

## Best High Schools: Other Winning Equations

The Innovators: Some problems call for unique solutions. Here, a few ideas that work.

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Newsweek

May 16 issue - There are many ways to make a high school great. NEWSWEEK's Best High Schools List uses one measure, the number of students who take AP and International Baccalaureate (IB) tests. But innovative educators across the country are creating hundreds of new ways to meet the particular needs of their students. Only one of the schools below, Wilson Magnet in Rochester, N.Y., made NEWSWEEK's List, but all are leaders in their own way. What these schools have in common are dedicated educators who look, listen and find unique ways to help their students learn.

### Greater Expectations

**KIPP High School in Houston**, the first high school created by the San Francisco-based nonprofit group whose acronym stands for Knowledge Is Power Program, is still nothing more than four large trailers in a lot. But the school, which opened last summer, has a decided advantage. Most of the 60 ninth-grade students are graduates of the KIPP middle school next door. Like other KIPP schools, its results have shown that low-income students can do as well academically as affluent students if given nine hours of school a day, discipline, fun and a team spirit. Principal Julene Mohr, 33, absorbed KIPP's vision as one of the first teachers at the original Houston middle school started in 1994 by KIPP cofounders Mike Feinberg and Dave Levin. She expects to eventually have 440 students, 90 percent of them poor enough to qualify for federal meal subsidies. To underline the central KIPP goal of all graduates' going to college, Mohr had her ninth graders spend their first week of school last summer at Houston Baptist University. "They told us the very first day that our priority was to go to college and stay in college," says Navid Nasr, the elected class president. "It gave me a nice image of what this is all for."

### Reaching Rural Students

Located in a poor, rural patch of central Maine, **Carrabec High in North Anson** is an unlikely candidate for high-tech teaching. But the school's remote location is precisely why the University of Maine has set up a network of cameras and fiber-optic cables to take teacher Brendan Murphy's calculus and statistics classes to students in five other schools, one nearly 75 miles away. Across the state, in an effort to knit together isolated districts, 90 other schools and libraries have a setup just like Carrabec's. Each site's classroom has a three-foot television screen split into quadrants, and two cameras in each room. During a recent class, Murphy taught calculus to two students in his classroom. Seven other students, sitting in three different classrooms, appeared in three of the screen's four quadrants. Murphy appeared in the fourth. They could all watch, listen and speak to one another in real time. For Carrabec, it's a big leap. Only half of the adults in the district have high-school diplomas, and 20 percent lack even that. But higher standards help. The "College Wall of Fame" displayed in Murphy's classroom boasts of his students' achievements: they'll attend MIT, Columbia and the University of Michigan next year.

### A Bridge to College

In 2002, a star student at **Wilson Magnet School in Rochester, N.Y.**, told science teacher George Wolfe that she was leaving the rigorous IB program because it was just too much work. Wolfe couldn't convince her that the IB diploma would make a difference in college admissions. He needed to find another lure—and he did at the University of Rochester, just across the Genesee River. Because of Wolfe, Rochester now offers free tuition to Wilson's IB diploma grads. Jon Burdick, Rochester's dean of admissions, says Wolfe's idea was appealing because the private research university wanted to keep bright, inner-city students in Rochester. About half of Wilson's 57 IB seniors are expected to get the program's diploma after exams this month and about 10 plan to attend the U of R. Wilson's reputation attracted 600 applications for 150 freshman spots this year. The message is getting out: hard work pays off.

## Life Without AP

Only a few elite private schools, like **Sandia Preparatory School in Albuquerque, N.M.**, have the financial resources to offer alternatives to AP and IB. This month, while students across the country sweat out AP tests, Jessica Siegel, a Sandia senior, will be interning with an executive producer at National Public Radio in Washington, D.C. Siegel doesn't think she's missing out. Instead she says Sandia's AP ban means a more stimulating education. "Here, we'll go off on a little sidetrack and then loop back," says Siegel. That's exactly what Sandia's headmaster, Dick Heath, likes to hear. Although he once taught AP classes himself, Heath objects to what he sees as AP's "off the shelf" curriculum. Instead, his teachers design the school's signature interdisciplinary courses, which emphasize class discussion rather than test scores. That's possible because tuition (\$11,600 this year) and fund-raising finance a 9-to-1 student-teacher ratio. Sandia is one of a handful of private schools across the country that have avoided AP. Guidance director Bruce Hammond believes that many more would join them were it not for anxious parents who want their children's expensive private high schools to ease admission to elite colleges. But he thinks that at schools like Sandia, the real danger is not low expectations but exhausted kids.

## A Real-World Education

School and real life shouldn't be separate worlds. That was the vision that led Dennis Littky and Elliot Washor to start the **Met Center in Providence, R.I.** (officially the Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center), in 1996. Littky and Washor thought they could get students at risk of dropping out to embrace education if learning wasn't confined to the classroom. Their idea has been so successful that there are now two dozen other schools around the country modeled on the Met and more in the works, thanks to funding from the Gates Foundation. Students at the inner-city school learn through internships and quarterly assessments called exhibitions. "We concentrate on our kids' being doers and talkers," Littky says.

April was exhibition time and junior Noam Bar-Zemer took an hour to detail an internship at a packaging firm, a comparative-religion course at Brown University, work with a children's theater company and his senior thesis and college plans. Instead of conventional courses, he wove a discussion of math, science and even environmental policy into his talk. Bar-Zemer's parents sent him to four previous schools of all types but he either turned off or failed. Close to 40 percent of Providence's public high schoolers dropped out last year, and Bar-Zemer says he could have been one of them. At the Met—housed in six subschools around the city but counted as a separate district—just over 5 percent of the school's more than 600 kids left during the same period.

*With Jay Mathews*

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