

A Progressive Assault on Selective High Schools

Instead of fixing public education, the left tries to end testing at schools it deems inequitable.

By Chester E. Finn Jr.
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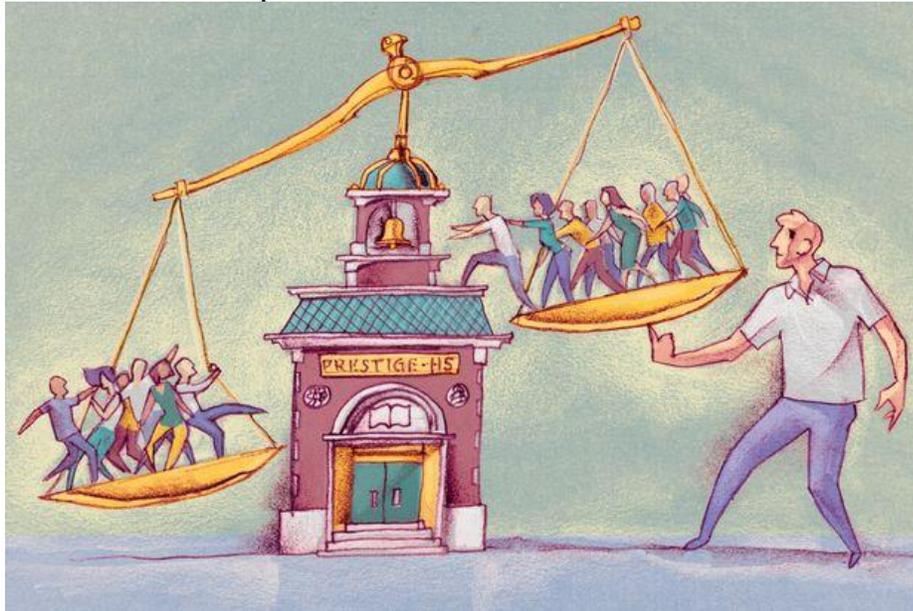


Photo: David Klein

Virginia Attorney General Mark Herring has fired the latest salvo in America’s assault on meritocracy: a 61-page opinion holding that the suburban Loudoun County school system discriminated against black and Hispanic youngsters because its selective-admission high school, the Academies of Loudon, hadn’t admitted enough of them. Never mind that—as Mr. Herring acknowledged—the school’s test-based admissions process is open to all and fairly managed. Because its results have a “disparate impact,” the school system must scrap it.

Nationwide, selective-admission public schools, also known as “exam schools,” are under attack because the demographics of their student populations don’t match those of their communities. Much like elite universities, critics allege, these schools have been admitting far too many whites and Asians and not nearly enough blacks and Latinos.

The ruckus began in New York, where admission to nine of the city’s hundreds of high schools is governed by the eighth-grader’s scores on a specialized admission test. Topping the list are Stuyvesant and Bronx Science, and there’s no denying that they’re full of Asian and white kids, many from low-income and middle-class families. This has raised hackles for decades, but Mayor Bill de Blasio and his schools chancellor have recently pushed to make the admissions

process more “equitable.” They want to reserve places for black and Latino children, abolish the entry exam, and instead admit top students from every middle school in the city.

But is every middle school churning out eighth-graders with the requisite skills and knowledge to succeed at Bronx Science? Are all children who make good grades eager, motivated learners ready to make the most of what these high-powered schools have to offer?

Instead of repairing the elementary and middle schools attended by poor and minority kids so that more of them will be prepared for places like Stuyvesant, and creating more such schools for bright children from every background to get a top-notch education, New York’s equity seekers are pressing to reallocate an extremely scarce resource. Mr. de Blasio and colleagues overlook the educational tragedies that the city’s schools routinely inflict on so many of the girls and boys they claim to be looking after.

The impulse is spreading. Consider another furor in Virginia, over admission to the esteemed Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology in Fairfax County, regularly ranked the country’s top high school by U.S. News. Thomas Jefferson is in such demand that it can accept fewer than 1 in 6 applicants. It’s been using its own special exam and a “holistic” admissions process that considers essays, interviews and teacher recommendations as well as grades and test scores. Thomas Jefferson’s minders have tried various strategies to bring in more pupils of color but none has worked very well. Among the 486 students [in the most recently admitted class](#), fewer than 25 were black or Hispanic—and few were low-income.

The Fairfax County superintendent and board last month moved to abolish the qualification exam and application fee. The superintendent proposed moving to a lottery system that would place every eighth-grader with good grades into the admissions pool. For now the Fairfax County School Board has shunned the lottery. An Asian-American father, testifying before the board called that plan “government-sponsored discrimination against Asians.”

Lotteries signal a sort of superficial fairness, but in practice they’re worse than taking every middle school’s best students. Their effect will be to encourage grade inflation across the system—to get more kids into the “pool”—and favor students who may be ill-prepared or indifferent over hundreds who yearn for the opportunity, many of them Asian-Americans from low- or middle-income families bent on getting their children the best possible education.

Much the same thing is happening elsewhere, including Boston (Boston Latin School), Philadelphia (Central High School), San Francisco (Lowell High School) and Washington (Duke Ellington School of the Arts, School Without Walls and others). All have a small number of highly regarded exam schools with enrollments that don’t mirror their communities and are therefore deemed retrograde, if not discriminatory.

Yet the remedies being sought in every case are wrongheaded. They fiddle with the rationing system instead of adding to the supply of selective schools—fewer than 170 nationwide at last count, among more than 20,000 U.S. high schools—or ensuring that more poor and minority kids are prepared to compete for entry.

Achievement gaps are widespread across America among kids from different backgrounds. On the National Assessment of Educational Progress, 13% of white eighth-grade students reached the “advanced” level in math last year, as did 31% of Asian kids, compared with only 2% and 4% of black and Hispanic children. Students who aren’t doing advanced math by the end of middle school aren’t likely to succeed in selective-entry high schools. But tackling that problem by abolishing tests and randomizing admission forfeits excellence in favor of fake equity.

Developing talented students is the right approach, but that means starting “gifted and talented” programs in many more elementary and middle schools. School systems would also have to face the reality that some kids are smarter and more motivated than others, no matter their color. That’s anathema to “progressive” reformers, who prefer to abolish accelerated classes for high achievers. Ithaca, N.Y., is one of several communities that has moved to make all sixth- and seventh-graders take the same math, no matter how adept some are.

It is the job of schools to create opportunities for all young people, regardless of background, to make the most of themselves. Teachers can encourage the kid with a gleam in her eye to take harder classes. They can spot the shy 8-year-old from a troubled home who loves to read and hustle him into a program for gifted students. They can’t overcome every innate difference or compensate for every disadvantage at home. But the best of today’s charter schools, such as New York’s Success Academy, show that a lot can be overcome.

The progressive assault on education in the name of equity ends up denying smart kids from every background the kind of education that will assist them to make the most of their abilities. That denies America human capital for a robust economy, while keeping a fraught society from producing the opportunities that allow true equity to flourish.

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