



New York City Comptroller
John C. Liu

NEWS RELEASE

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LIU: HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT SELECTION OFTEN UNFAIR AND ARBITRARY

*Schools Rejected Students Who Should Have Been Considered for
Entrance, Gave Seats to Some Who Didn't Meet Standards, Audit Finds*

NEW YORK, N.Y. — City Comptroller John C. Liu today announced that an audit of the Department of Education’s (DOE’s) high-school placement process determined that the process often reached arbitrary and unfair results: It denied many students an opportunity to be matched to seats in certain highly competitive programs even when the students met all eligibility requirements, while offering seats to other students who had not met the criteria.

“Our audit confirmed what many frustrated parents and students have long suspected: the City’s high-school placement process is often unfair and deeply flawed,” Comptroller Liu said. “Applying to high school is an important and stressful enough experience for students and parents, and it must not be left to a sloppy and random system like the one our audit found. We are pleased that the DOE has agreed to adopt our recommendations to ensure a fairer and sensible system.”

The audit examined student placement for the 2011-12 school year at five schools considered among the most competitive for entrance in their respective boroughs. The schools are Hostos-Lincoln Academy of Science (Bronx), Baruch College Campus HS (Manhattan), Midwood HS Medical Science Institute (Brooklyn), Tottenville HS Science Institute (Staten Island), and Townsend Harris HS Intensive Academic Humanities (Queens).

Students can apply for up to 12 programs, which they rank in their order of preference. The DOE then enters the students’ choices into its Student Enrollment Management System (SEMS). Students who apply to a screened school, like those the audit examined, must meet certain selection criteria in order to be ranked for possible enrollment by the schools.

Screened schools use their own criteria — such as seventh-grade report cards, standardized tests, and attendance records — to screen students. Students who meet the criteria are ranked on a list for possible enrollment, although the DOE does not require screened schools to rank every single student who qualifies because of the overwhelming number of applicants. Finally, SEMS matches students’ preferences against the schools ranking. When a student’s top pick school ranks them high there can a match and the student would be offered a seat at the school.

The five schools received 21,315 applications for 828 seats.

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- 5,702 students appeared to meet the screening criteria.
- The programs ranked 4,075 students.
- The audit found 1,946 unranked students, many of whom actually scored better than those who were ranked.
- 319 (8 percent) of the 4,075 students who the programs ranked appear NOT to have met the criteria. Of these 319 students, 92 were offered seats at the schools, and 60 were enrolled.

**Chart: Questionable Rankings of Students
by the Five Screened Schools**

High School	Total Number of Applicants to Each Program	Available Seat Target for Each Program	# of Eligible Students Who Were Not Ranked	# of Ineligible Students Who Were Ranked
Hostos-Lincoln Academy of Science (Bronx)	2,643	81	803	24
Baruch College Campus High School (Manhattan)	7,712	109	972	8
Midwood High School, Medical Science Institute (Brooklyn)	4,720	300	93	284
Tottenville High School, Science Institute (Staten Island)	952	68	74	3
Townsend Harris High School, Intensive Academic Humanities (Queens)	5,288	270	4	0
Total	21,315	828	1,946	319

Other Findings

Comptroller Liu’s audit also determined that:

- The five programs failed to maintain adequate records. Auditors asked the schools to produce documentation explaining the rankings of certain applicants, but only one school, Townsend Harris HS Intensive Academic Humanities, provided any records documenting its decisions. The other four had not kept such records, as they are required to do by the New York State Education Department.
- DOE does not require high schools to have written procedures to explain the methodologies they use to rank students. For example, Midwood HS Medical Science Institute states that students need report card grades of 90-100 in seventh-grade English, math, social studies, and science classes, but does not let students and parents know that it gives the math and science grades greater weight than English and social studies grades, which is part of its ranking formula.
- The DOE did not oversee the placement process in order to ensure that it ranked students fairly and consistently.
- Middle schools are not keeping high-school applications, as required. The DOE could provide student applications for only 14 out of 150 randomly selected students, so there was no assurance that guidance counselors accurately recorded students’ choices.

Response

The DOE generally agreed with the audit's nine recommendations. It agreed to:

- Review the ranking practices at the four schools the audit report determined had questionable rankings in order to ensure that the schools are following their own published screens and DOE policy for student selection.
- Require high schools with screened programs to document their ranking formula and processes.
- Review screened schools' ranking criteria, especially for those schools in high demand, in order to ensure that they are ranking students fairly and consistently.
- Ensure schools keep records of their ranking of the students applying to their programs, as required by the State Education Department.

Background

The DOE manages two different high-school placement processes. The first, known as the high-school application process, is for eighth-grade students applying for the ninth grade and first-time ninth graders applying for the tenth grade. Schools in the application process select applicants by using one of seven admission methods: (1) test, (2) audition, (3) educational option, (4) limited unscreened, (5) screened, (6) unscreened, and (7) zoned. Three-quarters (215,556) of the City's 284,513 high-school students on register as of October 2011 had been placed at their schools through this placement process. Comptroller Liu's audit focused on screened programs because they are one of the most popular for student applicants. For the 2011-2012 school year, 30 percent of the programs chosen by students were screened programs. Screened programs comprised 25 percent of student matches. However, because the schools themselves establish and oversee the ranking criteria and actually rank the students, the screened programs are also especially vulnerable to potential manipulation.

The remaining 68,957 students were placed in their respective high schools through the second process, known as the over-the-counter process, which is for (1) new students, (2) students returning to New York City public schools, and (3) New York City public high school students transferring between high schools.

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