



Central Park East I Elementary School

1573 Madison Avenue ♦ New York, NY ♦ 10029 ♦ 212.860.5821 ♦ www.cpe1.nyc ♦ Gabriel Feldberg, Principal

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Dear Families,

I spent Friday at a day-long planning meeting for principals of schools designated for Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI). I was there because state education policy changed: when evaluating schools, New York now counts students who opt out of state exams as scoring at the lowest level. Central Park East I's high rate of opting out led to our new CSI status.

The CPE1 mission statement describes a school that “encourages choice.” When it's time for the state language arts exam on April 2 and 3, I'll be handing out tests and wishing good luck to the children who choose to take them. I'll also spend time with the students whose families choose not to participate in testing. I'll be proud of both groups. Changing accountability rules won't change our commitment to choice.

This new CSI status leaves some families less certain what to choose. After an all-day meeting about how schools can exit CSI status, I can offer this guidance: Make the choice for your individual child, not our accountability status. More test takers will not automatically help a school avoid CSI. In fact, as you'll read below, schools with even higher opt-out rates than ours managed to avoid CSI completely. The calculations are much more complicated. Numbers don't tell the full story of any CSI school, but numbers tell you a lot about CSI.

CSI Statistics and What's “Valid”

This winter, thirty-five New York City elementary schools were identified for Comprehensive Support and Improvement. For every White student in these 35 schools, ten are Black and eighteen Latinx. Collectively, 93% of students in these CSI schools are, in the words of state accountability, “economically disadvantaged.” The percentage of students living in shelters is *three times higher* than the citywide

average. PS 197 in Central Harlem and PS 557 in East New York are six times higher. The percentage at PS 327 in Brownsville is *eight times higher*.

Our city's schools chancellor, Richard A. Carranza, has questioned tests with uneven outcomes. He said that the city's exam for admission into gifted and talented programs is "more a measure of the privilege of a child's home than true giftedness." Carranza also said that a single test is "neither reliable or valid" grounds for "brilliant Black and Latino students" to be denied admissions to the city's specialized high schools. And on the day that results of the most recent state exams were released to the public, Chancellor Carranza warned that test scores "should not be used to cast aspersions or make declarations on communities and schools." So if virtually all of the city's CSI schools serve economically segregated communities, would it be "reliable or valid" to "make declarations" about those schools?

Same Options, Different Risk

Just as the economics of school communities affect the odds of getting on the CSI list, economics matter when it comes to opting out of state exams. Not all schools with high opt-out percentages have been designated for Comprehensive Support and Improvement. Initially, schools with high opt-out rates are ranked toward the bottom of the state's accountability formula. Then, in a second phase of sorting, the state considers the scores of the students who actually took the tests. Essentially, if those few test-takers rank above the statewide average, the whole school avoids CSI. That's where the statistics start to skew.

New York's accountability formula gives no credit for students who score at the lowest level of its exams, and extra points for scoring at the highest level. On 2018's statewide math exam, "economically disadvantaged" students were almost three times more likely to count for no credit; "not economically disadvantaged" students were more than twice as likely to count for extra credit. Consider one downtown middle school where more than 96% of students opted out. Four test takers were "economically disadvantaged," and fifteen test takers were not. That school avoided CSI.

A family's income does not – does *not* – express the true brilliance of its children. There are schools (including ours) where "economically disadvantaged" test-takers scored higher last year. Still, our testing system's statistical *probabilities* give an extra cushion to districts such as Bellmore and East Islip – districts where average household

sits above \$115,000, where opt-out rates climb above 70%... and where the number of CSI schools is zero. When it comes to keeping wealthier school communities in good standing with the state, “not economically disadvantaged” is, simply, *advantaged*.

Opting into Choice

Over the past three years, about one in five New York State students have opted out. Each year, the number of children who refuse testing is greater than the population of the biggest city of eight different states. CSI might make cautionary examples of a handful of high opt-out schools. But if a few “not economically disadvantaged” test-takers can keep their schools in good standing, then CSI applies unequal pressure.

“Privilege isn’t a bad thing,” Chancellor Carranza has said of parental empowerment in schools, “as long as we share it.” To opt out without fearing the effects on your school has become a privilege. In a city where “economically disadvantaged” students represented two-thirds of those opting out last spring, we should, as the chancellor says, share privilege. I’m not arguing that anyone *should* opt out, just that no family should face extra pressure to opt *in*.

If policymakers eventually have to account for this unevenness, I predict we’ll end up with more relatively affluent schools penalized. That would be ‘equity’ through similar consequences. But, I would rather expand the privileges that only some communities currently enjoy. True equity would be telling every family in every school in every neighborhood what I’m comfortable telling you: Choose what’s best for your child, and your school will stand by your choice.

—Gabriel