

A Reason to Cheer in the Bronx

Charter school becomes educational beacon

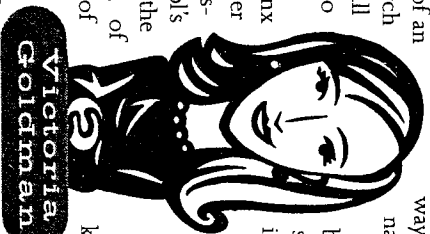
If they can build the Brooklyn Bridge, a school can rise from a rocky lot in the Bronx.

Bronx Preparatory Charter School opened its brand new doors in August, welcoming roughly 350 students into its bright, wide hallways with shining, multi-colored lockers, loft-like classrooms, a cafeteria, an immense music room, and more. Eventually, the school, which previously operated out of an old parochial school in a church building a few blocks away, will enroll about 800 students and go through 12th grade.

Behind the creation of Bronx Prep are the noble efforts of Upper East and Upper West Side professionals, philanthropists, the school's director, large Wall Street firms, the Robin Hood Foundation and, of course, the Department of Education.

But funds haven't come easy, and although the school's been blessed with streams of donations from Wall Street and Park Avenue, where charitable contributions have great appeal as tax deductions — and where giving birth to a school is better than having more of your own — much is still needed.

This gleaming example of a public-private partnership has debt. Bronx Prep cost \$19 million to build, and another million to get up and running, so board members are out shaking the trees.



And with good reason: If you tour the site, you can understand the need for such a school in this part of the city: Located on Third Avenue and 172nd Street not far from Yankee Stadium, it's a school with rising test scores, and a college list in the not-so-distant future. Once inside, you can't miss the garden variety of Ivy League banners that adorn the halls and stairways, and each classroom has a college name.

"The flavor here is college prep," beamed Kristin Kearns Jordan, the school's director, who previously was in charge of a foundation created by Wall Street executives that provided scholarships to parochial and private schools.

No "do-rags" here. Neighborhood children clad in khakis and golf shirts — there's a dress code — attend extra-long school days, 7:55 a.m. to 5:15 p.m., plus 10 Saturdays. They recite the times tables to the tunes of rap songs, and they answer teachers' questions on cue, hoping for the praise that comes with a right answer.

The student-teacher ratio at Bronx Prep is 15-1. All classrooms are orderly and have a schedule clearly posted. "We want the kids to see the world in an organized fashion," Kerns Jordan said. Teachers use a variety of learning techniques like music — everyone's favorite subject — merit and anything else to make learning the basics more fun. There are math

Olympians who earn certificates, emblems or patches, silver pins, and gold trophies (or even doughnuts) for academic excellence.

Outside the classroom, social workers supplement teachers' work by targeting such issues as self-esteem. Along with parents, they organize dances, class pictures, and promotions. Like everything else at Bronx Prep, the rules for behavior are clear: All middle-school students walk in two straight lines, line up against a wall before entering a classroom and go directly to their seats — quietly.

Because Bronx Prep is a charter school, admission is based on a neighborhood lottery

from a pool of children whose scores have been among the lowest in the city and state. "Today," boasted Kerns Jordan, "the average Bronx Prep student who has been at the school for three to four years now scores in the 70th percentile in math and the 60th in reading."

Once the kids are admitted, their parents sign an agreement acknowledging that this is a high-maintenance school, that they have to come to school to pick up their child's report cards, and that they also must make time for conferences and fundraising.

Without a doubt, Jordan is pleased with her baby's success. Her families, along with the community, value and respect the school. "It doesn't take long for kids to want to come to Bronx Prep," she says smiling, as any proud parent would. ■