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High School Reform

Pathways to a Diploma

In New York City, high school students who are overage and undercredited can take several routes to graduation.

By **Catherine Gewertz**

New York

Quiet has replaced the normal clamor of 3,200 students along the vast corridors of **John Adams High School** by 4 p.m. on a Thursday. In one corner of the building, however, a few hundred students settle into classes in an unusual learning experiment, part of New York City's effort to make graduates out of teenagers who might otherwise drop out.

At this Queens high school in the late afternoons and evenings, students who have fallen behind can acquire the credits they need while still juggling the jobs and family obligations that can put a diploma out of reach. Unlike traditional night school, this program includes a wraparound net of support intended to smooth the road to graduation.

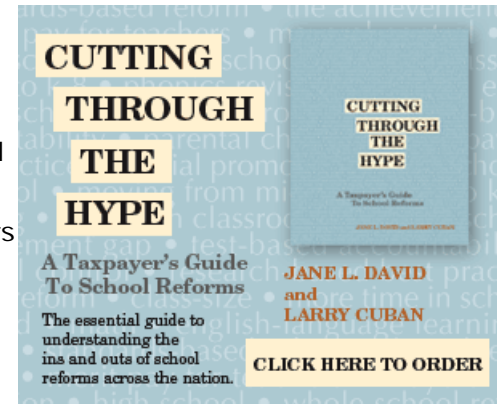
Career and college planning, job-skills development, and extra academic help are woven into the coursework. Social workers provide emotional support to manage the ups and downs of life that might derail students.

"This is an answer to the problem we've been seeing for years," said Susan Matloff-Nieves, the assistant executive director of youth services for Forest Hills Community House, a local social-service agency that provides postsecondary planning and general counseling for the students in the program at John Adams. "It's so far beyond night school or alternative school. It's the whole range of what they need. It's a different way of thinking about kids."

On a recent afternoon at Adams, students in one room are building technology and earth-science skills by using laptop computers to delve into varying theories on dinosaur extinction. In another, they are preparing for the Regents exams, which all New York state students must pass to earn diplomas. In other classrooms, students are troubleshooting school computer systems as part of an internship, or exploring their employment futures by taking an online inventory of their interests and skills.

The program at John Adams is one of 20 Young Adult Borough Centers operated by the New York City Department of Education in partnership with community-based organizations such as Forest Hills Community House. Spread across the district of 1.1 million students, the centers serve 5,000 students who are at least 17½ years old and have 17 or more of the 44 credits they need to graduate.

Students can build their schedules according to their needs. Some attend daily, for up to five hours.



Cindy Mahese, a student at the **Young Adult Borough Center at John Adams High School**, conducts an exercise on planting seeds with young visitors to the Queens Botanical Gardens. Her internship at the gardens, three days a week, was arranged through her high school.

—Emile Wamsteker for Education Week

Others come for just one class, 90 minutes twice a week. Some teenagers must take long bus or subway rides to attend. But if they complete the program, they receive diplomas from their home high schools.

Those with fewer than 17 credits, who are often younger and with weaker academic skills, are encouraged to try one of the city's 24 transfer schools, which are full-time, daytime programs that offer a more intensive approach to catching up. Those students earn diplomas from their newly adopted schools.

Transfer schools and Young Adult Borough Centers, or yabcs, are cornerstones of the city's "multiple pathways to graduation" concept. The idea is that by analyzing data, district leaders can figure out where and why teenagers stumble on the road to graduation, and can respond with a range of programs to help them stay in school.

The district's data show that the students likeliest to drop out of high school are those who are two or more years older than others in their grades, or who have fallen two or more years behind in their credits. Nearly half the teenagers who enter city high schools as first-time 9th graders each year, excluding special education students, become "overage and undercredited" within four years, according to district figures. If such students remain in regular comprehensive high schools, they stand only a 1-in-5 chance of graduating.

"Overage, undercredited kids are the dropout students, just at an earlier point in time," said Leah Hamilton, the executive director of the district's office of multiple pathways to graduation.

Officials developed two types of programs because they reasoned that students who had accumulated more credits could do better in—and better manage—a more flexible setting such as a YABC, and those who were further behind, with weaker skills, were best suited to the more structured transfer schools. Students in both types of program graduate at better rates than similarly undercredited peers who stay in regular comprehensive high schools.

A newer addition to the multiple-pathways approach is "learning to work" instruction, which helps students make the transition to work or college, and provides emotional support along the way. This additional ingredient is being mixed into some transfer schools, YABCs, and even General Educational Development, or GED, programs to help students make it to graduation and beyond.

A local organization supplies the learning-to-work element by putting employees on site with students. Forest Hills Community House has 14 staff members at the John Adams YABC. They team up often with the regular-course teachers to help students explore career options, write resumes, apply for college, land internships, or practice skills such as interviewing for a job. They

By the Numbers

Six-year graduation rates for overage, undercredited students who attend school in:

- **Young Adult Borough Centers: 39%**
- **Transfer Schools: 56%**
- **Regular comprehensive high schools: 19%***

* Seven-year rate

The New York City Department of Education examined its school pipeline and found that students who had become two years or more too old for their grades, or had fallen two years or more behind on their credits, were at the greatest risk of dropping out. Among the findings on students who are overage and undercredited (analysis excludes special education students):

- As of June 2005, **138,000** New York City students were overage and undercredited. About **70,000** of them were still in school, and **68,000** had already dropped out.
- **48%** of the **74,000** freshmen in the class of 2003 became overage and undercredited during high school.
- **84%** of students age 16 or older with fewer than eight credits end up leaving the school system before graduation.

also serve as all-purpose mentors and supporters, greeting students as they enter the building in the morning, or calling home to check on them when they're absent.

Tom Pendleton, the director of the learning-to-work initiative, said the program recognizes that accruing credits isn't the only ingredient necessary for postsecondary success. Making real connections to work and college, with lots of hands-on help from adults, is also crucial.

"The overall goal is to get them to graduate," Mr. Pendleton

said, "but helping them think about their future, and seeing that they have experiences that really help them plan, are also tools for engagement. It motivates them to complete the work they need to get their diploma and make those links [to the next step]."



Jeffrey D. Harris, the site administrator of a YABC in Brooklyn, goes over conjunctions with a group of students in an English class in October 2005. His school opened in 1998.
—Emile Wamsteker for Education Week

■ **93%** of the students who dropped out of the class of 2003 were overage and undercredited.

SOURCE: New York City Department of Education

The 300 or so students at the John Adams yabc are making those links in various ways. They are working toward their diplomas, and preparing to pass the state Regents exams, in settings tailored to their need for extra guidance.

Most classes here meet twice a week for 90 minutes. There are two, three, or four adults in each classroom at any given time: regular-course teachers, paraprofessionals, college students, or Forest Hills Community House staff members. The flexible scheduling makes it easier for students to manage outside duties, such as holding down jobs or caring for family members. The staffing enables them to get more targeted, in-depth help with their work.

"Before, I had shorter classes with just one teacher, and you can't ask for help because the teacher is always rushed," said Krystal Sing, 19, who came to the John Adams YABC last year after four years as a day student at the school. "This way is much better."

The schedule also affords time for the job- and college-preparation activities. One way is through internships. Some are performed at John Adams. Students earn experience—and the minimum wage—by working in ventures ranging from peer counseling to digital-music production. One group of teenagers, called the Mouse Squad, received training in computer troubleshooting. When someone at John Adams has a computer crisis, it's these students who come to the rescue.

Most internships are off site, though. Students are getting credits and paychecks for working in day-care centers, florist shops, zoos, and the offices of city and state officials. Forest Hills Community House employees worked the phones and walked major boulevards in Queens to persuade employers to adopt the interns.

Work and college preparation are regular parts of instruction in core courses, as well. One afternoon, Forest Hills staff member Michael Lawes dropped into a creative-writing class to lead a career activity



Ms. Mahese points out crocuses to young visitors at the Queens Botanical Gardens. Ms. Mahese is enrolled in a program designed to help New York City high school students graduate.

—Emile Wamsteker for Education Week

with English teacher Patrick Willoughby. With their laptops open, the students used a career Web site to explore fields that interested them, and to find out what college majors would suit those jobs and how much they might pay. YABC students have these and similar future-oriented workshops twice a week.

Mr. Lawes and Forest Hills colleague Juyon Song also make themselves available weekly to help students who want to apply to college. In one classroom on a recent evening, they helped Alyssa Gudar, 18, fill out a daunting financial-aid form. She was applying to several local and community colleges to study accounting, and admitted she was a bit overwhelmed by the process.

"With their help, that is the only way I could do it," she said.

Her friend, Ashley Deverteuil, 18, graduated from the YABC in January, but was back to get help applying to community college. She finished high school—and returned for support in giving college a try—because of the attitude of the adults around her at the YABC, she said.

"Here, they expected me to graduate," she said. "In my other schools, it was like, 'Whatever.' "

Forest Hills staff members are working to extend their support onto college campuses. They call students three times in the first year after they've finished the YABC program, to check on how they are doing in work or college, or to see whether they need help getting a job or enrolling in college.

In a pilot program with a local community college, YABC staff members follow students into their first year on campus to make sure they have the support they need. Ms. Song, who heads that initiative, walks the YABC students' applications over to LaGuardia Community College herself, and, once they're admitted, works with the college to have YABC students grouped together in classes, if possible. She goes to campus weekly to meet with the YABC cohort and see how everything is going.

"Some of them are a little afraid: 'What if I go to college? How will I do all that by myself?' It gives them that support," Mr. Lawes said.

Coverage of district-level improvement efforts is underwritten in part by grants from the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.



Ms. Mahese encourages 5-year-olds Devin Hughley, center, and Kyara Lezama, right, to imagine what it's like to be a tree during their field trip to the botanical gardens.
—Emile Wamsteker for Education Week