

The 100 Best High Schools in America

The Goal: Never has high school had to do so much for so many. NEWSWEEK unveils the top schools across the country and suggests what others can do to make the grade.

By Barbara Kantrowitz

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May 16 issue - In the winter of 1821, the civic leaders of Boston approved what was then a radical idea. At a time when advanced learning was largely restricted to the wealthy, they voted to create the country's first public high school, open to boys 12 or older who could pass an entrance exam. Ever since, Americans have been trying to figure out exactly what public high schools should do. Should they concentrate on preparing the best and the brightest for college? Should there be more emphasis on vocational training? Should students with different abilities and goals learn in the same classrooms, or should they be segregated into different tracks or even different schools? The debate has never been more contentious than now, when the attention of politicians, business leaders, educators, parents and students is focused on an unprecedented explosion of new ideas in big cities and small towns across the country. Everything is up for grabs: curriculum, size, even the idea of school itself. With new technology that puts the world at their keyboards, students can learn without a classroom or a formal teacher.

That first school still exists today as English High in the Jamaica Plain section of Boston, its seventh location in 184 years, and its evolution echoes dramatic social changes in thousands of schools around the country. The initial graduates were all white males who studied literature, science, math and history. It's now coed, and this year's 249 seniors are mostly black and Hispanic with ancestors from 30 countries. To meet their needs, the school houses a day-care center for teen parents, a Gay-Straight Alliance, a program to help kids find summer jobs and a social club for the large numbers of students from Somalia—among dozens of other activities.

Where once English High was alone in providing a free secondary education, there are now 27,468 public high schools. Assessing such a diverse group is daunting. Newsweek's Best High Schools List uses a ratio, the number of Advanced Placement (AP) and/or International Baccalaureate (IB) tests taken by all students at a school in 2004, divided by the number of graduating seniors. Although that doesn't tell the whole story about a school, it's one of the best measures available to compare a wide range of students' readiness for higher-level work, which is more crucial than ever in the postindustrial age. A generation ago, a high-school diploma gave most workers all they needed to get good jobs, says Larry Rosenstock, CEO of High Tech High in San Diego. "Now a high-school degree doesn't make it as a final, terminal degree. There's been a push to get people to seek further education."

The effort to produce a well-trained work force has to begin long before high school. "The single most important way to improve high schools is to improve elementary and junior high schools," says education historian Diane Ravitch of New York University. "If a student arrived in ninth grade ready for instruction in math, science, history, literature and foreign languages, then no further reform is needed." But with reform of the early grades underway for more than a decade, looking at high school now is a "natural progression," says Tom Vander Ark, education director of the Bill Melinda Gates Foundation, which started focusing on secondary education three years ago. "It felt like a very large problem that wasn't getting sufficient attention," he says.

No one hopes for success more than the graduates of English High. Georgette Travis, class of '84 and now a staff assistant at the school, says 1,300 students in grades 9 to 12 is a strain on everyone. Budget cuts have meant losing highly regarded art and music programs, and the library desperately needs updating. The headmaster does his best, Travis says, but it's a constant struggle. Without some help, schools like English will continue to struggle if they want to crack the top 100.

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