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May 12, 2021

Hon. Bill de Blasio
Mayor, City of New York
City Hall
New York, New York 10007

Meisha Porter
Chancellor
Department of Education
52 Chambers Street
New York NY, 10007

Re: NYC DOE Admissions Policy

Dear Mayor de Blasio and Chancellor Porter,

Thank you for considering these comments and for the critical work being done by the Mayor's office and the NYC DOE, especially over the past year during the COVID-19 pandemic. This letter includes comments and recommendations from the Arts, Culture, Education & Street Life (ACES) Committee of Manhattan Community Board 4 (MCB4) about the NYC DOE admissions policies that have been paused the 2021-2022 school year. The comments were approved at the May 5th, 2021 Full Board meeting with 35 in favor, 0 against, 1 abstaining and 0 present but not eligible to vote.

RECOMENDATIONS

Based on what we heard from experts and community members at a forum organized by our ACES committee, MCB4 has the following recommendations:

1. **Admissions Policy** - Engage the community in a dialogue about how NYC DOE admission policies should change to become more equitable and intentionally increase diversity for the 2022-3 school year and beyond, and do not reinstate all the policies that have been paused.
2. **DOE Communication** - Communicate future admissions policy changes more proactively, clearly and comprehensively so that the community has more time to understand their implications, especially parents whose students they impact.

BACKGROUND

Educational outcomes for Black and Latinx students in our district, Community School District 2, and across New York City are significantly lower than they are for white and Asian students due to both historical circumstances and inequitable policies. NYC public schools, including (but not limited to) schools that have used academic screens in their admissions processes, are some of the most segregated schools in the United States. Students benefit when schools have a combination of key policies and programs, such as rigorous and culturally responsive curriculum, reasonable class sizes, early interventions for academically struggling students, quality after-school programming, and on-site social workers. Research also shows that all students – regardless of background and past academic achievement – benefit academically and in terms of their social emotional development when schools are integrated.

Over the past decade, momentum has been building citywide for desegregating our public schools. Integration plans have been developed through community input and been approved by the DOE at the school, grade band, and district-wide levels.

Important milestones include:

- **2012:** PS 133 implemented a diversity in admissions strategy based on “set asides”
- **2014:** New York State’s schools were identified as most segregated in country, and state launched the SIPP program, funding communities to develop solutions
- **2015:** New York City passed the school diversity accountability act, requiring more reporting on diversity
- **2016:** The DOE expanded diversity in admissions program eligibility into middle and high schools
- **2017:** The DOE launched School Diversity Advisory Group, and approves first district-wide integration plan in District 1
- **2018:** The DOE approved District 15’s middle school integration plan, and Districts 9, 13, 16, 28 and 31 earned DOE grants to develop integration plans
- **2018:** District 2 received a 200K grant to address equity and segregation issues
- **2020:** DOE paused middle school screens and high school geographic priority policies for 1 year

Manhattan Community Board 4 sits within Community School District 2, a district that spans most of lower Manhattan, midtown and the Upper East Side. District 2 is a high-performing district. In 2019, (the most recent year with state test results) 78% of 4th graders scored a 3 or a 4 – the levels that indicate grade-level proficiency – on math and 80% scored a 3 or 4 in ELA. However, in District 2, including the parts that are within Manhattan Community Board 4’s boundaries, Black and Latinx students are significantly underrepresented in gifted and talented programs and middle schools that use academic

screens as part of their admissions policy. These selective elementary programs and middle schools operate as a pipeline to the city's selective public high schools, such as Stuyvesant, Brooklyn Tech and Bronx Science.

Community School District 2 has begun to try and address the fact that access to its selective programs and schools is not equitable. Work is currently underway supported by a \$3 million New York State Integration Grant, for the years 2020-23. The purpose of the grant is to learn about the benefits of integration and develop a sustainable strategy that addresses it. Grant funded initiatives include:

- Elementary School: Set asides (i.e. a reserved portion of seats) for elementary students who qualify for free or reduced price lunch at the PS 11 and PS 77 (Lower LAB) gifted and talented programs
- Middle School: Set asides for students who qualify for free or reduced price lunch at screened middle schools, including Clinton, Eastside Middle School, LAB, Salk & Yorkville East
- High School: Set asides for students who qualify for free or reduced price lunch at Baruch, Beacon, Eleanor Roosevelt and LAB, and priority admissions for District 2 high schools have been eliminated
- Curriculum: Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Education, a program that designs and implements curriculum that reflects students' diverse backgrounds and lived experiences.

These initiatives by the Community Education Council for District 2 and the district's staff are well-intentioned attempts to move toward more equitable and less segregated schools in the district. However, there is much more work to do, even compared to other districts in the city like our neighbor District 1, which developed a district-wide integration plan through community conversations that the DOE approved.

In December, Mayor De Blasio announced a 1-year pause to several New York City Department of Education admission policies that exacerbate segregation in our city's schools, including the use of academic screens. Academic screens take into account a student's performance in admissions by using grades, attendance or other indicators of academic success as part of how they evaluate students to determine who is granted admittance to a selective public school. The use of academic screens in admissions is generally accepted to be a factor that exacerbates segregation, unless screens are implemented in concert with other policies like set asides. The elimination of all middle school academic screens in admissions is a change that was welcomed by school integration and equity advocates in New York City. However, multiple parents have voiced support for a combined approach that involves the use of both academic screens and policies designed to increase integration, as exist in several other school districts in the US.

MCB4 ACES FORUM ON NYC DOE ADMISSIONS POLICY CHANGES

To provide our community with an opportunity to learn about the implications of this 1-year pause and discuss how public school admissions should be structured, Arts, Culture,

Education & Street Life (ACES) committee of Manhattan Community Board 4 (MCB4) organized a forum, “N.Y.C. Department of Education (DOE) Admissions Policy Changes,” on March 8, 2021. Staff from the DOE delivered a presentation on what the policy pause meant for students and their families this coming school year. Then there was a panel discussion, which included a combination of community members and expert perspectives. The event focused on middle school and academic screens. The panelists were:

- Kelly McGuire, Superintendent of Community School District 2, NYC DOE
- Nyah Berg, Integrated Schools Project Director at New York Appleseed
- Mercedes Vargas, MCB4 Member and NYC DOE parent
- Sadye Campoamor, Director of Community Affairs, NYC DOE
- Stefan Lallinger, Director at The Century Foundation’s Bridges Collaborative

Our objectives were the following:

1. Provide our community with helpful information about how the NYC DOE’s MS and HS admissions process has temporarily changed
2. Engage in a constructive dialogue about the benefits and drawbacks of making the recent changes to admissions permanent
3. Collect the data and perspectives necessary for MCB4/ACES to develop its stance on what NYC DOE admissions policies should be in the future

In their comments, the panelists emphasized several points about the admission policies that have been paused and how New York City’s public schools could become more integrated and equitable:

- The research consensus is that diversity benefits all students both academically and in terms of their social emotional development, regardless of their background and prior academic achievement.
- The extreme degree to which New York City public schools (both screened and unscreened) lack diversity is the product of a variety of policies, factors and historical circumstances, so permanently eliminating the policies that have been paused may contribute to desegregation over time, but it is unlikely to have a significant impact immediately on enrollment patterns.
- Academic excellence does not have to be in tension with eliminating policies that contribute to de facto segregation in the city’s public schools, because integration benefits all students.

We also took a live poll, which asked the following questions:

1. Which of the following best describes you?
 - Parent of a NYC DOE student(s)
 - NYC DOE employee
 - Student
 - District 4 (Chelsea, Hell’s Kitchen/Clinton & Hudson Yards) community member

- DOE parent and employee
 - DOE parent and employee, and District 4 community member
 - No affiliation with the DOE and not part of the District 4 community
2. Do you have all the information you want about the policy changes to middle and high school admissions?
 - Yes
 - No
 3. Should implementing policies that intentionally increase diversity in our public schools be a priority for the NYC DOE?
 - Yes
 - No
 4. After the 1-year pause this coming school year, what should happen to the NYC DOE's recently changed admissions policies?
 - Paused policies should be reinstated
 - Paused policies should be eliminated permanently
 - Some policies should be reinstated and some should be eliminated permanently

From the responses we received (full results are available in the appendix), several conclusions can be drawn. Most of the audience was parents of students who attend DOE schools. Overwhelmingly, attendees believed that the DOE should implement policies that intentionally increase diversity in the city's public schools, with 89% of respondents indicating that. The majority of the attendees (67%) indicated they would like some of the paused policies eliminated permanently and others to be reinstated. About a quarter (26%) of respondents said they wanted to eliminate the paused policies permanently. Reinstating the paused policies in their entirety was very unpopular, with only 7% of respondents indicating that was their preference. Even after the presentation by the DOE and the conversation among the panelists, nearly half (44%) of respondents still do not have all the information they want about the policy changes the DOE made to middle and high school admissions for this coming school year. Therefore, we can surmise that our forum's mostly parent attendees would like the following from the DOE:

1. Implementation of policies that intentionally increase diversity
2. Changes to admissions policies for the future (though we cannot say precisely how)
3. More information and better communication about admissions policies

CONCLUSION

We support changing the way students are admitted to schools in Community School District 2 after the 1-year pause expires on some admission policies. While we acknowledge that de facto segregation in schools is challenging to address, we believe it can and must be solved without diminishing the quality of the educational experience for any students attending our city's public schools. A student's background should not be predictive of which public schools and programs they have access to in our district or

anywhere in our city. Community School District 2 should follow the lead of other districts around the city that have moved more quickly and comprehensively to integrate their school buildings and programs. This process should happen in conversation with parents, community members, local and national experts on school integration, and DOE staff working in our district's schools, so that collectively we can develop and implement more equitable processes. Making data publicly available about the results of integration efforts around NYC will be vital for all of us to learn from what has worked and what hasn't worked.

We look forward to continued engagement with the Mayor's office and the DOE on this topic, and with others related to their work in our district.

Sincerely,



Lowell D. Kern
Chair
Community Board 4



Allen Oster
Co-Chair
ACES Committee

Kit Tollerson
Co-Chair
ACES Committee

Enclosure

CC: Hon. Corey Johnson, Speaker, City Council
Hon. Gale A. Brewer, Manhattan Borough President
Hon. Robert Jackson, NYS Senate
Hon. Brad Hoylman, NYS Senate
Hon. Richard Gottfried, NYS Assembly
Hon. Linda B. Rosenthal, NYS Assembly

Appendix: Live poll results

