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Via Facsimile and U.S. Mail

February 14, 2008

Mr. Joel Klein
Chancellor
New York City Department of Education
52 Chambers Street
New York, NY 10007

Dear Chancellor Klein:

I write to you regarding the new standards for Gifted and Talented (G&T) assessments, specifically the requirement that students score in the 95th percentile nationally in order to be offered a seat in a G&T program.

You have stated in public materials that the changes to the G&T assessments have been made with dual goals in mind: setting clear, high standards, and increasing equity and access. I completely agree with these goals. However, I am concerned that measuring our students against a single national standard may result in *decreasing* access to G&T programs.

The 95th Percentile Cutoff May Be Too Restrictive

As you know, there is a lot of talent in our school system, and many students who are capable of doing advanced work. It raises the question of whether the 95th percentile cutoff is too restrictive.

In your Gifted & Talented Proposal, you cite Seattle among the "large U.S. districts using 95th percentile or greater as standard."¹ It is worth noting, though, that Seattle has three tiers of gifted programs, each tailored to serve exceptional students who

¹ NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, GIFTED & TALENTED PROPOSAL, Nov. 2007 at 9. (available at http://schools.nyc.gov/NR/rdonlyres/A967CEFD-57F2-4ADD-986B-C2D062D100AB/27213/20071029_gifted_talented_slides.pdf).

learn at different, advanced speeds. These multiple gifted programs have varying admissions criteria (including teacher input, as well as test scores) that do not carry a 95th percentile cutoff for admission. For example, kindergarten- and first-grade students are eligible for the second tier of gifted programs if they score in the 90th percentile in two out of three subject areas on a cognitive abilities test.²

While I appreciate your effort to maintain rigorous G&T programs that will challenge the New Yorkers who stand out among the brightest students nationally, it is critical that we somehow address the needs of a wider population of local children who are capable of doing advanced work. Perhaps as many as half of all students who are in G&T programs today would not qualify for G&T under the new system (if they had to reapply).³ These children are thriving in the advanced educational environment they are in, yet under the new system, they may not receive the challenging education that they could handle.

Not to provide a challenging curriculum to these students risks stunting their academic growth and alienating a large number of active and involved parents who may just as soon turn to private or suburban schools for the educational needs that their children require. The City cannot afford to turn its back on these high-achieving students and their families.

Our Students Should Be Evaluated on a Level Playing Field

Our goal should be to get the most out of all of our students, but I do not believe this is possible if we restrict access to G&T programs to performance on a national test. Numerous studies have drawn a link between wealth and high achievement on standardized tests — yet we are now asking young New Yorkers from disadvantaged families to compete against children of greater means from other cities for seats in our own G&T programs. Rather than measure students by a national norm, I ask that you compare them to other students from the same school district, and use these results to assign seats in G&T programs. Similarly, I ask that you compare English Language Learners to students with similar exposure to English, and inform me of what steps you will take to do so.

We Must Do More to Achieve Racial Equity

I am also hopeful that changes to the system will promote racial equity. However, I should note that at least three of the five cities you cited in the Gifted & Talented Proposal — Seattle, San Diego and San Jose — have not achieved racial equity in their G&T programs similar to that of their overall student makeup. In Seattle, nearly 75 percent of students in the Accelerated Progress Program are white, compared to 40

² SEATTLE PUBLIC SCHOOLS, ADVANCE LEARNING: SPECTRUM, (*available at* http://www.seattleschools.org/area/advlearning/program_spectrum.htm).

³ *Schools Raise Bar for Classes for the Gifted*, NEW YORK TIMES, Oct. 30, 2007.

percent in the entire school system.⁴ In San Diego, African-American students make up 6.5 percent of G&T enrollment, compared to 14.5 percent district-wide.⁵ In San Jose, where Hispanic students represent 49 percent of the entire school district, they make up less than 25 percent of G&T enrollment.⁶ A single testing standard alone will not yield equitable G&T admissions.

I applaud you for taking steps to improve the access of all New Yorkers to G&T programs, particularly your comprehensive efforts beginning in 2008-2009 to identify kindergarten students for giftedness (as long as you allow parents to opt out of testing, and as long as any information collected is used solely for determining status in G&T programs, and not for tracking student or teacher performance). I ask that you augment this progress by creating a formal recommendation process for teachers and principals to identify gifted first- or second-graders who are not enrolled in G&T programs, so that these students may be re-evaluated.

After two or three years of schooling, these students may have progressed further than they were able to show in kindergarten, and may benefit from advanced curricula. Again, I point to Seattle as an example. There, teachers' identification of top students, and professional development programs to help teachers make these identifications, is a prime component not just of G&T access, but also of maximizing the growth of the most capable students.

Other Logistical Issues

Finally, I would like to address several logistical issues related to the restructuring of G&T programs.

1. Assessing All Students Must Not Take Away From Classroom Time

As I stated above, I believe that assessing all kindergarteners is an important element to give students of all backgrounds an opportunity to participate in G&T. However, because this is a time-consuming process of one-on-one evaluations, it poses a potentially large burden on the time of kindergarten teachers. It is my understanding that the Department of Education provides schools with money to pay for substitute teachers while the full-time teachers conduct the assessments. I ask that you take the opposite approach, and hire test administrators (who could be retired elementary teachers, or otherwise qualified evaluators). Doing so will cause fewer interruptions to the consistent routine of classroom instruction, and further standardize the assessment process.

⁴ *REPORT: SEATTLE'S GIFTED PROGRAM FAVORS WHITES*, SEATTLE TIMES, Dec. 3, 2007 (available at http://seattletimes.nwsource.com/html/localnews/2004050142_app04m.html).

⁵ SAN DIEGO CITY SCHOOLS, GATE PROGRAM EVALUATION REPORT, May 2005, at 2 (available at http://studata.sandi.net/programstudies/reports/GATE_Report_2005.pdf).

⁶ SAN JOSE UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT, 2005-2006 GATE PLAN, May 2005, at 5 (available at http://www.sjUSD.org/pdf/gate/gate_sjUSD_plan0506.pdf).

2. Parents Need to Know Earlier if Their Children Have Been Accepted

I am concerned that the May 31 timeframe for advising parents of their children's acceptance into G&T programs is too late. A number of parents in my Council District choose between a G&T program and private school — and many private schools require parents to pay deposits and to accept admission offers much earlier than May 31.

Given a choice between waiting to hear about G&T status, or pursuing an offer at a private school, these parents often choose the latter option. On March 16, 2007, I wrote to Liz Saplin, Coordinator of Gifted & Talented Enrichment (and you were copied on the letter), I wrote that the then-April timeline for informing parents about G&T acceptance was too late. Deposits at private schools — as high as \$3,000 — are due at many private schools in February. A number of parents whose children win acceptance into G&T programs thus face a significant financial sacrifice, one that may discourage our public school system from attracting exceptional children, and one that may be rectified with a more accelerated timeline.

I have received no response to my letter of March 16. I ask, again, that you explore a shift in the timeframe to relieve parents of these difficult and costly decisions.

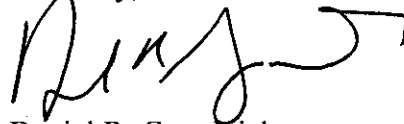
3. We Need a Reasonable Sibling Policy

Finally, I would like to address the issue of siblings of current G&T students. Raising the bar for admissions will almost certainly keep a number of future kindergarteners out of the G&T programs in which their older brothers and sisters are now enrolled. For reasons of continuity and practicality, parents have strong desires for their children to attend the same school. Principals also recognize the benefits of keeping siblings together — where class size allows.

I ask that you create clear guidelines that would accommodate the placement of students who did not qualify for G&T programs within the same school as their gifted siblings (subject to class size targets). I ask further that you share these guidelines with principals as soon as possible so that they have an opportunity to offer useful feedback. It is also especially critical that you inform all parents whose children are accepted into G&T of the final policy so that they may understand that the siblings are not guaranteed a seat in the same school as the gifted children.

Thank you for your careful consideration of these issues. I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Daniel R. Garodnick