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School thinks small in effort to win big
By Judith Graham

New York -- There is no reason for Bill Gates, the world's richest man, to come to the center of the impoverished South Bronx, except to see a remarkable education experiment.

Here, on streets littered with broken glass, in an old five-story building with security guards clustered around its main entrance, a dysfunctional high school is being reborn.

Morris High School was one of many failures in the Bronx school district, which serves some of the most disadvantaged urban areas in the United States. Fewer than one-third of Morris' 1,600 students made it to graduation. Three out of 10 students, on average, didn't show up each day. The majority of its students, many of them immigrants, read at the 2nd-grade level or below when they arrived.

Now, educators from Los Angeles to Boston, as well as Microsoft Chairman Gates, are visiting this campus to learn how the five small high schools now within Morris' walls are working with some of the highest-risk students in New York City--and achieving a measure of success.

Gates visited in September to announce \$51.2 million in grants for 67 small, theme-based high schools in the Big Apple, the largest single contribution his and his wife's Seattle foundation has made to an urban school system. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation cited studies showing the benefits of small schools, including higher graduation rates.

In many ways, the Morris campus symbolizes New York City's wave of public high school reform, which calls for establishing 200 small schools, with no more than 500 students each, in three to five years.

New York has been experimenting with small schools since the 1970s. But educational change on an unprecedented scale is occurring, with schools being created in greater numbers and more quickly.

School districts in big cities nationwide, including Chicago, are undertaking similar reforms. Chicago has opened nine small high schools in the past two years, and 12 more schools are on the drawing board.

Still, New York's plan is the most extensive. The Bronx alone has launched 31 small high schools during the past three years, more than any single district in the country.

"Bronx schools were a disaster area. . . . It was time for massive change," says Peter Steinberg, director of the Office of New and Small Schools for Region 2 in New York City, which includes most of the Bronx.

For the foreseeable future, Bronx administrators expect to establish 10 new small high schools a year, all on campuses of existing failed institutions.

"Until we have closed down all the traditional schools that have done such an inadequate job and created schools of choice for everyone, we won't stop," Steinberg said.

Even among high-risk students, the youths at Bronx International, one of the five high schools on the Morris campus, stand out. All have come to the U.S. in the past four years, most not speaking English.

Thirty countries and 22 languages are represented in Morris' fourth-floor hallways, which the 3-year-old school and its 230 students call home. More than one in seven students has had little, if any, formal education.

There are four small high schools like this one in New York, dedicated to working with recent immigrants. A new organization, International Schools Partnership, is working to create other similar model schools across the country, said Shael Polakow-Suransky, Bronx International's principal.

On a recent morning, social studies teacher David Gribben works on a class project built around the theme, "What is America." Each student gets a disposable camera to photograph scenes that symbolize America. The results are displayed at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, accompanied by students' writings.

Gribben's class embodies what Bronx International is trying to do with its still-developing curriculum:

Foster interaction: Six groups of four students are discussing their best ideas for photographs.

Mix youths from different cultures: That makes English the common language.

Make learning relevant: The project encourages students to explore their evolving perceptions of the country they now call home.

Link learning to the community: Students are excited that their friends and family would be invited to the exhibit's opening.

And personalize instruction: Some students will be more successful at drawing or photographing their ideas than they will be at writing, given limited literacy skills.

'They explain things'

Mariama Braima, 18, who emigrated from Togo in West Africa a year ago, has drawn a watch because, as her proposed caption explains, "In America, we always look at the time. It help us work fast."

Michael Stuetz, a photographer volunteering in the class, looks over Braima's shoulder. "Maybe what you need to do is add a person to this picture. Maybe they're looking at their watch, and you can catch a bit of motion to get the sense of being rushed," he advises.

Braima listens carefully and looks satisfied. "I like this school. They explain things," she says. Minutes later, four members of another group stand up at the front of the room to display the pictures they had drawn. Speaking English in public is part of the literacy program.

"Remember, when you stand before a group of people, you look at the back and you project your voice out loud. Because your ideas are important," Gribben says.

One girl who doesn't speak English acts out her concept: being in a store and unable to decide what to buy because there are so many choices. Another shows a picture of a large shoe stepping on a paper cup. "In America, if you are strong you survive. If you are weak, you don't," she says shyly.

Rethinking responsibilities

In a traditional large high school, Gribben, an idealistic 27-year-old, would have little contact with other teachers. With five classes of more than 30 students each, he would teach at least 150 per semester, or 300 a year. Classes would average about 40 minutes.

At Bronx International, teams of teachers of English, social studies, science and math work

together all year, seeing the same group of 70 to 80 students. In two-hour weekly meetings, teachers share what they are teaching and how.

If a student is having trouble, the team is supposed to notice and figure out what to do. Teams decide how to use resources. Eventually, team members will evaluate each other.

"It can be a little intimidating," said Renee Ehle, who teaches 9th- and 10th-grade English. "But there's real accountability."

Classes have been extended to up to 80 minutes, giving teachers time to go into more depth and ask students to practice skills.

Because instructors are being asked to rethink how they teach-- focusing more on projects and expecting higher performance from students--professional development is a priority, with coaching provided throughout the year.

Despite the extra support, the teachers' workload is overwhelming. "It is a tremendous time commitment," Gribben said one recent morning, looking tired even before school.

Teacher burnout is perhaps the greatest problem schools grapple with in New York and elsewhere, Polakow-Suransky said. But it's not the only one.

Resources are scarce on the Morris campus, as they are throughout New York schools. Principal Paulette Franklin of Bronx Leadership Academy II--a science-focused school on Morris' second floor--would like more computers and another science lab for her program. But funds aren't available.

Coordinating how the five small schools interact and use common resources such as the gym or auditorium requires constant attention, said Claralee Irobunda, principal of Morris High School, which still has 805 students but is expected to close within two years.

Infighting among school principals can become a problem. Leaders who have created successful small schools are in scarce supply and great demand, Polakow-Suransky said. Crucial to their success is a substantial degree of autonomy, which can run against the culture of many school districts.

Then there are the pressures on class size. Teachers would prefer classes with at most 24 students; if classes are larger than that, it's hard to give personalized attention, said English teacher Ehle. Her class has grown this year to 27--"too many," she said.

The more successful small schools are, the greater the temptation to load them up with students, which gradually expands them and defeats their purpose, experts say.

There is also the matter of meeting state and federal education standards. Particularly challenging will be preparing non-native English speakers for the New York State Regents Exams, which they will begin toward the end of the school year, Polakow-Suransky said.

Just trying to respond to each student's needs is "daunting," given the level of poverty, broken families and violence in the community, said Joseph Sherman, acting principal of the High School for Violin and Dance on Morris' fifth floor.

Still, early results at Bronx International point in the right direction. Attendance is 94 percent; more than 90 percent of students pass courses, despite higher standards. Student retention is 93 percent.

A second family

For Ishmael Kamara, 17, Bronx International is "like my second family."

Three years ago, Kamara arrived from Sierra Leone, where he had lived with his great-grandmother during the civil war. After rebels killed her, Kamara escaped with another relative. At a village where the relative had family, rebels attacked again, killing everyone else in the house while Kamara escaped by jumping through a window. Eventually, he arrived at a refugee camp in Guinea where teens like him survived through drug dealing and prostitution.

"Losing my family and everything, all that was very, very hard," said Kamara, who is near the top of his class at Bronx International after being sent to the U.S. by the International Rescue Committee. He dreams of becoming a lawyer or actor.

But "sometimes I wake up in the morning having all these bad feelings in me, thinking 'What did I do wrong for all this to happen?' But because we're in a small school, the teachers see it and ask you in a quiet place, 'What is wrong? Why are you sad? What do you need?'"

For Polakow-Suransky, whose office is decorated with photos of every student in Bronx International's first freshman class, those words are golden. This principal knows every student in his school, and he plans to keep it that way even when it reaches maximum capacity of 300 students next year.

"It's a little scary how fast things are going, because this is really deep work--connecting with these students and making them feel they are important and this place is important to them," he said. "But it's urgent that we move ahead."

One building becomes home to six schools

In 2001, New York City created five high schools inside the same building used to house Morris High School in the Bronx. The result was smaller class sizes, one of the centerpieces of a school reform movement in the city.

School enrollments for Morris High compared to the schools created in the same building

SCHOOL YEAR SCHOOL STUDENT TOTAL

(Total students) PER SCHOOL

2000-2001 (1,647) Morris H.S. 1,647

2001-2002 (1,679) Morris H.S. 1,604

Bronx International H.S. 75

2002-2003 (1,436) Morris H.S. 986

Bronx International H.S. 150

School for Excellence 150

Bronx Leadership Academy II 75

H.S. for Violin and Dance 75

2003-2004 (1,622) Morris H.S. 805

Bronx International H.S. 230

H.S. for Excellence 230

Bronx Leadership Academy II 155

H.S. for Violin and Dance 127

Bronx Collaborative H.S. for Technology & The Humanities 75

Source: New York City Public Schools