

P.S. 321

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To: Superintendent Anita Skop
Chancellor Carmen Farina
Mayor Bill DeBlasio

Cc: Daniel Dromm
Brad Lander

From: The PS 321 School Leadership Team

Dear Superintendent Skop, Chancellor Farina and Mayor DeBlasio:

As members of the School Leadership Team at PS 321, we are writing to express our concern about the current middle school admissions process in District 15. We recognize and appreciate the work the city is doing on diversity and integration through the Equity and Excellence for All agenda. First, we must acknowledge that our own elementary school is deeply segregated. We wish that were not the case and believe that all students would benefit from a more representative demographic. We welcome discussion about how to integrate elementary schools, and also understand that as a neighborhood zoned school we have less direct control than we do with the middle school choice plan that is currently in place.

We feel school choice is no longer working in our district and hope that we might work with you on a plan to change it. Although we know District 15 is currently working with many groups on diversity and equity, our middle schools remain very segregated. We believe this is a direct result of the selection process, and feel it is detrimental to all students in District 15.

We recognize efforts already taken to begin to reform the process, including blind ranking. However, when middle schools are allowed to screen and select students by academic performance, attendance, and behavior grades, the result will always be "selective" schools siphoning off a majority of the higher performing students, largely correlating with white, wealthier students. Maintaining the status quo feels untenable. The current reality is that 76% of white students in D15 are concentrated in just three screened D15 middle schools, and these same middle schools serve just 14% of the economically disadvantaged students in our district.

We applaud the sentiment behind efforts to address this issue by a handful of schools (including MS 447 and MS 839 in D15) which allot a certain percentage of seats to economically disadvantaged students. We urge the district to support similar initiatives in other schools and ones that go even further so that we can get closer to having all schools have 67% of students who receive FRPL (Free and Reduced Price Lunch), since that is the percentage in District 15.

We feel strongly that we must address racial, socioeconomic, and academic diversity in order to achieve integration in District 15, and research shows that diverse classrooms benefit all students. In their report *How Racially Diverse Schools and Classrooms Can Benefit All Students*, authors Amy Stuart Wells, Lauren Fox, and Diana Cordova-Cobo of Teachers College Columbia assert, “researchers have documented that students’ exposure to other students who are different from themselves and the novel ideas and challenges that such exposure brings leads to improved cognitive skills, including critical thinking and problem solving.”¹ Furthermore, it has been more than 63 years since our nation’s highest court established the unconstitutionality of segregated schools. We appreciate what a change this would be for the small number of schools currently serving primarily high-performing students, and that those schools would need support.

We believe in the elimination of screened schools. The elimination of any application process would unburden not only the schools, who devote considerable time and resources to tours, interviews, tests, and auditions, but also the families, who must take time to manage the process as well. This system clearly benefits families with more time and money and flexibility, contributing to the problem of segregation, and results in a disproportionate number of high performers concentrated in a few schools. We also believe that 5th graders are too young to have to experience the difficult rejection that is currently a part of the middle school application process.

We advocate instituting a lottery-based or Ed/Opt system for District 15 where admissions would be based solely on a lottery-system. However, it only works if all schools in the district adhere to the same admissions policy and *if the process is completely transparent.*

As we are confident you know, there is a movement among parents in District 15 for real change. While we know that we cannot speak directly for everyone at PS 321, we were elected to the SLT by the parents or staff of the school and have agreed unanimously to draft this letter. Though we appreciate the efforts of several schools in attempting to address these concerns, we feel this cannot be left to the discretion of individual schools and families; only system-wide reform will truly address the issue. Screened schools perpetuate the very inequities that Mayor De Blasio referenced when he described New York City as a “Tale of two Cities” and this is not the story we want for our children. We are heeding your call for average New Yorkers to join with elected officials to ensure that our city’s policies focus on the needs of all New Yorkers.

Thank you in advance for your consideration of our concerns. We would very much appreciate it if you would advise us as to what we can do to hasten change, and would welcome a meeting to continue this dialogue. We are eager to help in any way we can.

Sincerely,
The PS 321 School Leadership Team

Parent Members:

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Kate Singh
Nanette Giles
Pier Imbriano

Staff Members:

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Lauren Lumm (UFT Chapter Chair)
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Abby Getzler

¹ Wells, Amy Stuart, Lauren Fox, and Diana Cordova-Cobo. *How Racially Diverse Schools and Classrooms Can Benefit All Students*. The Century Foundation. 09 Feb. 2016. Web. 07 June 2017.

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