education activists dismissed her comments as a cop-out – they had hoped that the congresswoman would take a position on specialized schools admissions. But in her refusal to take part in the debate over the SHSAT, Ocasio-Cortez raised greater questions. Why has the focus of educational reform efforts in New York over the past decade been so myopic as to concentrate on only nine schools? Why has the discourse surrounding inequity in education been framed in a way that pits the interests of minority groups irreconcilably against each other, rather than as one that aims to uplift them all?

As a teenager, Ocasio-Cortez’s father attended Brooklyn Tech, waking up at five in the morning every day to commute from the Bronx. Despite the inconvenience, her father insisted on attending the school because, as Ocasio-Cortez explains, attending a

specialized high school was “seen as the only way to live a dignified life” (Ocasio-Cortez qtd. in Featherstone and Blatt). Today, that same “scarcity mindset” (as the Congresswoman puts it) is reflected in the pressure on Asian American kids to get into Stuyvesant and the desperation that drives their parents to pay test prep centers and oppose admissions reform.

With mayor-elect Eric Adams taking office in 2022, the fate of the SHSAT and de Blasio’s proposed plan for admissions reform is uncertain. It is clear that the SHSAT has to go – the current admissions system and its dependence on standardized testing is based on a false assumption of meritocracy, one that has a long and ongoing history of discriminatory effects against Black students. But abolishing the SHSAT will not fix the problem with the public school system. As a proposal from the Center for New York City Affairs at the New School points out, “Even if all [selective] schools and programs had to fill their seats using quotas proportional to the demographic breakdown of students in the city, the school system would still be inequitable” (Lynch and Mader). The fight for education reform cannot stop until all 1,800 schools in New York City have the funding, resources, and educational quality of its specialized schools. Stuyvesant is only the beginning.

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