

Public Schools, Public Oversight: Principles and Policy Recommendations During COVID-19 and Beyond¹



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND OCTOBER 2020 UPDATE

October 20, 2020

New York City's 126 screened high school and 196 screened middle school programs, some of the most highly sought after public schools in the City, rank and select students for admission. Screens contribute to the inequality and segregation rampant in New York City (NYC) schools and a number of students, parents, and Department of Education (NYCDOE) employees have called for their reform or elimination.²

In late 2019, the Fordham Law School Feerick Center for Social Justice published a report, [Screened Out](#), finding that no one—not parents, not students, not stakeholders—had access to admissions criteria or “rubrics” used by screened programs. Following the report, NYCDOE asked members of the High School Application Advisory Committee (HSAAC), a diverse group of stakeholders and experts committed to making New York City's high school admissions process more equitable, to offer recommendations for reform of screened programs (Rubrics Subcommittee).

The COVID-19 pandemic has further complicated high school admissions and compounded long-standing inequities. But it also presents an opportunity to rethink the admissions process and find ways to level the playing field. Due to the abrupt shift to remote learning in March of 2020, the most commonly used measures in screened admissions—7th grade test scores, attendance records and spring semester grades—are not available. The 2020-

2021 school year, with its delayed start, hybrid learning for some, all-remote learning for others, and periodic shut down of some or all schools, will create similar problems for the next cycle. The time for reform is now.

[Public Schools, Public Oversight](#), published in May 2020, lays out principles and policies to address the well documented shortfalls of the NYC admissions processes as well as challenges presented by COVID-19. The report recommends that Mayor de Blasio end screening in middle schools, standardize and centralize the high school admissions process, prioritize equity, and effect real transparency.

Public Schools, Public Oversight also outlines feasible reforms consistent with these principles that Mayor de Blasio and NYCDOE could implement starting this year:

1. Develop a set menu of standard criteria for screened high school programs, including criteria that promote equity;
2. Allow programs to choose from the menu, but also provide the option and support for programs that prefer to opt out of screening altogether;
3. Collect and make public each screened program's choices from the standard criteria;
- and 4. Assign students based on both inputs chosen by each program and equity considerations.

The impact of the pandemic has not abated and any plan must be forward-looking. As the detrimental effects on students will indisputably persist throughout the 2020-2021 school year, the HSAAC recommends that Mayor de Blasio and NYCDOE commit to reforming screened school admissions beyond the 2020-2021 admissions cycle.

¹ https://www.fordham.edu/download/downloads/id/14645/PublicSchoolsPublicOversight_print.pdf

² See, e.g., [Open letter to NYCDOE Chancellor](#) signed by approximately 1000 NYCDOE employees calling for the elimination of screens; [detailed proposal](#) by IntegrateNYC and Territorial Empathy for admissions reform, including a “COVID preference” in screened admissions for students most harmed by the pandemic; a [campaign to unscreen schools](#), including collection and release of admissions data and a well-attended series of school walkouts by Teens Take Charge;

numerous published pieces outlining the need for reform now, including Miriam Nunberg et al., [Especially now, public schools for all: NYC should do away with middle- and high-school admission screens](#), N.Y. Daily News (Oct. 9, 2020).