

— SECOND EDITION —

NEW YORK CITY'S

BEST

PUBLIC HIGH
SCHOOLS

A PARENTS' GUIDE

UPDATED!
Includes new
schools

Clara Hemphill

(author of *New York City's Best Public
Elementary Schools: A Parent's Guide*)

with Pamela Wheaton and Jacqueline Wayans

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with Pamela Wheaton and Jacqueline Wayans

**TEACHERS
COLLEGE
PRESS**

**TEACHERS COLLEGE
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
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To Rob

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PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

Public education in New York City is in the midst of a radical reorganization that began when Mayor Michael Bloomberg wrested control of the schools from the discredited Board of Education in 2002. This completely updated and revised version of *New York City's Best Public High Schools* incorporates for the first time the major changes instituted by the mayor and his chancellor, Joel Klein.

This second edition also offers all new profiles for 14 schools, most of which have opened in the past two years. In all, the book provides in-depth profiles of 50 schools and thumbnail sketches of three dozen more, including many that are new or newly discovered.

New York City has long had the most extensive system of school choice in the country, and, despite the many problems plaguing public education, the number of options for high school students continues to grow.

At the same time, a complex and intimidating admissions process for public high schools has long bedeviled even the most intrepid 8th graders and their parents, and, despite promises by the new administration to make it more humane, substantial improvements are likely to take a number of years. Still, as the schools here demonstrate, there are reasons to be optimistic.

The new chancellor is committed to the creation of small schools. Several dozen new schools have opened in recent years, and more are on the drawing boards. Private foundations such as the Gates Foundation, the Carnegie Foundation, and the Open Society Institute are pouring millions of dollars into high school reform in New York City, which is seen as a national model for urban education. While many of the new schools may flounder, and continual fiscal woes threaten many others, the momentum created by the reform efforts has generated a sense of excitement that is invigorating seasoned teachers and attracting new ones from outside the city and from other fields.

New York City has long offered plausible options for its very top students—those who can qualify for the super-selective schools such as Bronx High School of Science or LaGuardia High

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School of Music and Art and Performing Arts. But the ordinary neighborhood high schools that most students attend have suffered from lackluster leadership, dreadful overcrowding, and morale-sapping rounds of budget cuts.

If the mayor's reorganization of the school system works as planned, it may also reinvigorate the neighborhood high schools, giving more options for students who don't make the cut in the competitive exams and auditions for the selective schools. For years, elementary and middle schools were governed by 32 semi-autonomous districts, while the high schools were controlled by the central Board of Education. For students, the transition from 8th grade to high school was made even more difficult by a convoluted and confusing admissions process and by a wrenching change from one school system—with its own philosophy and curriculum—to another.

Now the city has been divided into 10 super-districts, each of which is charged with administering all the schools, covering kindergarten through 12th grade (see map facing page 1). This new organization, it is hoped, will make for more continuity from 8th grade to 9th grade and allow for a coherent K–12 curriculum—as well as reasonable alternatives for students who don't want to leave their neighborhood.

Confusing and uneven as the old system was, it did have some benefits: dozens of imaginative experimental schools were allowed to flourish—each with its own personality and tone, some of which drew students from a whole borough or even the whole city. From the Bard High School Early College (in which children complete high school and two years of college in a total of four years) to Aviation High School (a five-year program where students learn to be airline mechanics), from the Museum School (where a large portion of the day's lessons are conducted in museums) to the Young Women's Leadership Schools (one of the few all-girls public schools in the nation), the vitality and variety of the best public high schools is one of the city's unheralded strengths.

—Clara Hemphill

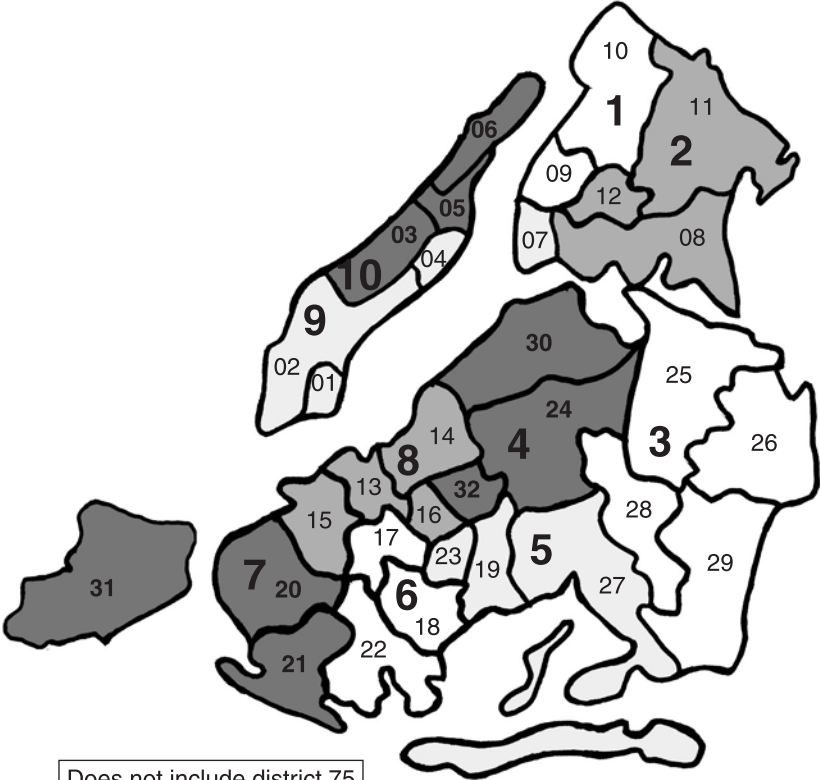
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This book was a collaborative effort. Pamela Wheaton, my colleague at *Insideschools.org*, did much of the reporting for Brooklyn and Staten Island. She cheerfully accepted early morning assignments in the far reaches of Manhattan Beach and New Dorp, doggedly tracked down recalcitrant administrators, and nearly froze her fingers interviewing students outside Brooklyn Technical High School one winter day. Jacqueline Wayans, who also works with me at *Insideschools.org*, discovered hidden gems in the Bronx. Special thanks go to my other colleagues at Advocates for Children. Judith Baum visited Landmark School and A. Philip Randolph Campus High School in Manhattan, edited early drafts, and provided moral support and useful insights based on her many years as a public school advocate. Deborah Apsel, Catherine Man, and Tamar Smith visited schools and updated profiles, as did Marcia Biederman, a freelance writer. Deborah Apsel also proof-read, helped check facts, and compiled the index. Alex Ruano compiled the data. AFC executive director Jill Chaifetz gave me precious time off from my other duties to research and write this book. Thanks to Erica Lansner, who generously agreed to take publicity photos.

The Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, the David L. Klein Foundation, and the Starr Foundation provided financial support for my research at AFC. My editor at Teachers College Press, Brian Ellerbeck, and publisher Carole Saltz, both public school parents, were enthusiastic backers of the project. The TC Press production staff put out the book in record time.

My husband, Robert Snyder, and children, Max and Allison, tolerated months of my distracted attention as I struggled to complete the project, which came to be known in our house as *The Book That Never Ends*. They are, as always, my greatest love and inspiration.

New York City Department of Education Map of Instructional Divisions



INTRODUCTION

New York City has some of the best public high schools in the country—as well as some of the worst. The best public schools expose students to a wide range of experiences that are unknown in private or suburban public schools: the chance to study acting with a Broadway star, to dance with an Alvin Ailey professional, or to have a private music lesson with a violinist from the New York Philharmonic. Students may raise chickens at a school in Queens or repair a subway car at a school in Brooklyn. They may study gamma rays emitted from black holes, or work with senior scientists at major hospital centers on cancer or AIDS research. New York City public school students have classmates from around the world. An African-American girl said she was thrilled when one classmate taught her to count in Russian and another explained why Muslim women sometimes wear headscarves.

There are difficulties, to be sure. Even the best schools suffer from the problems endemic to the public education system as a whole. Most classes are too large. Some buildings have peeling paint and antique equipment. Low pay and poor working conditions have driven many principals and teachers to the suburbs or to early retirement, and recruiting competent replacements is a challenge. But some schools, through skillful leadership and energetic fund-raising, have managed to mitigate these troubles and offer children unparalleled opportunities. They prepare students for Ivy League schools as well as first-rate public universities and help them win millions of dollars in scholarships that make higher education possible even for families of modest means.

There is a surprising variety of public high schools in New York City. There are behemoths such as Benjamin Cardozo High School in Queens with more than 4,000 students and course offerings as exotic as fencing and salsa dancing. There are tiny schools such as the Urban Academy Laboratory School in Manhattan, with about 100 students, where kids get such lavish individual attention that even those who otherwise might have become drop-outs go on to selective 4-year colleges. There are schools with a small-town feel in the almost rural areas of Staten Island

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and schools that seem like skyscrapers, like Manhattan's 10-story Stuyvesant High School.

There are schools with a classical curriculum, where everyone studies Greek and Latin, and schools that have turned tradition on its head, where even the teachers wear blue jeans, where kids help design the curriculum and kids and grown-ups are on a first-name basis. There are schools that consistently turn out finalists for the nation's most prestigious high school science award—the Intel Science Talent Search.

There is an all-girls school, the Young Women's Leadership School in Manhattan, where students debate the role of early feminists as they study the Enlightenment. There is an agricultural program at John Bowne High School in Queens where kids learn to shear sheep and milk cows as well as study algebra and chemistry. Kids fix subway cars at East New York Transit Tech in Brooklyn. At the Museum School in Manhattan, kids spend two afternoons a week at various museums—and learn to do research the way curators do.

In a special law program at Bronx High School of Science, kids met privately with several U.S. Supreme Court justices. At Dewitt Clinton High School in the Bronx, kids study playwriting with professional playwrights such as Wendy Wasserstein. At Hunter College High School, among others, kids participate in national Lincoln–Douglass debates and national mathematics competitions.

There are highly competitive schools where driven, workaholic teenagers pride themselves on the fact that they do 6 hours of homework a day—and survive on 4 hours of sleep a night. And there are places that inspire troubled or alienated kids to finish school and go on to college: Humanities Prep in Manhattan, for example, lured back to school a homeless girl—a drop-out whose mother had lost her life to AIDS—and helped her win admission to Harvard.

The city's tremendous ethnic and racial diversity gives the public schools a culture and flavor that are missing in most private or suburban schools. New York City public school students come from 170 different countries. This diversity enriches kids' social and intellectual lives. Students discover that building friendships across the great divides of race and class not only prepares them to live and work in a multiracial democracy, but also enhances their classroom experiences. A recent immigrant from the Dominican Republic, for example, brought his traditions of Caribbean music to a class on American jazz at

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LaGuardia High School of Music and Art and Performing Arts in Manhattan. His teacher described how white, African-American, and Latino kids melded their musical performances into a delightful gumbo of sounds. Whether kids are studying the American civil rights movement, the ancient myths of China and India, or the European colonizing of Africa, having classmates from different races, religions, and countries enlivens class discussions and offers students new perspectives.

The New York City public high schools are emerging slowly from a long period of decline. People over the age of 50 who grew up in New York City remember a time when most ordinary neighborhood high schools were adequate. Public schools had the support of the middle class. Teachers' salaries were competitive. Talented women—with few other career options—went into teaching, and, during the Vietnam War, talented young men seeking a deferral from the draft chose teaching as well.

The fiscal crisis of the mid-1970s dealt a blow to the city from which public education has never recovered fully. Waves of layoffs decimated schools. Routine maintenance was deferred. Physical plants fell into disrepair. Teachers' salaries, which had been competitive with the suburbs, lost ground in comparison to surrounding communities. The exodus of the white middle class to the suburbs accelerated, and the New York City school system increasingly was left with poor black and Hispanic children whose parents lacked the political power to demand adequate schools. As job opportunities for women expanded, fewer chose teaching. And, as the gap between teaching salaries in the city and those in the suburbs grew, it became increasingly difficult to recruit city teachers. With a few notable exceptions, New York City high schools came to be seen as the last refuge of the poor. Neighborhood high schools in large swaths of the city ranged from mediocre to downright dangerous.

That bleak situation began to change in the early 1990s, when, as part of a national school reform movement, the Board of Education allowed several dozen new small, alternative schools to open. While some of these have floundered, many have flourished and are now beginning to compete successfully for students with both private schools and the most selective public schools.

There are other tentative signs of life in what has been a moribund system. A few neighborhood high schools have been revived. A few schools have been granted "charter" status and

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are now free from certain bureaucratic regulations. Several new selective schools and good small programs within larger schools have been launched. And several vocational schools have retooled and now offer college preparatory courses to train future engineers as well as future plumbers and auto mechanics. Grim, giant factory-like schools still make up the bulk of the New York City public high school system, but there are a growing number of humane, academically challenging alternatives.

The demographics are changing as well. Huge waves of immigrants came to New York in the 1980s and 1990s and, while their numbers created tremendous overcrowding in the schools, the energy, ambition, and drive of many newcomers—and their faith that education is the route to success—have helped revitalize public schools. The growth of the city’s African-American middle class, along with the decision of many white middle-class families to stay in the city rather than move to the suburbs, has created a vocal constituency for public education. The schools are still woefully short of money, but, as the middle class begins to use the public schools again, they are demanding the adequate funding that has eluded public education for a quarter century.

Even in current circumstances, there are more options for high school students than commonly recognized. Students may apply to any school in the city—with some restrictions. And, while transportation woes, overcrowding, and interdistrict squabbling severely limit school choice for younger children, high school students who are old enough to travel by themselves have wider options. It’s not uncommon for kids to take the subway each day from Brooklyn to attend school in Manhattan or from Queens to attend school in the Bronx.

Unfortunately, finding a good public high school in New York City is a major chore. The high school admissions process is as complicated and agonizing as applying for college. The stakes are high, because the gap between the high-performing and low-performing schools is great. Authoritative information on the quality of schools is scarce.

The Department of Education does publish an annual directory of public high schools and distributes it free to all 8th graders. Others may pick one up at the Office of High School Admissions at 22 East 28th Street, 9th floor, New York, NY 10016.

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Telephone: (917) 256-4300. This annual directory of high schools is also available online: www.nycenet.edu/hs_directory. It provides information on admissions criteria for each school, a “mission statement,” and basic data such as addresses, telephone numbers, and the number of Advanced Placement courses offered. The Department of Education website (www.nycenet.edu/daa) offers annual school report cards with graduation rates, average SAT scores, safety records, attendance, and the like. Advocates for Children offers an online guide to public schools, www.inside-schools.org, with thumbnail sketches of schools.

Still, it’s difficult for parents and students to find out which schools are really good and which merely have glossy promotional pamphlets. It’s particularly difficult for parents to find a school that fits their child’s personality, and academic strengths and weaknesses—because a school that’s good for one child may be a disaster for another. This book fills the gap. It provides detailed profiles of 50 effective high schools in all five boroughs, as well as shorter descriptions of several dozen others. My colleagues and I at Advocates for Children, a nonprofit advocacy organization in Manhattan, visited nearly all of the city’s 235 high schools, sifted through hundreds of pages of Department of Education data, and interviewed hundreds of teachers, administrators, parents, and students to prepare this book.

This book is primarily for parents who are seeking a college preparatory high school for their child. It focuses on schools that draw students from across the borough or the city, that graduate most of their students within 4 years, and that send most of them on to 4-year colleges. It describes high-quality programs in the performing arts, which may lead to conservatories or art schools rather than traditional academic colleges. This book also includes a few outstanding “second-chance” schools that prepare for college students who have floundered in other high schools; these students typically take more than 4 years to graduate. It lists a few vocational schools that offer solid college preparatory programs. It also identifies effective special education programs for students with learning disabilities or other special needs.

The book gives briefer descriptions of good neighborhood schools that don’t admit students from outside their “zone,” of promising but untested new schools, of high-quality vocational programs that prepare most kids for work rather than college, and of effective programs for non-English-speaking students.

Getting Started

In most of the city, students are assigned to a neighborhood high school according to their address. Your child isn't required to go to this "zoned" school, but has the option of attending it without any special application. There are some high-quality neighborhood schools in Queens and Staten Island, and if you are lucky enough to live in their zones you may well begin and end your high school search right in your own backyard. But overall, the zoned neighborhood high schools in the city are pretty grim. Finding an appropriate program elsewhere probably will require an enormous expenditure of time and effort, not to mention the tedium of a daily commute for your child.

It's a good idea to investigate your high school options while your child is still in elementary school. If your neighborhood high school is adequate, you can relax. If not, you may want to begin agitating for improvements or even press the Department of Education to open a new school in your neighborhood. Parent pressure works—and several new schools have been launched in recent years as a result of parent organizing—but it takes time. Don't count on fixing everything in 6 months. More on how to press for change later.

The high school admissions process begins in earnest in September of your child's 8th-grade year. However, many parents and students start looking long before that. Some high-quality secondary schools serve students in grades 6–12 or grades 7–12. One, Hunter College High School in Manhattan, accepts children only in 7th grade. At others, only a few seats are available for new 9th graders, and it's easier to gain admission in 6th or 7th grade. Parents considering secondary schools for their children may want to read my book *Public Middle Schools: New York City's Best*, which profiles a number of effective schools serving kids in grades 6–12. That book concentrates on the middle grades and describes the admissions process for 6th and 7th graders. Profiles of these secondary schools are included in this book also, with an emphasis on grades 9–12 and descriptions of the admissions process for older students.

Where to Go for Help

Chancellor Joel Klein has established 13 regional offices where parents and students may go for help with various prob-

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lems, including applying to high school. Opened in the summer of 2003, these centers replace the high school superintendents' offices in each borough, which were closed. The old Office of High School Admissions at 22 East 28th Street, 9th floor, New York, NY, 10016, remains open, at least for a transition period. Its telephone number is (917) 256-4300. The Parent Center at the Department of Education, 52 Chambers Street, New York, NY, 10007 may be helpful as well. Telephone: (212) 374-5159.

Until 2003, high schools were administered by the central Board of Education, while elementary and middle schools were administered by 32 community school boards. Mayor Michael Bloomberg consolidated the 32 school districts into 10 "instructional divisions" and turned over administration of the high schools to 10 newly appointed regional superintendents. Each of these has a "learning support center" with a "parent liaison" and other staff members dedicated to placing students in appropriate schools. In addition, there are three "satellite" centers intended to offer sites that may be more convenient for parents.

The east side of Manhattan, downtown, and parts of the south Bronx (old districts 1, 2, 4, and 7) are now part of Division 9, with offices at 330 Seventh Avenue, telephone: (212) 356-7500. The West Side of Manhattan north of 59th Street (old districts 3, 5, and 6) is now governed by Division 10, at 4360 Broadway, telephone: (917) 521-3700.

The northern and western Bronx (old districts 9 and 10) are served by the regional office for Division 1 at 1 Fordham Plaza, telephone: (718) 741-7090. The eastern and southern sections of the Bronx (old districts 8, 11, and 12) are served by the regional office for Division 2, at 1230 Zerega Avenue. For the telephone number for Division 2, call the Department of Education switchboard at (718) 935-2000.

Division 3, serving eastern Queens (old districts 25, 26, 28, and 29) has two regional offices at 30-48 Linden Place, telephone: (718) 281-7575, and 90-27 Sutphin Boulevard. For the telephone number of the Sutphin Boulevard office of Division 3, call the Department of Education switchboard at (718) 935-2000. Division 4, serving western Queens and part of central Brooklyn (old districts 32, 24, and 30) has offices at 28-11 Queens Plaza North, telephone: (718) 391-8300.

Division 5, serving sections of southern Brooklyn and southwestern Queens (old districts 23, 19, and 27) has two offices, one at 82-01 Rockaway Boulevard in Queens, and the other at 1655 St.

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Mark's Avenue in Brooklyn. Division 6, serving a large swath of Brooklyn from Crown Heights to Bergen Beach (old districts 17, 18, and 22) has offices at 5619 Flatlands Avenue. For the telephone numbers of both Division 6 and Division 5, call the Department of Education switchboard at (718) 935-2000.

Division 7, serving Staten Island and sections of Brooklyn from Bay Ridge to Coney Island (old districts 31, 20, and 21) has offices at 415 89th Street, Brooklyn, telephone: (718) 692-5200, and 715 Ocean Terrace, Staten Island, telephone: (718) 556-8350.

Division 8, serving the Brooklyn neighborhoods of Greenpoint, Bedford Stuyvesant, and Park Slope (old districts 13, 14, 15, and 16) has its office at 131 Livingston Street, telephone: (718) 935-3900.

What Are Your Options?

The city's school system is a labyrinth of different programs, each with different admissions criteria. Some have entrance exams; others accept children by lottery. Some give preference to kids living in a particular zone, but consider applications from others. Some good schools actually favor weak students—because of peculiar Department of Education regulations governing what are known as “educational option” schools. The organization, administration, and admissions process for high schools is in constant flux. See www.insideschools.org or the Department of Education website, www.nycenet.edu for updates.

The first option to consider is your **zoned neighborhood school**. Call the Department of Education at (212) 374-5426 to find out the name of the school for which your child is zoned. A few neighborhoods, such as the East Side of Manhattan and small sections of the South Bronx, Brooklyn, and Queens have no zoned neighborhood schools. (Students who live in these neighborhoods have been given preference at small, alternative schools that were created in the early 1990s when several large, chaotic neighborhood schools were closed.) If your neighborhood school is uninspiring, you may want to see if there are any good specialized programs within it. Some otherwise lackluster neighborhood schools have excellent small programs for “honors” students or those with a particular interest in an area such as medicine or law.

There's another option for students in some Manhattan neighborhoods: high schools that were established by several

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community school districts before the 2003 consolidation of the city's 32 districts into 10 regional "divisions." These aren't zoned neighborhood schools, but they give preference (or in some cases limit admission) to students living within the boundaries of the old districts. They include six schools (Millennium, Baruch, Lab, School of the Future, Museum School, and Eleanor Roosevelt) in the old District 2 (the East Side south of 96th Street and the West Side south of 59th Street), one in the old District 3 (Beacon on the Upper West Side), one in the old District 4 (Young Women's Leadership in East Harlem), and one in District 5 (Frederick Douglass Academy in Central Harlem). Although the chancellor has moved to close the old district offices and to disperse their staffs, the district lines remain in effect for the purposes of zoning.

The city's seven **specialized high schools** are highly selective. Any student living in the five boroughs may apply. The three so-called science schools, Stuyvesant High School in Manhattan, Bronx High School of Science, and Brooklyn Technical High School, have one admissions test, given in October. Three new specialized schools opened in 2002, each affiliated with a college: The High School of American Studies at Lehman College in the Bronx, the High School for Math, Science, and Engineering at City College in Manhattan, and Queens High School for the Sciences at York College. Admission to these three schools is based on the same test. Students are expected to pick one of the six as their first choice. (Students who move to the city after the test is given may take it in late summer.) Students with the highest combined English and math scores on the multiple-choice exam are offered admission. Of the 23,000 students who take the test each year, about 840 are offered seats at Stuyvesant, 980 are offered seats at Bronx Science, and 2,100 are offered seats at Brooklyn Tech.

Students must inform their 8th-grade guidance counselors early in the fall that they intend to take the test and must obtain an admission ticket. Private school students may prefer to call the office of high school admissions directly at (917) 256-4300.

Many successful candidates have taken private "prep" courses to get ready for the exam. The Department of Education also offers a free "Math Science Institute" with summer school and after-school programs to help middle school students, particularly blacks and Hispanics, from low-performing districts prepare for the test. Call (212) 312-4816 at Stuyvesant High School for details.

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The seventh specialized school, LaGuardia High School of Music and Art and Performing Arts in Manhattan, requires an audition in dance, singing, instrumental music, drama, or technical theater, or a portfolio in studio art. Nearly 3,000 applicants audition for 70 spots in the acting program, and more than 1,600 applicants try out for 100 spots in the instrumental music program. More than 4,000 vie for 240 spots in art.

In addition to the seven specialized high schools, there are a number of highly **selective schools** that have their own admissions criteria. Hunter College High School, open to all New York City residents, admits children in 7th grade based on the results of a written exam given to 6th graders in January. Townsend Harris High School in Queens, open to all New York City residents, accepts 9th graders based on their school records and results of standardized tests. Staten Island Technical High School, open to all New York City residents, looks at a student's middle school record. The Lab School for Collaborative Studies and Young Women's Leadership School in Manhattan are other examples of selective schools. There are also selective or **screened programs** within some neighborhood high schools. Midwood High School in Brooklyn, for example, has highly selective programs in science and humanities that draw kids from across the borough; Midwood also serves as a neighborhood high school.

There are a number of **audition schools** that accept students who have a particular talent in music, dance, or art. In addition to LaGuardia, aspiring artists may consider schools such as Professional Performing Arts School, Talent Unlimited, and Frank Sinatra School of the Arts in Queens. There are also audition programs within neighborhood high schools: Bayside High School in Queens, for example, has well-regarded programs in music and art.

For years, **educational option schools** and **programs** within large high schools have offered some of the most attractive alternatives for kids—as well as some of the most perplexing and difficult admissions procedures. Many educational option schools have innovative course offerings. At the agriculture program at John Bowne High School in Queens, for example, kids care for live farm animals—and some go on to become veterinarians. The High School for Telecommunication Arts and Technology in Brooklyn integrates kids receiving special education services with the general population—and many kids become computer whizzes. At the High School for Environmental Studies in

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Manhattan, students have internships with the Nature Conservancy to maintain mountain trails, or study genetics with scientists working on fruit flies at the American Museum of Natural History.

The educational option schools were designed to ensure that students of all levels of achievement had an opportunity to take part in these unusual programs—and that low-performing kids as well as academic stars had an equal shot at admission. To that end, a certain proportion of seats have been reserved for high-achieving kids, a certain proportion for average kids, and a certain proportion for the lowest-achieving kids. The school administration typically chooses half the students; half have been assigned at random by Department of Education computers. Kids who score in the top 2% on standardized tests have long been guaranteed a slot in an “ed-op” school if they list it as their first choice on their high school application.

The problem for kids who score quite high, but who are not in the top 2%, is that high-performing kids are more likely than low-performing kids to apply. That means a school may accept nearly all of the low-performers who apply but only a small proportion of the high performers—good news if your child is struggling academically, not such good news if your child is successful but not at the very top.

The problem for school principals and teachers is that the Department of Education computer may assign kids who have expressed little interest in a particular program. That’s bad enough for a general education program but can be particularly difficult if, say, a child who has no interest in animals is assigned to an agricultural program. That said, “ed-op” schools include some of the best programs in the city and are well worth investigating. Department of Education officials have discussed changing the formula. Check the high school directory for updates.

Charter schools are public schools that operate with special permission from the state, called a charter. They are supported by public funds, but are not part of the Department of Education and are free of certain bureaucratic rules and regulations—such as receiving permission from the district superintendent before scheduling a field trip. The Renaissance School, a progressive school serving kids in kindergarten through 12th grade in Queens, converted to charter status in 2000. It accepts students by lottery. Two other Queens high schools, The International High School and Middle College High School, initially converted

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to charter status, and then returned to the Department of Education where they received larger budgets and a large degree of autonomy.

Alternative schools tend to be smaller than traditional high schools and generally offer students more individual attention. When alternative schools first opened in the 1970s, they attracted mostly students who were unsuccessful in their neighborhood schools. In recent years, however, many highly successful students have begun to choose alternative programs because they offer a warm and safe environment, smaller classes, and closer relationships between students and teachers. Many alternative schools have higher graduation rates and send more students to 4-year colleges than do the large zoned schools in the same neighborhoods.

Transfer alternative schools are designed as second-chance programs for students who are overage for their grade and far behind in their studies. Most admit students who have already attended at least one other high school. Several have evolved into sought-after college preparatory schools that admit 9th graders as well as transfer students. Brooklyn College Academy and Urban Academy and Humanities Prep in Manhattan are such transfer alternative schools. Principals at these schools typically interview and select students who they believe can benefit most from their programs. Although the students represent a wide range of abilities and skill levels, the fact that schools can select kids who agree with a school's philosophy and support its mission goes a long way toward building an effective community—and that helps make an effective school.

Special education is available for students who have disabilities that keep them from functioning in a regular classroom without extra help. At each high school we visited for this book, we asked about accommodations for children with special needs. Some such students are completely integrated into general education classes and receive special services from extra teachers assigned to help them; some are segregated in "self-contained" classrooms. Particularly good special education programs are listed in the index. For details on your child's legal rights and tips on how to navigate the special education bureaucracy, look at the Advocates for Children website at www.advocatesforchildren.org or www.insideschools.org.

Wheelchair accessible schools include: Stuyvesant, Lab, Museum, Humanities Prep, School of the Future, Urban

Academy, and Young Women's Leadership in Manhattan; Bronx Science and Dewitt Clinton in the Bronx; Transit Tech and Telecommunications in Brooklyn; and the Institute for Art and Technology and Townsend Harris in Queens. Some other schools are partially accessible. Check the high school directory or call each school directly for details.

What to Consider Before You Visit

Choosing a high school is even more difficult than choosing an elementary or a middle school. The stakes are higher. College admission looms on the horizon. Serious academic work kicks in—and if it doesn't, it's hard to catch up. While many parents feel confident supplementing their child's elementary school education with homework help or educational trips to a science museum, most of us can't tutor our kids in chemistry if the school falls short. And 8th graders have strong opinions. While few of us feel we have to consult our 4-year-olds about our choice for kindergarten, it's hard to ignore the demands of a hulking 13-year-old.

High schools, like elementary and middle schools, are roughly divided into two philosophical camps, progressive and traditional. And, while each philosophy has its strengths, the flaws in each become particularly glaring by the time kids reach high school. Parents who were content to have their kids study whales for a semester—while ignoring the multiplication tables at their progressive elementary school—become alarmed at the prospect that their children may never learn algebra. Parents who accepted the arithmetic drills and spelling tests at their child's traditional elementary school become fearful if high school biology is presented as lists of facts to memorize without any attention to analysis, research, and writing.

Traditional schools see their role as transmitting knowledge. They emphasize what teachers call "content"—dates in history, formulas in math, good grammar and spelling, knowledge of the periodic table in chemistry. Educated adults, they say, must have at least a passing acquaintance with the major events in world history, the key authors of English literature, and the facts that make up the foundations of math and science.

Progressive schools, on the other hand, seek to give students the tools they need to gather and analyze information, to weigh evidence from different sources, and to form their own opinions.

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These schools emphasize “process”—developing the skills needed to research a problem, rather than knowledge per se. It may be more important, they say, to study the Vietnam War in depth—looking at the various perspectives of the Vietnamese, the U.S. soldiers, the political leaders, and the U.S. public—than to learn a few isolated facts about every war the United States has faced. Kids should not be passive vessels acquiring knowledge, the progressives say; rather, they should be active participants in their education.

The problem, of course, is that kids need both broad general knowledge and analytical skills. They need to know the dates of the Civil War, and they also need to know why it is important. They need some of the facts that a textbook provides, but they also need to learn that a textbook isn’t the final word—and they need to know how to gather information from other sources. Inadequate traditional schools treat education as a list of facts to be mastered. Inadequate progressive schools, on the other hand, encourage kids to voice their opinions—even if they haven’t read the books on which their opinions should be based.

In researching this book, I tried to find schools that draw on the best of traditional and progressive philosophies, schools that have a balance between “process” and “content.” I looked for schools in which class discussions are common and kids write frequently. I looked for schools in which kids are encouraged to give their opinions—but also are encouraged to support their opinions with evidence from the materials that they are reading. I looked for schools that don’t rely exclusively on textbooks. The best schools supplement science textbooks with journal articles, newspaper stories, experiments, and field trips. They assign history students primary source materials such as diaries and court documents as well as books that offer a different point of view from the main text. In one of my favorite history classes, a teacher at Baruch High School in Manhattan had kids read an entry on slavery from a 50-year-old high school textbook; the notion that respectable historians were apologists for slavery as recently as 1950 was an eye-opener.

New York City high schools struggle against terrible conditions. Class sizes are large—typically 34, sometimes more. Many schools are badly overcrowded. Some have three overlapping sessions, with classes starting as early as 7 a.m. and ending after 4 p.m. (The principals in these schools must have three separate staff meetings to accommodate the teachers working different

shifts.) At most schools, principals have little control over hiring. Teachers with seniority are given priority for job openings, regardless of their talents. And the buildings have suffered from years of neglect. Peeling paint and gloomy lighting add to the prison-like ambiance.

The traditional high school is generally a place of endless petty rules. There are constant interruptions from bells or loud-speaker announcements. Contacts between grown-ups and kids are perfunctory. Walk with a principal through the corridors of a traditional high school, and chances are the only thing he'll say to kids is, "Take your hat off."

"Adolescents are among the last social groups in the world to be given the full nineteenth-century colonial treatment," Edgar Z. Friedenberg wrote in *Coming of Age in America* in 1963, a statement that rings true today. Alienation may be a right of passage for all adolescents, but the structure of traditional high schools seems to exacerbate rather than mitigate its effects.

Thankfully, the best New York City high schools have managed to break the mold. Some are small and uncrowded. Some have managed—through clever programming and extra money from grants—to keep class sizes low and to arrange for informal times for students to meet individually with teachers. Many have eliminated the petty irritants—such as rules about when kids can use the toilets. Some have eliminated bells. Some principals have wrested control over hiring through an agreement with the teachers' union called "school-based option." That means that a committee of parents, teachers, and administrators hires teachers—rather than having them assigned according to their seniority. Some principals have managed to trade in the utilitarian gloom pervasive in many schools—where kids are just marking time until graduation—for an atmosphere of excitement and challenge where kids love to come to school and feel they are partners in their education.

Questions to Ask and Things to Look For

Ideally, you and your child should visit schools before you apply. Many schools offer regular tours in October and November. Unfortunately, many others discourage visitors. Some offer tours only to students who have already been accepted. Others have an open house in the fall, where you can ask questions but cannot visit classrooms. Some offer good informa-

tion on their websites and permit prospective parents to pose queries. The high school fairs, offered in each borough in September or October, are good places to meet students, teachers, and administrators in the schools that interest you—if you can face the crowds. Go early in the day, if you can.

Location is probably your first consideration in choosing a school. The closer to home, obviously, the less time your child will spend commuting and the more likely she will be able to have friends in the neighborhood. In some cases it's worth it to travel a great distance to school—but have your child try out the commute before applying. Some kids find the combination of a long commute and 4 hours of homework too much to take. Others learn to do homework and sleep on the subway.

Safety is at the top of everyone's list of concerns. All New York City public schools have safety officers who are trained by the New York Police Department and who report any incidents of violence to the police. The best safety officers act like an old-fashioned neighborhood cop on the beat—walking through the corridors, chatting informally with kids, anticipating problems rather than reacting to them. The schools listed in this book generally have good safety records. Small schools—where teachers can keep an eye out for potential trouble—tend to have fewer safety problems than large ones. The incidents kids reported to me were mostly thefts from lockers and fistfights in the cafeteria. Some kids reported problems such as muggings on their way to school—but said they were safe inside the building. I've described a few serious incidents and places where I believe security should be improved.

The **size** of a school is tremendously important in determining the type of education your child will have. Small schools offer an intimacy and sense of belonging that are simply impossible in a large school. In a school in which the principal knows every child by name, it's unlikely your child will be lost or abandoned. Small schools tend to deal better with children's social and emotional problems than do large schools. They tend to be more tolerant of kids' eccentricities and may be more accommodating of children with learning disabilities. Small schools often give kids more individual college counseling.

As a rule, small schools teach subjects that require individual attention better than do large schools. Small schools often excel in teaching writing. In many small schools, teachers are more accessible than in large schools. That means if your child doesn't understand his calculus assignment, he can get help from the

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teacher rather than trying to muddle through it by himself. Safety is hardly ever an issue in a small school: No one gets away with bad behavior because everyone knows everything that happens.

However, there are some advantages to large schools. Some children feel claustrophobic in a small school—and yearn for a wider circle of acquaintances from which to draw their friends. Large schools tend to have much more extensive sports facilities, music departments, and art programs. A child with special needs—such as a vision- or hearing-impaired child—may have access to more extensive services in a large school. Large schools have greater course offerings, so if your child wants a 4th year of Japanese, or a 2nd year of calculus, she’s more likely to find it at a large school.

For the very talented student, a large school may offer what one teacher called a “critical mass” of other very talented kids—enough to make a stunning jazz ensemble or a ground-breaking science project. In fact, nearly all the students who take part in research projects for the Intel Science Talent Search come from large schools. A large school can more easily commit staff and lab space to high-level science research.

Kids who are self-confident, emotionally secure, and able to work independently often flourish at large schools. Many find a “niche”—a club, or a sports activity, or a classroom of a favorite teacher—that serves as a home base or a school-within-a-school. But lots of kids need more coziness and attention than the large schools provide.

Many parents don’t think to ask **how the day is organized**. But the length of classes may be as important as the size of a school. In traditional high schools, classes change every 43 minutes. Teachers offer five lessons a day. With a class of 34—the typical class size under the Department of Education’s contract with the teachers’ union—that means each teacher has 170 students. As Theodore Sizer pointed out in *Horace’s Compromise*, even a conscientious teacher cannot read and edit that many homework assignments on a regular basis. Even spending 5 minutes on each English paper adds up to 15 hours of work. Weekly writing assignments become too onerous for a teacher to manage.

Some schools have reorganized the day to give teachers longer classes in a system called “block programming.” Some schools, for example, will have 2-hour humanities classes, combining history and English. A teacher with two such classes a day will have 68 students instead of 170. Editing longer homework

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assignments becomes possible, if still difficult. Some schools have flexible programming, allowing teachers to schedule, say, a 1-hour class for a lecture but a 2-hour class for a complicated science lab.

Recent research on **class size** confirms what students and teachers have long known from experience: smaller is better. Smaller classes are associated with higher achievement on standardized tests, according to a May 2000 study by the National Center for Education Statistics. Research by the center, which is part of the U.S. Department of Education, found, perhaps surprisingly, that class size is at least as significant in secondary school as it is in elementary school.

The paradox that New York City parents must confront is that many of the most successful schools have large classes, while some ineffective schools have quite small classes. Parents are attracted to high-performing schools—and wrangle admission to them whatever the class size. Similarly, word gets out when a school is the pits—and parents avoid it even if it's half-empty. High-achieving kids are packed into the successful schools—and many do fairly well despite the large class size.

In my experience, large classes are manageable for lecture-style courses and courses in which students work independently or in small groups. Some lecturing is appropriate in high school. And one teacher may be able to supervise 30 or 35 kids working in groups of four or five on, say, a science lab—although smaller classes are certainly ideal.

Small class size is critical, however, in classes in which students are learning to write and express themselves orally. It's impossible to learn a foreign language without speaking, and it's next to impossible to speak with any regularity in a class of 34. (Sadly, the teaching of foreign languages is consistently weak in public high schools citywide.) Similarly, it's impossible to learn to write without constant practice. Teachers with classes of 34 often shy away from regular writing assignments because it's too much work to read and correct them.

"Class size is more important for reading and writing than for math and science," said Don McLaughlin, chief scientist at the American Institutes for Research, a Washington, D.C., research center, and author of a study by the National Center for Education Statistics. "In reading, writing and literature, you have to give feedback to the kids. There is nothing like red marks on the paper. In math and science, more of [the material] is in the book, and a bright kid can get more of it from reading a textbook on his own."

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Some schools, including Stuyvesant High School in Manhattan, have capped writing classes at 25 students—still high, but more manageable than 34. Some schools have come up with creative ways to keep classes small. At Humanities Prep in Manhattan, teachers agree to take on administrative tasks in exchange for small classes. And some teachers have inventive ways to make large classes manageable. A teacher at Beacon School in Manhattan, for example, recruited “cyber-mentors”—friends who agreed to edit student papers via e-mail on a regular basis.

School leadership is important. A good principal is an instructional leader as well as an administrator, one who cares more about the intellectual life of teachers and students than about the paperwork churned out by the central Department of Education. Look for a principal whose first concern is how to help teachers inspire their students. Watch out for one who boasts that his greatest accomplishment is replacing the locks on the lockers. When a principal leaves a school or retires, it’s always a big concern for parents and students. Many good principals hold schools together—in daunting circumstances—by the sheer force of their personality. A new leader may not be able to pull it off. But in high schools, particularly the large, well-established ones, a change in leadership is somewhat less traumatic than in elementary schools. That may be because in big schools much of the intellectual leadership and support for teachers come from the assistant principals or department chairs.

Hiring practices and the **quality of teachers** are key. Many parents are disappointed to discover that the city’s highly selective schools draw from the same pool of teachers as the ordinary neighborhood high schools. According to the terms of the teachers’ contract, senior teachers may request a transfer to a school with an opening that they consider desirable. Assignments are based on seniority, and a principal must accept these transfers. Some senior teachers, of course, are first-rate, but others are simply counting the days until retirement.

There is a provision in the teachers’ contract that gives some schools control over hiring. It is called “school-based option.” If the staff of a school votes to do so, a committee of teachers, administrators, and parents chooses new staffers. Of course, the committee can make mistakes, but many school-based option schools are distinguished by their cohesive staffs, teachers that share a common philosophy and approach to education.

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The best teachers are not always found in schools that attract the most affluent or highest-achieving students. Some of the city's most talented teachers see their work as a struggle for social justice, and they are attracted to schools that are committed to equity for the poor. Some of the small, progressive schools that serve kids who are struggling academically attract master teachers who approach their work with a missionary zeal. Further, some undistinguished neighborhood schools have pockets of excellent teaching. When weighing a school's performance, consider whether it's more important for your child to be with high-achieving kids or with teachers who are unusually able. Remember, most data for a school reflect the skills of the students rather than the skills of the teachers. A teacher who helps a kid who's struggling academically to finish high school and go on to college may be more talented than one who helps a high-achieving kid reach the same goal.

After safety, a school's **success in college admissions** is many parents' top concern. Many schools publish an annual list of the colleges their students attend. Ask for it when you visit. Try to visit each school's college office. In many large schools, there is only one college counselor for hundreds of graduating seniors. That counselor can't possibly give your child meaningful advice. Your child will be on his own in sorting through the admissions process unless he finds a sympathetic teacher or other mentor to help out. (Some parents even hire private college advisors.) Small schools tend to give more individual help. Some small schools have a full-time counselor for a graduating class of 60 or 70. In those circumstances, a counselor can really help your child choose appropriate schools and shape his or her college application.

Parents often wonder whether students will have a better crack at college admission if they attend a large, well-known school—where they might be in the middle of the graduating class—or if they attend a new or unheralded school—where they might really shine.

Chiara Coletti, spokesman for the College Board, which administers the SATs, said the quality of a high school's college office is of "utmost importance" in college admission. She said it's generally better to have an attentive counselor at an unknown school who can help your child with the all-important college essay than to have lackluster counseling at a large school with an established name.

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Pinning down the number of kids who actually go to college from a particular school is difficult. Principals, like proud parents, tend to exaggerate their children's accomplishments and frequently say, "Ninety-five percent of our graduates go to college," when they really mean, "A lot."

Any high school graduate is entitled to attend a 2-year college at the City University of New York. A principal who says all graduates were admitted to either 2- or 4-year colleges is only restating CUNY's admissions policy. (Although such a principal should be commended, at least, for ensuring that all kids apply to college.)

The Department of Education conducts an annual survey of high school seniors, asking them to state their plans after graduation. These data, published in the annual school report cards, are, unfortunately, unreliable and frequently list a large proportion of kids as having "unknown" plans.

For this book, I asked each school's college counselor to provide specific numbers of graduates who were admitted to 4-year colleges in 2001 and 2002. (Four-year colleges are more selective than 2-year community colleges.) Schools rated "excellent" reported that more than 95% of their graduates were consistently admitted to 4-year colleges; those rated "very good" reported that 76–95% were admitted to 4-year colleges; those rated "good" reported 50–75% and those rated "fair" reported fewer than 50%. For a few schools that did not provide data—or when the data provided seemed unreliable—I estimated from a Department of Education survey. I listed new schools with fewer than three graduating classes as "new school"—although it's clear that several of these are poised to become "very good" or "excellent." I also asked college advisors to give examples of the schools to which graduates were admitted.

I've included the **graduation rate** and as well as **average SAT** scores. The graduation rate tracks the number of 9th graders who graduate within 4 years. The statistics don't include students who transfer to other schools, but they do reflect the number of kids who drop out or who take more than 4 years to graduate. Schools with unusual circumstances—such as alternative schools that accept lots of kids in 10th or 11th grades—are listed as "not applicable."

The listing of SAT scores reflects the average scores of all seniors who took the test, as reported by the Department of Education. For new schools, very small schools, or those with

nontraditional populations, the numbers may not be available. Be aware that the numbers don't reflect the quality of teaching or even the level of achievement of all the kids. Some schools insist that all students take SATs, and such a school may have a lower average than a school with similar levels of achievement in which only a few kids take the test. Moreover, some schools that emphasize writing and oral expression over test preparation have high rates of college admissions, even for students with undistinguished SAT scores. As one high school college counselor said, colleges prefer students who can write and express themselves to those who can "regurgitate facts."

I've also included the **ethnic makeup** of each school, with the percentage of white, black, Hispanic, and Asian students in each school, as well as the proportion of students who are poor enough to qualify for **free lunch**. (Free lunch figures are only an approximation of a school's poverty rate, because many eligible high school students fail to sign up for free lunch.) These statistics are reported by the Department of Education for the 2001–2002 school year. See www.insideschools.org or www.nyce-net.edu/daa for updates.

How to Judge a New High School

New schools are opening all the time. In the fiercely competitive race to get into a good high school, it may well be worth it to apply to a new school that shows promise but that doesn't yet have a ton of applicants. Unfortunately, it's difficult for students and parents to predict which of the dozens of new schools will succeed—and which will founder.

The newer the school, the more important it is to visit, because you won't have a record of achievement or even a word-of-mouth reputation to go by. Most new schools have tours or open houses. When you visit, don't pay too much attention to the physical plant. Some of the new schools are in temporary spaces. Instead, look at the quality of teaching. Are the kids engaged? Or are heads down on desks? Ask where the teachers come from. The school may not have a track record but the teachers do. Do they come from a school with a similar philosophy? Are they masters of their craft? Or are they just counting the days until retirement?

It's more important to have good teachers than good students. New schools usually don't have the luxury of choosing the very best students. But if the quality of teaching is good, your

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child will get a good education—and the school will, in time, attract good students as well. On the other hand, a school with bright kids and boring teachers will probably always be a school with bright kids and boring teachers.

Even within a few weeks of a school's opening, kids—and parents—can get a feel for the tone and philosophy of a new place. Consider talking to students before or after school or on the school tour, if there's time. You can always go to a Parents Association meeting and hear parents' concerns (and kudos).

If your child is applying for the very first class of a brand new school, you may not even have classrooms to visit. In that case, listen carefully to the principal's spiel. A principal with a vision she can articulate—and a plan to carry out that vision—has a chance of creating a good school. One who can only tell you she believes punctuality is important, or one who parrots incomprehensible educational jargon, probably won't cut it.

Ask the principal how he thinks high school should be different from middle school. Ask how he balances a concern for students' social and emotional development with a focus on academic achievement. How does he plan to hire a staff? What does he look for in his teachers? If the school is a new mini-school within an unsuccessful large school, or a restructuring of an old school that didn't work, ask what mistakes were made in the past and how the staff learned to avoid those mistakes in the future.

Ask the principal where she taught before. The quality and philosophy of that school may be a guide to what the new school will be like. Ask how she thinks her new school will be similar to her old school, and how it will be different. Ask about her own children's experience in high school, what she liked about it or what she would change. Ask her to compare her new school to the school she attended as a young girl. Open-ended, friendly questions that display genuine curiosity are more likely to yield useful insights than the third-degree, which may put even a great principal on the defensive.

Getting In

Prepare for an unpleasant experience. One mother calls the high school admissions process legalized child abuse. The process has long been illogical, irritating, time-consuming, and enormously stressful. The office of high school admissions periodically promises to lessen the trauma with new regulations.

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Check the websites of the Department of Education (www.nycenet.edu) or Advocates for Children (www.insideschools.org) for any updates.

The admissions process begins in the fall of your child's 8th-grade year. Your child should receive the Directory of the Public High Schools from his middle school guidance counselor. Call your child's school or the Office of High School Admissions at (917) 256-4300 if you need a copy (it's also available on the Department of Education website, www.nycenet.edu). In some districts, junior high schools serve kids in grades 7–9. In these, students may apply for high school in either 8th grade or 9th grade. They also may apply in 9th grade if they wish to transfer from their current high school.

The Department of Education has long had one application for all schools (you can download it from www.nycenet.edu). Your child must list the schools to which he is applying in order of preference. The problem is that many of the best schools consider only students who list the school as their first choice. That means if your child is rejected by his first choice, he may well be rejected by all his choices. So weigh the first choice carefully. Your child submits his application in November and hears whether he's been accepted in March.

The high school directory gives a snapshot of the number of applicants in the previous year. It also shows which schools admit only children who list them as first choice or "Priority 1." One strategy might be to list one of those schools as the first choice and then have as the second choice a school that is promising but not as established—and as such admits kids who list it as "Priority 2."

Your child is automatically eligible for admission to your neighborhood high school, so don't waste your first choice on it. (However, if your child is applying for a selective or "screened" program within that school, she needs to list it as a priority.) Similarly, if your child is applying to Stuyvesant, Bronx Science, Brooklyn Tech, LaGuardia, or one of the other specialized schools, you need not list it as a priority. Admission to these high schools is based solely on the results of a multiple-choice exam or, in the case of LaGuardia, on an audition.

You also may want to consider transfer alternative schools, even if your child is entering 9th grade. These schools were designed to help kids who failed elsewhere and transfer midway in high school, but in practice they serve a wide variety of kids, including kids who are alienated by the anonymity of the spe-

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cialized high schools and kids who pick them as their first choice. Admission to the transfer alternative schools generally is based on a referral by a guidance counselor from your child's current school. Most require interviews as well. Some admit some of their students according to the educational option formula.

The admissions process for the selective, the unscreened, and the educational option schools appears to be corruption-free—at least on paper. For the selective schools, students are judged on the basis of their school records. For the educational option programs, 16% of the seats are reserved for students who are above average, 16% for those who are below average, and 68% are for average students; a computer chooses half the students, the school the rest. (Students who score in the top 2% on standardized tests are automatically admitted to their first choice.) For the unscreened programs, students are assigned according to how they rank the programs in order of preference.

Trying to pull strings won't get you anywhere at this stage of the process. The jockeying comes in March, when rejections and waiting list letters are sent out. If your child is rejected or wait-listed at all of the schools that you consider acceptable, that's the time to call your child's 8th-grade guidance counselor and make a fuss. Get her to telephone the school that interests your child the most and to plead your child's case. At this second round of admissions, some schools go by the book and accept whomever the Department of Education computer sends them. Others will bend the rules to admit students who are particularly interested in their programs.

It doesn't hurt to write a letter to the principal saying how much you admire her school. But lay off the heavy-handed letters of recommendation from hotshots. They just irritate the principals. They suggest you'll be an obnoxious parent who pulls strings to get her way.

Every year, thousands of students are rejected at all the choices they list on their applications—often through no fault of their own. At the educational option schools, a child with a poor attendance record and poor grades may be admitted—at random—by a computer, while a student with sterling credentials is rejected. Being rejected is devastating and demoralizing for both kids and parents. The admissions system has come under so much criticism that the Department of Education has promised to revise it. (Check for updates at www.insideschools.org or www.nycenet.edu/hs_directory.) But for now, this is how it works:

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Students who have been rejected at all their other choices are entitled to attend their zoned neighborhood school. If that school is unsatisfactory, a parent may make a written appeal to the Office of High School Admissions, at 22 E. 28th Street, 9th floor, New York, NY 10016, preferably with the backing of their child's guidance counselor. The appeal may include an explanation of what's unacceptable about the neighborhood school—if for example, it's dangerous or has very low levels of student achievement, or if it doesn't have an honors track or Advanced Placement offerings. The appeal may also include an explanation of why a student's record doesn't accurately reflect her achievement. If a child was rejected at her top choices because of poor attendance and mediocre marks in the 7th grade, for example, the appeal might explain why she missed classes and demonstrate that she had high 8th-grade marks—which are not included in the regular high school application. If the child's guidance counselor gave inaccurate information about the admissions process, that may be grounds for an appeal.

File your appeal as soon as your child receives rejection letters in March. Don't wait until April or May. If your child's guidance counselor is unhelpful, ask the principal for help. If the middle school principal is unhelpful, try the director of pupil personnel in your community school district office. You may want also to speak directly to the high school's assistant principal of pupil personnel, who is more likely to make admissions decisions than the principal.

In recent years, the Office of High School Admissions has handled all appeals—and has had a pretty good record of responding to parents' requests. You may also want to speak to the director of guidance or the parent coordinator in the regional office serving your neighborhood. Pleasant persistence and scrupulous good manners are the rule. Try not to irritate the hapless officials on the telephone, however justified your complaint. They spend their days talking to irate parents and will be more inclined to help if you're nice.

Using political connections is a time-honored way of getting attention. Most members of the City Council, the state Assembly, and the state Senate have members of their staff who work on school issues. It doesn't hurt to ask them to make a call or write a letter to the superintendent on your child's behalf—particularly if your child's guidance counselor and current principal have been

unhelpful. Don't expect this to work if your child is clearly unqualified for a particular program. But if the bureaucracy has treated your child badly it's your right to seek help from elected officials.

What if you move to the city after the admissions process has begun, or when your child is already in high school? Call the Office of High School Admissions at (917) 256-4300 or visit in person at 22 E. 28th Street, 9th floor, New York, NY 10016. Or go directly to your regional office.

If you're new in town, you can register your child directly at his zoned neighborhood school. Bring your child, an academic transcript, proof of address (a utility bill or lease), and immunization records.

If you want to enroll your child in a school other than his neighborhood school, or if you live in a neighborhood for which there is no zoned school, you must go in person to the Office of High School Admissions or your regional office. Bring your child and the paperwork with you. Go when the office opens at 8 a.m. or you may have to wait several hours.

Students entering 9th or 10th grade who move to the city after October may take the exam for specialized high schools in late summer. The specialized high schools do not accept students in the middle of the year, or after 10th grade.

The Office of High School Admissions will arrange for auditions for students who wish to apply to LaGuardia or other performing arts schools in 9th or 10th grade. The office will also arrange for interviews at alternative schools or educational option schools that may have space.

Students moving to the city in the 11th grade or later are most likely to be assigned to their zoned neighborhood high school, although exceptions are occasionally possible. The procedure for students who are new to the city is under review, so check for updates.

If All Else Fails . . . Founding Your Own School

Despite the gains of the past decade, there simply aren't enough good schools in New York City—particularly at the high school level. Some parents have banded together to demand better schools—and won. The Renaissance School in Queens and Baruch College Campus School in Manhattan are examples of schools that were created in response to parent agitating. Parents

Introduction

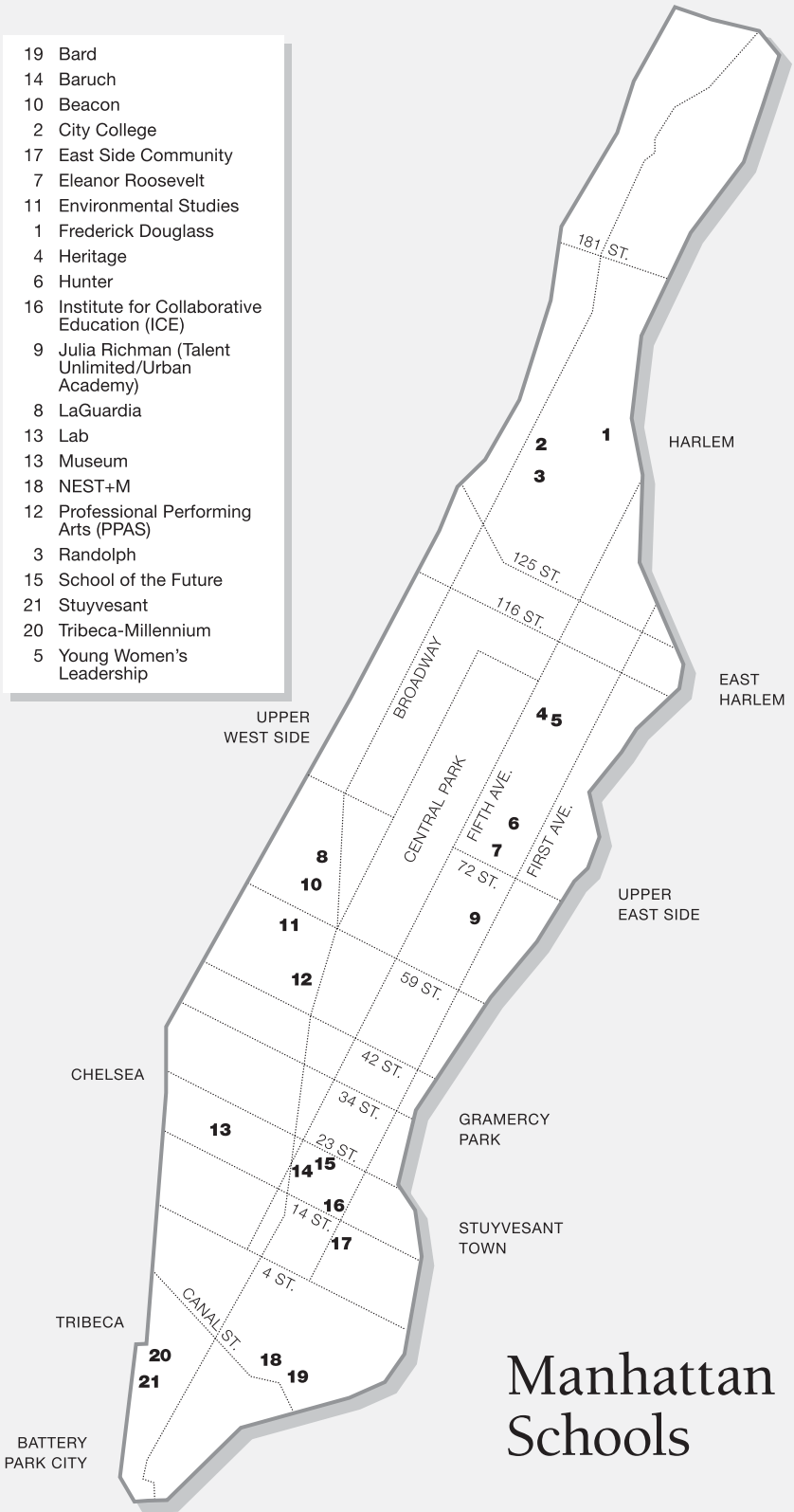
on the East Side of Manhattan, in the Park Slope section of Brooklyn, and in the Riverdale section of the Bronx have lobbied successfully for new schools to better serve their kids.

Some tips: Do your homework before you complain. Visit the schools in your neighborhood and be prepared to explain what is unsatisfactory about them. Visit schools that you admire and be prepared to consider what is necessary to replicate them. The central Department of Education is sympathetic to parents' desires for good neighborhood schools, but there is an understandable reluctance to set up racially segregated schools. Some battles for neighborhood schools have taken on ugly racial tones as white parents have sought to exclude black children through rezoning.

Talk to your superintendent about the possibility of setting up a high school or of expanding a successful middle school to include high school grades. New Visions for Public Schools, a Manhattan-based organization that has helped found several dozen schools, is a useful resource. Call them at (212) 645-5110 or visit their website at www.newvisions.org.

The best public high schools in New York City have all the variety and excitement of the city itself. They offer not only good classroom teaching, but also exposure to the arts and sciences as they are practiced by professionals in the city itself. They teach your child to get along with students of different races and religions. They promote values in which intellectual achievement is more important than material wealth—where, as one mother said, kids talk about books more than about money and trips and designer labels. They give your child a crack at admission to the country's most elite colleges. And, most important, they teach your child to be a citizen in our multicultural society.

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Manhattan Schools

MANHATTAN

Manhattan is home to some of the city's most selective schools as well as some of the most innovative and interesting alternative programs. Good transportation links to the rest of the city make it possible for students to commute from the far reaches of the five boroughs.

The borough's zoned neighborhood high schools are disappointing, so it's the rare Manhattan parent who can relax when it comes to high school admissions. Still, there are many more options than most people realize, and a number of new schools have opened in recent years.

High School for Economics and Finance, 100 Trinity Place, 10006, (212) 346-0708, is a small, safe school that attracts students from all five boroughs. It offers internships on Wall Street and weekly seminars conducted by business people. "The kids get a very good idea about what the business world is all about," one mother said. A block from the site of the World Trade Center, the school was evacuated after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack. Since then, it has rebounded and received far more applications than it had seats available for 2002 incoming freshman. More than 90% of its graduates go on to college, about 75% of them to four-year colleges, according to the principal. Tours are held in fall.

Next door, **Leadership and Public Service High School**, 90 Trinity Place, 10006, (212) 346-0007, offers an unusual mentoring program that pairs Syracuse University alumni with students. Three-quarters of the entering students have test scores below the state standard, and many take five or six years to graduate. Nonetheless, 90% of graduates go on to college, most to four-year programs. Parents and students give the staff and principal high marks for dedication and a nurturing spirit. The mother of a student who transferred to Leadership after having difficulty adjusting at another school said her daughter received the help she needed to succeed. "I found the school size was perfect," this mother said. "The location, the building itself and the structure were ideal." Two drawbacks: the school has no gym, and the elevator is so slow students are often late for class.

University Neighborhood High School, 200 Monroe Street, 10002, (212) 962-4341, is an unusual collaboration between the Department of Education and New York University. Graduate students from NYU's school of education tutor the students during and after school. The staff is ambitious for the students and sets very high standards for them. A few high school seniors take classes, including computer programming and human physiology, at New York University. Founded in 1999, the school has been particularly successful at helping new immigrants and others who are poorly prepared for high school. The school, surrounded by housing projects between Chinatown and the Lower East Side, attracts many kids from the immediate area. Parents may call the school to schedule a tour.

City-as-School, 116 Clarkson Street, 10014, (212) 337-6800, is a counter-cultural haven for kids who are alienated by traditional classroom. Openly gay kids, rebels, chronic truants, and kids who have been teased for their unconventional looks find a welcome here. Internships are stressed over classroom learning. A student may be paired with a professional botanist, for example, and work in the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, rather than study biology in the classroom. The school has sites in the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Queens as well as the main site in Manhattan.

Humanities Preparatory Academy, 351 West 18th Street, 10011, (212) 929-4433, takes in kids who are performing poorly or who have been truant for months and prepares them for demanding four-year colleges. In its most celebrated case, it admitted a homeless dropout whose mother had died of AIDS and whose father was ill—and helped her win a *New York Times* scholarship and admission to Harvard University (the girl's story was the subject of a made-for-TV movie, *Homeless to Harvard: The Liz Murray Story*). Humanities Prep also has some very bright but alienated kids who began their high school careers at selective high schools such as Bronx Science or Stuyvesant, as well as students who start 9th grade there. Humanities Prep began as a small alternative program within the large neighborhood high school in which it is housed, Bayard Rustin High School for the Humanities. Modeled on the Urban Academy, a successful alternative school on the Upper East Side, Humanities Prep became a school in its own right in 1997 and graduated its first class in 1998. There's an interaction between grown-ups and kids that's unusually close. Grown-ups try to accommodate kids' desires and dreams. "Humanities Prep really saved both my daughters,"

said parent Jonathan Lessuck. "It gave them the freedom to read whatever they wanted, to read and research whatever they were interested in." One is now at the University of Wisconsin, the other is at the College of Santa Fe. Other graduates have gone to Sarah Lawrence College, Northwestern University, Fordham University, West Point, Antioch College, and Bard College. The school's special education students are integrated in regular classes. Students with learning disabilities and emotional problems are admitted.

The Landmark School, 220 West 58th Street, 10019, (212) 247-3414, has some of the coziness you might find in a small middle school: cheerful classrooms decorated with students' work, and kids moving around as they work on projects. There's a family feeling, and kids seem happy and well cared-for. The school takes in kids with a wide range of academic preparation, including some who are poorly prepared for high school. Amazingly, most graduate and go on to college, some to hard-to-get-into schools such as Bard, Barnard, NYU, Fordham, Brown, and Antioch. The Landmark School was founded in 1993 on the model of Central Park East Secondary School, East Harlem's famed progressive school. Students in special education are completely integrated into regular classes, and a special education teacher is assigned to help them. Landmark is committed to the system of portfolio assessment, in which kids work on long projects, papers, and oral presentations to demonstrate their mastery of subjects. But it also has a good record of giving students the skills they need to pass the state Regents exams.

Uptown, **Central Park East Secondary School**, 1573 Madison Avenue, 10029, (212) 860-8935, has influenced a generation of progressive educators. Founded in 1985 by Deborah Meier, who won a MacArthur Prize fellowship or "genius" award for her work there, Central Park East was built on the belief that "less is more," that is, that it's more important to study a few disciplines in depth than to have a smattering of many subjects. Although *Time* magazine once called it "one of the most celebrated alternative schools in the country," CPES has fallen on hard times in recent years. Part of its troubles stem from the new state standards that insist that students pass Regents exams to graduate—exams that many teachers complain are based on breadth instead of depth of knowledge and that run counter to the philosophy of the school. Despite the dedication and seriousness of its principal, David Smith, CPES has suffered from rapid

Manhattan

teacher turnover and low staff morale. Nonetheless, the school continues to make its mark in the many new schools whose curriculum and philosophy it has influenced—from the Institute for Collaborative Education to East Side Community High School.

Manhattan Center for Science and Mathematics, F.D.R. Drive at East 116th Street, 10029 (212) 876-4639, is a selective, competitive school of 1,500 students, where calculus, Japanese, and Latin are taught. Students may take free classes in everything from hip-hop to West African dance through the Repertory Dance Theatre of Harlem. The college office is successful in finding good colleges and generous financial aid packages for its students. Unfortunately, truancy is a problem and a security officer said there are frequent fights.

Stuyvesant High School

345 Chambers Street
New York, NY 10282
(212) 312-4800
www.stuy.edu

Admissions: by competitive exam

Grade levels: 9–12

Enrollment: 3,041

Class size: 30–34

Average SATs: V:679 M:721

Graduation rate: 95%

College admissions: Excellent

Ethnicity: 43%W 3%B 4%H 50%A

Free lunch: 11%

At the southern tip of Manhattan, with stunning views of New York harbor, lies one of New York City's most celebrated schools: Stuyvesant High School. *Life Magazine* once suggested it might be the best high school in America, and, while such statements have a hyperbolic ring to them, there is no doubt that Stuyvesant ranks as one of the most selective—and competitive—schools anywhere. More than 23,000 students vie for fewer than 800 seats in the freshman class. Roughly one-quarter of Stuyvesant's top graduates go to the Ivy League, and many others go to highly selective schools such as Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Stuyvesant is one of the leading schools in the nation in terms of the number of students winning National Merit Scholarships and Intel Science Talent Search prizes. Alumni include three Nobel laureates, actors Lucy Liu, Paul Reiser, and James Cagney, astronaut Col. Ronald Grade, physicians Dr. Alvin Pouissant and Dr. Gustaav Damin (who discovered Lyme disease), and jazz great Thelonius Monk. The active alumni association raises money for scholarships and even stipends for kids who otherwise might have to leave school to work. Famous alumni return to offer help and inspiration, as when, for example, actor Tim Robbins gave a class in acting.

Students have extraordinary opportunities to conduct research with senior scientists, to take part in national math competitions, or to study music at a high level. The students are excited to be with one another, and, while the competition among them can be fierce, they also learn a lot from each other.

"There is an excitement and a buzz to the school every time I go in," said parent Pamela Wheaton. "There is something electric in the air. In classes, the hands are up—it's not all chalk and talk—and the students are taking as much of a role in the class as the teacher."

The school is elite, to be sure, but it's academically selective and not socially snobby. Immigrants and children of immigrants make up a large proportion of the student body. Some students are poor enough to qualify for free lunch. Students compete on the basis of brains—not money.

"We have people from all over the world who send their kids here because they want them to get ahead in life," said an administrator. "People see us as a golden key to Harvard, Yale, and Princeton."

While some teachers are inspired, the school is best known for its talented students—rather than a uniformly stellar teaching staff. "I remind people, kids take the [entrance] test, not the faculty," an administrator said.

"It's really all about the kids," said Renee Levine, former PTA president who serves as the building administrator and my tour guide. "You put a bunch of kids like this together and they feed off each other. On the subway, they talk about physics, they talk about Shakespeare."

In addition to the strong emphasis on academics, there are more than 100 clubs, 28 sports teams, and 25 student publications. Kids say they take part in clubs partly because they enjoy them and partly to build their resumes for college admission. Classes are held from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., and clubs often last until 6 p.m. Kids generally do 3 or more hours of homework. The long day, coupled with the fact that many students commute for an hour or more on the subway, doesn't leave much time for sleep. Some parents say the combination is simply too much.

"There is too much striving for excellence, and not enough time to just be a kid," one mother said. Parents complain the school sometimes has a sink or swim attitude toward kids who are struggling.

"We're certainly not cozy," said principal Stanley Teitel. "There appears to be greater stress in my school than in Bronx [High School of] Science," Stuyvesant's main public school competitor. "There is a greater emphasis on grades and the competition seems to be keener. Some kids just can't handle the pressure and they just crack."

For kids who flourish under the pressure—or for those who take it in stride—the school can be an extraordinary place. “My daughter said, ‘I want to do well enough that I don’t embarrass myself but not so well that it interferes with my social life,’” said Ms. Levine. “We also have kids who are very driven.”

“My daughter thrives on the competition,” said Katherine Kline, whose two children attended Stuyvesant. “She says if you don’t like competition, nobody says you have to come here.”

There is also, perhaps paradoxically, a sense of camaraderie among the students. The kids may scramble to beat others by a 10th of a percentage point on a test, but they are also supportive of one another and help one another out. For birthdays, kids plaster greetings for their friends on the walls and shower them with flowers. Ms. Wheaton described how her daughter learned factoring in math from the kids on the track team. Ms. Kline said her son, who was good in math, offered help to other students—and received help with his own writing. The school also has a formal peer-tutoring program by students in the honors or ARISTA program.

The 10-story building, opened in 1992 in Battery Park City, has a white and gray terrazzo entrance, escalators that whisk kids up and down to their classes (except when they’re broken—a frequent complaint), a well-equipped, sunny library, a swimming pool, a pleasant dining room with panoramic views, well-equipped gyms, and a large theater. But it’s the wide range of courses—rather than the physical plant—that really makes the school stand out.

The course offerings are almost as rich as those at a small college. Kids may study advanced metaphysics, read *Beowulf* and Chaucer, learn to act, read about the history of jazz in literature, or make their own video documentaries. They may study economics, the history of the Holocaust, Japanese culture, criminal law, or Latin American film. Robotics and architecture also are offered in the school’s technology department.

Students do independent research alongside senior scientists at laboratories in Rockefeller University, Mount Sinai Medical Center, and New York University. They may study plant and animal life in the field next door or learn how stones are moved in an Inca ruin—with help from a University of Chicago professor via the Internet. They write research papers—published in their own high school journal—on topics ranging from how salt in the diet of rats can induce hypertension to how the presence of a newly discovered enzyme might be used to predict cancer.

The math department is particularly strong. Students have a chance to go far beyond textbooks and lecture-style courses to delve into independent research with a rare passion. In one math research class I visited, tables were piled high with books with titles such as *The History of Math*, *Entertaining Science Experiments*, *The Magic of Mathematics*, *Mathematical Circuses*, and *The Joy of Mathematics*. Also available for their research were scholarly college-level journals such as *College Math Journal*, *The Mathematics Teacher*, *Mathematics Magazine*, and *Math Horizon*. Kids were having a “source swap”—exchanging books they’d taken out of the library—talking quietly to one another, or working silently.

Students worked in teams to solve problems of their own choosing; the first team to win got a pizza from the teacher. “I insist that it’s fun,” said the teacher. “The students never get told what to do in terms of the topic.” Indeed, kids seemed happy and energetic, and their excitement was palpable. Colorful posters of Pascal’s Triangle and “Fibonacci numbers in nature” decorated the walls. Paper polyhedrons made from origami paper hung from the ceiling.

Students write research papers—published in the school’s math journal—on topics such as the history of algebra, applications of Pascal’s Triangle, and an inquiry into the number of colors a mapmaker needs to make each adjacent country a different color.

The music department is renowned, and teachers as well as graduates perform professionally. The chorus teacher, Holly Hall, sang Tosca at the New York City Opera. David Grossman, who graduated in 1995, plays double bass for the New York Philharmonic, and composer Kai Winding is a graduate. The school has two choruses and three bands, for students of all abilities, as well as an orchestra. Students with no background in music may study beginning woodwinds and brass, while advanced students may play in sophisticated combos. Students have a chance to perform, whether they are serious musicians or consider music a hobby.

Social studies traditionally have not been Stuyvesant’s strength, but chair Jennifer Suri and a cadre of young teachers are invigorating the department. Although many teachers still rely heavily on textbooks, the department is now encouraging teachers to supplement them with books of essays and with original source materials such as diaries and court documents.

Parents agree that Stuyvesant's writing program is weak in comparison to other departments. Writing is the area in which class size is most crucial, and, with five classes of 34 students each day, teachers simply don't have the time to review regular long assignments. The administration agreed to cap writing classes for freshman at 25 students, and that has helped some. The quality of student writing I saw was quite high, and parents were more than satisfied with the course offerings in literature.

The school is useful not only for the content of the courses, but also for the contacts it offers. Ross Benson, who went to MIT after he graduated, worked on projects for three summers at an engineering firm in Soho—a job he got with help from the school's technology department. He crunched numbers about traffic patterns at John F. Kennedy International Airport, built a model of the roof of an Olympic-sized skating rink the firm was designing, and estimated the amount of weight that an underground parking lot would have to bear, said his mother, Ms. Kline.

"He was more than a gopher, because he'd had strong math and the computer drafting program at Stuyvesant," said his mother. "If you go to Stuyvesant, they know you're serious and they know you're going to do the job and get to work on time."

The quality of teaching ranges from outstanding to disappointing. One mother complained that a biology teacher didn't even read her child's research paper; another complained that a teacher showed up late for class even during Open School Week, when parents are allowed to observe. The mother of a very bright child with the unusual handicap of Tourette's syndrome said the school was slow to make the accommodations for him to which he was entitled by law.

The school has long hired teachers according to the seniority provision of the contract with the United Federation of Teachers. That means a senior teacher may be assigned to the school over the objections of the department chair or principal. And, because teaching at Stuyvesant is considered by some to be a plum job, the school gets quite a few seniority transfers. Some of these are great; some are burned out folks simply waiting for retirement. "There *are* some lemons [on the faculty]," said an administrator. "But we also have more Ph.D.s than some universities."

The school has become nearly half white and half Asian in recent years, unlike Bronx Science and Brooklyn Technical High

School, the other two specialized high schools in the city, which have larger black and Hispanic populations. Black and Hispanic children are concentrated in districts with low-performing middle schools and are less likely to get the preparation they need to pass the test. The Department of Education sponsors a Discovery Program, with summer school and after-school classes, to help prepare 7th and 8th graders from schools in low-performing districts for the test. (Call [212] 312-4816 for details.) Once they are in Stuyvesant, black and Hispanic students may have teachers of their race or ethnic group as mentors.

The school is about 60% male and 40% female. A “gender committee” of parents, faculty, and students has determined that fewer girls than boys pass the test, and that fewer girls who pass the test choose to come to Stuyvesant. Some parents may be reluctant to have their daughters travel alone on public transportation. There is also some concern that the competitive, macho atmosphere and the large number of male teachers is off-putting for some girls—although the girls I spoke to said they felt comfortable at Stuyvesant.

“The gender thing is a symbol of a much bigger issue—that the school prefers to say to kids: ‘We can’t do anything about your problems,’” said Anne Mackinnon, whose daughter attended.

There is a full-time guidance counselor for each class of 775 students, plus a social worker, an assistant principal for guidance, and several interns—master’s candidates training to be guidance counselors. The school has an on-site psychotherapist 5 days a week. In addition, every student is assigned a guidance teacher, and “home room” periods are scheduled at least once a week.

There are two full-time college counselors. The sheer size of the graduating class means there isn’t a lot of hand-holding, but parents say the office is well run. “They give extremely good advice,” said Ms. Mackinnon. “They have a way of assembling recommendations from teachers—starting freshman year—that works pretty well. They know the colleges well and insist that students apply to a range of schools, from a ‘safety’ to a ‘dream’ school.”

One problem: The graduating class is large and the kids, who are all very high-achieving, compete with one other for admissions to highly selective colleges.

“Some students, if they didn’t get into Stuyvesant, would have gone to their neighborhood school and would have been

the best students in the whole school and they would probably get into any college they wanted," said Louisa Chan, whose daughter attended Stuyvesant. "If 20 apply to Columbia from Stuyvesant, they are not going to take all of them even if they are qualified."

The concern is particularly acute for Asian parents, some of whom are discouraged that even perfect College Board scores won't guarantee admission to the college of their choice. One college admissions official acknowledged that having gone to Stuyvesant actually might put an Asian student at a disadvantage in college admissions—a concern shared by Ms. Chan.

"We do know that all the Ivy League schools are not going to take all the Asians that apply because they want diversity in their student bodies," she said. "On the other hand, the experience at Stuyvesant is irreplaceable."

Nonetheless, the school has a stellar record of college admissions. In one recent class, for example, 107 seniors were offered admission to Cornell, 56 to Columbia, 23 to Dartmouth, 22 to Harvard, and 22 to MIT. "For certain kids, a really good record at Stuyvesant opens the doors anywhere," said Ms. Mackinnon.

The admissions process at Stuyvesant is fairly straightforward, if agonizing. Any 8th-grade student may apply. Students must notify their guidance counselor that they want to take the test. Private school students wishing to take the test should contact their guidance counselors or the office of high school admissions. The test is administered in October. Students who move to New York City after the test has been administered may take it in late summer of the following year. Sample exams are available from the office of high school admissions. Some students take weekend prep courses to prepare for the exam. Others find a review book, such as ARCO's *New York City Specialized Science High School Admissions Test*, sufficient. Students receive one grade for the verbal section, one for the math. Admission is based on the combined score. That means a student can do very well on one section and relatively poorly on the other and still gain admission.

Tours are offered on a limited basis. There is an open house in the spring for students who have been accepted and their parents. Check the school's website, www.stuy.edu, for a virtual tour.

The Tribeca-Millennium High School

75 Broad Street
New York, NY 10001
(646) 497-0096

Admissions: selective/District 2 priority

Grade levels: 9–12

Enrollment: 500 (projected)

Class size: 25–30

Average SATs: new school

Graduation rate: new school

College admissions: new school

Ethnicity: 25%W 15%B 25%H 34%A

Free lunch: 34%

The Tribeca-Millennium High School was created to give downtown students a liberal arts education close to home and to serve as an anchor to help rebuild the area surrounding the site of the World Trade Center after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. Although the neighborhood is home to the super-selective Stuyvesant High School and several other small themes schools, Tribeca-Millennium was built to serve kids who wanted a demanding but less specialized education.

The school draws its philosophy from two other small, successful Manhattan schools: The School of the Future and Baruch College Campus High School. Tribeca principal Robert Rhodes, former assistant principal at the School of the Future, hopes to combine the “portfolio work” and an emphasis on independent research that have made Future popular with the strong writing program and use of small group “advisories” that have made Baruch successful.

Students are expected to write 10 to 15 research papers before they graduate. Students meet regularly with teachers in small groups called “advisories” to talk about any academic or social problems they may be having. There are no bells to mark class changes and classes last 52 minutes—slightly longer than the 43-minute periods typical of most high schools.

The school has leased three stories of a landmarked office building, which includes a gymnasium on the top floor. The school has an unusual collaboration with the YMCA of Greater New York—which offers after-school programs and free health club memberships to all students. Programs at the Y include drama, career development, homework help, basketball, cheer-leading, yoga, and karate.

Students seem comfortable asking teachers for help, and even regard the principal as an ally to be cultivated rather than as a disciplinarian to be avoided. During my visit, a girl whose father was ill with cancer stopped Rhodes in the hall to ask if she could redo a project. She felt she hadn't been at her best because of her worry about her father's illness and wanted a chance to improve. "They treat us with respect," another student said of the staff. "If you have a problem, you can talk to the teachers. There is always someone to talk to."

The staff, too, seem happy to be here. "We're given a lot of room for creativity," said an English teacher who moved from a suburban high school to attend graduate school at Teachers College. "I don't want English to be read-a-chapter-and-take-a-quiz. I'm really interested in getting the kids talking and engaged in books." Students have English four times a week, and a separate writing class three times a week. In an English class they compared two poems written by new immigrants—and wrote their own in the voice of a new immigrant.

In a history class, kids were articulate and passionate as they took part in a lively discussion of imperialism in Nigeria. In biology class, they learned about natural selection in an experiment designed to show how gray moths were more likely than white moths to survive during the smoggy days of the Industrial Revolution. The students placed squares of white, gray, and black paper on a sheet of newspaper, then took turns picking them up as fast as they could. The white bits of paper were easy to pluck, but the gray ones seemed to disappear against the newspaper.

The science teachers integrate biology and chemistry. On a field trip to Jamaica Bay, for example, students learned how different organisms make up food chains, what the oxygen cycle is, and what elements are found in a salt marsh. The emphasis is on hands-on projects rather than absorbing material from textbooks. "Having students memorize lists off the board may work for 10 or 20% of the students," said a science teacher. "But what are you going to do for the other 80%?"

The school opened in 2002 in temporary quarters in the High School of Art and Design on the Upper East Side, while its permanent site at the former ITT office building on Broad Street was being renovated. In its first two years, the school gave priority to students in District 2, the old district serving the East Side and downtown. The admission criteria may change, so check with the school. Tours are offered in the fall.

Bard High School Early College

525 East Houston Street
New York, NY 10002
(212) 982-5024
www.bard.edu/bhsec

Admissions: selective

Grade levels: 9–college

Enrollment: 500 (projected)

Class size: 20

Average SATs: new school

Graduation rate: new school

College admissions: new school

Ethnicity: 29%W 40%B 16%H 15%A

Free lunch: N/A

Bard High School Early College, an unusual collaboration between the Department of Education and Bard College, is designed to offer bright and motivated students a four-year program that combines high school with the first two years of college.

Modeled on Simon's Rock College in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, the school is the brainchild of Bard College president Leon Botstein, who has long believed that many 16-year-olds are ready to begin serious college work. Students at Bard High School Early College complete their high school requirements in two years. After four years, they receive both a Regents diploma and an associates' degree.

"We're not trying to shove education down their throats," said principal Ray Peterson. "The point is not to get a bachelor's degree when you're 19. It's just that more gets done" when kids are serious and focused on their work.

At most high schools, another teacher explained, the first 5 minutes of a typical class is wasted while students settle down. The next 15 or 20 minutes are spent going over homework—a benefit to the kids who haven't done their homework but a waste of time for those who have. And the last 5 minutes is wasted as kids start shuffling their papers in anticipation of leaving. Eliminate the wasted time—which may make up half of a typical student's day—and a good student can complete the requirements for high school in two years without undue pressure.

Bard High School Early College is housed in a pleasant, red brick building constructed as an elementary school in 1915. It has high ceilings, huge windows with views of the East River and

sunny, if rather bare and basic, classrooms equipped with wood-trimmed blackboards and oak cabinets. The school opened in 2001 in temporary quarters in Brooklyn and moved in 2002 to its current location.

School begins at the civilized hour of 8:55 a.m.—a good thing, since it's a long walk east from the nearest subway. Classes meet for 50-minute periods four or five times a week. More than half of the teachers have Ph.D.s, and many have taught at regular colleges. Faculty members have their own offices, with their office hours posted on the doors, just like in college.

Students are given a degree of autonomy and freedom that's more typical of college than high school. "We're not treated like children," said a student. "We're treated with respect." Students are welcome to study in unused classrooms—unsupervised. In one class in which the teacher was absent, students continued their work quietly, with none of the goofiness one might expect of high school students. "We treat you like an adult, and you act like an adult," a teacher remarked.

At the same time, there is a degree of individual attention that's the hallmark of a good, small high school. The principal, who also teaches 10th-grade English, seems to know every student by name. "You can talk to the teachers one-on-one," said a student.

The staff has a chance to share techniques and learn from one another, both formally and informally. Teachers attend summer workshops at Simon's Rock and Bard. The day I visited, a history teacher asked Peterson for advice on whether to have students memorize the Gettysburg address. "I did that with Shakespeare," Peterson told the teacher. "If you memorize it, it forces you to slow down and really notice the language and syntax."

The school places a particular emphasis on teaching students to write well, and encourages students to articulate their ideas in class discussions. The school year begins with a week-long "writing and thinking workshop" in which the whole school participates, modeled after similar projects at Simon's Rock and Bard College. (Peterson is former director of Bard College's Writing and Thinking Institute.) Students read their written pieces aloud. Teachers say the workshop builds a feeling of community, helps draw out the shyer students, and breaks down the classroom dynamic that is typically a dialogue between the teacher and two or three vocal students.

"Kids say the writing and thinking workshop gives them the sense that everyone has something to say, and everyone has a

sense of their voice being heard," said an English teacher. She said Bard is marked by a "lack of cliquishness," which she attributes to the workshop. "You'll see blacks and Asians walking arm in arm, said another teacher. "It's not competitive," said one girl. "Kids help each other here." The administration is committed to preserving the school's racial balance.

Classes have no more than 20 students. Some have as few as 10. Most are offered as seminars. In an English class, students discussed different perceptions of race in two poems written by African Americans, Nikki Giovanni and Zora Neale Hurston. In a history class, students wrote imaginary accounts of the Civil War told from the point of view of a soldier, a plantation owner, or an Irish immigrant in New York. In a calculus class, a teacher patiently explained a problem using diagrams and pictures when one student didn't understand. In a chemistry class, students worked on problems in small groups as the teacher circulated, offering help when kids needed it. Students have an introduction to Chinese, Spanish, and Latin in their first year, and then decide which language to study in depth.

Some of the classes have discussions that are far more abstract than is typical in high school. Tenth graders read a piece called: "Indians: Textualism, Morality, and the Problems of History," about different views of colonial history, and threw around words like "psycholinguistics," "post-structuralism" and "critical theory."

Bard College pays the salaries of the music faculty, and the school has a choir and a band, but no gym. "If you want athletics, this is not the place to be," said a teacher. All faculty members act as student advisors, and advisory periods are built into the schedule. This is especially helpful for the 9th graders, many of whom find the courses challenging and are struggling to keep up. Students say there's lot of homework. One girl said she typically did 4 or 5 hours of homework a night.

The school offers no special education services.

Students must write an essay as part of their application, which also includes an interview. The admissions committee looks for "spirit and verve" rather than "spelling and syntax" in the essay, a teacher said. "We read it not so much for correctness, but for voice," said another. The committee also looks for students who are emotionally mature. "We try to admit kids who we think are together," said Peterson. Another administrator said that students' scores on standardized tests don't predict how well they'll do at Bard. Evening open houses are held in the fall and spring.

New Explorations into Science, Technology & Math (NEST+M)

111 Columbia Street
New York, NY 10002
(212) 677-5190

www.newexplorations.org

Admissions: selective

Grade levels: K–12 (projected)

Enrollment: 800 (projected)

Class size: 25

Average SATs: new school

Graduation rate: new school

College admissions: new school

Ethnicity: 7%W 14%B 43%H 36%A

Free lunch: 30%

For those ambivalent about co-education, New Explorations into Science, Technology & Math (NEST) offers an unusual compromise: starting in 6th grade, boys and girls are separated for math, science, and advisories, while English and history classes have boys and girls together.

“The girls really come out of their shells and perform much better,” said principal Celenia Chevere, who was formerly principal of Young Women Leadership School, the all-girls school in East Harlem. “Historically, girls have always done well in humanities. The research shows that girls become more distracted in math and science when boys are in the class.”

NEST is an unusually quiet, sunny, and spacious school, with wide, gleaming halls, a “dining hall” (instead of a cafeteria), potted mini-palm trees, and “common rooms” for children to relax. One of the few schools in the city to serve children from kindergarten through high school, NEST aims to give public school children the small classes and continuity of instruction commonly associated with private school—as well as the possibility of single-sex education for at least part of their school careers.

The school’s word-of-mouth reputation spread soon after it opened in 2001 with just a few classes, and it has attracted an interesting mix of parents—artists and teachers, bus drivers and sanitation workers, accountants and business people. There is a gentle rapport between children and teachers, and nobody, it seems, raises his or her voice. Kids are expected to work hard—4 or 5 hours of homework a night is not uncommon in the high school.

“NEST is not for everyone, but isn’t that what school choice is about?” said the mother of a 6th grader and an 11th grader. “My children love NEST. They often have to give up TV or a weekend activity to finish their work, but they appreciate the challenge.”

The early grades at NEST look like a lot of good progressive schools, with plenty of cozy corners to read in, blocks to play with, and kids’ artwork displayed. Children call teachers by their first names and do homey projects such as baking bread and making applesauce. But the early grades are more academic and structured than in most schools, and children are expected to learn to read before they leave kindergarten. Students wear uniforms—the kids prefer to call it a “dress code”—starting in 3rd grade: preppy Lands’ End-style khaki or navy pants with white, maroon or navy shirts.

Academic courses are accelerated in the middle and “upper” or high school. Although the school is billed as a K–12 program, there is a separate application process for admission to the middle school and the high school, and kids who can’t keep up may be asked to leave. Some Hispanic parents from the Lower East Side have complained to elected officials that NEST’s admission standards exclude many neighborhood kids.

On the other hand, more than one-third of the student body is Hispanic, as is the principal. NEST makes no pretense of being an ordinary neighborhood school—in fact, in its lobby is a sign that proclaims “A public school with a private school mission.”

“It’s a seamless curriculum but it’s not a seamless admission process,” said the principal. Elementary school students must apply for admission to 6th grade, and middle school students must apply for admission to 9th grade. Applicants must go on a tour and orientation, have an interview, and take a written test.

Students start preparing for high school Regents while still in middle school. The high school algebra and geometry sequence, which usually takes three semesters, is compressed into two here, as is the three-semester course in advanced algebra and trigonometry. The curriculum used in grades 7–12 is called “CPM” or “College Preparatory Math.”

Although Ms. Chevere studied at the progressive Bank Street College of Education, she has also come to appreciate the benefits of what she calls a classical education. There’s plenty of emphasis on spelling and grammar—NEST was one of the few schools I’ve seen where kids still diagram sentences—and teach-

ers spend plenty of time making sure that kids know the material they need to pass Regents' exams—whether it's the dates of the Homestead Act or lists of the properties of certain chemicals. Classroom discussions are tightly focused. In a global studies class, for example, the teacher asked students very specific questions about religions in ancient Greece, rather than more-opened ended ones.

The school has very limited special education services. However, in 2003, it launched a collaboration with the private Churchill School, which serves children with special needs, to have one class of learning disabled children.

Two parents said the school was unwelcoming to kids who didn't fit the mold. "A child cannot have behavioral problems and be successful there," said the parent of an aggressive child. Another parent said a teacher was disparaging toward a five-year-old who needed extra help. But most parents we interviewed are enthusiastic, calling the school "creative," "academically challenging," "warm and nurturing."

NEST places a strong emphasis on the arts and has a dancer-in-residence from the Ballet Hispanico. The school has a lovely dance studio, with shiny hardwood floors and a wall of mirrors. Parent-led tours are held in the fall; applications are due in December and interviews are held in January.

East Side Community High School

420 East 12th Street
New York, NY 10009
(212) 460-8467

Admissions: educational option

Grade levels: 7–12

Enrollment: 490

Class size: 18–20

Average SATs: V384 M430

Graduation rate: 65%

College admissions: very good

Ethnicity: 2%W 34%B 57%H 6%A

Free lunch: 80%

East Side Community High School has passionate, knowledgeable teachers who understand that teaching is a performance art—and that winning kids’ attention with a good act is half the battle. There’s a science teacher dressed in a white jacket and possessing all the humor and pizzazz of PBS’s Bill Nye the Science Guy. He wows the class by mixing water and hydrogen peroxide to make oxygen—and setting a match to it so it explodes with a bang. There’s a history teacher who gets the kids to play at being European diplomats in the years before World War II—and makes them come up with ways to avoid war. And there’s a math teacher who brings elementary algebra to life with giant sheets of graph paper posted on the wall—and who gives kids the chance to ask questions whenever they don’t understand.

Kids here learn that knowledge doesn’t only come out of textbooks and that it’s not enough to read one version of events. In a class on the Spanish American War, for example, kids compared the different points of view in a standard text, a left-wing history, a text written in Spanish, and one that concentrated on the role of women.

A member of the Coalition of Essential Schools, the national network of small progressive schools, East Side Community teaches that it’s more important to study a few subjects in depth than to have a smattering of information about many topics. Students learn to express themselves well and to defend their points of view—both orally and in print. Students write several drafts of each paper, and class discussions—rather than lectures—are the norm. Very small class sizes make it possible for

kids to write and talk a lot. The school is also proud of its math curriculum, called CPM or College Preparatory Math.

Children receiving **special education** services are completely integrated into regular classes. Most classes have two or three adults, including aides and student teachers, so the kids who need extra help get individual attention right in their classes. One boy who had a history of behavior and emotional problems flourished with the attention he received here and now is going to college. "I take school more seriously now because the teachers care about the student," the boy said.

The school has after-school homework help from 3 p.m. to 5 p.m.—particularly important for children whose parents may not have enough education themselves to help with high school work. Each child has an advisor who can help with social as well as academic problems, and students and parents may call the advisor at home.

Most of the students enter the school with weak academic skills. The staff helps them stay in school, even when they have big personal problems, such as a 9th grader who had a baby when she was in 7th grade. "We're committed to working with very tough kids," said principal Mark Federman.

The school has a full-time college counselor, paid for with a grant from Prudential Securities. About three-quarters of the graduates go on to 4-year colleges—an excellent record, especially considering the level of preparation of the kids when they start. Graduates have gone to Cornell, Columbia, NYU, Wharton, Connecticut College, and Wesleyan.

Prospective parents and students may visit the school in the fall. The school occasionally admits students mid-year. Most kids are admitted in 7th grade.

Institute for Collaborative Education

345 East 15th Street
New York, NY 10003
(212) 475-7972
www.ice-ny.com

Admissions: educational option

Grade levels: 6–12

Enrollment: 348

Class size: 18–22

Average SATs: V475 M458

Graduation rate: 72%

College admissions: good

Ethnicity: 37%W 23%B 25%H 15%A

Free lunch: 26%

Founded in 1993, the Institute for Collaborative Education (ICE) is a small, progressive secondary school that is evolving from a school that serves troubled, mostly poor kids to one that aggressively courts—and attracts—the high-achieving children of the educated middle class.

“The philosophy hasn’t changed,” said principal John Pettinato. “The applicant pool has changed. We’re getting more gifted kids, more middle-class kids, but we’re keeping a racial balance. Kids who are bright and who have had trouble at other schools do very well here.”

The school prides itself not only on its racial diversity—blacks, whites, Hispanics, and Asians are all represented in roughly equal proportions—but also on the range of different abilities and income levels represented. Classes have 20 or fewer students, which makes it easier for teachers to accommodate various levels of ability.

The school stresses writing not only in humanities classes, but also in science. Students write research papers on topics such as smallpox and the development of immunology. One student wrote an eight-page paper on how different species arise from hybrid birds on the Galapagos Islands.

A member of the Center for Collaborative Education, ICE shares the belief of Deborah Meier, founder of Central Park East Secondary School, that schools should be democratically run institutions in which parents, teachers, and even students have a say in deciding what is taught. ICE attracts and engages kids who might be alienated or may have dropped-out had they gone

elsewhere. Although only two-thirds of the students graduate on time, more than 95% graduate eventually—a testament to the perseverance of both students and staff.

Many of the teachers come from Brown University's graduate school of education. ICE is a member of the Coalition of Essential Schools, a national network of schools organized by Brown University's TheodoreSizer, who believes that small schools that concentrate on teaching a few subjects well are more effective than large schools that attempt to teach a wide array of subjects.

"They really specialize in teaching kids how to think independently," said parent Cindy Holden O'Neill. "They teach children to challenge everything. They say: 'Prove it to me.' The kids are very happy and secure, and the principal knows everyone."

And, while some parents might find the atmosphere too relaxed, others praise the administration's willingness to cater to student interests. When Ms. O'Neill's son told teachers he was interested in making an animated film, they set up a film club—just for him and another student—and even bought them a camera. "My son never liked school until coming to ICE," said another mother, who called the atmosphere "stimulating and challenging."

The school's strength is in the humanities. "The projects are interesting and productive," said parent Judy Sussman. "But a math school, it's not." The students are unusually nice to one another, with no backbiting or cliques, and the teachers seem to value kindness, she said.

ICE has become more academically challenging in recent years. "The teachers all say they are teaching at a level that is one or two years above where they used to be," said Ms. Sussman. Strong students may take classes at NYU. At the same time, students who are struggling get the attention they need.

One student couldn't write, but drew well. "We had him draw the characters in *Hamlet*," said Pettinato, who has master's degrees in both special education and social work. "Then we said, 'Why did you draw them like that?' He was able to explain, and then he was able to do a character analysis. His spelling wasn't great—we do drafts and more drafts—but he realized when he was interested in something he was able to do it."

The Institute for Collaborative Education occupies the fifth floor and part of the fourth floor of the former Stuyvesant High School, which it shares with the High School of Health Professions. The building isn't in great shape, and some rooms have peeling paint.

It's an informal place. Students call teachers by their first names and sometimes use slang when speaking to adults. Blue jeans are the rule, on adults as well as kids. Kids are boisterous and loud during class changes. But it's also a place that's serious about preparing kids for college: ICE boasts that nearly all of its graduates go on to college and that about two-thirds go on to 4-year schools. College acceptances include the University of Chicago, Cornell, Penn State, Middlebury College, Hampshire College, Bard College, Bucknell, and College of the Atlantic.

Children living in any of the five boroughs may apply. The school offers monthly tours.

The Lab School for Collaborative Studies

333 West 17th Street
New York, NY 10011
(212) 691-6119

Admissions: selective/District 2 priority

Grade levels: 6–12

Enrollment: 730

Class size: 31

Average SATs: V571 M599

Graduation rate: 99%

College admissions: very good

Ethnicity: 57%W 10%B 9%H 24%A

Free lunch: 12%

The Lab School for Collaborative Studies aims to give students an academic program that's on a par with Stuyvesant or Bronx Science in an atmosphere that's less competitive and more relaxed. Kids work hard here—and some are as sleep deprived as their counterparts at the specialized high schools. But the school is less intense, the size is intimate, and many kids feel they can count on grown-ups for help and encouragement.

“Even though the classes are big, you really receive an enormous amount of attention,” said Marlene Spoerri, my student tour guide. “The teachers are available all the time—before school, during lunch, after school. They understand each student's problems.”

Indeed, on my visit, I saw teachers working individually with kids—during class time while other kids were working independently, or during their free periods. Teachers have a chance to meet and plan lessons with one another as well—a rarity in public high schools.

Founded in 1987, Lab was District 2's first combined middle and high school, serving kids in grades 6–12. Lab offers high school students the mixture of progressive and traditional teaching techniques for which the district elementary and middle schools are known. Priority is given to students living within the old District 2 boundaries (most of the East Side south of 96th Street and the West Side south of 59th Street).

In physics, kids see who can construct the highest freestanding tower from a single sheet of paper—a fun project—but they also are expected to grasp formulas for velocity and motion. In

English and history, kids are expected to offer their opinions—but teachers insist they support their opinions with facts from the texts that they are reading. Traditionalists may grumble that the math program is “fuzzy” and progressives may grumble that there are too many textbooks, but for many parents the balance is just right.

“It’s academically serious, without being high pressure,” said parent Lisa Siegman. She said the school is staking out a middle ground between schools with “crazy amounts of homework” and those that are cozy and nurturing without being rigorous.

The physical surroundings aren’t beautiful. The Lab School shares space with the Museum School in an ugly, fortress-like concrete structure originally built as a large, neighborhood junior high school. Corridors are poorly lit, and the paint job is depressing.

But the Lab classrooms are cheerful and well equipped, with colorful bulletin boards, hanging mobiles, fish tanks, and plants. New science labs have perked the place up. Class changes are pleasant, with kids talking quietly to one another, and then settling down quickly to study. There are no bells, no PA announcements to interrupt the day, no passes necessary to go to the bathroom.

“Mixing a high school with a middle school gentles down the kids,” one teacher said. “There is a toughness that is pervasive in most high schools that is missing here.” Indeed, the high school manages to retain some of the playfulness of a school for little kids. In an 11th-grade physics class, a giant roller coaster made from K’nex, a colorful plastic construction toy, was used to study accelerated motion. A toy with swinging metal balls attached to strings is used to study potential energy. Kids build rockets and set them off in the playground.

The math curriculum follows the district’s “ARISE” curriculum, a series of math textbooks that require students to create and verify their own methods for solving problems. In these, students must use words to explain their work and present their strategies. Some parents complain the curriculum is confusing; others defend it, saying it makes math understandable.

A Lab math teacher, Stephen Murray, who also teaches at Fordham University, says students who’ve had this so-called “constructivist” approach are better prepared for math in college. “They know *why* it works, they don’t just know *that* it works,” he said. Students take the same standardized Regents and AP calculus exams as other New York City students.

In a pre-calculus class, the teacher began with a 15-minute explanation of matrices, and then the students sat in pairs and

worked independently on problems. Anyone who hit a stumbling block could ask either the teacher—who was moving from student to student—or the student with whom he was paired.

In social studies and English classes there is more discussion than is typical in traditional high schools. In English, there is more emphasis on literature from the second half of the 20th century than on the classics.

In one American history class, kids were discussing a *New York Times* editorial denouncing the U.S. Supreme Court decision that made George W. Bush president and the impact of the decision on black Americans. When a student offered an opinion, the teacher said, “Can you give us an example from the editorial?”—encouraging debate, but keeping students from straying too far from the text.

“One of the things I like the most is the fact that all the teachers manage to introduce social and political aspects into their classes. It’s not just English composition,” said my student guide, Ms. Spoerri. “It makes us socially conscious and politically aware.”

Like teachers at most other public schools, Lab’s writing teachers battle large class size. But Lab gives more writing assignments than is typical. Students are expected to write three or more drafts, and they sometimes edit one another’s work. In one 11th-grade AP English class I saw, kids were editing 9th graders’ papers—an exercise their teacher said helped both sets of kids hone their writing. The quality of writing I saw was quite good. Students must write a 10- to 20-page senior thesis to graduate.

While middle school classes are large—33 to 35 students—the high school class size is a bit smaller than average—31 or 32. Some Advanced Placement classes have fewer than 25 students.

The school has an unusual **special education** program for students who are classified as learning disabled. The students are completely integrated into regular classrooms with two teachers—one certified in special education. I saw a chemistry class in which it was impossible to distinguish the special education students from the others—except when the special ed teacher sat next to a student who was having trouble and offered individual help.

The Lab School encourages children to take an active role in their education and their community. Students may petition the administration for electives of their own choosing. One student actually taught a course on videotape editing, and another taught a course on martial arts. Students also are expected to take part in community service projects. Every junior works 6–10

hours a week as an intern at a place such as a day care center, a hospital, an architectural firm, or a judge's office. There is a student exchange program in Eastern Europe sponsored by the Lauder Foundation.

Some parents described the school as warm and "touchy feely," while one mother complained that the school was "very competitive" and that teachers assigned "way too much homework," particularly in the 6th grade. Another mother called the school "elitist" and "cold." She said there were divisions between Brooklynites—who tend to be middle class—and Manhattanites—who have more money. It's particularly difficult for students who start in 9th grade to fit in socially with kids who've been there since 6th grade. "I wish they helped kids more through social difficulties," another mother said. "If you don't find a group of kids to hang with, you could be miserable."

For many, the transition from elementary school is very difficult. "They push the kids awfully hard," said the mother of a 6th grader. "I wish they would let up a little. Sometimes the material they are covering seems absurdly advanced." She said her daughter had so much homework she had no time to work on the school newspaper or take a theater class after school.

The middle school always loses part of its class to Hunter College High School in 7th grade and to Stuyvesant and Bronx Science in 9th grade. But increasingly kids who pass the exams for specialized high schools are choosing to stay at Lab.

Rob Menken and Sheila Breslaw, co-directors of Lab, acknowledge that a small school such as theirs can't compete with the facilities of Stuyvesant or Bronx Science and has much more limited course offerings. For example, Spanish is the only foreign language offered. Stuyvesant offers seven. Lab offers one year of Advanced Placement calculus; Stuyvesant offers three. Lab has no formal program for kids who want to compete in the Intel Science Talent Search. Ms. Breslaw said the school is organized to study a subject in depth, rather than to zip through an accelerated curriculum.

The students who stay at Lab for high school do so because the advantages of its small size make up for its disadvantages. Super-achievers who may find the number of AP courses limiting can take college courses at New York University, Borough of Manhattan Community College, and Parsons School of Design. One student who was intent on entering the Intel Science Talent

Search managed to do so by finding his own mentor—a scientist in the department of human genetics at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center.

The school is designed to give much more individual attention than is possible at a large, traditional school. Teachers from each grade have weekly meetings to plan lessons together and talk about individual students' progress. "All the 9th-grade teachers will get together to discuss which kid is floundering and what we're going to do about it," Ms. Breslaw said. Once a month, student representatives meet with teachers to discuss their concerns.

Lab students and their teachers say the competition for college is a little less fierce here than at Stuyvesant. It's easier to get noticed by MIT if you're one of a few applicants from Lab, rather than several dozen from Stuyvesant. And the Lab college counselor is likely to know you well and to have the time and energy to advocate your cause.

The college counselor meets with groups of parents in their homes to discuss the admissions process and to help outline options. "We've found colleges are hungry to accept our kids," said the counselor, Wendy Muskat. Lab graduated its first high school class in 1997 and has established its reputation by sending nearly all of its graduates to 4-year colleges—including several to Columbia, Cornell, and Carnegie Mellon. Graduates also have gone to Brown, Skidmore, Smith, Oberlin, Hamilton, Cooper Union, Wesleyan, Barnard, and Julliard.

The college office encourages students to look at schools outside the northeast and helps them to find programs that might not be well known but that are a particularly good match for a student.

The school accepts students in 6th, 7th, and 9th grades. Middle school students are automatically admitted to the high school. The school accepts 30–40 new 9th graders. The school looks at a student's grades, attendance records, and scores on standardized tests for admission to 9th grade. "Kids who really, really want to come should make themselves known to their guidance counselor," Ms. Breslaw said. "We want kids who want to be here."

The school is wheelchair accessible. Interested parents should arrange a tour in the fall of the year before they want their child to attend.

New York City Museum School

333 West 17th Street
New York, NY 10011
(212) 675-6206

Admissions: educational option/District 2 priority

Grade levels: 6–12

Enrollment: 357

Class size: 25

Average SATs: N/A

Graduation rate: 75%

College admissions: good

Ethnicity: 24%W 25%B 39%H 12%A

Free lunch: 34%

The premise of the Museum School is this: The great museums of New York have the tools to give children a great liberal arts education—not just an appreciation of fine art but also a firm foundation in science, history, and English. Students here learn to do research in the great Egyptian collection of the Brooklyn Museum, or the laboratories of the American Museum of Natural History.

High school students visit museums at least two afternoons a week. When they study immigration, they visit Ellis Island and the Lower East Side tenement museum to relive the newcomers' experience. When they study the French Revolution, they visit the lavish Rococo period rooms at the Metropolitan Museum of Art to get a concrete idea about the excesses of the *ancien regime*. In biology, they inspect fossils and work with scientists behind the scenes at the natural history museum. They learn about natural selection and adaptation by studying the dioramas of large mammals, observing, for example, how different kinds of bears' claws are suited to different environments.

They learn to use the collections the way museum professionals do. They do research in the museum archives, learn how museums take care of their objects, and even become curators of their own exhibits. They learn that objects—a portrait from the colonial period or pottery shard from ancient Egypt—can be a source of information about history just as documents—the Federalist Papers or the Book of Exodus—can be.

The Museum School was founded in 1994 by Ron Chaluisan, a former teacher at the Lab school, and Sonnet Takahisa, a former museum educator at the Brooklyn Museum. Their hope was to

create a school that would accept children of all talents and abilities, all income levels and ethnic groups, and offer an education with the academic rigor of a traditional college preparatory school and the fun and excitement of a progressive elementary school.

They won a grant from New Visions for Public Schools—the Manhattan-based education organization—to set up shop in the former junior high school, IS 70, that also houses the Lab School. (Chaluisan is now at New Visions.) The school also received grants from the Center for Arts Education, the Annenberg Foundation, the New York State Council for the Arts, and several other foundations.

The school, which serves kids in grades 6–12, graduated its first class of 30 students in 2001. Of those, 28 applied to college. One was a National Merit semifinalist; another won early admission to the School of Visual Arts. Others were accepted to Bard, Beloit, C.W. Post, the University of California at Santa Cruz, as well as CUNY and SUNY.

Parents call the high school teachers “awesome,” “inspiring,” and “really wonderful.” One mother who has one child at Stuyvesant and another at Museum called the teaching at Museum superior. Parents love the fact that students learn how to do research as well as learning the basic facts of a subject.

“They learn something about the process of learning,” said PTA president Pat Conway. “There are textbooks in every class, but they also use a much broader range of primary resources than any school I know. They learn that just because something is written in the newspaper doesn’t mean you have to believe it—and that almost everything [written] is interpreted by someone who has a point of view.”

Students use not only the artifacts in a museum, but also documents in museum collections. That means a student investigating Native American history might look at totem poles and pottery shards as well as diaries of European explorers when they first encountered the Indians. And the artifacts are not just works of art or curiosities, but sources of historical information, Ms. Conway said. A piece of pottery made from clay not found in the region where it was unearthed, for example, may offer evidence of trading.

The school has a formal collaboration with five museums: the Brooklyn Museum, the American Museum of Natural History, the Children’s Museum of Manhattan, and South Street

Seaport Museum. These museums have assigned their own staff educators to team-teach full-time with Museum School teachers for 8-week projects called “modules.” In addition, the students visit other museums as the curriculum requires.

The Museum School is a laid-back, aggressively egalitarian place in a part of the city that abounds with Type A parents (and with schools, both public and private, that cater to them). The Museum School welcomes and accommodates students whose academic records aren’t stellar, even as it offers a curriculum that can challenge the brightest kids. The tone of the school might be a bit loose for some tastes. Class changes can be boisterous, with lots of shouting and a bit of shoving. Some kids drift into class late.

But every time I visit I find something that keeps me longer than I planned—an unusually interesting conversation with a teacher, or a particularly engaging class. The staff makes me see ordinary things in an extraordinary way: how the well-worn and well-loved dioramas at the natural history museum, for example, can be used in a lesson on Darwin and evolution, how students can learn about adaptation from the shapes of different grizzly bear claws or the different colors of fur. The teachers are passionate about their craft, and constantly refine their techniques to better reach their students.

In one corridor of the school, a map of Jerusalem was posted, with changes over time showing graphically the rise and fall of the Roman Empire. In a history class, students studied documents of the Russian Revolution—including an American tourist’s first-hand account of Czarist Russia and a recruitment poster for the Russian Army. A global history class studied Zen Buddhism and meditation on a trip to the Japanese garden of the Brooklyn Botanic Garden.

The school works best for a student who is focused, engaged, and rather mature. One mother transferred her son out of the Museum School because he simply wasn’t able to concentrate during the many trips. But the school also has attracted high achievers who are alienated by large, traditional schools. One boy, for example, transferred from Stuyvesant; another returned to Museum after trying a college preparatory Catholic school.

Children may be admitted in either 6th grade or 9th grade. In 6th grade, all candidates are interviewed by the faculty. They participate in a mini-class and also are asked to write an essay, solve a math problem, and observe an object and describe it. In

Manhattan

9th grade, students are accepted based on the educational option formula designed to ensure a mix of high- and low-achieving kids. The school has a resource room for children who need extra help with their reading, but no self-contained special education classes.

The school offers weekly tours from October to December. Priority is given to students in the old District 2, south of 59th Street on the West Side and most of the East Side south of 96th Street.

Baruch College Campus High School

17 Lexington Avenue, Suite A1503

New York, NY 10010

(212) 802-2620

Admissions: selective/District 2 priority

Grade levels: 9–12

Enrollment: 391

Class size: 34

Average SATs: N/A

Graduation rate: 99%

College admissions: excellent

Ethnicity: 35%W 7%B 16%H 42%A

Free lunch: 49%

Pairs of kids are sprawled on the floor, reading to one another from the Epic of Gilgamesh, the story of the Babylonian king, as part of their study of ancient history. Some kids are in the classroom. Some are in the hall. It's a difficult text, but the kids find that reading out loud and discussing it with a partner makes it a little easier.

This relaxed atmosphere, combined with hard work on classical texts, is typical of Baruch College Campus High School, a new school that has become one of the most popular in Manhattan, even though it graduated its first class in 2001.

"We're somewhere in between progressive and traditional," said founding principal Jill Myers, now supervisor for a group of schools that includes Baruch. "The assignments we give are [based on] progressive [ideas], but the curriculum is traditional."

Kids read Greek classics such as *Antigone* and *The Odyssey*, Shakespeare's comedies, Dante's *Inferno*, as well as modern novels and non-Western works of literature from Africa and Asia. They study the rules for iambic pentameter and the works of Indian women authors. They learn about Greek philosophers such as Aristotle and Democritus and also debate current events. From time to time, the school designates a "grammar day" on which teachers and kids concentrate on improving grammar.

Lectures by teachers are rare, and groupwork is emphasized—so much so that the school periodically invites the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, a small Manhattan musical ensemble, to talk to kids about how their members work together without a conductor. "It teaches them about working in groups, and how adults reach consensus," said Ms. Myers.

The school serves students with a whole range of skills, from high achievers to those who are learning disabled. All receive a college preparatory education that Ms. Myers said is taught on an “honors level.” Classes are large, sometimes topping 35.

“The kids are so impressive. They’re good thinkers, articulate, involved in the world,” said parent Joyce Rittenburg. “My daughter loves the teachers. There’s a beautiful new science lab. The writing program really focuses on building skills. And there’s a better balance between the classics and contemporary literature than at some other schools.”

Baruch College Campus High School was founded in response to complaints by East Side parents that there were few high school choices in the neighborhood. It’s located on the campus of Baruch College, part of the City University of New York. The classrooms, on the 10th floor of a modern building, are sunny and cheerfully decorated with kids’ work and large charts outlining the key lessons of the day. The furniture is basic, but there are plenty of books and supplies. The classrooms are particularly cramped, with far too many students for the available space. But the students (63% of which are girls) seem unusually well-behaved and willing to put up with crowded quarters in exchange for engaging instruction.

Sharing space with the college can be inconvenient. The high school office and computers are on the 15th floor, five floors away from the classrooms. The college uses the classrooms at night, so high school teachers must lock up their books and supplies each day. But there are advantages as well. Students have access to the college library and theater and may take college classes for free, for college credit.

While the academics are challenging, the school has some of the warmth and intimacy of an elementary school, and has the emphasis on children’s emotional and social development that a good middle school provides. Ms. Myers was formerly the principal of a well-regarded middle school, the Clinton School for Writers and Artists.

In the fall, the entire 9th grade takes an overnight trip to an environmental center upstate—a chance for kids to get to know one another and to build a community.

Baruch is structured so teachers have time to get to know children well as individuals. Each student is assigned the same advisor for 4 years. Students meet with their advisors in a group of 20 every day for half an hour. Advisors supervise student gov-

ernment elections, offer helpful hints on time management and organization, or listen to any problems kids may be having. Students write a weekly letter to their advisor, an exercise that improves their writing as well as keeping the advisor informed of any concerns. In the 12th grade, advisors help guide students through the college admissions process.

Teachers in different disciplines have regularly scheduled time to meet with one another, so they can keep track of each child's progress in different subjects and keep his advisor informed. The advisor also serves as a contact for parents. "If your kid is having trouble, you don't need to make six phone calls, you make one," said Ms. Myers.

The school has a well-staffed college office, and there's a lot of handholding in college admissions. Graduates have been admitted to Columbia, Barnard, University of Michigan, Vassar, Cornell, Antioch, NYU, Sarah Lawrence, Howard University, and the University of Wisconsin. The school boasts that every graduate has been admitted to a 4-year college. Ms. Myers, whose own children are graduates of a private school in Riverdale, boasts that Baruch's college office is "as good or better than any private school."

Writing is emphasized, and the school encourages students to weigh the information they get and not to take everything they read at face value. Students also are encouraged to look at history from different points of view.

In one unusually interesting American studies class, students read a 50-year-old textbook, written by a Harvard University professor, which suggested that slavery was not so bad. Students were amazed to see that an eminent scholar might have held such a view and were surprised by how attitudes had changed over the years. The lesson gave them a taste of historiography—the history of history.

In another history class, one group of kids studied the role of women in defense factories in World War II, while another studied the racial segregation of the armed forces. The whole class then met to compare experiences of women like Rosie the Riveter and African-Americans during the war.

While Baruch has positioned itself as a school that concentrates on the humanities, its math and science departments have improved significantly in recent years. The school blends progressive and traditional teaching techniques for math, placing less emphasis on the "new math" that critics have derided as

“fuzzy” and more on old-fashioned application of formulas while still encouraging inquiry and discussion. Teachers have combined the progressive “ARISE” curriculum with passages from 13 other textbooks, Ms. Myers said. In each of the math classes I visited, students seemed serious and engaged. Students were free to discuss tricky problems – not just listen to explanations by the teacher. All 11th graders take pre-calculus, and seniors may take AP calculus.

In a chemistry class in a sparkling new science lab, students pondered the question of why milk spoils quickly at room temperature but stays fresh in the refrigerator. They dipped zinc pellets in different solutions of hydrochloric acid and observed the effect of temperature on chemical reactions.

Students said their homework load ranged from two hours to five hours a night, with three hours seeming to be typical.

“I feel I get a lot of attention from the teachers,” one girl said. “If you need help after school, the teachers are willing to help you.”

Sports include volleyball, soccer, basketball, softball, baseball, and track-and-field.

The school integrates **special education** pupils who are classified as learning disabled into regular classes and offers extra help with a “consultant teacher,” a special education expert who works with the classroom teacher. The school also serves hearing-impaired kids.

The school has far more applicants than spaces available. So if your child wants to be considered for admission, be sure Baruch is listed as first choice on the application. (Typically, 600 students list Baruch as their first choice, and there are 110 seats available.)

If your child doesn’t get in on the first round and really loves the school, have her 8th-grade guidance counselor call and put in a plug for her. Regular tours are offered in the fall.

School of the Future

127 East 22nd Street
New York, NY 10010
(212) 475-8086
www.sof.edu

Admissions: selective/District 2 priority

Grade levels: 6–12

Enrollment: 600

Class size: 22

Average SATs: N/A

Graduation rate: 86%

College admissions: very good

Ethnicity: 38%W 19%B 23%H 20%A

Free lunch: 38%

The School of the Future has a first-rate writing program and a stellar record of sending just about every graduate to college. Classes have fewer than 25 kids, and students receive an unusual degree of attention and help from grown-ups in everything from writing the first draft of a paper to applying to college. Kids and staff both seem happy to be here.

Kids wear hats backwards and sometimes sit on their desks. There are no bells, and kids don't have to ask permission to use the bathroom. But don't mistake the informality for a lack of academic rigor. To graduate, kids are expected to show their mastery of major subject areas through a "portfolio assessment" of written work and oral presentations.

At most schools, teachers have five 43-minute classes of 34 students each day, or 170 students, and it's almost impossible to pay attention to each child's writing. At the School of the Future, history and English are combined to form humanities. Humanities teachers have two 2-hour classes of 22 students each day—a much more manageable number that allows teachers to help kids from the early stages of forming a thesis through several drafts.

Throughout the term, kids present their work to others for discussion. In one 11th- and 12th-grade class in humanities, a student, Jose Gonzalez, sat on a desk, wrapped his legs around the metal legs, and recited a poem he had written about the great defense attorney Clarence Darrow.

A Negro accused of a murder he did not commit . . .
No one would take the case

But one man did
Clarence Darrow
On the road to lynch city
Clarence intervened . . .

When Gonzalez finished, other students discussed Darrow and his times—from the Pullman strike and the left-wing labor movement at the turn of the twentieth century to the Scopes monkey trial, the Tennessee case on the teaching of evolution in public schools.

In a 9th- and 10th-grade humanities class, in a room made beautiful with hanging plants and bins of books, kids seated at tables struggled to form a thesis about Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. With the help of their teacher, who walked from table to table, each came up with a different central idea—which they then wrote on construction paper and posted on the bulletin board. "Mark Anthony uses dishonesty as a strategy to capture the murderers of Julius Caesar." "Shakespeare uses storms, dreams, and warnings to let the readers know Caesar will die."

Writing is part of every class, and every piece of writing goes through three or four drafts. Kids might write a poem about a history lesson, an essay on Sophocles, a movie review, or a plea to improve the conditions in the school bathrooms. They keep daily journals in science class and even write descriptions of how they solved a math problem.

Founded in 1990, the school has just 550 kids in grades 6–12. The small size, combined with the fact that kids stay for 6 years, means students and staff really get to know one another. If any student starts to slough off—or even if anyone gets a little depressed—some grown-up is sure to notice right away.

The school, which is wheelchair accessible, is in a newly remodeled former vocational high school for girls. The building is nothing fancy, but it's clean and pleasant. Girls' bathrooms are bigger than the boys', and the kids' lockers are inconveniently located in the basement, but the building has a nice gym and an adequate cafeteria. The library is small, and students frequently use the public library nearby.

The School of the Future is a member of the Coalition of Essential Schools, an organization of schools that includes Central Park East. The staff repeats the progressive mantra that it's more important to learn "habits of mind"—various ways of approaching a new problem—than to learn a particular set of

facts. Kids are encouraged to find their own solutions—not merely have the teacher give them information.

It always takes a minute to spot the teacher at the School of the Future. Desks are pushed together in blocks of four—not lined up in rows—and the teacher is as likely to be working with a child individually as talking to the group as a whole. The school has many student teachers from Teachers College, New York University, and the New School, so there's usually more than one grown-up in a class.

In a 9th-grade math class, kids were sprawled on the floor in the hallway and leaning over desks, coloring large sheets of paper marked off in squares. They were making scale drawings of paintings by Picasso and Georgia O'Keefe in a lesson intended to show how artists use mathematics in their work.

Balanced with traditional Regents preparation, the school uses District 2's "ARISE" math curriculum, which is designed to motivate kids who otherwise might not be interested. Kids use math to solve what they call "real world" problems, such as using a linear equation in algebra to convert Fahrenheit to Celsius.

In a 9th-grade science class that integrates elements of biology, chemistry, and physics, a fish tank bubbled and a 2-foot-long iguana stretched out on a log in a 6-foot-tall cage. Decorating the room were photos and descriptions written by the kids of class trips to a farm upstate and to Central Park, where they collected water samples and tested them for oxygen rates, acidity, and the number of organisms.

Kids in groups of five gathered around a lab table for a simple chemistry experiment, heating wax and noting how its temperature reached a plateau when it boiled. A teacher's aide assisted a girl in a wheelchair. That project finished, the kids gathered as a group while the teacher asked them to complete an exercise in optics, trying to predict where light would exit from a lens.

Children with mild learning disabilities are integrated into regular classes, assisted by a **special education** teacher who modifies the lessons to accommodate them.

"I talk to the teachers about their lessons," said the special education teacher, Jos Marks. "One day they learn better one way, one day they learn better another way." One girl understands lessons better when they are read out loud, so he reads to her. A boy has trouble focusing. "We have a deal. He concentrates

for 10 minutes on the lesson, and then he reads what he wants for 5 minutes.

“The really incredible thing is that they are immersed in the class, and they don’t consider themselves out of the ordinary or dumb or stupid, because they feel they can accomplish so much,” said Marks. Special education pupils also receive after-school help.

Students are assigned advisors, with whom they meet regularly. The school has an unusually good after-school program.

One mother said the school devotes an unusual amount of time to teaching children to write well and described teachers as “tireless, energetic, and very creative.”

Another raved about the college admissions counselor, who writes “extensive” letters of recommendation, takes kids personally to visit college campuses, and tirelessly calls colleges on behalf of students. Recent graduates have been accepted to Cornell, Stanford, New York University, Wesleyan, Amherst, Fordham, and Penn State. About 88% of graduates go to 4-year colleges; 12% go to 2-year colleges.

The kids whom I spoke to were less stressed out than kids at more selective, competitive schools. Their one criticism: A school so small can be claustrophobic socially, particularly after 6 years. Kids have $1\frac{1}{2}$ –2 hours of homework a night—not a negligible amount, but not as heavy as at some other schools.

The downside of a small school is that it can’t have a wide array of programs. Parents and students complain that the sports program is weak and the music program nonexistent. Advanced Placement courses are offered in the after-school program. Students may make arrangements to take college courses at the City University of New York and New York University.

In a foreign exchange program, 12 kids a year visit families in Sweden, Spain, France, or the Netherlands for one week. The school pays for the trips through its own fund-raising; parents need not pay individually.

Julia Richman Educational Complex

317 East 67th Street
New York, NY, 10021
(212) 570-5284
www.urbanacademy.org

Admissions: varies by program

Grade levels: preK–12

Enrollment: programs range
from 100–400

Class size: 10–28

Average SATs: vary by program

Graduation rate: varies by program

College admissions: vary by program

Ethnicity: varies by program

Free lunch: varies by program

The Julia Richman Educational Complex is a nationally recognized experiment in urban school reform based on the notion that large neighborhood high schools simply don't work, particularly for poor city kids, and that big buildings need to be divided into smaller units for them to function.

The old Julia Richman High School was a chaotic place where truancy was rampant, fights were common, and barely one-third of the students graduated on time. Metal detectors were installed in a desperate attempt to keep students safe.

Small-school advocates led by Ann Cook and Herb Mack, founders of the Urban Academy, a small progressive high school, pressed to have the building reorganized. It was closed in 1996 and reopened as the Julia Richman Educational Complex, with six autonomous schools, each with 400 or fewer students. With the help of grants from various foundations, the building was reorganized around the principle that small schools, in which every teacher knows every student, are safer and more nurturing than large schools where no one knows your name—or notices if you skip class.

The beautifully renovated building houses six small schools: a selective performing arts program called Talent Unlimited, a tiny college preparatory school called Urban Academy, a middle school for autistic children, a college preparatory school for new immigrants, the Ella Baker elementary school serving kids in prekindergarten through 8th grade, and the Vanguard Academy high school.

There is a day care center that allows high school students who have babies to continue their education while keeping their children nearby, a student health center affiliated with Mount Sinai Hospital, and a staff development center to help teachers hone their skills. The metal detectors have been removed. The programs vary in quality, but several are quite successful.

There has been friction between the Julia Richman complex and some neighborhood parents, who sought to evict several of the small schools and programs to install a traditional, selective academic high school with an Advanced Placement track that would serve neighborhood kids. The small schools in the Julia Richman complex draw students from across the city, including many black and Hispanic kids and many who qualify for free lunch.

In the days of the old Julia Richman, almost no parents from the prosperous, mostly white Upper East Side sent their kids to what was then their neighborhood high school. In recent years, however, as neighborhood public elementary and middle schools have improved dramatically, middle-class and even wealthy parents have begun to choose public schools over private. Many are now agitating for better high school alternatives, and some have looked covetously at the newly renovated Julia Richman complex as a site for a new high school that serves more neighborhood kids and offers more varied and advanced courses than the small schools provide. The Department of Education, however, supports the existing programs in the building and promised instead to work with parents to identify other sites for new schools. Students living on the East Side may, of course, apply to programs in the building.

Talent Unlimited, with 425 students, is a well-established performing arts school that attracts students from across the city and sends them on to schools such as Vassar, Columbia, Tisch School of the Arts at New York University, and Philadelphia College of Arts. It occupies a wing of the Julia Richman complex and has its own entrance at 300 East 68th Street.

In an unusual collaboration, MTV, the cable music channel, offers Talent Unlimited students summer internships, scholarship money for college, and even mentors. Each MTV volunteer meets once a week with a dozen students to chat about everything from college admissions to the latest music. MTV gave money to help refurbish the auditorium and pays for a "Princeton Review" course to help students prepare for the SATs.

Talent Unlimited offers programs in vocal music, dance, drama, and instrumental music, and has just launched a musical

theater program. The school combines a traditional academic program with instruction in the arts. Class size ranges from 26 to 28. Admissions are by audition. About 3,000 students audition for 125 seats in the freshman class. Prospective parents may attend an open house and performance in October. For details, call the school at (212) 737-1530, ext. 652.

The **Urban Academy Laboratory School**, with just 100 students and classes averaging 15 pupils or fewer, has an unusually imaginative and experienced teaching staff and a good record of keeping in school kids who otherwise might have dropped out. Its word-of-mouth reputation has spread, and while it still serves as a “second-chance” school for kids who have been alienated by large, traditional high schools, a few children come directly from their middle schools into 9th grade. It has an unusually good record of getting students into college, and some students have been accepted at schools such as Wesleyan, Brown, the University of Chicago, Swarthmore, and Yale.

The Urban Academy has a mix of children of the educated middle class and students from working-class and poor families. The U.S. Department of Education named it a Blue Ribbon School of Excellence in 1997, and it was named a New American High School in 2000. The Public Education Association awarded its entire staff the Maurice Hexter Award for excellence in teaching—an award usually given to an individual.

“The kids have sparks coming off their sneakers, the level of excitement is so high,” one father said.

“The dedication of the teachers is remarkable,” a mother said. “We’ve always been impressed with just how well they know our daughter—her strengths and weaknesses in detail. She loves it. How often do you hear a kid say, ‘I love high school’?”

The Urban Academy is a member of the progressive Coalition of Essential Schools. Students must prepare oral and written reports demonstrating their proficiency in each discipline. Students interested in admission should call the school director, Ann Cook, at (212) 570-5284 and arrange a tour. Students are interviewed and write an application to demonstrate their commitment to the school.

Manhattan International High School, modeled on International High School in Queens, successfully prepares for college students who have just arrived in the United States. **Vanguard High School**, a small alternative school, has some good teachers but hasn’t established a strong reputation.

Eleanor Roosevelt High School

411 East 76th Street
New York, NY 10021
(212) 229-9951
www.erhsnyc.org

Admissions: selective/District 2 priority

Grade levels: 9–12

Enrollment: 500 (projected)

Class size: 31

Average SATs: new school

Graduation rate: new school

College admissions: new school

Ethnicity: 40%W 10%B 15%H 35%A

Free lunch: 35%

For years, Upper East Side parents complained that there was no high school suitable for bright kids who wanted to stay in their neighborhood. Most of the existing high schools on Upper East Side, from Talent Unlimited in the former Julia Richman to the High School of Teaching on 88th Street, were small theme schools that didn't offer the broad liberal arts curriculum that many parents craved, while Hunter College High School was next to impossible to get into.

The Eleanor Roosevelt High School, also known as the Upper East Side High School, was founded in 2002 after months of lobbying by parents, many of whose children attended PS 6. The school opened with a 9th grade in September 2002 in temporary quarters in Chelsea (in the same building as the Lab School and the Museum School) as construction began on the permanent site in the former Sotheby's warehouse.

Even before the school opened, a few of the parents who lobbied the hardest for the new school complained that the curriculum wasn't traditional enough to suit them. They feared that the small size of the school might prevent it from having advanced courses—a fear that the administration has tried to ease. But many more parents—including those whose children enrolled—were enthusiastic. "I love Eleanor Roosevelt!" said one mother. "This school has a great story to tell," said a father.

Principal Susan Elliott, one of the founders of Baruch Campus High School, has put in place a strong humanities curriculum similar to that of Baruch. Classes are offered as seminars, and students are encouraged to express their points of view. The

English teachers and the history teachers plan their lessons together, so, for example, students read *Beowulf* in English class at the same time they study the Middle Ages in history. Students read classical texts such as *Oedipus Rex* and the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and explore them in an unusual way. The day I visited, students were experimenting with writing poetry about Oedipus and Gilgamesh using different voices.

Ms. Elliott visited the Dalton School when she was planning the curriculum for Eleanor Roosevelt, and was impressed with the way the private school integrates art into core academic subjects. At Eleanor Roosevelt, she has tried to accomplish the same thing. Students may take art classes (including art history or drama) four times a week. In one class, students read *The Tempest*, and made collages of scenes from the play. In another, they wrote historical reports about Paleolithic cave art and recreated cave drawings of mastodons. Students may also choose instrumental music or music appreciation. Foreign languages offered are French and Spanish.

The school is committed to integrating technology into the curriculum, and the math and technologies teachers plan their lessons together. In a 9th-grade math class, for example, the students sat with wireless laptop computers, learning how to enter data in an Excel spreadsheet, which they then used to solve an algebra problem. Ms. Elliott was the assistant principal for mathematics at Baruch, and is knowledgeable about both the pitfalls of the “new” or “constructivist” math and the more traditional methods. At Eleanor Roosevelt, there is an attempt to blend the two approaches.

The school’s new quarters has five stories with modern science labs, an auditorium, and a large physical education space but not a full-size gymnasium. The administration is arranging for additional space for sports at Asphalt Green.

Teachers meet at least once a week to talk about individual students’ progress, and the principal seems to know where everyone is at any given time of day. “I know who is supposed to be going to after school and whether they show up or not,” said Ms. Elliott.

In the school’s first two years, priority was given to residents of District 2, which includes the East Side and downtown. About 80% of the first class had above average test scores. Tours are offered in the fall. The principal’s email is selliott@mychoe.net.

Hunter College High School

71 East 94th Street
New York, NY 10128
(212) 860-1267

www.heimdall.hchs.hunter.cuny.edu

Admissions: exam, entering 7th graders only

Grade levels: 7–12

Graduation rate: 94% (estimate)

Enrollment: 1,200

College admissions: excellent

Class size: 25

Ethnicity: 49%W 8%B 7%H 36%A

Average SATs: V680 M710

Free lunch: 3%

Hunter College High School is a highly successful, very selective and competitive school that prepares its students for the country's most elite colleges. It's known particularly for its strength in the humanities, but it also offers high-level math courses and regularly fields semifinalists for the Intel Science Talent Search. Students may conduct research in genetics or biotechnology as interns at Mt. Sinai Hospital, Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, or Rockefeller University. Hunter consistently sends one-quarter to one-third of its graduating class to Ivy League schools.

Teachers encourage discussion and debate, and there is an emphasis on learning to write well, not only in English classes but in science classes as well. Students learn to edit as well as to write and typically edit one another's papers through several drafts.

"There's tons and tons of writing. I don't think you can leave Hunter without learning to write well," said parent Sharon Kleinbaum. "I've been impressed by how much the teachers care about the kids. It's a place that really cultivates the intellect."

It's also a high-pressure place, where lots of kids are chronically sleep-deprived because of mountains of homework and long commutes. Hunter College High School accepts students from across the city, and some have commutes as long as 2 hours a day each way.

Hunter has an unusually strong program in music and art. The drama department offers students the chance to write and perform their own plays and musicals. Student musicians have

performed from France to Senegal. Art history classes take trips to Florence and Sienna. Students may sing medieval and Renaissance music *a cappella*, play American jazz in an orchestra, or take a college-level studio art course in nude figure drawing.

Unlike schools where students are required to specialize in science or math, dance or singing, students at Hunter are required to have a balanced course of English, history, math, science, and the arts. They may choose as many extra projects as they feel they can handle. At Hunter, a student can both be in the class play and conduct an independent research project in science.

Classes are smaller than the public high school norm. Although some introductory courses have 30 students, most classes have fewer than 25 kids and many upper-level courses have 15–20. “Hunter is great because it combines the class size and academic quality of a private school with the diversity of a public school,” said a senior.

The school is predominantly white and Asian, with smaller numbers of blacks and Hispanics, and it has a reputation of being tolerant of openly gay students. Most students are middle class, and there are many children of new immigrants. Students may be intellectually competitive and even academically arrogant, but there’s no competition over clothes or fancy vacations. “No one talks about which Prada bag is the best,” one girl said.

The surroundings are pretty grim, and the kids call the school “The Brick Prison.” The building is an ugly brick high-rise with tiny slits for windows. Classrooms have no windows at all. Ventilation is bad, and the heating system is uneven. The halls are strewn with occasional bits of litter and even graffiti. The school has grungy, scuffed-up lockers, reading materials photocopied 25 years ago, and books held together with tape.

But one goes to Hunter, after all, for the life of the mind—not for the physical stuff. And most kids are so grateful to be here that it seems churlish to complain about some beat-up textbooks. What the school offers very bright kids is each other’s company, some very good teachers, and a consistently high level of intellectual excitement in the classes. Several parents said they were envious of their children’s experiences—the passion one girl developed for biology, or the thrill of studying Asian art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The school offers students an unusual degree of independence and freedom. Students may spend their free periods in the library, hanging out in the halls, or at a coffee shop down the

street. The corridors serve as the student lounge and cafeteria, as kids chat and chew pizza seated cross-legged in front of their lockers. For seventh graders, the responsibility can make for a difficult transition—as they struggle to organize their own time to finish projects—but most of the high school students I interviewed cherished being treated like adults.

The school is smaller than Stuyvesant or Bronx Science, 1,200 students in grades 7–12 and only 750 kids in grades 9–12. Kids say they get to know teachers well, particularly because they may have the same teacher for several courses. Each class has a “grade advisor” who follows them through their 6 years.

Like Hunter College Elementary School, Hunter College High School is touted as a “laboratory” school for the study of “gifted” education. It is tuition-free and supported by tax levies, but it’s not part of the Department of Education. Instead, Hunter College, part of the City University of New York, administers it. The school hires its own teachers, sets its own admissions criteria, and writes its own curriculum. Students may take college courses at Hunter College while still in high school.

Hunter College High School was the first public high school for girls in New York City. Founded in 1869 as the Female Normal and High School, it was divided into a high school and college in 1903 and renamed Hunter College High School in 1914. It opened its doors to boys in 1974.

The high school shares a building with Hunter College Elementary School, but the two schools have very different personalities. The elementary school, on the ground floor, is a relatively laid-back, relaxed, progressive school where kids play with blocks and no one pushes them to read until they seem ready.

The high school upstairs, on the other hand, is a more traditional place where no one forgets that getting into a super-selective college is the goal. One mother complained that a 7th-grade teacher introduced a new vocabulary word by saying: “This is an SAT word”—as if to remind students, even as they started secondary school, that they’d need to do well on the Scholastic Assessment Tests to get into a selective college.

Children in the elementary school are automatically admitted to the high school. Others are admitted in 7th grade based on the results of a test administered to children in January of their 6th-grade year. Only Manhattan residents may apply to the elementary school; children living anywhere in the five boroughs who meet the eligibility requirements may apply to Hunter

College High School. About 50 children enter Hunter College High School from the elementary school. About 190 are chosen from other schools.

Because it's administered by CUNY—not the Department of Education—Hunter isn't bound by the Department of Education requirement to teach American history in 7th and 8th grades. That means teachers can use these years to introduce children to topics that form the foundation of social studies—such as political philosophy, cultural anthropology, and a smattering of economics—and give them tools to use for research—such as how to use documents and primary sources. Children investigate these “global studies” for 3 years before they look at American history in 10th and 11th grades.

Students are expected to offer regular oral presentations. Students read a combination of the classics and contemporary literature, works from the Western canon as well as novels from Asia and Africa.

“It's a perfect balance between a classical curriculum and innovative teaching methods,” said Catherine Hausman, whose son attends. One morning, four girls sat in the hall preparing a critical analysis of “The Wasteland” by T. S. Eliot to present to the class. In another class, kids were in pairs, reading lines out loud from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story*, which they were then asked to compare. In a drama class, kids were standing in a circle shouting nonsense syllables—with great expression. In a science class, kids stood at lab tables in clusters, using graphing calculators to measure the rate of heat loss from test tubes of boiling water.

The school is a stressful, intense place. One teacher described an “insane careerism” about where kids go to college and “hysteria about having a 1350 SAT score”—a score that would be considered very good indeed almost anywhere but Hunter. I met a child who was visibly disappointed that he would be going to Swarthmore. (He'd been hoping for Yale.) One teacher said the “parents are just nutso” about their kids' college admissions.

Students who are grappling with any other problems in their lives—a death in the family, or a divorce—may find it hard to keep up. One mother complained that the administration was “phenomenally unresponsive” when her son had academic troubles. He eventually dropped out and enrolled in a program for a general equivalency diploma. “You have to be self-sufficient and a little thick-skinned to survive,” the mother said.

Former PTA president Eve Kravitz said children need to be “self-starters” with good study skills and the ability to work independently. “No one will say, ‘This is how you do it,’” she said. “For the kids it does fit, it’s a wonderful thing. But it’s not the kind of school where you can just send your kid off and everything will be fine.”

In fact, of an entering class of 240 kids, only about 175 graduate. Some leave in 9th grade to attend Stuyvesant or Bronx Science, which have a reputation for even more high-powered courses in math and science. Some leave because the homework load is too heavy. Others find a long commute from Queens or Staten Island too tiring.

Admission to Hunter is extremely competitive. Children who score in the 88th percentile in reading and in math on standardized tests given in 5th grade are eligible to take the entrance exam in January of their 6th-grade year. (The cutoff scores have varied in the past.) The school makes accommodations for children in special education whose reading and math scores meet the cutoff. If, for example, a child is blind or hearing impaired, an appropriate aide may assist during the exam. The school is wheelchair accessible.

Nearly 2,000 kids take the exam each year, which consists of a multiple-choice part and an essay. The essay counts heavily, and children who cannot write competently are not admitted.

The 160 children who score the highest on the multiple-choice portion of the test (and who write acceptable essays) are offered admission. In addition, about 40 seats are set aside for children who are “economically disadvantaged”—children from low-income families. Those children must have standardized test scores high enough to be eligible for the exam, and must pass the essay part of the test, but may have slightly lower scores on the multiple-choice section. Students must apply for economically disadvantaged status before taking the exam.

Seventh grade is the only year in which children are admitted.

The Professional Performing Arts School

328 West 48th Street
New York, NY 10036
(212) 247-8652
www.ppasnyc.org

Admissions: by audition

Grade levels: 6–12

Enrollment: 350

Class size: 22–30

Average SATs: V510 M482

Graduation rate: 92%

College admissions: very good

Ethnicity: 47%W 32%B 18%H 3%A

Free lunch: 7%

The Professional Performing Arts School (PPAS) was founded in 1990 as a way to give aspiring actors, dancers, and musicians the technical skills they need to become professional performers and the academic skills they need in whatever career they choose.

The school has regular academic classes from 7:45 a.m. to 1:15 p.m. and 2–4 hours of professional training in the afternoon with actors, dancers, and musicians from the Actor’s Institute, the Alvin Ailey School, School of American Ballet, and Harlem School of the Arts. The school also has a very popular new program in musical theater that puts on ambitious productions such as *A Chorus Line*.

Kids work hard to combine their academics with the performing arts. Musical theater is particularly tough, because kids must be proficient at acting, dance, *and* singing. The instrumental jazz program at Harlem School of the Arts is small and growing, while the vocal music program has a wide repertoire including classical, gospel, and opera. Students have performed at Carnegie Hall. The Alvin Ailey dance program is unrelenting and unforgiving. But there is a sense of balance here as well. Kids are taught that there’s more to life than professional or academic success.

“We’re really [committed to] turning out well-rounded human beings who will go out and tackle the world and really make a difference,” said a teacher. For example, students are encouraged to use their skills for more than mere entertainment—performing at an AIDS awareness benefit, or putting on a

light opera for the American Cancer Society to persuade children not to smoke.

PPAS accommodates kids who are working in film, television, or theater productions, both on and off Broadway. About 20% of the students work professionally. When they're on location—sometimes for 3 months or more—teachers send them their lessons through a computer modem, a fax machine, or Federal Express.

Some recent graduates include singer Alicia Keys, Lee Thompson Young (*The Famous Jeff Jackson*), Jesse Eisenberg (*The Emperor's Club*), Sean Nelson, who starred in HBO's *The Corner* and attends Temple University, and Sara Zelle, who played Liesel in *The Sound of Music* on Broadway and attends Harvard. A group of PPAS graduates starred in *Raising Victor Vargas*, an acclaimed Sundance Film Festival entry in 2003.

The school, just off Broadway in the theater district, shares a 100-year-old building with a popular and successful elementary school, Midtown West.

The teachers are attentive and protective of the students. They realize, better than the pupils, that today's child actor on Broadway may be tomorrow's unemployed has-been. On the performing side, that means the kids have to develop real skills they can fall back on when they reach an age where merely being cute won't get them a job. On the academic side, it means the kids have to master algebra and English grammar so they can go into other lines of work if their performing careers fizzle.

Academic classes are smaller than average for New York City high schools and emphasize discussion and writing assignments. "They do a tremendous amount of writing," said principal Mindy Chermak. The humanities are particularly strong. In a 10th-grade humanities class, the teacher launched an interesting discussion of the cultural clashes that ensued when the Crusaders married Muslim women. History and English classes are integrated. Students read *The Grapes of Wrath* as part of their study of the Depression, for example.

Science and math integrate the arts and technology. One math teacher wrote a jazz tune to help kids memorize an equation. A science teacher uses computers and animation to teach about digestion.

The math department is strong and improving rapidly, and one particularly solid teacher has a Ph.D. in astrophysics.

“There’s an incredible mix of obviously exuberant kids from all over the city, all races, all social classes,” said Erica Zurer, whose daughter is now at Marlboro College. “There is a core of very dedicated, very good teachers.” The school has a few **special education** pupils. These children, diagnosed with learning disabilities, are integrated into regular classes with the help of a consultant teacher, who shares tips with the regular classroom teacher.

The performing arts traditionally attract more girls than boys and the school has 266 girls, and only 92 boys.

“Every teacher is approachable. Every teacher is willing to help,” one girl said.

PPAS has a small middle school. In one recent year, about 90 kids auditioned for 28 seats in the middle school. Middle schoolers take a wide range of performing arts courses, and then choose a major in 9th grade. The middle school curriculum integrates songs and games in the humanities. For example, students sang a song they wrote themselves about the Ming Dynasty.

Most students enter in 9th grade. High school auditions are scheduled in November and December. Prospective parents may attend a “showcase” of the school’s academic and performing arts programs in October. Between 1,000 and 1,500 kids audition for 70 spots.

The graduation rate for this school reflects the fact that some students come for a limited period of time. For example, a student from Chicago might come for one year while he is performing in *La Boheme* and then return home. About 50 students graduate each year. Graduates have been admitted to NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts, Barnard, Oberlin, and Harvard.

High School for Environmental Studies

444 West 56th Street
New York, NY 10019
(212) 262-8113

Admissions: educational option

Grade levels: 9–12

Enrollment: 1,425

Class size: 20–34

SATs: V488 M493

Graduation rate: 81%

College admissions: very good

Ethnicity: 26%W 21%B 38%H 15%A

Free lunch: 33%

The High School for Environmental Studies combines a traditional academic program with unusual internships that give students a chance to restore hiking trails in Nature Conservancy preserves, study the health effects of asbestos with research scientists at Mt. Sinai School of Medicine’s environmental health program, or teach young children about horseshoe crabs and sea stars at the New York Aquarium’s “touch tanks.”

The school was founded in 1992 with support from a private foundation, the Surdna Foundation, and the Council on the Environment of New York City, as a way to encourage students to become aware of threats to the environment. The school has its own nonprofit organization, the Friends of the High School for Environmental Studies, which raises \$200,000 a year for extras such as internships and a “career center” to help students get part-time and summer jobs. The Friends also help organize eco-tours of Alaska and whale-watching trips to Baja California, Mexico.

The High School for Environmental Studies encourages students to become politically active and to think about their place in society. All 10th graders must take a course in ethics. The Council on the Environment trains students to be community organizers for projects to encourage recycling or water conservation. Students travel to Albany to speak to state legislators about preserving the New York City watershed.

Despite its green theme and innovative projects, the academic program of the school is quite traditional. It’s a tracked school, with separate classes for Advanced Placement, honors, general, and special education students. Honors and Advanced Placement classes have 20–25 students; general classes are somewhat larger. Some students who need extra help have classes as small as 12.

There are no homerooms. Bells mark class changes every 43 minutes. The school has nine Advanced Placement offerings, and for children who are strong academically, there's lots of room to grow.

"I love the school and so does my daughter," one mother said. "They have incredible course offerings. The teachers are there from early in the morning to late at night. A lot of the teachers really encourage the kids to stretch and challenge themselves."

Students said the amount of homework they did ranged from 2 to 5 hours a night, with 2 or 3 hours a night typical.

The school aims to offer an education that balances science with humanities, math, music, and art. It attracts kids who are strong in more than one discipline—talented musicians who love science, or athletes who are strong in math.

"This is a good school for academic achievers who want a well-rounded outlook on life," said music teacher Beth Cohen. "Everyone is very accepting of each other. There is no rivalry between the band kids and the jocks because everyone is interested in a lot of things."

English classes mix readings of classics such as *Hamlet* and *Oedipus Rex* with contemporary fiction and poetry. History and math rely heavily on textbooks. Science classes mix the use of textbooks with experiments and special projects. In a particularly lively class in earth science, kids were demonstrating Newton's law of gravitation by attaching spherical magnets to strings and swinging them from yardsticks balanced between two desk chairs. They imagined the magnets were planets and tested the minimum space between them before they collided.

Students may research the local climate and pollen counts related to pollution on a project for high school students at Columbia University sponsored by the NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies Institute on Climate and Planets.

The building—the former silent film studio of Fox Films—has some grand touches. The art deco lobby has gilt decorations with an Egyptian theme. The principal's office has mahogany woodwork. The auditorium was the private screening room for the chief executive officer of Fox Studios.

The classrooms and halls are well-lit and plain white—a refreshing change from the gloomy hues typical of the Department of Education. The science labs are up-to-date, and the library has dark-wood furniture, colorful mobiles of stars and musical notes, and African papier-mâché masks. Students work on botany projects on a roof garden.

But the layout of the building is confusing, and one teacher complained that it contributes to a lack of cohesiveness in the school. "The way the school is built makes it difficult to communicate with others," the teacher said. "The hallways twist and turn. The teachers' lounge is at the furthest corner of the school." Students complain of traffic jams during class changes because the corridors are very narrow.

The school has hit some bumps. There has been a rapid turnover of teachers and administrators. Students complained of administrative glitches in such things as programming: Kids would be assigned four study halls in a row, for example, or a program with no lunch period. Some students are irritated by what they see as petty rules: They must have a pass to go to the bathroom. They aren't permitted to leave the building for lunch. And the school hasn't quite forged a coherent bridge between the traditional academic program and the internships in environmental studies.

"Some teachers are fabulous and have really changed my life, and I've made some wonderful friends," said a senior girl from the Bronx. "But there's not a lot of school spirit, and there aren't a lot of activities to bring students together."

Others say the extraordinary opportunities available make up for the occasional irritations.

A senior girl said she had one internship studying the genetic changes in fruit flies at the American Museum of Natural History, and another weeding plants in the Brooklyn Botanical Garden. A third was a paid summer job building trails in a Nature Conservancy preserve in upstate New York. "You're out in the woods all day and you cut down trees with a chain saw and you learn to drive a tractor to draw logs out," she said.

Parents and students say the staff of the college office is attentive, and graduates have been admitted to colleges such as Columbia, Barnard, Smith, Swarthmore, Tufts, Penn State, Wellesley, University of Chicago, the University of Pennsylvania, Wesleyan, Alfred, Antioch, Vassar, Skidmore, and Oberlin.

Teachers are hired according to a contractual provision that gives priority to those with the most seniority.

Kids are chosen according to the educational option formula designed to balance the number of high- and low-achievers at the school. Administrators choose half the entering class, and half are assigned at random by computer. The school is open to students from all five boroughs.

The school offers tours for prospective parents in the fall.

Beacon School

237 West 61st Street
New York, NY 10023
(212) 245-2807
www.beaconschool.org

Admissions: educational option/District 3 priority

Grade levels: 9–12

Graduation rate: 85%

Enrollment: 917

College admissions: very good

Class size: 28–34

Ethnicity: 45%W 18%B 30%H 7%A

Average SATs: V510 M502

Free lunch: 27%

The Beacon School was founded in 1993 by teachers from the Computer School who wanted to create a high school with the same spirit of innovation and cozy atmosphere that have made that West Side middle school popular.

The Beacon School has quickly become one of the most sought-after alternative schools in the city, with 1,300 kids applying for 150 spots in 9th grade. Its imaginative use of computers led *Family PC* magazine to name it one of the top 100 “most wired” schools in the United States. The lush art rooms, well-equipped photography lab, and digital art and music studio offer students the chance to work on creative projects in depth.

The teachers are young, politically liberal, and unusually eager and attentive. One teacher called the staff “wildly overeducated.” Teachers read widely in their own disciplines, and their classrooms are filled with books that suggest their knowledge goes well beyond what’s in a textbook.

The teachers pay attention to individual kids’ interests and struggles. Each student has the same advisor for 4 years. Kids meet with their advisors in groups of 15–20 for 40 minutes twice a week—a chance to catch up on any academic or social problems they may be having. In addition, kids and teachers often talk informally during their free periods.

“We are teachers first, before we are English teachers or math teachers or science teachers,” said Christopher Lehman, an English and technology teacher. “We are not just dealing with our own little subjects. We are dealing with a whole child. Whether we’re laughing-joking-silly or very serious, we care

about the kids more than we care about our subject—and we care about our subjects a great deal.”

The school is in a converted warehouse on the West Side near the Hudson River, and, although it sounds like a grim location, the physical plant is actually one of the school’s strengths. The walls are white, decorated with students’ work, movie and theater posters, and art prints. The classrooms are a bit cramped, but they are brightly lit. Some are carpeted and some have river views.

A founding teacher and one of the school’s co-directors, art teacher Ruth Lacey, was able to help design the building to include such extras as a drama studio. “The Board of Ed couldn’t believe we wanted a black box,” she said. When the school first opened, she organized students to paint a mural of the New York skyline in the cafeteria.

The school is in the progressive camp and stresses the use of “portfolio assessment” in addition to the Regents exams required of all New York State students. In order to graduate, students must demonstrate their proficiency in major disciplines with long written and oral reports.

Students may work together on shorter projects. For example, as part of a 10th-grade study of Europe’s colonization of Africa, students debated whether the United Nations should intervene in the war in the Republic of the Congo. Students took the part of a dozen different countries and based their positions on newspaper clippings and magazine articles about the conflict.

Teachers use textbooks sparingly. In a geometry lesson on similar triangles, the teacher used no textbooks at all—only photocopied exercises, protractors, and compasses.

In a 9th-grade history class, students watched a movie about an isolated group of people called the Ladakh near Tibet who were just beginning to have contact with the industrialized world. Students weighed the pros and cons of modernization in a discussion so passionate that half a dozen kids gathered round and continued talking even when the lesson was over.

There are some lecture courses as well—AP biology, for example. But even in these, the style is crisp and engaging, and kids feel free to interrupt the teacher if they don’t understand.

“Teachers are totally young, totally enthusiastic, and involved with the school,” said Dee Ratterree, whose son chose Beacon over the more traditional Bronx High School of Science. “There is something so engaging about teachers that are so passionate. It really rubs off on the kids.”

The school uses the Internet to an unusual degree. All teachers and students have their own e-mail addresses, and many students have their own websites. Students may e-mail teachers at home with questions. Parents can look up a teacher's assignment on the school website.

In one of the most unusual uses of the Internet, the school recruits "cyber-mentors" to help edit student papers. "I have a lot of really smart friends—lawyers, doctors, ultimate Frisbee players," said Lehman. "They want to volunteer and I e-mailed them and said, 'Put your money where your mouth is.' The kids post their first drafts and the cyber-mentors give their comments. What we gained was a depth of criticism that I was unable to give" with so many students.

The art projects give students a chance to follow their own interests, and the art studios are a pleasant hangout for kids during their free periods. One student made a photo exhibit on hip-hop music. Another photographed homeless people—and wrote about their living conditions. Students may produce their own CDs.

Some kids find the lack of structure difficult. One student who transferred to the more traditional Frederick Douglass Academy said he preferred the clear expectations of standardized tests to the open-ended projects at Beacon.

Other students said the amount of work they did varied from year to year—and depended somewhat on their own motivation. One student said that $1\frac{1}{2}$ hours a night of homework was typical.

"If you're interested, you can take a project and run with it. If you're a kid who's not self-motivated, you might slide through without doing a lot of work," said Ms. Ratterree. "But the place has a *joie de vivre* that's wonderful. I just love it." A student calls Beacon "a lovely school with great teachers," but complains that classes are sometimes disrupted "when my teacher has to stop the lesson and go into the hall to tell students who are obviously cutting class to be quiet." The school has become seriously overcrowded in recent years.

The school offers Advanced Placement courses in calculus, statistics, biology, chemistry, environmental science, and physics, and helps students prepare for AP exams in several other disciplines. Students may take college courses at Columbia, NYU, Fordham, Hunter, and John Jay as well as college credit courses collaboratively taught by Beacon and college staff at the school. About 85 students are enrolled in these courses each semester.

Manhattan

College choices range from schools with an environmental theme such as the College of Environmental Science and Forestry to liberal arts schools such as Barnard, Cornell, Vassar, and New York University.

Preference is given to students who live in District 3 on the Upper West Side. Only students who list Beacon as their first choice are considered for admission. In recent years, the school has admitted students according to the educational option formula designed to ensure a balance between high-achieving, average, and low-achieving students. However, the admissions procedures are under review, and prospective parents should contact the school for updates. Students who are particularly eager to attend who are not admitted on the first round of acceptances should ask their middle school guidance counselor to call on their behalf. Some parents have complained of favoritism in the admissions process, claiming that the school picks and chooses the kids it admits—rather than accepting its quota of students assigned by the Department of Education. That's a plus if you're a pushy parent, a minus if you're not.

LaGuardia High School of Music and Art and Performing Arts

108 Amsterdam Avenue (at 65th Street)

New York, NY 10023

(212) 496-0700

LaGuardiahs.org

Admissions: by audition

Grade levels: 9–12

Enrollment: 2,340

Class size: 30–34

Average SATs: V519 M530

Graduation rate: 89%

College admissions: very good

Ethnicity: 45%W 19%B 19%H 17%A

Free lunch: 29%

Handel's *Messiah* was playing on the radio. Sun streamed in the large windows of the sculpture studio. Seventeen-year-old Timur Civan, in blissful concentration, used a heavy mallet and small chisel to carve a block of alabaster that was mounted on a wooden pedestal. His teacher, Roy Greenberg, had brought large chunks of the white stone back from a trip to Italy, and it was a particularly prized material among the students.

"This school is a safe haven for artists," Timur said as he took a break. "The fact that I can do this every day—and not have to worry about things that don't interest me—is wonderful. We may not have classes like marine biology but we get"—and he paused for emphasis—"Italian alabaster!" He patted the stone as lovingly as he would a woman and then went back to work, trying to decide what shape his sculpture would take.

LaGuardia High School of Music and Art and Performing Arts is a highly selective, widely acclaimed school that trains students for the country's best art schools and music conservatories, as well as for conventional academic colleges and universities. Its long list of distinguished alumni includes actor Al Pacino, entertainer Liza Minelli, singers Laura Nyro and Peter Yarrow, and writer Erica Jong, along with notable jazz musicians, composers, classical musicians, and dancers.

The eight-story building was opened in 1984 with the merger of two older schools, the High School of Music and Art and the High School of Performing Arts, made famous by the movie *Fame*. The building, with pleasant views of Lincoln Center and

the Hudson River, has large studios for painting, sculpture, photography, ceramics, dance, and drama; an art gallery for displaying student work; a recording studio; individual practice rooms; and an 1100-seat theater.

The school exudes both cheerfulness and a seriousness of purpose. Walk through the brightly lit corridors, tiled in primary colors, and you may hear a trumpet playing jazz riffs, an orchestra warming up, a piano accompanying ballet dancers, or a group of girls singing in harmony as they get books from their lockers. Poke your head in the studios and you'll see kids in deep concentration at the barre, at the easel, or on stage. There's electricity in the air from the kids' passion about their work.

Students take a regular academic course load as well as three to four periods a day of their chosen art specialty: drama, dance, vocal music, instrumental music, or studio art. To fit all their classes in, kids must attend school from 8:10 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Most of the studio courses are taught by professional artists, and collaborations with the New York Philharmonic and the New York City Opera offer students unparalleled opportunities to learn from artists who are masters of their craft.

Some students may receive free, individual lessons from a Philharmonic violinist; other may take part in a "master" group class offered by a Philharmonic flautist.

Each year, the New York City Opera and students co-produce musicals such as *West Side Story* and Steven Sondheim's *Into the Woods*. Students perform as the actors and singers; the opera company offers everything from vocal coaches to professional help with sets and costume design.

With approximately 2,600 highly talented students, LaGuardia inevitably has the problems endemic to large, competitive schools. For some, impossibly high standards combined with a sense of alienation and difficulty connecting with adults can lead to depression and even suicide attempts. Dancers, in particular, sometimes have irrational fears of weight gain and suffer from anorexia and bulimia. The school has instituted a special nutrition program to make sure students eat properly. The head of the guidance department confessed that, with his tiny staff, it sometimes can be "overwhelming" to try to deal with students' problems.

But these difficulties are mitigated by a school culture that encourages teamwork and cooperation over individual achievement. Performing in an orchestra, or in a play, or in a gospel choir is, after all, a group endeavor. Students need to learn to work

together and to rely on one another. "There is a culture of kids supporting each other," said a teacher in charge of coordinating student activities, a comment that was echoed by others. "Kids learn to applaud each other. There is a sense of community. Kids aren't fighting for a tenth of a point advantage in their grade-point average." There is an unusually active Parents Association.

Although the school has no homeroom periods or advisories, a lot of grown-ups seem to be available to talk to kids informally. On my tour, I saw a number of teachers working individually with kids.

Students form small "schools" within a large building. They become attached to their studio, which becomes a meeting place. That means dancers hang out with other dancers and singers hang out with other singers. In addition to providing a safe haven in a large school, the attachment to the studio also fosters interracial friendships. Students say the harmony between kids of different races is one of the things they like best about the school.

"It's so friendly. There are no fights. I love the different kinds of people you meet," one student said as she relaxed with friends in a student lounge set aside for seniors. "And the shows we put on are professional. A gospel concert moved me to tears."

"No one is weird," a girl with blue hair said as she put books in her locker in the hall.

"Because we're all weird," her friend, with green hair, replied.

"It's not like other schools where the black kids sit with the black kids and the white kids sit with the white kids," another girl said. "Look at the lunchroom, and you'll see one person from each ethnic group at each table." The school has a good mix of whites, blacks, Hispanics, and Asians. It's about 67% female and 33% male.

The racial diversity is also a source of artistic strength. A young Dominican boy from Washington Heights, for example, brings his love of Latin dance music to classes in which he influences and is influenced by students who perform the light opera of Gilbert and Sullivan or African-American jazz.

"It's like a gumbo—a big stew. They all learn from each other—even inadvertently," said Bob Stewart, a jazz musician whose son attends LaGuardia. "They become part of the world community."

The school not only is racially diverse, but also includes kids from different income levels and neighborhoods, said Laurie Spiegel, whose two children attended LaGuardia. The school also has many openly gay and lesbian students.

"There are kids who live in Queens and Staten Island, kids whose fathers are police officers or bus drivers, kids who live in townhouses on the East Side," said Ms. Spiegel. "There are kids from Eastern Europe and China whose parents are physicians driving cabs."

"My children really learn to appreciate the kids for who they are. They know a kid might not be so good in math but is a fabulous trumpet player," she said. "The same kid who you helped in reading will help you do some creative project."

The large size of the school offers what one teacher called a "critical mass" of talent in any particular subdiscipline and a chance to form small groups of students interested in almost any artistic endeavor. "There are enough kids to provide a spark" for others interested in jazz trumpet or hip-hop dance or carving Italian alabaster, a teacher said.

The school offers a traditional academic program similar to a better-than-average New York City neighborhood high school. Class sizes are the norm for public schools in the city—30–34—and the quality of instruction ranges from dull to inspired. Many teachers offer their lessons from the front of the classroom to students lined up in rows. The curriculum is standard for New York State. Students are assigned to "honors" or regular classes depending on their level of achievement.

A new principal, Kim Bruno, formerly assistant principal at Professional Performing Arts School, seems to be working hard to make some changes in curriculum and teaching style, to include less traditional teaching and more project-based work. There is also a cadre of new, young assistant principals who seem to want to make changes and are bringing new energy to the academic departments.

Some teachers integrate the academic subjects with the arts. A science teacher, for example, teaches anatomy in a way that allows artists to learn to draw better. Actors put on a skit to dramatize an episode in history.

The fact that the students are all performers livens up some classes. The foreign language department is unusually strong. That's partly because a strong and competent department chair insists that teachers speak almost exclusively in the language they are teaching—unlike foreign language courses in most schools in which English is spoken more than the language being studied. It's also because the kids are used to memorizing lines and aren't inhibited about hamming it up a bit. "They love to be on stage," said the

assistant principal for foreign languages, Susan Kardos-Kaplan.

Students who want advanced courses that aren't part of the regular curriculum sometimes make special arrangements. One math student received permission to take a course at Hunter College. A student with a dozen childless female relatives who worked in an area with high-tension wires wanted to investigate whether their work environment might affect fertility. She was paired with a geneticist at Columbia University who helped her design an experiment on fertility with fruit flies.

A small number of learning disabled students receive **special education** services and are fully integrated into regular classes. Like everyone else, they must pass the audition to be admitted. The school also has an increasing number of students studying English as a second language.

The school loses 150 of its 700 entering students between 9th grade and 12th. Some find that the combined course load of arts and academics is too punishing. It takes a lot of determination to dance 4 hours a day and keep up with your academic coursework, and some kids decide it's not worth it.

Some kids can't cope with the anonymity that is possible at a large school. One father said he transferred his daughter to a small progressive public school after he discovered she was skipping classes frequently and no one seemed to notice.

Nearly 90% of graduates go on to 4-year colleges, and of those about 30% go to conservatories or art schools. Many others are accepted at art programs within liberal arts universities. "Colleges find the strong arts specialty attractive," said college advisor Judy Meiselman. Dancers sometimes choose to go straight into professional performing.

There is a "showcase" in October, in which prospective parents and students may visit the school to see a performance. Auditions are held in November and December. Some 10,000 to 12,000 students entering 9th and 10th grades audition for 800 to 1,000 seats.

Although some students have had extensive training in the arts in middle school, some have not. Some vocalists, for example, have had no more formal experience than singing in their church choir, and dancers may have picked up hip-hop movements from their friends.

"You don't have to be a professional to start," said a teacher. "They look to see if you move well."

In March, students who have been accepted are invited to an open house. There are no other tours for prospective parents.

Young Women's Leadership School

105 East 106th Street
New York, NY 10029
(212) 289-7593
www.tywls.org

Admissions: selective/District 4 priority

Grade levels: 7–12

Graduation rate: 91%

Enrollment: 360

College admissions: excellent

Class size: 20–25

Ethnicity: 6%W 40%B 53%H 1%A

Average SATs: V464 M452

Free lunch: N/A

Founded in 1996 as one of the few all-girls public schools in the nation, Young Women's Leadership School has quickly gained a reputation as a serious, academically challenging college preparatory school for girls who believe they can achieve more without the distraction and competition of having boys in their classes.

Cheerful and well-equipped rooms, small classes, attentive teachers, and a no-nonsense atmosphere combine to make this school a popular alternative to large neighborhood middle or high schools.

As a small school, the course offerings are limited. Sports consist of badminton games in the all-purpose room. The school does, however, have the luxury of a full-time college counselor, who meets weekly with each girl in her junior year and senior year. The counselor takes the girls on overnight trips to visit colleges, including Yale University, Smith College, and Connecticut College. Smith College offers students summer school classes on its campus in Southampton, Massachusetts. Skidmore College and New York University offer summer classes as well. Students have been accepted to such schools as Fordham University, Mount Holyoke, Howard University, and Rutgers University. The school graduated its first class in 2001, and all 32 seniors were accepted at 4-year colleges.

Occupying three floors in an office building at 106th Street between Lexington and Park Avenues, the school has pleasant quarters with commanding views of Central Park.

Girls wear uniforms—plaid skirts or gray trousers with blue blazers, emblazoned with a crest on the breast pocket, or blue

sweatshirts. Good manners are emphasized, and I heard lots of “excuse me’s” as girls passed one another in the halls.

But there’s a relaxed feel to the school, as well. The walls are painted in soothing pastels of light pink and mauve, with navy blue trim. Classrooms have framed art prints on the walls, cozy sofas, and tables instead of desks. Girls call their teachers by their first names (except for the Japanese teacher—because in Japan, only family names are used) and think nothing of plunking themselves in a favorite teacher’s office without an appointment to ask advice.

“It’s almost like you’re not in school,” said student Tiana Rogers. “It’s more like being with your family. You call everyone by his or her first name. You can just ask a question without worrying about formality.”

Instead of a noisy cafeteria, girls eat lunch in a place they call their “dining room”—with round tables suited for conversation, rather than the long, institutional tables typical of public schools. Large windows let in the sun.

Classes offer an unusual degree of discussion and debate, and students feel free to interrupt a teacher if they don’t understand. There is a strong emphasis on learning to write well, and the class size of 20–25 means teachers can edit student papers without becoming overwhelmed.

Some classes have a feminist twist. In an 11th-grade humanities class, girls studying 18th-century philosophers of the Enlightenment read an excerpt from Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Women*. For homework, they had to create an imaginary dialogue between Jean Jacques Rousseau and Wollstonecraft on the role of women in society.

Girls sometimes discuss topics that might be embarrassing in a co-ed class. In a biology class on the digestive system, for example, a teacher spoke candidly about the pain of hemorrhoids during pregnancy.

“They are taught to be young ladies,” said Ana Torres, whose granddaughter attended. “She loves the school. They are treated with respect, and they are respectful in return.”

The school is the brainchild of Ann Rubenstein Tisch, a journalist who believes that single-sex education is an important way to counter what researchers see as a crisis of confidence that strikes young adolescent girls. “It seems to be where the unraveling begins, right out of elementary school,” Ms. Tisch said.

“Kids can go from being fairly stable, to getting into trouble—socially and academically.”

Carol Gilligan at Harvard University’s School of Education, among others, has said that girls who are self-assured as preteens begin to change as they reach adolescence. Once fearless about raising their hands in class, the girls become shy and withdrawn. They begin to worry more about their looks and about pleasing boys than about academic achievement. Girls who are high achievers in elementary school often begin to stumble in middle school, overtaken by boys whose confidence is increasing, the researchers say.

Ms. Tisch believes that single-sex education can overcome some of these problems. With the cooperation of the Department of Education, she helped found the Young Women’s Leadership School. A foundation she heads, The Young Women’s Leadership Foundation, pays for the college advisor and an after-school program. The school is affiliated with the Center for Educational Innovation, a school reform organization.

Priority is given to students in East Harlem, who make up about 70% of the 7th-grade class. Girls outside the neighborhood may be admitted as space permits. The school offers weekly tours for prospective parents in January and February. All prospective students must tour with their families.

There are a few openings for students entering in 9th grade. Students who want to be considered for admission must list Young Women’s Leadership as their first choice on their high school application.

Heritage High School

1680 Lexington Avenue
New York, NY 10029
(212) 828-2858

Admissions: educational option

Grade levels: 9–12

Enrollment: 300

Class size: 20–25

Average SATs: V394 M389

Graduation rate: 54%

College admissions: good

Ethnicity: 1%W 44%B 54%H 1%A

Free lunch: 76%

An unusually bright and cheerful building, small classes, and a talented teaching staff make Heritage High School one of the most promising new schools to open in the city in the past decade. Heritage has a close collaboration with Teachers College—which offers free tuition to teachers pursuing their masters’ degree—and offers an art program that’s far richer than most small schools can provide.

Founded in 1996, Heritage was the brainchild of Dr. Judith Burton, former chair of the arts and humanities department at Teachers College. She believes that the arts should be accessible to all students—not just those who attended specialized schools such as LaGuardia or the Professional Performing Arts School—and that, in addition to studio art, students should be exposed to the cultural and artistic heritage of New York City with trips to museums, theaters, concerts, and public gardens. Half a dozen students have been chosen as interns at the Museum of Modern Art, and one worked as a tour guide at the Whitney.

Trips are integrated into the curriculum. In Central Park, for example, 9th graders conducted a biology lab to test the water quality of the Harlem Meer, drew leaves in an art class, and climbed rocks as part of an effort to “build community.” Twelfth graders studied the Harlem Renaissance with trips to the Studio Museum of Harlem, a show at the Apollo Theatre, and a visit to Langston Hughes’ home.

Housed in a gleaming redbrick 19th-century building with green trim, Heritage occupies the top two floors of the Julia de Burgos Cultural Center in East Harlem, a haven for Latino artists, with studios, a gallery, a stage, and office space. Shiny hardwood

floors, terra cotta tiles, tall windows, and pressed-tin 20-foot ceilings make the school feel airy and spacious.

The classrooms have some of the coziness of an elementary school, with children's art, such as cardboard collages and papier-mache animals, and teachers' construction paper time-lines lining the walls. Bulletin boards are decorated with students' illustrations of world religions, part of a history project for "global studies." There is a nice rapport between the students and teachers, and the kids aren't afraid to ask the grown-ups for help.

The teachers offer imaginative approaches to the curriculum, while staying close to the requirements for Regents exams. In a biology class, for example, students learned about adaptation by using different tongs and tweezers to lift different sizes of beans—approximating the beaks of different species of finches that Darwin observed on the Galapagos Islands.

"We meet the kids where they are," said principal Peter Dillon. "Most come in with very weak reading and math scores, but all pass the Regents' exams, most on the first try."

I saw a few 9th graders who chewed gum, slouched in their chairs, their faces half hidden by their puffy jackets. But by senior year, it seems, nearly all the kids have acclimated to the serious tone of the building. A 12th-grade economics class, for example, had a serious and lively discussion about how sweatshops overseas affect the job market in the United States. Older students were attentive and serious in a math class.

The collaboration with Teachers College offers lots of perks for the students and also makes Heritage an unusually attractive place to teach. Eighty percent of the staff is working toward a master's degree or a Ph.D., said Dillon, and TC offers partial tuition remission. The development office of Teachers College helps Heritage write grants, and the salaries of half a dozen staffers are paid by TC, including a college counselor, an art teacher, a museum coordinator, and the director of the after school program.

Special education services for children with learning disabilities or emotional problems are provided in regular classrooms. In one class, the paraprofessional (assistant teacher) assigned to help a particular student didn't embarrass him by sitting right next to him, but rather observed the class unobtrusively. The administration is proud that some special education pupils graduate with regular diplomas.

Heritage had a disappointing graduation rate in its first years, but that rate seems likely to improve as the school attracts stronger students. More than three-quarters of all graduates have been admitted to four-year colleges, including Fisk, Cornell, Loyola, and NYU, according to the college counselor. The school holds tours in October for prospective parents and students.

A. Philip Randolph Campus High School

135th Street and Convent Avenue
New York, NY 10031
(212) 926-0113

Admissions: selective/educational option

Grade levels: 9–12

Graduation rate: 77%

Enrollment: 1,307

College admissions: very good

Class size: 25–34

Ethnicity: 2%W 47%B 48%H 3%A

Average SATs: V439 M498

Free lunch: 58%

Sunlight filters through the gothic windows of A. Philip Randolph Campus High School, giving the dark-paneled walls in the entrance and auditorium a burnished glow. The well-worn gentility of the 77-year-old neogothic building matches the serious, no-nonsense tone of this traditional college preparatory school.

Perched on a hill overlooking a park on the edge of the City College campus, A. Philip Randolph is housed in the former High School of Music and Art. The school attracts students from across the city to its selective programs in science and engineering. The school also has a general academic program and an interdisciplinary humanities program in which students are selected according a formula designed to give access to both high and low achievers.

Parents call the school “wonderful,” “exceptional,” “safe,” and “caring.” One mother said the attention teachers showered on her son when he was struggling academically helped turn him around. A father praised the warmth of the staff and the quality of teaching. “It’s a blessing,” he said. Some students have chosen A. Philip Randolph over the specialized high schools because of its relatively small size and reputation for individual attention.

A few students compete in the Intel Science Talent Search, and the school sends its top graduates to schools such as Columbia, Barnard, Wellesley, and Wesleyan. The College Board awarded A. Philip Randolph its “Inspiration Award” in recognition of its “innovative efforts” to broaden access to college, especially among children from poor families.

The school has 10 Advanced Placement courses. Advanced students may take City College courses. Students may have internships at Mt. Sinai School of Medicine and the NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies at Columbia University, and may study science topics ranging from anatomy and genetics to bacteriology and global warming.

In some ways, the school is old-fashioned. Students study Latin, as well as French or Spanish. They read out loud from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, and copy math problems from the blackboard as kids have for generations.

But there are also innovative and creative teaching methods. In an engineering class, kids made their own Rube-Goldberg type devices out of ropes, pulleys, paper cups, and tiny parachutes to slow the speed of plastic film canisters rolling down a slope. The teacher used the kids' inventions as a way to introduce elements of physics—velocity, acceleration, and gravitational force.

In a greenhouse perched on the roof of the school, kids grew plants that are known to attract butterflies. The plants are part of a partnership with the city Parks Department to establish a butterfly garden in St. Nicholas Park adjoining the school. Large potted plants and small trees that the kids grew decorate the school auditorium for special events.

In a social studies class, kids pretended they were United Nations diplomats. Each chose a country to represent, then debated that country's position on international drug trafficking.

The school offers lots of encouragement and support to kids applying for college. There is a full-time college counselor who meets with kids as early as 9th grade. The school offers SAT prep classes, and students typically take the SAT three times. Students may apply to as many colleges as they wish, and some apply to as many as 20.

The science program, called "medical professions," and the engineering program offer only 125 seats each for the entering class. Students need not list one of these programs as their first choice to be considered. For admission to these screened programs, the school looks at grades, standardized test scores, behavior, and attendance records, as well as any accelerated courses students may have taken in 8th grade. Admission to the other programs in the school is based on the educational option formula designed to ensure a mix of low- and high-achieving kids.

The school also offers classes for students classified as learning disabled and for those with emotional problems. Some **special education** pupils are placed in separate classes; others are integrated into general education classes.

All incoming students are expected to attend a summer orientation program that helps them become familiar with the school's culture.

There is peer mediation to help kids resolve their differences, coordinated by a guidance counselor. Tutoring is offered before and after school and in Regents prep classes, and science lab make-ups are offered on Saturday mornings in May and June. Students are expected to take part in community service projects.

After-school athletics are strong, and A. Philip Randolph fields 24 teams. The girls track team has been the city champion—and featured as the fastest team in the country for the 800-meter relay race. Gym is offered five times a week. The gym program includes "Project Adventure," which stresses noncompetitive physical education such as rope climbing, belaying, knot tying, and movement. The program is designed to promote trust, cooperation, and problem solving, as well as encourage fitness, the assistant principal for physical education said.

The school has more girls than boys.

The school has an open house for prospective parents in October.

High School for Math, Science & Engineering at City College

138th Street & Convent Avenue
New York, NY 10031
(212) 220-8179

Admissions: selective

Grade levels: 9–12

Enrollment: 500 (projected)

Class size: 25

Average SATs: new school

Graduation rate: new school

College admissions: new school

Ethnicity: 22%W 32%B 16%H 30%A

Free lunch: 13%

A small school with a big name, The High School for Math, Science & Engineering was created to serve strong students who might otherwise leave public schools for private or parochial schools. One of a trio of new specialized high schools located on CUNY campuses, MS&E (as the school is known) is housed at City College. Students may use the college's physics labs, computer labs, library, and gym, and may take college courses in fields such as engineering and architecture.

"By their senior year, students will be taking most of their courses at the college—for college credit, tuition free," said MS&E principal Randy Asher. "Most students will be able to enter the college of their choice with sophomore standing." City College is particularly known for math, science, engineering, and architecture, Asher said, "but we dropped 'architecture' from the name of our school because it was too long." Students are admitted to MS&E according to their scores on the entrance exam that's also given for Stuyvesant, Bronx Science, and Brooklyn Tech.

Like Brooklyn Tech, MS&E places an emphasis on the practical applications of science, not just the theory. "We want the kids to be marketable to colleges—and industry," said Asher, who was assistant principal for math and computers and Brooklyn Tech.

The computer curriculum starts in 9th grade with applications of Microsoft office. In 10th grade students build a computer "mother board" and in 11th they take a CISCO networking class. In 12th grade they study computer programming at the col-

lege. Students learn CAD (computer assisted design) and circuit design and build rockets and robots.

Students learn drafting, perfect 3-D drawings, and use computer programs to design bridges that, for example, maximize strength while minimizing cost. The school is working with companies such as Hewlett-Packard and its spin-off, Agilent, to act as mentor for students working on digital electronics and computer circuitry.

MS&E is one of the few schools in the city to offer German as a foreign language. Teachers say Germany is a “world power” in engineering, manufacturing, and design. Some important scientific journals are written in German, and many companies for which the students may eventually work are in Germany. Spanish is also taught.

One teacher, an electrical engineer with 30 years experience in aeronautics and defense, challenged students to design a napkin holder that was safe, cheap, rust-resistant, and easy-to-use. The kids came up with beautiful and practical designs, but burst into applause when the teacher presented his own creation: a simple rock.

An MS&E physical education teacher offers 90-minute classes 2 or 3 times a week, with instruction in football, calisthenics, soccer, and basketball. She also introduces them to sports medicine, including topics such as how to manage injuries and the basics of CPR.

“Our staff can pay attention to the social as well as the academic side of students’ lives,” said a teacher. “There’s a lot of one-on-one attention and a lot of time for questions.” “I expect all of my faculty to know every single student,” Asher said.

The school has no special education services, but Asher said: “If a student had special needs we would do whatever we could to accommodate them.”

School runs from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., with four 90-minute classes each day. Students may go anywhere on campus for their one-hour lunch. After lunch there is a one-hour “enrichment” in subjects such as working on the school newspaper or the school play.

The school opened in 2002 with 100 9th graders, and planned to add a grade each year. It was housed in eight red trailers on the college athletic fields while its permanent quarters were being renovated. The school welcomes involved parents and hires its own teachers after interviewing them, rather than taking them according to seniority, as is typical in New York City schools.

“The best part is the schedule,” a parent said. “Less time is wasted settling in and moving around and conversations can be more in depth. The one-hour lunch is really nice.” The school is about 60% male. It has a nice racial mix, and includes students from 30 different countries. Tours are offered weekly. Admission is based on the results of the specialized science exam given in October.

Frederick Douglass Academy

2581 Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard (149th Street)
New York, NY 10039
(212) 491-4107

Admissions: selective/District 5 priority

Grade levels: 6–12

Graduation rate: 84%

Enrollment: 1061

College admissions: very good

Class size: 30–34

Ethnicity: 1%W 83%B 14%H 2%A

Average SATs: V471 M457

Free lunch: 91%

The Frederick Douglass Academy was founded in 1991 by an ambitious and charismatic educator, Dr. Lorraine Monroe, who sought to give the children of Harlem the rigorous preparation for college that's common in suburban high schools but all too rare in low-income urban neighborhoods.

The school, called FDA for short, serves children in 6th through 12th grades and has succeeded admirably in its mission. It regularly sends more than 90% of its graduating class to college. Most of those go to 4-year colleges and some even go to the Ivy League. The school has been so popular that school reformers have cloned it, setting up FDA II in Harlem and FDA III in the Bronx.

The Frederick Douglass Academy is a serious, traditional, and highly structured place, where rules of behavior are carefully spelled out and infractions swiftly punished. Children are expected to complete 2 hours of homework a night—and they are sent to detention if they don't. A child arriving at school wearing boots rather than the regulation black shoes (no sneakers allowed!) is sent home.

Before enrolling a child, parents must sign a form agreeing to show up for parent-teacher conferences and to make sure homework gets done. The child must agree to abide by the written rules, called the "12 non-negotiables." Children who can't keep up with the heavy workload are asked to leave.

Crisp uniforms, with mandatory neckties for boys and skirts for girls (except in the winter months, when trousers are permitted), are a hallmark of Frederick Douglass. "We insist that everything they have on be either navy or white," said Dorothy

Haime, assistant principal for the middle school. "Uniforms are a big part of what we do."

She explained that uniforms eliminate competition over clothes and therefore serve as a great equalizer between poor and middle-class children. Having children wear uniforms also allows the grown-ups to spot at a glance anybody who doesn't belong at the school—an important way to ensure security.

Dr. Monroe left Frederick Douglass in 1995 to become director of the School Leadership Academy at the Center for Educational Innovation, a Manhattan school reform group. Dr. Gregory Hodge replaced her.

"What Hodge has managed to do is keep the culture that Lorraine has established going, to raise a lot of money for the school, and to keep the good kids coming," said Dr. John Elwell, executive director of Replications, Inc., the nonprofit organization that has helped establish the FDA clones.

The course offerings are impressive, and the dedication of the staff is impressive. "Every teacher does something extra," Ms. Haime said. Everyone on the staff supervises at least one extracurricular activity, such as coaching the soccer team or the debating team.

Trips include excursions to Paris, San Francisco, Israel, and South America.

There is one **special education** class for children with learning disabilities.

Students run the school store in collaboration with The Gap, which supplies the school uniforms. Students learn business techniques by running the store, and one student was flown to San Francisco to meet with Gap executives. In addition to school uniforms, the store sells notebooks and office supplies to students. Profits help pay fees for college applications.

FDA has no playground and only a windswept cement patio as an entrance. Inside, some of the walls are standard Board of Ed issue—devoid of decoration and painted the drab gray and lime green tones so popular with the Department of Education painters. But there are also some cheerful yellow walls and some pleasant classrooms, well equipped with fun-to-read books, novels, biographies, and Aesop's fables, as well as standard textbooks.

Students I spoke to said the school is safe and that the principal is extremely strict about punishing infractions. Several stu-

dents complained that boys had more opportunities than girls in sports. The principal declined to be interviewed.

FDA has an extended day program, and the building is open until 7 p.m. each night. The school has several open houses in February. Most students enter in 6th and 7th grades. There are only a few openings in 9th grade. Priority is given to students living in District 5, in central Harlem.

Bronx Schools



- 1 Bronx High School of Science
- 3 Bronx Leadership Academy
- 5 FLAGS
- 2 High School of American Studies at Lehman College
- 4 Hostos-Lincoln Academy

THE BRONX

Bronx public high schools have the reputation of being dull, demoralizing, and even dangerous—with the obvious exception of the nationally acclaimed Bronx High School of Science.

Fortunately, school reform efforts of the past decade are slowly bearing fruit. There are a few new schools and programs that shine through the pervasive gloom. Some are “mini-schools” or specialized programs in otherwise uninspired high schools. Some are new schools that show promise, even if they haven’t yet established a record of excellence. Some are selective. Others admit everyone who applies.

Bronx parents whose children don’t pass the exam for Bronx Science (or who find Bronx Science too big and bureaucratic) shouldn’t despair. College admissions offices, eager to diversify their student bodies, look favorably on good students—particularly blacks and Hispanics—who haven’t had the opportunity to attend name-brand schools. Graduates of several new small, alternative schools or selective programs in down-at-the-heels neighborhoods have done quite well when it comes to college admissions. The trick is to find a program with competent teachers who will prepare your child to do college work and a strong college office that will lobby on his or her behalf.

Parents looking for good public high schools in the Bronx should contact the Family Choice Project at the Mosholun-Montefiore Community Center, 30-85 Bainbridge Avenue, 10467; telephone: (718) 652-0282; e-mail: ecc99@juno.com. The Family Choice Project, in the Norwood section, offers a high school fair in the spring to make parents of 7th graders aware of their high school options. In October, the center offers help with the high school admissions process. A middle school guidance counselor leads a seminar to show parents the best way to fill out applications.

Some schools and programs worth considering:

With nearly 4,000 students, **John F. Kennedy High School**, 99 Terrace View Avenue, Bronx, NY 10463, is one of the largest in

the city. Although its size is unwieldy, some students are unruly, and the school is not successful overall, two small programs within the building are noteworthy.

The Math and Science Institute is an honors program with only 160 students in grades 9–12. It is part of the Gateway to Higher Education, a nonprofit organization affiliated with the CUNY medical school and dedicated to increasing the number of minorities in professions such as medicine, art history, computer science, and engineering. Classes are capped at 25. Students have a chance to do sophisticated research in a DNA laboratory. Kids have summer internships at the New York Aquarium, the Museum of Modern Art, the American Museum of Natural History, and Upward Bound. Call (718) 562-5756 for details.

The Institute for Environmental Studies and the Urban Community is a semiautonomous program at JFK in which students maintain the school garden, go hiking and camping, and investigate issues such as the need for a water filtration plant for New York City. Students have had a good record of admission to Ivy League schools, including Barnard, Dartmouth, and Columbia, said the director of the program. Call (718) 562-5500 for more information.

Lehman High School, 3000 East Tremont Avenue, Bronx, NY 10461, (718) 904-4200, with more than 3,500 students, is a large school that works, thanks to the strong leadership of principal Robert Leder, who has hand-picked a staff that's as optimistic as he is. "Mr. Leder is never down and always has time for you," said a student. The building is immaculate, and colorful student murals adorn the walls. Lehman maintains an active arts department, fields 32 sports teams, and offers activities ranging from an intermediate guitar class to step aerobics, bowling, and fishing. The academically strongest students are tracked in honors, advanced placement, and college prep courses. Struggling students get help, too. The "Tech Bridge Program," a partnership with a construction company, teaches students how to build computers. One disruptive student who was thrown out of a number of general education classes blossomed in Tech Bridge, an assistant principal said. Take a look at the school's web site: www.lehmanhs.com.

The Riverdale Kingsbridge Academy, 660 West 237th Street, Bronx, NY 10463, (718) 796-8516, is a new school created in response to neighborhood parents who wanted a small, local alternative to the huge Bronx high schools such as JFK. Perched

on a hill overlooking the Hudson River, the school has a new addition with a cafeteria, a library, and two science labs. The area has an almost suburban feel with a small field and public parks adjacent to the building, which serves children in grades 6–12. The high school is modeled on Townsend Harris, the successful humanities high school in Queens. There is a solid stable of long-time teachers, many of whom favor desks in rows and traditional methods. There are, however, some interdisciplinary projects as well. In a class combining art and writing, 6th graders read the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, then rewrote it make it accessible to younger children. Students built their own Ziggurats (temples), made their own clay versions of the Centaur, or created a comic strip. Art and music are strong at the school, and the school has an impressive ceramics lab. Three out of seven of the classes on each grade are honors level. Tours are given on Wednesdays in October and November. Students zoned for MS 141 are automatically admitted. Twenty-five seats for students zoned for IS 368 are available through a lottery.

The Bronx School for Law, Government & Justice, at 163th Street between Sherman and Grant, is a high school where the kids seem happy and the adults have high expectations for them. Started with a grant from New Visions for Public Schools, the school is expanding to serve children in grades 6–12 in a new building near the construction site for the new courthouse. The day we visited, the principal was gently mediating a dispute between kids. He didn't sit at an intimidating big principal desk and chair, but a couch and cushioned chairs facing each other in a circle. "We believe in talking things through and nipping issues in the bud. We have very few incidents here as a result," an assistant principal said. The school maintains a quiet atmosphere with uniforms and traditional teaching techniques, including bi-weekly quizzes in each subject. Ninth graders are required to attend a six-week summer program. In the law program, students conduct mock trials. Speakers at the school have included activist Al Sharpton, trial lawyer Johnnie L. Cochran, Jr., and actor Danny Glover. Call (718) 402-8481 for details.

Jane Addams Vocational School, 900 Tinton Avenue, Bronx, NY 10456, (718) 292-4513, is an unusually pleasant school that prepares its mostly female student body for careers in court reporting, travel and tourism, business, nursing and cosmetology. It offers certification in the trades as well as advanced college prep classes for students who have excelled. Graduates have

been admitted to hard-to-get-into schools such as Duke University, Cornell, and NYU. Students praise the family atmosphere. "You really feel at home and teachers are really easy to talk to," said a student.

Morris High School, 1100 Boston Road, Bronx, NY 10456, is home to three promising new mini-schools. **Bronx International**, modeled after International High School in Queens, has a talented and energetic teaching staff who offer organized, focused, and creative lessons to new immigrants from 30 countries, including many who speak little or no English. Students who cannot understand English are paired with more advanced peers who share their native tongue. "They used to laugh at me when I stood up to answer a question [at my former school]," said our guide, a refugee from Western Africa. "So I just kept my mouth shut. Here we work in small groups in the classes so we can help each other. We are smart people. We don't laugh at each other." Tucked away on the fourth floor of the majestic Morris High School building with its turrets and towers, Bronx International opened in 2001. Telephone: (718) 620-1053.

Bronx Leadership Academy II opened in 2002 with the hope of duplicating the success of its namesake, Bronx Leadership Academy. Unlike its predecessor, which is focused on the study of law, BLA II emphasizes science. It has a seasoned principal with a background in science; longer class periods to increase student concentration on a subject; and collaboration with the New York Academy of Medicine, a non-profit health research organization. Students are expected to conduct research on ailments that disproportionately affect urban areas, such as asthma. Telephone (718) 542-3700, ext 2360. Also worth watching: **Marble Hill High School for International Studies**, a school that serves students from 21 countries; (718) 561-0973.

Dewitt Clinton High School, 100 West Mosholu Parkway, Bronx, NY 10468, (718) 543-1000, www.dwchs.org, is a large, overcrowded, traditional high school. The Macy medical honors program offers some very bright kids a springboard to colleges such as MIT, Columbia, Wesleyan, Tufts, Yale, Dartmouth, Brown, and Vassar. The classes are mostly chalk-and-talk, and some students complain they are left to fend for themselves when they hit an academic bump. Still, the school offers some nice extras, such as a Theater Development Fund program. Students see Broadway shows, and then write and produce their own plays with the help of professional playwrights such as Wendy Wasserstein.

A new school in a converted factory in one of the poorest Congressional districts in the nation, **Wings Academy**, 1122 East 180th Street, Bronx, NY 10460, (718) 597-1751, sends most of its graduates to 4-year colleges—even a few kids who entered 9th grade reading at the 4th- or 5th-grade level. One graduate won a *New York Times* scholarship to attend Connecticut College. Another was admitted to the selective Tisch School of the Arts at NYU. Small classes, dedicated teachers who offer individual attention, and an outstanding college counselor are the secrets to Wings' success. A member of the Coalition of Essential Schools, which includes schools such as Central Park East in East Harlem, Wings expects children to demonstrate competence in various disciplines through "portfolio assessments"—written and oral presentations to members of the faculty that delve into a particular topic in depth. Wings Academy has a more traditional tone than many CES members. Bells mark class changes. Teachers are addressed formally as Mr. and Ms., not by first name. Although some classes are taught as seminars, with chairs in a circle and lots of discussion, many have desks in rows, with the teacher eliciting responses to particular questions rather than encouraging debate.

Bronx High School of Science

75 West 205th Street
Bronx, NY 10468
(718) 817-7700
www.bxscience.edu

Admissions: competitive exam

Grade levels: 9–12

Enrollment: 2,707

Class size: 34

Average SATs: V624 M666

Graduation rate: 99%

College admissions: excellent

Ethnicity: 36%W 9%B 10%H 45%A

Free lunch: 19%

The Bronx High School of Science is one of the most celebrated schools in the nation. Its graduates have won five Nobel prizes in physics—more than any other school in the country. Its students work with professional scientists on sophisticated original research projects such as analyzing gamma rays emitted from black holes or looking for a protein suspected of exacerbating multiple sclerosis.

Best known for its science and math departments, Bronx Science has a strong English department as well. Students may study journalism, read women's literature, learn to debate, or produce their own plays. They write frequently, revising drafts of their papers several times. In the social sciences, as in the hard sciences, students conduct original research as part of the Intel Science Talent Search.

The school inspires loyalty among its alumni, who contribute half a million dollars a year to the school. "They are more proud of having gone to Bronx Science than to the Ivy League colleges they attend when they graduate," said assistant principal Stephen Kalin. Entrance is by competitive exam.

Alumni include novelist E. L. Doctorow; black activist Stokely Carmichael; Dr. Neil de Grasse Tyson, director of the planetarium at the American Museum of Natural History; *New York Times* columnist William Safire; dance critic Anna Kisselgoff; former Columbia University President Michael Sovern; and Teachers College President Arthur Levine. Also: the country's first African-American neurosurgeon, Thomas Matthew, now practicing in Louisville, Kentucky, businessman Ronald Lauder; Gap CEO Mickey Drexler; and former New York City schools chancellor Harold Levy.

Bronx Science is a stressful, highly competitive place, with large classes and a demanding, traditional curriculum. About 75 students in each entering class leave before graduation. Some are worn out by the long commute from their homes in distant boroughs. Others are alienated by the size of the school and by what they see as a lack of individual attention. But for the students who can work independently, who thrive on competition, and who make personal connections with the teachers, the school is an intellectually stimulating, even thrilling, place.

Students may leap beyond ordinary high school subjects to study astrophysics or chaos theory, organic chemistry or constitutional law. Very bright students who may have been bored in elementary or middle school suddenly find themselves challenged in classes with other very bright kids and teachers who pitch classes at a high level and a rapid pace.

"You have to know your child," said James Fogel, former president of the Parents Association. "It is a sink or swim kind of place. An awful lot of kids are used to being at the top of their class at elementary and middle school, and now they are all together." But he said that his son and daughter had extraordinary opportunities unavailable anywhere else. Bronx Science, he said, is far more challenging academically than the well-regarded private school from which his children transferred. The school consistently leads the nation in the number of Intel semifinalists among its students.

In a DNA lab, students can match tissue samples as prosecutors might for criminal suspects. Students in a special law class have a chance to meet privately with justices from the U.S. Supreme Court. Students have met justices Sandra Day O'Connor and Anthony Scalia.

"My daughter met Gloria Steinem when she came to the school," said Camille Clark, a Queens parent. "[Secretary of State] Madeline Albright spoke. There are so many unique opportunities."

While Bronx Science kids may have a reputation for being grinds, some kids say they have time for fun. "We hang out. We go to the movies. We're normal. It's not like all we do is sit around and do calculus," said Edie Kaminsky, a student from Manhattan. And it's not all math and science, either.

"I don't like math and science, but we're really strong in liberal arts," said another student, Susan Katz, from Forest Hills, Queens. "You pick and choose a lot of your classes. We have a lot of work, but you have time for other things."

Still, the workload is punishing, and sleep deprivation is a common complaint. Although a few kids said they did 2 hours of homework a night, most said 4, 5 or even 6 hours a night is more common. Add a commute of up to 2 hours a day from distant boroughs, and it's easy to see why some kids sleep from 1 a.m. to 5 a.m. each night and others learn to sleep in snatches on the subway.

Bronx Science, founded in 1938, has been co-ed since 1946 and was the first of the specialized science schools to accept girls. One mother said it's a place where girls are taken as seriously as boys, even in traditionally male subjects such as math and science. "It's okay to be a nerd and a girl," said Ratna Sircar, whose daughter, Monica, won the 2000 grand prize in the Intel Science Talent Search for her work in biochemistry. "She blossomed like anything. Girls are treated equally to boys. Teachers don't call on boys rather than girls."

The school prides itself on its racial and ethnic diversity. Many students are children of immigrants, and it's a place where children of different races feel comfortable. Ms. Clark, who is African-American, said she was pleased that her daughter learned about the Chinese Lunar New Year and various Indian festivals. She was also proud that her daughter had a chance to perform a play she wrote for a celebration of Black History Month.

While very large, Bronx Science is somewhat smaller than its rivals, Stuyvesant and Brooklyn Tech. Teachers and administrators say it's warmer and less competitive than Stuyvesant, cozier and more intimate than Brooklyn Tech.

For years, Bronx Science was known as a place without a lot of rules. Students have long enjoyed the privilege of leaving the building for lunch, for example, or passing through the corridors without a hall pass. Students say the new principal, Valerie Reidy, a long-time science teacher at the school, is changing that culture of tolerance by cracking down on things like gum-chewing and wearing hats in school. She's instituted a dress code banning bare midriffs, and prohibits students from "hanging out" in the cafeteria except during their regular lunch periods.

Although students grumble about the changes, PA President Stefan Mayer said Ms. Reidy had only imposed "sensible rules to make the school run better." He added: "She says you don't want to walk around looking as if you're going to the beach." Other parents say the principal seems to have a more formal relation-

ship with students than her predecessors did, and one mother complained that Ms. Reidy had abandoned the previous administration's practice of meeting regularly with students.

Ms. Reidy has cracked down on the staff as well, and has made what one teacher called an unwarranted attack on absenteeism. A teacher complained that she insisted on a written note from a doctor when he was absent for just one day. "She's bright and demanding, but she rules with an iron fist and she has no people skills," this teacher said. "She's alienated a lot of staff." Mayer agreed that the principal "may not have a great bedside manner" but said the battle to decrease absenteeism among teachers was useful and overdue. And teachers and parents both seem to admire Ms. Reidy's strength as an instructional leader, particularly in guiding students through the Intel science competition.

Once the most sought-after public high school in the city, Bronx Science fell to second place in the number of applicants listing it as their first choice when Stuyvesant moved into a new building in Battery Park City in 1992. Still, with more than 21,000 applicants for a freshman class of 750 seats, admission to Bronx Science is extremely selective. (A few dozen students are admitted in 10th grade.)

Bronx Science has a pleasant but ordinary building constructed in 1959. Its facilities are less dramatic than Stuyvesant's, which has an indoor pool, shiny escalators, and a high-tech interior. But Science has used donations from alumni to install an unusually good computer system—the entire building is networked—and to keep science laboratories up-to-date. The building is wheelchair accessible.

The parents, staff, and administration have taken steps to ensure that the quality of teaching at Bronx Science is as good as possible, and Science partisans say the proportion of good teachers is higher than at the other specialized schools. More than 10% of the staff are graduates of Science, and that gives the school a sense of continuity and community.

The staff voted to become a "school-based option" program for hiring. That means a committee of teachers and administrators interviews and picks new staff members. In most New York City public schools, teachers are permitted to choose where they teach according to how much seniority they have, and senior but burned-out teachers sometimes transfer to schools that are seen

as desirable—over the objections of the principal and other staff. At Science, there are no such seniority transfers.

There are some uninspired teachers at Bronx Science, as there are at all schools. But it also has many for whom teaching is clearly a joy.

In a technology class, a teacher eagerly demonstrated the CISCO Networking Academy Program, in which students learn how to network computers—gaining marketable skills to help pay their college bills.

A teacher helped kids build bridges from poplar wood and glue in a class on the principles of engineering. The students conducted “structural stress analysis” with a machine designed to determine whether the bridges could hold up to 1,000 pounds.

In an English class, a teacher gently encouraged students to express their ideas about Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, discussing why bad things happen to good people.

In an advanced calculus class, students interrupted the teacher when they didn’t understand—and gathered round to discuss a point after class was dismissed.

Students watched a videotape of a PBS documentary on World War I in a history class, and discussed details of trench warfare such as how letters were brought to the front. The kids were reluctant to go when the bell rang.

Students in chemistry class tested the strength of different brands of plastic wrap. When they were done, they discussed a documentary videotape they were producing as an independent project to persuade NASA to explore Pluto rather than Jupiter. “Jupiter is not going to freeze anytime soon—so they should go to Pluto at least once,” a girl said.

“This is a place of high stress and exhilaration,” said an English teacher, as she took a break from helping a student with a paper. “Sometimes the stress wins out, and sometimes the moment of exhilaration is so great I could teach for 100 years.”

The day I visited, students wandered into department offices, for informal chats and advice. In the biology office, students chatted with their advisor about college admissions and the Intel competition.

But it’s a gigantic school, and students who are not aggressive about seeking out teachers’ help are sometimes lost. Even navigating the corridors between classes is a challenge. Freshmen must learn which staircases have human gridlock and which are

empty, which routes will get you to class on time and which routes will leave you stuck in traffic as your next class begins.

The mechanics of signing up for classes, figuring out what courses to take, or getting into an oversubscribed Advanced Placement class can be difficult and bureaucratic. A major complaint of students and parents: Only the highest-achieving students are permitted to take certain AP courses. While AP English and computer science are open to most interested students, kids must take a qualifying exam to enroll in AP calculus and are screened before taking AP physics.

Like all famous institutions, Bronx Science has its share of critics. One boy who transferred to a small alternative school in Manhattan complained that teachers didn't know his name and that there was too much emphasis on memorization and recitation of facts. "It's cold and uncaring," he said.

A Brooklyn mother said teachers limited their interaction with students to formal lessons. "There is nobody who feels they have to connect with you," she said. A Bronx mother who had three children at Bronx Science said: "The teachers didn't know who my kids were. They gave pure lectures—with no discussion or questions. When you had problems, they showed you the door. My kids found it easy to cut class."

One Bronx Science graduate said he floundered in college because he didn't know what to make of all the information he'd accumulated, he wasn't used to thinking independently, and—perhaps most important—he didn't know how to ask adults for help.

Teachers say that the punishing schedule of five 43-minute classes with 34 students in each class—typical for New York City public schools—combined with the fast-paced and extremely demanding curriculum at Science leaves them little time to help anyone who is having trouble.

"To have any direct interaction with a student is difficult," a science teacher said. "If you have students that are struggling—they are lost. We have 100 lab reports a week. You can't correct them for English [grammar] and science [too]. We try, but it's almost impossible." Another teacher said the guidance department is ill equipped to deal with students' emotional problems.

Each guidance counselor is assigned hundreds of students. "We're terribly overburdened," said Christine J. Scott, the assistant principal for guidance. A father said, "My son was there for four years and didn't even know the name of his guidance counselor."

Students who are successful find a way to get the help they need by courting the adults in the building, by seeking out other kids for advice, or, in some cases, by hiring private tutors. (Teachers are available for free tutoring at 7:30 a.m.) Parents also can act as intermediaries by helping kids navigate a bureaucracy that one mother compared to the Motor Vehicles Department.

“When people ask, ‘Is it a good school and should I send my child there?’ I say, ‘It’s a great school, but plan on being involved because it’s a very complicated place,” said a parent.

Parents praise the staff of the college office. “The college office is really outstanding,” said Mayer. “They really make kids feel welcome in the process.” Ms. Scott, who is also head of the college office, has “great contacts,” said Ms. Clark, who chairs the college committee of the PA. Twelve teachers act as “college mentors.” In exchange for a reduced teaching load, these mentors help their 50 advisees through the college admissions process and write letters on their behalf. Unfortunately, Ms. Clark said, some classroom teachers refuse to write recommendations for students.

The school typically sends 12–15% of its graduating class to Ivy League schools. Ms. Scott said the school tries to help kids find a college where they will be happy—not necessarily the most prestigious one. “We indoctrinate parents—go for the best fit, don’t go for the name,” she said, adding that the best programs aren’t always at the most famous institutions. For example, a student interested in international affairs might choose Georgetown University, while Michigan State has the best program in veterinary medicine, Ms. Scott said.

Students are admitted by competitive exam administered in October. The office of high school admissions issues a booklet with admissions information and sample exams. Parents say that most successful candidates have taken private courses to prepare for the exam. The Math Science Institute offers summer school and after-school programs to help students from middle schools in low-performing districts prepare for the test. Call (718) 933-8321 for details.

About half the students come to Science from Queens, many by a private bus service. In the past, the school has offered tours only to students who pass the exam, although there has been some talk of offering fall tours as well. Call the school for details.

The High School of American Studies at Lehman College

250 Bedford Park Blvd.
Bronx, NY 10468
(718) 960-5115

Admissions: competitive exam

Grade Levels: 9–12

Enrollment: 400 (projected)

Class size: 25

Average SATs: new school

Graduation rate: new school

College admissions: new school

Ethnicity: new school

Free lunch: 30%

The High School of American Studies at Lehman College is one of three new small, specialized high schools to open on a city university campus. These schools are designed to offer high-achieving students a chance to make use of college facilities while receiving more individual attention than they might at the mammoth Bronx Science, Brooklyn Tech, or Stuyvesant.

Myra Luftman, formerly the assistant principal of social studies at DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx, was named acting principal of American Studies, which opened with fewer than 100 9th graders in 2002. Students are expected to take 3 years of American History (and to double up with world history their freshman year.) English teachers will share planning with history teachers to make the courses interdisciplinary.

Teachers attempt to bring history to life with lots of trips, as part of a collaboration with The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History. Students may travel to Gettysburg to re-enact Pickett's charge in the Civil War, walk the Freedom Trail in Boston, or visit Philadelphia to learn about the Constitution. They may tour Old Sturbridge Village, Salem, and Plymouth, Mass., to learn about colonial America, or Ellis Island to learn about immigration.

The school is more welcoming to parents than most high schools. One day, a parent brought in crumb cake for the office staff to share—a homey gesture you might see in an elementary school. Parents often drop their children off and chat with school staffers at the beginning of the day. Teachers are often willing to

stay until 5 p.m. to meet with a parent, so parents don't need to wait for a formal parent-teacher conference.

"Every teacher knows every student," said Ms. Luftman. "We talk about the progress of every student."

Students may use the Lehman College facilities, including the cafeteria, library, sports facilities, and science labs. Seniors may enroll in Lehman College courses for college credit. The 37-acre Lehman campus is in the northwest Bronx, across from the Jerome Park Reservoir.

"We're using the college campus as an extension of the high school," said the principal. The administration recognizes that high school students don't have the maturity of college students and is sure to watch kids closely. High school students are escorted by a teacher to the library, and eat lunch in a separate section of the cafeteria, supervised by a teacher. Teachers take attendance before *and* after lunch. (At most schools, attendance is taken during the morning only.)

The principal has a lot of energy and is responsive to parents and students. "She's kind of that mother hen type," said a parent, who was impressed with the way in which Ms. Luftman spoke informally to prospective students at the high school fair.

Students take six semesters of American history (compared to two at most schools), a requirement one staffer called "a teacher's dream" because students can go into a particular period in depth. They may spend an entire semester studying colonial America, for example, or four weeks on the New Deal. The American history class we visited was taught in a traditional manner, with the teacher posing questions such as "Identify four major goals of England's mercantilist policies," and "What were the Townsend Acts and why did they anger the colonists so much?"

In a global studies class, the teacher led a discussion on a topic that's unfamiliar to most high school students: early Arab trade routes with East Africa. She told students that 3rd-century coins from North Africa and Persia had been discovered in Zanzibar, that the Bantu language was influenced by Arabic, and the Islamic-style architecture could be found in the Kilwa, the oldest city in east Africa.

A gentle and engaging math teacher offered some clever problems that made algebra fun: "The 19th-century mathematician August DeMorgan once said: 'In the year X squared I was X

years old.' What year was he born?" Or: "A bunny hops up 10 stairs 1 or 2 stairs at a time and never hops down. How many different ways can he reach the top?"

The school offers Spanish and Italian, taught with more emphasis on grammar than conversation. Students typically do four hours of homework a night.

There are summer scholarships for selected students to study at Cambridge University in England. There are also internships at the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History and at historical archives in New York City.

Admission is based on the selective specialized high school exam given in October—the same exam given for Stuyvesant, Bronx Science, and Brooklyn Tech.

Hostos-Lincoln Academy of Science

475 Grand Concourse
Bronx, NY 10451
(718) 518-4333

Admissions: educational option

Grade levels: 9–12

Enrollment: 377

Class size: 28–30

Average SATs: V403 M423

Graduation rate: 86%

College admissions: good

Ethnicity: 1%W 20%B 75%H 4%A

Free lunch: 72%

The overwhelming majority of kids at Hostos-Lincoln Academy live in poor neighborhoods. They come from homes where Spanish—not English—is spoken. And yet most pass Regents exams, graduate from high school on time, and many go on to four-year colleges. Graduates have been admitted to Harvard, Brown, NYU, and Fordham.

Keys to the school's success are the strong leadership of principal Michele Cataldi, a soft-spoken, almost grandfatherly man; a staff that has a clear respect for the students; and a family-like atmosphere in which everyone knows everyone else's name. The school was named a "Blue Ribbon School" by the U.S. Department of Education

The school prides itself on offering solid, academic courses, including advanced placement classes. Incoming 9th graders attend a summer program in science, math, language arts, and technology. Because no upperclassmen are in school at this time, the new students can get used to their surroundings—and to one other—without pressure from older peers. The summer session also gives the staff a chance to find out about the students' strengths and weaknesses academically and socially.

A summer pre-college/pre-engineering program has been offered for several years, and about three-quarters of graduates become science or engineer majors in college. "Teachers truly care for their students," said a student. "Many teachers even use their lunch hours to help students."

Located on the campus of Hostos Community College, Hostos-Lincoln Academy allows students to see successful older students who look like them and other role models, such as the

college president who grew up in the community. Students may use the college swimming pool, cafeteria, and library. Advanced high school students may also enroll in college classes.

Hostos welcomes students' families, too, offering them tutorials and use of the gym. (The gym is open year-round—even during vacations.) Parents may also enroll in Saturday programs, where GED preparation, English instruction, computer training, and even stained-glass production are available. "If you provide for the parents, they will work with you beautifully," the principal says.

Students in the "health occupations" program within the high school study anatomy, become certified in CPR, and have internships at Lincoln Hospital. The students come from the Dominican Republic, Mexico, and Central America.

Students are admitted according to a formula designed to ensure a mix of low-, middle-, and high-achieving students.

Bronx Leadership Academy

1710 Webster Avenue
Bronx, NY 10457
(718) 299-4274

Admissions: educational option

Grade levels: 9–12

Enrollment: 557

Class size: 25

Average SATs: V427 M406

Graduation rate: 77%

College admissions: good

Ethnicity: 3%W 44%B 51%H 2%A

Free lunch: 79%

A small, orderly alternative to the large and chaotic neighborhood high schools in the Bronx, Bronx Leadership Academy has built a reputation as an academically challenging college preparatory school for both general and special education students. It's a leader in the small-schools movement, and several other new schools, including Bronx Leadership Academy II, have been created on the BLA model. The school was founded 1993 as a collaboration between the Department of Education and South Bronx Churches, a neighborhood organization committed to improving schools.

There are very few lecture courses here, and students are more likely to debate the origins of World War II or prepare for a mock U.S. Supreme Court hearing than to read from a textbook. Students are well-mannered and articulate, full of life and energy, and passionate about their school. The school attracts high-achieving public school students as well as parochial school students who like the structured setting and the fact BLA students wear uniforms. The school, situated in a desolate neighborhood, is open from early morning until evening, and "someone is always there to help," said a senior girl.

Students in the "junior fellows" science and medical program take part in research projects as part of a partnership with New York Academy of Medicine. BLA also has attorneys on staff who help kids develop an understanding of both constitutional and criminal law. BLA is one of the few schools in the Bronx to offer Latin. The school is wheelchair accessible. Students with special education needs are integrated in regular classrooms. Many small schools have limited arts and athletics programs, but

BLA has a strong arts department, the girls' basketball team won the city championships in 2002, and students attend plays through the Open Door program with former New York Times drama critic Frank Rich. More than half the graduates go on to four-year colleges, including Binghamton, Syracuse, Penn State, Skidmore, and University of Vermont. "If you are having a bad day everyone knows just by looking at you," said a senior girl. "If you don't have a family at home you will have one here."

Foreign Language Academy of Global Studies (FLAGS)

470 Jackson Avenue, Room 338
Bronx, NY 10455
(718) 585-4024

Admissions: educational option

Grade Levels: 9–12

Enrollment: 269

Class size: 34

Average SATs: V423 M406

Graduation rate: 88%

College admissions: good

Ethnicity: 4%W 36%B 58%H 2%A

Free lunch: 85%

At some schools in the South Bronx, students who display their intelligence risk bullying from others. Not so at the Foreign Language and Global Studies High School known as FLAGS. “I have seen kids do a complete 180-degree turn in six months, from rough to blooming, once they realize they don’t need that hard shell here,” said a recent FLAGS graduate who went on to Hamilton College.

A new principal, Carol Sonnessa, has imposed needed discipline, boosted morale, and improved academics. Students proudly wear their uniforms and adhere to stringent rules. Attendance is high. Administrators greet every student in the morning with a smile. At the same time, they have a low level of tolerance for disrespect or bad behavior. At this school, it takes little more than a smart aleck-y facial expression to get a student called to the office. As a result, student altercations are rare. Offenders can look forward to their parents being alerted, to staying after school, and to studying guidance materials related to the problem. Parents must attend counseling with the student once a week until the counseling is longer needed.

Most students come in with weak reading and math skills, but about three-quarters graduate on time and many go on to college. The school’s focus is foreign language, and each student is required to take at least one language for three years starting in the 9th grade. (Most students we met were taking two or three languages.) Students may choose to study Japanese, French, German, or Spanish. The quality of teaching varies: We saw

many excellent teachers, and a few who had trouble holding students' attention.

A fine geometry teacher had lost her voice the day before our visit and couldn't speak above a whisper, but still managed to keep her students interested in and excited about the material. The teacher of a senior literature class—where students select a prominent writer, such as Ernest Hemingway, and read his works—was clearly excited about her job. "I do not feel like I am baby-sitting; I actually get to teach," she says.

FLAGS is housed in the Jeffrey M. Rapport School for Career Development, a high school in District 75, a citywide district for children with special education needs.

Unlike many small schools, FLAGS has proper resources for **special education** students. We saw one "resource room" class with only eight students. The calming sound of chimes and a tabletop waterfall could be heard in the background. Some of the kids were preparing to take SATs, others were completing business letters or studying for a math test.

Brooklyn Schools



- 7 Brooklyn Studio
- 2 Brooklyn Tech
- 8 Goldstein
- 5 Midwood
- 6 Murrow
- 1 Science Skills Center
- 4 Telecommunication
- 3 Transit Tech

BROOKLYN

Brooklyn has several well-regarded large high schools that draw kids from across the borough. The movement to create small new schools is just beginning to take root, but there are some promising, fledgling programs that are worth investigating. Parents also should consider small, specialized programs within large high schools that are otherwise undistinguished.

Many Brooklyn high schools offer tours or open houses to prospective parents in the fall. In addition, parents should consider visiting the Brooklyn high school fair in September or October. Call the Office of High School Admissions at (917) 256-4300 for details.

Brooklynites talk about the “Three Ms”—Midwood, Murrow, and Madison—three large high schools that have remained popular even as parents and teachers elsewhere have become disenchanted with schools of their size. Profiled here are Midwood, a traditional neighborhood school with selective programs in science and the humanities open to all Brooklyn residents, and Murrow, a progressive school open to students across the borough with a strong performing arts department and an award-winning chess team.

James Madison High School, 3787 Bedford Avenue, 11229, in the Midwood section, is a well-regarded, traditional, neighborhood school that offers a wide array of electives (including painting, fashion design, ceramics, film, drama, and conflict resolution), a marching band, and many theatrical performances. Some 4,000 students are jammed into a school built for 2,500, and students attend in overlapping sessions beginning at 7:30 a.m. The school is divided into “houses” including the demanding Law Academy (with a court-room named after Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg, a Madison alumna), Bio-Med, Math Academy, Humanities, Media Arts, and a well-regarded music program. The Center for Administration and Management is the only house open to children from outside the zone. Students must pass through metal detectors to enter the school. One mother complained that the school has an “institutional” feel to it and that students are treated as “numbers, not individuals.” But a

father said that teachers are “willing to extend themselves” and are always “on the look out” for students who might be interested in Intel science research projects. The staff greeted the principal, Joseph A. Gogliormella, with a standing ovation when he came to the school in the spring of 2003. He had been a popular English teacher at Madison for 15 years and was particularly successful at improving the reading and writing skills of struggling students during his tenure as principal of New Utrecht High School. Frequent tours are offered in the fall. The school’s telephone number is (718) 758-7200.

Established in 1993 as a small school where even alienated students could learn the math, science and technology they need for college, **Middle College High School at Medgar Evers College**, 1186 Carroll Street, 11225, in Crown Heights gives students personal attention and first-rate advice on college applications. Unfortunately, the school’s enrollment has grown dramatically in recent years, swelling average class size and overwhelming the school’s attractive building that was constructed in 2000 for far fewer than the nearly 900 students now enrolled. The principal, Dr. Michael Wiltshire, is so popular with parents that they marched on City Hall in protest when he was temporarily removed from his post. But he has ruffled some teachers’ feathers, and some students complain that he is a strict disciplinarian. “He’s getting results,” Marcia Biederman wrote in her profile for *insideschools.org*, adding that the school has a “fantastic” guidance counselor who gets just about every graduate into a four-year college. Advanced students may take college courses at Medgar Evers College. One of the few high schools exempted from the chancellor’s new standard curriculum, Middle College High School uses a mix of traditional and progressive teaching methods. Students seem focused, and class changes are smooth. Fights are not uncommon, a student government officer said, but many are solved through mediation. In recent years, students have been admitted through the “educational option formula” designed to ensure a mix of students of different abilities. Telephone: (718) 703-5400.

A school that has become a neighborhood institution is **Boys and Girls’ High School**, at 1700 Fulton Street, in the Bedford Stuyvesant section, led for years by a charismatic disciplinarian who once patrolled outside school carrying a claw hammer. The school draws kids from some of the lowest-performing middle schools in the city. Principal Frank Mickens brought order to

what had been a troubled, chaotic place by enforcing strict codes of conduct and keeping kids he called troublemakers out. His critics say he violated many kids' right to an education by refusing to let them enroll in their neighborhood school or by suspending them unfairly. His supporters say the get-tough policies allowed serious students to get a sound, traditional education. Graduates have been admitted to schools such as Columbia, Tufts, Dartmouth, Cornell, and Brown. Telephone: (718) 467-1700.

Clara Barton High School for Health Professions, at 901 Classon Avenue, in the Prospect Heights section, is best known for a nursing program that's popular among the children of Caribbean immigrants. Students also may enroll in a selective Medical Science Institute, an honors program that's smaller and more intimate than similar programs at the behemoth Midwood High School or Brooklyn Tech. The school is one of the few in the city with a bilingual program in Haitian Creole. The business program is also popular. One of the most successful programs for **special education** students trains kids to be dental lab technicians. The academics are traditional, and the building, next to the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, is well kept. Except for the honors program, students are admitted according to the educational option program designed to ensure a balance of low-performing and high-performing students. Telephone: (718) 636-4900.

Abraham Lincoln High School, at Ocean Parkway and West Avenue in the Brighton Beach section, has a well-regarded photography program that's open to kids from across the borough. Students have classes in photography every day. The program, with just 130 students, offers kids a sense of belonging in a large neighborhood high school. They take their regular academic courses with kids in the neighborhood high school. Students work in still photography and also learn digital video editing. Their work is published professionally in magazines, and they sometimes are hired to do professional publicity shots for corporations. Some go on to art schools, particularly the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University, but the director of the program encourages them to consider liberal arts colleges as well. Graduates have been admitted to Yale, Stanford, Dartmouth, and Cornell. Students are selected according to their grades and attendance records, as well as a portfolio of their work. For details call the photography teacher, Howard Wallach, at (718) 372-5474.

John Dewey High School, 50 Avenue X, offers its 3,200 students an unusual degree of independence, allowing them to choose how to spend a day that begins at 8 a.m. and ends at 3:20 p.m. Students choose from a rich menu of electives and independent-study options in addition to required courses. A grading system with broad categories (rather than numerical grades) is aimed at minimizing competition. During free periods, students may work on assignments in “resource centers” equipped with computers and staffed with teachers, or socialize on the school’s rolling lawn. Students are generally attentive. But some kids said the lack of structure has led them into temptations, like cutting class and smoking. Telephone: (718) 373-6400

The New School for Research in the Natural and Social Sciences, a small school housed in John Jay High School, 237 Seventh Avenue, in the Park Slope section, offers small classes with interesting research projects and lots of opportunities for writing and discussion. The new school serves students in grades 6–12. Teachers are “on the ball, and they expect a lot of good things out of the kids,” says a mother. “Most importantly my son really enjoys the school.” John Jay High School, a disorderly school with low levels of student achievement, is being closed. Telephone: (718) 965-8430.

Located in a bright and airy former factory building overlooking the busy Brooklyn Queens Expressway, **Benjamin Banneker Academy**, 77 Clinton Avenue, 11205, (718) 797-3702, is a small, nurturing school for students interested in math and science. Lockers and walls are painted in primary colors; the ground floor red, the middle two floors a cheerful canary yellow, and the top two floors blue. There is a full-sized gym, a dance and drama room, and a huge art studios flooded with sun shining through a skylight. The school has two selective programs (in pre-engineering and pre-medicine), and two “educational option” programs that admit students with a range of abilities (humanities and “media communication”—web design, video production, and computer graphics).

In the bad old days of the 1990s at **Westinghouse High School**, 105 Tech Place, 11201, (718) 625-6130, students roamed halls unchallenged, fights were common, and the vocational program was woefully behind the times. But a capable new principal, armed with a grant for school reform and partnerships with neighboring colleges and corporations, is beginning to turn the school around. The school has been renamed the George

Brooklyn

Westinghouse Career and Technical Education High School and is transforming itself into a center for information technology. Every student takes computer technology courses and by junior year chooses a specialty field. In most cases, students graduate with industry certifications in areas such as computer networking. There are still lots of problems at the school. Kids must still pass through metal detectors, and tardiness is an issue. The computers are out of date, and science equipment is inadequate. Nonetheless, Westinghouse is making progress and is a school worth watching.

Small classes, attentive teachers, and a safe, family atmosphere make **Brooklyn College Academy**, 350 Coney Island Avenue, (718) 951-5941, a popular alternative to Brooklyn's large zoned neighborhood high schools. "We run the spectrum from very, very bright kids to those with learning disabilities, and they all do well here," said principal Juliana Rogers. Students call Brooklyn College Academy the "big island school" because it has so many recent immigrants from Trinidad, Jamaica, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico. It also has kids from Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India. The school has two sites. Grades 7 to 10, called Bridges to Brooklyn, is on Coney Island Avenue adjacent to Prospect Park. (The telephone for that site is 718-853-6184.) In 11th grade, students move to classrooms on the campus of Brooklyn College. The school houses a model **special education** program for autistic children, who are placed into regular classes where they receive extra help. Two autistic boys were the best students in a 9th-grade science class—and helped other kids with math. The school also does well with "school phobic" students.

A dozen new schools are on the drawing board. Check *inside-schools.org* or the high school directory for updates.

Brooklyn Technical High School

29 Fort Greene Place
Brooklyn, NY 11217
(718) 858-5150
www.bths.edu

Admissions: competitive exam

Grade levels: 9–12

Enrollment: 4,090

Class size: 34

Average SATs: V568 M620

Graduation rate: 94%

College admissions: excellent

Ethnicity: 27%W 21%B 11%H 41%A

Free lunch: 31%

Brooklyn Technical High School, one of the largest and most selective schools in the city, has a proud tradition of training engineers, inventors, and scientists as well as athletes, politicians, and business leaders. Two of its graduates have won Nobel prizes for science.

One of the city's three specialized science schools, Tech has a curriculum that emphasizes the practical applications of scientific principles—not just the theory. Tech students may make furniture polish in chemistry class, solder circuits in an electronics class, or survey Fort Greene Park in a civil engineering class. They may study video production, architecture, environmental planning, or industrial design.

Brooklyn Tech has the highest proportion of blacks and Hispanics of the three specialized science high schools and the most students from families poor enough to qualify for free lunch. Parents say the diversity is one of the school's strengths.

"You get Russian kids from Brighton Beach, black kids from Bedford Stuyvesant, Hispanic kids from Sunset Park," said Robert Sietsema, who is white, and whose daughter commutes to Tech from Greenwich Village in Manhattan. "Tech seems to have more students who are interested in pulling themselves up by their bootstraps."

He said his daughter is getting a solid academic program, but she is also thrilled by the hands-on technical courses. She made a screwdriver in metal shop. Later, at home, she dismantled—and reassembled—her CD player.

Tech admits students with lower scores on the competitive entrance exam than Stuyvesant or Bronx Science, and for some it is the third choice among the specialized schools. Some Brooklyn students, for example, travel nearly 2 hours on the subway to Bronx Science.

But others, like basketball star Rebecca Richman—admitted to Rutgers University on full athletic scholarship—traveled 2 hours *to* Tech *from* the Bronx. Ms. Richman, who is African-American, said she liked the “mix of kids” at Tech, as well as its sports program.

Sietsema maintains that Tech students are less hyper-competitive and obsessed with grades than those at Stuyvesant. Some parents choose Tech over private schools. A mother said Tech pushed her son to achieve in a way the well-regarded private school from which he transferred did not.

With 4,000 students, Brooklyn Tech is one of the largest schools in the country. The size offers the possibility of extensive laboratories and shops needed for the pre-engineering programs—equipment that would be prohibitively expensive in a smaller school. Kids can make sophisticated architectural drawings on a computer, dissect a shark in anatomy class, or design a pedestrian bridge (to cross busy DeKalb Avenue) in civil engineering.

But the size also spawns a formidable bureaucracy that makes everything from registering for classes to applying to college a chore. One mother complained that the school failed to accept her son’s credits for advanced courses taken in 8th grade—forcing him to repeat courses and delaying his chances of taking Advanced Placement courses, electives, and internships. When he was a senior, she said, the school failed to mail a critical document to a college—one that may have made the difference in admissions. Another mother complained she spent half a day on the telephone trying to sort out the procedure her son needed to follow when he missed an exam because of illness.

"The real shortcomings in the school lie in a control-obsessed, inflexible, and oversized administration," a student said. "There are too many guards and paraprofessionals and too few materials and people with real work to do."

The New York Times wrote a scathing report on Brooklyn Tech in 2003, citing "long-standing tensions" between the staff and the principal, Dr. Lee McCaskill, who was described as controlling the school "largely through fear and intimidation." *The Times* said bureaucratic bungling by the principal resulted in students'

being left out of various special events, such as the national robotics championship. The paper said the principal's oppressive management style had led several talented teachers to quit.

Teachers have five classes of 34 kids a day, and, with a fast-paced curriculum, there's little time for individual attention. "I have no time to coddle them," a math teacher said. It also is hard for teachers to get guidance from their department chairs. The assistant principal for math supervises 37 teachers at Brooklyn Tech. At Bronx Science, his counterpart supervises 25. Students say they have 2 to 5 hours of homework a night. "My son never had a moment to breathe, there was so much work," one mother said.

For an outgoing student who makes friends easily and isn't afraid to ask grown-ups for help, the size of the school and the workload can be manageable. But a student who is shy, who is reluctant to talk in class, or who isn't aggressive about working the bureaucracy can easily become lost and alienated. The overburdened guidance staff can be abrupt, one mother said.

The school is tracked into regular, honors, and Advanced Placement courses. Parents complain that the best teachers gravitate toward the most demanding classes. One mother said the kids who are academic stars and those who are really struggling get the most attention, and it's easy for a child in the middle to get lost.

Of an entering class of about 1,200 students, about 1,000 graduate. Some who leave are worn out by the commute and the homework. Some are alienated by what they see as the lack of personal attention. Some leave the city. And some are asked to leave because of poor performance.

Brooklyn Tech had its first students in 1918. Its current building, completed in 1933, sprawls over much of a city block and has a tower that's the highest point in Brooklyn. It is a clean, well-kept, institutional-looking building, with a rotunda decorated with murals in the main entrance, and student artwork decorating the walls. On the tenth floor, there is a large, H-shaped cafeteria with panoramic views of the Manhattan skyline. The school has a large, beautiful auditorium and an internal courtyard used as a garden by kids studying environmental science.

The school has an unusually active alumni association that has pledged to raise \$10 million, half to be used for capital projects, and half to be used as an endowment. The interest from the endowment will provide the school with enough money to keep laboratories and computers up-to-date. That's a staggering

amount for a public school and an important buffer from the vagaries of Department of Education funding.

“For many alumni, Tech was the pivotal experience in their lives—more important than college,” said Michael Weiss, chairman of the alumni association and head of the Metrotech Business Improvement District in downtown Brooklyn. Leonard Reggio, the chairman of Barnes & Noble booksellers, and another Tech alumnus, is leading the fund-raising effort, which has already collected \$6 million.

“Engineering schools are more expensive [than regular high schools] to run, and we need to keep up with changing technology,” said Weiss.

The alumni association is active in efforts to modernize both the physical plant and the curriculum, bringing the school in line with new standards promulgated by the organization that accredits engineering colleges, the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET).

“There’s a revolution going on in engineering colleges—and that’s what’s happening at Brooklyn Tech,” said Weiss. The ABET standards, Weiss said, call for teachers to develop an interdisciplinary curriculum in which both students and teachers work in teams. “The math teacher should know what the biology teacher is doing. And students need to be challenged to work in groups. When I was a kid, I did a lab alone. But that’s not the way the world works. Scientists and even stockbrokers work in teams,” he said. In a 9th-grade technology course, for example, students worked in groups to make chairs out of cardboard strong enough for the principal to sit on.

The funds raised by the alumni help pay for staff development—training teachers in new computer languages, for example, or in how to use the Internet to do research in humanities classes.

A reorganization of the school began in 1999, with a program called CareTech. Designed to break down the anonymity of a large school and to ease kids’ transition to high school, CareTech is made up of 270 kids who travel together and take most their classes together in their freshman and sophomore years. They have a 6-day summer orientation before they start school. The teachers have common planning time so they can coordinate their lessons. Students are admitted to CareTech after an interview. Students looking for a more intimate experience in a large school should consider applying.

Another new program designed to give kids more individual attention is called PULSE, the acronym for Preparation for Understanding Learning through Science Education. The program, with 100 students in each freshman and sophomore class, gives kids extra summer courses and time with individual teachers. It prepares students for a high school major in biochemistry that includes science research and volunteer work in hospitals. The program's mission is to prepare minority students for pre-medical studies in college. "Teachers know you by name," one girl in the program said. "Teachers help you out."

The school curriculum and teaching style are mostly traditional. The staff is senior. "There are a lot of teachers who have been there forever," said a Brooklyn mother. "That's both good and bad. Some are just marking time. But some are very experienced and very dedicated."

Students must declare a major in spring of their sophomore year. In their junior and senior years, they take courses in their major two periods a day. Although the majors have some of the most exciting courses in the school, some students complain they don't get their first choice and are assigned to one they don't really like. They also complain they aren't allowed to change majors once they start.

"The thing I don't like about majors is they are really specialized," said a sophomore boy from Brooklyn. "It's made for people who decide what they want to do when they are 10."

Another boy complained he wanted to take computer science, but was assigned to industrial design—a poor fit because he's not good at drawing. But others said courses in their major were their favorite part of the school.

Tracy Sietsema picked electrical engineering as a major, one of 4 girls and 80 boys who did so. At the college level, engineering schools are "desperate to recruit girls" into "the last institutions that are completely male dominated," her father said. "A girl who already has two years of engineering courses and leadership experience was like catnip to them." She was accepted at Rensselaer, which boasts that "97% of their grads are hired right after college at salaries that average just under \$100,000," her father said. "So if you know anyone with a girl who wants a full scholarship to a good school, send her to Tech and tell her to pick one of the engineering fields!"

Weiss, of the alumni association, said the administration is considering changing the majors because there is a blurring of

the line between disciplines, such as electrical engineering and mechanical engineering. The administration is planning to have fewer, less specialized majors, Weiss said. For now, majors include architecture, chemistry, civil engineering, industrial design, computer science, electrical engineering, math and science, and social science research.

Students in the “media communications technology” major learn printmaking, photography, journalism, and computer graphics. A student in the environmental science major said she enjoyed the creative projects, such as putting on skits about water depletion and taking field trips to Prospect Park.

Students in the “bio-medical science” major prepare for careers in medicine by studying human anatomy, genetics, and organic chemistry. Some graduates go directly to 6-year programs that combine pre-med with medical school.

Several parents recommended the major in technology and the liberal arts, designed for students planning to study humanities in college. It has a “Great Books” curriculum, including readings about the Peloponnesian War and the Sumerians, as well as *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, and *Moby Dick*.

The school’s emphasis on pre-engineering has a downside: Preparation is generally stronger in math and science than in the humanities. For those outside the liberal arts major, the writing program is limited. Most students do better on the math section of the SATs than on the verbal section.

The school has an extensive sports department, including teams for football, swimming, and softball. The school teaches fencing, and kids can even study how to become a lifeguard.

Security is a concern. Fistfights sometimes break out on the street at dismissal time, often involving teenagers who are not students at Tech. Students say there are occasional squabbles in the lunchroom, when, for example, one student slaps or shoves another. A mother said freshmen sometimes are teased by upper-classmen.

Parents say the college admissions office is overburdened. One mother said she planned to hire a private college advisor to help her son through the process. Nonetheless, Brooklyn Tech graduates are admitted to some of the most selective colleges in the country. Columbia, Cornell, and New York University take large numbers of graduates, and a few go to Harvard, Barnard, and Carnegie Mellon. Many students attend CUNY and SUNY

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schools, in part because their families are too poor to pay private college tuition and are reluctant to seek financial aid.

Students are admitted to Brooklyn Tech according to their test scores on the specialized science school exam administered in December. Parent tours are offered in the fall. About 22,000 students apply, and 2,100 are offered seats. About 1,200 accept. A few dozen are accepted in 10th grade. A brochure outlining the procedures is available from the Office of High School Admissions. Many successful applicants have taken private “prep” courses for the exam.

Science Skills Center High School

49 Flatbush Avenue Extension
Brooklyn, NY 11201
(718) 243-9413

Admissions: educational option

Grades: 9–12

Enrollment: 739

Class size: 31

Average SATs: N/A

Graduation rate: 71%

College admissions: good

Ethnicity: 7%W 83%B 8%H 2%A

Free lunch: 47%

Founded in 1993 with grants from the National Science Foundation and New Visions for Public Schools, Science Skills Center is designed to encourage city kids to consider careers in medicine, engineering, and other scientific fields. Students take field trips to the Bronx Zoo, summer school courses at Long Island University, or college courses at Polytechnic University. All students have double periods of science every year as part of the Gateway Institute for Pre-College Education, a program that strives to increase the number of black and Hispanic students who apply to medical school.

One of the nice things about Science Skills Center is that the kids really want to be there. Students get individual attention and have a good relationship with teachers. “The Brooklyn Tech teachers didn’t give you too much attention,” said a student who transferred from that specialized science high school. “Here, everyone knows everyone.”

Another student called this school “one of the best in Brooklyn” even though the staff can sometimes be “harsh.” The atmosphere is formal and respectful—but never oppressive. Students “dress for success” on Wednesday, when boys wear jackets and ties and girls wear business attire. “Kids are friendly and interested and they are willing to do what you want them to do,” a teacher said.

Science Skills takes part in the Family Heritage Documentary Project of the New York Association for New Americans. Students take photos and write about their families, strengthening their writing skills. (Their work is posted on the NYANA website, NYANA.org.)

A Muslim student said the administration is tolerant of her beliefs, and even sets aside a place for students to pray during the day.

After-school activities include a track team, a chess team, a theater program, and a robotics team (which in its first year won an industrial design award and went to the national championships). The school has collaborations with five theater companies to bring actors into the classroom and allow students to attend plays such as “The Crucible” at the Roundabout Theater in Manhattan.

The school’s graduation rate has been improving in recent years. Even though only about one-third of the students enter the school with the skills necessary to begin high school, more than two-thirds graduate on time, within four years.

Science Skills is housed in utilitarian building in a formerly industrial neighborhood near Polytechnic University and Long Island University, next to the Manhattan Bridge in Brooklyn. It’s a few blocks from the neighborhood that resident artists have nicknamed DUMBO—Down Underneath the Manhattan Bridge Overpass.

Many students choose to attend Polytechnic University and four-year CUNY programs, but graduates have also been admitted to private colleges such as Middlebury, Brandeis, Yale, Amherst, Columbia, and Barnard. Admission is open to all New York City residents. In recent years, students have been admitted according to the “educational option” formula designed to attract a mix of students of different abilities.

High School of Telecommunication Arts and Technology

350 67th Street
Brooklyn, NY 11220
(718) 759-3400
www.hstat.org

Admissions: educational option

Grade levels: 9–12

Enrollment: 1,161

Class size: 21–34

Average SATs: V447 M472

Graduation rate: 80%

College admissions: good

Ethnicity: 20%W 16%B 53%H 11%A

Free lunch: 44%

Some schools build their reputation by attracting high-achieving kids. Telecommunication is building its reputation by attracting first-rate teachers—and, as a consequence, strong students from across the borough are beginning to seek it out as well.

Telecommunication is known for its high-tech curriculum, its strong art and writing program, and its gentle approach to integrating kids in **special education**. It has impressive Advanced Placement offerings, the ARISTA honors society, and competitions ranging from the Lincoln–Douglass debates to the Shakespeare Oratory Contest. While it is not small, its size is more manageable than the giant Brooklyn high schools.

“This is a school that combines a hard-working faculty with academics, athletics, and the arts,” said student Vanessa Poggioli. “If you’re not doing well in a subject, there will be a resource; if you want to start a club, they’ll help. And it’s so nice that it’s small—you know most everybody. You don’t get run over in the halls—that’s nice.”

Located in the quiet, residential neighborhood of Bay Ridge overlooking the Verrazano Narrows Bridge and New York Harbor, Telecommunication is housed in a gothic-style brick building, complete with turrets and towers. Inside the stately entrance, stained glass windows from 1914 depict Scholarship and Character. A 1933 statue of Joan of Arc stands in a glass case. The building once housed Bay Ridge Girls’ High School—a selective school for girls at a time when Brooklyn Tech admitted only boys.

Inside, the atmosphere is far more modern. While retaining some of the architectural charm and detail of the original building, Telecommunication is well supplied with up-to-date equipment.

The school has a television studio with three cameras and sophisticated editing systems, five computer labs, and online access in every classroom. In addition, there is a mobile computer lab—a cart with 30 laptops equipped with antennas used for research in humanities classes and for science labs. Every student learns the computer language HTML. It was one of the first high schools in the city to have its own server, and there is a course dedicated to creating and maintaining the school's website: *www.hstat.org*. New computer technology is incorporated throughout the curriculum.

The school, which is open to students from across Brooklyn, in the past drew most of its students from Bay Ridge. Now, increasing numbers of Park Slope families are looking at it as a good, smaller alternative to the more established Murrow and Midwood high schools. Students also are transferring from these larger schools.

"I selected it because of its size and its location," said Park Slope parent Irene Moy, whose daughter chose Telecommunications. "I didn't want her in a school with 4,000 kids. It didn't have a great reputation, but it was up and coming. I figured the way the colleges work, if you were a bright student you could be in the top 10% of the class and maybe have a better shot at college."

One junior transferred from a large neighborhood high school, John Dewey. "Here there's more one-on-one contact with teachers," he said. "The teachers are young—we can talk to them."

Another student came from Murrow. "Here everyone hangs out together," she said. "In Murrow, groups were divided more according to race." Telecommunications also has a reputation of being tolerant of openly gay students.

The faculty voted overwhelmingly for "school-based option" in hiring new teachers. Instead of being assigned according to seniority, as is the norm in New York City public schools, prospective teachers are interviewed by the staff and asked to teach a demonstration class.

Principal Philip Weinberg said attracting good teachers and offering them opportunities to improve their skills are his most important tasks. He quoted his predecessor, Charles Amundsen, as saying: "Everyone will tell you it's all about kids. Your job as principal is to remember it's about good teachers and good teaching."

The principal is proud of the school's "ability to integrate technology into our academic life." Many staff development days

have been devoted to how to do interdisciplinary work, especially in English and social studies, and how to use exemplary websites in a classroom. English honors students created a web page to show off what the class had learned about author Toni Morrison and her novel, *Song of Solomon*. Students were asked to write two original essays, one discussing the importance of names in the novel and the second exploring another theme. They also provided online photographs and a biography about the author and links to relevant sites.

An AP English class for seniors applauded after their teacher read out loud Sylvia Plath's poem, "Daddy," and then the class analyzed how the author conveyed her feelings.

In a social studies class, students analyzed how the Civil War affected the roles of women and of free blacks. They looked at real Civil War bullets and Confederate bank notes, and watched portions of the PBS series on the Civil War. In a class in AP global humanities, students held debates about the use of violence by British suffragettes in the 19th century. Students first wrote individual speeches, then combined them into a group presentation.

Math classes tend to look alike from school to school—chalk-and-talk with an overhead projection of a graphic calculator. But in an engaging calculus assignment, students worked to determine the maximum volume of a box with a certain surface area. They made different-shaped boxes as a homework assignment. Then the teacher poured a bucket of beach sand in the boxes to see which held the most.

Writing is taken seriously. Ninth graders take a required writing class every day, adding an extra period to the day. Class size is kept small in the core academic subjects—22–26 students per class in 9th grade. "It's better to spend money now and save money on remediation later," the principal said.

The school has an award-winning program that integrates **special education** kids into regular classes. Some of the 100 students with learning disabilities or emotional problems are in segregated classes, but the school also integrates special education students to an unusual degree and offers them a chance to take some of the same college preparatory courses as other kids. Some teachers of integrated classes have an assistant. Some team-teach with a special education teacher.

Special education students help run the school store, which sells supplies and clothing donated by the Gap. They receive job

training at local hospitals, take part in an integrated video arts program, and visit the elderly at a nearby senior citizen center.

The atmosphere in the school seems relaxed and friendly. There are no lockers, and students must carry their coats and books. Space is limited so there isn't a lounge or other special place for students to hang out.

"The teachers are constantly looking out for the individual," said junior Jeremy Lewis. "They don't put too much pressure on you and there's a lot of cultural diversity."

The staff of the dean's office prefers mediation to other forms of discipline. There is an automatic suspension "if kids lay hands on each other," one of the deans said. Hats and portable stereos are confiscated, but there seems to be a high tolerance for minor transgressions such as chewing gum.

Community service is mandatory. There are plenty of teams and extracurricular activities at the school, including student exchange programs and trips abroad. Students have visited a Navajo reservation, Israel, Korea, and Japan, and staff members have visited China. Internships are offered with NY1 television and the NY New Media Association. The first instruments have arrived for a burgeoning music program. A choir promises to attract students from the strong choral program at MS 51 in Park Slope.

Parents Association president Petra Pena has twins, one at Telecommunications and the other at the much larger zoned neighborhood school, Fort Hamilton High School. While acknowledging that Fort Hamilton is a very good school, she prefers Telecommunication.

"I like the [way] teachers work with the kids and the support they give," she said. "Fort Hamilton is not personalized, it's way too big. If kids are not aggressive they get lost."

Telecommunication has become something of a feeder school for Smith College, thanks to Ms. Brouder, a Smith graduate who recruits students. Other college choices include Yale, Columbia, Cornell, the University of Chicago, Northwestern, Brandeis, SUNY Binghamton, Vanderbilt, Vassar, Amherst, and Pace University. Telecommunication's top students do better with college acceptances than those ranked in the middle at the more competitive specialized and larger schools, said the principal.

In the past, the school has admitted students according to a formula designed to ensure a balance between low- and high-achieving students. The principal also seeks a balance of kids from different neighborhoods. The school offers regular tours in the fall.

Brooklyn Studio Secondary School

8310 21st Avenue
Brooklyn, NY 11214
(718) 266-5032

Admissions: educational option

Grades levels: 6–12

Enrollment: 700

Class size: 20–28

Average SATs: V436 M467

Graduation rate: 56%

College admissions: good

Ethnicity: 66%W 12%B 14%H 8%A

Free lunch: 51%

Brooklyn Studio Secondary School is a small, humane place that offers a gentle alternative to large neighborhood high schools. It was founded in 1994 as an “inclusion” school where children in **special education** get the extra help they need in regular classes without being segregated. With an enrollment of 700 kids in grades 6–12, the principal and teachers know everyone. “I know every child by name, whether they are in my class or not,” said English teacher Olga Muñoz. Small classes mean kids get individual attention.

“I don’t want to leave,” said senior Letizia Bevilacqua. “We can talk to teachers about our social life or personal problems or anything.” The transition to high school is smooth, and kids can easily keep in touch with their favorite middle school teachers.

The school offers classes in journalism, television, and radio. Advanced Placement courses vary from year to year, depending on enrollments, but typically include American and world history.

Brooklyn Studio shares a building with an elementary school, PS 128. Children may attend school in the same building, from kindergarten through 12th grade, just by moving from one wing to another—a big plus for parents who are nervous about sending their children to a big junior high or high school far from home.

Principal Hal Epstein, the former supervisor for speech services for the district, says mixing kids in special education and general education helps everyone. The special ed kids tend to perform better when they’re with higher achieving kids, and the general ed children get more attention than they would otherwise.

In addition to a regular teacher specialized in English or math or history, most classes have a “paraprofessional,” as teachers’ assistants are called. The two adults may work as a team, planning lessons together, or the para may work individually with kids who need extra help.

“We don’t believe in isolation,” Epstein said. “We believe in providing support in the classroom.” Even children who are classified as “emotionally disturbed” may benefit from an inclusion class, he said.

To persuade me, Epstein showed me an English class where the children, who obviously loved their teacher, were discussing *The Outsiders*, a novel about a 14-year-old orphan and gang member. He challenged me to pick out the emotionally disturbed child and the learning disabled child in the class. I could not.

“When you put 12 emotionally disturbed kids together in class, what they learn is how to be emotionally disturbed,” Epstein said. “Kids who had anti-social tendencies in other schools fit in here.”

I asked several high-achieving kids what it was like sharing a class with disabled kids. They shrugged as if I’d asked what it was like sharing a class with kids with green eyes. They pointed out that having smaller classes and extra teachers meant they got a lot of attention. Some college preparatory classes, such as global studies, might have two disabled kids, while others, such as remedial reading, might have as many as ten.

The teaching at the Brooklyn Studio School is, for the most part, traditional, with desks in rows and lots of chalk and talk. The school, built in 1900, is light and cheery, although some classrooms are inadequately heated. Nobody gets away with cutting class: if your child is absent for 2 days, the office calls home.

One mother, Theresa Hernandez, said her son, who needed extra help in reading, was happy to have a “resource room” teacher come into his regular class. In his previous school, he had been taken out for “resource room” and missed regular class time.

For her daughter, attending a school with grades 6–12 allowed her to keep contact with a beloved middle school math teacher when she moved on to high school. “Her math teacher said ‘If you ever have a problem, you know where I am. My door is open.’” Ms. Hernandez said. “It’s like a family. All the teachers work together.”

Some parents and students complain that high-achieving kids aren’t challenged, and others complain that sports are lack-

ing. But a recent graduate said Brooklyn Studio is “ideal for a student who wants to be the big fish in the little pond.” This student said the “unbelievable” teachers were “there for you academically, but also when you need a friend. The principal and assistant principal were my second Mom and Dad.”

The school has a pleasant mirrored dance studio. Bowling and volleyball are the only athletic teams.

The school, which graduated its first class in 2001, has a good record preparing disabled students for Regents’ exams. Several special education students have been admitted to college, one to St. Francis, another to CUNY. Other graduates have been admitted to New York University, and to SUNY campuses at Buffalo and Stonybrook.

Children from the middle school are automatically admitted to the high school. Others are admitted to the 9th grade as space permits according to a formula intended to ensure a balance of low- and high-achieving students.

The principal welcomes visits by parents.

Midwood High School

2839 Bedford Avenue
Brooklyn, NY 11210
(718) 487-7000

Admissions: neighborhood school/screened

Grade levels: 9–12

Enrollment: 3,612

Class size: 31–34

Average SATs: V515 M541

Graduation rate: 87%

College admissions: very good

Ethnicity: 34%W 37%B 9%H 20%A

Free lunch: 8%

Midwood High School is an unusual hybrid: It's a zoned school that accepts everyone who lives in the neighborhood, and it is home to several selective and nationally acclaimed programs in science and humanities that draw students from across the borough.

At Midwood, it's socially acceptable to study round-the-clock. Heavy-duty sleep deprivation is common among the highest-achieving and most competitive kids—those who compete in the Intel Science Talent Search. The humanities program, in which all kids study Latin, is challenging as well, if a little less intense than the science program.

The school has an extensive sports program—including both competitive team sports and so-called lifelong sports such as aerobics, tennis, bowling, and billiards. Soccer, basketball, varsity swimming, and track are strong. There are dozens of after-school clubs, from the Islamic Society and the Christian Seekers to the Gay-Straight Alliance, the Mock Trial Team, and the Thespian Club. Midwood even has a boys' cheerleading squad.

There are several major stage productions, including the annual dancing and singing competition between upper- and lower-classmen called "Sing" and a student-run musical production at the end of the year. Guitar lessons are offered to every 9th grader.

The school is racially integrated, and students say that's one of its strengths. A black student, Natasha McLeod, recalled how her life had been enriched by friendships with a Russian—who taught her to count in Russian—and with a girl from Pakistan—who explained to her why she covered her head with a scarf. A white girl who transferred from a small private school said she

appreciated the lack of snobbery. Midwood's mix of super-brains, average students, athletes, and the physically uncoordinated is a continuing lesson in tolerance.

"All different religions and races, freaks and geeks, you learn to like all kinds of people here," one girl said. "You know those high school movies where some kids are popular and people are so mean? It's not like that here. Everyone is so nice."

The tone is traditional and highly structured. Bells mark class changes every 43 minutes. Students are tracked according to their ability for most classes. Rules of decorum—such as no hats—are enforced. Passes are necessary to go to the toilet. Students who linger in the corridors are stopped and required to show their program card. Teachers take attendance in each class, and parents are notified if a student skips. Although there are occasional fistfights, students say the school is safe. There are no metal detectors and bathrooms are unlocked. Class changes are orderly.

The U-shaped building with a cupola, constructed in 1940, is cheerful and well kept, if somewhat worn. Yellow walls and gray tiles contrast with the black floor. The labs that produce so many top science students are so old they could almost qualify as museum pieces. Science equipment is stored in oak cabinets with glass doors. The school is right across the street from Brooklyn College, where qualified students may take advanced classes.

Midwood is severely overcrowded. Up to 4,000 students are packed in a building designed for 2,300. Classes are on three overlapping sessions, with some students arriving as early as 7 a.m. and finishing at 12:30 p.m., and others arriving at 10:45 a.m. and staying until 4 p.m. The first lunch period—at 9:45 a.m.—begins when most people would prefer to be eating breakfast. The building is even used at night. Brooklyn Comprehensive Night School, which offers high school classes for older students and those who are working or caring for families during the day, conducts classes from 5 p.m. to 11 p.m.

The overcrowding strains both staff and students, and some activities are pushed aside simply because of lack of space. Practice for band and orchestra, for example, starts at 6 a.m. or 6:30 a.m. Many popular classes, particularly Advanced Placement courses, are so oversubscribed that only students with the highest grades are permitted to take them. Kids who don't find a niche can get lost in the crowd.

At the same time, there are great opportunities for the kids who can take advantage of them. For the 350 kids in the Intel Science Talent Search program, there is the chance to work with senior medical and social scientists on original research at hospitals and universities. Students in the Intel program devote their summers and 3 hours a day during the school year to their projects, in addition to their regular classes.

One girl worked with a sociologist at Brooklyn College to analyze how students of different races have different career goals. Drawing on a random sample of students and using advanced statistical methods, she found that black students at Midwood had lower aspirations than whites—even when the study was controlled for levels of academic achievement and family income.

Another girl, Ms. McLeod, studied estrogen receptors in the brain tissue of mice with a neurologist at Rockefeller University in Manhattan. "It's really fun," she said. "You do what real scientists do. And my mentor is really nice."

It may be fun, but it's grueling. Ms. McLeod leaves her home in Park Slope at 6:15 a.m. to reach Midwood in time for classes at 7 a.m. At 12:30 p.m., she leaves school for the 1½-hour subway ride to Rockefeller University on Manhattan's East Side, where she works for 3 hours, until supper time. At home around 7 p.m., she has supper and studies from 8:30 p.m. until 1 a.m.

Some kids take the pressure in stride. Ms. McLeod seems happy and relaxed, and even has time to play competitive soccer twice a week and to see an occasional movie on the weekend. But for other kids, the pressure to succeed is overwhelming. "Kids are obsessed with grades," she said. Grade-point averages are figured to the 100th decimal place, and kids are ranked accordingly.

One girl who found the stress of competition too great was hospitalized after a suicide attempt, an administrator said. *The New York Times Magazine* chronicled the life of an Intel student who worked so hard she didn't stop for meals. Of the 100 freshmen who sign up for the Intel program, only half stick it out to their senior year.

About 325 students are admitted each year to Midwood's medical science program, from which the Intel kids are drawn. Students in this program must complete 5 years of science and 4 years of mathematics, as well as at least 3 years of a foreign lan-

guage. Course offerings range from meteorology—there is a weather station on the roof—to psychobiology, space sciences, and computer programming.

The humanities program, while demanding, is somewhat less grueling than medical science. About 250 freshmen are admitted to the humanities program, in which students must take 5 years of English, 5 years of social studies, 2 years of Latin, 3 years of a modern foreign language, 3 years of science, and 3 years of math. Electives range from creative writing and the history of cinema to Asian studies and a course called “The History of Resistance and Oppression.”

In many of the introductory courses, students concentrate on taking notes and listening to lectures, but in the more advanced courses, such as creative writing and AP history, there is more discussion and debate.

“In the beginning, there wasn’t a whole lot of thinking—it was just memorizing, said a junior girl who studies about 2½ hours a night. “Now, in the honors and AP classes, we discuss a lot of things rather than just listening and writing things down.”

Latin is taught as it has been for decades, with an emphasis on grammar and translation. “Which cases can only be used with a passive verb?” asked a teacher in a bowtie as he went over homework exercises with students. “The dative,” the students replied.

English and history are combined in humanities courses for freshmen and sophomores. That means students study the history of Africa at the same time they read African literature. In advanced history classes, students read primary source documents, such as speeches and political cartoons, as well as textbooks.

Advanced students may take free college courses at Brooklyn College. Students also have access to the college library, chemistry labs, and swimming pool. “The best thing about Midwood is its affiliation with Brooklyn College,” said senior Richard Leybovich.

The collegiate program is for students who are zoned for the school. There is some movement between the programs, and students in the collegiate program may apply to a specialized program in the middle of their high school career. About half the school is made up of students in the collegiate program. The school offers English as a second language and has a bilingual program in Haitian Creole.

Midwood has about 150 **special education** students with learning disabilities or emotional problems. Some are in segre-

gated classrooms, but there are 26 fully integrated classes that mix 22 mainstream kids with 7 kids with special needs. In these "inclusion" classes, two teachers, one of whom is certified in special education, work side by side. An administrator said the advantage of the inclusion classes is that students in special education are exposed to college preparatory material, and some are scoring well above the minimum required for passing Regents exams.

The school has a stable, senior staff, many of whom have been at Midwood for years and some of whom are graduates of Midwood. Teachers say there is a sense of camaraderie that makes them want to stay—even among those who have been offered higher-paying jobs in the suburbs. New staffers are hired according to the provision of the teachers' contract that offers jobs to teachers with enough seniority, even over the objections of the principal. The school has a significant number of seniority transfers on the staff.

The administration boasts that Midwood sends several dozen graduates to Ivy League schools each year, as well as a large number to New York University and the occasional student to MIT. Even though there are only two college counselors for a graduating class of 500 to 700 seniors, the office is well run and efficient and keeps students on top of deadlines, said former PA president Joseph Cooper.

Midwood has won numerous honors. In 1999 it boasted more semifinalists in the Intel competition than any other high school in the nation, and in 2000 it tied for first place. *Newsweek* and *U.S. News and World Report* ranked it among the top high schools in the United States in 2000. The school offers 16 Advanced Placement courses, and the College Board listed it among the top schools in the nation in terms of AP offerings.

There is some criticism, however, that the school devotes more resources to the whiz kids than to the ordinary students.

"You can't beat the math and science," said Cooper. "But the things that are not the school's specialty get pushed aside. If you're not in the specialized programs, you're forgotten about." While the drop-out rate is low, about 10% of students take more than 4 years to graduate and many kids transfer to other schools. Midwood has 1,000 to 1,300 entering freshmen and a graduating class of 500 to 800.

While some teachers assign frequent papers, some kids manage to get through writing very little. "I can't remember my

daughter doing a single term paper in 4 years," said Cooper, whose daughter was in the medical science program. "One [English] teacher said to us, 'Quite frankly, I don't have time to grade them,'"—a common complaint among teachers who have five classes of 34 students. Students said the amount of writing they do depends on the courses they take. In a creative writing class, for example, writing assignments are frequent. In a literature class, they may be rare.

Principal Steve Zwisohn disputes the notion that the attention lavished on the Intel kids hurts the others, saying that having high-achieving kids in the school inspires those who are struggling to work harder. And the problem of too few writing assignments is a function of large class size—common to all schools, not just Midwood.

Even the successful kids complain that the giant size of the school has its drawbacks. "It's not personalized," said a senior. Another added: "No one gets to know anyone. You really have to make an effort." But Zwisohn, who became principal in 2002, is committed to making Midwood a gentler, warmer place. "I'm much more parent- and student-oriented," he said. "I'm around the building. I talk to the kids. I like a much more friendly, looser atmosphere."

For many parents, the advantages outweigh the disadvantages. One mother said team sports, the chance to participate in elaborate stage productions, and the opportunity to meet students from vastly different cultures have made her daughter's high school experience rich and satisfying.

"I had a lot of misgivings when I sent her to Midwood," said Aline Wolff, who transferred her daughter from a small private school. "But the overall level of education is such that I don't think she has lost anything and she has gained a variety of experience that she wouldn't have had otherwise."

Students zoned for the school are automatically admitted. Students in the medical science program and humanities program are admitted according to their academic records. Applicants must list Midwood as their first or second choice to be considered. The school offers tours for prospective parents and students during October and November.

Edward R. Murrow High School

1600 Avenue L
Brooklyn, NY 11230
(718) 258-9283
www.ermurrowhs.org

Admissions: educational option, audition

Grade levels: 9–12

Graduation rate: 85%

Enrollment: 3,775

College admissions: very good

Class size: 34

Ethnicity: 45%W 24%B 13%H 18%A

Average SATs: V499 M525

Free lunch: 19%

Edward R. Murrow High School was founded in 1974 with a progressive, almost utopian vision that students learn best when given the freedom to decide how to spend their time. Walk through the corridors, and you're sure to see kids sitting on the floor chatting with their friends—enjoying the free time that is blocked out in every student's schedule.

At Murrow, making friends and learning to get along with others are considered as important to students' development as academics are. The school is racially and ethnically diverse, and has kids of every level of skills—from super-high achievers to the severely disabled. It also attracts kids from different social milieus—from politically conservative residents of Marine Park to openly gay kids from Park Slope.

The school is best known for its theater, art, and music departments, but the regular academics courses are as strong as any in the city. Students may take a wide array of Advanced Placement courses, and some compete in the Intel Science Talent Search. Seven foreign languages are taught. The chess team has won statewide competitions. What distinguishes Murrow from traditional schools with similarly strong academic programs is a culture that accommodates kids' desires—rather than the convenience of teachers or administrators.

Many of the petty irritations of high school life are missing here. There are no bells, no hall sweeps by deans to get stragglers into class, no rules about wearing hats indoors. Kids' dress can be conventional—or not. Shocks of turquoise blue hair and the white head scarves that modest Muslim girls wear are both in evidence.

Most liberating for students, perhaps, is the philosophy of instruction: It's seen as the teacher's job to motivate kids, to light a fire under them, and to make them want to come to class—not the kids' job to sit and listen no matter how boring a lesson may be.

Remarkably, the school works most of the time for most of the kids. While some can't handle the freedom—and begin to skip class or slough off—for most kids Murrow is a spirited, joyful place where learning is fun and the respect that teachers give kids is reciprocated.

"If you are driven, you can go very far," said Jennifer Gale, a senior who did advanced biology research in the cardiac department of a Brooklyn hospital as part of the Intel Science Talent Search. "There's nothing to stop you from taking advanced courses. If you're not so ambitious, and you need someone constantly on top of you, this may not be the place for you."

For kids with self-discipline, the school offers great opportunities to learn to write well, to do independent research, to perform in a musical production, or to become active in student government. But if a student doesn't find a niche, it's possible to become lost and even drop out.

It's a safe school, despite its unwieldy size. Just as Jane Jacobs found that busy streets are safe streets, founding principal Saul Bruckner discovered that corridors in which kids sit and chat are safer than empty corridors. The school's chief security officer, Sgt. Annie Hickey, patrols the halls as an old-fashioned cop on the beat might patrol a neighborhood. She picks up litter or an empty soda bottle, she said, because she feels that the school is her home, and she regularly skips lunch because she enjoys being with the kids, whom she calls "my children." Kids complain that the security staff takes a hard line on smokers—but most parents are glad of that.

"There are very few rules in the building, but the kids know we enforce the rules we have," Bruckner said. Kids who fight are suspended for 5 days. Suspension works as a punishment here, Bruckner said, because kids genuinely like school and don't want to be excluded.

Every student is assigned a free period every day when they may study in the library, eat a snack, or just hang out. "It relieves tension," said Bruckner. "It's not easy being a high school student and sitting in class all day." Kids form friendships across the great divides of race and class based on their common free periods, he said.

Kids change courses and teachers four times a year. Parents say that takes some getting used to, but Bruckner says it's a way to ensure that the greatest number of kids and teachers get to know one another.

Constructed in the 1970s, the building has undistinguished architecture, with too few windows and a labyrinth of corridors. But the color scheme, with red orange, yellow, and green tiles, is cheerful and the lighting is adequate.

The overall quality of teaching is high. Some Murrow graduates return to teach and have an enduring loyalty to the school. There is a gentle, friendly banter between students and staff. Teachers ask kids' opinions and seem to value what they say. Some teachers of art, social studies, and English coordinate their lessons, so students may, for instance, study the history and literature of Africa at the same time they make African masks in art and listen to a performance of African music on a trip to the Brooklyn Museum.

The Western canon is taught in English and *The Scarlet Letter* and *Wuthering Heights* are required reading. But non-Western civilizations have a place as well. A global studies class discussed bride-burning and female power in India, and investigated how Hindu beliefs might influence women's lives.

Mostly native speakers teach foreign languages—a rarity in New York City public schools. Courses are offered in French, Spanish, Italian, Russian, Chinese, Latin, and American Sign Language. Nearly 450 kids study Russian, and about one-quarter of the student body speaks Russian at home.

Unlike many other high schools, Murrow places no restrictions on who can take Advanced Placement classes. "You don't have to be brilliant to get into an AP class," one mother said. "You have to be willing to try."

Advanced science students may participate in the Intel Science Talent Search, for which kids find mentors among professional scientists and work on original research projects. The teacher who leads the Intel competitors emphasizes writing and oral presentation. That gives Murrow kids an unusual skill: They can explain their projects in ordinary words to nonscientists. And the school shies away from the intense competition that drives some kids at other schools to work so hard their health is impaired.

"Our teacher says: 'Even if you come out with a project that's not going to win, you're doing real science in a real lab and that's

what's important.' We're not trying to push out winning papers at the expense of our happiness," said Ms. Gale.

Kids are expected to work hard. Two to three hours of homework a night is typical. But Murrow kids seem to suffer less sleep deprivation than kids at more competitive schools. The school gives letter grades rather than numerical grades—and that seems to lessen the competition as well.

The arts are a great strength and one of the school's main attractions. Students put on two of what one mother called "amazingly professional" musical theater productions each year, such as *Guys and Dolls*.

"Anyone can get involved, not just those in the theater program," said a mother. Another mother said she was "incredibly pleased" with her son's music program, which included two vocal classes and a piano class.

Students in the fine arts program may take courses ranging from photography and television production to figure drawing, set design, and stage lighting. An acting class practicing a scene from the play *Is There Life After High School?* seemed almost professional—because of the talent of both the students and the instructor.

Murrow has no team sports, and students for whom organized athletics are important should consider another school. The school has nearly twice as many girls as boys, perhaps because of its emphasis on the arts and its lack of team sports.

The school does, however, offer physical education four times a week with such nonstressful, noncompetitive activities as yoga, co-ed volleyball, or swing dancing.

The academic schedule allows for slightly longer classes than are typical in public high schools. Each class meets for two 1-hour periods and two 45-minute periods a week. Teachers have unassigned time to prepare for classes and talk to colleagues. New teachers in a department have a common preparation period so their department chair can meet with them regularly and help them become acclimated to the school's culture. Each student meets a guidance counselor four times a year to discuss any problems he or she may be having.

Classes mostly mix students of different abilities, except for Advanced Placement courses and certain remedial classes. About 12% of the students receive **special education** services, and many are integrated into regular classes in which they receive extra help from a special teacher or a teacher's aide. In one class, for example, an aide took notes for a child who couldn't write but who other-

wise was able to follow a class. "If you were a special education parent, you would want your child in Murrow," one mother said.

Murrow was a pioneer in what is now called "inclusion"—keeping special ed kids in a mainstream class with two teachers, one specialized in the subject area, the other certified in special education. The school also serves some low-functioning mentally retarded students in a work-study program at local hospitals. These students are not integrated into academic classes and do not receive academic diplomas. The school is wheelchair accessible and has services for blind and deaf children.

Parents say the college counselors are attentive and competent, despite the overwhelming numbers of kids they must serve. Many go on to CUNY and SUNY schools, although some attend private schools such as Vassar, Syracuse, Cornell University, and New York University. In keeping with the egalitarian mission of the school, the college office gives the same attention to a student applying to a community college as to one applying to the Ivy League. The college counselor attempts to match the student with a college where he or she will be happy—not necessarily the most selective or competitive school. The college office encourages students to have realistic choices—a "safety" school as well as a "reach" or dream school.

"We're not prestige-oriented," said a college counselor. "We don't believe our job is to make Murrow look good because we have a large number of kids going to an Ivy League school. We try to help students feel good about the [application] process and to help them through it.

"We don't see high school as a way station to college. We want them to have a rich and satisfying high school experience"—and not see it as merely a way to prepare for college, the counselor said.

One mother whose daughter was admitted to Smith College said the college counselor returned her calls promptly and was always willing to meet with her. Although the college office is unable to give the close personal attention a student might receive at a private or small public school, she said, the quality of the staff is remarkable.

"The guidance counselors are amazing people," said the mother. "They have a well-organized system and they are very level-headed about what colleges to go for."

Murrow is open to any student living in Brooklyn. Applicants must list Murrow as their first choice to be consid-

ered. Students in the music and art programs are admitted by audition. Students in other programs are accepted according to the educational option formula designed to ensure that the school has a mix of high-achieving and low-achieving students. Because a disproportionate number of high-achieving kids apply, it's easier for a student with a poor academic record to get in.

Under the formula, any student who scores in the top 2% on standardized tests and lists Murrow as his or her first choice is automatically admitted. Because one-fifth of the entering class scores in the top 2%, that leaves very few spots for kids who score, say, in the 96th percentile. In fact, the school has 10 applicants for every spot among high achievers, but accepts nearly all of the low achievers who apply. Students who live in a specified zone around the school have priority, but the school isn't considered a zoned neighborhood school and everyone who wants to attend must apply.

The school offers daytime tours and nighttime open houses in the fall for prospective parents and students.

East New York High School of Transit Technology

1 Wells Street
Brooklyn, NY 11208
(718) 647-5204
www.transittechhs.org

Admissions: screened/educational option

Grades: 9–12

Enrollment: 1,449

Class size: 28–34

Average SATs: V374 M394

Graduation rate: 64%

College admissions: fair

Ethnicity: 2%W 73%B 23%H 2%A

Free lunch: 79%

Transit Tech teaches kids to repair buses and subway cars—and also prepares them for college. Many graduates go directly to work, but the academics are strong enough that some go on to 4-year SUNY and CUNY colleges as well as private schools. Four members of a recent graduating class were awarded full scholarships by the Posse Foundation to attend Vanderbilt and Lafayette.

This successful vocational school, in a desolate manufacturing area, is attracting increasing numbers of middle-class kids. It's also attracting more girls, who say they feel comfortable here despite the fact that women traditionally have shied away from skilled trades.

The teachers have an *esprit de corps*, and the kids seem happy to be here. Some staff members have enrolled their own children, and some graduates come back to teach. The PTA is active and offers workshops that typically draw 100 parents on topics such as how to deal with the problems of adolescence.

When the state education department began requiring all students—college bound or not—to take Regents exams, Transit Tech had one of the highest pass rates in the city on the English exam. New York State named it a “School of Distinction.”

New technology has made academic work an increasingly important part of vocational training, and Transit Tech has responded by making the curriculum more demanding, particularly in writing courses.

"We're increasing the amount of [required] writing every year," said assistant principal Paul Tropicano. "People have to be able not only to use equipment but to interpret data in technical manuals as well. Every year we add different components to integrate academic courses with vocational."

Staff development days give teachers a chance to see what other teachers do—academic teachers go into the shop and get their hands dirty, and career and technical teachers learn about incorporating writing into their classes.

The school has a strong **special education** program that integrates students with learning disabilities—including those whose first language is Spanish—into regular classrooms with two teachers and an extra-small class size.

In the "railcar lab"—which may be the largest high school classroom in the United States—students learn how to repair a real subway car. Students in special education work alongside mainstream kids.

In addition to the well-equipped shops for electronics and transit technology, the school has seven state-of-the-art computer labs. In fact, most majors in the school involve computers: computer science, computer-assisted machine technology, computer electronics, and computer-assisted engineering. Computer science students work as interns at the Metropolitan Transportation Authority. Graduates are eligible to participate in the Transit Authority's apprenticeship program, which provides them with three years of paid training.

"Even in Brooklyn Tech their computer program isn't as good as ours," boasted one student. "I missed getting into Tech by like 10 points but I'm better off here. Their computer program isn't as advanced."

Kids go through a metal detector just inside the entrance—usually a sign of an unsafe school. But students and parents say the metal detector was installed at their request and that it provides an extra measure of safety in what is sometimes a dangerous neighborhood.

To prepare students for the English Regents, the school offers a 10-week course entitled "Technology and the Writing Workshop" in which juniors use the Internet, and interactive CDs to work at their own pace on a simulated Regents exam. Since the course was introduced, the pass rates on the test increased dramatically, the principal said.

Ninth-grade classes, in both shops and academics, are capped at 28 students.

Students said they would like to have internships and more work experience, and many of the boys said they wished the school had a football team. There are 16 teams for boys and girls. The baseball team reached the city finals, and played in Yankee Stadium. The boys' track team, coached by Transit Tech graduate Sydney McIntosh (whose three sons attended Transit Tech), is nationally ranked. One of its runners is ranked No. 2 in the country in his event and is one of Transit Tech's success stories.

"When he was a freshman, he got into a lot of fights. He was one of the kids I 'sentenced' to the track team," said McIntosh. "I said, 'Come run with me,' but he got into another fight. I brought him into the principal's office and he was told, 'If you get into another fight, you'll have to go to another school.'" But the boy turned around and is now ready for college.

The guidance staff works hard to ensure that every student has a place to go after graduation.

Some students go to technical colleges. Most go to CUNY and SUNY schools, and a few go to private colleges. The school has both "screened" programs—which accept students according to their academic records—and educational option programs, which attempt to balance the number of high and low achievers.

The Leon M. Goldstein High School for the Sciences

1830 Shore Boulevard
Brooklyn, NY 11235
(718) 368-8500

Admissions: educational option

Grade level: 9–12

Enrollment: 799

Class size: 34

Average SATs: V517 M555

Graduation rate: 90%

College admissions: very good

Ethnicity: 73%W 11%B 8%H 8%A

Free lunch: 13%

Imagine a new building with high-tech science labs and well-equipped rooms for art, music, drama, and photography on a leafy campus overlooking the water. There are no irritating bells, no squawking announcements from the public address system. Sound like a suburban California school? Guess again. It's the Leon Goldstein High School for the Sciences, located in the far reaches of Brooklyn on the campus of Kingsborough Community College.

Formerly known as Kingsborough High School, the school was renamed for the college's late president, who dreamed of an "educational park" serving students from kindergarten through college on a narrow peninsula off Brighton Beach.

Perhaps because of its remote location, Leon Goldstein High School remains a well-kept secret. "It's almost like a private school in a public school setting, because of its size," said former PTA co-chair Donna Lechillgrien. "It's a real gem."

The high school serves as a lab school for college students studying education, who come to observe. Senior citizens enrolled in the "My Turn" program at the community college help tutor new immigrants. One day, students in the high school photography class interviewed the senior citizens and took portraits of them. The school also has an early childhood center, serving the college students' children in kindergarten through second grade.

"This is different from every other high school," said student Zoe Waltrous. "You get to walk across campus. You get fresh air and you get the college experience."

The principal and the teachers say there are fewer discipline problems because students who are allowed to move around are less likely to get restless. On the flip side, the school might not be the place for a student who can't handle that freedom. Especially in the warm weather, the temptation to play hooky is strong on the beautiful campus. Deans head out in cars to round up the missing, according to parents.

Students have use of the college gym, library, and auditorium. Students worked with urban planners to design the outdoor space behind the building. A science class tested soil and suggested plants that would grow well. An art class drew up landscaping plans.

Leon Goldstein bills itself as a "science school" where students take 4 years of math and 4 years of science. But Leon Goldstein students score high on the writing, English, and social studies Regents tests; less well on the math and science tests.

"I think its strength is in the humanities even though it's a science school, believe it or not," said Ms. Lechillgrien. The principal is committed to expanding science research so that the school achieves its goal of becoming a top science school. The school puts on two plays a year and won an Annenberg grant to bring in professional artists. The school has an association with Lincoln Center and boasts an accomplished jazz band with a teacher who's a musician and composer. On a recent visit, students practiced a swinging version of Tito Puente's "Oye Como Va." A student dancer choreographed her moves during the class. The school collaborates with Brooklyn Botanic Garden and offers workshops for parents on landscaping, flower arranging, and growing bonsai.

Teachers offer a mix of progressive and traditional techniques. "I prefer to hear the students do more talking than I do," said Marilyn Horan, assistant principal for humanities. "But sometimes a lecture is the right thing to do."

Students in an English class compared early-twentieth-century attitudes toward marriage in the play *Our Town* with mores today. The class surveyed students' attitudes toward marriage—and had a spirited boy-girl discussion punctuated by laughter.

Students in a Mexican history class re-enacted a court case, *The People v. Emiliano Zapata*, with the teacher as judge. Students acted as prosecutor and defense attorneys, and the rest of the class served as jury.

Students in a Spanish class created their own poems using words from poems published in Spanish. "This is like a break for us," said one of the students. "She [the teacher] actually makes it fun!" Student work on display included illustrated essays, written in Spanish, about what the students imagined themselves doing in 10 years.

The arts are integrated into English, social studies, and language classes. Kids in an English class reading *Lord of the Flies*, for example, worked with visiting artists to build small canoes out of balsa wood and chicken wire to be floated in Sheepshead Bay.

Those who need special help get tutoring in English, math, science, and social studies, thanks to a grant from the Green Tree Foundation. Homework averages about a half-hour per night in each of the major subject areas.

Classes are 54 minutes—slightly longer than typical. Juniors and seniors take courses taught by college professors in a program called "College Now." Students with an 85 average or above may take college courses for credit in the "Bridge Program." "Every student here should have a college experience," said principal Joseph Zaza.

The principal is philosophically committed to mixing kids of different abilities in classes. The school integrates students in **special education** into some general education classes with extra help. These "inclusion" classes are smaller than average. The school accommodates children with learning disabilities and emotional problems, as well as children who are vision or hearing impaired.

AP courses are offered in both AB and BC calculus, biology, chemistry, physics, Western civilization, U.S. history, English literature, and, on occasion, Spanish. The typical class size is 34, but in many classes, especially AP courses, there are as few as 14 students. One downside of the small size of the school, according to parents, is that if a student doesn't get along with a teacher, there aren't many alternatives.

To promote extracurricular activities, students are dismissed from regular classes at 1 p.m. on Wednesdays for an hour of club meetings, including dance, drama, and science. There are some athletic teams, including soccer, basketball, swimming, golf, bowling, tennis, and handball.

Parent Susan Schaeffer, who lives in Manhattan Beach, said her son chose Leon Goldstein over Brooklyn Tech because it was

small and close to home. Senior Sarah Maniscalco said she had been accepted to the highly regarded medical/science program at Midwood but that she preferred the small school and college campus atmosphere at Leon Goldstein.

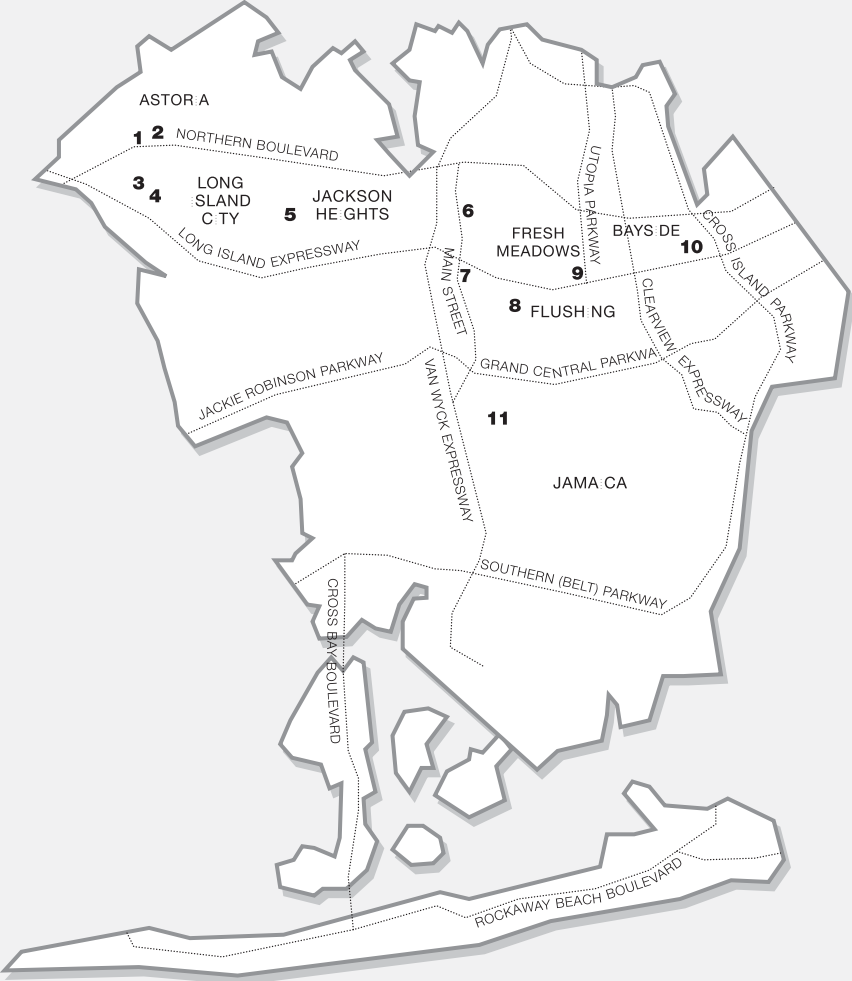
"I love it. I don't want to leave," she said. "Being small is really important. We get to know the faculty really well—like a big family. There are no 'popular kids' at our school. Everyone finds their own niche."

Kids make friends across the grades. At the popular "Sing" performance in December, virtually every student in the school participated; seniors were paired with freshmen and sophomores with juniors. "The seniors take the freshmen under their wings," said Ms. Lechillgrien.

The vast majority of graduates go to either 4-year or 2-year colleges, such as Kingsborough Community College. Many choose CUNY and SUNY schools, especially Albany, Binghamton, and New Paltz. Other recent grads have gone to Cornell, MIT, Boston University, and Yale.

The school is open to all New York City residents. Students are chosen by a formula designed to ensure a mix of high and low achievers. Most students come from nearby Brooklyn and Queens neighborhoods, including the Rockaways. A few come from Staten Island. Reaching Manhattan Beach by public transportation is difficult. Some Queens students hire a private bus.

Queens Schools



- 1 Academy of American Studies
- 2 Baccalaureate
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QUEENS

Queens has more functioning zoned neighborhood high schools than most other areas of the city, partly because the borough has had strong educational leadership and partly because its middle-class families form a constituency for public education. In very rich neighborhoods in Manhattan, many parents send their children to private school. In very poor neighborhoods in the Bronx, parents lack the political clout to demand good schools. But in middle-class neighborhoods in Queens (as well as Staten Island), parents support the public schools and insist that they be adequate.

Queens principals managed to keep large zoned high schools afloat even as waves of immigration in the 1980s and 1990s swelled enrollments dramatically. Queens high schools are the most overburdened in the city. Many of the schools operate on three overlapping sessions, with the first kids coming in as early as 7 a.m. and the last leaving after 4 p.m. Even the most able principals are consumed by details of crowd control.

Parents looking for schools that are not overcrowded should consider the small alternative schools in neighborhoods close to Manhattan, particularly Long Island City. In addition, schools with selective admissions such as Townsend Harris are able to limit their enrollments and therefore are not overcrowded.

Students interested in math or the arts should consider **Bayside High School**, 208th Street and 32nd Avenue. It has a welcoming, newly renovated building, complete with flower boxes out front. An experienced, competent principal, Judith Tarlo, has improved the atmosphere and tone of the school and taken important steps to address long-standing security concerns. Bayside now is so popular (and crowded) it may be forced to go to split sessions. Students from all over Queens apply to the Academy of Music, the Professional Art program, and the selective Science, Math, and Research Talent program (which also offers classes for native speakers of Korean). The math department is one of the best in the city. On one of our visits, we saw kids in a double-period advanced calculus class do incredibly challenging work—by themselves—even though their teacher

had been called out of the classroom. Bayside has 27 athletic teams, including golf, and a swimming pool. The sports teams and the active student government foster school spirit. Bayside is doing an increasingly good job integrating **special education** students and regular ed students in team-taught academic classes. There is a magnet culinary arts program that trains kids in special education to be chefs. An accomplished jazz band has “gigs” all over the city and the music department puts on three or four shows each year. Prospective parents may attend an open house in October. Call (718) 229-7600 for details.

Forest Hills High School, 67-01 110th Street, is a popular, very overcrowded, neighborhood high school that’s been on double or even triple sessions for several years. Constructed in the 1930s, the elegant Georgian-style building, “seems a perfect fit with its bucolic residential neighborhood,” Marcia Biederman wrote in her review of Forest Hills for *Insideschools.org*. But she adds that “budget cuts and population growth have taken a toll. . . . Every classroom is jammed, some physical education classes are held on the school stage, 9th-grade biology classes sit cheek-to-jowl at tables, and even elite science students conduct independent research work in a standing-room-only lab.”

She said there is “solid instruction” for many high achievers and average students, but added that struggling students might get lost here. A medical science program sends students on observational “internships” in a local hospital. A sought-after law and humanities program—which selects a mix of high, average and low achievers—requires an in-depth paper on a topic like the electoral college. Some accelerated students may take courses at Queens College. Telephone: (718) 268-3137.

Richmond Hill High School, 89-30 114th Street, Richmond Hill, 11418, (718) 846-3335, is colossally overcrowded, but a strong principal has created a warm, safe atmosphere in which students “are generally treated with affection and respect,” Tamar Smith wrote in her review for *Insideschools.org*. The school’s “travel and tourism” and zoology programs are noteworthy. **Newtown High School**, 48-01 90th Street, Elmhurst, 11373, (718) 595-8400, suffers from terrible overcrowding, as well. But it has a first-rate architecture and engineering program, run by a licensed architect who helps students learn drafting and computer-assisted design by working on real architecture projects. **William C. Bryant High School**, 48-10 31st Avenue, Long Island City, 11103, (718) 721-5404, has a warm, informal tone

despite overcrowding so bad that hallways are gridlocked and some classrooms meet in trailers. The school's good reputation and math/science enrichment program draw applicants from beyond Bryant's zone.

Parents may also consider small successful programs within large, even unruly, neighborhood high schools. **Hillcrest High School**, 160-05 Highland Avenue, Jamaica Estates, 11432, has a selective pre-med institute that has steered many students toward M.D. and R.N. degrees. The school has a cadre of good teachers and serious, focused students, despite the building's chipped paint, frequent fights, metal detectors at the entrance, and serious overcrowding that has forced the school to adopt triple sessions. The pre-med program includes an internship, required courses in anatomy and microbiology, and a host of Advanced Placement offerings. In a DNA lab students prepared to run forensic tests on real genetic material. "The administration has none of the us-against-them attitude prevalent elsewhere, and a social studies class comparing Athens and Sparta might well have been contrasting Hillcrest with other city schools," Marcia Biederman wrote in her review of Hillcrest for *Insideschools.org*.

The borough also offers some noteworthy vocational programs. At **Aviation High School**, 36th Street & Queens Boulevard, Long Island City, 11101, (718) 361-2032, students learn to repair and maintain airplanes, and some earn FAA certification in a five-year program. "Teachers are clearly practitioners of the trades they teach and they treat the students as soon-to-be colleagues rather than underlings," Judy Baum wrote in her review of Aviation for *Insideschools.org*. Academic classes are mostly traditional in teaching style. Students receiving **special education** services are placed in regular classes or in a special track, depending on their level of ability. One student complained that equipment is old and tools are "from the Stone Age" but another said the school is great for people who "have a passion for airplanes and want the best start you can get anywhere."

An unusual school for new immigrants is the small, progressive **International High School**, on the campus of LaGuardia Community College at 67-10 Thomson Avenue, Long Island City, 11101. Small classrooms decorated with colorful posters of students' work give the school the warmth and intimacy of an elementary school. Students spend their day with a small group of kids and teachers who are organized in interdisciplinary teams. Students build scale models of New York City bridges in a proj-

ect that links math, physics, and geography. Students assembled an exhibit at the Queens Museum analyzing the decision to drop the atom bomb on Hiroshima. Teachers each have 70 students—instead of the 170 typical in a traditional high school—and that allows them to get to know the kids well. Students who are confident in English are placed in classes with students who are just beginning. They learn from one another. Only students who have been in the United States fewer than four years and who have limited command of English are eligible for admissions. Telephone: (718) 482-5455.

Three new theme schools, opened in 2003, offer a refuge from the overcrowding that plagues the borough's high schools. Just a few miles from the Nassau County border in Bellerose, **The Queens High School of Teaching, Liberal Arts, and Sciences**, shares the new Glen Oaks campus with two new K–8 schools. The high school, which will eventually serve 1,500 students, is designed to relieve the killer overcrowding at neighboring Cardozo and Frances Lewis high schools. The new complex is just west of Commonwealth Boulevard, off the Union Turnpike. Principal Nigel Pugh, the former assistant principal of the well-regarded Robert F. Kennedy Community High School in Flushing, can be reached at npugh@nycboe.net. **Information Technology High School**, 21-16 44th Road, Long Island City, is designed for students with an interest in computer certification courses and web design. The school will eventually serve 1,100 students. Principal Jeff Levin, formerly assistant principal for technology at Manhattan's selective Stuyvesant High School, can be reached at jlevin@nycboe.net.

The High School for Law Enforcement and Public Safety, 116-25 Guy Brewer Boulevard in Jamaica, is connected to a Police Athletic League community center. It boasts a forensics lab, courtroom, and EMS labs designed with the help of firefighters. It will eventually serve 1,200 students. Principal Diahann Malcolm can be reached at DMalcol@nycboe.net.

Check Insideschools.org or the high school directory for telephone numbers for these new schools.

The Frank Sinatra School of the Arts

29-10 Thomson Avenue, Room C404
Long Island City, NY 11101
(718) 361-9920

Admissions: audition

Grade Levels: 9–12

Enrollment: 1,000 (projected)

Class size: 28

Average SATs: new school

Graduation rate: new school

College admissions: new school

Ethnicity: 44%W 19%B 27%H 10%A

Free lunch: N/A

The Frank Sinatra School of the Arts offers a full academic program as well as special courses or “studios” in dance, music, art, and drama. Singer Tony Bennett was instrumental in getting the school opened. Parents, many of whom are artists themselves, are involved in the school. PTA meetings draw large turnouts.

Principal Elliott Salow, whose dapper dress and thin mustache make him a John Waters look-alike, exudes an infectious excitement about the school. Staff and students clearly love the place, and their shared enthusiasm permeates the classrooms. “It’s like our own little private school,” said one student.

Frank Sinatra opened in 2001 in temporary quarters at LaGuardia Community College while permanent quarters were being built across the street from the Museum of the Moving Image in Astoria. The school offers “real-world experience” in such areas as negotiating a contract, said Salow, a former assistant principal at LaGuardia High School in Manhattan. Students are also expected to perform “community service in the arts,” doing such things as organizing skits among hospital patients.

Many teachers are professional artists. The chorus teacher is an opera singer who has students rehearsing works by Handel. An English teacher came to the school after a career in stand-up comedy. And the ballet teacher is a specialist in Baroque dance.

Collaborations with arts groups enrich the curriculum. Students train to be docents at the Queens Museum, visit the Kaufman Film Studios, and work on projects with the Theatre Development Fund. Students went to see *Harlem Song*, and the

fund sent musicians to help students write music to go with their original lyrics.

Students audition for a “studio” in dance, instrumental music, vocal music, fine arts, or drama. In 11th grade, students may stay in their studio or switch to film-making, musical theater, or theater technology.

The challenge for Frank Sinatra—as for other performing arts schools—is to get kids as excited about academics as they are about their artistic talents. Here, too, the school seems to be succeeding. The students are savvy enough to know that they won’t all make it as professional artists, musicians, and actors, and many seem eager to prepare themselves for liberal arts colleges. The principal, former head of social studies for the city, is an experienced administrator with a good grounding in the humanities.

Students carry a full academic load in addition to their “studios.” We sat in on a lively “global studies” class in which 9th graders were discussing Hinduism. The French and Spanish teacher took students to a play at the French Institute as a way to incorporate the arts into an academic class. The school set aside Thursday afternoon as a special day for math tutoring after the first year, when students’ scores on the math Regents exam were disappointing.

Each teacher meets with 20 students once a week for an advisory period. The attendance rate the first year was 93%—the second highest in Queens, according to the principal. Kids and teachers can forge close relationships: a drama teacher, Yvette Miller, told us how moved she was when students presented her with a director’s chair with her name on it.

“The best part of Frank Sinatra is the students,” she said. “The students love it here, and are generous in time and spirit.”

Artwork is up on the walls, and the sound of students practicing instruments wafts into neighboring classrooms. There is no gym so the students take fitness classes in the dance room. About 80% of the students come from Queens and girls outnumber boys. The school has an open house in fall.

Academy of American Studies

28-01 41st Avenue
Long Island City, NY 11101
(718) 361-8786

www.academyofamericanstudies.com

Admissions: educational option

Grade levels: 9–12

Enrollment: 450

Class size: 25–34

Average SATs: V487 M483

Graduation rate: 88%

College admissions: good

Ethnicity: 36%W 7%B 30%H 27%A

Free lunch: 48%

The Academy of American Studies was founded in 1996 with support from the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, a conservative foundation that seeks to bolster the study of American history in public schools, and the Center for Educational Innovation, the Manhattan-based school reform group. The school is traditional in terms of the subject matter taught, but encourages inquiry and debate rather than passive memorization of facts.

Students travel to Gettysburg to re-enact Pickett's charge in the Civil War, walk the Freedom Trail in Boston, or visit Philadelphia to learn about the Constitution. They tour Salem and Plymouth, Massachusetts, to get a sense of colonial America. A few even have won scholarships to study at Cambridge University in England for 5 weeks during the summer, paid for by the Gilder Lehrman Institute.

Teachers encourage students to read primary source documents and to examine history from different points of view. Students may read eyewitness accounts of survivors of the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire, for example, as well as the journalism of Jacob Riis about conditions of the poor at the turn of the twentieth century. They may read President Lyndon Johnson's public statements on the Vietnam War and contrast them with his private diaries.

Students debate significant historical issues such as "Thomas Jefferson: Hypocrite or Man of His Times?"

"We teach that it's okay to research and argue a case, even if they don't believe it," said assistant principal Mark Solkoff. "We

say: 'Don't put your year 2000 values in the 1700s.' Doing the research, kids were shocked to find there were African-Americans who had slaves."

American Studies has 1-hour classes three times a week for English and history, and 1-hour classes four times each week for math and science. The longer class time allows kids to study material in more depth. In addition, the small size of the school allows kids to get to know their teachers well.

Students all have lunch at the same time in the building cafeteria—and that allows them to get to know one another as well.

Many of the students are children of immigrants, and many speak a language other than English at home. Twelve religions and four continents are represented in the student body.

Teachers have voted for "school-based option" in hiring new staff. That means new teachers are interviewed and chosen by a committee of staff and administrators. In most schools, teachers are assigned according to seniority. The school-based option makes it easier for the school to have a cohesive staff with a shared philosophy.

The school has a few learning disabled students in **special education** who are integrated into regular classrooms and receive extra help. The school offers after-school tutoring for kids who are struggling.

The school graduated its first class in 2000. Most of its graduates go on to 4-year colleges, including Cornell, NYU, Sarah Lawrence, Barnard, Brown, Alfred, Adelphi, SUNY Binghamton, and Vassar. It offers Advanced Placement courses in biology, calculus, U.S. history, English, Spanish, and French.

Admission is based on the educational option formula designed to ensure that the school has a balance of low- and high-achieving students. Tours for prospective parents are held every Thursday throughout the year.

Middle College High School

45-35 Van Dam Street
Long Island City, NY 11101
(718) 349-4000

Admissions: Call school

Grade levels: 9–12

Enrollment: 521

Class size: 25–28

Average SATs: N/A

Graduation rate: N/A

College admissions: good

Ethnicity: 24%W 19%B 52%H 5%A

Free lunch: 77%

One of the city's first alternative schools, Middle College High School was founded in 1974 in an effort to prepare for college students who might flounder in a traditional high school. Middle College High School is unusually successful in sparking an interest in academics among kids who don't fit the mold, who are alienated from most grown-ups, or who are only average students.

Small classes, 70-minute periods, and extra-attentive teachers break down the anonymity and constant class-changing typical of a traditional high school. Kids have more freedom than is usual in high school and may, for example, go outside for lunch or to the college library during a free period. "It's really a college atmosphere," one student said. "You're responsible for yourself."

In the wake of "open admissions" at the City University of New York, LaGuardia Community College, among others, was flooded with students who were unprepared for college work. LaGuardia President Joe Shenker helped establish Middle College High School as a way to catch those students early and find ways to give them the help they would need in order to succeed.

Middle College High School concentrates on developing the skills that students really need in college—and that too many traditional high schools neglect. Rather than collecting the facts needed for a multiple-choice exam, students at Middle College learn to write well, to analyze different points of view, and to defend an argument. They learn to speak articulately in class and to research answers to questions they raise themselves.

"Most schools act as if kids are receptive vessels to fill with information," said a teacher. "The real key is to take kids who are *not* interested and to get them involved in an academically rigor-

ous curriculum. You have to pay attention to what's on kids' minds."

Children's innate curiosity is often extinguished by stultifying courses in 7th and 8th grades, she said, and reviving that curiosity—particularly after poor preparation in middle school—is a challenge. The school's success depends on a young, energetic staff that simultaneously makes friends with students and commands their respect.

"I like the egalitarian relationships we build with the teachers," said recent graduate Wilson Villafana, now at DePauw University. "It's not 'Mr.' or 'Ms.' It's easier to ask them things and talk to them. It's never boring."

A senior said he was on the verge of dropping out when he came to Middle College. "I never liked school. I was very shy and I just didn't care," said Thomas Walsh. "One teacher, I call him my challenger, he inspired me to be a hard-working student. I didn't want to go to his class not knowing the work. I didn't want to feel stupid."

For a few, the freedom is too much. But most relish being treated like adults competent to make their own decisions.

The building is pleasant, if basic. Part of the community college campus, most of the classrooms are plain white, and windowless, with adequate lighting and posters decorating the walls. There are no bells, and the school is relaxed about standards of dress and decorum. Some kids wear their hats backwards. Some chew gum. At least one sported a pierced eyebrow. Students may use the college facilities and may take college courses.

The school requires students to show their mastery of various subject areas through "portfolio assessment"—oral and written presentations to the faculty. The school resisted the efforts by the State Department of Education to require students to take Regents exams, saying that the exams, which include multiple-choice questions, represented a lowering—not a raising—of their standards. "The Regents curriculum is about pouring oodles of information into them and having them spew it back," a teacher said.

The Middle College curriculum encourages students to study a particular theme—such as imperialism or colonialism—in depth, rather than learn the names and dates of dozens of events in world history. Students read books such as *Bound Feet, Western Dress*, about the impact of Western culture on a Chinese girl.

In English classes, students read the standard high school fare from Shakespeare to James Baldwin, but they also read current books such as Terry McMillan's *Disappearing Acts* and Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*. "They read books that everyone is talking about so they feel part of a literate society," a teacher said.

Classes are small—25 to 28 is typical—and the schedule is organized so teachers have two or three—not five—classes a day. That means teachers can devote more attention to individual students' writing. Papers go through multiple drafts.

The school's math curriculum, developed by the National Science Foundation, is designed to teach high school math to kids whose foundation in arithmetic and pre-algebra may be shaky.

In a pre-calculus class, kids worked on a problem to gauge the speed of an object dropped from a helicopter as it hit the ground. The teacher didn't give the formula at first, but had students explore ways to attack the problem intuitively. Kids called out suggestions, and were attentive and engaged—no heads on desks here. "If you get the wrong answer, ask 'Why?' Always ask 'Why?'" the teacher said. By the time the formula was presented, it seemed to have meaning for the kids.

In a science class, kids identified rocks, collected on trips to various parks, as igneous, sedimentary, or metamorphic. They worked on lab tables as the teacher walked among them, answering any questions they might have. In a physics class, kids designed their own parachutes. Students work on projects associated with the Queens Botanical Gardens and the planetarium at the American Museum of Natural History.

Advanced students may take courses at LaGuardia Community College. All students may use the college library. Sports include swimming, karate, weight training, soccer, basketball, volleyball, and golf. Girls also have track and tennis. The school offers **special education** services for the hearing impaired.

Teachers at Middle College believe that the intellectual, moral, and emotional development of students is intertwined. Both teachers and guidance counselors develop close relationships with kids and encourage them to talk about any problems they may have. Gay students, shy students, and kids with miserable home lives all get the individual attention they need to flourish.

Graduates attend colleges such as Iona, Hofstra, Marymount, Adelphi, Dowling, and Fordham, as well as CUNY and SUNY schools.

Middle College High School, briefly a charter school, has returned to the jurisdiction of the Department of Education and has been granted a degree of autonomy and is free from certain bureaucratic requirements. Prospective parents and students may call the school to arrange a tour. In recent years, there have been 2,400 applicants for 100 seats. Middle College also accepts transfer students who have had difficulties in other high schools. The school's admissions criteria are under review. Call the school for updates.

The Baccalaureate School for Global Education

34-12 36 Avenue
Astoria, NY 11105
(718) 729-6009

Admissions: selective

Grade levels: 7–12

Enrollment: 350 (projected)

Class size: 25

Average SATs: new school

Graduation rate: new school

College admissions: new school

Ethnicity: 23%W 20%B 27%H 30%A

Free lunch: 45%

The Baccalaureate School for Global Education is the first public school in New York City in which all students prepare for the International Baccalaureate, a degree widely accepted at universities in 110 countries outside the United States. The school, opened in 2002, is designed to combine the spirit of inquiry and discovery that characterizes a good progressive school with the broad curriculum for which good traditional schools are known.

Many of the projects are interdisciplinary. Students learning to speak and write in Mandarin Chinese made decorative wall hangings, drawings, and posters in celebration of the Chinese New Year.

Ninth graders analyzed 15 newspaper articles about Africa over the February vacation, then wrote a research paper, and created a collage of images. In class, they cheerfully worked in groups to create large maps of Africa. They read *Kaffir Boy*, a book about apartheid, then researched South African leaders on the sleek white laptop computers which all student are issued.

“Here the emphasis is on making sure the children are learning,” said a teacher who is a veteran of a more traditional school. “There the emphasis was on whether it looked to the outside world that children were learning.”

Rather than the short, 45-minute periods common in most high schools, classes are 80 minutes long, giving students and teachers time to work in depth. All students—even 7th graders—take electives with titles such as “human rights,” Spanish dance, theater, or “Monitoring for Meaning in Science.”

In all the classes we visited, there was obvious respect for student opinion. "They kind of let you be independent," said a 9th grader. "They expect you to do it on your own."

While there's lots of hands-on work, students say they have many hours of traditional homework each night because they must study to pass both New York State Regents exams and earn the IB diploma. "It's a lot of hard work, but most of the teachers are great," said a student.

The school has a strong feeling of community. Every day begins with a small group "advisory" and students are expected to do "community service."

"BSGE has an extremely dedicated administration and faculty and a diverse population of bright and motivated kids from throughout Queens," a parent said. "Students are challenged and engaged by the curriculum."

The Baccalaureate School is not yet accredited by the International Baccalaureate Organization, the non-profit group that includes 1,395 IB schools in 114 countries. However, the school is working with the organization to implement the IB curriculum. One benefit of the IB: because the curriculum is standardized, students who move from one country to another may transfer easily from one IB school to another.

The United Nations International School, a private school in Manhattan, offers an IB, as does a small program within Washington Irving High School, a public school in Manhattan. (Curtis High School on Staten Island has a small program it calls IB, but it isn't accredited by the IBO). The new Queens school is the only public school in New York City to offer the IB curriculum to all students, not just those in a small honors program.

Applicants submit a portfolio of graded work and take an on-site writing exam and a math exam. Students and parents are interviewed by the staff. The school is open only to Queens residents. The school has a new building, a four-story, refurbished hand-bag factory in Long Island City, but no gymnasium, auditorium, or outside space.

The Renaissance Charter School

35-59 81st Street
Jackson Heights, NY 11372
(718) 803-0060
www.trcs.org

Admissions: charter school, lottery

Grade levels: K-12

Enrollment: 500

Class size: 25

Average SATs: V417 M425

Graduation rate: 87%

College admissions: good

Ethnicity: 19%W 27%B 41%H 13%A

Free lunch: 57%

This progressive, experimental school has the feel of a small-town school, with kids from kindergarten through 12th grade under the same roof. An unusual architectural design gives the building, a former department store, a homey feel and encourages children of different ages to mix.

Kindergarten and 1st-grade classrooms on the ground floor open off a central indoor playroom equipped with playground equipment. The day I visited, a high school student was helping elementary school kids play table hockey during recess. Upstairs, high school classrooms open off a central lounge with sofas and carpeted areas—a place for students to chat informally with teachers or one another.

Founded in 1993 by a group of teachers who wanted a school that was run jointly by staff and parents, the Renaissance School has attracted super-involved parents, particularly at the elementary school level. The elementary school has become one of the most sought after in Queens, with far more applicants than spots available, and demanding, well-educated parents are satisfied that their children are being challenged.

In the past, many of Renaissance's best students left for larger, traditional high schools with wider course offerings and well-established reputations. However, 8th graders are increasingly choosing to stay for high school, leaving only a handful of seats for newcomers. The quality of teaching is good throughout the building, and the high school, with only 200 students, has been successful in piquing the interest of students who might be bored or alienated in a traditional school.

There is a warm, almost chummy rapport between the students and staff. Kids get the feeling that grown-ups are here to learn, too. One day, four students were in the principal's office, discussing the school website they were setting up.

"I don't know HTML and I don't want to learn it!" principal Monte Joffee said, referring to the computer coding used to make pages on a website.

"Monte! Set a good example! I don't want to learn Sequential II," a boy exclaimed, referring to the second-year high school math course.

"All those codes are so freaky," Joffee said.

"You'll get used to it," the student reassured him.

The school is philosophically committed to keeping kids of all abilities together in classes, a task that becomes increasingly difficult as students get older. Classes have fewer than 25 students, and that helps. But teachers acknowledge it's tough. Some children misbehave, and teachers must spend a certain amount of time maintaining order.

"The brighter students really have to be motivated to push themselves," a teacher said. "The self-starters, the self-motivated do well. If they are not self-starters, they could just do average work and get by."

In a political science class, students read Plato, Aristotle, and Machiavelli. They discussed the increase in lynching after the U.S. Civil War and compared it to the rise of civil unrest in Africa in the postcolonial period. In both cases, a power vacuum after the fall of a strong, if oppressive, government led to chaos. The students supplemented their readings from textbooks with clippings about Sierra Leone from current issues of the *New York Times*.

The Renaissance School is committed to integrating students in **special education** into regular classrooms. Teachers are skilled at using students' strengths to help compensate for their weakness. For example, one student who suffered from "dysgraphia"—the inability to write—was able nonetheless to design a beautiful website.

Teachers are involved in kids' social and emotional lives. Students call teachers at home, and some confide their most intimate problems—a neglectful parent, a gang recruiting students in their neighborhood, an overeager boyfriend.

The college office gives an unusual level of advice and support, and students are encouraged to apply to private schools

Queens

and to state schools outside New York City. Graduates have been accepted by the University of Pennsylvania, Skidmore, New York University, Syracuse, Connecticut College, the University of Massachusetts, Adelphi, Clark, and Bard.

The school converted to charter status in 2000, a designation that frees it from certain bureaucratic requirements and gives it autonomy from the Department of Education. Children are admitted by lottery. The school has open houses for prospective parents in January and February. Admissions criteria for charter schools may change. Call the school for updates.

Robert F. Kennedy Community High School

75-40 Parsons Boulevard
Flushing, NY 11366
(718) 969-5510
www.rfkschools.org

Admissions: educational option

Grade levels: 5–12

Enrollment: 560

Class size: 20–32

Average SATs: V445 M470

Graduation rate: 86%

College admissions: good

Ethnicity: 50%W 11%B 20%H 19%A

Free lunch: 22%

Robert F. Kennedy (RFK) Community High School is a combined middle and high school designed to give extra attention to kids who might get lost in a large school. Founded in 1992, the middle school was established to give underachievers of average intelligence the boost they need to perform at their potential. It also has attracted accomplished students who might be overwhelmed in a traditional school. One mother said her son, who was strong academically but very shy, blossomed in middle school classes of 20 or fewer kids.

The middle school has only 160 students in grades 5–8, and classes have 20 or fewer students. The high school is somewhat bigger, with 400 kids in grades 9–12, and classes have 30 or 32 students. There is a friendly rapport between students and teachers, and grown-ups aren't afraid to share a joke with kids.

There are no bells, and the class changes are pleasant and uncrowded. Bathrooms are unlocked and children are allowed to use them when they please. The building is spotless, well lit, and cheerful. The walls have white tiles and cinderblocks painted yellow. There's a large gym, a nice computer lab, and a pretty art room. The building is not wheelchair accessible.

Students say the building is safe, and a recent graduate said the lack of bells and the one-hour classes were good preparation for college. She said she typically did 2 hours of homework a night when she was at RFK.

Many of the high-achieving middle school students leave for larger, traditional high schools that have wider course offer-

ings. But for those who stay, there are some Advanced Placement courses as well as the opportunity to conduct sophisticated research with a chemistry teacher who specializes in dating ancient artifacts. The teacher, Dr. Joel Blickstein, won a Toyota Tapestry grant to date fossils and what is believed to be the world's oldest musical instrument, a 45,000-year-old bone flute from Slovenia. Two students helped him with the research—and had their names listed as authors on a scholarly paper, he said.

RFK is in the forefront of the movement to place **special education** students in regular classes with extra help. In one class, a speech therapist worked in the classroom with the English teacher, helping him adapt his lessons. In another, a visually impaired child had books on tape.

"One of the things I like about inclusion is the humanizing effect it has on the whole community," said a teacher. "The more able kids do not resent the time they spend helping the less able kids get along." Pugh said the school is particularly proud of its record in helping students in special education gain admission to college.

Graduates of RFK have been admitted to colleges such as Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, New York University, the University of Pennsylvania, Hofstra, Iona College, Queens College, and SUNY campuses at Binghamton and Albany. One graduate was admitted to the engineering school at Cooper Union.

Students are required to perform community service, volunteering in nursing homes, hospitals, museums, houses of worship, and the police department. Teachers say the community service program helps contribute to safety in school. "If kids have the opportunity to help other people, they are less likely to be violent," said music teacher Michael Buzzeo.

Like many other new schools, RFK has suffered from staff turnover. The high school had three principals in its first decade. But parents are enthusiastic about their children's education.

Having 5th graders in the building as well as 12th graders is one reason for RFK's success. "We segregate kids in school, but we don't segregate them at home," said one mother, Debbie Fine. "At home, we expect a kindergartner to get along with a high schooler." Older students look out for younger ones as brothers and sisters might.

Her son chose RFK even though he was admitted to the super-selective Townsend Harris. “I didn’t want him in that competitive atmosphere—he can do that in college,” she said. “I didn’t want him burned out in high school.” She said her son is a shy boy who flourishes in a small school. The school has an open house for prospective parents and students in October.

Agricultural Program at John Bowne High School

63-25 Main Street
Flushing, NY 11367
(718) 263-1919 or (718) 575-4069

Admissions: neighborhood school/educational option

Grade levels: 9–12

Graduation rate: 54%

Enrollment: 3,542

College admissions: good

Class size: 34

Ethnicity: 9%W 20%B 44%H 27%A

Average SATs: V399 M455

Free lunch: 54%

A dozen teenagers squatted in a large field in the shadow of Queens College, turned black soil with small trowels, and planted eggplant seedlings in neat rows. “Pull out those weeds!” their teacher, a tall, husky man, shouted.

“How much do I water it?” asked a girl.

“Don’t drown it!” the teacher replied.

The teenagers were working on a farm—an actual, working farm—in back of John Bowne High School as part of the school’s 4-year, year-round agricultural program. They raise chickens, shear sheep, and tinker with tractor engines—as well as study algebra and read Shakespeare in their regular academic courses.

The agricultural program was founded in 1917 in a stable adjacent to a wood frame elementary school—at a time when most of Queens was farmland, and training students to shoe horses and work on farms was as logical as teaching children to work on computers is today.

The fact that it has survived and flourished for more than 80 years is testament to the program’s ability to adapt vocational education to a rapidly changing economy. The program serves 600 students in a school of more than 3,500.

“We’re not just training kids to be farmers,” said Steve Perry, the assistant principal in charge of the agriculture students. “Our goal is to train them for specialties in plant and animal sciences.” Everyone takes college preparatory courses, and while some graduates become farmers, others go on to be veterinarians, landscape architects, zookeepers, or marine biologists.

While in school, the students tend the apple and peach trees in the orchard on the school’s four-acre farm; grow and sell toma-

toes, lettuce, corn, pumpkins, eggplant, flowers, and house plants; and learn to care for exotic animals such as iguanas and snakes. The program even offers a course in horseback riding, and some students get jobs on horse farms. The school equestrian team rides in Forest Park.

One graduate breeds horses, another opened a pet shop, and a third sells pharmaceuticals to veterinarians. Students work as interns on dairy farms upstate or other farms on Long Island, as well as at plant nurseries, zoos, parks, and animal hospitals in the city.

The program prepares students for jobs that most city students wouldn't imagine, such as becoming a veterinarian for farm animals—a career for which Perry says there is high demand. The program also attempts to adapt to technological changes in the agricultural industry to enhance career possibilities. Perry set up a high-tech fish farm to train students in what he says is the expanding career field of marine biology and fisheries. Students raise telapia and trout—the first to be eaten, the second to be released in streams upstate.

While every student takes a full academic program at the high school, the “aggies,” as the agricultural students are called, also take extra courses designed to prepare them for a career or vocation.

“Most of them go on to college, but those who don't, have skills,” said plant science teacher Magdy Faris, as he supervised students planting flowers, trimming shrubs, and pruning red roses in an interior courtyard of the buff-colored brick high school. The high achievers may go on to become landscape architects, while others may get jobs right out of high school as gardeners or florists. Faris said he teaches students the basics of running a business as well as the science of plants.

Perry, who studied agriculture himself at John Bowne in the 1970s, said the program provides focus for students at a time in their lives when many lack the motivation to study.

Ivy Almonte, a college student and recent graduate who was back at the school to volunteer, said the pleasure of caring for iguanas, parrots, and snakes helped keep her spirits up when her interest in some traditional high school subjects flagged.

“I always knew I loved animals and wanted to be their doctor,” she said, adding that one of her fondest memories of high school was taming a snake. “You hold it a lot and make it feel secure. You give it a routine. It's not that difficult.”

Kids take their regular academic classes in John Bowne High School, a mostly orderly place in which teachers talk to one another and to students in a relaxed, informal way. Many teachers favor desks in rows and lectures, but there is some opportunity for individual attention in a well-regarded writing program (which is not part of the agricultural program). One student won the Barnard College essay contest. Students come from 70 countries and speak 40 languages.

College-bound graduates of the agricultural program generally attend state and city colleges. John Bowne is open to any student living in the zone. The agricultural program is an educational option program open to any student in the city. Children are admitted according to a formula designed to ensure a mix of high-achieving and low-achieving students. Students must attend summer school for at least 2 of their 4 high school years. The agricultural program is open to students in **special education**. The school has an orientation session for new parents and students in June.

Townsend Harris High School

149-11 Melbourne Avenue
Flushing, NY 11367
(718) 575-5580

Admissions: selective

Grade levels: 9–12

Enrollment: 1,070

Class size: 25–34

Average SATs: V624 M616

Graduation rate: 99%

College admissions: excellent

Ethnicity: 51%W 7%B 10%H 32%A

Free lunch: 15%

The kids were reading a passage from *The Odyssey*—in the original Greek—that recounted how Odysseus sailed to the island where the Cyclops lived. Their teacher paused to show how knowledge of Greek improves their vocabulary in English.

“Dec-,” the Greek word for “ten,” forms the prefix in words as common as “decade” and as obscure as “decamen,” the teacher said, and challenged the students to find an English word for “The 10 Commandments.” When no one responded, he answered the question himself: The Decalogue, from “dec” and “logos,” for word.

Townsend Harris High School is to Queens what Stuyvesant High School is to Manhattan and Bronx High School of Science is to the Bronx: a super-high-powered, highly selective school that draws students from across the city and consistently sends graduates to the Ivy League.

But Townsend Harris differs from Stuyvesant and Bronx Science in several key respects. It focuses on the classics and humanities, rather than science. It’s a manageable size, with an enrollment that’s one-third the size of the so-called science schools. Its population is about 65% female, while Stuyvesant and Science have more boys. Its campus, while hardly bucolic, is in a pleasant, leafy residential area next to Queens College, not an urban neighborhood. Those factors help make Townsend Harris somewhat warmer and gentler than its city rivals.

“There is an effort to make it noncompetitive,” said one mother, Evelyn Deluty. “There are enormously high standards and a mountain of work, but it’s not cut-throat.” Events such as “pajama day”—when everyone wears pajamas to school—help

make the school cozy. Older students act as mentors to freshmen, easing the transition from middle school to high school and encouraging friendships between students of different ages.

"It's a very demanding place, and a lot of students feel overwhelmed, but all in all it's a great place," said former Parents Association president Cele Ioannou. "When they reach college, they appreciate all the work they've done—because college is easier." Ms. Ioannou, who had a daughter at Townsend Harris and a son at Bronx Science, said Townsend Harris has more homework, but teachers know the students better and there is better communication between the school and parents.

Townsend Harris exudes a sense of both privilege and calm. It's one of the few public high schools in Queens that's not frightfully overcrowded. The building architecture, while not to everyone's taste, is nonetheless an attempt at grandeur, with a modern, stark gray cinderblock exterior; wide, brightly lit, and immaculately kept corridors; skylights; and a terrace off the library that allows students to enjoy fresh air without leaving the building. Classical music rather than bells announces the time for classes to change. The students eat in a "dining hall," not a cafeteria.

The curriculum is traditional, and students follow roughly the same course of study as at other public high schools. Besides the study of classics—everyone is required to take Greek or Latin—what distinguishes Townsend Harris is the unusual level of inquiry and class discussion encouraged by the staff. "The teachers ask us question after question rather than telling us what the answer is," one student said. Although forms of address are formal—teachers are addressed as Mr. or Ms.—students feel free to chat and joke with teachers between classes.

The school is best known for the humanities, but the sciences are strong as well. The laboratories are well equipped and cheery, and there is an emphasis on experiments in addition to textbook learning. In one chemistry homework assignment, for example, students made their own litmus tests with cabbage juice. Advanced science students may do independent research projects and compete for the Intel Science Talent Search prize. The school had five Intel semifinalists in 2001, and three in 2003.

Students are expected to study 3 to 4 years of a modern language—Japanese, Hebrew, Spanish, or French—in addition to Latin or Greek. Students write more frequently than is typical in high school. Freshmen take classes in English literature, as well as an introduction to linguistics and a writing composition class.

"They really tear those kids' papers apart and make them redo them," said Ms. Ioannou. "They keep throwing them back at them."

In global studies, or world history, the emphasis is on original source materials rather than textbooks. Students read literature in translation, letters from travelers, and the constitutions of the countries they study.

Townsend Harris has managed to reduce class size to 25 students in 16% of its courses. The others have standard class sizes ranging from 30 to 34.

Students are encouraged to develop their skills in speaking and defending an argument. The school's debate team won a statewide "moot court" championship 3 years in a row.

Homework is heavy. Parents say it's not unusual for students to have 4 hours of work or more a night. Sleep deprivation is a common complaint. Regular classes start at 8 a.m., and extracurricular activities, such as music rehearsal, are as early as 7 a.m. Kids complain that they are up until midnight every night and have no time for anything else.

There are dozens of seemingly petty rules. The dress code forbids tank tops or short shorts. Students are not allowed to go outside the building for lunch until their senior year. Paradoxically, the strictly enforced rules create an atmosphere that's reassuring and soothing, if sometimes a bit stuffy, parents say. "Within the structure, there is enormous freedom," Ms. Deluty said. "The culture of the place is relaxed."

The school has a strong sense of community—almost a club-biness—fostered by school traditions. All students recite the "Ephebic Oath," in which they promise to be good citizens and to leave their school better than they found it. The school even has its own lexicon: Papers are called "collaterals."

The original Townsend Harris High School began as a 1-year introductory program within the New York Free Academy, New York City's first free school of higher education, founded in 1848 and later named City College. In 1906, Townsend Harris became a separate, 3-year college preparatory school for boys. It flourished until 1942, when Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia closed it, calling it an "elitist" institution.

In the early 1980s, the school's alumni began to lobby for it to reopen. Local politicians in Queens were particularly receptive to the idea of a highly selective college preparatory school, in part because the borough didn't have a selective science school. The

school opened in 1984 under the leadership of Malcolm Largmann, a high school administrator with a Ph.D. in 18th-century English literature from New York University. The new Townsend Harris was founded in collaboration with Queens College, and all students are expected to take college courses in their senior year, called the Bridge Year. The school moved into its new building on the Queens College campus in 1995.

Largmann served as principal until his retirement in 2001. Thomas Cunningham, the former principal of Far Rockaway High School, replaced him.

Cunningham, whose daughter graduated from Townsend Harris, pledged to continue the school's traditional emphasis on humanities and the classics, while adding more Advanced Placement courses, particularly in science, and improving the use of technology in classes. Townsend Harris has had more limited Advanced Placement offerings than the specialized high schools, with courses in European history, global history, calculus, Spanish, psychology, environmental science, and computer science. However, the required Bridge Year at Queens College offers all students many opportunities.

The Townsend Harris faculty voted recently to become a "school-based option" school. That means the principal and staff may hire their own teachers, rather than being forced to accept teachers assigned according to seniority, as is typical in New York City public schools. The school has a large number of very talented, engaging teachers, as well as a few who are less-than-inspiring.

Sports include basketball, bowling, cross-country, track, swimming, fencing, volleyball, tennis, handball, baseball, and soccer. Students are required to perform community service, volunteering, for example, in schools or in homes for the elderly.

The size of the school, with 250 students in each grade, means students get more help with college admissions than they might at a very large school. "I know all the students on a first-name basis," said college counselor Marilyn Blier. "We meet with students in small groups their junior year, and with their parents, and draw up an individual plan." She said about 20% of the graduating class goes to Ivy League schools, and well over half the class goes to top tier schools, including MIT, Duke, Stanford, and the University of Chicago.

Ms. Blier said the strength of the school's writing program and the breadth of students' knowledge are shown by the high scores students have on the SAT IIs, the essay and subject area

exams formerly known as the SAT “achievement” tests. Townsend Harris is stronger than Stuyvesant or Bronx Science in students’ scores on the SAT II exams, she said. “Where we lag behind is in pure test-taking skills, and that shows up on the SAT scores,” which, while high, are a shade lower than those for Stuyvesant.

Townsend Harris has an active alumni association that includes some men who graduated before the school was closed in 1942, and some younger men and women who graduated from the new school. The alumni have raised a \$1.5 million endowment, which provides scholarship money for graduates and staff development for teachers.

The admissions process for Townsend Harris is somewhat mysterious, and many highly qualified candidates are turned away. There is no admissions test, and students do not submit a writing sample with their application. Rather, applicants are judged according to their reading scores, math scores, grades, and attendance records. There are 3,000 to 4,000 applicants for 250 seats. Only students who list Townsend Harris as their first choice and who meet the cutoff—usually a grade-point average of 94 or 95—are considered.

The school attempts to balance the proportion of students from each neighborhood, which gives an advantage to those from outside Queens who apply. The school takes a certain number of pupils from each neighborhood high school zone in Queens. That means getting accepted is more difficult for students from neighborhoods in which lots of kids apply—such as Bayside—than it is for those in which fewer apply—such as southeast Queens. The school also attempts to have an ethnic balance of kids from each neighborhood school. From a school district that is 80% white and 20% non-white, Townsend Harris will accept eight whites and two non-whites, for example. Students living anywhere in New York City may apply.

Francis Lewis High School

58-20 Utopia Parkway
Fresh Meadows, NY 11365
(718) 357-7740
www.pouch.com/users/flhs

Admissions: neighborhood school/screened/educational option

Grade levels: 9–12

Graduation rate: 70%

Enrollment: 3,870

College admissions: good

Class size: 34

Ethnicity: 25%W 15%B 18%H 42%A

Average SATs: V457 M534

Free lunch: 17%

Walk down the corridor of Francis Lewis High School, and you'll hear kids chatting in Spanish, Italian, Hebrew, Korean, French, Chinese, and Japanese, and even reading in Greek and Latin. In a Chinese class for native speakers, students translate 17th-century literature into modern Chinese. Students practice Japanese calligraphy in what one teacher calls the largest Japanese program in the city. In a Spanish class, kids act out a courtship scene from a 19th-century novel. Students read passages from Herodotus in the original Greek.

Francis Lewis is a pleasant, traditional neighborhood high school with grassy playing fields, a courtyard shaded by oak trees, and an entrance decorated with hanging plants, students' artwork, and a large fish tank. It has a junior ROTC drill team, a jazz ensemble, and a marching band.

The school was built in 1960 to house 1,860 students and now has more than 3,800. Because of this serious overcrowding, students from outside the zone may apply only to the screened programs or the educational option programs. The selective University Scholars program, which focuses on foreign languages and the classics, is open to students from all over Queens. There is a selective math and science program in which students compete in the Intel Science Talent Search, working with professors and nearby colleges on original science research. Two students were recently named semi-finalists. The school also has a "law institute" that accepts both high- and low-achieving students from outside the zone.

Francis Lewis has extensive bilingual programs in Chinese, Korean, and Spanish in which students may study math and science in their native languages while learning English. Some of the language courses allow students to study literature in their native language in addition to studying English. Other foreign language courses are designed for English speakers. Some classes have a mixture of native speakers and English speakers.

"I have a United Nations here," said principal Catherine Kalina. "I'm amazed by how well they get along and how interested they are in one another's culture."

It's difficult to find a niche in a school as big as Francis Lewis, but the foreign language department provides a base for many students. "If you come here at 5:00, it's not unusual for kids to be in the foreign language office talking to a teacher," one teacher said. In one Hebrew class, kids began the period just relaxing and chatting—in Hebrew. Their teacher said it was a chance for them to unwind and meet their friends.

In the Japanese program, students—nearly all of them native English speakers—begin reading with phonetic texts transliterated into the Roman alphabet. By the third year, they learn Japanese calligraphy and even read Japanese newspapers. They learn about Japanese culture and how to fold origami paper. The courses meet 5 days a week for 42 minutes and lead to a Regents exam.

Francis Lewis has 26 athletic teams, and students may use the swimming pool at Queensboro Community College. About 550 students do community service, some in churches or other houses of worship, others working with handicapped youngsters in nearby elementary schools.

The school received an Annenberg grant several years ago to integrate arts into the curriculum. Kids may watch a performance of African dancers as part of their study of African history. Or they may build model pyramids and create their own hieroglyphics when they are studying ancient Egypt.

The overcrowding forces the school to schedule classes from 7:20 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., and to stagger arrival hours and dismissal times.

Francis Lewis is taking part in the "Least Restrictive Environment" initiative, which seeks to integrate **special education** pupils into regular classrooms. A mentally retarded girl, for example, was placed in a regular classroom for art history. While others in the class took regular exams, she had a special exam

with questions about primary colors rather than famous painters. The program is still in its infancy.

Francis Lewis has a well-regarded work-study program for special education pupils who work in local businesses, nursing homes, and day care centers as kitchen helpers and aides. "Some kids who can't seem to function well in school do well in work," a teacher said. There is a "computers for business" class for special education students from across Queens. The building is not wheelchair accessible.

Graduates of Francis Lewis attend CUNY and SUNY schools as well as some private colleges, including Ivy League schools. Some students have won full scholarships to Brandeis, Middlebury, and Vanderbilt University. Students also have been admitted to Penn State, the University of Pennsylvania, Brown, and Columbia. "The kids, the parents, and the faculty here are ambitious, goal-oriented, focused, and humane," said college counselor Dr. Barbara Cooper. "It's an upwardly mobile, striving population."

Students are admitted to the University Scholars and the Math Science Research Program based on their scores on standardized tests, middle school grades, and attendance record. Most successful candidates have grade-point averages in the 90s. The "law institute" accepts students according to the educational option formula designed to ensure a mix of low- and high-achieving kids.

The school encourages prospective parents and students to visit the school during the day when classes are in session. Call the assistant principal for pupil personnel, Jeffrey Scherr, or the principal, Catherine Kalina, to schedule a tour.

Queens High School for the Sciences at York College

94-50 159th Street
Jamaica, NY 11451
(718) 657-3181

Admissions: competitive exam

Grade levels: 9–12

Enrollment: 500 (projected)

Class size: 25

Average SATs: new school

Graduation rate: new school

College admissions: new school

Ethnicity: 14%W 35%B 15%H 36%A

Free lunch: 35%

Queens High School for the Sciences combines the warm personal attention from teachers that you might expect in an elementary school with the extensive facilities of the York College campus, including a well-equipped library, up-to-date science labs, and an Olympic-sized swimming pool.

One of three small specialized city high schools to open on college campuses in 2002, Queens High School for the Sciences offers a refuge from the jam-packed classrooms and gridlocked corridors of the borough's over-burdened neighborhood schools. Both kids and grown-ups seem happy to be here, and the atmosphere is simultaneously serious and relaxed.

"School should be a place where kids have choices," said principal Brian Jetter, who once taught at Brooklyn's John Dewey High School, where freedom for students is prized. "It shouldn't be so rigid that teachers are dictating everything that they have to know. Kids enjoy coming to school. It's not oppressive."

The day I visited, 10 kids were playing touch football with a teacher during their lunch break on the grassy playing fields of York College—the kind of informal interaction between kids and grown-ups that's typical of the school. In the office, a mother chatted with the science research teacher who had asked her to come in because her son hadn't turned in his homework—the kind of attention that's more typical of a small private school. Throughout the school, I came across teachers talking individually to students. Any time a child is absent, the guidance counselor calls home.

"Teachers are focused on students," one student said. "It's nice and caring and friendly," said another. "You get to know people well," said a third. Class size is smaller than typical for public high schools, with no more than 25 students in a class. Students say they average 2 to 3 hours of homework a night.

Classes mix standard high school reading lists with some interesting discussions and projects. Students read classics such as the *Odyssey* and have not-too-typical conversations about the role of women in ancient Athens. Students' artwork and writing samples are posted on bulletin boards—as they might be in an elementary school—but the material covered is sophisticated, such as synopses of articles from scientific journals on the Ebola virus or essays about Aristotle. Jetter, formerly the head of science and math for Queens high schools, is particularly well-equipped to run a school that focuses on science. At least one of the school's science teachers has a Ph.D.

Students have access to the college's cafeteria and library, and science classes are held in the college labs. "Instead of cheap, crummy microscopes we have digital, compound microscopes—real microbiology equipment," one student said. "And we can take college courses."

If the high school cannot offer a particular course—and the offerings in the arts are skimpy—students may look to the college. "I don't have a drama class but one student was in the York College theater production," said Jetter. Students take part in the college's math club.

Being on a college campus offers perks and intellectual stimulation for the teachers as well as the kids. "We're treated like faculty," Jetter said, flashing his York College ID card that identified him as a faculty member. "We're invited to all their professional development."

The high school is mindful of parents' concerns that 14-year-olds need more supervision than college students. High school students eat in the college cafeteria, for example, but at times set aside just for them—and with a high school staffer assigned to supervise. High school students may use the college gymnasium, but only when a teacher is available to be with them.

Teachers are interviewed and hired by a committee under the provision of the teachers' contract called "school-based option." (Most schools hire teachers according to seniority.)

The school opened with just a 9th grade in portable classrooms while permanent quarters were built adjacent to a pedestrian mall in a renovated brick building, York College's former nursing school. The school quickly developed a sense of community. The first PTA meeting attracted 60 parents—a huge turnout considering there were only 100 students in the school. The whole school went to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in Manhattan one Saturday.

Students are admitted according to their scores on the specialized science school exam given in October—the same entrance exam as for Stuyvesant, Bronx Science, and Brooklyn Tech.

Benjamin Cardozo High School

57-00 223rd Street
Bayside, NY 11364
(718) 279-6500
www.cardozohigh.com

Admissions: neighborhood school/screened/educational option
Grade levels: 9–12 **Graduation rate:** 87%
Enrollment: 3,974 **College admissions:** very good
Class size: 34 **Ethnicity:** 30%W 20%B 11%H 39%A
Average SATs: V488 M533 **Free lunch:** 12%

This gigantic, overcrowded school is one of the most successful neighborhood high schools in the city and consistently ranks among the top in the United States in the proportion of students taking Advanced Placement courses.

Lush lawns, shady maple trees, a pleasant outdoor patio, and expansive playing fields give it the feel of a suburban high school—even though overcrowding means classes start at 7:30 a.m. and some kids have lunch at 9:05 a.m. Nearly 4,000 students attend classes in a building designed for 2,500.

Most students live in the zone for Cardozo, but each year about 300 new students are chosen from 6,000 applicants for three specialized programs. The selective DaVinci Math-Science Research Institute, in which students do biomedical and math research, rivals Stuyvesant High School or Bronx High School of Science. The dance program accepts students by audition. The law program—in which students take courses in criminal and civil law and act as interns for lawyers or politicians—accepts students according to a formula designed to balance the number of high- and low-achieving students.

The size of the school makes it possible to offer a wide array of courses and programs. The school has two orchestras and three bands, and performances range from *Porgy and Bess* to Mozart's *Kyrie*. Teachers in the science department say their equipment is on a par with the laboratories of a small college. There is a well-appointed library, with 10 computer work stations for Internet research. The art department has prepared students for the Rhode Island School of Design and Cooper Union. The

dance department offers courses in ballet, modern dance, jazz, dance criticism, and choreography. The school even houses a special education program for students who are “school phobic”—so frightened of school that they need psychological help.

The school has 28 athletic teams, including basketball, soccer, gymnastics, tennis, baseball, lacrosse, and bowling. There is a well-equipped weight room. “For kids who aren’t really into the team sports and aren’t too athletic we have yoga, we have salsa, fencing, and volleyball,” a teacher said. Everyone has physical education five times a week, and it’s not unusual to see teachers and students playing together in intramural sports.

But the size has drawbacks, as well. Eight portable classrooms have been put on a playing field to cope with overcrowding. Scheduling is such a nightmare that class rosters are rearranged 2 or 3 weeks into each semester, as students are shifted from oversize classes to ones that have fewer students.

Class changes are so crowded that kids get stuck in human gridlock in the corridors. That sometimes makes them late for their next class. “You have road rage,” said Alicia Hornstein, a student in the law program. “Everyone is stuck in traffic, so everyone is irritable. You accidentally might bump into someone because you have absolutely no place else to go and they might start yelling at you. There are way too many people.”

Some students never quite adjust to the crowds, and some say it’s hard to make friends in such a big, sometimes anonymous school. Many, however, find a niche by joining one of the school’s many clubs. In early September the Parents Association sponsors a brunch to give students a chance to shop around for clubs ranging from the “Future Lawyers” to the “Pakistani Club.”

Given the conditions, the building is remarkably safe. The students are attentive and mostly well behaved (although some kids complain about occasional fistfights). The atmosphere is relaxed and the corridors clean and brightly lit. “One of the reasons the school is safe is we have ten deans who really talk and listen to students,” said principal Rick Hallman.

Cardozo prides itself on having higher academic standards than the minimum state requirements for high school diplomas. Cardozo requires 4 years of science and 4 years of a foreign language. Students are strongly encouraged to take 4 years of math. Homework is heavy, and 3 hours a night is not uncommon.

Some students choose Cardozo over Bronx Science or Stuyvesant, saying it offers comparable academics in a somewhat less intense, less competitive atmosphere. The science department maintains that its level of instruction is on a par with the selective high schools and points to the fact that its students regularly beat those schools in the Science Olympiad competition.

Cardozo has an unusually high proportion of students taking Advanced Placement courses. In fact, the College Board in 1997 ranked it 12th of 12,002 schools in the nation in the ratio of graduates to AP exams taken. The day I visited, 300 students were taking the AP calculus exam, and 100 were taking the AP Spanish exam. Sixteen AP courses are offered.

Although some parents complain that the academic superstars get the most attention, the administration is committed to offering good teaching to average students and to those who are struggling. "Your excellence isn't going to come from paying attention to the top 20%," said Hallman. "You have to give attention to those in the bottom as well."

Several teachers described their strategies for helping kids who were having trouble, ranging from individual math tutoring during a teacher's lunch hour to team-teaching for students in special education. "If you are failing, they give you extra work," one girl said. "They give you extra chances. They don't give up on you."

The math department attempts to give students the sense of joy that mathematicians feel as they unearth the answer to a problem. "We've always wanted to get the kids to discover things [themselves] rather than have the teacher stand at the board and give them 1,000 problems," said Michael Riccardo, assistant principal for math and music.

The department offers a double period of math to help students who are struggling. Classes are slightly smaller than normal—25–30 kids. "We want to try to get them to experience success," Riccardo said. Unlike at many high schools, there is no limit on the number of students who may take advanced courses. "If a kid wants to take AP calculus, give it a shot," Riccardo said.

The English department concentrates on the classics of the Western canon, from *Antigone* and *The Canterbury Tales* to *The Scarlet Letter*. "No one gets out of our school without reading Shakespeare," said the assistant principal for English, Peggy

Kurtz. "We're still using books that in most high schools would be collecting dust." Everyone studies literature for 4 years, in addition to a "college writing" class. Writing classes are somewhat smaller than average, with 25 students. Seniors must write a "senior thesis" of at least five pages.

The administration encourages teachers to give writing assignments in every class, even in physical education, where students might write a critique of magazine articles about nutrition or drug abuse.

The school offers Spanish, French, German, Latin, modern Greek, and occasionally Hebrew and Italian. The size of foreign language classes is 34, making it difficult for students to speak frequently in class. There are 250 students in the English as a second language program. The school offers bilingual instruction in Korean and Chinese.

The social studies department houses the "mentor law and humanities program," designed to carry on the ideals and traditions of Supreme Court Justice Benjamin Cardozo, for whom the school is named. Students in the law program take a regular course load in their freshmen and sophomore years. In their junior and senior years, they take courses in constitutional and civil law and work as interns at law offices, with local politicians or in police stations.

The science department is proud of its record in preparing high-achieving kids to compete in the national Intel Science Talent Search and is one of the leading schools in the city in terms of the number of finalists and semifinalists for the Intel prize. "In the research field or in medicine, a lot of kids will apply to Cardozo rather than Stuyvesant," a science teacher said.

The school's selective DaVinci Math-Science Research Institute offers students the chance to conduct original research. There is a \$1.2 million science laboratory in which students may test samples of DNA utilizing techniques used to identify criminal suspects or to track the transmission of tuberculosis from one from patient to another.

"Students have the opportunity to do cutting edge research on a lot of equipment that colleges would be envious of," said a teacher in the biology research department. And, because the DaVinci program is small—with only 100 kids in each grade—students have a chance for a lot of individual attention.

Throughout the science department, there is an emphasis on experimentation and learning by doing—for average students as well as the stars. In a 9th-grade physical science research class, kids built models of medieval catapults called trebuchets from wood and tape to demonstrate principles of physics and engineering. In a beginning biology class, kids used microscopes to observe cell division in a slice of onion.

The school is participating in the “Least Restrictive Environment” initiative, which places **special education** students in classes with general education students. Teachers licensed in special education work as a team with regular classroom teachers, adapting the curriculum as needed. These classes have 20 general education pupils and eight special education pupils.

In one such class, a special education teacher and a science teacher painted white lines representing the human circulatory system on the school’s playing fields. Students stood on the grass and held up red and blue cards representing the passage of oxygen through the bloodstream.

Special education pupils who are not zoned for Cardozo may apply to the dance program to be considered for admission.

The building is partially wheelchair accessible.

Parents praise the quality of the staff of the college admissions office, but acknowledge that there is little opportunity for individual attention because of the size of the graduating class—1,000.

Students are issued a number from one to 1,000, then given an appointment to see the college counselor for half an hour or so. The Parents Association recruits parents to help the college office. These volunteers look at students’ applications to make sure they have necessary stamps and signatures before the students meet with the college counselor.

A typical graduating class might have two or three dozen graduates admitted to Ivy League schools, several dozen to the University of Michigan, and more than 100 to New York University.

All students who live in the zone for Cardozo are automatically admitted. Students from anywhere in Queens may apply to the specialized programs for either 9th or 10th grade. The DaVinci Math-Science Research Institute is highly selective, with more than 2,000 applicants for 100 seats. Students must list it as

their first choice to be considered. Successful candidates generally have grades in the 90s.

The mentor law program accepts students according to the educational option formula designed to ensure a mix of high- and low-achieving students. The school picks half the students. A computer picks the rest. Students must list the law program as their first choice. (Students whose standardized test scores are in the top 2% are assured admission if they list Cardozo as their first choice.) More than 4,000 students apply for 100 seats.

The dance program accepts students by audition. About 600 students apply for 100 spots. A tip to would-be applicants: Not many boys apply to the dance program, so even male students who aren't proficient should consider applying. Students in **special education** also are eligible for the dance program.

Staten Island Schools



- 1 Curtis
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STATEN ISLAND

With its tract houses and large backyards, much of Staten Island is culturally more akin to suburban New Jersey than to the other boroughs of New York City. Parents are generally satisfied with their neighborhood high schools.

Staten Island's junior high schools each have "high school night" in October at which representatives from different high schools describe their programs. Staten Island parents also should consider attending high school fairs in Manhattan and Brooklyn.

Curtis High School

105 Hamilton Avenue
Staten Island, NY 10301
(718) 273-7380

Admissions: neighborhood school/integration variance
Grade levels: 9–12 **Graduation rate:** 71%
Enrollment: 2,472 **College admissions:** good
Class size: 34 **Ethnicity:** 38%W 34%B 23%H 5%A
Average SATs: V456 M450 **Free lunch:** 45%

Curtis High School, housed in a sprawling, labyrinthine 100-year-old, gothic-style building, is a racially and economically integrated school with a strong arts program that attracts students from across the borough. It is one of only a few city schools to have white students who willingly travel out of their neighborhood to attend a school in which they are in the minority.

The guitar ensemble is one of many well-regarded music groups in the performing arts program. The bands—including the jazz ensemble, a concert band, a symphonic band, a symphonic wind ensemble, a marching band, and an orchestra—perform frequently in the school, in the community, and out of town. The school even had a performance at Carnegie Hall a few years ago. Curtis also offers beginning keyboard instruction.

The school has a state-certified nursing program, a Navy Junior ROTC course, an honors track, and a school of international studies. Journalism students put out a monthly newspaper. Kids in all programs—from honors to special education—learn desktop publishing in a well-equipped newsroom/computer lab. Most of the teachers live on Staten Island and some graduated from Curtis themselves. Many faculty members—including the principal—send their own children to Curtis.

“There’s a school spirit here,” says principal Edward Seto. “I didn’t create it. I just didn’t muck it up. You see it at athletic events, spirit days, and ‘I love Curtis’ days.” There are several dozen athletic teams, including, in a recent year, the city football champions. There is a playing field next to the school.

Just up the hill from the ferry at St. George, Curtis is in an urban neighborhood in transition, with fading Victorian houses

(formerly summer homes of wealthy Manhattanites) on one side and large low-income housing projects on the other.

The school's white population, which steadily decreased in the 1980s and early 1990s, has stabilized in recent years because of an "integration variance" that encourages white children from other neighborhoods to attend Curtis. The school's drop-out rate has dropped from 15% to less than 1%—one of the lowest rates in the city.

"That integration variance saved the school," Seto said. "It's beyond a racial thing. You need to have a certain racial and socioeconomic balance in a school to succeed. And this school has gotten stronger. That's the remarkable story."

Parents, students, and faculty agree. Curtis High School is a school that works, in large part because of its diversity. Kids from different ethnic groups mingle in the crowded hallways and lunchroom. Like all schools, Curtis has its share of scuffles between kids, but none of them has been racially motivated, according to the staff.

"We were very concerned that it was a huge school," says Marta Vengochea, whose two children attended. "But nothing unpleasant [has] ever happened. It is very welcoming. You feel that everything is under control. It's a wonderful school."

She praised the school's "incredible" theater and music program, as well as student trips abroad, a foreign exchange program, and the program in English as a second language that her niece from Argentina was enrolled in.

One secret to Curtis's success: Students and faculty respect and listen to one another. At a monthly Council Meeting, the student government, faculty, and administrators discussed issues as mundane as garbage in the hall, or broken locks in the girls' locker room, as well as the more contentious question of mandatory photo ID cards.

Another key to success: small programs, each of which have their own identity and allow kids and grown-ups to get to know one another well. Curtis is divided into 12 houses. The most popular and successful programs are the Navy Junior ROTC, practical nursing, the performing arts department, an honors program called "IB/Scholarship," and the School of International Studies (SIS) program, also for high academic achievers.

The kids with the best academic skills generally opt for the nursing, IB, or SIS programs. The **practical nursing program** is one of just three in the city. It prepares students to take the state

certification test after their senior year, and 85% of them pass. Seniors alternate weeks working in a hospital and in school.

“It permits low-income kids to enter the professional world,” said Seto. “They may come from a family that never had a professional in the family. This breaks that cycle. Most continue to go on to college and get their RN.”

One senior nursing student transferred from the smaller, prestigious Staten Island Tech. “Friends at Staten Island Tech said, ‘You’re going into that environment?’” said senior Jennifer Smith. “But when I got here it was the total opposite of what they said. It’s such a well-rounded program and a well-rounded school.”

The **IB program** is open to incoming 9th graders who have a 90% average in math, science, and reading, have good attendance in middle school, and qualify through a placement test. Most students who don’t make it into the IB program end up in SIS, where they must maintain an 80 average. The IB program originally was affiliated with the International Baccalaureate Organization, a nonprofit Swiss foundation, but it proved too expensive for Curtis. It is still a rigorous academic program offering Advanced Placement courses in English, chemistry, biology, physics, European history, American history, foreign language, calculus, and art history. Students also participate in lectures and labs at the College of Staten Island.

The **Navy Junior ROTC program** was ranked second among 435 ROTC high school programs in the United States in 1999. Students have two periods daily of ROTC for 4 years, wear their uniforms once a week, do 3,000 hours of community service, march in parades, and do military drills in physical education. About 20% of graduates go on to join the military, and a few have been admitted to West Point and Annapolis.

The English department is one of the strongest in the school, and writing is a key focus. A sample assignment? Here’s one for a freshman IB English class on creative writing:

THE GREAT LOST GREEK MYTH

During a dig on the sunny isle of Crete, your group of intrepid knowledge-seekers inadvertently uncovered a stack of stone tablets, chiseled upon which are some of the most mind-boggling myths never dreamed of by our old friend Mr. Bulfinch. Your assignment is to smuggle these allegories past the watchful eyes on Mount Olympus, not to mention the Greek authorities, and

present them to your fellow mythmakers, focusing on both the literal and symbolic meanings of the stories. Each collaborative group is responsible to produce: (1) a typed story with cover, (2) artwork reflecting the story, (3) a physical representation of the principal god/goddess involved, (4) a presentation.

English teacher Joe Scro does “free” writing with his students. He and his students write for 3 or 4 minutes continuously, not worrying about punctuation or style, just getting their thoughts on paper. They each keep a journal and, sitting in a circle, are encouraged to read their work out loud. They later edit their work.

“I write with them—I’m one of the crowd. We’re all writers together,” said Scro. “In the beginning you want them to be writing fluently, you want to remove obstacles.”

The school was built for 1,500 students and is the only seriously overcrowded school on Staten Island. Lack of space hampers some of the art programs. “The physical layout of the school is the weak link—living in a 100-year-old environment,” said art teacher Marilyn Corti. “I would love to do photography, but there’s no space.”

In a tiny dance studio—the size of a regular classroom—members of the Curtis Dance Ensemble were choreographing a dance to “Footloose.” Despite the cramped space, the enthusiasm, energy, and talent of the kids were palpable.

What do students like about the school? “I like the diversity here—you can find anyone here,” said one.

“My math teacher takes it personally if I don’t show up in tutoring,” said another.

“It’s not like other schools where kids come in and beat each other up,” said a third.

Most kids go to state and city colleges, but some have been admitted to Yale, MIT, Harvard, Brown, and Dartmouth. Tours for prospective parents and students are available on request.

The Michael J. Petrides School

715 Ocean Terrace, Building B
Staten Island, NY 10301
(718) 815-0186

Admissions: lottery (K–8), educational option (high school)

Grade levels: K–12

Graduation rate: 99%

Enrollment: 1,166

College admissions: very good

Class size: 34

Ethnicity: 72%W 10%B 11%H 7%A

Average SATs: V478 M482

Free lunch: 15%

The Michael J. Petrides School, open to all Staten Island residents, is a laboratory school designed to develop new teaching techniques and share them with other schools. With children in kindergarten through 12th grade, Petrides is a place where high school kids tutor little kids, teachers of children of different ages learn tips from one another, and teachers and kids get to know one another well.

“I love that it’s a small school,” said senior Dina Crowe, who said she wants to teach at Petrides when she graduates from college. “You can’t get in trouble because everyone is always on top of you. It’s like a small family.”

Parents say they appreciate the fact that teachers may get to know kids well over several years and may help them design projects suited to their particular talents. Dorothy Low said teachers encouraged her son to set up websites and to work as a disk jockey in a theater program.

“You get to know the teachers and they get to see your child grow,” Ms. Low said. “Especially for a high school child, [it’s important] that the teachers really know him on an individual basis. You’re not going to get that in a traditional setting.” There are 500 students in the high school.

A lavishly equipped school set on 43 acres on the former campus of the College of Staten Island, Petrides looks like a private school set in a country club. It offers kids in grades 6–12 perks such as their own wireless laptop computers. The elementary school has “reading lofts”—cozy nooks where children can climb up and read a book. The cafeteria is bright and beautiful and overlooks a grassy playing field.

Students use their laptop computers at home and school. In one math class, kids used them to take notes and write down their homework assignments. In a Spanish class, kids used the Internet for research on Spanish artists. In an AP biology class, half the kids used a textbook and half used the Internet or a CD that came with their textbook to look up the function of the cilia and mucus in the respiratory system.

“With laptops, every classroom is a laboratory and the computer becomes a tool,” said Principal Michael Davino. Students who have technical troubles may bring their laptops to the cafeteria, where a technical team troubleshoots three times a week. In the well-equipped computer lab, kids may study graphic arts, page layout, and desktop publishing. Teen-friendly assignments include designing cell phones and CD covers.

In the middle school, classes have been organized so that teachers work in interdisciplinary teams and have common planning time. That means a social studies teacher, for example, can plan lessons in coordination with an English teacher. Teachers from different disciplines can share strategies for helping a particular child.

Davino said the middle school initiative has been so successful that he plans to introduce similar techniques in the high school. Teachers attend a “summer institute” where they are introduced to new teaching methods.

Most classes mix kids of different abilities. However, some low-achieving kids in the 9th and 10th grade have been placed together, with only 14–20 students in a class and longer instruction for math and science. The school encourages all students—not just the highest achieving—to take Advanced Placement courses. About one-third of the high school students take at least one. The scores on Regents exams have been high in the humanities, weaker in math and science.

Despite its spacious fields and campus, Petrides has a limited sports department. Gym is typical for a public high school: 96 students each period share a gym and a small weight room with two teachers. High school students are not permitted on the fields during lunch (although elementary and middle school students may use them).

The staff is hired according to the seniority provisions of the UFT contract, which gives the most senior teachers the right to a job, even over the objections of the principal. The school had been “school-based option”—in which prospective teachers are

interviewed by a committee—but the teachers voted to revert to the system of hiring by seniority.

The high school graduated its first class in 2001. Students have been admitted to Cornell, St. John's, SUNY Binghamton, Penn State, Iona College, and Hofstra. Parents say the college counselor is helpful and gives out her home telephone number.

Most students enter in kindergarten. In recent years, there have been 25 to 30 spaces in the 4th grade, fewer than 10 in the 6th grade, and about 50 spaces for new 9th graders. There are often more than 800 applicants for 9th grade.

For the high school, students are admitted according to the educational option formula designed to ensure a mix of low- and high-achieving kids. At most educational option schools, the administration picks half the class and a computer picks the other half at random. Because of the patronage scandal, however, Davino has opted to have the computer choose all the students.

Staten Island Technical High School

485 Clawson Street
Staten Island, NY 10306
(718) 667-5725

Admissions: selective

Grade levels: 9–12

Enrollment: 717

Class size: 34

Average SATs: V615 M634

Graduation rate: 100%

College admissions: excellent

Ethnicity: 80%W 3%B 5%H 12%A

Free lunch: 3%

Staten Island Technical High School is a small, elite high school with a specialty in engineering, an unusual Russian studies program, and a homey, small-town feel. All students take at least 3 years of electronics and at least 3 years of mechanical engineering, as well as a full course load of other academic subjects.

Staten Island Tech was founded in 1988 in response to pressure from parents in this rural and suburban borough to have a specialized high school similar to Manhattan's Stuyvesant, Bronx High School of Science, Brooklyn Tech, and Queens's Townsend Harris.

It was one of the first high schools in the United States to participate in a student exchange program with the former Soviet Union after a summit in which President Ronald Reagan and Soviet Premier Mikail Gorbachev agreed to closer cultural ties.

Russian is the only foreign language taught at the school. Students put on skits to learn to speak the language. They also put their knowledge to practical use. For example, they translated the liturgy for a Jewish Passover seder into Russian for new immigrants at a local community center.

Two of the school's Russian-language teachers are among the first graduates of Staten Island Tech, and their rooms are decorated with Russian hockey jerseys, posters, postcards, and other souvenirs gathered on their trips to Russia. Each year, 10 students and a teacher visit Russia for a month and 10 Russian students and a teacher visit here.

Staten Island Tech has a pleasant atmosphere, with clean-cut kids, involved parents, and lots of school spirit. The old-fashioned red brick building has hardwood floors and original pan-

eling. "When I came here I felt like I went back to 1950," joked one teacher.

Teachers and administrators say they know every child in the building. Parents say the small size is reassuring, but kids sometimes find it claustrophobic. "I can't wait to get to a big college," a senior girl said. "Here everybody knows your business."

The school has managed to enroll roughly equal numbers of girls and boys—unlike other engineering programs that are lopsided with males. One of the things that attracts girls is a sports department that is as good for them as it is for boys.

Staten Island Tech and nearby Ralph R. McKee Career and Technical High School share sports teams, as well as a homecoming. The school athletic field recently has been renovated by parent volunteers with financial support from the City Council.

In addition to an English research paper every term, sophomores write a chemistry research paper; juniors, a history research project; and seniors, a paper in math or engineering.

Students in a senior English class acted out scenes from *Othello*. Juniors discussed *Everyday Use* by Alice Walker. A stack of journals was piled high in a corner, containing students' reflections on what they had read as well as free writing, including poetry. The teacher's written comments were thoughtful and frequent throughout the journals. The curriculum was integrated with art projects—including very creatively executed posters and dioramas made as a project about *Macbeth*.

Classes last the standard 42 minutes, but the staff is talking about the possibility of introducing block scheduling or longer class periods. Students say their homework takes from 2 to 4 hours a night and the school is demanding.

But the high achievers at Staten Island Tech seem to thrive on the work and the competition. Once, the administration tried to do away with the posting of the honor roll, complete with grade-point averages, on a bulletin board. The students rebelled, and grades have been posted in the hallway ever since.

Another bulletin board documents community service projects that kids are involved in—tutoring and mentoring middle school students, organizing food drives, and volunteering at soup kitchens and nursing homes.

The school strongly urges incoming freshmen to take a 6-week summer school program at which they may take courses in subjects that might cause them concern. Many of them start their study of Russian then.

Tech is a school where most children succeed. There is a very low drop-out rate, and a lot of support offered to kids who need help. There is peer tutoring before and after school and faculty tutoring throughout the day, and many teachers give up their lunch hour to work with kids. The faculty interviews any student who's failing a subject, and parents of any absent student are called.

Open to all New York City residents, the school attracts mostly kids from Staten Island. Only a handful of students come across the Verrazano Narrows Bridge from Brooklyn.

The vast majority of the school's graduates go on to 4-year colleges, including West Point, Middlebury, Princeton, MIT, and Cooper Union. Staten Island Tech has had the highest graduation rate in the city in recent years.

Admission is based on applicants' classroom grades and 7th-grade scores on standardized tests. The cutoff score to be considered for admission changes every year. There is an open house in October, for which parents should register in September.

Tottenville High School

100 Luten Avenue
Huguenot, NY 10312
(718) 356-2220

Admissions: neighborhood school

Grade levels: 9–12

Enrollment: 4,004

Class size: 34

Average SATs: V485 M500

Graduation rate: 82%

College admissions: very good

Ethnicity: 82%W 3%B 8%H 7%A

Free lunch: 3%

“What’s the tuition here?” a member of a sports team visiting from the Bronx asked a Tottenville player. His assumption that the school is private wasn’t surprising considering how plush a campus it has, with three playing fields sprawled out over 14 plus acres and a huge, modern school building that’s the largest facility in New York City. With 43 teams and 700 kids playing, it has one of the most comprehensive and successful sports programs in the city. With just over 4,000 students, it has one of the largest populations as well.

For students who can handle the size, Tottenville prides itself on offering something for everybody. “We work hard to break down the anonymity factor—we try to get kids involved in things, clubs and teams,” said Principal John Tuminaro. Kids from the three area middle schools, IS 7, 34, and 75, vie for entrance to one of two “Institutes”—humanities and science—via exams given in the 8th grade. Those who miss the cut-off on the exam may take honors courses.

Tottenville offers many programs that smaller schools can’t such as a “Virtual Enterprise” program in which kids run a mock advertising agency, or a Cisco course in computer networking. (Many land summer internships including one student who helped set up Schools Chancellor Joel Klein’s computer.) In a dental hygiene course, students were learning how to clean one another’s teeth. We were treated to a four-star meal prepared by the Culinary Arts students: grilled sweet potato and ginger soup, escalopes of salmon with baby greens with sesame vinaigrette, and “beggars pouch”—a sweet pocket of dough filled with strawberries and tied up with licorice string. (If only school

lunches were so good!) The music department has a stellar jazz band, concert band, and a concert chorus decked out in tee-shirts which read, "How do you get to Carnegie Hall?" (They had already figured that out, having just sung there the day prior to our visit, one of four schools in New York state to be so honored.) There is a small auto repair shop and a woodworking shop. The girls' soccer team is a perennial city champ; boys' baseball is usually one of the top teams in the city as well.

The giant gulf between this suburban-looking school, where many seniors drive their own cars to school, and the rest of the city was apparent in a 10th-grade English class where students read *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens. They were encouraged to talk about their expectations for how they want to live when they grow up. One boy described a colonial style home, with columns and a large backyard with a swimming pool and tennis courts. Morning announcements on the loudspeaker mention meetings of the Young Republican Club and of the Irish culture club.

The building, a closed-U shape built around a courtyard full of blossoms in the spring, is sprawling, and built out of serviceable concrete. The hallways, tiled in institutional orange and beige, are enlivened by inset cabinets featuring student work. The building houses two stores, mostly run by students most in **special education** who otherwise might be in danger of dropping out. Tottenville Treasures, the brainchild of a social worker, smells of scented candles and potpourri and sells greeting cards, teddy bears, and roses for Valentines Day.

A small supermarket, also run by students, features not only regular grocery items but baked goods and sandwiches prepared by students in the Culinary Arts program. The day of our visit, there were homemade apple turnovers and the smell of freshly baked chocolate chip cookies permeated the air.

Most academic classrooms are set up in a traditional format, with desks in rows, and teachers leading the discussion. There are some notable exceptions. A lively Italian class was taught by a native speaker who spoke only in Italian. There was an easy-going, but studious, atmosphere in the AP calculus class. As the teacher circulated among the students, there was a gentle hum of conversation as the kids worked together to solve problems. An interesting English elective course focused on Civil Rights literature of the 1960s, where the class was reading *Manchild in the*

Promised Land. Many teachers are graduates of Tottenville themselves, and many send their own children there.

The size of the school has its drawbacks. Although many parents praise the schools extensive course offerings and caring teachers, one mother called the administration “inept” and “unresponsive” and said the staff used the large size of the school as an excuse for not accomplishing more. Another mother withdrew her son saying that any “complaints, questions, or comments are ignored.”

Tottenville has also received some bad press because of occasional, highly publicized fights on the school grounds. However, security is not oppressive and the principal is tolerant of minor infractions. He frowns on staff that yell at the kids or who aren't welcoming. “They need to find their home here,” he said. “I like to think I'm a kid's principal.”

More than 90% of the graduates go on to four-year college. St. Johns University is a popular choice. Students have also been accepted at Cornell and Columbia. Tottenville High School is a zoned neighborhood school. About 120 African American and Hispanic students have been admitted from other parts of the island on integration variances. An open house is held in October for prospective students and their parents.

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