

October 30, 2008

Fewer Children Entering Gifted Programs

By [ELISSA GOOTMAN](#) and [ROBERT GEBELOFF](#)

The number of children entering New York City public school gifted programs dropped by half this year from last under a new policy intended to equalize access, with 28 schools lacking enough students to open planned gifted classes, and 13 others proceeding with fewer than a dozen children.

The policy, which based admission on a citywide cutoff score on two standardized tests, also failed to diversify the historically coveted classes, according to a New York Times analysis of new Education Department data.

In a school system in which 17 percent of kindergartners and first graders are white, 48 percent of this year's new [gifted students](#) are white, compared with 33 percent of elementary students admitted to the programs under previous entrance policies. The percentage of Asians is also higher, while those of blacks and Hispanics are lower.

Parents, teachers and principals involved in the programs, already worried at reports this spring that the new system tilted programs for the gifted further toward rich neighborhoods, have complained since school began that they were wasteful and frustrating, with high-performing children in the smallest classes in a school system plagued by pockets of overcrowding.

"They took the knees out of a program that was working," complained Christopher Spinelli, president of the Community Education Council for District 22 in southeastern Brooklyn.

For years, the Bloomberg administration has struggled to rationalize the gifted programs, long derided by critics as bastions of white privilege yet seen by many middle-class New Yorkers as a reason to stay in the city's public school system.

In his 2005 State of the City address, Mayor [Michael R. Bloomberg](#) promised to maintain all of the city's existing gifted programs while creating more in "historically underserved districts."

Department of Education officials said this week that they had not intended to reduce gifted enrollment radically, but were satisfied in the knowledge that all children in the programs had cleared the same hurdle. Previously, the city had a hodgepodge of programs with varied admissions requirements; in 2007, when the city required applicants to take the same tests but did not set a uniform cutoff, some were filled with students who had scored extremely low.

"We have taken critical steps to expand gifted and talented — including extensive outreach that has led to many, many more students being tested — but we won't compromise standards and thereby dilute our programs," Schools Chancellor [Joel I. Klein](#) said in a statement. "In the past, when gifted and talented programs were run by the districts, students scoring at the 5 percent or 10 percent level on a national scale were being admitted to gifted programs. This is unfair to the students."

City officials said that in an effort to broaden next year's gifted enrollment, they planned to create citywide programs based in Brooklyn and Queens — currently, the three such programs that have a higher admissions standard are all in Manhattan — and begin all gifted programs in kindergarten; 38 percent now begin in the first grade. But they have no

plans to change the tests or the 90th percentile cutoff (which was lowered from 95th percentile because too few children met the higher standard).

Problems with the new admissions policy surfaced in June, when [an analysis by The New York Times](#) showed that children from the city's poorest districts were offered a smaller percentage of gifted slots than in the previous year, while children in the city's wealthiest districts captured a greater share. The new data and analysis go further by looking at actual enrollment and the race of students, information the city could not previously provide.

The incoming gifted class is 9 percent Hispanic, 13 percent black and 28 percent Asian. Their kindergarten and first-grade peers in the city are 41 percent Hispanic, 27 percent black and 15 percent Asian. Students admitted to gifted programs under the previous policies are 15 percent Hispanic, 31 percent black and 20 percent Asian.

But the most profound change is the overall shrinkage of the gifted program, with 1,305 kindergartners and first graders starting new classes this fall, down from 2,678 last year, according to the Education Department. That drop comes despite the fact that 16,324 students applied for entry-level slots this year, up from 6,246 in 2007.

In an effort to encourage applications in neighborhoods that previously had few or no gifted programs, the city spent \$5 million to publicize the process and to administer the two tests: the Otis-Lennon School Ability Test, or Olsat, a reasoning exam, and the Bracken School Readiness Assessment.

"The most ridiculous part of all of this is this process was supposed to be easier this year and more accessible, especially to minority parents and parents in District Six," said Kelley Ragland, a book editor whose son tested into the gifted kindergarten at Public School 153 on Amsterdam Avenue at 147th Street in Manhattan, only to learn the program had been abandoned because too few children enrolled. "And it's absolutely backfired."

Because the other planned gifted kindergarten in the area, at P.S. 98, attracted only a handful of students, they were folded into a first-grade class, leaving District Six, in a heavily Hispanic part of Upper Manhattan, without a single gifted kindergarten. Six other districts, of 32 citywide, also lack entry-level gifted programs this year: Districts Seven, Eight and Nine in the Bronx, and 16, 19 and 23 in Brooklyn. Last year, two districts lacked entry-level programs. Over all, about 14,000 of the city's 400,000 elementary students, or 3.5 percent, are in gifted classes.

Besides the lower number of students meeting the new admissions requirements, gifted enrollment has dropped because the city did not create waiting lists for the most popular programs, as schools have in the past. In addition, families who were originally offered slots at their second- or third-choice schools were not notified if positions at their first choices became available.

"We were interested in keeping open the marginal schools that had a very low register," explained Marty Barr, executive director for elementary school enrollment. "We did not want to give people a second chance at the top-choice schools."

At P.S. 163 on the Upper West Side, Maya Tolstoy, a research scientist, and Dina Levy, an account executive for a clothing company, said they were shocked to find their children's gifted kindergarten half empty, with 11 students.

"To get your kid into a good kindergarten in New York City is such a yearlong battle, and I know that it's a very desirable program," Dr. Tolstoy said. "It's a shame that other kids are being denied the opportunity."

Ms. Levy said the situation "doesn't seem fair" and is "a little disconcerting," noting: "We don't want the program to get canceled."

At P.S. 110 on the Lower East Side, the gifted kindergarten class has 16 children, while another kindergarten class has 28, a situation Lisa B. Donlan, president of the local Community Education Council, called “unfair to the entire school community.”

At P.S. 52 in Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn, one of four schools with gifted classes of eight — the minimum the city requires — the other five kindergartens have 22 or 23 children each.

“Their intentions are all good, and I understand making it more uniform across the city,” the school’s principal, Ilene Altschul, said of the changes in gifted admissions. “I just don’t understand how a class of eight children is beneficial.”

Over all, there are 66 entry-level gifted programs this year. Forty have fewer than 21 students, the citywide average class size for the lowest grades. The largest, [New Explorations into Science, Technology and Math](#) — known as Nest —has 104, split among five classrooms.

In an interview, Education Department officials stressed that the gifted program is a tiny slice of the city school system, and that many more children are served by enrichment programs in which clusters of students or an entire school receive accelerated instruction on a topic, like science or the arts.

They also pointed out that many students who pass the test do not end up in gifted programs — more than 1,000 of the 2,320 students who qualified for entry-grade slots did not enroll this year, compared with 1,500 of 4,200 children offered gifted slots last year.

“We have a lot of eligible children who make other choices,” said Anna Commitante, who oversees the department’s gifted and talented offerings.

Some parents say that to truly broaden access, the city needs to provide yellow bus service to children who qualify for prestigious gifted programs far from home. According to city regulations, yellow bus routes serving non-special education students do not generally run longer than five miles or cross borough lines.

Eleanor Cawley selected the gifted program at P.S. 232 in Howard Beach, Queens, for her 5-year-old daughter, Kiera, only to discover in September that she had to apply for a variance to get bused from their home on the Rockaway Peninsula, about seven miles away. “They didn’t think it through,” said Mrs. Cawley, adding that she had still not received a variance and was spending about \$60 a week on gas.

Shelly-Ann Alston, who lives in the Bronx, ended up putting her son, DaShawn, in Catholic school when she learned that the city would not bus him to Nest, on the Lower East Side, where he had won one of the city’s most sought-after spots.

“They put it out there like it’s for everybody, but really it’s not,” said Ms. Alston, who works at a car rental company. “It’s not set up for kids who live in the other boroughs.”