PLACE NYC

To: New York City Council, Committee on Education

Re: Public Hearing on the Department of Education New Admissions Changes on 1/25/2023

Submitted electronically to https://council.nyc.gov/testify/ on 1/28/2023

PLACE NYC (Parent Leaders for Accelerated Curriculum and Education) is a collective of elected NYC public school parent leaders dedicated to improving academic standards, curriculum, and outcomes for all NYC public students in all of our public schools.

Abrupt and Drastic Changes to Admissions

Public school parent communities across the city are deeply concerned about the abrupt and drastic changes to middle school, high school and Gifted & Talented kindergarten admissions processes over the last three years without proper parent engagement through an opaque process. Many of the changes, initiated in the last administration but continued in whole or in part by the current administration, make it challenging to maintain reliably high standards of excellence and expectations for admissions to competitive schools. The unreliability has added further confusion to an already anxiety-ridden experience of navigating through the admissions process for students and families.

Admissions Changes Prompted Enrollment Drops

Schools managed by the NYC Department of Education (DOE) have hemorrhaged enrollment in the past three years with more than 10% of our student population exiting the system. Among our parent community, the changes in admissions have played an outsized role in the departures. Parents have voiced their frustrations with lowered academic standards and the anti-merit admissions policies that the DOE abruptly pivoted to for middle school and high school admissions, affecting over 150K students in 5th and 8th grade each year.

Parents and guardians do not want to enter an unpredictable system and leave the fate of their children's education to chance. In addition to the admissions policy changes, some schools have expanded set-asides (to more than 2/3 of available seats in some instances) leaving many middle

class families to discover during the admissions process that their child only qualifies for a small percentage of seats in their district, greatly reducing the opportunity to attend a school with accelerated programs.

Families with more than one child have had to navigate vastly different application processes each year with changes purportedly made in the name of ever-elusive and constantly changing equity and diversity goals which never seem to center on improving the academic outcomes of students or making any of our schools more rigorous.

Manhattan Families Most Adversely Impacted

With the steep drop in the number of screened schools, expanded set asides for low-income students, and elimination of district and geographic priorities, families in Manhattan have been severely and disproportionately affected. Enrollment loss has been in the double digits at even some competitive programs, leaving these schools disproportionality and ironically, less diverse.

G&T Evaluation Becomes More Subjective, Unclear and Opaque

Another major concern for families in our community is the subjective, unclear, and opaque criteria (such as "curiosity") which PreK teachers are using to assess and nominate potential students into the program. Nominated students are then placed into the lottery for 2,500 seats with a six applicants to one seat ratio. For families applying to G&T, it is yet another confusing change to apply to the program without confirmation first that their child has been nominated. There are better ways to improve diversity in order to serve the children who have accelerated needs including expansion and marketing of the program in under-represented neighborhoods.

Reinstate Middle School Screens - It's What Many Parents Want

For middle schools, PLACE asks the Chancellor to direct superintendents to reinstate screened middle schools where there is a demonstrated demand for such schools. In District 2, families spoke strongly in favor of keeping screens in multiple public engagement sessions. However, the superintendent ignored parents' pleas and unilaterally decided to continue with a lottery-style admissions for all middle schools. This decision prompted the elected parent leaders of Community Education Council 2 to pass two votes of no confidence. This refusal from the DOE to compromise as other districts have done is an affront to "parent engagement" and has led to even higher distrust from families who are voting with their feet in this particular school district where K and 6th grade enrollment losses have been greater than most districts.

High School Admissions Shouldn't be a Lottery

With regard to High School Admissions, the DOE did not hold ***any*** formal public engagement sessions with impacted families. Through outcries and advocacy efforts from PLACE NYC, other CEC and CBO's, parents were able to reduce the disastrous impacts seen with the previous year's admissions which left many students without placement to any of their 12 choices. Even with the adjustments for the 2022-2023 school year, the admissions changes are insufficient and grossly inadequate. Students' educational future should never be determined by a random lottery number when there are criteria that can be used such as tests, grades and other relevant metrics that highlight a student's content proficiency and individual accomplishments.

Restore Objective Criteria and Make It Universal

We strongly urge the DOE to return to an objective G&T screening assessment and make it universally available to parents during regular school hours. The newly announced process where parents first apply to G&T programs without knowing if their child will qualify, and then having PreK teachers evaluate only students whose parents applied will only lead to a higher proportion of applicants coming from parents who are "in the know." Teachers have been instructed to assess the child based on a training video which emphasizes "equity" instead of objective criteria, and to then fill out DOE worksheets to nominate students for the G&T lottery - a process which ironically, is deeply inequitable and wholly insufficient to identify gifted students.

Accountability for Academic Excellence

In conclusion, the parent leaders of PLACE NYC implores the City Council to urge the DOE to restore rigorous academics, accelerated curriculum and merit-based admissions. These criteria are essential to a successful and diverse school system, and positions all children to reach their highest potential. The approach of the last administration to attain equity has clearly taken a toll on excellence AND enrollment, while failing to achieve true sustainable equity and improving academic outcomes. We urge the City Council to adopt stronger oversight measures over the DOE to ensure real equity isn't overlooked at the expense of excellence, and that policies are not anti-academic and really a cosmetic cover for accountability because all our students deserve to have their hard-work celebrated and encouraged.