

Controversies over Public Exam Schools: A Case
Study Of Lowell High School in San Francisco Unified
School District

Madeline Aubry

Senior Comprehensive Project
Occidental College: Department of Urban Environmental Policy
Professor Shamasunder, Professor Rodnyansky

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	3
Abstract	4
Introduction	4
Background	5
<i>High School Application Process</i>	6
<i>Desegregation History in SFUSD</i>	6
Literature Review	8
General Overview	8
<i>Lines of Tension and Controversy over Public exam schools</i>	8
<i>Proponents of Public Exam High Schools</i>	8
<i>Opponents of Public Exam High Schools</i>	8
Critical Topics within the Debate	8
<i>Disagreements over What Public Exam Schools Do</i>	9
<i>The Role of Standardized Testing in Public Exam School Admissions</i>	9
<i>Conversations Regarding Diversity, Elitism, and Racism</i>	10
<i>Anti-Affirmative Action Sentiment: Ho vs. SFUSD and the Brief Removal of Selective Admissions at Lowell</i>	11
<i>Exam Schools and How They Pit Minority Groups Against One Another</i>	12
<i>The Media's Influence on Community Tensions</i>	13
Gaps in Current Literature	14
Research Methodology	14
Interview Findings	15
Contrasting perceptions of the role the entrance exam plays in making Lowell “excellent”	16
<i>The entrance exam at Lowell allows for the school to maintain its rigorous environment for high achieving students</i>	16
<i>The entrance exam at Lowell is a mechanism for sorting students. Lowell is no different than the other public schools other than it predominantly admits grade level students</i>	17
The sorting mechanism of the exam is advantageous to the city and certain families within the district	17
<i>Lowell keeps wealthier families in the district who may otherwise leave the district or attend private school</i>	17
<i>Appealing to white and Asian middle/upper class families</i>	18
Racially based assumptions about schools in San Francisco contribute to their disparities and harm cross-community solidarity	18
Quantitative Data Connections	18
Discussion	20
Recommendations	21
Get rid of the exam, keep the rigor	21
<i>Addressing the question of the exam</i>	21
<i>Implement clear, specific characteristics that make the school specialized</i>	22

<i>Supporting students from lower performing middle schools</i>	22
Rethink tracking methods of students	22
Create a catalog with every school in the district	23
A more equitable funding model: PTSA fundraising	23
Conclusion	24
Limitations	24
Final Thoughts	24
Bibliography	26
Appendix A: Interview Questions	32
Appendix B: Demographics of San Francisco Public High Schools: Average % 2017-2022	
Appendix C: % Qualified for free/reduced lunch by high school : Average % 2017-2022	34
Appendix D: % Cohort Grad Meeting UC/CSU requirements: Average % 2017-2022	35

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As a Lowell High School graduate, this research was born out of a genuine desire to answer my own questions and thoughts about Lowell and SFUSD that I have been pondering and discussing with friends and family for the last eight years. I have struggled to understand my views in this debate, as it is complex and multifaceted. However, this research answered many of my questions. I am happy to say that I have come to conclusions on questions that have puzzled me for a long time.

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Abstract

This research investigates the contentious issue of public exam high schools. Public exam high schools select their student body predominantly through some measure of academic merit. Through a case study of Lowell High School in San Francisco, California, the only public high school in the school district, this research examines the role of selective schools in a district and what their future should look like, as districts strive for educational equity. While debates over their existence and specifically their method of selecting students has gained significant attention locally and nationally, little research has presented detailed solutions to this issue. Based on interviews with San Francisco School Board members and representatives of seven other public schools in the city, as well as through an analysis of publicly available data, this research demonstrates that selective public schools, as currently implemented, have a negative impact on the district, benefiting only a small proportion of the students selected to attend using outdated, biased selection methods. The focus on Lowell High School exposes larger issues of inequality and disparities within the district and support the notion that while specialized high schools can be beneficial, the current selection process relying on exams should be revised or eliminated. The findings highlight false narratives about some of the high schools in the district, leading to the need for a comprehensive catalog of all of the schools. Findings also support the need for a more equitable funding model, specifically in regards to Parent Teacher Student Association (PTSA) funding.

Introduction

Public exam high schools exist all over the country and are a source of controversy. Public exam schools are public high schools that admit students primarily based on merit, through a standardized test, grades, personal statement, or some combination of the three. These schools embody the tension in American democracy between the goal and pursuit of individual achievement versus equality (Finn, Hocket, 2012, p. 9). This differs from zoned public high schools, where attendance is typically based on geography, lottery, and student preference (Finn and Hocket, 2012, p.13). As our country has grown and developed and education has proven to be a large factor in determining earning potential and future options, disagreements over educational policy have become complicated and polarized (Finn and Hocket, 2012, p. 7). These disagreements stem from differing ideas about the purpose of education and how to deal with the inequities that plague our society and the lives of students, many of which are caused or have been exacerbated by the history of segregation in our education system (Probolus-Cedroni, 2022). Students come from different backgrounds, privileges, resources, and support networks, making a single track in education infeasible. This leads to questions over best practices to support students of varying academic readiness. Acknowledging how the history of racism within our country still fuels many of these disparities is an ongoing challenge as approaches don't often directly engage these histories. These complications have led educational policymakers in various directions, including opening up schools focused on specific interests, creating Advanced Placement (AP) courses or college track courses for certain students, and in some cases, creating academically selective public exam schools. These selective schools, though less common than AP courses and college track courses, are still prevalent in our educational system (Finn and Hocket, 2012, p. 10). There are 165 academically selective public high schools in the country, fueling a continuing conversation over the purpose of public schools altogether (Finn and Hocket, 2012, p. 11).

This research explores the future of selective public high schools through a case study of Lowell High School, a selective high school in the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD). Debates about Lowell's admission policies and its existence as a whole have been going on for decades, but have increased in the last few years in tandem with heightened national

conversations around affirmative action. Despite the relative scarcity of selective schools across the country and the fact that a small share of students actually attend one, these schools seem to dominate local conversations about equity within public high school districts, particularly in San Francisco. This research aims to better understand, with a goal of equity, the role they play, the effect they have on their district, the effects these schools have on cross-community solidarity, and, ultimately, the future of public exam schools.

Background

This section briefly provides information about the San Francisco United School District (SFUSD) and Lowell High School (Lowell). SFUSD comprises 18 public high schools. Eleven of these public high schools, including Lowell, are traditional, comprehensive public schools. This research includes these 11 schools, with a primary focus on Lowell, the only public exam school in the district. Lowell, founded in 1856, is ranked as one of the highest performing schools in California and has been recognized as a National Blue Ribbon School four times, a California Distinguished School eight times, and as a Gold Ribbon School once. (Lowell High School, SFUSD). Figure 1 below shows a map of San Francisco, with Lowell High School marked. See Appendix B for demographic information.

Figure 1: Map of San Francisco



 Lowell High School

High School Application Process

For ten of the 11 schools considered in this research, not including Lowell, SFUSD uses a ranked lottery system to assign students to a high school (Apply to SFUSD Schools, SFUSD). SFUSD uses a separate application and selection process for Lowell. While this process has changed over time in an effort to diversify Lowell's student body, it is largely dependent on a student applicant's previous academic work, i.e., grades, as well as standardized test scores. Students coming from public middle schools must submit their 7th and 8th grade scores from the state-administered Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) tests; students coming from alternative or private middle schools, where the SBAC is not administered, take a Lowell-specific entrance exam in 8th grade. Additionally, Lowell utilizes a three-band admissions approach: 70% of students are accepted strictly on the basis of test scores and grades (Band 1); 15% are admitted based on a combination of academic factors plus holistic considerations (Band 2); and the remainder of the students are selected from under-represented middle schools, and have also met academic requirements outlined by Lowell (Band 3) (Applying to Lowell, SFUSD). Band 3 schools are identified as schools that are underrepresented in the last three-year period in terms of student population, number of applicants, and number of admissions. Notably, the list of underrepresented schools also includes private middle schools, where few students choose to attend public high schools. Student socioeconomic status and ethnicity has also been taken into account, though this has varied over the years (Lowell High School Band Summaries for 2023-24 Admissions, 2022).

Desegregation History in SFUSD

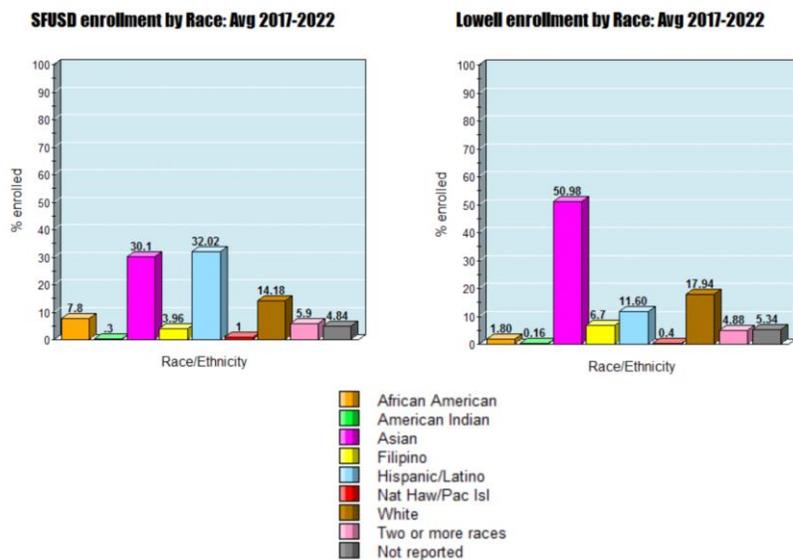
The history of desegregation policy in San Francisco has had important effects on Lowell's admission policies throughout the years. Desegregation advocates have historically identified Lowell as an obstacle in desegregating the school district, due to its merit system seemingly gatekeeping Black and Latino children from attending. The first desegregation effort for San Francisco public schools was the Horseshoe Desegregation Plan from 1971-1978. This plan divided San Francisco into seven zones and used California's state guideline for racial balance which said that any one ethnic group in any one school should not deviate more than 15% from that group's representation in the district as a whole (Ming, 2002, p. 175). The bussing of students out of their neighborhood and into another one was a large aspect of this plan ("Facing Our Past, Changing Our Future: Part II - Five Decades of Desegregation in SFUSD (1971-

Today, SFUSD). The horseshoe desegregation plan ended up capping white and Asian enrollment at desirable schools, which led many white and Chinese American families, in particular, to leave the district. More than 20,000 white students left SFUSD following the implementation of this plan, one of the largest white flights in the country (Facing Our Past, Changing Our Future: Part II - Five Decades of Desegregation in SFUSD (1971-Today, SFUSD). In response to this exodus, SFUSD proposed a new plan called the Educational Redesign plan, which required every school to represent a minimum of four racial/ethnic groups and no one group could take up more than 45% of the whole school (Ming, 2002, p. 175). It also included an Optional Enrollment request, which was granted to many Chinese Americans, allowing them to attend whichever school they wanted. In the early 1980s, the NAACP sued the SFUSD because the schools remained deeply segregated, and the bussing plan predominantly negatively affected Black families in Bayview/Hunters Point whose kids were being bussed to far away neighborhoods. In turn, in 1983, SFUSD implemented a consent decree, with the goal of eliminating segregation in the district's schools. It followed the Educational Redesigns same plan for desegregation that within a school, a minimum of four ethnic/racial groups be represented and that no one group could take up more than 45% of the whole school (Ming, 2002 p. 176). The implementation of the consent decree worked smoothly until 1994, when a group of Chinese American parents filed a lawsuit, *Ho v. SFUSD* (Ming, 2002, p. 176). The lawsuit questioned the legality of the consent decree. It was filed on behalf of Chinese parents, who felt that the racial quota system disproportionately negatively affected their children, denying them access to their first-choice schools. At this point, Chinese Americans had become the largest minority group in San Francisco. They felt the decree unconstitutionally allowed for "less qualified" applicants (generally considered to be Black and Latino students) to take away seats from Asian American students (Ming, 2002, p. 177). Their argument that the system was biased against their children was supported by the fact that, among other things, under the consent decree, Asian students had to score higher on the Lowell admission exam than white students, and both white and Asian students had to score higher than Black and Latino students (Riley, 2021). They felt it was unfair to exclude children from certain schools because of their ethnicity. The case culminated in race being excluded as a quota; a diversity index, which used indicators like mother's education level or socioeconomic status, was used as an alternative, starting in 2002. In 2001, Lowell specifically adopted the three-band admissions system in an effort to

achieve racial balance (Riley, 2021). Aside from a brief two-year period utilizing the lottery system, this three-band method is still utilized.

Figure 2 compares enrollment by race in SFUSD as a whole versus Lowell, as an average over the last 4 years. This graph shows the over representation of Asian and white students at Lowell and the underrepresentation of Latino and African American students (Enrollment Multi-Year Summary by Ethnicity, DataQuest).

Figure 2: SFUSD vs. Lowell enrollment by race/ethnicity



Literature Review

The following literature review examines literature considering public exam schools and debates over their benefits and drawbacks. It provides insight into public exam schools nationally, as well as specifics regarding Lowell High School in San Francisco. This review includes scholarly research, journal articles, and media coverage regarding selective schools. It begins with a general overview of the debate surrounding public exam schools, the two sides to this discussion, and then more specific information about the topics that this debate concerns.

General Overview

Lines of Tension and Controversy over Public exam schools

Controversy over public exam schools at a basic level revolves around disagreements regarding the process of admission to these schools. One group, the proponents, supports utilizing standardized testing methods to accept students into these schools, while the other group, the opponents, sees this method as inequitable and contrary to the goals of public education. Some opponents call for the restructuring of the exam, while others call for the elimination of public exam schools altogether. Communities have been pitted against each other in these disagreements and few solutions to this problem have been successfully implemented; notably, few of the sources reviewed actually call for the end of public exam schools altogether.

Proponents of Public Exam High Schools

Broadly speaking, proponents of selective schools view them as an essential place for high achieving, highly focused students to excel within the public school system. They argue that the environment of rigor, competition, and high expectations at public exam schools is not present in regular public schools, and thus, these schools provide a special service to academically gifted students, regardless of their financial situation. This curated environment of academic excellence, they argue, is created both by teachers and students, and upheld by the selective admissions process (Mac Donald, 1999). The pro selective school debate largely rests on the belief in the importance of individual achievement (Finn and Hocket, 2012, 11).

Opponents of Public Exam High Schools

Opponents of selective schools view them as inequitable and elitist. They argue that these schools privatize a public resource and fail to accurately represent the demographics of a district due to admission requirements that rely on standardized tests, which have been proven to be inequitable. Opponents feel that these schools hoard resources and effectively segregate students. (Hammack, 2010).

Critical Topics within the Debate

While the arguments outlined above provide an overview of the two general sides in this debate, the following sections will delve into more specific details over the various discussions regarding public exam schools and the complexities within this debate.

Disagreements over What Public Exam Schools Do

Proponents of public exam schools present them as specialized schools catering to a subset of the student population, regardless of socioeconomic background. They argue that these schools act as a launchpad of upward mobility for students, preparing students for admission into elite colleges (Cano, Asimov, 2022). Because these schools are made up of only highly motivated students, there are fewer distractions and behavioral issues from less motivated students, curating an environment of rigor and high expectations. Mac Donald argues that because of these elements, regular public schools do not meet the needs of high achievers (Mac Donald, 1999). This argument rests on other public schools being entirely inferior, a point that is recurring in the pro selective school argument, but never addressed as a real cause for concern for the students in the district who attend these other schools. While the bulk of proponents' arguments in favor of selective schools rests on the importance of a selective environment for students to excel academically, proponents also note that these schools tend to provide more resources and more rigorous courses than the other public schools (Cano, Asimov, 2022).

Opponents of public exam schools contend that while the environment within a public exam school may be of higher quality, few studies have shown that selective schools actually provide positive causal effects on students' future achievements (Barrow et al., 2020). A study done in Chicago in 2020, found that attending Chicago's elite selective schools did not significantly improve student test scores overall, but did find that students reflected on their high school experience more positively than students who attended regular public schools (Barrow et al., 2020). This points to benefits public exam schools have that all students could benefit from, regardless of academic standing. Another study done in New York looked at the impact of attending a school with high-achieving peers, looking specifically at three of New York's most selective public schools. The research focused on marginal students, students who just made the cutoff for acceptance into one of these three elite schools; it found little impact on four-year college enrollment and graduation (Dobbie and Fryer, 2014). Some proponents of public exam schools argue that being surrounded by many high achieving students, even if you are at the cusp of that, will still be positive and increase those students' success. However, this research found little evidence to support that (Dobbie and Fryer, 2014). The research also found that students eligible by their academic achievements for a public exam school, but who chose not to attend,

were still likely to attend a high school with fewer Black or Latino students, suggesting segregated public schools exist outside of the public exam school system (Dobbie and Fryer, 2014). Additionally, opponents of Lowell have argued that the extra resources and availability of more rigorous courses adds to the imbalance of academic resources within the district and creates more disparities among the public schools (Cano, Asimov, 2022).

The Role of Standardized Testing in Public Exam School Admissions

The equity of standardized testing has become one of the major points of contention in regards to public exam school admission policies. Proponents support the use of standardized testing in some function to admit students. They argue that the test allows the school to keep functioning and that without the test, these schools would be no different from any other school in the district (Suzuki, 2022). They also argue that merit based admission is race blind and changing this will harm Asian American students, who tend to do well on standardized tests (Saul, 2022). Along these lines, proponents also tend to argue against affirmative action policies, which have been implemented over the years in an effort to diversify selective school populations. They have cited “mismatch theory,” which states that affirmative action policies can result in under qualified students being admitted into schools they are not qualified for (Mukherjee, 2022).

Opponents maintain that the use of standardized testing to select students for a public school is inequitable and results in segregation and sorting. While standardized tests can appear as an equitable form of admission, standardized tests fail to take into account the different circumstances, prior schools, and backgrounds and privileges of the student (Probolus-Cedroni, 2020) resulting in test bias. Extensive research has shown that Black, Latinx, and Native students do poorer on standardized tests than their White and Asian peers (Rosales and Walker, 2021). According to Kimberly Probolus-Cedroni, in her paper, “Bright Flight: Desegregating Boston’s Elite Public Schools, 1960-2000: “merit based decisions have become another way for white families to control societal values and have become a way to legitimately allocate spots at top schools in a ‘non-discriminatory’ manner.” She also adds that the values assigned and associated with these merit tests are not inclusionary, as they are values determined by a largely White group. This issue over merit was challenged directly by a father in Boston in 1971 because he believed that the reason his son did poorly on the standardized admissions test was because his son was Black. Probolus-Cedroni writes:“...this privileged a certain cultural knowledge that did

not translate to inner city Black students; African American students were denied equal educational opportunities in accessing the city's best schools through the very construction of the exam" (Probolus-Cedroni, 2020). These schools undermine educational equity by using tests as an assessor of admission; they have in many ways allowed white parents to hide behind the "color blindness" of standardized tests without actually making any important changes to the policies that lead to racially segregated schools (Probolus-Cedroni, 2020). In New York City, a similar situation occurred in 1968, when there was a teachers strike made up of the African American Teachers Association and others, directly challenging these "white values" on the entrance exam to New York's elite public high schools (Hammock, 2010). In 1971, the chancellor of the New York Public Schools, Harvey Scribner, raised issues about the admissions policies at these elite schools; his concern only culminated in legislation being put forward to protect their status (Hammock, 2010). Opponents of Lowell also argue that Lowell's existence as a public exam school goes against a 1990s law banning the use of academic achievement for admission to regular public schools. However, it has an exception for pre-existing requirements in specialized schools, making debate over this law difficult (Cano and Asimov, 2022).

Conversations Regarding Diversity, Elitism, and Racism

A recurring argument put forward by opponents is that public exam schools tend to inaccurately represent the demographics of a district, over-representing Asian and white students, whilst underrepresenting Black and Latino students. The disproportionate representation of white and Asian students at Lowell in the years prior to 2019 are also seen in New York, Boston, and Chicago's exam schools (Tucker, 2022). This disparity is inextricably tied to the fact that Black and Latino students tend to perform poorer on standardized tests, largely due to disparities in pre-high school education (Rosales and Walker, 2021). However, it also appears that there are gaps in interest from the start in these selective schools. A study done in Chicago found that more than 60% of white students and 80% of Asian students took the exam school admission tests, while only 25% of Black and Latino students did (Goodman and Rucinski, 2018, p. 3). That being said, this lack of representation at exam schools cannot only be linked to lack of information or lack of previous preparation. Some opponents argue that the environments of these elite schools are unwelcoming and undesirable for Black and Latino students. A study done at Lowell High School found that many of the Black and Latino students who perform well on the admissions test do not choose to attend the school, even after being admitted (Ming, 2002, p. 186). The

ongoing controversies around exam schools and the strong sentiments against changing the exam protocols may have resulted in minority students not wanting to “enter an environment in which their very presence would seem to some an indication of ‘preferential treatment’” (Ming, 2002, p. 186).

Additionally, incidents of racism at Lowell have gained media attention and likely have contributed to the low numbers in Black and Latino attendance. In 2021, during a lesson on anti-racism, social media posts were put up by an anonymous hacker spewing racist and antisemitic comments (Tucker, 2021). At Boston Latin School (BLS), the oldest public high school in the country, and a selective admission school, a similar incident occurred. In 2016, students at BLS came forward citing racial hostility after a white student threatened to lynch a Black classmate and no appropriate response was undertaken by the school. A study done in Boston showed that Black and Latino students are 13% less likely to rank BLS as their first choice school (Goodman and Rucisnki, 2018). These incidents lead some opponents to conclude that amending admission requirements to increase diversity is not a solution and these schools should be eliminated from the public school system altogether.

Anti-Affirmative Action Sentiment: Ho vs. SFUSD and the Brief Removal of Selective Admissions at Lowell

As discussed in the background section, *Ho vs. SFUSD* was a lawsuit filed in 1994 on behalf of Chinese American parents who felt that their children were being disproportionately harmed by the consent decree (this essentially was an affirmative action policy that placed a racial quota on school admission policies and resulted in fewer Chinese students getting into Lowell). They felt it was unfair to exclude children from certain schools because of their ethnicity. This same backlash was apparent in 2021, when the San Francisco School Board voted to get rid of Lowell’s selective admissions policy and include it in the lottery with the rest of the public high schools in SFUSD. The board cited “pervasive systemic racism and a lack of diversity at Lowell” as the primary reasons for the switch; these reasons are not dissimilar to the reasons for the implementation of the consent decree in 1983 (Talley, 2021). The removal of a selection admissions process at Lowell received backlash immediately, from parents at Lowell and other invested community members (Fuller, 2022). Their concerns mirrored that of the plaintiffs in *Ho*

vs. SFUSD. Although there was no lawsuit formed in response to this admission change, the Asian American community (largely the Chinese community) organized and rallied to oust three of the school board members who had voted to make this change. They cited that the policy change was racist against Asian American students (Fuller, 2022). The attorney hired to support the fight to return Lowell to a selective school, argued that this policy change helped Black and Latino students at the expense of Asian American students, the exact same sentiment expressed by the plaintiffs in the 1983 lawsuit (Yamamoto, 1997). There was apparent fear that the quality of the school would be diminished and hard-working students would be held back by unmotivated and unprepared students (Fuller, 2022). Some even went as far as to cite that students during the two-year lottery switch were performing worse than Lowell students in the past, citing a mismatch theory, which believes that affirmative action policies can result in under qualified students being admitted into schools they are not qualified for (Mukherjee, 2022). At the same time that this eruption over admissions policy change was happening, four-year-old tweets by Allison Collins, the vice president of the San Francisco School Board and a Black woman, were made public; one of her tweets said, “Many Asian Americans believe they benefit from the ‘model minority’ BS,... They use white supremacist thinking to assimilate and ‘get ahead’” (Fuller and Taylor, 2021). These tweets coupled with the change in admission policy angered Asian American communities and fueled the belief that this policy change was made at their expense.

Exam Schools and How They Pit Minority Groups Against One Another

As discussed above, exam schools have had a long history of exacerbating cross community tensions. Eric Yamamoto in his writing, *Critical Race Praxis: Race Theory and Political Lawyering Practice in Post-Civil Rights America*” discusses Critical Race Praxis and its relevance in the Ho v. SFUSD lawsuit, sentiments that can also be reflected on the more recent debate over Lowell’s brief switch to a lottery system. Yamamoto refers to the Critical Race Praxis as an approach towards analyzing events and concepts. Critical Race Praxis, “combines critical, pragmatic, socio-legal analysis with political lawyering and community organizing to practice justice by and for racialized communities” (Yamamoto, 1997, p. 10). One implication of the Critical Race Praxis that is relevant to the discussion of exam schools and lawsuits filed over changes made to their admission is the “interracial praxis,” which “acknowledges continuing white dominance in many spheres of socio-economic life and expands justice inquiry beyond

white on black and even white on color to encompass color on color” (Yamamoto, 1997, p. 11). According to Yamamoto (1997), these exam school controversies end up pitting minority groups against one another, further exacerbating the concept of Asians as a “wedge” or “middle” minority, in turn promoting white supremacy and hiding white influence and stake in the debate. The plaintiffs in *Ho vs. SFUSD*, as well as the groups that came out defending Lowell's selective admissions, argued that efforts to diversity harm Asian Americans, in order to help Black and Latino people. This makes Asian Americans the victims and Black and Brown people the “new perpetrators.” However, in a society where white people are, in reality, always dominant, this is impossible and constructs a mask for white supremacy to continue (Yamamoto, 1997, p. 70).

Additionally, affirmative action policies fail to adequately address the history of racism and exclusion that has caused some of these disparities in education and outcomes on merit exams. The debates that come out of anti-affirmative action opinions, both at the local level and national level, are problematic in that they end up representing affirmative action policies, like the consent decree in San Francisco in 1982, as *complete* solutions to racial disparities and racism in institutions (Jayakumer, Adamian, 2015). For example, in *Ho v. SFUSD*, the NAACP, was the primary defender of the consent decree, fighting to preserve this very small step in the direction to more diversity within an elite school. According to work done by Una Jayakumer and Annie Adamian in, “*Towards a Critical Race Praxis for Educational Research: Lessons from Affirmative Action and Social Science Advocacy*,” “affirmative action does not challenge institutional racism and selective admissions processes.” The consent decree attempted to change the demographics of Lowell. It went no deeper than that metric; it did not investigate the test used to assess merit, nor the quality of early education that students were receiving before applying to Lowell. It challenged nothing of the status quo, yet it angered many families and caused the NAACP and other supporters of affirmative action to defend it as if it was a full solution. Jayakumer and Adamian also argue that because the formation of the entire legal system is racialized and has been complicit in the process, lawsuits like *Ho v. SFUSD* and the Harvard affirmative action court case end up reinforcing this aspect of our legal system, pitting minority groups against one another, creating more gaps in community empowerment and sustaining whiteness (Jayakumer, Adamian, 2015). Perhaps, rather than employing bland policy changes that do not interrogate any aspect of institutional racism, the schools should diversify in more

meaningful ways and focus on making sure the atmosphere is welcoming for students of color (Talley, 2021).

The Media's Influence on Community Tensions

Notably, the media, local and national, has played a role in advancing the narrative discussed by Eric Yamamoto, Una Jayakumer and Annie Adamian, that these exam school controversies end up pitting minority groups against one another. The media represents these disagreements as community battles predominantly between the Asian community and Black and Latino communities. The media representation of these issues drastically over-simplifies them, further frustrating an end goal of cross-community solutions. They frame the argument as Asian parents, angered that many of the affirmative action policies employed by these elite schools end up reducing the number of Asian students who are accepted, versus Black and Latino parents, who feel that these schools are elitist, segregationist and hoard resources from the rest of the school district (Tucker, 2022).

A 2018 New York Times article entitled, "*Asian Groups see Bias in Plan to Diversify New York's Elite Schools,*" discusses a proposal put forth by Mayor de Blasio to diversify New York Elite Public schools. The article focuses predominantly on one side, Asian American parents who opposed this change, citing that this change will exclude Asian students and make it harder for them to get into these specialized high schools. It quotes Kenneth Chiu, the Chairman of the New York City American Democratic Club, comparing this proposed change to the Chinese Exclusion Act, an act during the 19th century prohibiting Chinese immigration (Hu and Harris, 2018). Similarly, a 2021 San Francisco Chronicle article entitled, "*S.F. 's Lowell isn't the only selective school to come under fire. Here's a look at others across the U.S.*", outlines debates all over the country; San Francisco is the only city that has switched to a full lottery based system. In New York, there was an attempt to change the exam school admissions system, but it was opposed mainly due to an "opposition effort by one of the school's billionaire graduates and backlash from Asian families who said the plan was discriminatory against its many low-income Asian students (Vainshetin, 2021). In another article by Jill Tucker, entitled, "*Debate about elitism at S.F. 's Lowell High School reflects broader fight over merit-based admissions,*" Tucker writes that across the district, there have been issues of discrimination, racism, slurs, and online racial harassment. The school board has not commented on the prevalence of discrimination

across the district, as a whole. Additionally, the measure to make Lowell completely lottery based, put forth by Alison Collins, one of the ousted board members, would create a community coalition to form a plan to address racism at Lowell. The measure, which has now been overturned, would not have looked at racism across the entire district (Tucker, 2021).

Gaps in Current Literature

In San Francisco, and other large cities with exam schools, there is a focus on exam schools as either the epitome of inequality and segregation or as an equal opportunity place for high achieving students to succeed, individually and alongside each other. There is extensive research into the arguments for and against exam schools, yet there is a gap in discussion over why these schools are so protected, why these conversations dominate the conversation around equity and ignore the fact that other public schools in the district are battling the same issues of segregation and racism. According to a study done in 2022, in San Francisco, all of the public schools, on average, are highly segregated. According to research, about 60% of the 99 public schools analyzed have “highly segregated” student populations. Lowell is actually rather moderate in its segregation scoring (Sumida, 2022). The unusually high rates of advantaged students that opt into private or parochial school education point to the need for more analysis of the SFUSD and fuel this research. The following sections present semi-structured interviews, supplemented with publicly-available data, to further explore this issue in the context of Lowell High School.

Research Methodology

This research seeks to better understand exam schools within public high school districts and why and how they continue to exist regardless of their controversy. Disagreements over them dominate local conversations about equity within the district. This research is a case study of Lowell High School, an exam admissions school in the Lakeshore neighborhood of San Francisco.

This study primarily utilized qualitative methods through semi-structured interviews with San Francisco School Board members, school administrators and counselors, and parents with and also includes publicly available data to better understand the different high schools in the district and contextualize interview responses. IRB approval was granted on November 7, 2022. This

publicly available data was gathered from the Education Data Partnership website and the California Healthy Places Index. This data helps in investigating numerical quality differences between the various schools and neighborhoods in the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD). The percentage of students eligible for free and reduced lunch are indicators of the economic diversity of a school, while the percentage of cohort graduates meeting UC/CSU requirements is an important indicator of how many and which groups of students are graduating with the basic requirements to get into college. This is a useful metric in better understanding how successful a school is at providing a path of upward mobility. Basic demographic data was gathered, as well, to visualize segregation within SFUSD and to better understand disparities in student achievement. This quantitative data has been gathered for Lowell, Washington, Lincoln, John O'Connell, Thurgood Marshall, Galileo, Mission, Balboa, Ruth Asawa School of the Arts (SOTA), Wallenberg, and Burton. Data was only gathered for high schools with enrollments of over 400. There are five public high schools in San Francisco with enrollments of less than 500. See **Appendix B** for these quantitative findings.

The bulk of the findings in this study come from the semi-structured interviews with San Francisco School Board members, SFUSD administrators and counselors, and parents with the aim of providing an array of insights into the perceptions of the effects of having an exam school in the district. Sixteen interviews were conducted; these interviews represented people associated with six public high schools in San Francisco, including Lowell High School. Abraham Lincoln High School (Lincoln), George Washington High School (Washington), Thurgood Marshall High School (Thurgood), Ruth Asawa San Francisco School of the Arts (SOTA), and Wallenberg High School. These individuals included principals, guidance counselors, a college counselor, a PTSA member, and a parent of a student who got into Lowell during the brief period when a lottery replaced the exam system. The principal of Presidio Middle School, a feeder into Lowell, was also interviewed; he also is a Lowell alumnus. Additionally three SFUSD school board members were interviewed.

While the specific questions posed in the interview varied slightly depending on the position of the interviewee, most of the questions were developed to better understand the perceptions and views different stakeholders held towards Lowell versus the other public high schools in the

district. Representatives from the other public high schools were asked specific questions about their schools and their understanding of the disparities between the various schools in the city. A list of the interview questions is provided in **Appendix A**.

Interview Findings

Table 1 highlights the stakeholders who were interviewed for this research. This table organizes them by the institution that they represent and then by their more specific role within that body. This table shows their most current positions within SFUSD, however many of the interviewees have had a range of positions and jobs at various institutions within SFUSD.

Table 1 SFUSD Interview Participants

Ann Hsu	SF School Board	Commissioner 2021-2022
Matthew Alexander	SF School Board	Commissioner 2021-current
Mark Sanchez	SF School Board	Commissioner 2001-2009, President 2007-2009, Commissioner 2016-current
Robert Freedman	Lowell High School	Lowell PTSA President
Maria Aguirre	Lowell High School	College Counselor
Anon	Lowell High School	Mother of lottery admitted student
Anon	Washington High School	Administrator
Erin Lynch	Washington High School	Assistant Principal
Betty Hom	Lincoln High School	Counselor

Anon	Lincoln High School	Counselor
Omar Campos	Lincoln High School	Counselor
Chris Rosenberg	Wallenberg High School	Assistant Principal/Principal 2017-2022
Anon	Ruth Asawa School of the Arts High School	Administrator
Kevin Chui	Presidio Middle School Principal, Lowell alumni	

The table below provides an overview of the three main takeaways as well as selected quotes from the interviews. Following the table is an in-depth look at each of the main takeaways.

Main Takeaways	Selected Quotes
Contrasting perceptions of what makes Lowell “excellent”	“Lowell is an environment that fosters kids to really pursue their academic excellence... pursue with intensity their academic interest. Kids at other schools pursue their other interests.” Ann Hsu (school board and parent)
	“What sets Lowell apart is the fact that they take the top test takers right, they take whatever percentage it is of eighth graders right, so the top 15% of test takers in the entire city.” - Kevin Chui (Presidio Middle principal and Lowell alumni)

<p>The sorting mechanism of the exam is advantageous to the city and certain families within the district</p>	<p>“Also inadvertently, or advertently, in that sorting process you separate Black kids out, and brown kids, so is there a binding interest, whether people want to admit it or not, that many many many families do not want their students with Black kids, for many different reasons, but the base reason is there is a racial animus going on. So having an exam school that sorts out Black and brown kids is advantageous in that regard and it works very wonderful in that regard, as well.” - Mark Sanchez (School Board)</p>
<p>Racially based assumptions about schools in San Francisco contribute to their disparities and harm cross-community solidarity</p>	<p>“There are huge disparities between west side and east side schools. The biggest disparity we get...you can never really see it. Is the money that gets generated from PTSA’s every year.” - Kevin Chui (Presidio Middle Principal and Lowell alumni)</p> <p>“Nobody wants to send their children to a school that is mostly Latin, that’s why you don’t get a lot of kids going to O’Connell. Right. Burton, Mission? Like, these are all great schools. They’re awesome. Friends and colleagues, I know, administrators at these schools, like they’re doing amazing things. But, you know, they’re historically, mostly Black and brown schools. I don’t know. It is. It is on some levels, like anti, anti people of color.” - Omar Campos (Lincoln counselor)</p>

Contrasting perceptions of what makes Lowell “excellent”

The entrance exam at Lowell allows for the school to maintain its rigorous environment for high achieving students

Three of the interviewees asserted that Lowell acts as a specialized school for academically rigorous students to excel, that it provides a higher quality, more academically focused learning environment than the other schools. In their opinions, the entrance requirements (be it the SBAC or the Lowell entrance exam) allows for the school to continue in this vein. These metrics help to curate an academically intense and focused environment, by bringing in kids who fit this narrative and barring those who don’t from entering. A mother at Lowell expressed, “Frankly, a

merit-based admission policy seems more fair. I think of gifted students with families who can't afford private school missing out on Lowell because the lottery picked other students who weren't as academically gifted or doing the hard work to get good grades" (Anonymous interview, 01/31/23) These interviewees asserted that Lowell was not the school for every child and that is okay. Ann Hsu, a past member of the SF school board, argued that, "Lowell is an environment that fosters kids to really pursue their academic excellence... pursue with intensity their academic interest. Kids at other schools pursue their other interests" (Ann Hsu, 12/27/23). The president of the Lowell PTSA, Robert Freedman stated, "I know that for my daughter not having to worry about the kids who want to have an outburst and not giving a shit about class and stuff like that, not having them there at Lowell, has made it so there's no distraction in class (Robert Freedman, 01/06/23). These interviewees also noted that Lowell offers more challenging courses than the other public schools, and a few of the other interviewees mentioned that Lowell teachers tend to stay longer than teachers at other schools, but these were the only references that acknowledged something technically different about Lowell setting it apart from the other schools, other than the students who are enrolled. Almost all of the interviewees agreed that a classroom environment at Lowell feels different from other schools, in that there are fewer disruptions, and that most of the students are focused and have high levels of internal motivation to succeed academically.

The entrance exam at Lowell is a mechanism for sorting students. Lowell is no different than the other public schools other than it predominantly admits grade level students

The other 13 interviewees argued that the test is the only thing setting Lowell apart from the other public high schools in the district and that this was problematic. They stated that the only reason Lowell ranks so well and is regarded so highly is because the selection process allows the school to only accept students who come in at grade level. The entrance exam is set up in a way that will inevitably lead to differences within the student body, in terms of demographics, economic status, internal motivation, and academic performance. Some of these participants argued that if the only thing making or keeping the school different from the other schools is a selective process of admission, that process is simply acting as a sorting mechanism for students. And, as that method has been proven to favor white and Asian students over Black and Latino students, this method is a segregator, as well as a sorter. An administrator from SOTA

stated, “There’s no way to have equitable standardized testing. And we all know that. And we’ve known that for decades. And yet, we continue to operate in a system that we know doesn’t work. And that’s systemic racism. That’s all that is, right? You have a system that, you know, continues to exclude marginalized people. And you continue to operate under it, and tell the marginalized people to get to the standard instead of realizing that your standard doesn’t work for everyone. That’s just institutionalized racism, we know that, everyone knows that” (SOTA Admin, 02/19/22).

The sorting mechanism of the exam is advantageous to the city and certain families within the district

Lowell keeps wealthier families in the district who may otherwise leave the district or attend private school

At a basic level, when asked why Lowell, constantly surrounded by such controversy and accusations of inequity, continues to be protected as an exam school, all of the interviewees pointed to Lowell's esteemed and politically connected alumni network. Its alumni association has ties to city politics and puts a lot of money and time into protecting the status quo of Lowell. This protection of Lowell is due to a multitude of factors. The most notable one brought forth by interviewees was that Lowell is viewed as the only “acceptable” public high school in the district by many families, and thus it keeps these families in the district. These families who view their high school choice as either Lowell or private school, tend to be wealthier families, meaning they tend to donate more to the district, which is favorable to the city. Additionally, in San Francisco, schools get paid per student so it is in the district's interest to keep as many high school aged residents in its public school system. San Francisco already has a very high percentage of kids in private high schools, so they need this money. Notably, Lowell is the biggest high school in the district.

Appealing to white and Asian middle/upper class families

As discussed above, seven of the interviewees asserted that the exam curates an environment that deems this school “acceptable” by certain families. It maintains that the environment of the school is of a higher economic bracket than many of the other public high schools, mainly takes students from certain areas, and is predominantly white and Asian, while still being a part of the

public school system. Without Lowell, interviewees expressed that they thought many of San Francisco's white and Asian middle and upper class families would move out of the district or attend private schools.

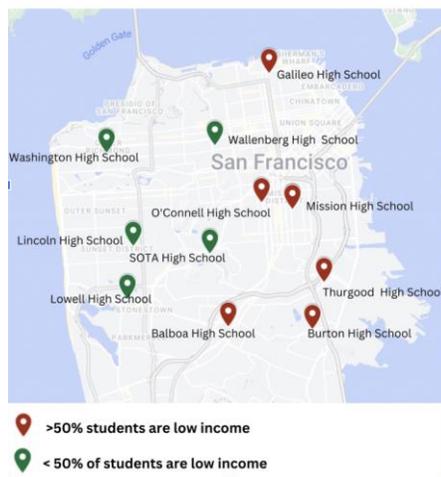
Racially based assumptions about schools in San Francisco contribute to their disparities and harm cross-community solidarity

Explicitly noted by three interviewees and more vaguely addressed by others, racially charged assumptions about the public schools, particularly schools on the east side of the city (these neighborhoods are largely Black and brown), contribute to the segregation and disparities present within SFUSD public schools. Many families, predominantly white and middle/upper class families, associate schools with larger percentages of Black and Brown students as being worse in quality; generally, unconsciously and consciously these families do not want to send their kids to schools with large Black and brown populations. This is a cyclical problem where more economically advantaged families do not want their children to attend schools on the east side, leading to wealth disparities among schools. Because PTSA fundraising is one large avenue in which schools access resources, this leads to big imbalances in what the various schools can access thus, making these schools less appealing. These uninformed biases result in actual structural differences between the schools, creating a cyclical issue of underinvestment and segregation. Ultimately, white and upper class families hold a lot of power around the narratives associated with certain schools. These narratives result in the further segregation of the school district and harm black and brown families.

Quantitative Data Connections

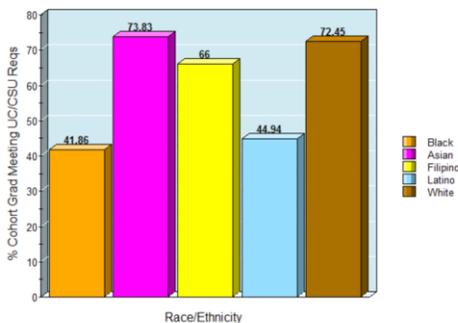
Although the resource disparities between schools does not necessarily correlate with being of lower quality, the notions put forward by interviewees around there being differences between schools on the east and west side is backed up by quantitative data. It can be assumed that schools with lower percentages of low income students likely have more funding through their PTSA than schools with higher rates of low income students. These trends reflect demographic trends within the city as a whole. **See Figure 3.**

Figure 3: San Francisco public high schools



Schools on the east side of the city also tend to have higher percentages of Black and Latino student populations. Utilizing district-wide cohort graduates meeting UC/CSU requirements as a marker, racial achievement gaps are prevalent district wide, and including Lowell. See Figure 4

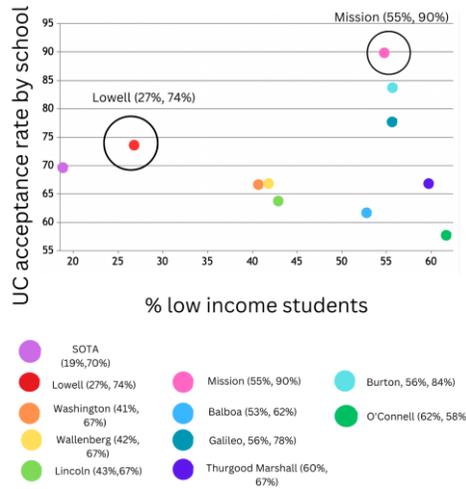
Figure 4: Average district wide cohort meeting UC/CSU requirements



However, with that said, several public schools with higher shares of low income students and Black and Latino students than Lowell have higher rates of acceptance into the UCs, providing evidence that Lowell may not be providing the upward mobility that its proponents argue for. Some of the interviewees expressed this notion, as well, that Lowell really is not providing a

different service than any other public school and the largest issue is the false narratives being spread about the other schools, particularly schools on the east side of the district. Some interviewees supported these false narratives, while others dismissed them. **See Figure 5**

Figure 5: UC Acceptance rate by % of low income students



Discussion

Interviews supported an understanding of the role an exam school plays in the district, its relationship to the other schools, and how other schools view and are affected by the presence of an exam school. There were contrasting takes among interviewees regarding the purpose and the pros vs cons of having an exam school. While there was a general consensus that the entrance exam curates an environment of students who are academically motivated and focused, there were contrasting opinions regarding the acceptability of this method. Some viewed the exam as a necessary step towards ensuring that the school can continue to provide a space for students who are very academically driven, while others argued that the exam simply acts as a sorting mechanism and aids in creating a false myth around the school as superior to the other schools. It also results in a segregated student body because of preexisting disparities within the education system.

Effects on the Community

Lowell's existence, while not necessarily directly harming the other schools in the district, does

create a rift between communities. It acts as an arena for anger and frustration to play out, mostly around issues that are much more far reaching than Lowell, like the segregation that exists within the entire district, not just at Lowell. Those who defend Lowell's selective admission policies represent a narrow-minded view of the schools in SFUSD, illuminating the elitism and racism that is rampant within the district. And those who call for the end of Lowell's exams represent larger frustrations within the district of the disparities and segregation that exists among and between all of the schools. It is simpler to demand the removal of selective admissions at one school, than to begin the restructuring of our entire educational system. While a majority of the interviewees agreed that the existence of an exam school is inequitable and benefits from already existing disparities within the public education system, none of the interviewees explicitly discussed how these disagreements have played out between communities, namely as a battles between the Asian community and Black and Latino communities.

Participants did draw connections between how Lowell's existence and the debates over it have continued to help white supremacy. These connections echoed sentiments expressed by Eric Yamamoto in his Critical Race Praxis article, that these debates stir up community tensions, hindering systemic change and shielding white people's participation in these issues (Yamamoto, 1997). The debate over Lowell also mirrors comments made by Una Jayakumar and Annie Adamian (2015) regarding affirmative action policies and how affirmative action policies typically do little to address systemic issues. The fight to get rid of Lowell's selective admissions test is a small battle; it does relatively little to change the status quo of inequity within SFUSD. This is not to say that the selective exam should not be dismissed, but in reality, it appears that that would be a fairly small step towards a more equitable school district. The existence of Lowell alone may not actively harm the other schools, but it does create an outlet for frustrations to gather and exacerbates these frustrations in a way that ultimately hinders real systemic change to SFUSD.

Recommendations

The following recommendations have been informed by interviews, analysis of publicly available data, and the literature review undertaken for this project. While this research was conducted specifically in relation to Lowell High School and the San Francisco Unified School

District, these recommendations aim to be generalizable, as similar debates over exam schools are happening throughout the nation. It is important to note that these recommendations provide only incremental ideas towards addressing the issues of exam schools and what they represent and protect, but elitism and racism will never be solved through any governmental policy alone and especially not without larger structural changes in government, housing, and healthcare. In an effort to not stray outside of the scope of this research, these recommendations are specific to the field of education.

Main Recommendations

Create specialized academically rigorous schools through specific characteristics within the school, rather than an exam	Rethink tracking methods for students	Create a district wide catalog detailing every school and their offerings	Create a more equitable funding model regarding PTSA fundraising
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Get rid of the exam, keep the rigor

Addressing the Question of the Exam

First and foremost, this recommendation answers and provides a solution to the biggest question put forward in this research: *Should public exam schools continue to exist as they do/what should their future be?* Based on the interview findings presented in the previous section, Lowell and other public exam schools should remove their selective admission requirements. As supported by many of the interviewees, it is compelling for a district to have public schools with specialized focuses, such as a science school or art school. Lowell claims to be one of these schools; its specific focus is providing a rigorous academic environment that the other schools do not, a place for highly motivated students to learn and push one another. The issue is that Lowell is not this, it is simply a big comprehensive high school, with a multitude of course offerings, a selected student population and elite background which allows it to have more resources than the other schools. There are not enough things about Lowell's actual structure that make it different from the other big public high schools in the district. There is nothing wrong with having a public school that is more rigorous or offers more difficult classes, but the student body cannot be selected through a standardized system that has continuously proven to be inequitable.

Implement Clear, Specific Characteristics that Make the School Specialized

A specialized rigorous high school could be curated by implementing certain characteristics into the school that make it actively different from the other comprehensive high schools in the district. This could look like students having to graduate with more credits, or complete some form of research/capstone project in order to graduate, as many of the private high schools require. This would set the school apart from the other public high schools in a meaningful way, while allowing students to self-select a more rigorous high school experience.

Supporting Students from Lower Performing Middle Schools

In order to ensure that this “more rigorous” public school does not end up reinforcing segregationist practices, the school and district must robustly address achievement gaps. As of now, as backed up by Maria Aguirre, a Lowell college counselor, the school is not supporting students who come in from lower performing middle schools (Maria Aguirre, 1/11/23). Quantitative data also shows the gap in success among ethnicity/socioeconomic status for students who attend Lowell, backing up this claim (see appendix D). The school must have in place specific extra support for students attending the school from lower performing middle schools to ensure their success. Ideally, changes would also be made to address these disparities among elementary and middle schools, but this recommendation aims to provide support for the current situation. Specific counselors should be made available for students coming from lower performing schools to ensure that the students are succeeding academically and feeling supported. Additionally, teachers should be required to hold office hours, like in college, to ensure that students who need extra support can receive that.

Rethink Methods of Tracking Students

The metrics of success for students, such as test scores and the percentage qualified for CSU/UCs, should not all be measured on the same scale, as it currently is. Students come from varying backgrounds, meaning they are not all starting in the same place and should not be measured against one another as such; students have varying academic goals, as well. Sarah Ballard-Hanson, the principal of Thurgood Marshall, brought forward this issue when posed with a question about disparities in quality of education across the San Francisco public schools. She noted that rigor, the concept of challenge, likely varies across the school sites, but that is a

relative term. Because over 30% of the students at Thurgood have had major gaps in their education due to immigration, what they need to get caught up on in terms of skills varies greatly from students at other schools (Sarah Ballard-Hanson, 12/28/22). That being said, tracking indicators of student success and school quality is essential to ensuring that schools are effectively supporting students who need extra support. The school should be actively lessening achievement gaps in all ways, among all students. These metrics should be tracked through quantitative data, as well through the qualitative personal accounts of individual students' experiences.

Create a Catalog with Every School in the District

A number of the interviewees mentioned a lack of consistency and oversight in the district, leading to big disparities in quality of instruction and what level of proficiency students graduate with. Sarah Ballard-Hanson, the principal of Thurgood Marshall, stated, "The reputation of San Francisco high schools is such a mixed bag. There is genuinely a lack of cohesion across school sites (Sarah Ballard-Hanson, 12/28/22). This lack of oversight of the schools and what they offer is one factor contributing to gaps in achievement. Based on both interview answers and qualitative data (using cohorts graduating with UC/CSU requirements as one indicator of an achievement gap), there is evidence of large disparities in student achievement throughout every school in San Francisco (See Appendix D). At large and including Lowell, Asian and White kids tend to leave high school meeting more of the requirements for enrolling at a UC/CSU than Black and Latino students. Based on these comments, I recommend that the city produce a catalog in the form of a searchable database detailing every elementary, middle, and high school within the district. This catalog does not exist currently, making it difficult for parents and students to gain a comprehensive understanding of the high schools within their district. A comprehensive catalog of the schools would provide information on the various classes offered, the different tracks each school has, demographic information, proficiency information, and other important insights into the schools. Many of these metrics are already available online but currently separated by school on separate school sites, making it difficult to compare and contrast schools. The database would be available in multiple languages. This would help to highlight the special/unique offerings of every school, empowering families and students to make more informed decisions about their

education. There appears to be a large issue within the district of people being misinformed about the schools or simply following hearsay, rather than doing real research on the different schools. This would make it a lot easier for families and middle school counselors to educate themselves.

A More Equitable Funding Model: PTSA Fundraising

Lastly, I recommend that a more equitable funding model is undertaken by SFUSD, specifically in regards to PTSA fundraising within all of the public schools. According to the head of the Lowell PTSA, “we tend to have more money than we need all the time” (Robert Freedman, 01/06/23). PTSA fundraising is one way in which certain schools gain access to more resources than other schools, leading to disparities among schools and thus, contributing to achievement gaps. A determined percentage of the money raised by the top three funded PTSAs should be redistributed to the rest of the high schools in the district. This model should be introduced in elementary and middle schools, as well. As evidenced through the interviews and qualitative data, SFUSD remains highly segregated, by ethnicity and socioeconomic status. This would be one minor step towards combating this issue.

Conclusion

Limitations

Limitations of this project included limited sample size of participants, unanswered interview requests, lack of representation of certain schools/people in interviews, and inability to acquire certain datasets. There were many claims made by interviewees that lack quantitative data backing them up, such as recurring comments claiming a subset of parents choose only between Lowell or private school and that without Lowell many families would leave the public school district. Within this research, there is little numerical data to back this claim up. Lastly, while the findings and conclusions about San Francisco Unified are important and relevant to other school districts with public exam schools, San Francisco is a unique school district in many ways, which limits the generalizability of this research.

Potential for further research is extensive. A regressive analysis looking at school demographics, neighborhood demographics, school offerings/resources and where students end up after high school would be incredibly helpful for implementing new strategies to increase the quality of all of the high schools. It would also be interesting and worthwhile to include more

information about private schools, and understand what role these private schools serve in the district. San Francisco sends the highest number of students to private schools of any major city in the country; the effect this has on the public school district should be studied in depth (Fuller and Taylor, 2021).

Final Thoughts

This research largely sought to answer much debated questions in SFUSD—the equity of having a public exam school in a district, the pros and cons of it, and how it affects the community in San Francisco. Through the literature review, and interviews with school board members, administrators, counselors, parents, and my own conclusions, it appears that having a public exam school is largely a negative attribute for a school district whose goal is equity. The service it provides is selective and its method of selection is biased, meaning it benefits only a small percentage of students (largely Asian and white). It benefits the city as being a point of pride to host such a nationally recognized school, and possibly it also benefits the city as it may keep more money in the district by appealing to middle and upper class families who may view it as the only acceptable option for public school. A great deal of literature exists related to the inequity of standardized testing and to continue to use such a test within a public school system is discriminatory and harms a goal of equity. These exams act as a “racially blind” method of segregation and form the myth that these schools are elite and better than the other schools in the district.

That being said, the issues that exist at Lowell over diversity and segregation exist throughout the district. Getting rid of selective schools will not solve the much larger problem in these districts, which is that white and economically advantaged families hold a lot of power, both in the political sense, as well as in the force they hold behind shaping a narrative of “good” or “bad” schools. These families' uninformed opinions ultimately shape decisions over which schools are considered acceptable or worthy, leading to more segregated schools, and thus segregated resources. There are huge issues of racism and elitism within parents' views towards school quality. Lowell has become a focal point in discussing inequity in the district, for good reason, however, it also arguably impedes more drastic change from taking form by taking up such space in local conversations. The recommendations that have been put forward serve as

only small steps towards improvement; structural changes to educational systems, housing systems, and healthcare systems must change in order to really combat these problems.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions*

*questions varied slightly per conversation

School Board Member Interviews

1. School Board Questions

- a. Can you please tell me about your position on the school board? What is your role?
- b. Can you tell me a little about how the school board works with school administrators and parents? What does that look like?
- c. In your opinion, what is the role of a school board in improving the quality of public education in a district?
- d. What in your opinion, is the mission of SFUSD?

2. Lowell based questions

- a. In your opinion, what is the role of having an exam school like Lowell? What purpose does it serve the district to have a school like Lowell?
- b. What are your thoughts about the current Lowell admissions process?
- c. What are your thoughts on standardized testing?
- d. In your opinion, do you think that every child in the city who wants to go to Lowell has an equal opportunity to get in, from the beginning of their education? Outside of personal factors of students and their families, do you think the public elementary and middle schools provide equal opportunities?
- e. How are families/students made aware of Lowell and the process of getting in?
- f. What are the disadvantages that some students face in getting into Lowell?
 - i. If you do think there are disadvantages some students face, where do you think these disadvantages come from? Their families/backgrounds or prior education? Or both
- g. What are the arguments in favor of keeping Lowell a merit based public school?
- h. What about the opponents of Lowell? What are their reasons for wanting to change Lowell's admission policies or get rid of Lowell altogether?
- i. In your opinion, what are the differences between Lowell and the other schools in the district?
- j. How do resources at Lowell compare to resources at other high schools in the district?
- k. Why is Lowell considered such a good school? Better than the other schools in the city?
- l. Lowell was a completely lottery based school for 2 years- This received a lot of attention and pushback- What are your thoughts on this?

3. Larger school district questions

- a. Conversations and debates about admissions at Lowell High school seem to consume discussions over equity within the public school system in San Francisco. Why do you think this is?
- b. What do you think about Lowell versus the other schools in the district? What are the main differences you see between a school like Lowell, a school like say, Lincoln, and a school like John O' Connell, in terms of educational quality, teacher quality, student success etc.. Are there differences in resources?
- c. Where do you think elementary schools fall into this puzzle about high school quality?
- d. Are there discrepancies between school quality of the other zoned high schools in the district? Why is that?
- e. Back to my earlier question about the mission of SFUSD, do you think that all of the high schools are meeting that mission?
- f. It seems that schools within San Francisco remain fairly segregated by race... Why do you think this is? Are there efforts for integration being made?

Teachers/Administrators (Lowell, Lincoln, Washington, Thurgood Marshall, Wallenberg, SOTA, Presidio Middle School)

- I. Can you please start by introducing yourself/providing some background information on yourself?

- II. Could you tell me about your role at X, a little about the school, about the culture of the school? Generally speaking, what type of students go to X?
- III. Are there different tracks for students at X? Are most kids college bound?
- IV. What is the college admission process like for students at X?
- V. For students that are not interested in college, are there other tracks provided to guide them or how does that work?
- VI. Are there relationships between principals at the various high schools in San Francisco? Do schools work together in any way?
- VII. What role do you think X plays in the district? What is its purpose in the district?
- VIII. What makes X different from other schools in the district?
- IX. Do you see big differences in quality between various public high schools in the city?
- X. Is Washington providing a path of upward mobility for low income/first gen students?
 - A. How is that being done?- what conversations are happening about increasing the quality of education
- XI. In your opinion, what is the role of having an exam school like Lowell in SFUSD- what does it do for the district- positive or negative?
- XII. It seems like the proponents of Lowell, fall back on the assumption that the other schools in the district are not as good of an education and cannot provide the same paths of upward mobility for high achieving students that Lowell can. Do you think this is true? What can be done about this?
- XIII. How does a school like Lowell differ from X - what are the biggest differences?
- XIV. Through my research, it seems that the conversation in San Francisco about public high schools and equity is consumed by a focus on Lowell, its admissions requirements and student demographics that don't reflect the district. Why is this? Why are the conversations lacking depth about issues of equity in the district as a whole?
- XV. Do you think the existence of having an exam school like Lowell affects students that do not get in? Is its existence actively harming other students? Does Lowell negatively affect other schools in the district?
- XVI. What did you think about Lowell switching to a lottery based system?
- XVII. I hear people arguing for needing MORE Lowells- what do u think about adding more schools that have academic requirements?
- XVIII. Is there a place for Lowell in a district that wants equity?
- XIX. San francisco has a very high rate of parents who send their kids to private schools... Why do you think so many parents send their kids to private schools in San Francisco? How does that affect decisions and etc
- XX. What are the biggest factors holding the district back from providing all students with a good high quality education?
- XXI. If you could make changes to the public high school system for more equity , what would those be?
- XXII. What are the biggest factors holding the district back from providing all students with a good high quality education?

	Lowell	Lincoln	Washington	Balboa	SOTA	Wallenberg	O'Connell	Galileo	Mission	Thurgood	Burton
Asian	50.98	48.86	56.35	43	17	52	6.78	54.90	8	17.37	33.0
Black	1.8	5.66	4.42	5.34	7.60	9.56	13.46	4.86	14.62	10.10	8.46
Nat Hawaii /Pac Isl	.4	1	0	2.5	.3	.6	2	.5	1	2.18	3.4
White	17.94	8.98	10.22	3.84	38.2	15.26	6.36	8.50	10.32	.94	2.08
Am Indian	.16	.16	.24	.28	.50	.38	.20	.24	.56	.76	.3
Filipino	6.7	3.44	4.52	7.94	4.18	3.84	6.72	4.76	3.52	4.02	13.3
Latino	11.60	24.96	16.54	31.88	18.18	17.64	58.04	20.22	56.04	58.38	33.80
None reported	5.34	4.10	3.80	3.0	8.60	4.46	3.38	2.60	3.46	4.34	2.96
Two or more races	4.88	3.26	3.42	2.4	8.72	4.46	3.44	3.46	2.64	1.76	1.86

* highlighted numbers represent the most represented race within each school

Appendix C: % Qualified for free/reduced lunch by high school: Average % 2017-2022

	Lowell	Lincoln	Washington	Balboa	SOTA	Wallenberg	O'Connell	Galileo	Mission	Thurgood	Burton
% Qualified free and reduced lunch	34.4	46.90	47.98	61.66	19.98	49.70	68.54	63.20	56.78	61.98	63.34

Appendix D: % Cohort Grad Meeting UC/CSU requirements: Average % 2017-2022

	Lowell	Lincoln	Washington	Balboa	SOTA	Wallenberg	O'Connell	Galileo	Mission	Thurgood	Burton
% Qualified free and reduced lunch	84.40	61.96	67.04	58.18	85	68.76	35.06	65.16	57.78	34.22	61