Big Change in Gifted and Talented Testing

By SOPHIA HOLLANDER

A new test for admission into New York City's gifted and talented program will account for the bulk of a student's score, upending a testing regime that a growing number of children had appeared to master.

In a broader overhaul than previously announced, the Naglieri Nonverbal Ability Test, also known as the NNAT, will count for two-thirds of a student's score, said city officials, who signed a three-year, $5.5 million contract with the testing company Pearson earlier this year. The Otis-Lennon School Ability Test, or OLSAT, which increasing numbers of children had prepared for intensely, will drop to a third of the total from 75%.

City officials hailed the new test as a vast improvement. It relies on abstract spatial thinking and largely eliminates language, even from the instructions, an approach that officials said better captures intelligence, is more appropriate for the city's multilingual population and is less vulnerable to test preparation.

As a result, they expressed the hope that it would "improve the diversity of students that are recognized as gifted and talented," said Adina Lopatin, the deputy chief academic officer for the city's Department of Education. City officials said they were currently compiling data on the program's racial breakdown but students who qualified tended to be concentrated in wealthier districts. Areas such as the South Bronx produced few candidates.

Some experts have raised doubts about the NNAT's ability to create a racially balanced class. Several studies show the test produces significant scoring gaps between wealthier white and Asian children and their poor, minority counterparts.

"The NNAT is advertised as the gold standard ticket that will solve all your problems," said Carol Carman, associate professor in the School of Education at the University of Houston-Clear Lake who has studied the test. "I'm not sure that any test should advertise itself that way."

Pearson officials didn't respond to a request for comment.

Jack Naglieri, author of the test, said Ms. Carman's study was "fraught with problems."
"There have been people who have taken pot shots and used bad research to say I'm wrong," Mr. Naglieri said. "The goal of my test is to give everyone an equal opportunity to do well."

The shift marks the latest attempt by city officials to address a seemingly intractable problem: How to create equity in the admissions process for its gifted and talented program, which begins in kindergarten and goes through third grade. It is a challenge that persists throughout the system and culminated at the high school level last month. The NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund filed a federal civil rights complaint against the city's Specialized High School Admissions test, which decides admissions to elite programs such as Stuyvesant.

"I think similar principles apply in the gifted and talented process," said Damon Hewitt, director of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund's education practice. He said the group was considering whether to investigate the city's gifted and talented admissions.

Enrollment in the gifted and talented program is a coveted prize, providing advanced classes for the select group of children who qualify. Competition for the limited number of spots has become fierce since the city began using standardized tests as the sole criteria for admission in 2007-08. Parents who can afford test preparation have flocked to companies that provide classes and tutoring, spending hundreds and even thousands of dollars.

The number of students applying for the coveted spots has skyrocketed: Last year, nearly 5,000 children qualified for a spot in a gifted and talented kindergarten program by scoring in the 90th percentile or above, more than double the total four years ago.

More than half of those students qualified for the five elite citywide programs by scoring in the 97th percentile or higher. Many were destined for disappointment: Those schools only had about 400 kindergarten seats.

Using tests for admissions was supposed to make the system "equitable across the city" and provide consistent standards, Ms. Lopatin said. Previously, each of the city's 32 districts had developed its own admissions process.

The NNAT is marketed by Pearson as a "culturally neutral evaluation." But this claim can be misleading, some experts warned.

In 2009, Ms. Carman published a study of 2,000 children in Texas that found that non-Asian minority students scored six IQ points lower, and poor children scored eight points lower. Those who fell into both categories scored nearly 14 points lower. "That's a big problem," she said.

The test has since recalibrated its scoring and offers a second edition, NNAT2. But questions remain.

The abstract nature of the exam actually makes it more susceptible to test preparation, some argue. On the NNAT, often students "don't understand what they're supposed to do," said David Lohman, a professor of educational psychology at the University of Iowa and the co-author of a rival test, called the CogAT.

The NNAT is significantly harder than the tests city has previously used, with some questions confusing even for adults, tutoring companies reported. "We've known for some time that, on these sorts of tests, understanding what to do is half the battle," Mr. Lohman said. "You solve one problem and create another."

Mr. Naglieri dismissed the idea that preparation could unduly reward students on his test.
"You're not going to be able to solve a really hard question on my test because you know how it works," he said. "You have to intellectually manage the demands of the task."

Tutoring companies across the city have reported a frenzy since the NNAT was announced, with families signing children up for private tutoring sessions, enrolling them in multiweek boot camp classes, and buying test preparation booklets in droves—even though the test won't be administered until January.

Parent Lesia Sopinka said she had already begun tutoring sessions for her son—even though, at 3 1/2 years old, he won't take the test until next year.

"I don't want my child to be scared—to throw him in the test and he doesn't know what's going on," Ms. Sopinka said.

The new test "has sort of thrown everyone into a tailspin," said Janet Roberts, the director of education at Aristotle Circle, a tutoring and consulting firm.

She estimated that they had sold out of the NNAT test prep book (retailing for $149) four times faster than any of their previous publications.

Bige Doruk, the founder of Bright Kids NYC, another tutoring company, said she had no trouble selling NNAT Boot Camp packages—eight to 10 sessions, plus preparation materials—which start at more than $1,000.

"The anxiety levels are actually quite high," she said, adding that her own 4-year-old daughter had been doing weekly sessions since August. Still, she praised the switch. "I do think it's a better test," she said. "It's more valid—as much as it can be valid for a four year old."

Thus far, efforts to create more parity in the system have been met with skepticism from some quarters and produced little evidence of success. The Bracken School Readiness Assessment—the test being replaced by NNAT—had trouble producing diverse classrooms in the gifted program.

Even the test author agreed it was a poor choice.

"It's not ideal," said Bruce Bracken, noting that his test was designed to identify children who needed help. The test was susceptible to tutoring because its concepts were intended to be taught, he said, adding that he wished the city used the test to help ensure that every student entered kindergarten with a mastery of basic concepts.

Some educators said that as long as standardized tests remained the sole criteria for admissions, little would change.

"They can keep switching tests from now until doomsday and it's not going to make a difference," said James Borland, a professor at Teachers College at Columbia University. "The rationale behind the process is fatally flawed."

Others said that even if they maintained testing, the city could still address other barriers for disadvantaged children. Currently, parents must sign up their children to take the test, screening out those whose families are less engaged or savvy.

"This is willful neglect," said Michael Holzman, a research consultant at the Schott Foundation for Public Education, who recently wrote a study called "A Rotting Apple: Education Redlining in New York City." "This is a problem that could be solved any afternoon Chancellor [Dennis] Walcott wants to solve it."
City officials said they had considered the possibility of extending the test to all children, but found that it would be "a big investment of time and money," Ms. Lopatin said, including cutting into classroom instruction. Instead, she said, they have increased outreach efforts to build awareness, including a screening program in all pre-K classes that identifies possible candidates. They have also reevaluated the kinds of tests they use.

Others said the city isn't doing enough to promote diversity in the gifted program.

"You have to believe that what they're doing is a failure or you have to believe that African-American and Latino kids are less gifted," Mr. Borland said. "One of those has to be true."

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