

Public Statement by Ibram X. Kendi

School Committee Meeting

10/21/20

Members of the Boston School Committee, I am writing to express my support for suspending the high-stakes test for Boston's three exam schools. My name is Ibram X. Kendi. I am a Boston resident and a parent.

I am not going to speak to you about what is best for my child. It is not your job to do what's best for my child. It is your job to do what's best for all Boston children. And I'm one of many Boston residents who share your perspective: thinking about what's best for the community of Latinx and White and Black and Asian and Native and biracial and low-income and middle income and upper-income kids in this city. And what is always best for the community is admission policies that create equal opportunity for all. And we know a policy is creating more equal opportunity if it is closing racial and economic inequity. We know a policy is not creating equal opportunity if it is maintaining racial and economic inequity. And the data is indisputable on the effects of this plan: it will close racial and economic gaps.

That's how we should be assessing proposed and existing policies. Are they reducing or maintaining racial inequities? Because if they are reducing racial inequity, then they are antiracist. If they are maintaining or expanding racial inequity, then they are racist. And so, I urge you to approve this antiracist policy proposal. Because it is what's best for the community. Again, I am not supportive of suspending the standardized test for my child. I'm married to a physician, and my wife and I have the resources to sign her up for an expensive test prep course. We have the resources to hire a test prep consultant. We have the financial ability and job flexibility to take off from work to tutor her ourselves. All the test prep will end up being money well spent: it will boost her score.

All the while, I'll come here and tell you that she worked hard in school, and she's so smart—and that's why she got such a high score that got her into the exam school. I won't tell you I took advantage of the multi-billion-dollar test prep industry. I won't tell you that across the United States test prep companies and consultants are concentrated in White and Asian neighborhoods—and no wonder they tend to get higher scores on standardized tests. Because we're not supposed to talk about all this. We're not supposed to be talking about the fact that all Boston children do not have equal access to high quality test preparation—and it's impossible to create that equal access. We're not supposed to talk about all this legal cheating: because that's what it is.

It is like allowing some NFL teams more time to practice in the offseason and when those teams regularly win the Super Bowl somehow claiming the rules are fair. And of course, when you try to take away the practice advantage to those winning teams, they are going to resist the policy change. They are going to claim you are being unfair. They are going to claim they are being persecuted and their teams are the best, all the while they know privately, they were gaming the system all along.

This is the elephant in the room that the folks claiming the standardized test is fair do not want to discuss. They will just claim White and Asian kids on average score higher on tests because they are smarter or work harder. Meaning Black and Latinx kids are not as smart or not as hard-working. Meaning White and Asian kids are intellectually superior. And all these racist ideas from people claiming they are not racist.

I could claim that low-income Black and Latinx children are intellectually inferior; that there's something wrong with them. After my child receives extraordinary K-6 schooling, after my child receives extraordinary test prep, I can sit here and lie through my teeth and argue that the standardized test is fair; that my child is extraordinary; that she deserves the extraordinary opportunities in these three schools. But I'm not going to do that. As much as I care about my daughter, I care about fairness, I care about justice, I care about equity, I care about the truth. We have a culture of lies to substantiate the exalted and the advantaged in this country. We do not want to tell the truth to provide equal opportunity for the denigrated and disadvantaged in this country.

And to tell the truth about standardized tests is to tell the story of the eugenicists who created and popularized these tests in the United States more than a century ago. Eugenicists today are commonly considered to be racist but somehow many Americans consider their tests to be "not racist," whatever that means.

In 1869, Charles Darwin's cousin, English statistician Francis Galton, hypothesized in *Hereditary Genius* that "[t]he average intellectual standard of the negro race is some two grades below our own." Galton pioneered the western eugenics movement but failed to develop a testing mechanism that verified his racist hypothesis. Where Galton failed, other eugenicists succeeded.

Stanford University psychologist Lewis Terman introduced and defended the viability of the nation's first popular standardized intelligence test in his 1916 book, *The Measurement of Intelligence*. These "experimental" tests will show "enormously significant racial differences in general intelligence, differences which cannot be wiped out by any scheme of mental culture," [Terman maintained](#). He imagined a permanent academic achievement gap, a permanent racial hierarchy, verified by these supposedly objective measures.

It is fascinating how Americans today can rightly decry the Nazi Holocaust, Americans can rightly decry Jim Crow segregation, but still defend the invention of eugenicists: the standardized test. By the 1960s, genetic explanations to explain the so-called achievement gap itself had largely been discredited. Instead lower test scores from Black and Latinx students were explained by their environment. The new racist ideas claimed their broken cultures and broken homes and broken schools and broken families had made them culturally or behaviorally inferior—not their genetics.

And today, many Americans still imagine an achievement gap rather than an opportunity gap. We still think there's something wrong with the kids rather than recognizing there's something wrong with the tests. Standardized tests have become the most effective racist weapon ever devised to objectively degrade Black and Brown minds and legally exclude their bodies from prestigious schools.

Why do Black and Latinx children routinely get lower scores on the standardized tests? Either there's something wrong with the test takers or there's something wrong with the tests. Why are Black and Latinx children routinely under-represented in the exam schools? Either there's something wrong with the Black and Latinx children or there's something wrong with Boston's admissions policies. To say there's something wrong with Black and Latinx children is to say racist ideas. And those who say racist ideas, typically deny their ideas are racist.

We need to stop putting down Black and Latinx and Native children. We need to stop putting down low-income White and Asian children. There's something wrong with the test; there's something wrong with the admissions policies—not the kids. We need to radically change our educational system and stop attacking the kids and their caretakers and their teachers.

Members of the School Committee: It is your job to do what's best for the children of caretakers who don't have the time and privilege to make statements today. I'm speaking about the overwhelming majority of caretakers of the city's low-income Black and Latinx children; these families are suffering the brunt of the coronavirus pandemic in this city; these families are facing unemployment and food insecurity and housing insecurity.

The children who have the least in their homes often have the least in their schools—an ongoing crime that you have the power to begin to change. I wholeheartedly support this plan that begins to reverse the status quo: Instead of advantaged kids having the edge in admission decisions, disadvantaged kids should have the edge in admissions decisions. From eliminating the test to setting aside a number of seats from each zip code, this proposal will allow our exam schools to more closely reflect the racial and economic makeup of Boston kids. This proposal can begin the process of Boston transforming our high-quality exam schools into high-quality opportunity schools. Let's call them that, let's make them opportunity schools.