

5/30/19

TO: Office of the DC Auditor  
FROM: Concerned parents of School Without Walls past and present  
RE: Admissions at the school

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The School Without Walls High School (Walls) student body doesn't look like D.C. – it's half as African-American and Hispanic, three times as white and one-quarter as disadvantaged (at-risk) as the rest of the system. The school serves well the children of some D.C. residents, but misses an unknown number of talented students from low-income and minority families. Parent efforts to raise concerns about the school's admissions have been unsuccessful, and the school bungled its own plan this year to improve one part of the admission process.<sup>1</sup> Based on our own years of effort, we do not believe there is adequate will within the system to deal with the scope of the problem.

The Office of the D.C. Auditor (ODCA) has authority to access sources that no one else can -- examine student files, interview officials, and analyze data -- to fully evaluate the situation. Our request we hope will find a ready audience, in view of the Auditor's May 24 letter to the Council discussing discriminatory selection at selective high schools generally -- affecting special education students and graduates of Ward 7 and 8 middle schools. The Auditor concluded, in words we could have written, that "the issues of selective high schools, equity, and the possibility of discriminatory practices could be a topic for citywide discussion and I encourage you to consider a joint Council hearing on the topic. This could include what the District's residents want to see in terms of 6<sup>th</sup> grade to 12<sup>th</sup> grade pathways and expansion."<sup>2</sup>

We know, and describe below, the Walls problems (the non-transparent admissions system yielding disappointing results on dimensions of race and class), but a more detailed review by the Auditor to prepare for Council hearings is now clearly needed. This note explains the school, the problem of its student body makeup and the questions that warrant investigation.

Awareness grows elsewhere about the problem of adequate talent identification in selective urban high schools (and colleges)<sup>3</sup> but discussion is muted or even unwelcome here. We understand the Local School Advisory Team didn't even discuss the changes in admissions that were almost implemented this year. Thus, the irony that we must submit our request for the sunshine of investigation without our names, from fear of reprisal from the school administration.

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<sup>1</sup> The plan would have addressed only some of the problems to be discussed below. As reported in the press, the plan called for the top 15 students in each middle school to be invited to take the Walls admission test. The plan could have reduced the influence of prior grades and tests but how the rest of the admissions criteria would still have been applied is unknown. Perry Stein, "D.C. had a plan to diversify one of its most selective high schools." *The Washington Post*, Feb. 9, 2019. Available at: <https://wapo.st/2uEC37L>.

<sup>2</sup> ODCA, Letter to Council Chairman Phil Mendelson and Education Committee Chairman David Grosso, May 24, 2019. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2HVlt9a>.

<sup>3</sup> Annotated sources are in the appendix.

## **Walls Facts**

Founded in 1971, Walls is a selective high school (grades 9-12). The school is housed in a renovated school building at 2130 G St., N.W., surrounded by the George Washington University campus. It has about 50 teachers. Principal Richard Trogisch has been there for at least a dozen years.

Four D.C. selective high schools (Banneker, Ellington, McKinley Tech and Walls) require applicants to have a B average (3.0 GPA) and citywide PARCC achievement test scores on math and reading in the top two categories (levels 4 or 5) and an interview. But Walls also requires its own test covering math, reading and writing. Walls also requires interviews of both the applicant and parent with a panel of faculty, staff and students. Application to the D.C. unified school choice lottery is also required.

This multi-stage admissions process results in a high-achieving group. Every student takes one or more Advanced Placement tests (with an 84 per cent pass rate); college courses are available at nearby GWU; test scores on the PARCC and college admission tests are very high and college acceptance is the norm for graduates. It is regularly cited as a top school—for example ranked #51 nationally among magnet schools and #191 overall in *U.S. News Best High Schools* (2019).<sup>4</sup>

DCPS materials report the 600 students in 2018-19 were 47 per cent white, 30 per cent black, 11 per cent Hispanic, and 6 per cent Asian.<sup>5</sup> (Citywide, the D.C. Public Schools enroll 15 per cent white students, 60 per cent black students, 20 per cent Hispanic and 2 percent Asian.)

Few at Walls are English-language learners (1 percent) or require any type of special education (zero percent), compared to citywide figures of 14 per cent English-language learners and 17 per cent special education.

The District's "at risk" definition counts only 12 percent of Walls students (from families that are homeless or who receive food stamps or public financial support, or those who are a year or more behind in high school). The citywide fraction at risk is 48 per cent.<sup>6</sup>

Sources in the appendix show how this topic is under wide discussion. Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez remarked "seven Black students accepted into Stuyvesant (a \*public\* high school) tells us that this a system failure. Education inequity is a major factor in the racial wealth gap. This is what injustice looks like."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See ranking at <https://bit.ly/2HP6pg1>.

<sup>5</sup> The overall Walls white percentage is rising (5 per cent since 2016) but DCPS has delayed our FOIA request for exact numbers in the entering classes over the last five years (saying it requires "reviewing voluminous records").

<sup>6</sup> Citywide numbers are from the Office of the State Superintendent of Education, *D.C. School Report Card*. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2I4CC1V>.

<sup>7</sup> Nina Golgowski, "8 Elite Public Schools in NYC Only Accepted 190 Black Students." *Huffington Post*, March 19, 2019. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2HSQbT8>.

## **Problems with the Walls admissions process**

DCPS materials do not fully describe the admissions process as some parents have experienced it or as school officials have indicated informally that it works. It is simply unknown what may be the general pool of potential high-performing applicants, who among them applies (learning about the opportunity and navigating the complex stages of applying), who succeeds at each stage, and how final admissions decisions are made.<sup>8</sup>

Some parents have raised questions about changes that could bring greater racial and socio-economic diversity in the Walls admissions process, but these efforts have gone nowhere since data are missing that could provide clear understanding of the process as it works in fact versus the process as the public materials describe it.

Here are examples in five areas of how the present admissions process may fail to identify talented students from minority and low-income families:

### **(1) Scoring the Walls admissions test**

To gain an admissions interview, a student must score well on the school's "standardized, proprietary" test of math (Algebra I and Geometry for rising 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> graders; algebra II/calculus/trigonometry for rising 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> graders), reading and writing. All details of the test are obscure. We asked by FOIA for the name of it and got papers showing nothing other than "School Without Walls High School Admissions Test," so it may be an in-house creation. Technical quality of a high-stakes test and its scoring scheme can only be assessed by independent review; has there been any? The Independent School Entrance Exam used in Boston Latin admissions drew fire.

Validity of scores is a concern in several ways.

- What if a student is tested in geometry but hasn't taken it? Is it available in all D.C. middle schools or will some score lower simply for not having had the opportunity to study it? Algebra I is tested but we understand it's also offered at only a few middle schools.
- What if some get access to test-related materials? A copy of the Walls admissions test or at least some form of test-prep has been rumored to be available online. Commercial online prep is available for the Boston exam, the Independent School Entrance Exam or ISEE, widely used by private schools (e.g., Kaplan, starting at \$299). The equity concerns are obvious.
- What if some schools do classroom test prep not available to all? One school is reported to review a previous year's algebra 1 content for those who have gone on to geometry, algebra 2 or another higher level other than algebra 1 class at the time of the testing.

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<sup>8</sup> These data may have been assembled as part of planning for the revised admissions proposal this year but to our knowledge have not been released publicly. Data have been occasionally shared by staff to insider parents, but not for analysis and discussion. For example, minutes of the Home and School Association executive board show staff told the group at its March 13, 2014, meeting, apparently without elaboration, that of "1,300 applications, approximately 650 students were invited to sit for the test, approximately 225 were interviewed, and the class size was projected to be about 140 students."

Scores from the Walls test are of uncertain value if threats to their validity are widespread.

## **(2) Late or re-taken tests**

Postponed tests or re-tests are another unknown. We are concerned about the fairness of a process that apparently gives administrators discretion to allow some applicants to get special testing arrangements (postponed or re-taken) and we wonder if the justifications are reviewed carefully to avoid fraud or bias in who is allowed to postpone or re-test. Questions of fairness can arise if, as parents have heard, applicants have been allowed to take the Walls admission test even after the lottery and wait list results are known, or even (as parents have also heard) get a second chance.

## **(3) Interviews**

Online materials say: “Prospective students will meet with a panel of teachers and current students for 10 minutes. Following the student’s interview, parents of the student will meet with the interview panel for approximately 5 minutes.” Given the enormous possibility of bias, what valuable and reliable information is gained in a few minutes? It is unknown if any formal criteria or scoring system is involved (though parents have heard of a rubric). Student scoring is of concern since unbiased selection of who takes part, and also sufficient student training, are needed to avoid the danger of unconscious bias and higher scoring of candidates of more familiar race/class background. And what role is there for the 8<sup>th</sup> grade attendance record, that interviewees in past years were told to bring?

In addition, parents are concerned that without controls in place, interview results can be manipulated (scored unusually high) to attempt to justify admissions for a favored candidate with lower grades and tests.

## **(4) Use of interview results**

How the interviews are used is uncertain. Admission descriptions discuss the requirement of applicant and parent interviews. In contrast, *The Washington Post* report on the new system proposed for the 2019-20 year (and later scrapped) described the final admissions decision this way: “more students pass the Walls admission test than can be accommodated at the school, so the citywide lottery makes the final decision on who gets to enroll.” This does not mention any role for the results of the interview, though parents have heard comments at school suggesting interviews are scored somehow and can be definitive.

## **(5) Admissions decisions**

Prior grades and attendance, PARCC tests, the Walls admissions test, lottery results and interviews are sources of information for admissions decisions, but it’s of the greatest importance to know the specific criteria and the decision process. These are now obscure. Offering admission is a prediction of success and should be based on many factors. Especially concerning would be a system that heavily weights past performance especially achievement tests, since those are so strongly influenced by early life circumstances. Doing better is not an impossible quest. Even if it

may be new in Washington, D.C., ways of improving the pipeline and finding highly promising students in every segment of a city are discussed in many sources cited in the appendix.

Reports of decisions made with late test results are just one example of college-style decisions where administrators appear to have great discretion. Creation of a waiting list and selection from it are another example -- involving questions of how the list is assembled and maintained, based on what criteria, and how individuals are selected from the waiting list for an offer of admission. Would review of student files show that a call or letter of recommendation from a D.C. leader in business, politics or law assured a student's admission? (This is not far-fetched. A previous chancellor got a child moved to a desired high school with a phone call.) Selection of students to achieve an incoming student body balanced among the city's eight wards is another unstated criterion parents have heard is used.

### **Conclusion**

A unique and high-quality selective high school needs a transparent admissions process that affords all talented students equal access. As the often-used phrase goes, "demography shouldn't be destiny" (referring to the high correlations between between educational results and the racial or low-income status of a student's family).

Not every student is suited to advanced academics (and the District has other selective schools for those with high-level talents of other kinds). But the process needs to be clear and open, so the public has confidence scarce seats are distributed fairly. And that is not the case today.

If anything, Walls should have an admissions preference for otherwise qualified students from low-income families. As the Cooke Foundation report explained, "to overcome the burdens of poverty and nonetheless perform at a high level is itself an indicator of ability and perseverance; true merit, properly understood, recognizes both scholastic achievement and the importance of the distance traveled..."<sup>9</sup>

But the conversation about what the school student body should look like has never started. At Walls, as parents of current and past students with questions and concerns, we have found limited data, incomplete explanations, a lack of concern for the issue of fairness in talent-spotting, and generally unwelcoming responses from officials. This year's discontinued remedial plan would have been only a small step at broadening access, but we doubt even that was based on significant data and analysis.

We see no path forward inside the system. We request a review of the Walls admissions design by the D.C. Auditor, with recommendations to the Council and mayor for changes needed.

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<sup>9</sup> *True Merit*, p. 1 (see Appendix for citation). The Carnevale report from Georgetown makes the same point.

## Appendix of Sources

### On school systems elsewhere working on similar issues

**New York.** Elizabeth A. Harris, “Di Blasio proposes changes to New York’s elite high schools.” *New York Times*, June 2, 2018. Available at: <https://nyti.ms/2WFe8QQ>.

**Boston.** James Vaznis, “Boston exploring new entrance test for exam schools,” *Boston Globe*, March 6, 2019 (reporting extensive research on barriers imposed by the Independent School Entrance Exam used in admissions to Boston Latin and other selective high schools there, as well as two-year community forum on improving the Boston admissions process). Available at: <https://bit.ly/2FL4pBH>.

**Fairfax County, Va.** Lisa Rab, “Does the No. 1 high school in America practice discrimination?” *Washingtonian*, April 26, 2017 (reporting that “Fairfax’s Thomas Jefferson High School is still less than 5 percent African-American and Latino. Improving that number has proved complicated.”). Available at: <https://bit.ly/2W6Y3I8>.

**Montgomery County, Md.** Donna St. George, “U.S. officials probe alleged discrimination against Asian American students in Md.,” *Washington Post*, April 21, 2019 (reporting that “Parent leaders involved in the [federal complaint] allege that the school system — the state’s largest — discriminated against Asian American students while seeking greater racial balance in two sought-after middle school magnet programs. They say the number of Asian American students invited into the programs fell 23 percent from 2016 to 2017, amid a wave of attention to diversity issues, and then dropped by 20 percent the next year after a new screening and selection process took effect.” Available at: <https://wapo.st/2X4FQqZ>.

Followed by *Post* editorial, “Montgomery schools’ ‘not-so-perfect process’ needs transparency,” *Washington Post*, April 30, 2019 (approving efforts to broaden eligibility to reach more talented students for enriched middle school, saying “efforts by the school system to develop student talent earlier and expand enrichment classes to schools other than those housing the magnet programs should be applauded.”). Available at: <https://bit.ly/30M2eHM>.

Work on the issue has been under way for decades. Most recently in 2016, after the release of a report showing black and Hispanic students were less likely than whites and Asians to be chosen for a number of selective academic programs and to enroll in them. The study suggested improving early talent development and changing the selection process. Metis Associates, *Montgomery County Public Schools: Study of Choice and Special Academic Programs--Report of Findings and Recommendations* (March 2016). Available at: <https://bit.ly/2vGvpOq>.

### On problems facing talented low-income students seeking the best education

Jennifer Giancola and Richard Kahlenberg, *True Merit* (Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, 2016) (concluding “we are relegating our brightest minds from low-income families to attend institutions with fewer resources, lower graduation rates, lower paying employment prospects, and reduced access to the upper echelons of leadership and commerce. This unequal treatment cheats the striver

out of obtaining the best education available and denies society at large the benefits of having the most educated workforce possible.”). Available at: <https://bit.ly/2HPay3r>.

Anthony P. Carnevale, *et al.*, *Born to Win, Schooled to Lose: Why Equally Talented Students Don't Get Equal Chances to Be All They Can Be*. Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2019 (reviewing research tracking students from earliest years into adulthood, finding “throughout the K–12 pipeline, economically disadvantaged students are more likely to lose ground at each point along the way. We lose the most talent from underdevelopment before high school: 49 percent of economically disadvantaged students who had above-median math scores in kindergarten have below-median scores in eighth grade.” And concluding “as a society, we aren’t doing enough to ensure that equally talented children have equal access to affirming environments. There are things we can do to even the odds.” Available at: <https://bit.ly/2VqQQNN>.

### **On adjusting metrics to better evaluate student potential than by tests alone**

Students applying to college will now receive an “adversity score” from the College Board to measure their social and economic background. The College Board, a nonprofit that oversees the SATs, will calculate a score out of 100 using 15 factors, including neighborhood crime rates and family education levels. The idea is that the higher the number, the more disadvantages the student experienced. The score is part of a larger rating system, the “environmental context dashboard.” Students won’t see their score, only colleges. The “adversity score” tackles the question of fairness in the college application process — a debate that reignited after a federal investigation revealed a nationwide scheme to get the children of wealthy parents into elite schools via bribery and other methods. The adversity score does not address race, which is notable since colleges’ affirmative action policies have recently been challenged in court. Still, college admissions experts say it will inevitably lead to increased racial diversity on campus because of the correlation between ethnic background and average household income, which is reflected in test scores. An evaluation of a student’s background has never been done in such a systematic way, and experts are hoping this will finally make the admissions process more holistic.

Nick Anderson and Susan Svrluga, “Coming soon to the SAT: An ‘adversity score’ offering a snapshot of challenges students face,” *The Washington Post*, May 16, 2019. Available at: <https://wapo.st/2I0pGbY>.

Later withdrawn. Anemona Hartocollis, “SAT ‘Adversity Score’ Is Abandoned in Wake of Criticism,” *New York Times*, August 27, 2019. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/27/us/sat-adversity-score-college-board.html>.