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New evidence of an extreme gender bias in selective high school admissions demands an independent evaluation of the exam

By Leonie Haimson, Executive Director

Last week, Ben Chapman of the NY Daily News wrote about the [disproportionate number of girls](#) rejected from the highly-selective Specialized high schools compared to the boys. As I was quoted in the article, "You would think that the city would be taking every step they could, to ensure that girls are accepted to these high schools at, at least the same rate as boys...Girls should have the same opportunities as boys and the data suggests that this entrance exam has a gender bias that needs to be addressed."

I have been writing about the gender imbalance at the specialized high schools since [2010](#). There has been much written about the low numbers of black and Latino students admitted through the SHSAT exam, with only 10 Black students and 27 Latino students accepted into Stuyvesant high school [this year](#). Indeed, in 2012, [a complaint was filed](#) with the Civil Rights office of the US Department of Education about the exam's discriminatory impact.

Meanwhile, the Mayor has [continued to blame the state](#) for the problem, which passed a law years ago requiring that the exam results be the deciding factor in three high schools, Stuyvesant, Bronx Science and Brooklyn Tech; yet in the case of the other five high schools that use the exam, their method of admissions is completely under his control. It is also important to note that [NYC is the only district in the country](#) with selective high schools in which a single high stakes exam is the sole criterion for admissions.

Yet the Daily News article is the first time to my knowledge that the mainstream media has reported on the sharp gender differential between the admission rates of boys vs. girls. Here is a chart showing a large gender gap of ten percent, with only 15.4% of girls who took the exams admitted to the specialized schools compared to 20.4% of boys:

	# tested	# admitted	% admitted
Females	14,513	2,240	15.4%
Males	13,693	2,799	20.4%
total (w/ known gender)	28,206	5,039	

These disparate results strongly suggest the exam exhibits gender bias, especially as among NYC public school students, girls tend to get better grades AND better test scores than boys. Here, for example, are their comparative scores on the [2017 state 8th grade exams](#):

	mean scale score	Level 1		Level 2		Level 3		Level 4		Level 3+4	
		#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
ELA											
Female	316.0	3874	12.7	9773	32.0	10203	33.4	6668	21.8	16871	55.3
Male	303.1	8017	24.5	11565	35.3	9096	27.7	4102	12.5	13198	40.3
MATH											
Female	296.5	9127	36.6	9203	36.9	4202	16.8	2415	9.7	6617	26.5
Male	288.6	12609	44.8	9294	33.0	4078	14.5	2174	7.7	6252	22.2

You can see from the above that according to the state exams, girls obtain higher scale scores, achieve higher proficiency rates and more of them score at the highest level (level 4) in both ELA and math.

I also checked for the gender differential on the 7th grade state 2017 math tests, since many 8th graders take the Regents exams in math instead. Girls get higher scores on these exams as well:

Category	Mean Scale Score	Level 1		Level 2		Level 3		Level 4		Level 3+4	
		#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Female	307	10405	33.2	9386	29.9	6601	21.1	4965	15.8	11566	36.9
Male	303	12676	38.2	8887	26.8	6492	19.6	5093	15.4	11585	34.9

In past years as well, according to [this paper](#) by Sean Corcoran and Christine Baker-Smith, if state test scores, grades and attendance from 2005-2013 were used as criteria instead of the SHSAT, girls would be 9 to 13 more points more likely to be admitted to the specialized high schools: "***In fact, the gender gap would shift dramatically in favor of girls with the use of grades and State tests.***"

That's a far greater disparity than they found for Black or Latino students (who tend to score lower on the State exams). Yet among similar applicants with the same performance on the State exams, girls, Blacks, Latinos and low-income students were all significantly less likely to score high enough to be admitted to these schools, and Whites and Asians significantly more likely to be accepted.

Corcoran and Baker-Smith also said, however, that over that period, girls were less likely to apply to the specialized high schools, which is no longer seems to be the case, with more girls now taking the SHSAT than boys.

In 2016, after much criticism of the exam and its racially disparate results, Pearson was awarded a [six-year, \\$13.4 million contract](#) to improve the previous SHSAT, which was also written by the company. This is despite the fact that Pearson is not noted for its high-quality exams, to say the least.

They did eliminate the [scrambled paragraph section of the exam](#), and the [logical reasoning section](#), but appear to have made few other changes, other than making the exam even longer -- to 180 minutes from 150 minutes. They also included only non-fiction passages in the ELA section (perhaps a nod to the Common Core/David Coleman personal preference for informational texts.)

One of the most [frequent criticisms in the past](#) has been the highly unusual way in which the SHSAT was scored, to give extra weight to students who scored exceptionally high on the math or the ELA sections, rather than those who received an overall high average score. Apparently this remained the scoring method [as late as 2016](#). Has the methodology changed? Is this one of the reasons for the extreme gender disparity in the results?

In any case, whether you believe that using one high-stakes exam as the sole criterion for admissions is itself unfair and highly unreliable (as I do), it is [long overdue](#) that the SHSAT be independently evaluated for gender AND racial bias. There have been calls for this independent evaluation as [far back as 2008](#). Given the latest stark disparity in admissions for girls vs boys, that should be mandatory. Or perhaps a Title 9 complaint? Please leave your comments below.

Below are the offer of admissions by gender and by school; you can see that the more selective the school the more unbalanced the numbers; with Stuyvesant 58% male and 41% female.

School Name	Total Offers	Female	% Female	Male	% Male
Stuyvesant High School	902	374	41%	521	58%
High School for Mathematics, Science, and Engineering at City College	149	65	44%	83	56%
Bronx High School of Science	912	392	43%	515	56%
High School of American Studies at Lehman College	141	88	62%	53	38%
Brooklyn Technical High School	1904	815	43%	1081	57%
The Brooklyn Latin School	582	290	50%	287	49%
Queens High School for the Sciences at York College	151	72	48%	79	52%
Staten Island Technical High School	326	144	44%	180	55%