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ON EDUCATION

Some Immigrant High Schoolers Receive a Lesson in Disappointment

By SAMUEL G. FREEDMAN

Two winters ago, Pablo Oliva began the process of applying to public high schools in New York. A complicated process at best, it looked utterly byzantine to a 13-year-old who had only recently come to America from Argentina. But there in the vast list of choices, amazingly, Pablo found the ideal place.

It was a brand-new school, and would specialize in teaching English to immigrant teenagers. It would be situated on the campus at Kingsborough Community College, a 10-minute bus ride from Pablo's home in the Gravesend section of Brooklyn. The school's partnership with Kingsborough meant that Pablo could use the college library, swim in the college pool and, most important, take classes for college credit.

Now, nearing the end of his sophomore year, Pablo has been the victim of a bait-and-switch. What was initially called the International High School at Kingsborough Community College operates miles from that campus, sharing part of a middle school's building in Canarsie. Pablo's commute to what is now simply called International High School takes more than an hour each way. He has no access to college facilities or classes. And like a number of his classmates, he has been intimidated and robbed just outside the building.

"It's very awful," he said during an interview last week. "I feel bad and sad. I'm wasting time off my life." Then he translated a comment his father, Hernan, was making in Spanish: "The Department of Education is lying to New York citizens. And they lied to us."

Officials at the department acknowledge that they opened registration for the school without having obtained the promised site on or near the community college. And, even as the school is well into its second year, the department does not have an alternative to the current site at 755 East 100th Street.

"We were aggressive in opening the school," said Garth Harries, the chief executive officer of the department's office of new schools. While "one side of the balance sheet" was the lack of a

better location, he said, that concern was outweighed by the record of academic success at several other high schools in the so-called Internationals Network. "We understand that just as we make these trade-offs, it creates trade-offs for parents and families," he said, adding that the department had not deliberately misled the 160 families with children in the school.

Yet what remains starkly evident in speaking to a half-dozen current students and their parents, as well as to educators and immigration advocates familiar with the situation, is that none of the immigrant families had any inkling about the abrupt change in location and academic offerings until two weeks before the high school opened in September 2005.

By then, it was too late for the pupils to apply elsewhere. They and their families had no choice but to listen to repeated assurances from the department that the school would move imminently to a more suitable location. Late last fall, the principal, Michael Soet, invited representatives from the department to address about 50 parents and students. At the last minute, the officials canceled because they had no solution to offer.

"Nobody cares," said Sohir Mikhail, an immigrant from Egypt whose son, Fady, attends the school. "The guys at the board of ed are not going to hear the voices of immigrants."

What those voices express is a sense of betrayal. Even as many students and parents praise the Canarsie school for its academic program, they castigate the education department for its unkept promise of a safe, convenient school with access to college courses.

MIGUEL LOPEZ, a clergyman, enrolled his sons Jeferson and Johantry in the school because the Kingsborough campus was about 15 minutes from their home in Flatbush. It takes the boys nearly 90 minutes by a combination of subway and bus to reach the Canarsie site. On the two days a week when physical education is scheduled, they must leave home by 5:30 a.m.; the class starts at 7 because the school gym is oversubscribed during regular periods.

The inconvenience might not matter so much if the students felt secure in the neighborhood. But the immigrant teenagers have become easy prey for criminals who linger just off school grounds. A Haitian pupil was beaten up at a nearby bus stop recently, and lost several teeth. A Dominican teenager's gold chain was stolen as he walked to the subway after his first day of classes. Pablo Oliva was robbed even of his MetroCard.

Youstina Rafla, a ninth grader, said: "I'm afraid to stay after school for yoga. I'm afraid to leave alone after dark. You have to come as a group and go as a group."

Mr. Harries and Jemina Bernard, another top executive in the new-schools office, said they had

been unaware of the safety problems at the high school until this columnist recounted several incidents.

But Mr. Soet, the principal, sent an e-mail message saying, "All of the incidents that have been reported to me I have in turn reported to the Department of Education through the appropriate channels." He added that he had made repeated requests — as yet unanswered — to have a second school safety officer assigned.

Then there is the matter of the college courses. The flagship school of the Internationals Network in New York, on the campus of LaGuardia Community College in Queens, not only allows students to take college classes but ultimately to earn an associate's degree. The families that chose the Brooklyn school had been led by the education department to expect something comparable.

Instead, Jeferson Lopez discovered he would not be able to take classes to prepare for a career in architecture. Youstina Rafla, who aspires to be an agent with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, has been unable to start amassing college credits. Pablo Oliva could not even get permission to use the Kingsborough library on weekends.

Meanwhile, Ms. Bernard said the education department was "in the process" of identifying a school site closer to Kingsborough, with the prospect of opening it for the 2007-8 academic year.

The parents and pupils can be forgiven for hearing such words with a tad of skepticism. "I still don't believe what they're telling us," said Pablo Oliva. "For two years, they've been telling us we would move. I want to know the truth."

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