

More Accessible Educational Opportunities for Preschoolers



Encouraging Children in Low-Income NYC Districts to Take the Gifted & Talented Admissions Test

NYC students entering kindergarten through grade three can sign up to take the admissions test for Gifted & Talented programs, which offer specialized instruction and enrichment opportunities. Students in low-income districts are less likely than their peers in higher-income districts to take the test. As a result, fewer low-income students test into and attend Gifted & Talented programs, missing out on the potential for improved educational outcomes and other benefits related to social well-being. We redesigned communications to encourage more parents from all income levels to sign their child up for the admissions test.

Summary

New York City's Gifted & Talented programs (G&T) offer specialized instruction and enrichment opportunities to exceptional students regardless of socioeconomic status. These programs are designed to help students entering kindergarten through grade three excel academically, which can have cascading effects on their lives even after school. These are exactly the kinds of programs that could support students from low-income districts and set them up for future success. However, students in low-income districts are less likely than their peers in higher-income districts to take the admissions test. As a result, fewer low-income students test into and attend G&T programs.

Highlights

- ▶ While all NYC students should have equal opportunity to access to Gifted & Talented programs, fewer students in low-income districts take the admissions test.
- ▶ Redesigning communications about test sign-ups by framing it as an opportunity and also accounting for limited attention helped increase test uptake.

A compounding issue is that New York City sometimes uses sign-up rates as an indicator of demand for G&T programs and, thus, as an indicator for where additional programs should be created within the City. This creates a vicious cycle where low sign-up rates result in fewer local G&T programs in low-income districts, and the lack of convenient nearby programs prompts fewer sign-ups in these areas.

In an effort to combat this problem, the New York City Office of School Enrollment (OSE) at the Department of Education (DOE) sends informational emails and postcards to parents of all students who are eligible to take the G&T test based on their grade levels. Yet, the emails and postcards have not narrowed the testing gap between low-income and high-income districts. Because the City is interested in increasing the number of students from low-income districts who qualify for and enroll in G&T programs, they wanted to dig deeper to identify potential solutions.

In 2016, the New York City Behavioral Design Team (NYC BDT)—ideas42's unit within the NYC Mayor's Office—partnered with OSE to both identify behavioral barriers preventing signups for the placement test and design solutions to help more parents follow through on signing their children up.

Uncovering behavioral barriers

To take a closer look at how we might increase the number of low-income families signing their preschoolers up for the admissions test, our team conducted both qualitative and quantitative research. We focused on preschoolers entering kindergarten, since their potential admission to G&T would likely have the most impact on their experience. First, we went through the sign-up process ourselves and then took the practice test that students use to prepare. We also examined data on families in NYC who have and have not opted into the admissions test. To learn directly from families who might access G&T programs, we surveyed and spoke with parents who were visiting Family Welcome Centers, which are locations throughout the five boroughs where families can access a range of City services for students enrolled in DOE schools.

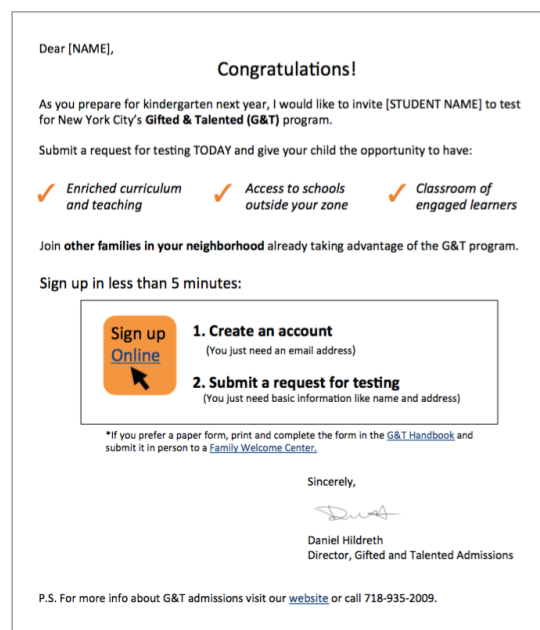
Through this process, we uncovered several behavioral bottlenecks that parents face when considering Gifted & Talented testing for their students. First, parents might overlook information about the program. Parents, particularly those with lower incomes, are extremely bandwidth constrained. Their attention is consumed by the very real demands of work, paying rent, feeding their families, and arranging childcare, among other responsibilities. Therefore, low-income parents sometimes miss information that could be important for them and their children. Information regarding an optional task—like G&T testing—is particularly susceptible to being overlooked.

We also learned that parents who are aware of G&T testing may forgo signing up because they have an inaccurate **mental model** of G&T being for “other” students (e.g., students from more affluent neighborhoods or who have better grades), not their own child. Parents’ own experiences with the school system may **prime** negative identities (such as having lower academic performance or not having attended post-secondary education), further decreasing their comfort level and perceived relevance of the G&T program for their children.

Redesigning emails and postcards

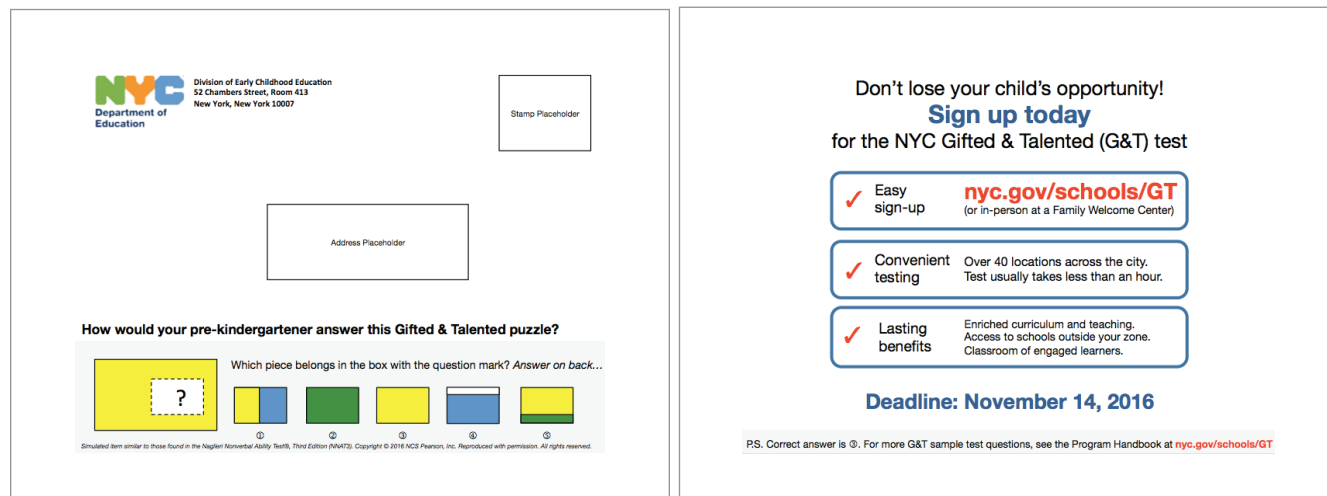
To address these barriers and help prompt test sign-ups, the NYC BDT decided to focus on improving an existing communication from the City and sent both a redesigned email and a redesigned physical postcard to parents of preschoolers who would enter kindergarten in the 2017-2018 school year. The email, pictured to the right, used a congratulatory tone to prime a positive identity of a proud parent and used illustrated icons and succinct language to highlight key information quickly (to account for **limited attention** and bandwidth) and prompt action.

The mailed postcard (featured below) attempted to reframe the G&T program as one in which students of different races,



genders, and income levels participate. On the front of the card, we included a sample test question from the actual placement test to 1) draw parents’ attention, 2) reduce ambiguity around testing level required to succeed and 3) reinforce that the G&T program was relevant to and attainable for their child.

Because we know that information alone is often not enough to change behavior, the back of the card prompts immediate action using evidence-based components—*loss framing*, an emphasized deadline, and simplified action steps—and provides details about G&T to underscore that any child can benefit from the program.



These messages were sent to 60,000 households randomly assigned to one of four groups—15,000 households received the redesigned email and redesigned postcard, 15,000 received the redesigned email and the standard postcard, 15,000 received the standard email and redesigned the postcard, and 15,000 received the standard email and standard postcard.

Results

The redesigned communications had the largest impact on low-income districts. The results of our randomized controlled trial showed that families that received the redesigned email, regardless of which postcard they received, were one percentage point more likely to sign up for and show up for the admissions test. **This increase among low-income districts represents a 9% increase in testing rates.** In addition, those who received the redesigned emails and standard postcard were one percentage point more likely to show up for the test, on average, which represents a **12% increase in testing rates among low-income districts.** Among all districts, the redesigned emails led to a 5% increase in test registration rates and a 6% increase in testing rates, overall.¹

An interesting and surprising outcome was that increasing the number of tests taken lowered average scores on the exam. Parents receiving redesigned emails resulted in slightly lower average test scores across all districts. This suggests that the new group of students who were encouraged to sign up were

¹ All results are statistically significant at the 5% level (p<0.05).

less prepared to take the test. For that reason, we did not observe an increase in the number of students who qualified for G&T programs. A potential reason for the lower scores is that some parents enroll their students in test prep courses, and not all students have equal access to such classes.

Takeaway

Simply redesigning the content of existing communications about Gifted & Talented was an effective means of prompting students to sign up for and show up to the admissions test. But registering for the admissions test is just one step in making the Gifted & Talented program more representative.

The discrepancy in average test scores indicates that a combination of messaging to encourage registering for the exam alongside test preparation support may be more effective in closing the achievement gap between districts. These findings provide evidence to support offering free and accessible test prep among low-income districts to reduce the inequities in test-taking skills. An imperfect proxy for ability, test-taking preparation may be crowding out lower-income students from accessing Gifted & Talented resources and the opportunities that they provide.

Making it easier for gifted students to access supportive educational programs regardless of their parents' resources is an important step in achieving equitable outcomes for New York City's next generation. Our work with the City to encourage more students in low-income districts to take the admissions exam for Gifted & Talented programs was one step that demonstrates the promise of using behavioral insights to improve equity alongside other supportive programming.