

Controversies over Public Exam Schools: A Case
Study Of Lowell High School in San Francisco Unified
School District

Madeline Aubry

Senior Comprehensive Project
Occidental College: Department of Urban Environmental Policy
Professor Shamasunder, Professor Rodnyansky

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Acknowledgements

Introduction

conversations around affirmative action. Despite the relative scarcity of selective schools across the country and the fact that a small share of students actually attend one, these schools seem to dominate local conversations about equity within public high school districts, particularly in San Francisco. This research aims to better understand, with a goal of equity, the role they play, the effect they have on their district, the effects these schools have on cross-community solidarity, and, ultimately, the future of public exam schools.

Background

This section briefly provides information about the San Francisco Unit, w2 792 re. 7210 grDe.721rB.-6(8 Tm E

For ten of the 11 schools considered in this research, not including Lowell, SFUSD uses a ranked lottery system to assign students to a high school (Apply to SFUSD Schools, SFUSD). SFUSD uses a separate application and selection process for Lowell. While this process has changed over

coming from public middle schools must submit their 7th and 8th grade scores from the state-administered Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) tests; students coming from alternative or private middle schools, where the SBAC is not administered, take a Lowell-specific entrance exam in 8th grade. Additionally, Lowell utilizes a three-band admissions approach: 70% of students are accepted strictly on the basis of test scores and grades (Band 1); 15% are admitted based on a combination of academic factors plus holistic considerations (Band 2); and the remainder of the students are selected from under-represented middle schools, and have also met academic requirements outlined by Lowell (Band 3) (Applying to Lowell, SFUSD). Band 3 schools are identified as schools that are underrepresented in the last three-year period in terms of student population, number of applicants, and number of admissions. Notably, the list of underrepresented schools also includes private middle schools, where few students choose to attend public high schools. Student socioeconomic status and ethnicity has also been taken into account, though this has varied over the years (Lowell High School Band Summaries for 2023-24 Admissions, 2022).

Desegregation History in SFUSD

The history of desegregation policy in San Francisco admission policies throughout the years. Desegregation advocates have historically identified Lowell as an obstacle in desegregating the school district, due to its merit system seemingly gatekeeping Black and Latino children from attending. The first desegregation effort for San Francisco public schools was the Horseshoe Desegregation Plan from 1971-1978. This plan

which said that any one ethnic group in any one school should not deviate more than 15% from

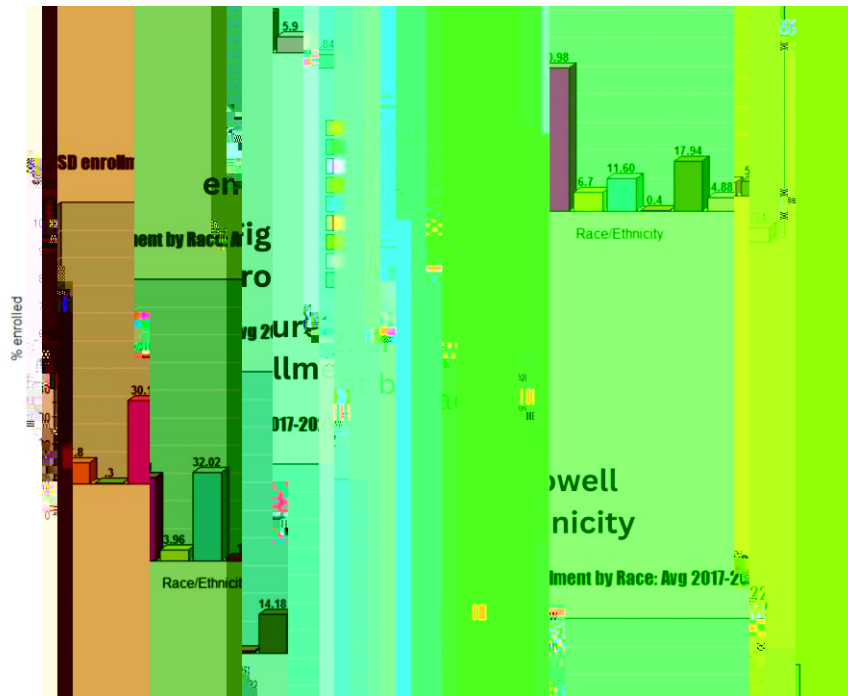
students out of their neighborhood and into another one was a large aspect of this plan ("Facing Our Past, Changing Our Future: Part II - Five Decades of Desegregation in SFUSD (1971-

Today, SFUSD). The horseshoe desegregation plan ended up capping white and Asian enrollment at desirable schools, which led many white and Chinese American families, in particular, to leave the district. More than 20,000 white students left SFUSD following the implementation of this plan, one of the largest white flights in the country (Facing Our Past, Changing Our Future: Part II - Five Decades of Desegregation in SFUSD (1971-Today, SFUSD). In response to this exodus, SFUSD proposed a new plan called the Educational Redesign plan, which required every school to represent a minimum of four racial/ethnic groups and no one group could take up more than 45% of the whole school (Ming, 2002, p. 175). It also included an Optional Enrollment request, which was granted to many Chinese Americans, allowing them to attend whichever school they wanted. In the early 1980s, the NAACP sued the SFUSD because the schools remained deeply segregated, and the bussing plan predominantly negatively affected Black families in Bayview/Hunters Point whose kids were being bussed to far away neighborhoods. In turn, in 1983, SFUSD implemented a consent decree, with the goal of eliminating the bussing plan for desegregation that within a school, a minimum of four ethnic/racial groups be represented and that no one group could take up more than 45% of the whole school (Ming, 2002 p. 176). The implementation of the consent decree worked smoothly until 1994, when a group of Chinese American parents filed a lawsuit, *Ho v. SFUSD* (Ming, 2002, p. 176). The lawsuit questioned the legality of the consent decree. It was filed on behalf of Chinese parents, who felt that the racial quota system disproportionately negatively affected their children, denying them access to their first-choice schools. At this point, Chinese Americans had become the largest minority group in San Fran

from Asian American students (Ming, 2002, p. 177). Their argument that the system was biased against their children was supported by the fact that, among other things, under the consent

achieve racial balance (Riley, 2021). Aside from a brief two-year period utilizing the lottery system, this three-band method is still utilized.

Figure 2 compares enrollment by race in SFUSD as a whole versus Lowell, as an average over the last 4 years. This graph shows the over representation of Asian and white students at Lowell and the underrepresentation of Latino and African American students (Enrollment Multi-Year Summary by Ethnicity, DataQuest).



Literature Review

The following literature review examines literature considering public exam schools and debates over their benefits and drawbacks. It provides insight into public exam schools nationally, as well as specifics regarding Lowell High School in San Francisco. This review includes scholarly research, journal articles, and media coverage regarding selective schools. It begins with a general overview of the debate surrounding public exam schools, the two sides to this discussion, and then more specific information about the topics that this debate concerns.

General Overview

Lines of Tension and Controversy over Public exam schools

Controversy ov

Disagreements over What Public Exam Schools Do

Proponents of public exam schools present them as specialized schools catering to a subset of the student population, regardless of socioeconomic background. They argue that these schools act as a launchpad of upward mobility for students, preparing students for admission into elite colleges (Cano, Asimov, 2022). Because these schools are made up of only highly motivated students, there are fewer distractions and behavioral issues from less motivated students, curating an environment of rigor and high expectations. Mac Donald argues that because of these

were still likely to attend a high school with fewer Black or Latino students, suggesting segregated public schools exist outside of the public exam school system (Dobbie and Fryer, 2014). Additionally, opponents of Lowell have argued that the extra resources and availability of more rigorous courses adds to the imbalance of academic resources within the district and creates more disparities among the public schools (Cano, Asimov, 2022).

The Role of Standardized Testing in Public Exam School Admissions

not translate to inner city Black students; African American students were denied equal
rough the very construction of the
-Cedroni, 2020). These schools undermine educational equity by using tests as
an assessor of admission; they have in many ways allowed white parents to hide behind the
ts without actually making any important changes to the
policies that lead to racially segregated schools (Probolus-Cedroni, 2020). In New York City, a
similar situation occurred in 1968, when there was a teachers strike made up of the African
American Tea

chancellor of the New York Public Schools, Harvey Scribner, raised issues about the admissions
policies at these elite schools; his concern only culminated in legislation being put forward to
protect their status (Hammock, 2010). Opponents of Lowell also argue that Lowell's existence
as a public exam school goes against a 1990s law banning the use of academic achievement for
admission to regular public schools. However, it has an exception for pre-existing requirements

vs. SFUSD. Although there was no lawsuit formed in response to this admission change, the Asian American community (largely the Chinese community) organized and rallied to oust three of the school board members who had voted to make this change. They cited that the policy change was racist against Asian American students (Fuller, 2022). The attorney hired to support the fight to return Lowell to a selective school, argued that this policy change helped Black and Latino students at the expense of Asian American students, the exact same sentiment expressed by the plaintiffs in the 1983 lawsuit (Yamamoto, 1997). There was apparent fear that the quality of the school would be diminished and hard-working students would be held back by unmotivated and unprepared students (Fuller, 2022). Some even went as far as to cite that students during the two-year lottery switch were performing worse than Lowell students in the

meaningful ways and focus on making sure the atmosphere is welcoming for students of color (Talley, 2021).

across the district, as a whole. Additionally, the measure to make Lowell completely lottery based, put forth by Alison Collins, one of the ousted board members, would create a community coalition to form a plan to address racism at Lowell. The measure, which has now been overturned, would not have looked at racism across the entire district (Tucker, 2021).

Gaps in Current Literature

In San Francisco, and other large cities with exam schools, there is a focus on exam schools as either the epitome of inequality and segregation or as an equal opportunity place for high achieving students to succeed, individually and alongside each other. There is extensive research into the arguments for and against exam schools, yet there is a gap in discussion over why these schools are so protected, why these conversations dominate the conversation around equity and ignore the fact that other public schools in the district are battling the same issues of segregation and racism. According to a study done in 2022, in San Francisco, all of the public schools, on average, are highly segregated. According to research, about 60% of the 99 public schools

analy

publicly available data was gathered from the Education Data Partnership website and the California Healthy Places Index. This data helps in investigating numerical quality differences between the various schools and neighborhoods in the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD). The percentage of students eligible for free and reduced lunch are indicators of the economic diversity of a school, while the percentage of cohort graduates meeting UC/CSU requirements is an important indicator of how many and which groups of students are graduating with the basic requirements to get into college. This is a useful metric in better understanding how successful a school is at providing a path of upward mobility. Basic demographic data was gathered, as well, to visualize segregation within SFUSD and to better understand disparities in student achievement. This quantitative data has been gathered for Lowell, Washington, Lincoln, (SOTA), Wallenberg, and Burton. Data was only gathered for high schools with enrollments of over 400. There are five public high schools in San Francisco with enrollments of less than 500. See **Appendix B** for these quantitative findings.

The bulk of the findings in this study come from the semi-structured interviews with San Francisco School Board members, SFUSD administrators and counselors, and parents with the aim of providing an array of insights into the perceptions of the effects of having an exam school in the district. Sixteen interviews were conducted; these interviews represented people associated with six public high schools in San Francisco, including Lowell High School. Abraham Lincoln High School (Lincoln), George Washington High School (Washington), Thurgood Marshall High School (Thurgood), Ruth Asawa San Francisco School of the Arts (SOTA), and Wallenberg High School. These individuals included principals, guidance counselors, a college counselor, a PTSA member, and a parent of a student who got into Lowell during the brief period when a lottery replaced the exam system. The principal of Presidio Middle School, a feeder into Lowell, was also interviewed; he also is a Lowell alumnus. Additionally three SFUSD school board members were interviewed.

While the specific questions posed in the interview varied slightly depending on the position of the interviewee, most of the questions were developed to better understand the perceptions and views different stakeholders held towards Lowell versus the other public high schools in the

district. Representatives from the other public high schools were asked specific questions about their schools and their understanding of the disparities between the various schools in the city. A list of the interview questions is provided in **Appendix A**.

Interview Findings

Table 1 highlights the stakeholders who were interviewed for this research. This table organizes them by the institution that they represent and then by their more specific role within that body. This table shows their most current positions within SFUSD, however many of the interviewees

Anon	Lincoln High School	Counselor
Omar Campos	Lincoln High School	Counselor
Chris Rosenberg	Wallenberg High School	Assistant Principal/Principal 2017-2022
Anon	Ruth Asawa School of the Arts High School	Administrator
Kevin Chui	Presidio Middle School Principal, Lowell alumni	

The table below provides an overview of the three main takeaways as well as selected quotes from the interviews. Following the table is an in-depth look at each of the main takeaways.

Main Takeaways	Selected Quotes
Contrasting perceptions of what makes Lowell õgzegmpvö''	intensity their academic interest. Kids at other schools and parent) school board
	top test takers right, they take whatever percentage it is of eighth graders right, so the top 15% of test takers - Kevin Chui (Presidio Middle principal and Lowell alumni)

The sorting mechanism of the exam is advantageous to the city and certain families within the district

process you separate Black kids out, and brown kids, so is there a binding interest, whether people want to admit it or not, that many many many families do not

merit-

known that

continues to exclude marginalized people. And you continue to operate under it, and tell the

Admin, 02/19/22).

The sorting mechanism of the exam is advantageous to the city and certain families within the district

Lowell keeps wealthier families in the district who may otherwise leave the district or attend private school

At a basic level, when asked why Lowell, constantly surrounded by such controversy and accusations of inequity, continues to be protected as an exam school, all of the interviewees pointed to Lowell's esteemed and politically connected alumni network. Its alumni association has ties to city politics and puts a lot of money and time into protecting the status quo of Lowell.

public school system. Without Lowell, interviewees expressed that they thought many of San

Schools on the east side of the city also tend to have higher percentages of Black and Latino

different service than any other public school and the largest issue is the false narratives being spread about the other schools, particularly schools on the east side of the district. Some interviewees supported these false narratives, while others dismissed them. **See Figure 5**

Discussion

Interviews supported an understanding of the role an exam school plays in the district, its relationship to the other schools, and how other schools view and are affected by the presence of an exam school. There were contrasting takes among interviewees regarding the purpose and the

create a rift between communities. It acts as an arena for anger and frustration to play out, mostly around issues that are much more far reaching than Lowell, like the segregation that exists within

represent a narrow-minded view of the schools in SFUSD, illuminating the elitism and racism that is rampant within th

larger frustrations within the district of the disparities and segregation that exists among and between all of the schools. It is simpler to demand the removal of selective admissions

District, these recommendations aim to be generalizable, as similar debates over exam schools are happening throughout the nation. It is important to note that these recommendations provide

relative term. Because over 30% of the students at Thurgood have had major gaps in their education due to immigration, what they need to get caught up on in terms of skills varies greatly from students at other schools (Sarah Ballard-Hanson, 12/28/22). That being said, tracking

information about private schools, and understand what role these private schools serve in the
d

only small steps towards improvement; structural changes to educational systems, housing systems, and healthcare systems must change

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Merit-

2. Lowell based questions

- a. In your opinion, what is the role of having an exam school like Lowell? What purpose does it serve the district to have a school like Lowell?
- b. What are your thoughts about the current Lowell admissions process?
- c. What are your thoughts on standardized testing?
- d. In your opinion, do you think that every child in the city who0hzed testing?

	Lowell	Lincoln	Washington	Balboa	SOTA	Wallenberg		Galileo	Mission	Thurgood	Burton
% Qualified free and reduced lunch	84.40	61.96	67.04	58.18	85	68.76	35.06	65.16	57.78	34.22	61