



THE PARTHENON GROUP

Parthenon's work with the NYC Department of Education, as featured in Time Magazine

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**How to Keep
Kids in School:**

One city's answer to the dropout epidemic



Life

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EDUCATION

Stopping the Exodus. New York City has more dropouts than most cities have students. It also has more ways to help them

BY CLAUDIA WALLIS

KIDS WHO QUIT SCHOOL DON'T JUST suddenly drop out; it's more of a slow fade. Typically it begins in the ninth grade, if not earlier, often when life hits a particularly nasty patch and racking up credits in class no longer seems especially compelling or plausible. Ernestine Maisonet started fading in eighth grade, when the grandmother who had raised her died. "She was a woman who worked wonders," murmurs Maisonet, who says she doesn't know her mother and isn't close to her dad. After the death, her family of six siblings fell apart. Maisonet has lived sometimes with an aunt, sometimes with a boyfriend, and sometimes she had no place to go. "I was a good student until my grandmother passed away," says the 19-year-old redhead from the Bronx. Though she was enrolled in high school, she earned just three credits in two years: "I completely shut down. I didn't do good at all."

Tanya Garcia, 19, of Brooklyn also went off track at the end of middle school. A fire destroyed her family's apartment and left them homeless for four months. She landed in a large, impersonal high school, and quickly became disengaged. "I started getting into drugs—weed, drinking, cocaine and heroin." After two years of mostly cutting class, she had accumulated a grand total of one credit. When she tried to transfer to another school, "the dean pretty much laughed in my face," she says. At 16, she stopped going to school. "I didn't see myself having any kind of future. I would get some job I hated and just survive."

Against all odds, Maisonet and Garcia are slated to graduate in New York City's class of 2007. They are among some 13,000 students who dropped out or were on the verge of doing so but have been recovered in the public



Guidance

Tanya Garcia sees Andy Vernon-Jones, her advocate-counselor, on a daily basis

school system. The city's secret? Finding out who was dropping out and why and offering a variety of paths—complete with intensive social support and personalized instruction—back to school.

Nationally about 1 in 3 high school students quits school. Among black and Hispanic students, the rate is closer to 50%. For decades, school districts obscured the hemorrhaging with sleight of hand—using misleading formulas to calculate graduation rates and not bothering to track the kids who fell through the cracks. Getting a more honest accounting became a top priority for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which was instrumental in persuading the Governors of all 50 states to agree in 2005 to start measuring graduation rates in a fair and consistent way. Ask Melinda

Gates to name the foundation's top achievement in education so far, and she doesn't hesitate to answer, "Getting the nation to look at graduation rates in the right way."

In 2005, New York used Gates funding to commission the Parthenon Group, a Boston-based consulting firm, to dig deep into its graduation data. The resulting 64-page report, released last October, enabled the nation's largest school district to discern how many kids it was losing, which ones and when. Just as important, it showed what was working to salvage high-risk kids like Maisonet and Garcia.

New York asked Parthenon to focus on students who were two or more years behind their peers in accumulating credits toward graduation. "We had a hunch that these over-



Ernestine Maisonet overcame personal obstacles and expects to graduate in June.



Lisa Syrianos, a Young Adult Borough Center teacher, works with student **Carlos Otero**.

age, undercredited kids were the bulk of the dropouts,” says Leah Hamilton, executive director of the city’s Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation. That turned out to be more correct than anyone had imagined: 93% of dropouts had a history of being overage and undercredited. In fact, once students fell into this category, they had just a 19% chance of finishing high school or getting a graduate equivalency diploma (GED).

The groundbreaking study—which is being emulated in Boston, Chicago and Portland, Ore.—was full of surprises. Among them was the sheer size of New York’s problem: 70,000 students from 16 to 21—more than one-fifth of the city’s high school population—were two or more years behind their peers in accumulating the 44 credits needed for graduation. An additional 68,000 had already dropped out. All told, New York’s 138,000 lost and vulnerable kids made up a population larger than the combined public high school enrollment of Philadelphia, Houston and Boston.

Some of the biggest surprises in the midst of this enormous crisis were the small bright spots. The study showed that a number of existing programs were remarkably effective in propelling dead-end students toward a diploma. Transfer schools—small, personalized high schools specially designed for kids who have fallen seriously behind—had a 56% graduation rate, compared with 19% for such high-risk kids at ordinary high schools, and some transfer schools were graduating nearly 70%. Another program, Young Adult Borough Centers (YABCs), which operates in the late af-

ternoon and evening for students 17 or older, was enabling about 40% of these last-chance students to graduate.

New York discovered that its most vulnerable ninth-graders—the weak readers—were much more likely to stay on track toward graduation at the city’s newer and smaller high schools than at its large conventional ones. “A big aha,” says Hamilton, “is that a single strategy was not going to work. You need a portfolio of strategies.” In the wake of the report, the city has examined what the best transfer schools, YABCs and GED programs were doing right and is trying to replicate them citywide.

It’s easy to spot what’s going right at South Brooklyn Community High, the transfer school that Garcia attends. It’s obvious the minute the doors open. Waiting in the bright, airy reception area are six advocate-counselors, or ACs. Each counsels 25 or so kids, whom they greet individually, often with elaborate, personalized handshakes or fist pounds. These close relationships are cemented by daily meetings and twice-weekly group sessions. When any of the school’s 150 students fail to show up in the morning, the AC makes a phone call to find out why. Freddie Perez, 17, compares this with the check-in procedure at

the big high school he used to attend: “I’d swipe my ID at the beginning of school and then go back out the door,” he says.

The ACs are not school-district employees; they work for a nonprofit organization called Good Shepherd Services. Every New York transfer school and YABC is paired with a community-based organization that focuses on the social, emotional and family issues that tend to weigh down these students. “We don’t have the expertise for these complex challenges,” explains schools chancellor Joel Klein, who heads the New York City Department of Education. The academic staff is also enthusiastic about the partnership. “Teachers can focus on the best way to educate students,” says South Brooklyn’s principal, Vanda Belusic-Vollor. “That’s huge!”

Classes at South Brooklyn have 18 to 25 students, as opposed to as many as 34 in the city’s large high schools. Students call their teachers by their first name. Because the school runs on a trimester system, kids can rack up credits more quickly than they could at an ordinary high school—part of the plan to keep them moving briskly toward graduation day. The teachers favor a hands-on approach; there’s very little chalk and talk. Perez says he used to hate U.S. history. “In my old school, they’d just give you a page number and tell you to answer questions in the text.” At South Brooklyn, he says, “we’ll study a court case for a week, and the second week, we act it out. When it’s test time, you remember it.”

Students are pushed toward New York State’s demanding Regents diploma, which means passing seven exams, and toward

‘I didn’t see myself having any kind of future. I would get some job I hated and just survive.’

—TANYA GARCIA, WHO NOW EXPECTS TO GRADUATE AND ATTEND COLLEGE

higher education. They must participate in the city's Learning to Work program, which teaches employment skills, provides college and career counseling, and offers subsidized internships. While not everyone loves his or her internship, Garcia was so inspired by her stint at a youth newspaper that she now hopes to study journalism in college.

Most of the same elements are at work at the YABC in Lehmann High School in the Bronx, where Maisonet spends her evenings. There are small classes led by dynamic teachers, a Learning to Work program and close relationships with counselors from a health and social-services group. The atmosphere here is a bit more no-nonsense. The 250 students are all over 17, and many have weighty daytime responsibilities. "They have kids at home. Some are pregnant. Some are homeless," says assistant principal Martin Smallhorne, an energetic young administrator who works hard to create a personalized program inside one of the city's larger and less intimate high schools.

The clock is ticking for his 310 students. The goal: get them to graduation before they hit 21 and age out of the system. YABCs stress efficient scheduling. To attend, students must have spent at least four years in high school and have accumulated at least 17 credits. "Their transcripts tend to be a mess," says Michele Cahill, who helped create the Multiple Pathways program and is now at the Carnegie Corporation. Students might be missing the second half of algebra and three years of phys ed. "Ordinary high schools are not set up



Martin Smallhorne, head of a Young Adult Borough Center, strives for a sense of community

to deal with these kinds of gaps," says Cahill, but a good YABC can sometimes get the job done in a year. New data show that about one-quarter of students at YABCs and transfer schools go on to college.

Klein plans to greatly expand the number of transfer schools and YABCs over the remaining 2½ years of Mayor Michael Bloomberg's administration. Replicating successful programs is always tricky, but in this case there's a peculiar obstacle. Under state- and federal-accountability rules, schools full of students who don't graduate on time are labeled failing. By that definition, YABCs and transfer schools fail no matter how brilliant a job they are doing. "It's hard to get partners to invest and hard to attract strong leaders when the school is labeled failing," says Hamilton.

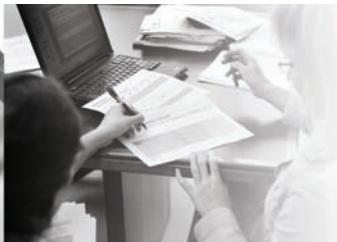
New York will also have to stem the tide of students who fall behind in the first place. Ninth grade is a major pitfall. Parthenon found that 78% of kids who become overage and undercredited had to repeat freshman year. One key is improving reading skills in middle school—a challenge nationally. Last year 37% of the city's eighth-graders were proficient in reading, up from 30% in 2002 but still a long way from ideal. Another key, Klein believes, is continuing to replace big, impersonal high schools with smaller schools that offer a sense of community and a variety of programs. Says Klein: "You want to create a really robust set of options."

Providing more choices is paying dividends for New York. In the past three years, the city has raised its on-time graduation rate from 44% to 50%, though how states measure such figures continues to spur debate. Five- and six-year graduation rates are also up. "We think it's powerfully important to increase all these rates," says Klein. "It may take a kid a couple of years longer, but if the kid gets the diploma, the economic consequences are huge."

Maisonet is thinking about a job in veterinary care and possibly college, but without all the support she has had at the YABC, it won't be easy to move on. When Maisonet suffered a late miscarriage in March, Smallhorne sent two outreach staff members to find her, and she was back in school two weeks later. "I love YABC," she says. "The teachers say, Come on, you have to graduate—we don't want you here no more. But I'm going to cry when I leave." ■



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The Parthenon Group, founded in 1991, is a strategic advisory firm with more than 200 members located in offices in Boston, London, Mumbai, and San Francisco. Parthenon aims to be the advisor of choice for CEOs and business leaders of Global 1000 corporations, high-potential growth companies, private equity firms, and educational institutions. As a leading advisor to the education industry, our Education Center of Excellence offers unparalleled services to clients across many markets, including global K-12 for-profit and publishing; higher education; education technology and corporate training; investors in education; consumer products and services; and non-profit organizations and foundations.



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