

The Schools We Need

by public school students
of the Bronx, New York
and What Kids Can Do

CREATING SMALL HIGH SCHOOLS THAT WORK FOR US



“In a small school,
everyone’s opinion
can be heard.”





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and keeping them to ourselves.
Maybe if we spoke up a little
more, things would get better.”

A BRONX STUDENT

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Introduction

What's so different about a small high school, compared to a large one? When school leaders decide to create more small schools in their district, how do students themselves experience the change in their everyday routines, as well as in their sense of power and possibility?

These questions could be asked of at least 100,000 students in recent years, as school districts across the country have started breaking up giant schools of 1,500 to 4,000 students into smaller, more personal schools of only a few hundred.

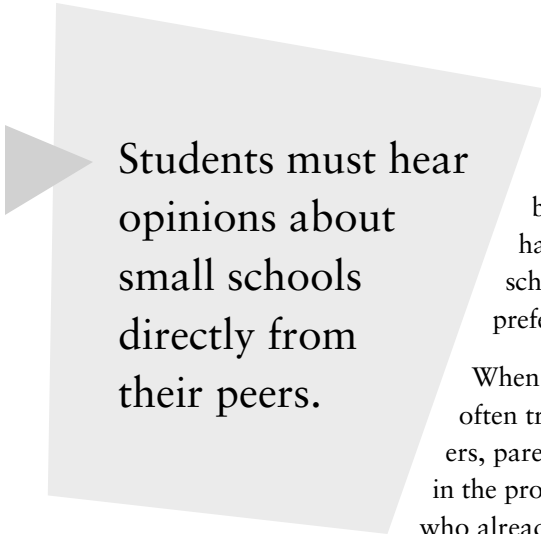
Some of the new small schools have themes (like international studies, or the arts, or science and technology) that connect everything students learn in all their subjects. Some occupy their own separate buildings, though most find a home in a set-apart area of a large high school, which may be changing over to include several small schools.

But they all rest on the belief that students will learn more, have better lives at school, and go on to better futures when they don't get lost in the crowd.

Plenty of research backs up that belief, especially for students who do not come from backgrounds of privilege. And recently, several large foundations—the Carnegie Corporation, the Open Society Institute, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation—have put millions of dollars into the creation of new small high schools.

In the Bronx, New York, an initiative called New Century High Schools has taken up the challenge with that financial boost. Ten small high schools have already opened in the Bronx in the last year, and eleven more will open soon. Still more are on the drawing boards, as school people and community groups come up with new proposals that reflect their educational ideas.

In a few years, as many as 30 new small schools will give Bronx students an alternative to the enormous high schools sometimes built a century



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ago. Already, in large buildings like Morris High School at 166th Street, all entering ninth graders go to one of the four small schools that occupy the building of 1,500 students. More than half of Bronx students now make a small school their first choice when they list their preference for where to attend high school.

When school leaders plan small schools, they often try to involve students along with teachers, parents, and other community members in the process. For example, at least two students who already attended a large Bronx high school serve on each “school design team” that works out the details of a New Century High School. Sometimes these are seniors, who graduate before the new school gets off the ground. Sometimes they are ninth graders, who are among the new school’s pioneer class in their tenth-grade year. Sometimes they are Bronx students who attend one of the small public schools in Manhattan, where New York’s small school initiative began over ten years ago.

Whatever their background, these students bring an important perspective to the work of starting up the new small schools. Their opinions, questions, and objections stand for those of every student whose life would change dramatically with the new school.

Outnumbered by the adults on the design team, they do not come to planning meetings with advanced degrees in education or experience in managing organizations. But they have something even more important—the reality of being a young person in high school in America today.

Unless school planners listen carefully to the ideas of high school students, the Bronx leadership believes, this bold small-school initiative will fall short of its potential. Equally important, other students must hear opinions about small schools directly from their peers, who know their worries about what the new system might bring.

This booklet came about to address those two needs. Its 20 student co-authors spoke from their minds and hearts, just when the Bronx high school system was in the midst of changing to smaller schools. They were speaking both to adults who are planning small schools and to the students whom such changes will affect.

They don’t know all the answers to the candid questions and concerns they raise. But they are crucial partners in the inquiry, and to hear their voices constitutes an important step toward its success.

As one of these students said at the start of making this book, “We’re often thinking things and keeping them to ourselves. Maybe if we spoke up a little more, things would get better.”

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Thinking Out Loud

A conversation with Bronx high school students in the midst of change

Students Becoming Experts

When a school system decides to make the transition from very large high schools to small ones, not every student gets the chance to express an opinion or to ask the questions they want answered. Above all, most students want to know: Exactly how will their daily lives be changing if they go to a small high school instead of a large one?

Twenty public high school students in the Bronx, New York gathered recently to offer some answers to that question. Brought together by the leadership of New Century High Schools, some had served on the school design teams for new small schools. Others were simply students attending the new schools. All were in the middle of the transition, and all had something to say about it.

Some, like Minerva and Janill, are tenth graders still trying to get used to the new scene unfolding in their big former school. They think ninth graders like Joshua, Malissa, and LaTisha have the advantage, because they started out in the new small school, and so didn't have to make a break with the old one.

A few, like Zoranyi and Livet, have served with teachers from the district on design teams, creating visions for new small schools that won't get started until after they have graduated. They are full of ideas about small schools but haven't had the chance to experience the reality.

A half dozen, like Nyrere, Ishmael, and Ivy, have been going to one of the new small schools for more than a year, and have strong opinions about what's working and what isn't.

And at 17, Rosa is preparing to graduate after three years in a small public school that has been around for more than ten years. Her school has already gone through its startup years, and its ways are more established and accepted by its students.



“None of us fit the stereotype of a powerful political person—we’re young, we’re minorities.”

These Bronx students, like so many others around the country, are caught up in what is already the most important educational initiative of the new century. And as they gather to investigate their own experiences, they are building their own expertise.

Just like the adults who work on the small schools experiment, they must start by finding the right questions. As they talk with other students, they must listen to their answers and test them out against what they know for themselves.

They have the great advantage of youth—they don't have to pretend that everything is just fine. With no careers to protect, no reputation on the line, they can just say what they think, change their minds when they want, give credit where it's due. They can ask the questions nobody else dares to ask—and, sometimes, they can answer them.

Building Community Together

Like most teenagers, these Bronx students worried a good deal about making friends in a new school. Being an outsider in a really big group, they agree, is harder than in a smaller group:

I imagined myself in a huge place with thousands of students and being this very small person looking for people in the building. It's a horrible feeling. You feel lost and scared. – ROSA

When I came from Jamaica, I couldn't speak so that anybody understood me. I spoke bad English, and I would use my size and my aggressiveness to my advantage. If you said "What?" or "I can't understand you," in the old days at [my big school], I would punch you in the mouth. In a smaller atmosphere I make friends with guys who were timid and small and help them. – NYRERE

In a big school you can't catch every single detail, so you start making these stereotypes and assumptions about people based on their heritage or their physical appearance. In a small school you know them as individuals. – ROSA

“When you know other people better, you have respect, pay attention, don't throw newspaper in the hallways.”

All of them have found that small schools make the process easier.

After one term I know pretty much everyone in the school. I'm in a class of 127 ninth graders, and [because it's a new school] there are only 50 tenth graders. – LATISHA

Everybody knows each other and all the teachers know you, so it's easier to get along with people. – MALISSA

Mama, Julio, and Danjela are all tenth graders at the new Bronx International School. As recent immigrants to the United States, they especially appreciate the close community a small school provides.

In a small school you get to know people's stories. It's good to know people's stories. You could think different about the person when you know what happened to her in her country. – MAMA

My friends in a big school tell me that if you want to be popular you have to be in a gang and use drugs. In a small school, no one is more than the other one. Everyone is the same. Everybody is number one. – JULIO

Of course there's a time when you say about someone, I don't want to be friends with this person. But it's good to follow the words: "Don't judge something if you don't know anything about it." In a small school you find out more about it, so you would understand it more, and you wouldn't judge it. – DANJELA

Building a community of respect, these students say, is easier when people know something about each other:

The main thing is to know someone. If you don't know me, how can you respect me? If we come into school and we never talk to each other, I will never know who you are. – ISHMAEL

When you know other people better, you have respect, pay attention, don't throw newspaper in the hallways. [You can] be there when the person needs you. — DANJELA

Other systems also help build trust, friendship, and respect. Many small schools have advisory groups, for example, where about a dozen students and a teacher-adviser get to know each other well over a year or more.

In smaller schools they try to organize students together so they will not tease each other. We know each other more in advisory groups; we feel comfortable. It's the safe spot they give to us to talk about where are we going, what are we feeling, what is our family doing. — ISHMAEL

In our advisory we have community meeting, and one or two people lead it. We bring up topics, anything that's bugging you. We go through one part where we bring negative acts to the community and get advice from friends, or write it out as free writing. It took us a while to express our feelings with each other, but now it helps with everything. We're all a tight community, and we are there for each other when things go wrong. — JOSHUA

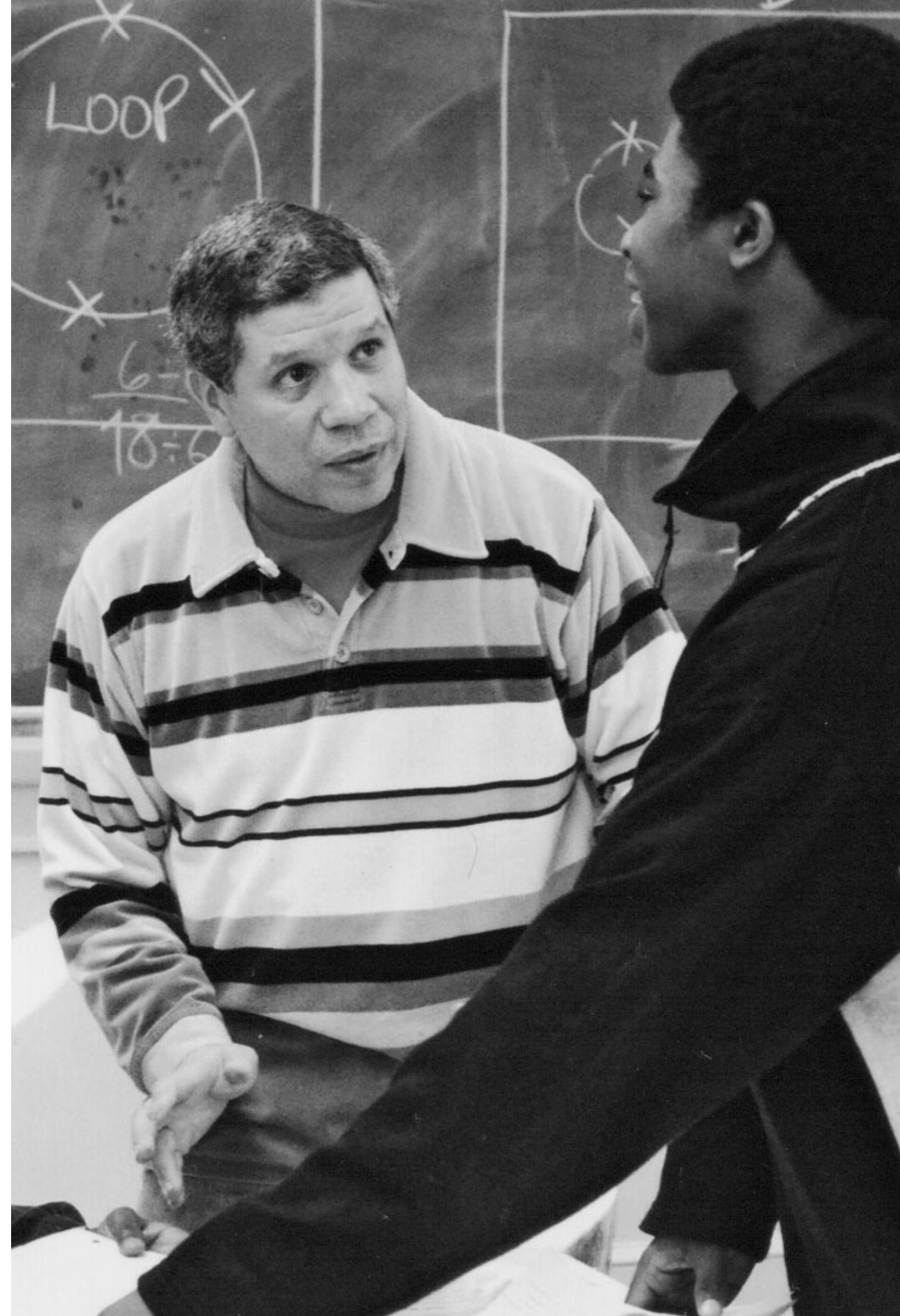
In the Aerospace Academy we have class commanders. Any issue that's brought up, you bring to the commander, and then they bring it to the next higher-ranking person. You help each other out—sort of the same as advisory but done in a more military way. — ALBERTO

Small schools help parents feel part of the community, students say:

In [my old school] when the ROTC hosts a night for the community, only maybe 18 parents came. In the Academy more parents come, because it's small and they feel better known. The small school has a list, and they can personally invite them and check. And with fewer parents, they have more time. — NYRERE

More Time and Attention from Teachers

The biggest difference in a small school, all these students say, is the extra time and attention they receive from teachers and counselors:



Students' questions about learning in small schools

Can a small school help us . . .

- ▶ have more interesting classes?
- ▶ learn more about problems we care about?
- ▶ set goals that reflect our potential and our interests?
- ▶ get better at knowing and doing the things we care about?
- ▶ make sure that when we try hard our effort pays off?
- ▶ show others in the school and the community what we know and can do?
- ▶ have teachers who respect and care about us and our families?
- ▶ have better relationships with teachers and other adults?
- ▶ get along better and bridge the differences among students?
- ▶ improve our access to interesting choices after high school?
- ▶ meet and work with adults who can help us succeed in life?
- ▶ connect what we do in school to what goes on in the rest of our lives—families, work, community or youth groups?
- ▶ gain respect and develop into leaders in our communities?

In my old school, they had too many students and not enough time. The principal was always busy, the counselor was always busy. They would say, "I can't fit you in my schedule, come tomorrow." We didn't have them when we needed them. That was a major problem. In a big school, the bell rings and people are gone in a flash. – ZORANYI

In a big school, the counselor might have 1,000 students, where in a small school there might be one counselor for 300 students. You feel that you can ask anyone for help at any time—personal things as well as things involving school. Anything I need, I can go to pretty much any teacher, my advisor, my counselor, even the principal. The principal knows everyone's name! – ROSA

I see a difference—we get the lesson done and get to the end with extra time, and students in the big school don't get to the end. We focus more. Students learn more, because you have longer periods and teachers have more time to explain the work. – LATISHA

In smaller schools you get to see the teachers after class. They are always ready to help you with problems that you are facing and with academic work. In a big school, the teacher doesn't have time to notice all the students individually. Here we build up a special relationship with teachers, like they are like our guardians. They know us by name, they know how we feel, and what's going on—because they ask. – ISHMAEL

When their teachers know them well, kids may push themselves to work harder and succeed.

When your teachers know your name, you're under more pressure to do well. – ALBERTO

In a test, I feel like when they ask a question, they're directing it towards me. – JOSHUA

The expectations are high of students, but sometimes they can feel too high. It could be good, but for me it's been hard. But you can use your advisory period to talk about things like that. – MINERVA

Now [when] I am applying to college, being from a small school I have almost too much attention! Not just for me, but for all students, they are asking, "Is your essay done? Are you sending out applications?" – ROSA

But with those higher expectations, teachers also offer extra support.

Our teachers care to go as far as staying until five o'clock each day to tutor you in your weak area. – NYRERE

Teachers help you in different ways. They might try to speak Spanish because they want to help you. They don't speak very well, but they try! – JULIO

They provide an after-school program where they bring in other adults to help students who need help. And they also pay students to help other students; I get paid to do that. – ISHMAEL

In the school I went to before, they just give you grades on your report card. In a small school they give you comments, how you can improve. It makes me have my next goal [be] to do that thing, to get a better grade. – LORI

And because teachers in small schools know more about their students, they can help develop their hopes and dreams for the future.

I wanted to become a teacher, but then I changed my mind and decided to become a vet. My teacher, who knows that, is helping me out and trying to get me an internship. At a bigger school they might not know you well enough to know that. – JANILL

The teachers talk to us about our dreams and futures, what we want to be and do. They are not deciding for you, they are guiding you . . . My adviser talks to me about college, about the future. Right now I'm kind



of thinking what to do. I want to be a computer engineer, an accountant, a lawyer, an actor. By the time I become a senior, I will decide. – ISHMAEL

If I didn't have close teachers like I had in my senior year, I wouldn't have made the decision to go upstate and study animals. I wasn't thinking about that, and yet these teachers gave me a lot of support—my teacher saw people individually. That happens more in a small school. – ZORANYI

Different Curriculum, Different Ways of Learning

Advocates of small schools often talk about the alternatives they offer students regarding curriculum and different ways of learning. For many in this group of Bronx students, both are real benefits.

Minerva is a tenth grader at the High School for Teaching and the Professions, which is just getting started in a corner of Walton High School. Last year, the “school” was a program for ninth graders within the larger school. This year, the academy has its own name, space, and staff of teachers. Most of its students have expressed some interest either in teaching or another professional field.

They want to give you an idea of what it's like in teaching and the other professions. They have a special class on psychology and in computers. – MINERVA

At the small school Nyrere and Alberto are helping to start, the Bronx Aerospace Academy, leadership is the central theme. The new school, which also exists only as a ninth-grade program, grew out of a partnership with the Junior Air Force Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC) at Evander Childs, a 3,000-student high school where Nyrere recently graduated and Alberto is a senior. This year, as Alberto explains, both are helping the ninth graders get used to the military culture:

Nyrere does the physical part, and I do the mental part—the history of ROTC, regulations about the uniform and how to wear it, class protocols. There's a lot of discipline. When we come into class we stand at parade rest behind our seat. Then we say the Pledge of Allegiance and sing the Air Force song, and the instructor comes in.

Zoranyi, who graduated last year from a large Bronx high school and is now in college, served on the design team for another new small school, the High School for International Studies. She explains how different kinds of curriculum allow for different ways of teaching:

We'll be doing all the basics to go to college, but doing it by different techniques. Like we're studying international countries and cultures—sooner or later we're going to work together. Offering a little more than just the basics makes it interesting for students—more inspirational. If I want to learn science, I can study what scientists in Japan are working on.

Rosa chose a different international school shortly after her arrival from the Dominican Republic three years ago, because it enrolls immigrant students like her. She was looking not only for an immersion in her new language but also for the supportive and collaborative environment that small schools provide.

International School has its own culture. We are 300 students from all over the world, all having the same goal, to learn English. So we support each other and help each other, and teachers help, too. When you live in a country where everyone speaks the same language, it's hard to adjust to a place where people come from all over the world. They all come with so many ideas, and when you put them all together it's interesting. We work in groups, like in real life, not sitting in separate desks. It helps you develop communication skills.

In small schools students often work together in small groups instead of listening to the teacher lecture most of the time. The teacher acts more as a coach, moving from student to student.

Students learn to work together as a team, because that can be arranged. They have more opportunity to participate in class. They get more comfortable learning without the distraction of the whole crowd.

It also gives them more chance to be a leader. – ZORANYI

We have more time to work on things, and when you are in a small group you analyze better, you understand better. When you learn something in small schools, you will never forget. – LORI

Even though fewer courses may be offered at a small school, most have enough activities so that everyone participates, one way or another. And their small size allows a more flexible approach that encourages students to go off campus for advanced or elective classes.

The truth is that it's less quantity, more quality. A big school has more opportunities, but the information doesn't get to all students. In a small school opportunities are for everyone—everyone knows about them. For example, when I was in eighth grade in a big school, we were supposed to have a prom, but they didn't tell everyone. I didn't know when it was, so I didn't go. – LORI

Since you know everybody, you have a friendship with people, so they're willing to follow you if you have a good idea for an activity. A few weeks ago I started a club called the Pen Pal project, and now we have this strong group. – ROSA

Some people think small schools are like special ed, because we only take four subjects. But schools like this can get more students educated. They always talk more about going to college, preparing for our future . . . Now I am taking psychology at Hostos Community College. It's pretty hard. – IVY

“We need to know what's going to happen, to agree on what's going on. Let us help decide. Let us approve.”

And among the opportunities small schools offer, students appreciate the chance to participate in decisionmaking that affects them.

The teachers and principals are not the only ones that make the school, the students also participate in making the decisions. If something is going on that we don't like, we have a voice to talk. They always hear us and try to make it better. – ISHMAEL

We made the school, that's true. The student council has to go to all the decisions about what to build and say what we like. We ask decisions from the students. – IVY

In a small school, everybody's opinion can be heard. – MALISSA

How Best to Get Started?

A common method of starting up small schools—one experienced by many of these Bronx students—is to give them a separate section of a larger school, like a corridor, a whole floor, or maybe just a few connected classrooms with an office. Eventually, the larger school is replaced completely with five or six new small schools that share the building. Rosa's school started the process in the early 1990s and by now has worked out many of the details of sharing space, she explains:

My school is a huge building, divided into floors for each school. Students in one small school cannot go to another school's area. And each school has its own schedule for when they come in and leave, and when they eat lunch. Three schools share space at lunch, and problems are very rare; students seem to understand that we are sharing space. We also share the gym and the auditorium, but the schools are not together there at the same time. The whole building shares our sports teams. That works out well. And sometimes there are activities when students from different schools get together—for example, a music program where students from Julliard come and tutor students in instruments.

In the early days of such a changeover, however, tensions can arise among students who stay in the large school and those moving into the small ones.

Students' practical concerns about small schools

- ▶ How will students be chosen for any particular small school or learning community? How will we know that the process is fair to everyone?
- ▶ Will we have a chance to spend time with friends who do not attend the same small school?
- ▶ How much of our day will we spend with the same group of kids? How many students will be in that core group, and what will we do together?
- ▶ Who will be our principal and which teachers will we have?
- ▶ Will we have our own guidance counselor and other administrative staff? If we share administrators with other schools, how much of their time can we expect?
- ▶ What other adults will we work with, either inside school or in the community?
- ▶ Where will we be (a section or floor of a larger building)? Will the small school have its own space? What will it be like?
- ▶ Will we have to share facilities like bathrooms, the cafeteria, gym, auditorium, and library with other small schools? How will that work?
- ▶ Will we have a different schedule (like with longer block classes)? Will we lose elective courses offered in the larger school?
- ▶ Will our requirements for promotion and graduation be different from those in the larger school?
- ▶ Will we have the same extracurricular activities and special programs? If not, what will the school offer instead?

When they opened a small school with ninth graders on the fourth floor of our high school, we felt bad—because it was our chilling area, where we would rest, talk, dance, share. We had to take classes in offices, and the rooms were so small. And when we went to visit our old teachers on the fourth floor, security officers would ask us for a pass and say, “What are you doing here?”
— ZORANYI

If kids in the large school perceive they are losing something, they can resent the small school's students.

I was jealous when the small school came to take our fourth floor. We lost our counselor, and they gave me a new counselor, and I was so mad, I didn't even know her name. It gets harder for the kids that are left behind in the big school, and they take it out on the small school. New small schools should give plenty of transition time, so people are not losing their teachers and counselors. — LIVET

They might have had a good program before that was similar. Or they think we think we're better than them because we're wearing uniforms. They can take it out on us. — MALISSA

To prevent situations like this, students suggest paying close attention to keeping the small schools physically separate.

It's nice to share a building with other schools, but sometimes students from the big school walk right into our classes, and they don't listen when the teachers ask them to go. They should give us our own floor so we can close our doors, instead of opening to all students. — ISHMAEL

Every day the P.A. system for [the big high school] cuts in right in the middle of our classes. They tell us that they'll shut it off, but our teachers have to stop teaching until it's over. — JOSHUA

Our small school is located in a big school, and we have four classrooms at an intersection where a lot of students pass. We need to put small schools in a place where they will not be disturbed by others. — ALBERTO

Planners can also lessen conflicts by involving students in the process.

The problem is that we need to be aware of changes before. Don't let the plan be made just by adults. We need to know what's going to happen, to agree on what's going on. Let us help decide. Let us approve. — ZORANYI

Several of these Bronx students, in fact, served on planning teams for the new small schools starting up there. In general, they felt positive about the experience. Livet was on the planning team for the Marble Hill School for International Studies, now in its first year.

I was one of two students on the team, and they always wanted to know our feelings.

Youth and adults on planning teams need to work out the delicate balance of listening to each other and coming to consensus, they note. In her own case, Janill says, that wasn't always easy:

The planning team was supposed to include the voice of students, but there were so many teachers that we were rarely heard. You would say something and they would notice it, but then they would say something else.

The Limitations of School Choice

For these students, new small schools did offer real alternatives to the large, overcrowded high schools most Bronx students attend. They urge families considering a small school to get as much information as possible, then to weigh carefully advantages and disadvantages.

The names of the schools can be confusing. Students might think “this school is just for the arts.” Or they come looking for studying law—

you're not going to study law in high school! They think, "That's all I've got to know, that's what I'll learn." But that's the wrong attitude. If you go to a school with a special area of concentration, it's more like a theme; they're teaching the same thing using that theme. You still have to take the courses you need to get to college. Any of those schools is going to offer you what you need to graduate. – ROSA

In the Aerospace Academy, the uniform is free, from socks to hats, and there's not much competition about appearance. You don't have to waste your time on expensive sneakers. Some people may not have money, but they still have the same clothes everyone else has. – NYRERE

When I was looking for a high school, in this book they gave you I noticed the big schools have all these great programs, but the smaller schools don't have them. Small schools don't always have a lot of the kind of special programs that benefit students with special ed or bilingual needs. – ROSA

At the same time, students were realistic about the extent to which they can really choose the perfect school. Most recognize that particularly for junior high students, their parents' preference probably plays a more important part in where they go to school.

In junior high school you're thinking about games, you don't know yay about life. You want to go where your friends go. – ALBERTO

Some kids have an idea of what they want to do, most are thinking about other things in junior high school. – JOSHUA

They advise junior high students not only to talk to their parents but also to ask questions of older students about different small schools. On the other side, they caution parents to listen well, too.

Parents should sit down and talk one-on-one to their kids, listen to them, and then let them go to the high school where they want to go. A lot of the students we get don't like the uniform, and the parents are forcing them to be there. There's a negative impact. When you put students inside a school where they don't want to go, they don't follow the rules. I used to do that when I was a freshman. Other people can't change someone, people have got to change themselves. – ALBERTO



“A big school has more opportunities, but the information doesn't get to all students. In a small school, opportunities are for everyone—everyone knows about them.”

These students will understand that not everyone will end up in the school they most want, and they urge adults to be up front about that.

Don't pretend that everyone has this big choice. In fact, students often don't have a choice between schools they might want to go to. It's not so much between big and small, as between schools you might want to go to. Even though I wasn't excited about going to the new small school, I didn't want to go to either of the other choices. – MINERVA

In our school there are kids who wanted to go to the Leadership Academy 1, which studies law, but it was filled to capacity, so they just threw them into Leadership Academy 2 [which has a different focus]. For them it was way off topic. It wasn't their interest. They had no other choice. – JOSHUA

One large high school was so overcrowded that it was forced to assign many ninth graders to its new small school, although they hadn't chosen to go there. In such cases, Minerva and Janill advise getting information to students as soon as possible:

It wasn't necessarily a bad thing to be forced to go to the new small school, but they kind of sprung it on us. They told us in June that we were going to have a new principal and be separated from the rest of the school. They didn't tell us until over the summer that we were going to have a different schedule, that we would have a separate entrance, a dress code, and so on. – MINERVA

Everything was very unorganized. They had the ideas of what they wanted to do when they wanted to open it. But they didn't give us an idea of what to expect until orientation. – JANILL

Several students took a philosophical view, pointing out that some things are more important than choice.

I wouldn't want to be forced to go to a school that didn't have anything to do with my interests. On the other hand, it would be even worse to go to a big school against my will. – LATISHA

You want to let students be heard, but big schools are not working. The only choice is something else, smaller schools. It's kind of an experi-

ment. Students have to give up some of their choice, because they're not getting what they need in big schools. We can't satisfy everybody's feelings. We have to give it a chance. – ZORANYI

Conclusion: Give Small Schools a Chance

These Bronx students do not think that smaller size can solve all the problems of their schools. They realize that schools face overwhelming issues—insufficient funding, inadequate facilities, teacher shortages, overcrowding, and neighborhood safety—and they plead for help with these problems.

Our schools are not getting the best attention, the teachers. We're not getting what we deserve. – ZORANYI

It's mostly the area that's bad, not the school. When I come on the bus it's eight o'clock and they're already on the corner, starting trouble. It's the early morning hustle—they don't even go to the school. In school you're being taught the right things, and then you go outside and see the wrong things. – JOSHUA

Between the street and school is a mixture of negative and positive. Students are uncomfortable where schools are located, and it makes it hard to keep up their learning when you see the violence behind them. We need more police protection in our neighborhood, to keep schools from being mixed up with the streets. – ZORANYI

Still, they believe that taking action together has the potential to change things for the better.

But we need also to make our communities better, to involve them more in the schools, because the school is part of the community. Community leaders need to take steps to clean up their communities and to involve the students more in their community. – ROSA

Across the country right now, that community action has to do with changing large high schools into small ones. Students will be ready to contribute their thoughts and muscle to that initiative, these Bronx students agree, as soon as adults welcome them as partners.

Up Close in a Small School

An interview with a small school student and planner



Rosa Fernandez, who immigrated to the Bronx from the Dominican Republic three years ago, is a senior at Manhattan International High School, a 300-student public school in New York City. Rosa also serves on the planning team for Discovery High School, a new small school scheduled to open at Walton High in the Bronx in September 2003. She talks here about the structures and practices that make a small school different for students.

Being Known Well

“Small schools are perfect for teenagers, because we need people to be warm and care about us, to be after us—otherwise we might take the wrong road.”

When I first got to my school in tenth grade I felt lonely—it’s normal, like with any other [new] place. But the difference in a small school is that people notice you. They know that you are feeling just like they felt when they first came. And the teachers know that, too. So they try to approach you, talk to you, let you know that they are there and you can go at any time and ask them anything.

Sometimes on your writing the teachers ask a question, such as “how are you doing, how are you making the transition to this school?” Even though those are small things—writing a little note on someone’s paper—it gives you strength to continue working, to know that someone knows what you’re like.



Small schools are perfect for teenagers, because we need people to be warm and care about us, to be after us—otherwise we might take the wrong road. Mostly you're in school, so school becomes your home. And you want to make sure that you're in a good home.

This is a hard age. You're confused, you don't know what you're going to do, you feel alienated. You need adults around you, and friends. And in a small community, it's more likely that you'll find people that know you better.

There is a parent in school who works in the office. That's such a great idea, to have a parent in school, believe me. You know they have a child and they understand you better and they understand the things you need. I bother the parent so much for copies and things—it's a good mediator.

Student Groupings and Schedules

“The classes are longer than in most large high schools, but they go by quickly. We teach the class to each other, we participate.”

At my school, like many small schools, you have classes with the same group of 75 students and the same four teachers in your cluster or grade. The classes are 70 minutes long, which is longer than in most large high schools, but they go by quickly. The difference is that we're not lectured [to] by the teacher. We teach the class to each other, we participate.

There are discussions, debates, group activities. If there are five questions to answer, there might be five tables; each group takes one question to discuss and comes up with an idea or a written paragraph. Everyone has to agree, and then at the end every table presents their views. These are essential skills for your life—you're going to have to be talking to people and making agreements, so it's a good thing to learn.

Of course in every classroom people have different levels. But I don't see any difference between us. It comes naturally being with everybody else, because that's what life is like. In every group project there



has to be a leader, but we divide the work. It's all about feeding each other, having something to offer.

I don't think that just because you're a bad student you have nothing to say. There's something that you react to, something you like, and you have to find it. In order to find it you need to be exposed to every kind of person, not to be limited. And you have to be given the opportunity to succeed. There's a Spanish saying, *“Nadie nace sabiendo.”* (“No one is born knowing.”) You learn!

Everyone has something to teach and something to learn. Maybe a not-so-skilled student might teach you how to be more patient—skills about life that you need! This is what you get out of high school, these little things about knowing yourself.



Curriculum

“I think they offered us [pottery] that year to get us to think: How can you turn your thoughts in your mind and make them real, construct something that you can touch?”

In most schools there’s not that much analytic thinking in classes. They just give you the information and expect you to say it back. That’s one of the greatest things in my school—you’re not just learning about details, you’re learning about life. Let’s say we read about the Pilgrims. You come to the class, you’re prepared, you know the information. However when you come to the class, here comes the other side! The teacher might ask you to think, “How did [the Pilgrims] feel when they came here, what was the weather [like], how did they have to adjust, how did that affect their lives?” You have to put yourself back in time and think. You might be asked to write a response and perhaps present it to the class. It makes you be involved and not just memorize. It brings history alive.

In science, we do lab reports on projects. This year we did a lab report about electrical current and saving electricity at home. Using all these math calculations, we had to explain how electricity is calculated, read about it, and calculate the bill at our house. I thought, “How am I going to do this!” But that kind of thing makes you understand it better. You go and find the equipment, and you take the watts and the hours. You get it the most when you do it.

My school organizes every cluster or grade with learning themes, one for each grade—civilization, evolution, systems and structures, and transformations. At the beginning I was like, “What is this? Why not just ninth, tenth, eleventh, twelfth grades?” But at the end of the first year I realized the connection. For example, in the year I was in “evolution,” I took biology, so we were learning about human

evolution and different species. In English and history we were learning about Darwinism, about World Wars I and II.

And with “systems and structures,” we learned about the structure of a family and the government. That year I took U.S. government and in science I took chemistry, which is all about atoms and what forms matter takes. Everything is a system, some are just more complex than others.

I also took a pottery class that was offered to all the students in the building. You had to make a pot, and I thought, “How am I going to do this?” But then I saw it as a structure—you’re making it piece by piece, one by one, and then you are uniting the pieces to form one structure. I think that’s why they offered us [pottery] that year, to get us to think: “How can you turn your thoughts in your mind and make them real, construct something that you can touch?”

Graduation Portfolios

“The skills you learn with your portfolio, they’re going to stay with you for the rest of your life.”

In my small school and many others, you don’t graduate just because you have 42 credits and you’ve passed all your classes. Instead, you make portfolios, where you collect works that you have done throughout your high school years. Our portfolio has seven parts—a literary essay, a math project, a science lab report on a project, a research paper for social studies. Two other parts are something written in your native language, and a creative piece like a poem or a drawing or a piece of music, describing what it means to you. And for the last part, you make a resume, like you would hand out to get a job.

For every part you make an annotated table of contents—explaining what the piece means, what it’s about, how it relates to the theme that you were studying that year, how it relates to the real world. And you also do an evaluation of yourself, your high school career, your future plans, things that have influenced you as you think back. It goes at the beginning, because maybe the panel who evaluates you doesn’t know you that well.

Most likely you use junior and senior year work in your portfolio, because it's more high-level writing and better projects. You include one project for each of your classes. For history you might include a research paper that you wrote. I'm including one I wrote about comparing the philosophies of Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois, because they each presented methods to resolve problems for African Americans. The skills—doing research, formulating a thesis statement, showing evidence for your argument, writing well and concisely—are the work you will do at college, too. It shows more than just taking a test. It presents your ideas, what you have learned through high school. It might take a month or so to write a research paper, and so it also shows a lot of effort.

You are assigned a mentor at the beginning of your senior year to help you with the portfolio process. You might go to your mentor and say, "These are the pieces I want to include in my portfolio, here they are." She'll read it, comment on them, tell you to change this or improve this. So it's not like you're going to take a project from your junior year and put it in—you have to edit it and make it better for it to be portfolio quality. You meet with your mentor once a week. Throughout the whole year it's a lot of work to put up the portfolio. On Wednesdays we have a special schedule; freshmen through juniors leave at two o'clock for extracurricular activities, but seniors stay for [portfolio] mentoring.

We also take the state high school exit exams, the Regents. But portfolios show better what you have done in four years, what you know, how you use the things you know to show how you know it. On a multiple-choice question, you might get it right or wrong even by guessing! The skills you learn with your portfolio, they're going to stay with you for the rest of your life. You can even use it for future reference in college, like for looking up how to do a citation. With a test, you don't get to use it again. A test tells how you're feeling at the moment. But if you write an essay for the portfolio, you have more time, you can do your better quality and show more what you know.



Students' Rights and Responsibilities

"If you have a plan as to how to make something better, you have a chance to change anything you want."

We have a dress code in my school and basic rules that you have to follow, such as respecting your classmates and using proper language. Of course you have the security guards in the hallway and the lunchroom, making sure everything is all right, but there's no metal detector when you come in—that would right away make me think I am in a situation that is not secure!

Through the student government we talk about issues at school and try to solve them. Anyone can come into the student government. It meets every two weeks. We talk about rules, we organize activities to make everyone involved, we think about ways to make [the school] better for students. If you have a plan as to how to make something better, and you present it well to the teacher or the principal, you have a chance to change anything you want. [At my school], we're allowed to go out for lunch, for example, but if my school didn't have that and students really wanted it, they could say, "These are the reasons why we, the student body, think we should go out for lunch," and argue for that in a respectful way. And most people need to agree to it.

When there are conflicts, students either go to their teachers or maybe their mentor. Or they go to someone they feel comfortable going to; it could be the guidance counselor or another teacher. Personally I've never had a conflict. But if there's verbal fighting going on, there's always an adult around who will stop it before it gets into something physical. Then they go to the guidance counselor and the people involved talk about it.

But the next day they're normal, acting like friends again. When you get used to the same people, you know them. There might be some clashes but the next day you're friends again. That's the thing about knowing people—you know their strengths and weaknesses and how they are. If you are in a class with people you don't usually know, you might not care about them so much, and if you have a conflict it might explode more. That's what I think.



“We could start a school!”

How a community youth group proposed a school built on its ideas

In a narrow, red, four-story house next to a grocery store on a busy Bronx corner, seven young people crowd into a small conference room. They look and dress like any other teenagers in this New York City neighborhood, and they joke around like friends that go way back. But something unusual is going on in this place. As Jacky, 15, says:

None of us fit the stereotype of a powerful political person—we’re young, we’re minorities.

Yet when the group around the table begins to talk about its work, anyone can feel the power it wields. These are the members of Sistas and Brothas United (SBU), and they have decided they can change their world. They have gathered this winter afternoon to tell the story of the new school they’re trying to start.

First Step: Speak Up for Change

Now 17, Fernando and Jean (pronounced “John”) first met as freshmen in high school and discovered they lived across the street from each other. Fernando was already involved in the Northwest Bronx Coalition, a local community group trying to clean up the streets and fix up the schools. The group held a youth meeting to take action, and Fernando enlisted Jean to help. He tells the story:

We decided to go to the school and try to take pictures of all the things that was messed up—the doors, broken hanging lights, how easily the handrails to the escalators came off, the broken fire alarms, broken steps. There was this big community meeting, and we got a chance to speak to the Schools Chancellor.

I was 15 years old, and it was my first public meeting. So many people came that they had to stand on the tables to see, and the tables broke. I found a hard hat, a yellow construction hat, and I wore it through the whole day and to the meeting. And when I spoke, I said, "I shouldn't have to go to school wearing a hard hat, with things falling from the ceiling."

The Chancellor's office was pissed off, but the news reporters started asking me for interviews. And when they found that I was 15, it started bugging them out—most kids my age were chilling in the park.

And that's when I realized it was something really cool. I didn't think of it at the moment, but I used to hang outside the office, and the next day in the neighborhood they started calling me the Channel 11 guy. It was like a joke at first, but then they were like, "Yo, how'd you do that?" And that's how I got Jean into it. Now I'm on the board of directors of the Coalition.

As more young people from the Bronx started showing up, Sistas and Brothas United spun off as a separate youth action group within the larger Coalition. Alex, 17, describes how getting involved affected him:

The whole point of SBU is to develop leadership, your full potential. I never thought I would open my mouth and be opinionated—I was always more to myself. This helped me find out how intelligent I am, that I had rights too. I had to engage myself—paying attention, being open-minded, doing trainings. At my first public meeting, I had to record the data of what the politicians were saying—were they committing to our demands or were they opposing the demands?

Jacky, who says she has always been shy, was nervous at first about knocking on doors to get neighborhood people to come to a meeting on improving the nearby Mosholu Parkway. But the group coached her in how to do successful outreach:

You always have people who are negative, but you are supposed to find a common bond between them and yourself. If they have kids,



“We had a hip hop rally in front of City Hall, where I spoke for about two minutes in front of 30,000 people. I wasn't scared—it was my people, a bunch of youth.”

you talk about kids. If you see they're elderly, they have trouble walking, you say, "The streets are really messed up, and we're working on getting them better." You want to fix something that would help them. For youth, we speak about schools, about how [at SBU] we get to speak on anything we want to speak on, and how you can be comfortable to do that here. That's a real help when you're trying to get youth to come here.

In addition, members of Sistas and Brothas United receive training in how to set agendas and priorities, plan and run meetings, speak at public events, testify at legislative hearings, and negotiate with school and other administrative officials. When they can draw public attention to things that matter, Alex says, the rewards are far-reaching and very personal:

"I shouldn't have to go to school wearing a hard hat, with things falling from the ceiling."

We were in Albany in front of the Governor's Mansion, protesting for education. We had a hip hop rally in front of City Hall, where I spoke for about two minutes in front of 30,000 people. It went from coast to coast; I was in the L.A. Times! I wasn't scared—it was my people, it was a bunch of youth. I had the future in front of me, so I talked to them. It's all about self-determination. You got to set goals for yourself, long term and short term. You always got to have a destination.

The group has achieved important victories. Jean talks about how their early work on the decaying facilities at his high school paid off:

In John F. Kennedy we got a lot of stuff fixed—the lights, the escalators, we got the boys a new gym locker room, we got more books into the school. That gives me a sense of power. After that I started noticing, learning more about the chain of events that we have to go through to get things done. As an organization, a few youth together have enough power to speak to officials about problems in our schools. You know you're not just nobody in your schools—you can do changes.

A Key Target: Improving Schools

Everyone at SBU works on a community issue, such as traffic, and also on an issue that centers on education. Cesar explains:

I'm on the teacher quality campaign. We made questionnaires for teachers and students, and we gave them out, trying to get information on how they think about teaching, how they could improve it. Then with the information from that, we have a meeting.

Alex worked on that campaign, too.

We go into schools and go one-on-one with teachers, putting them to the test and helping them find better ways to talk to students. A lot of students don't understand what's going on—sometimes only one student will get it in a class, and the teachers move on anyway. So we're trying to reach teachers—to generate ways that youth and teachers can communicate and build some kinds of understanding.

Experiences like these got them thinking about how to make schools better, says Luz. Now a senior at Walton, a very large Bronx public high school, she remembers the campaign to rehab the largely vacant Kingsbridge Armory.

We proposed putting three small schools into the Armory and started thinking about what those schools would be like—what they would teach. We're still working for that—it's an ongoing project.

Jean recalls working with outside organizations on the same proposal.

We met constantly with them, we gave them our ideas about what we want to see in there—like an ice skating rink, some space for a community center, an athletic facility.

High school students in the Bronx could not fail to notice the growing initiative to introduce new small schools into the local landscape. Most of the new schools started as ninth-grade "programs," then added a grade each year until eventually they occupied a portion of a large school's space, with an independent principal and staff. As Luz tells it:

Even though all of us were going to big schools, we were looking at how the new small schools affected our own schools. We noticed that in a smaller school you have more of a one-to-one with the teachers, and the school is like a community. You know the students, everyone knows each other, and there's less conflicts.

In the typical large, overcrowded high school, observes Helen, 17, teachers and students often don't communicate well:

We know that from experience; we all go to overcrowded schools. When we have problems in the classroom, we have to solve it ourselves. When they're giving you a lesson and you don't really understand, they don't have time to go up to you and show you one-on-one.

Alex agrees:

It's rough, it's real rough. She might be helping 45 other people out.

Why Not Start One?

As they gained experience working on school problems, the young activists in Sistas and Brothas United started thinking about a school design of their own. Luz explains:

We figured it would be a great idea for us to start our own school and do things right. All of us came up with the idea together, like a brainstorm thing. We wanted a theme-based high school, about social justice and leadership, like SBU.

Seeking more educational expertise than their community organization could provide, they reached out to nearby Fordham University as a co-sponsor that would lend support and guidance to the new school. New York University's Institute for Education and Social Policy offered the young planners technical assistance. Teachers from DeWitt Clinton High School joined the team, too, along with professors from two other local colleges.



Students came up with other ideas as the planning progressed.

We would like students to be able to talk to the teachers about their grades, participate in their own grades more. – HELEN

And we want students to be part of the planning of the curriculum. There should be one day when you have to do an actual project in the community. – ALEX

The incoming freshmen are going to have a project. It might be an abandoned building, or what to do with a vacant lot—that might be their project, working out the math of that. One day a week they'd be out, either outreaching for that project, or doing research. That's when the community people, like from SBU, would come in and help them out to reach their targets. – LUZ

We're going to interview the teachers, because we want the teachers to agree with what we want to see in the school. – HELEN

If they have the same vision as us. – LUZ

If you're going to be a teacher or staff of our school, it would be mandatory that you go to a summer program, to decide the curriculum to teach. And the students have a little input into that, and there's a chance for the teachers to talk with the students and to know the community. Sometimes it's a very big problem that teachers don't come from the communities they're in. – FERNANDO

Alex knows the power of a democratic school first hand, from attending one of the Bronx's other small public schools, the New School for Arts and Sciences. When air quality problems there made teachers and students sick, he helped organize a successful campaign to move the school to a new building. He describes his school's governance process:

We have a leadership team that involves students and parents in decisionmaking at the school. We hire the teachers and principals, have evaluations, one-on-one talks with the principals about how they did.

Using a similarly collaborative process, the SBU planners produced document after document explaining their new school's mission, its design, its hopes and dreams. They decided to call it the Leadership Institute for Social Justice, with the motto "Education for Community Action." It would be more than just a school, according to the mission statement they wrote:

It teaches young adults to not only give to the community but to also get a better understanding of what changes need to be made to benefit the community, as well as to implement them . . . A focus on leadership will prepare youth to take charge of their lives and be active, engaged participants in their communities. An emphasis on community action will encourage youth to take action to bring about real change, and to do this collectively and cooperatively. A focus on social justice will help students clarify their values, understand their rights, and relate these to the broader world around them.

These beliefs are important because they will make learning real, challenging, and important . . . It will be a place [students] want to attend every day, because it will be a school they helped create.

A focus on social justice will help students clarify their values, understand their rights, and relate these to the broader world around them.

On this winter afternoon in early 2003, as the March day approaches when the students and their partners will go before the city and district authorities to present their proposal, the young people around the table at Sistas and Brothas United are worried, but optimistic. Helen says:

It would start with ninth graders, as a program in a big high school, and then as it got more grades it would become a school. We'd be going in from Sistas and Brothas as mentors.

A Stake in the Future

The student planners talk openly about how working to change their schools and communities has changed them. Jacky describes the new sense of power she feels:

You don't have to be scared when you voice your opinion about something at a meeting. Here, there's a lot of people to back you up.

Fernando speaks of the responsibilities of the activist's life:

To do this kind of work, you give up a lot of time. When you miss school it's for an important meeting—it might be someone from the Board of Ed, or the Chancellor, or the high school superintendent. A group of us went up to Albany to fight for the funds for summer youth programs, having meetings with the politicians all day. It's kind of like in college, when you have to speak in class and do a report.

They have learned about effective communication, Helen says:

You have to communicate with adults, speak well in front of adults. You learn how to express your ideas and thoughts, how to take charge.



Jean offers an example:

That reminds me of the meeting where Fernando was wearing a hard hat. It was one of our first meetings, and we were really prepping each other to be in front of TV for the first time. Fernando has a paper with his notes on it, and he's shaking and the paper's shaking. And then he crumbles it up and starts saying it right from his head. And it came out way better.

And Alex tells of the confidence that comes with knowing what you want to say:

My second speech, it was my first meeting with the Alliance for Quality Education, dealing with the education budget, with Dr. Wolcott. He was talking to me, and I was trying to say my speech, but he wasn't paying attention.

I put down my paper, I picked up my chair and the mike, and I walked over to him and sat down right next to him. And he gave me the attention I needed. I told him what was on my mind, presented my hand, and when I left, he shook my hand. It took leadership. It built my determination.

These young activists well know that their work will not always pay off immediately. Jean and Fernando joined the organization as high school freshmen, and after three years they have a sense of perspective.

The campaigns that we work for are not going to affect us so much. They are going to affect our future, the younger kids. – JEAN

It's going to have a long-term effect—everyone that comes after us is going to feel it. – FERNANDO

But, as Luz and Cesar observe:

In the work we do, you can't be selfish. When you think about it, by the time the school is actually a school, we're probably out of it. It's not even our brothers and sisters, it's future generations. It's about us standing up for what we believe in and making a change for them. – LUZ

Our sons and daughters. – CESAR

And when they think about their futures, they have confidence that they will make a difference.

We're all the future elected officials, teachers, lawyers, doctors. Most of us are going to become staff in SBU and make it bigger—have it be all around the country. – JEAN

I want to be a politician in this community. – LUZ

And I'll run against her! – FERNANDO

In speaking for himself, Alex seems to speak for all of the members of Sistas and Brothas United:

I can't say now that I'm going to keep up this work. But whatever I do in the future, I'm going to change the world. I'm going to affect it. With my history and background, I don't want to see today's youth grow up the way I did. I take everything in this organization personally because of that.

Student Contributors

Thinking Out Loud



Tamika Crump is a ninth grader at the Bronx Leadership Academy 2 located at Morris High School.



Danjela Dobrosavljevic, 16, arrived in the U.S. from Belgrade, Yugoslavia in July 2001 and attends Bronx International High School.



Rosa Fernandez was a member of the planning team for Discovery High School, which will open in September 2003 at Walton High School. She's a twelfth grader at Manhattan International High School.



Lori Gonzalez, 15, was born in the U.S. but moved with her family to Ecuador where she lived for eight years. She returned to this country in May 2000 and is a tenth grader at Bronx International High School.



Janill Guerrero is a tenth grader at the High School for Teaching and the Professions (Walton High School), which as a ninth grader at Walton he helped design.



LaTisha Habersham is in the ninth grade at the High School for Teaching and the Professions, located at Walton High School.



Alberto Flores is a senior at Evander Childs High School where he was a member of the planning team for the Bronx Aerospace Academy.



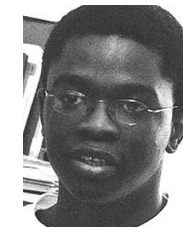
Nyrere Francis was also part of the Bronx Aerospace Academy planning team. A recent graduate of Evander Childs High School, he now helps train student cadets at the Bronx Aerospace Academy.



Julio Gonzalez, 18, left Guatemala for the US in May 2001 and is in the tenth grade at Bronx International High School.



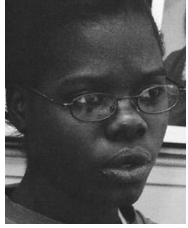
Zoranyi Hernandez helped design the High School for International Studies at Kennedy High School. A recent graduate of Morris High School, she's a freshman at Canton College in upstate New York.



Ishmael Kamara, 16, traveled from Guinea to Sierra Leone by foot, where he was a witness to war, and arrived in the U.S. in October 2000. He is in the tenth grade at Bronx International High School.



Mama Keita, 17, also a war refugee in Sierra Leone, came to this country in October 2000 and is a tenth grader at Bronx International High School.



Ivy Nkhoma, 18, comes from Malawi and arrived in the U.S. in January 2000. She is in the tenth grade at Bronx International High School.



Livet Ortiz helped plan the Marble Hill School for International Studies. A recent graduate of Morris High School, she's a freshman at the State University of New York at New Paltz.



Joshua Rivera is in the ninth grade at the Bronx Leadership Academy 2 located at Morris High School.



Malissa Rivera is a ninth grader at the High School for Teaching and the Professions located at Walton High School.



Minerva Rosario was on the planning team for the High School for Teaching and the Professions at Walton High School and is now in the tenth grade there.

Up Close in a Small School



Rosa Fernandez, twelfth grade, is a student at Manhattan International High School and a design team member for Discovery High School at Walton High School.

"We Could Start a School!"



Sistas and Brothas United



Fernando Carlo, 17
Walton High School



Cesar "Roar" Cejada, 17
Clinton High School



Helen Colon, 17
John F. Kennedy High School



Alex Cross, 17
New School for Arts and Sciences



Jean Henry, 17
John F. Kennedy High School



Luz Milanes, 18
Walton High School



Jacky Torres, 16
Clinton High School

What Kids Can Do, Inc.

Through an array of media and publication formats, What Kids Can Do brings student work and voices to bear on critical issues facing schools and communities. It also presents powerful examples of what young people, guided by teachers and other adults, can contribute and achieve.

Bronx New Century High Schools

Begun in 2002, this unprecedented borough-wide effort aims to redesign high schools for the benefit of students and teachers. A belief that students are more successful in small, personalized learning communities drives the initiative. Over the next few years, the Bronx New Century High Schools will downsize seven large, challenged high schools into a number of smaller schools. A grant of \$7.5 million from the Carnegie Corporation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and Open Society Institute supports the work. The New York City Department of Education, New Visions for Public Schools, the United Federation of Teachers, and the Council of Supervisors and Administrators are key partners.

Carnegie Corporation

In 1911, Andrew Carnegie founded the Carnegie Corporation of New York "to do real and permanent good in this world." The foundation supports programs in education, international peace and security, international development, and strengthening U.S. democracy. Long concerned with improving public education, the foundation launched the Schools for a New Society initiative in 2001 in seven cities across the United States, with additional support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. In 2001, the Carnegie Corporation and the Gates Foundation joined forces with the Open Society Institute to launch the New Century High Schools in New York City. Creating new types of smaller high schools that not only work better but also serve all students well is a central part of both initiatives.

Some Resources

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