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Equity For the Gifted

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Over the past few weeks I have learned a more about the city's efforts to provide "equity" for academically advanced students. Failure to air this issue fully in recent years this has left many tens of thousands of our children shortchanged, most of them minority children. Rather than improve the situation, as Mayor Bloomberg promised in his re-election campaign, the cure has made matters worse.

This did not begin during this administration, although the promulgation of new rules to promote "equity" in admissions to programs for the academically advanced have already begun to have the opposite effect. Nowhere is this clearer than in Region One, which comprises most of the west Bronx. Of the 10 regions in the city, Region One has a special distinction. Despite being home to over 100,000 students, more than many big cities, it alone has not a single "self-contained" class in grades K-8 for gifted and talented students.

Region One is composed almost entirely of minority students. Of the scores of public elementary and middle schools in the area, the three schools in the Riverdale section are the only ones with a significant Caucasian population, and even there, white students are in the minority.

District 10, the larger of the two component districts in the region, has no gifted and talented seats largely because for the past dozen years it had been led by the recently retired Irma Zardoya, a foe of any type of program that recognizes academic excellence.

Ms. Zardoya banned spelling bees, discontinued the competitive science fair, terminated honors programs, and ended homogeneous class groupings that organized children by academic ability. The result of these policies is that during her tenure, admissions to the top specialized high schools declined by 80% even as the total school population increased by 25%.

I suggest that this is yet another way that we damage minority children, as President Bush suggests, through the "soft bigotry" of low expectations.

Some years ago I discussed these figures with Chancellor Klein, who put the blame on "middle class exodus." I see this differently. Rather than the demographic shifts being the cause of the shocking decline in specialized high school admissions, I see the wrong-headed public policy decisions as a causative factor in the exodus of middle class families.

Dismayed by all this, in 1999 the voters in District 10, coming to the polls in huge numbers, threw out the old school board, electing a new board committed to the restoration of all that Ms. Zardoya had scrapped. Inexplicably, the board retained her as superintendent. She was affiliated with the Ramirez

political machine, though it's unclear what effect that had.

To pacify the board, Ms. Zardoya reinstated a science fair — one at which no prizes were awarded, lest the self-esteem of the children be damaged. The demand for a gifted and talented program was deflected by the tactic of confusing real G&T classes with “whole school enrichment,” the idea pioneered by progressive education icon Joseph Renzulli that all children are gifted and talented in some way.

By the time the board caught on, it was too late. The mayor had gained control of the school system, hired Mr. Klein, who employed Diana Lam, part of the progressive establishment, as Deputy Chancellor for Instruction. She found in Ms. Zardoya a kindred spirit, and promoted her to lead the new, larger region.

Ms. Lam was succeeded by Carmen Fariña, another opponent of gifted and talented programs, who took a page out of Ms. Zardoya's playbook by hiring Mr. Renzulli as the Education Department's consultant on matters gifted and talented. Out of this came a slight increase in the number of gifted and talented seats — 17 classes, or 340 new seats citywide, the educational equivalent of a thimble in the ocean.

Now the favored strategy coming from Tweed is the same one that Ms. Zardoya used to such disastrous effect, the Renzulli “whole school enrichment” model.

Meanwhile, those who run the gifted and talented programs in the city, people who don't really believe in true gifted and talented education such as the “self-contained” model, are doing all that is possible to undermine it.

New rules for admission, promulgated under the guise of “equity,” have parents in districts that have had real G&T programs, such as District 3 on Manhattan's west side, scouring the real estate listings in suburban newspapers. Rather than promote “equity” by addition of seats, the new rules attempt to achieve equity by subtraction, undermining the rights of middle class families who have done nothing wrong but give birth to bright children.

Ultimately this strategy will kill gifted and talented education in the few precincts where such education has been allowed to flourish. And as these programs die, so do the hopes of bright minority students who, like their peers in the northwest Bronx, will be denied the opportunity to excel.

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