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TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO APPEARS ON NPR'S MORNING EDITION

Steve Inskip: This next story underlines the challenge of diversity and the complexity of getting it right. Bill de Blasio, the Mayor of New York City, wants to change the way that students are admitted the city's most elite public high schools. De Blasio wants to admit more people of color but not all people of color agree with his plans for some of the most famous public schools in the country.

Mayor Bill de Blasio: They are really the jewels in the crown of public education in New York City. They include Stuyvesant High School, Brooklyn Tech, Bronx Science.

Inskip: Students are admitted to these schools if they score highly on a single test and that's what the Mayor wants to change. He wants to broaden the criteria to include another test as well as kids' performance in middle school. The proposal has met with a passionate response. De Blasio has been accused of watering down the standards, though the Mayor argues he's getting the standards right for schools where the stakes are high.

Mayor: They literally are the breeding ground for the future leaders of this city and even in some cases of the nation. Eric Holder and David Axelrod came out of Stuyvesant High School, for example.

Inskip: Former Attorney General and former advisor to President Obama.

Mayor: Exactly right. But what's happened over the years is they've become more and more exclusionary. Stuyvesant High School in its last admissions process only admitted ten African American students for an incoming class of almost 1,000. I mean that's really the most painful example of what's gone wrong with these amazing institutions and it speaks to a larger reality of the need to create diversity and opportunity in all public schools and particularly in our strongest public schools.

Inskip: Although, there's a dilemma here because it's not the people of color in the broadest sense that are excluded. It's something like half of the kids admitted to these schools are Asian-American. What's going on?

Mayor: Well, look, let's start with the reality of New York City today. We are a city that's almost two-thirds people of color and you're right that some of the specialized high schools have a very substantial Asian population and also a very strong white population in the schools.

But the problem and the challenge is New York City is majority African-American and Latino. And these schools don't even come close to representing the communities that make up our majority.

Inskeep: Well, why aren't they doing better on the test? Because as some people know, there's been a single test that students are administered and everybody takes the same test.

Mayor: But the problem, in fact, is the test on many levels. The simplest way of saying it Steve – you know the finest universities in this country, graduate schools, no one makes their admissions choices based on a single test. It's an outmoded concept.

What we propose is to look at the grades that students have had over the course of their whole middle school career, to look at their scores that they've had on a variety of State tests on education. But to get away from this notion of a single determinative test – you know high-stakes testing has been very controversial, rightfully, all over the country.

And you know there's a lot of great, talented kids that just don't happen to test well and there's some families who have a lot of resources and focus on test preparation. It's a very skewed dynamic.

Inskeep: So, is this fundamentally an economic issue? You have more affluent kids who might be white or might be Asian and the families have time and they have money for test prep, and black and Latino kids, statistically speaking, would have less of that?

Mayor: I think some of it is an economic reality. I think some of it is the problem of a single test unto itself.

Inskeep: Why don't you just invest in more test preparation for people who need help?

Mayor: Because we don't believe in a single test as a way of making decisions. So, I think the point in this – we can't allow this level of exclusion. It's just not acceptable. It creates kind of a continuity with a broken past that we don't want to allow around here.

The plan that we've put forward, some it is rooted in a great model in the State of Texas, you know the University of Texas system made a decision a few years back to admit the top ten percent of high school classes in the State of Texas –

Inskeep: Sure, wherever you are in Texas, upper class school, lower class area, whatever – if you're in the top ten percent you get into the University of Texas.

Mayor: And it was meant to really provide opportunity to a broader cross-section of Texans. And in many ways I think it's been a great success. That was one of the inspirations for us to say

we want to admit the top kids in each middle school in this city. Right now we have 600 middle schools. Half of them don't send any kids to these specialized high schools. We want every middle school to be represented.

We want to make sure that there's another measure in play which is those State test exams. Everybody takes those. It's a real universal measure but the skew had gotten so great that we couldn't live with it anymore.

Inskeep: Well, there has been so much debate and I want to mention a couple of the things that have been said about this. Jason Riley of the Wall Street Journal writes in that newspaper that this is what happens when you try to reconcile what is irreconcilable – group preferences on the one hand and equal treatment of individuals on the other. Are you going for group preferences here?

Mayor: No, we're talking about the single test problem while we're simultaneously talking about a problem of lack of representation. The fact is that one facilitated the other.

Inskeep: Peter Koo, a City Councilman, made remark that perhaps is familiar to you, that is quite personal. "The Mayor's son just graduated from Brooklyn Tech and got into Yale. Now he wants to stop this and build a barrier to Asian Americans, especially our children."

Mayor: Well, obviously, that's not true. The whole concept here is universality and inclusion. Many, many kids are still going to have an opportunity, from all backgrounds, to go the specialized high schools but lots of other fine high schools.

But I go back to two un-moveable pieces of this equation. We cannot make decisions based on a single test. And two – we cannot have the majority of our people who are black and Latino left out of the equation and that's what's been happening for years and years.

It's not an acceptable situation morally and it does not say to all those kids that they have an equal future.

Inskeep: One other thing – an Asian-American scholar writes in the New York Times that the real problem is there's only a small percentage of schools that are really good. Why isn't everybody having opportunity for an elite school?

Mayor: And I think that is a very fair critique. The larger solution is that parents can look across a whole range of high schools and say, "I'm really satisfied my child will do well there and have a great future." But I don't think it's right to say, well, until we get to that day, let's keep an exclusionary process in place. Unfortunately, in this case we have to walk and chew gum. We have to create more fairness with the best high schools we have today and build a whole set of higher quality high schools going forward.

Inskeep: Mayor Bill de Blasio, thanks very much.

Mayor: Thanks so much, Steve.

Inskip: New York City's Mayor says he can order some changes in the testing process himself but for larger changes he will need the approval of the New York State legislature. Big battle may be ahead.

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