**Why Elite Public High Schools Fail: Words From Outside Stuyvesant**

*Chicago’s selective enrollment system highlights the vital shift schools must take in order to secure educational equality.*

In early June, I found myself at the edge of an auditorium balcony, watching the remains of my high school’s graduation fizzle out beneath me.

From above, large mylar balloons, floral arrangements, and beaming swarm of students all signaled an overwhelming sense of normalcy. If you were to have peered over with me, you might have thought this was just like any other public high school graduation.

And it was - the night was tinged with student’s nerves, excitement, and lingering affection for their soon-to-be alma mater.

But it also wasn’t. A small, bustling lobby housed the roughly 200 graduating seniors of Northside College Preparatory, an elite public high school in Chicago.

From 2015 to 2019, I attended Northside Prep as part of its small fraction of students who identified as both low-income and minority.

Admission to schools in Chicago’s selective enrollment system has become akin in nature to the [college admissions](https://www.chicagotribune.com/lifestyles/ct-life-selective-enrollment-college-admissions-tt-0928-20190928-476oka2x6vc4dlpdweksdmk5qm-story.html) process - rigorous, highly competitive, and often harrowing for students and parents alike. These schools also fail to reflect the diversity of their application pools.

Unlike the elite schools of major cities such as New York and Boston, Chicago selective enrollment high schools are often exempt from the discourse surrounding exam schools and their role in maintaining racial and socioeconomic inequity. New York schools like Stuyvesant have [become emblematic of our nation’s struggle to achieve equality](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/18/nyregion/black-students-nyc-high-schools.html?module=inline) in the educational space. But Chicago, for the most part, has continued to skirt around the periphery of these national debates.

Perhaps this is due to the distinctive model Chicago abides by in its admissions process for the city’s selective enrollment schools. Chicago Public Schools, the third-largest school district in the United States, champions a class-conscious and race-conscious approach to fostering diversity in its elite public high schools. Standards of admission are lowered for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The admission process is defined by a[point-based scale of evaluation](https://cps.edu/SiteCollectionDocuments/gocps/GoCPS_Scoring_SE_2019.pdf). Chicago’s most selective schools, such as Northside College Preparatory and Walter Payton College Preparatory, require near-perfect scores for admission. Scores are derived from three equally weighted categories: grades from a student’s seventh-grade report card and two standardized exams. Point totals out of 900 are used to determine if and where hoards of eighth-grade hopefuls are placed.

Due to the city’s enduring battle with residential segregation, zip code remains the most decisive factor in how a student’s application is assessed. [Employing census data,](https://cps.edu/sitecollectiondocuments/gocps/GoCPS_Tier_Process_web.pdf) Chicago Public Schools has divided the city into four socioeconomic tiers - an effort to acknowledge the varying degrees of privilege between Chicago communities.

Tiers are used to loosely signal adversity, with Tier 4 students considered the most economically advantaged. As such, those residing in the less affluent and often majority-minority Tier 1 communities need not score as highly on their applications as students from Tier 4 neighborhoods to be considered for admission.

Undoubtedly, Chicago’s effort to improve the diversity of elite high schools via its affirmative action based admission process is honorable. Yet, it invites questions regarding the standards at which policies or instruments promoting racial or socioeconomic diversity are held to. Underlying most inclusion efforts is the objective to achieve sufficient levels of integration rather than absolute equality.

New numbers offer a measure of promise but also serve to underscore the racial incongruities that persist in elite Chicago schools. Freshman enrollment rates for Latinx and Asian-American students have increased substantially since the birth of Chicago’s selective enrollment system. Last year, [11 percent](https://consortium.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/2019-06/GoCPS%20A%20First%20Look-May2019-Consortium%20and%20Chicago%20Fed.pdf) of Latinx students enrolled at Chicago’s top public high schools while Asian-American and multi-race students accounted for roughly [39 percent](https://consortium.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/2019-06/GoCPS%20A%20First%20Look-May2019-Consortium%20and%20Chicago%20Fed.pdf) of the incoming freshman class. But at the same time, black students face a measure of regress - only [12 percent](https://consortium.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/2019-06/GoCPS%20A%20First%20Look-May2019-Consortium%20and%20Chicago%20Fed.pdf) enrolled in selective enrollment schools in the previous year’s admission cycle. While this percentage is greater than enrolled Latinx students, [the number](https://www.dnainfo.com/chicago/20170901/south-loop/whitney-young-jones-lane-tech-northside-payton-selective-enrollment-black-data/) has been in decline since 1998.

Further augmenting the racial and socioeconomic disparities in the Chicago education system is the narrow view of equality that informs its mechanisms for inclusion.

Vehicles for diversity, such as Chicago’s admission process, are inherently flawed in that their influence only extends as far as the entrance of elite high schools. Chicago’s selective schools boast a greater minority presence than those of New York. But once students enter the classroom, they are thrust into a losing race. Students from underprivileged backgrounds are expected to compete with their more advantaged peers. Those that attended low-resourced community schools prior to high school find themselves academically unprepared for the rigor of selective enrollment. These academic gaps, due to disparate educational experiences, are background considerations for the elite.

In this regard, students’ personal histories are erased, their struggles and disadvantages unaccounted for.

Entering as a freshman at Northside Prep, I became hyperaware my position as a low-income minority. I found that my years of foundational education differed vastly from my peers. Many boasted diplomas from the city’s top private, Montessori, and magnet elementary or middle schools. I’d attended an elementary school just ten minutes from my low-income community on the West Side of Chicago.

Just as I sacrificed sleep and energy to keep up with my more affluent peers, I sacrificed personal ambition for the sake of academic success. I worried that spending time on things that mattered to me - writing, spending time with family and friends - would leave me behind my classmates. Each step I took forward academically, another part of me - crucially dependent on aspirations and fulfillment outside the classroom - detached.

My elite education, like many other low-income minority students, offered a window from poverty and afforded me glimpses into financial stability. Academic achievement became fragilely tied to a deeply rooted sense of responsibility to those who’d beared extra weight so that I would receive a high-quality education and presumably, a better future.

Part of the promise of elite schools is that they are a means to an end, a light at the end of the tunnel for low-income and minority students. Despite what we believe, an elite education does not translate to academic success, especially apparent when contextualized for low-income students of color. Studying student outcomes in selective enrollment schools, the University of Chicago and the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago showcased that minority students from Tier 1 communities [fared worse on standardized exams](https://consortium.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/2018-10/Selective%20Enrollment%20HS%20Snapshot-Feb%202018-Consortium.pdf) than did low-income or minority students attending non-selective enrollment schools. Minority students also found their grades and class rank adversely and [disproportionately affected](http://laschoolreport.com/elite-schools-prized-by-parents-and-politicians-alike-may-actually-hurt-disadvantaged-students-more-than-they-help-new-research-shows/) by the competitive nature of elite high schools. When it comes to college admissions, these individuals find themselves held back.

Absent a thorough reevaluation of classroom structure in selective enrollment schools, Chicago’s elite consortium will continue to disservice low-income and minority students. These schools must make a sustained effort to delve past surface indicators of equality, such as statistics highlighting a growing minority presence, and implement programs that help remedy educational gaps. This includes city-sponsored academic sessions to prepare disadvantaged students for the rigor of selective enrollment schools. In a more immediately practical fashion, school climate teams must foster a broader dialogue on the disadvantages minority and low-income students face, allowing students to become empowered and not inhibited by their own experiences.

Over the past four years, I’d struggled to reconcile these issues of economic and racial disparities into a single concrete solution - ultimately adopting the same cynicism that leaves our schools unequal. Graduation, however, seemed to rekindle this discussion.

On the cusp of new beginnings, I left the buzz of my classmates and their parents for the dewy embrace of a city night, a rare lull for introspection. I thought less of the festivities and more of the dire implications behind my diploma. It shouted privilege, embodied four years of challenging a system poised against me, and reignited my gratitude for the educational opportunities I had been afforded in the most formative years of my life. I was lucky.

But not everyone is.