

Yonkers High School: The County's Best

How the International Baccalaureate brought Yonkers to the head of the class.

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Yonkers High Class of 2009

In its December 2008 feature entitled “America’s Best High Schools,” U.S. News & World Report ranked Yonkers High School the best in Westchester County, beating out the usual suspects. Of 21,069 public high schools in 48 states ranked, Yonkers High came out in the “Top 100” in the nation, in the 37th spot. Chappaqua’s Horace Greeley High School? No. 46. Rye Brook’s Blind Brook? No. 87. Scarsdale High School? No. 92. Bronxville? Honorable mention.

Yonkers High? The best? That’s right.

No doubt, you’ve read many articles and heard many stories about the city’s troubled educational system—not enough teachers, a mostly underprivileged group of students, and not enough money. “Funding is our singular most pressing challenge,” Yonkers Schools Superintendent Bernard Pierorazio says. “There is really no comparison between funding in the Yonkers public schools and schools in the more affluent communities in Westchester.” Pierorazio reports that the average taxable income per student in Yonkers is \$195,000, while the average in Westchester County is \$480,000; the average real estate value per child in Yonkers is \$595,000, while the average in Westchester is over \$1.2 million; and the combined wealth ratio per child in Westchester is 2.760 while in Yonkers it is 1.021. “This is the fight I bring to Albany each year to equitably fund the

Yonkers public schools,” he says.

Which is why the ranking of Yonkers High, where 63 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced lunch, as the top Gold Medal School in Westchester might come as a real surprise, a head-scratcher. Why did it perform so well?

Two years ago, U.S. News & World Report teamed with analysts from School Evaluation Services (SES), a K-12 education data research firm run by Standard & Poor’s, to develop a process that would allow them to analyze how well high schools serve all their students, not just those who perform at the top of their class. The team wanted to provide a clear picture of how well high schools are preparing their students—those who are least advantaged as well as those who are most advantaged, and all those in between. What defines a good high school according to the team? A school that succeeds in all three of the following criteria:

1. Its students perform at levels that exceed expectations given the school’s relative level of student poverty (the NYS Regents exam results were used for this measurement).
2. Its least-advantaged students (those receiving free or reduced-price lunch) achieve proficiency rates on state tests that exceed state averages (a school’s math- and reading-proficiency rates for disadvantaged students compared with the statewide results were used for this measurement).
3. Its students are prepared for college. For this, student participation in and performance on Advanced Placement (AP, or college-level) exams and/or International Baccalaureate (IB) exams was analyzed. U.S. News called this measurement the College Readiness Index, which looked at how many seniors took at least one AP/IB test before or during their senior year and how well the students did on those tests. Only schools that got a College Readiness Index of at least 20 met the criteria for Gold and Silver Medal selection. Yonkers got an 80.7. Scarsdale scored a 63.1, and Bronxville, 65.5 (Bronxville didn’t score quite high enough in the state tests to make it past the first two criteria). “While Yonkers High may have disadvantaged students, those students are taking a rigorous curriculum,” says Robert Morse, the director of data research at U.S. News. “It’s pure good performance.”

Past high school rankings have been more simplistic, U.S. News maintains, such as ranking by descending SAT scores with no demographics taken into account or how many students actually passed the advanced tests. “People have a little trouble understanding our method, measuring relative performance rather than absolute,” Morse says. “But if we didn’t consider the economic factors, then it would only be measuring high to low, which is a disservice. Some schools are really doing an outstanding job for all their students. They’re outperforming others in the state.”

Yonkers High Principal Ralph Vigliotti credits his “terrific teaching staff, students, and parents” for his school’s performance. The teachers and counselors tout the “seriously motivated students.” The students bow to their “incredibly dedicated teachers.” Perhaps. But what made Yonkers stand out is the fact that the school has made its advanced International Baccalaureate courses open to all its students, not just a select group of brainiacs. According to Vigliotti, by graduation this year, more than 85 percent of the class of 2009 will have taken one or more of the 42 sections of 17 different IB courses on offer. “Rather than just having a real strong IB diploma program and to heck with everyone else, Yonkers has managed to also emphasize the elective IBs,” says Paul Gazzerro, director of analytical criteria at Standard & Poor’s SES. “They’re making sure as many students as possible get access to a rigorous, college-level curriculum, even if it’s just one course.”

Yonkers High School started on the path to where it is today 10 years ago when the city’s school system was

reorganized. The system was losing its academically gifted population after 8th grade to private schools and wanted to staunch that outflow. Its six high schools created specialty or magnet programs within each high school—Roosevelt, for example, specializes in math and engineering, Lincoln specializes in business, Gorton’s emphasis is health and medicine, and Saunders specializes in trades and technical studies that include automotive mechanics, cosmetology, culinary arts, and fashion design among others. There are two new high schools (making a new total of seven): Riverside emphasizes environmental sciences, and Palisade Preparatory is a College Board school (it offers college preparatory studies). In the spring, Yonkers eighth-graders apply for the schools of their choice—and while none of the high schools require students to take a test to get in, Yonkers High requires students have a mid-year average in the 80s to qualify.

Yonkers High decided to align itself with the International Baccalaureate (IB) Programme. The International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO.org), a Geneva, Switzerland–based nonprofit, was established in 1968 with a mission of providing a rigorous, well-rounded education for students throughout the world so that they would qualify for university study no matter where they chose to pursue their high school education. In the U.S. the program has mostly been embraced by public high schools (and now middle schools) looking to raise their standards. There are only two other IB schools in Westchester (Dobbs Ferry and EF International Academy, a private school in Tarrytown), 42 in New York State, 665 nationwide (about 2 percent of total U.S. schools), and 2,571 schools in 134 countries around the world. To become an accredited member of this organization, schools undergo an exhaustive authorization and training process. “A core group of ten of us was involved in the three-year IB approval process and curriculum design,” says English teacher Christopher Vicari. “It was intense.”

At Yonkers High, as at each IB school, students opting to go for a full IB diploma are required in 11th and 12th grade to take a slew of courses in six areas of study—English, language, history, experimental sciences (biology/physics), math, and an elective such as art, music, psychology, philosophy, or environmental systems. An IB student must also complete a two-year critical-thinking course called Theory of Knowledge; rack up 150-plus hours of service and activities; and produce a 4,000-word essay in an area of personal interest.

Since Yonkers became part of the IB program, it has gone from awarding five IB diplomas in 2004 to having 42 out of its 205 seniors scheduled to get diplomas at the end of this year. “Last year, of the thirty-four students who got the full diploma, eight or nine got full scholarships to college,” Principal Vigliotti reports.

Jazmin Graves, a soft-spoken IB diploma senior who plays the flute, takes karate, and plans to double-major in languages and music when she attends Columbia University on full scholarship next year, is a big fan of the program. “It obviously teaches you how to research and write,” she says, “but it also encourages you to be inquisitive and willing to explore. I feel ready to participate in the global arena.”

But it seems many in and around Westchester were not ready for Yonkers High to be designated as one of “2009 America’s Best High Schools”—or for the ensuing hoopla. “A lot of my high school friends said, ‘We can’t believe it!’” says Deanna Cachoian-Schanz, a class of ’05 alumna and currently a senior at Sarah Lawrence College. “But I’m not surprised. We’re in Westchester where everyone has their noses up in the air. This tells them, ‘Hey, we’re here and we’re smart.’ People say you’re lucky if you have one great teacher in your life. I had at least six at Yonkers High.”

So, what do the other Westchester schools make of this?

“We pay no attention to these rankings,” Scarsdale High School Principal John Klemme wrote in an email. “Comparing schools is something that may sell magazines, but it’s a pointless exercise to say one is ‘better’ or ‘worse’ than another.”

SES’s analyst, Paul Gazzerro, sees it slightly differently. “Scarsdale can afford to ignore the rankings. If you’ve already signed on and paid the property taxes that are part of living in Scarsdale, you’re pretty convinced that you don’t need to be ranked and rated. Just as Harvard probably doesn’t care exactly where they fall this year, number one or number three. It matters a heck of a lot more to Penn State.”

Besides, he argues, the U.S. News rankings model makes sense for most schools. “We’re measuring how well the school as an organization has done moving all their kids through and giving them access to a college-level curriculum. A school’s goal should be to take students to their potential.”

And, on that measure, Yonkers High School seems to be excelling. “Sometimes at the faculty meeting there was disbelief—how could Yonkers be number thirty-seven in the country?” Principal Vigliotti admits. “I said, ‘Guys, pinch yourselves; this is real. This is what we have been working for and what our kids are capable of doing if we give them opportunities.’”

Laura E. Kelly lives in Mount Kisco with her husband, author Warren Berger, and springer spaniel Tanner. She learned a lot about how great the Westchester high schools are and almost wishes she had a teenager to send through the system. But then again, not.