



With Schools Ditching Merit for Diversity, Families of High Achievers Head for the Door

Description

Alex Shilkrut has deep roots in Manhattan, where he has lived for 16 years, works as a physician, and sends his daughter to a public elementary school for gifted students in coveted District 2.

It's a good life. But Shilkrut regrettably says he may leave the city, as well as a job he likes in a Manhattan hospital, because of sweeping changes in October that ended selective admissions in most New York City middle schools.

These merit-based schools, which screened for students who met their high standards, will permanently switch to a lottery for admissions that will almost certainly enroll more blacks and Latinos in the pursuit of racial integration.

Shilkrut is one of many parents who are dismayed by the city's dismantling of competitive education. He says he values diversity but is concerned that the expectation that academic rigor will be scaled back to accommodate a broad range of students in a lottery is what's driving him and other parents to seek alternatives.

Although it's too early to know how many students might leave the school system due to the enrollment changes, some parents say they may opt for private education at \$50,000 a year and others plan to uproot their lives for the suburbs despite the burdens of such moves.

"We will very likely leave the public schools," says Shilkrut, adding that he knows 10 Manhattan families who also plan to depart. "And if these policies continue, there won't be many middle- and upper middle-class families left in the public schools."

A National Battle Over Merit

The battle in New York City is an example writ large of a high-stakes gamble playing out in cities across the country – essentially a large experiment in urban education aiming to improve the decades-old lag in performance of mostly black and Latino students. By ending screened admissions that

segregate poorer performers and instead placing them in lottery schools with higher achievers, the theory goes, all students benefit.

But the research cuts both ways on the academic impact of mixed-ability classrooms, and many New York City parents say they don't want to roll the dice on their kids' education. If a large number of families do exit the city's public schools in 2023, it would mean another financial blow to a system that has already lost more than 100,000 students since the beginning of the pandemic. Yet some of these parents may decide to remain in the public system and augment their kids' education with advanced after-school classes, a common practice.

"When desegregation policies have been adopted in other cities, some parents who object stick it out and adapt," says David Armor, a professor emeritus at George Mason University who has extensively researched integration policies. "But I would expect some degree of middle-class flight in New York City given how the lottery is going to change the academic composition of the middle schools."

Diversity advocates – school educators, local politicians, and progressive nonprofits and parents – dismiss the threat of an exodus as scaremongering while they score wins. In Park Slope, Brooklyn, an affluent, progressive NYC neighborhood, it was parents who led the charge to end selective middle schools several years ago in a prelude to the citywide policy shift this fall. But Park Slope isn't representative of the more moderate politics of much of the city like Manhattan's District 2, where most parents at a recent series of community meetings strongly backed selective education.

Nationwide, about 185 school districts and charters in 39 states have adopted integration policies, ranging from redrawing school boundaries to preferential admissions for low-income and black and Latino students, according to the Century Foundation, an advocacy group. A quarter of them have been implemented since 2017.

"Students benefit educationally and socially from racially and economically integrated schools," says a report from New York Appleseed, an advocacy group that lobbied for the removal of admission screens. "Society and our political systems benefit from the reduction in racial prejudice."

But advocates don't win them all, suffering a remarkable setback in progressive San Francisco in 2022. After the Board of Education angered some parents, particularly Asian Americans, by shifting Lowell, the city's premier selective high school, to a lottery system during the pandemic, a grassroots campaign formed and successfully recalled three members in a landslide vote. The new board voted to keep screened enrollment at Lowell.

NYC Rolls Back Selective Ed

The retreat from selective middle schools in New York City gained momentum during the pandemic. Prior to COVID, almost 200 of the city's middle schools, or nearly half the total, used enrollment screens, typically grades and test scores, to select high achievers.

Whites and Asians won a disproportionate number of seats in these competitive schools, creating a form of segregation based on academic performance. For instance, at Salk School of Science, a junior high in District 2, these groups accounted for three-fourths of the enrollment, with blacks and Latinos

taking less than a quarter of the seats even though they make up two-thirds of all students in NYC's system.

During the pandemic, middle schools suspended screened admissions because standardized testing had been temporarily paused – and that gave diversity advocates an opening to lobby for a permanent end of selective middle schools.

NYC Department of Education Chancellor David Banks, a black man who rose up the ranks from school security officer, recently got a taste of bitter politics of integration after making a politically incorrect comment in favor of merit-based education. The blunt-spoken chancellor was pilloried as “evil” on Twitter for saying that students who work harder deserve to go to a top school compared to those who need water thrown on their face to get them to class. As a former principal, Banks was speaking from experience.

But perhaps due to the political pressure, rather than ordering the restoration of screening, Banks punted. He told his superintendents who run more than 30 districts to solicit feedback from parents and then decide whether to bring them back.

In October, the superintendents mostly sided with progressives, dropping screened admissions permanently in more than 130 middle schools and restoring the practice in almost 60 of them for enrollment in fall 2023. Some parents cheered the sea change, arguing it's wrong to pressure young children in 4th grade to compete for selective middle schools.

“Screens end up excluding black students and English language learners and those from low-income families,” says Nyah Berg, the executive director of New York Appleseed. “It's fundamentally unsound to judge the worthiness of a student who is nine years old to attend a middle school based on their test scores and grades.”

But many other parents, particularly in District 2, are appalled by the rollback of meritocracy. The district covers a large swath of Manhattan, from the affluent Upper East Side and Midtown to Greenwich Village and the financial district. It is also home to a disproportionate share of high performing students.

One District 2 mom, who taught in city public schools for six years, says she and her husband have already bought a house in Riverside, Conn., where schools provide accelerated education. They plan to move there if they can't afford a private school in the city.

“It's 100% certain that our children won't go to an unscreened school,” says the mother, who asked not to be named because she has two kids in public elementary school. “It's heartbreaking because I grew up in the city and went to public schools. But the standards are falling now.”

The major problem with mixed-ability classrooms, particularly in an unscreened urban school, is the remarkably large difference in skill levels that teachers will likely encounter, says Jonathan Plucker, a professor of education at Johns Hopkins University who researches student achievement gaps. Some middle school students may be at least three years behind their grade level and others three years ahead, making it next to impossible for a teacher to give struggling students the attention they need while challenging advanced students with specialized curriculums.

“The idea that everyone benefits in a mixed-ability classroom is an ideological statement that flies in the face of all the evidence we have, which is very mixed,” Plucker says. “And not just for advanced students. It’s not clear that struggling students benefit either.”

The Exodus

The New York City school system, the nation’s largest, has been losing students for years. With about 1.1 million students at its peak, the system began shedding students in about 2016, which some experts attributed to a decline in the birth rate.

The drop-off accelerated in this and other cities nationwide during the pandemic. Many parents left after seeing the harm done to their children by remote learning when teachers, backed by their union, refused to return to the classroom. Families of all races, particularly blacks, and all income levels exited public schools for charters, homeschools, and mostly for an education outside New York City in New Jersey and in southern states like Florida.

By 2022, the city’s schools were down to about 900,000 students, a remarkable 10% drop from two years earlier.

Nothing is more dangerous to the city’s schools than the loss of students. State funding is based on head count, and the decline already forced Mayor Eric Adams to cut more than \$200 million from the education budget this summer.

Future cutbacks may jeopardize a major reform approved in September that requires the city to reduce the size of its large classes – high school classes now capped at 34 students will go down to 25. The goal is to lift the abysmally low English and math test scores of city public school students, with more than half of them failing to achieve proficiency in these key areas in 2022.

“I have no doubt that some parents in areas like the Upper East Side will leave the city because of the elimination of screens,” says Ray Domanico, a longtime researcher of the city’s school enrollment both within the system and now at the conservative Manhattan Institute. “With significantly fewer kids enrolled today, the city shouldn’t be pushing policies that could drive more families away.”

When the City Lured Families Back

Selective middle schools were created decades ago to keep middle-class families in the city as crime was pushing them to the suburbs in large numbers. By the 1990s, as the soaring murder rate began to recede and more people moved into less inhabited areas of District 2, parents began to demand better schools, Domanico says.

“The school system chose to respond to those families by setting up screened schools,” he says. “The city wanted to appeal to better-educated parents of all racial groups who had good jobs.”

In District 2, officials rolled out screened middle and high schools that quickly gained a reputation for excellence, including the Salk School of Science on East 20th Street in 1995.

The schools helped lure white and Asian families to the district. In the following two decades, the number of white students in the district rose to 26% in 2020, up from 19% in 2003, according to state enrollment data. More Asian students enrolled in the district too, bringing their total to 22%, while the number of black students fell to 14% from 22%. Latinos, the largest group, declined as well.

Chien Kwok, a Chinese-American, was part of that transformation of District 2. He was working in China when his child was accepted into a gifted and talented elementary program in the district, prompting his family to move back to Manhattan.

“District 2 had a real draw for parents,” says Kwok, the treasurer of the district’s Community Education Council, which gives parents a voice in school policy. “You could work in the city, send your kids to a great gifted and talented elementary program, then to an awesome screened middle school, and high schools are the best. It was a meritocratic feeder system that is now destroyed.”

Parents Back Selective Admissions

The battle over District 2 middle schools came to a head this fall. At four community meetings attended by the district’s superintendent, Kelly McGuire, a large majority of parents and advocates spoke in favor of restoring screened admissions. The meetings added weight to resolutions already passed by the district’s CEC supporting competitive admissions.

So in late October, when McGuire announced he was imposing a permanent lottery for admission at all of the about 17 middle schools that had used screens, parents were flabbergasted.

It didn’t help his cause that the day before his announcement, McGuire’s wife, Judith Kafka, a professor of educational policy at City University of New York, co-wrote an opinion piece against screened admissions. She said that competition for admission hurts all students, and quoted a parent in Park Slope who prefers a lottery because it ends the stress that comes with striving for high marks and a seat in a good school.

Parents in District 2 were offended by the article. To them, it suggested that McGuire always intended to ignore their views and instead wanted to persuade them using his wife as a surrogate.

At a community meeting in November following McGuire's decision, parents directed their fury directly at the superintendent.

"I am now looking for private schools for my son," said CEC member Danyela Souza Egorov. "But so many families in our district have reached out to me that they cannot afford it. It's deeply unfair that your plan does not meet the needs of these families."

McGuire responded that he did hear the community's call for accelerated learning. But rather than restoring competitive schools that stress out families, the superintendent said he's creating a new honors math course in four middle schools for those who qualify, and all schools will offer eligible 8th graders an advanced biology course and algebra, which is sometimes taught in 9th grade.

For reading and writing, McGuire said, middle schools will continue to differentiate instruction, in which students pick books and essay topics to match their own proficiency levels.

The changes, he told parents, "dramatically increase the number of accelerated learning options for students in our district."

CEC member Kaushik Das didn't agree, calling McGuire's honors offerings "meager scraps."

When Mixed-Ability Schools Fail

Parents see a big difference between the defunct selective schools, once full of strivers and bright minds, and the new mixed-ability schools that will try to tailor instruction to learners of widely differing skills and motivation.

Hunter Dare's daughter learned this lesson at Simon Baruch, which became a District 2 lottery school during the pandemic. The sixth grader was three years ahead of her peers in math in a classroom with some students working at the second-grade level. The teacher's response was to give the girl an algebra textbook for self-study and promised to work with her when time permitted. But that never happened.

She was bored in her other classes as well, and was handed only 15 minutes of homework a day.

"It was bad because she wasn't challenged and she just lost interest in school and started slipping backwards, not doing things she was supposed to do," says her father.

Dare was considering leaving the city for a better school for his daughter. But she got lucky in the 2022 lottery and was placed in the Baccalaureate School for Global Education in Queens, which Dare calls one of the few remaining highly rigorous middle school programs in the city. His daughter's motivation is back as she tackles at least two hours of homework a night.

Another mother in District 2 calls her son's experience during the pandemic at the unscreened Robert Wagner middle school "a disaster." In English class on most days, she said, 25 students spent much of the period reading a variety of unchallenging fantasy and sports books. So there was little opportunity for a dynamic class discussion around a compelling literary topic. Instead, the teacher walked around the classroom and briefly talked individually to students. They avoided tackling difficult authors from Toni Morrison to William Shakespeare whose works require more elucidation and class discussion.

"Advocates say students learn best in mixed-ability classrooms, but in fact nobody really learned much from their reading in my son's class, and that's terrible," says the mother, who asked not to be named because her children are still in public schools.

She says she won't put her younger child in an unscreened District 2 middle school after seeing one up close. Instead, the family will likely decamp to Connecticut, where they recently bought a home.

By Vince Bielski

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