

AUDIT REPORT

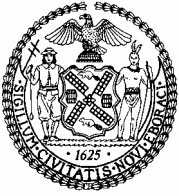


CITY OF NEW YORK
OFFICE OF THE COMPTROLLER
BUREAU OF MANAGEMENT AUDIT
WILLIAM C. THOMPSON, JR., COMPTROLLER

Audit of the Department of Education's Administration of the High School Admission Process

MD05-064A

April 12, 2006



THE CITY OF NEW YORK
OFFICE OF THE COMPTROLLER
1 CENTRE STREET
NEW YORK, N.Y. 10007-2341

WILLIAM C. THOMPSON, JR.
COMPTROLLER

To the Citizens of the City of New York

Ladies and Gentlemen:

In accordance with the Comptroller's responsibilities contained in Chapter 5, §93, of the New York City Charter, my office has audited the Department of Education's (DOE's) administration of the high school admission process.

Entrance into a City high school is guaranteed to all students who are City residents and meet eighth or ninth grade promotion standards. We audit City activities such as this to ensure that they are operating fairly, accurately, and in the best interest of the public.

The results of our audit, which are presented in this report, have been discussed with DOE officials, and their comments have been considered in preparing this report. Their complete written response is attached to this report.

I trust that this report contains information that is of interest to you. If you have any questions concerning this report, please e-mail my audit bureau at audit@comptroller.nyc.gov or telephone my office at 212-669-3747.

Very truly yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "William C. Thompson, Jr.".

William C. Thompson, Jr.

WCT/EC

Report: MD05-064A
Filed: April 12, 2006

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The City of New York
Office of the Comptroller
Bureau of Management Audit

**Audit of the Department of Education's
Administration of the High School
Admission Process**

MD05-064A

AUDIT REPORT IN BRIEF

This audit evaluated the Department of Education's (DOE's) administration of the high school admission process. Specifically, we focused on: whether the high school admission process in the middle schools was consistent with DOE procedures; whether middle school guidance counselors carried out their responsibilities in the process adequately; and whether DOE-reported student high school selection and placement data was valid.

Audit Findings and Conclusions

Overall, we found that DOE officials are administering the high school admission process according to DOE procedures. Deadlines are established for each stage of the process, meetings are held between DOE officials and representatives of the applications-processing vendor to discuss issues that arise, and training is provided to middle school guidance counselors on their role in the admission process, although the training could be improved. In addition, DOE regional offices hold regular meetings with guidance counselors to discuss the meeting of deadlines and any other admission issues.

The records of the guidance counselors at the middle schools we visited indicated that they met with students and their parents in the students' final year of middle school to familiarize them with the high school directories and the application process. The guidance counselors we interviewed also attended high school fairs and open school nights and assisted students in filling out the high school applications; and they reviewed the completed application forms to ensure that students met the eligibility criteria of the high school programs they selected on the form. However, the middle school guidance counselors and principals we interviewed were unclear about how the various methods of high school student selection worked, indicating that their effectiveness in carrying out their responsibilities during the application process could be improved with additional training.

Overall, we reviewed 184 applications for the 31 sampled middle schools, encompassing 2,208 total possible high school choices, and compared the hard copy applications to the electronic data recorded in the High School Application Processing System (HSAPS). For 13 (42%) schools, all the high school choices on the 77 applications reviewed matched the

corresponding information in HSAPS. For 14 (45%) schools, each had only one application (total of 14 out of 85 applications) where some high school program choices did not match the information in HSAPS. The remaining four schools (13%) each had at least two applications (total of 11 out of 22 applications) that did not fully match the available choices listed in HSAPS. Four of these 11 applications had only one high school program choice that did not match. In total, 2,081 (94%) of the 2,208 total possible high school choices available that were listed on the student applications matched the corresponding information in HSAPS.

DOE managers responsible for oversight of the high school admissions process stated that HSAPS was designed to allow guidance counselors the flexibility of entering changes directly in the electronic system as applications are reviewed with students and parents. Consequently, one should not expect that the high school choices reflected on the hard copy application would match exactly with HSAPS in every case.

Although the data discrepancies we describe were not widespread and generally could be expected, we could not determine whether the discrepancies resulted from proactive changes made by guidance counselors or data entry errors, because HSAPS allowed a change simply to override and delete the prior entry without documenting the change. DOE officials stated that they recognize the advantages to be gained from modifying HSAPS so that all data that is entered in HSAPS is maintained in the system, even if certain information is later changed. They have stated that steps have been taken to effect that enhancement.

We also tested whether the high school indicated as the match in HSAPS was the high school in which the student was actually enrolled for the 2005-2006 School Year, based on the records in the ATS system. We found that 156 (85% percent) of the 184 students in the sample had enrolled in the matched school. The remaining 28 (15%) students had not enrolled in the matched high school; however, the differences were not related to the reliability of HSAPS data but rather resulted from personal circumstances, including the family's moving, the student declining the offer, the student successfully appealing the initial decision, and the student remaining in the ninth grade.

In addition, during our visits to the 12 middle schools, we found that High School Directories were not delivered to schools on a timely basis; and there was confusion amongst guidance counselors and principals regarding the student selection methods used by the high schools.

Audit Recommendations

Based on our findings, we make three recommendations. DOE should:

- Require that documentation be kept of any changes made to HSAPS computer data after the student application data is initially entered.
- Ensure that the High School Directories are delivered on a timely basis
- Ensure that the guidance counselors and principals have a thorough understanding of the high school selection methods.

INTRODUCTION

Background

The Department of Education (DOE) provides primary and secondary education to more than one million New York City (City) students. The school system is organized into 10 regions, each of which includes approximately 130 schools.

Each year, about 100,000 students apply to the City's public high schools. All students who are City residents and meet eighth or ninth grade promotion standards are guaranteed entrance into a City high school. As part of the Chancellor's Children First Initiative, DOE made changes to its high school admission process for the 2004-2005 School Year. In the past, students selected five high schools (not including their zoned high school) when completing their high school applications. If not accepted by any of their selected five high schools, students were automatically assigned to their zoned school.

Beginning with the 2004 entering class, however, students complete high school applications by ranking in order of preference up to 12 high school programs—a high school may offer several programs. Students are no longer automatically assigned to their zoned high schools. If students wish to attend their zoned high school, they must list one of that school's programs as a choice on their applications. Usually high school programs focus on a specific theme or area of interest. Students may select programs offered at 12 different schools or several programs in one school to reach their 12 choices. Students are matched to their highest ranked school program that has in turn ranked them for admission.

Although the admission criteria for schools vary, they fall under six main selection method categories:

Educational Option Programs: These programs are designed to allow students of all achievement levels entrance into a high school program. Students are selected to attend these schools based upon a statistical distribution that is determined by standardized reading test scores from the seventh grade. The process allows high school personnel to select 50 percent of their students; a computer randomly selects the other 50 percent. Students who scored in the top two percent of the seventh grade standardized test and who rank this program as their first choice are guaranteed admission.

Audition Programs: Admission requires that students demonstrate proficiency in the specific area of the chosen program. For example, if a student auditions for a dance program, the student may have to prepare a dance routine as part of the audition. Only applicants who are ranked for admission by the school will gain admission.

Test Programs: Students are required to take the Specialized High School Admissions Test for entrance to one of the six specialized high schools.¹ Student acceptance is based on test results and the student's priority order for the specialized schools. Students rank their choices of specialized high schools on the day of the exam. They may still select up to 12 high school programs during the application process.

Screened Programs: These programs admit students based on varying criteria such as academic achievement, attendance, and test scores. The criteria vary from school to school. Only applicants who are ranked for admission by the school will gain admission.

Unscreened Programs: A computer randomly selects students for acceptance into the program. Many of the unscreened programs require parent-student participation and attendance at an orientation session that is included in the selection process.

Zoned Programs: These are high schools that give priority access to students from specific neighborhoods. Students who wish to attend their zoned high school are guaranteed admission if they enter it as a choice.

Since December 1, 2001, Spherion Atlantic Enterprises LLC–Technology Group (Spherion) has been under contract with DOE to process high school applications. The vendor prepares student application forms for submission to students, including entering student data, such as grades and attendance records, into its system and onto each student's application. Spherion, upon completion of data entry, provides on-line applicant information to the high schools, based on student choices but not indicating the applicant's rank order of the school, receives the resulting student-admission rankings from the high schools, runs the matching algorithm, sends the match letters to students, and provides the final student rosters.

The high school selection and admission process begins with students receiving the *Directory of New York City Public High Schools* (High School Directory) during October of their final year in middle school. The directory has information on each of the City's high schools, such as eligibility requirements, high school student selection methods, and school program descriptions. In addition, some schools list their latest Regents examination performance and graduation rates. Middle school students and their parents are encouraged to learn about the City's different high school programs, to read the directory, to meet with the guidance counselor, and to attend high school fairs, open houses, and parent workshops.

In October 2004, the middle school students receive a high school admission application from their school guidance counselor. The application allows students to apply for up to 12 different high school programs. These choices must be listed in order of student preference. The application also contains sections where a student can note if they want to apply for one of the

¹ The Specialized High Schools are: Bronx High School of Science; Brooklyn Technical High School; High School for Mathematics, Science and Engineering at City College; High School of American Studies at Lehman College; Queens High School for the Sciences at York College; and Stuyvesant High School.

six specialized high schools that require the Specialized High Schools Admissions Test, or if they want to apply to any of LaGuardia High School's six performing arts programs that require an audition.

Completed applications must be signed by the student and parent before being submitted to the school guidance counselor for processing in December. Guidance counselors review the completed high school admission applications for accuracy and either enter the applications information on-line into the High School Application Processing System (HSAPS) or send it to Spherion for data entry if they do not have the time to enter the applications on-line within the established deadline.

Student applications are processed and made available on-line to the high schools by Spherion. Each high school has a committee that evaluates all applicants when warranted by the selection method. The committee ranks the students who applied to their school or programs and makes recommendations for admission. Neither the student nor the school is aware of the other's ranking. Each student receives one school match: the student's highest ranked school or program that has also ranked the student for admission.

The matching process is done in three rounds:

Round One. This is referred to as the Specialized High School Round. Only students who receive an offer by a specialized high school are informed. A student who receives a specialized school offer must accept or decline by the established deadline or it is rescinded.

Round Two. This is referred to as the Main Round and includes all students except those who have accepted in the Specialized High School Round.

Round Three. This is referred to as the Supplementary Round. Students not matched during Round Two have another opportunity to request up to 12 new choices for Round Three. The process will try to match every student with the highest ranked school on their application. Those students who are not matched to one of their choices will be assigned to an available high school as near to their homes as possible. All students are placed by the end of Round Three.

The final determination of a student's enrollment is recorded in DOE's Automate the Schools (ATS) computer system. This system contains student biographical data, as well as student admission, discharge, transfer, attendance, and academic data.

According to information provided by Spherion, 99,421 students participated in the high school admission process during the 2004-2005 School Year. The following is a breakdown of how and when the 99,421 students were placed for admission:

Table 1

High School Placement Process
2004-2005 School Year

Category	Number of Students	Percentage of Students
Total Number of Students Assigned in Round One	5,970	6%
Total Number of Students Assigned in Round Two	74,906	75%
Total Number of Students Assigned in Round Three	18,545*	19%
Total	99,421	100%
Students Placed in Top Three Choices of High School	60,623	61%
Students Placed in Fourth through Twelfth Choices of High School	21,892	22%
Other (e.g., student moved)	16,906	17%
Total	99,421	100%

*Includes the 1,930 students who opted out and were unassigned. Students who opt out may choose to stay in private or parochial schools, may be moving, or may wish to stay in their junior high school for the ninth grade.

As indicated above, for the 2004-2005 School Year, 80,876 (81%) of the 99,421 students who participated in the high school admission process were placed by the end of Round Two. In addition, 60,623 (61%) of these students were placed in one of their top three high school choices.

Objective

The objective of this audit was to evaluate the Department of Education's administration of the high school admission process, specifically:

- whether the high school admission process in the middle schools was consistent with DOE procedures,
- whether middle school guidance counselors carried out their responsibilities in the process adequately, and
- whether DOE-reported student high school selection and placement data was valid.

Scope and Methodology

The scope period of our audit covered students matched to high schools during the 2004-2005 School Year. Our scope period was the first year of the new high school admission

process. We also expanded our scope to review, but not test, the admission procedures for the 2005-2006 School Year to determine whether any changes had been made to the process.

To obtain an understanding of DOE's high school admission process, we interviewed the Chief Executive Officer of Student Enrollment Planning and Operations, as well as other officials of the DOE Student Enrollment division. We also reviewed DOE policies and procedures regarding the high school admission process, as well as its 2004-2005 High School Directory.

To familiarize ourselves with Spherion's role in processing high school applications, we met with Spherion's Managing Director and Delivery Director, and reviewed Spherion's contract. In addition, a review of the Comptroller's Office Omnibus Automated Image Storage and Information System (OAISIS) was performed to verify that DOE's contract with Spherion was registered with the Comptroller's Office.

We reviewed documentation to determine whether Spherion was administering the high school admission and selection process in compliance with its contract. We also reviewed the 2004-2005 School Year minutes of meetings between DOE and Spherion officials and copies of reports DOE requested from Spherion during the 2004-2005 School Year.

We obtained a listing from Spherion of the middle schools in its database and compared those schools with a list of middle schools provided by DOE to determine the completeness of Spherion's information. We then received from Spherion the following data for each of the middle schools:

- Total number of students who participated in the high school admission process.
- Total number of students who were assigned to a high school.
- Total number of students who were placed during the first, second, and third rounds.
- Total number of students who were placed in choices one through twelve, broken down by choice.
- Total number of students placed in the specialized schools.

We analyzed the above information and identified the middle schools with a high percentage of students (at least 60%) not assigned to one of their top three high school program choices when compared to other schools. We met with the principals and guidance counselors at these 12 schools regarding their responsibilities in the high school admission process and reviewed relevant documentation.

At the 12 middle schools, we interviewed each principal and guidance counselor about the high school admission process at their schools to determine whether it was consistent with procedures explained to us by DOE officials. To learn whether guidance counselors met with students and parents regarding the high school application process and tracked their students' progress through the process, we reviewed each guidance counselor's records and logbooks of their meetings with the parents and students.

To determine the validity of the student high school selection and placement data reported by DOE, we randomly selected 31 from the approximately 250 middle schools and then randomly selected six high school applications from each school. We reviewed a total of 184 student high school applications.² We determined whether the high school choices listed on the applications matched the information that was entered in HSAPS during the 2004-2005 School Year. We also determined whether the high school program to which the student was matched as indicated in HSAPS was in fact the high school program in which the student was enrolled the following September, as recorded in the ATS system.

It should be noted that we did not test the accuracy of the ATS database system, which records a great variety of student information, nor did we test high school admission committee compliance with established criteria in selecting students for admission, since such selections were outside the scope of our audit.

Our audit was conducted in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards (GAGAS) and included tests of the records and other auditing procedures considered necessary. The audit was performed in accordance with the City Comptroller's audit responsibility set forth in Chapter 5, §93, of the New York City Charter.

DOE Response

The matters covered in this report were discussed with DOE officials during and at the conclusion of this audit. A preliminary draft report was sent to DOE officials and discussed at an exit conference held on January 9, 2006. On January 20, 2006, we submitted a draft report to DOE officials with a request for comments. We received a written response from DOE on February 23, 2006. DOE officials agreed with the audit's findings and recommendations, stating, "DOE has already made the suggested improvements."

The full text of DOE's comments is included as an addendum to this report.

² Inadvertently, four applications for one school, five applications for a second school, and seven applications for a third school were sent to us.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, we found that DOE officials are administering the high school admission process according to DOE procedures. Deadlines are established for each stage of the process, meetings are held between DOE and Spherion officials to discuss issues that arise, and training is provided to middle school guidance counselors on their role in the admission process, although it could be improved. In addition, DOE regional offices hold regular meetings with guidance counselors to discuss the meeting of deadlines and any other admission issues.

The records of the guidance counselors at the middle schools we visited indicated that they met with students and their parents in the students' final year of middle school to familiarize them with the high school directories and the application process. Most of the guidance counselors began these meetings while the students were in the seventh grade and initiated some meetings with students in the sixth grade. The guidance counselors we interviewed also attended high school fairs and open school nights and assisted students in filling out the high school applications; and they reviewed the completed application forms to ensure that students met the eligibility criteria of the high school programs they selected on the form. However, the middle school guidance counselors and principals we interviewed were unclear about how the various methods of high school student selection worked, indicating that their effectiveness in carrying out their responsibilities during the application process could be improved.

Overall, we reviewed 184 applications for the 31 sampled middle schools, encompassing 2,208 total possible high school choices, and compared the hard copy applications to the electronic data recorded in HSAPS. For 13 (42%) schools, all the high school choices on the 77 applications reviewed matched the corresponding information in HSAPS. For 14 (45%) schools, each had only one application (total of 14 out of 85 applications) where some high school program choices did not match the information in HSAPS. The remaining four schools (13%) each had at least two applications (total of 11 out of 22 applications) that did not fully match the available choices listed in HSAPS. Four of these 11 applications had only one high school program choice that did not match. In total, 2,081 (94%) of the 2,208 total possible high school choices available that were listed on the student applications matched the corresponding information in HSAPS.

DOE managers responsible for oversight of the high school admissions process stated that HSAPS was designed to allow guidance counselors the flexibility of entering changes directly in the electronic system as applications are reviewed with students and parents. Consequently, one should not expect that the high school choices reflected on the hard copy application would match exactly with HSAPS in every case.

Although the data discrepancies we describe were not widespread and generally could be expected, we could not determine whether the discrepancies resulted from proactive changes made by guidance counselors or data entry errors, because HSAPS allowed a change simply to override and delete the prior entry without documenting the change. DOE officials stated that they recognize the advantages to be gained from modifying HSAPS so that all data that is entered in HSAPS is maintained in the system, even if certain information is later changed. They

have stated that steps have been taken to effect that enhancement in addition to making the following improvements during the 2005-2006 School Year.

During the 2005-2006 School Year, the following improvements were made to HSAPS:

- The computer system prompts the user when a student is ineligible for a high school program because it is restricted to students in another borough.
- Safeguards were implemented to prompt the computer user when incorrect school program codes are entered. During the previous year, guidance counselors were able to enter the wrong code and proceed to the next computer input screen without the error being detected.
- The computer identifies programs available in the Supplementary Round or schools that are closed to additional student admissions.
- The computer system lists the high school as well as the program code to ensure that the correct information is entered by guidance counselors.
- The computer system data presentation is better organized. The students are listed in alphabetical order, and their final grades from the previous year are also posted in the computer system.
- Guidance counselors stated that it is now easier to gain access to the computer system and that there were fewer instances of the system “freezing.”

We also tested whether the high school indicated as the match in HSAPS was the high school in which the student was actually enrolled for the 2005-2006 School Year, based on the records in the ATS system. We found that 156 (85% percent) of the 184 students in the sample had enrolled in the matched school. The remaining 28 (15%) students had not enrolled in the matched high school; however, the differences were not related to the reliability of HSAPS data but rather resulted from personal circumstances, including the family’s moving, the student declining the offer, the student successfully appealing the initial decision, and the student remaining in the ninth grade.

In addition, during our visits to the 12 middle schools, we found that High School Directories were not delivered to schools on a timely basis; and there was confusion amongst guidance counselors and principals regarding the student selection methods used by the high schools. These issues are discussed in the following sections of the report.

Changes to Student Data in HSAPS Not Documented

HSAPS allows changes to data in its system to override and delete the prior entry without documenting the change. Therefore, we could not determine whether discrepancies found

between high school choice information shown on student applications and the data entered in HSAPS were from changes made by guidance counselors or by data entry errors.

Four of the 31 sampled middle schools had at least two student applications in which some of the high school program choices indicated did not match the choices in HSAPS. Some schools had only one high school program choice on an application that did not match HSAPS. However, on some applications none of the school programs chosen by the student matched those in HSAPS data. For example, the Ella Baker School in Manhattan had four applications that indicated 1-12 high school choices that did not match those on HSAPS. For one of these applications, seven choices listed were not shown on HSAPS; and the order of the school choices that did match the choices on HSAPS was reversed, thus incorrectly reflecting the student's preferences. For another application, a comparison of school program choices in the application with those in HSAPS revealed that HSAPS listed 12 entirely different school choices.

DOE officials stated that cases in which the choices listed on a student's application did not match the information shown on HSAPS were caused by changes made by students and guidance counselors after the initial application information was entered. They also stated that HSAPS was designed to allow guidance counselors the flexibility of entering changes directly in the electronic system as applications are reviewed with students and parents. Consequently, one should not expect that the high school choices reflected on the hard copy application would match exactly with HSAPS in every case.

HSAPS is an online computer system; changes made to its information are not required to be documented. Although, in some cases we saw that the changes made to information in the system were also indicated on the student's application, in the majority of cases they were not. As a result, we could not verify that the discrepancies were merely undocumented changes agreed to by the students.

We concluded that these types of data discrepancies were not widespread occurrences and generally could be expected; as stated previously, 2,081 (94%) of the 2,208 total possible high school choices indicated on the applications matched the information in HSAPS. However, considering the results at the above-cited four schools, DOE needs to ensure that changes made to HSAPS computer data after it is entered are documented. At the exit conference, DOE officials stated that they have taken steps to ensure that all data that is entered in HSAPS is maintained in the system, even if certain information is later changed.

Recommendation

1. DOE should require that documentation be kept of any changes made to HSAPS computer data after the student application data is initially entered.

DOE Response: "This recommendation had been implemented for the 2005-2006 School Year.

“The DOE had recognized that the High School Admission Process System (‘HSAPS’) required the ability to track changes made to students’ applications on line and, accordingly, created an appropriate enhancement to that system. Currently, Office of Student Enrollment, Planning and Operations staff can view all data entries for any applicant and re-create the application in the event that this is needed, a tool that is particularly useful in the event of an appeal of the placement.

“In addition, upon any submission (entering, changing, deleting choices), a receipt is automatically generated for the guidance counselor to print and give to the parent. During all professional development and computer workshops it is suggested to counselors that they duplicate the receipt and keep one for filing purposes. This receipt guarantees that both parents and counselors are able to access the chain of data entry events that result in a completed application.”

High School Directories Not Delivered to Schools on Time

Nearly all of the middle schools that we visited experienced delays or problems in receiving High School Directories for the 2004-2005 and 2005-2006 School Years.

High School Directories list all of the available high schools, their programs, the school program code to be entered on the applications, and the criteria used by the high schools for selecting students. The schools receive two types of directories: English-language and bilingual directories.

Schools received the English-language directories in mid to late October. Some schools did not receive the directories until the beginning of November, and then only after school officials had made numerous phone calls to DOE to notify them of the problem. Such late delivery of the directories gave students only four to six weeks to review the directories and make their high school selections before applications were to be submitted to their guidance counselors at the beginning of December.

School officials complained that when they did receive the directories, they did not receive an adequate number. There was a bigger problem in receiving the bilingual directories, which were delivered even later than the English-language directories or in some cases, not at all. One school, with 300 bilingual students in the eighth grade, did not receive the bilingual directories until some time in November.

In many instances, school officials stated that they were forced to borrow both English-language and bilingual directories from neighboring schools or to travel to DOE headquarters in Manhattan to pick up the directories. A guidance counselor at one school that never received the High School Directories for the 2005-2006 School Year told us that he had called DOE to report the problem and was told by DOE officials that they “had to get back to him.” A week later, DOE officials called to let him know that he would have to contact other schools to inquire whether they had any extra copies of the directories. The guidance counselor stated that he had a difficult time finding enough directories because many of the schools that he called also did not

receive copies of the directories or did not have enough of them. Another school official complained that the school received the directories only after the school fairs had taken place, making it that much more difficult for the students who attended the fairs to be well enough informed to ask relevant questions of the various high school representatives.

At the exit conference, DOE officials cited a number of changes that they initiated subsequent to our audit period. Officials stated that the Office of Student Enrollment Planning and Operations had the High School Directories distributed to middle schools in June 2005 for students entering high school during the 2006-2007 School Year. Receiving directories in June provided families with more time to research schools, to travel over the summer to those high schools being considered, and to be better prepared when attending Citywide and borough High School fairs in the fall. Officials also stated that directories were distributed in June 2005 to Regional Offices to be available upon request; high schools received directories at the end of August or early September for the 2006-2007 School Year. The Citywide High School fair was held on September 17-18, 2005 and borough fairs were held on October 15-16, 2005. According to officials, directories were also available at the fairs.

Recommendation

2. DOE should ensure that the High School Directories are delivered on a timely basis.

DOE Response: “The improvement suggested in the recommendation has been implemented already.”

Confusion amongst Guidance Counselors and Principals Regarding High School Selection Methods

The middle school guidance counselors and principals we interviewed during our school visits were unclear about how the various methods of high school student selection worked, indicating that their effectiveness in carrying out their responsibilities during the application process could be improved. An understanding of these methods is essential if these officials are to assist students in making informed decisions when filling out the applications.

Each of the guidance counselors and principals whom we interviewed offered us a different interpretation of the six selection methods. Some guidance counselors and principals thought that for all selection methods the computer randomly selected 50 percent of the students and the high schools randomly selected 50 percent of the students; however, this is the case only for the Educational Option programs. Most of the guidance counselors were unable to tell us which of the selection methods, if any, required interviews and when required, whether the interviews were conducted before or after the student is accepted by the school. One principal even added a seventh selection method, the “general selection process,” although the principal was not able to explain it to us.

Guidance counselors and principals should have a thorough understanding of high school selection methods so that they can be of greater assistance to their students.

Recommendation

3. DOE officials should ensure that the guidance counselors and principals have a thorough understanding of the high school selection methods.

DOE Response: “This recommendation has been implemented already during the 2004-05 year with annual improvements.”

Auditor Comment: As previously stated, our interviews with the guidance counselors and principals during the 2004-2005 School Year revealed that they were unclear regarding the various methods pertaining to the high school student selection process.



THE NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

JOEL I. KLEIN, *Chancellor*

ADDENDUM

Page 1 of 3

LaVerne Evans Srinivasan, Deputy Chancellor of Operations and Planning

OFFICE OF THE CHANCELLOR

52 Chambers Street – New York, NY 10007

February 22, 2006

Gayle Horwitz
Deputy Comptroller's Chief of Staff
The City of New York
Office of the Comptroller
One Centre Street
New York, NY 10007-2341

Re: Draft Audit Report on DOE's
Administration of the High
School Admission Process
(MD05-064A)

Dear Ms. Horwitz:

This is to address the findings and recommendations of the City of New York Office of the Comptroller Bureau of Management ("Comptroller") Draft Audit Report ("Report") titled "Audit of the Department of Education's Administration of the High School Admission Process."

At the outset, the New York City Department of Education ("DOE") thanks Comptroller staff for the courtesies extended during audit field work and the opportunities provided for responding to and clarifying preliminary findings. Further, we note that the findings are positive on the whole, a point that is particularly significant in view of the fact that the scope of audit involved students matched to high schools for the School Year 2004-2005 - the first year of implementation of the new high schools admissions process. Nonetheless, we are responding to the Report recommendations inasmuch as the DOE has already made the suggested improvements and it is important to acknowledge and explain these efficiencies.

Recommendation #1 – DOE should require that documentation be kept of any changes made to HSAPS computer data after the student application data are initially entered.

This recommendation had been implemented for the 2005-06 school year.

The DOE had recognized that the High School Admissions Process System ("HSAPS") required the ability to track changes made to students' applications on line and, accordingly, created an appropriate enhancement to that system. Currently, Office of Student Enrollment, Planning and Operations staff can view all data entries for any applicant and re-create the application in the event that this is needed, a tool that is particularly useful in the event of an appeal of the placement.



THE NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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In addition, upon any submission (entering, changing, deleting choices), a receipt is automatically generated for the guidance counselor to print and give to the parent. During all professional development and computer workshops it is suggested to counselors that they duplicate the receipt and keep one for filing purposes. This receipt guarantees that both parents and counselors are able to access the chain of data entry events that result in a completed application.

Recommendation #2 - DOE should ensure that the High School Directories are delivered on a timely basis.

This was implemented in June 2005.

The recommendation was based largely on findings that concerned the delivery of the 2004-2005 Directory of the New York City Public High Schools (Directory) for distribution to students who would be entering high school beginning September 2005 (School Year 2005-2006). The improvement suggested in the recommendation has been implemented already.

Historically, the timing of the delivery of Directories was determined by the dates of the start of the school year and the High School Fair, which served as the kick-off event for the high schools admissions process. In School Year 2004-2005, adhering to this timeline, the 2004-2005 Directories were distributed in October 2004 because the school year started late and the fairs were not held until October 16th.

In June 2005, before the summer recess, public middle schools and DOE Regional Offices received the 2005-2006 Directory along with *Making Choices: A High School Admissions Prep Book*, a companion workbook intended to help students navigate the directory. These publications were for the benefit of students who would be part of the entering class in School Year 2006-2007.

Until recently, Directories had not been available to students before the start of their eighth grade. The current Directory distribution timeline reflects a bold and innovative improvement to the overall process. We not only changed the timeline, but worked with a new carrier to ensure that Directories were in the middle schools before the seventh graders' summer recess.

This new delivery schedule was developed consistent with our goal of providing information to students and their parents early in their middle school careers. In the spring of 2004, we began holding workshops for sixth and seventh graders. We repeated those sessions in the spring of 2005. These sessions were added to our annual workshop series of thirty (30) Information Sessions held in October and November throughout the city for 7th and 8th grade students and their parents. In addition, twenty sessions were held for parents through Community Education Councils and various association meetings, including PTA and leadership teams.



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We also launched a new 2005 Summer Tutorial Series of five (5) evening sessions for prospective 8th grade students and families discussing *Making Choices: Finding the Schools That Are Right For You*.

In furtherance of our stated goals, High School Directories will be distributed to middle schools in June 2006 for the class entering high school in School Year 2007-2008.

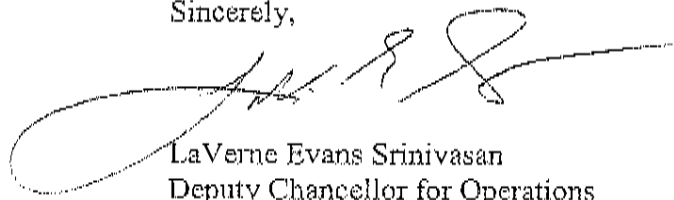
Recommendation #3 – DOE officials should ensure that the guidance counselors and principals have a thorough understanding of the high school selection methods.

This recommendation had been implemented already during the 2004-05 year with annual improvements.

Professional development strategies have evolved over time to meet the varying needs in the field. Specifically, workshops are held annually at each Region for all 8th and 9th grade guidance counselors. Information includes an overview of the high school admissions process; discussion of each of the selection methods; guidance strategies to assist students and parents with choosing programs; and training on HSAPS. Each workshop includes strategies customized to that particular Region's enrollment issues. Additional workshops on the use of HSAPS are held at computer centers for the guidance counselors in each Region. Similar workshops are offered for high school principals and their staff. Parent coordinators and attendance teachers, as well as Regional personnel, also have been trained on various facets of the admissions process.

In closing, we are pleased that our efforts to create and support a reliable and dynamic process to match students to high schools have been acknowledged in the Comptroller's Report. Although we had already implemented the Comptroller's recommendations, we welcome the interest and assure the Comptroller and public that it is our intention to continue to monitor, assess and, as needed, improve the admissions process.

Sincerely,



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