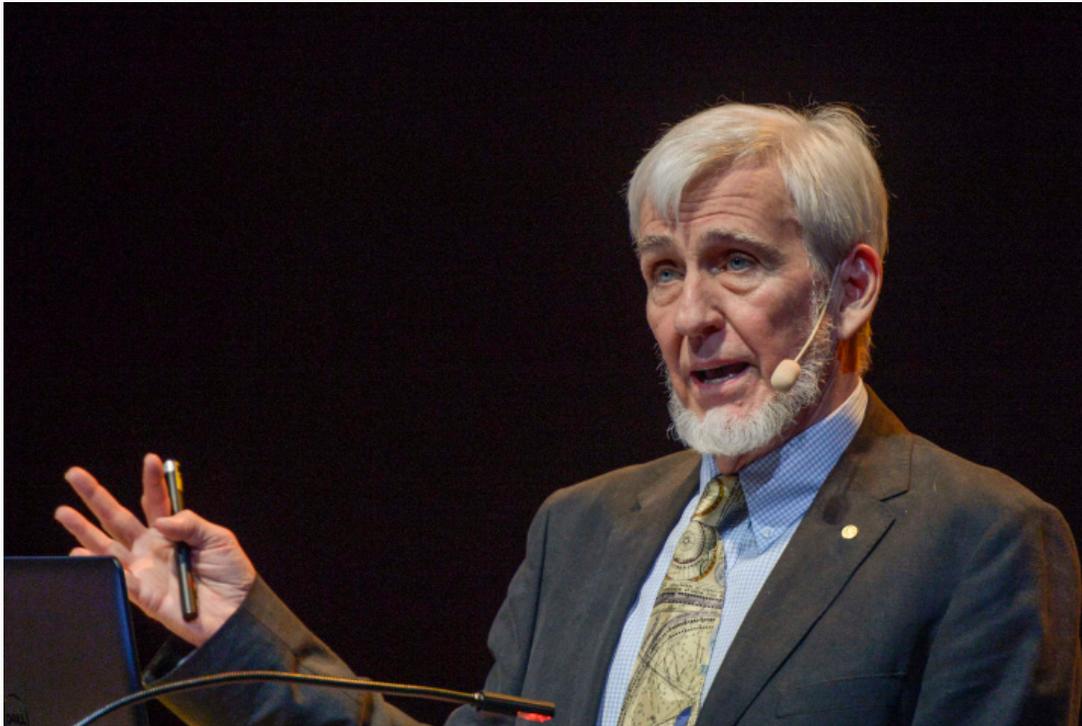


**OPINION**

NYC's last Nobel? The war on quality schooling

By [Mark Schulte](#)

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The 2014 Nobel laureate in Medicine, John O'Keefe.

Photo: REUTERS

Dr. John O'Keefe, who today receives this year's Nobel Prize in medicine, is the 45th graduate of a New York City high school to win the world's most prestigious prize.

He attended Regis, the elite all-boys Catholic high school on the Upper East Side. But 42 of these Nobelists were from public high schools — and politics now threatens to shut down that pipeline.

Consider: O'Keefe is also the 10th graduate of City College to win a Nobel — but there won't be many more for some time, because city leaders devastated City College for decades by forcing it to abandon its rigorous entrance standards back in 1969.

In that year, Mayor John Lindsay caved in to a group of black, Puerto Rican and white left-wing radicals who were staging violent protests on campus for the admission of more minority students.

He abolished CCNY's very competitive admissions policies for an "open admissions" policy that quickly transformed the school.

I was a CCNY student from 1967 to 1971. During my last two years, I experienced the college's academic disintegration, as students who could barely handle community-college work were admitted in large numbers, a shift that destroyed one of the nation's leading undergraduate institutions.

It wasn't until 1999 that Mayor Rudy Giuliani wisely abolished open admissions at the senior colleges at CUNY. (He did so with critical backing from former Rep. Herman Badillo, a CCNY graduate, who died last week.)

While CUNY's senior colleges haven't yet fully returned to their former academic glory, another brilliant graduate of CCNY (and DeWitt Clinton HS), William Macaulay ('62), a self-made billionaire, donated tens of millions to establish the Macaulay Honors College at CUNY, which since 2001 has attracted an increasing number of the city's brightest high-school seniors, as CCNY did before the open-admissions catastrophe.

In short, CUNY again has a chance of incubating future Nobel Prize winners.

Could we really repeat Lindsay's mistake with our top public high schools? In fact, politics killed one of them before.

Three of the city high schools' Nobel laureates attended Townsend Harris in the 1930s, when it was the all-boys prep school for City College. Yet Mayor Fiorello La Guardia, in a burst of anti-elitist demagoguery, closed the distinguished institution in 1942. It wasn't revived until 1984.

That year, through the persistence of its alumni, Townsend Harris HS re-opened in 1984 in affiliation with Queens College. It's now the borough's top academic high school.

Today, there's another threat.

Another 14 of the city public school's Nobelists graduated from Bronx Science, Stuyvesant and Brooklyn Tech.

Under a 1971 state law, admission at all three schools continues to be governed by the Specialized High Schools Admission Test. This policy has allowed all three to maintain their national reputations for academic excellence.

But a political assault may change that. In 2012, the New York City-based NAACP Legal Defense Fund filed a complaint with the US Department of Education tendentiously claiming racial/ethnic bias in the SHSAT. A host of local politicians have been making the same argument.

Then-Mayor Michael Bloomberg unequivocally rejected the Legal Defense Fund's claims.

(It's worth noting that, for the previous 72 years that the LDF was headquartered in NYC, including 44 years when it was led by civil-rights giants Thurgood Marshall and Jack Greenberg, the LDF didn't claim bias in the SHSAT, whose basic format hasn't changed in many decades.)

But Mayor Bill de Blasio, who grew up in Cambridge, Mass., and arrived in the city in 1980 to attend NYU, appears blithely unfamiliar with this history of triumphs and tragedies in the city's public-education systems.

The mayor, whose son Dante attends Brooklyn Tech, supports the LDF's revanchist campaign to replace the SHSAT with subjective criteria.

No matter that the most likely result will be to impose racial and ethnic quotas at Bronx Science, Stuyvesant, Brooklyn Tech and five newer specialized high schools: Brooklyn Latin, Staten Island Tech, HS of American Studies at Lehman College, HS for Mathematics, Science and Engineering at City College and Queens HS for the Sciences at York College.

It seems unlikely that the Legislature will recklessly amend the 1971 law mandating the SHSAT as the sole criterion for admission into the specialized high schools.

But Mayor de Blasio has other ways to destroy New York's best: Schools Chancellor Carmen Fariña is looking at options for changing the nature of the test, in an evident effort to give the critics at least some of what they want.

Mark Schulte is a retired New York City public-school teacher and Bronx Science graduate.

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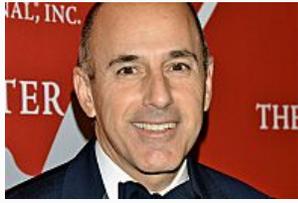


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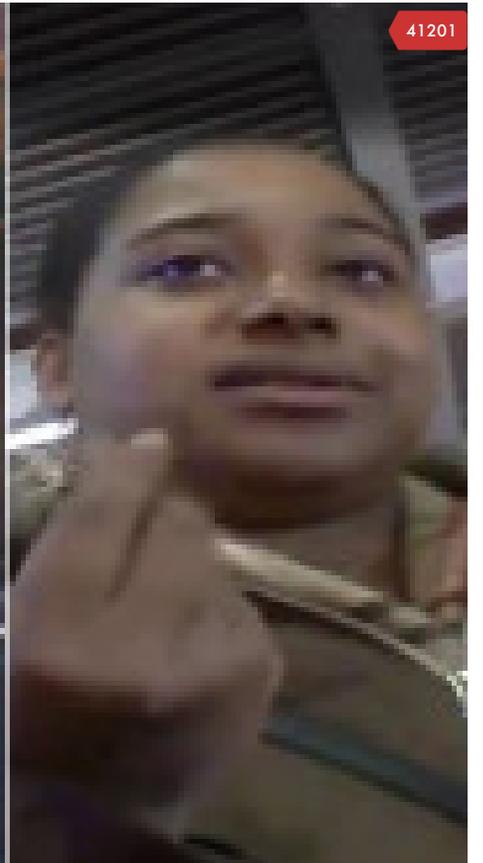
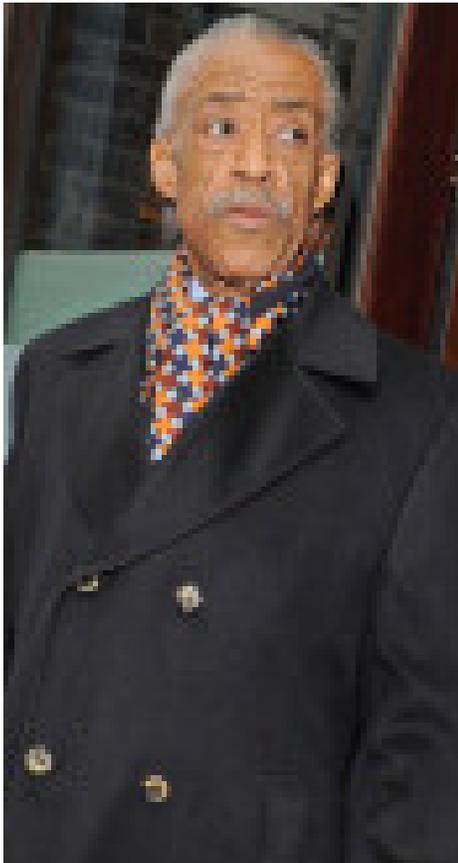
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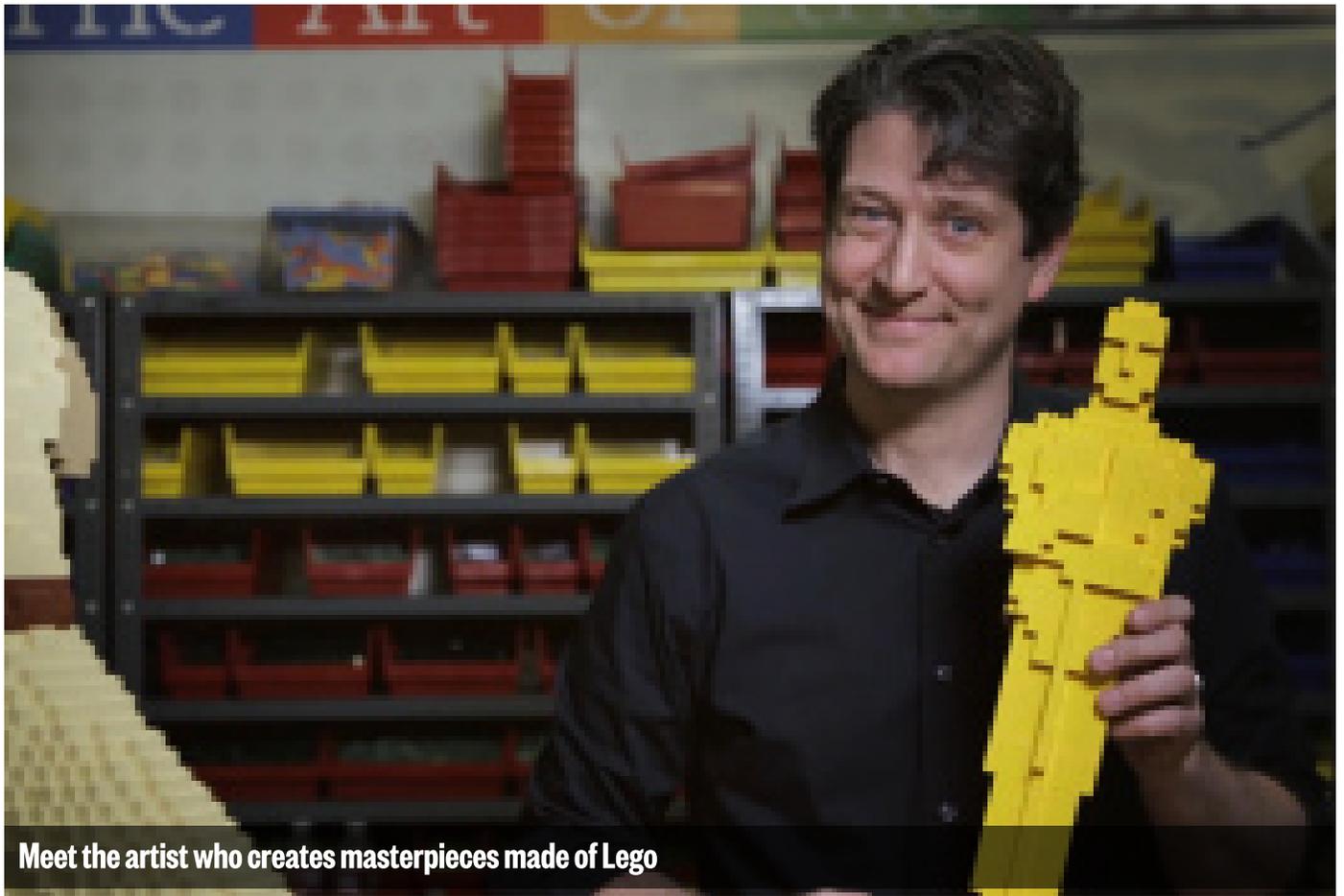


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