

Bronx Youth Heard

At Catholic Schools, Lessons Extend Beyond the Classroom

**JONATHAN
MERCEDES**

Catholic school students say they're excelling in and out of the classroom, thanks to the recent number of after-school programs offered to them by the Archdiocese of New York.

Chris Valerio, 17, says the programs offer students an escape from the serious problems of everyday life. The Cardinal Hayes High School senior added that the extracurricular activities also allow students to enjoy the company of their friends.

The programs are not just beneficial from a social aspect, but students also attribute their academic success to extracurricular activities.

Nathalie Cortes, 15, shares a similar experience to Chris'. At the Academy of Mount St. Ursula in Bedford Park, Nathalie says her after-school jazz music program has improved her mood, which has also helped her

understand the importance of time management. Her homework still gets done and she's developed a strategy to balance school and the other clubs she's involved with. "Out-of-school programs make challenging classroom experiences more pleasant," she says.

According to Rebecca Tuttle, spokeswoman for the Archdiocese of New York City, these programs help students expand their resources and gain extra knowledge and experience. "After-school programs matter because they present new ideas and options to students that may have a rather insulated life, centered around a small Bronx neighborhood. Their world enlarges and their dreams expand," Tuttle says.

And Tuttle may be right in her assessment.

Henry Rodriguez, 15, says, "These programs really helped my knowledge evolve in other things, which helps me to contribute more in class."

Henry is part of Lehman College's Engaging Latino Communities for Ed-



Photo courtesy Catholic Archdiocese of New York
STUDENTS FROM THE Visitation School, a Catholic school in Van Cortlandt Village, practice "It's a Hard Knock Life" for their Drama Club's debut presentation of *Annie*. Back row l-r: Shirley Fernandez and Olivia Ward; Front row l-r: Rita Familia and Nayani Rojas.

ucation (ENLACE), a program that offers extra math and science classes to Latino students to help improve their grades. Henry has been a part of the program since February 2015.

The benefits also help students become more qualified and prepared for colleges and future careers.

For Catholic schools, Tuttle adds,

"Students that participate in the programs have more success when they transition to high school and college as they have already have a head start in exploring their interests in a safe, nurturing, monitored environment and developing a more complete sense of self."

Many students have other interests outside of school and programs that support their creativity and help in the process of their development. As a freshman, Chris of Cardinal Hayes High School played the guitar and drums outside of school but wanted to collaborate and learn from other students. So when Cardinal Hayes offered an after-school program for young musicians he was thrilled. Now a senior, Chris recalls that he wanted to take his creativity to new heights and share it with others.

"These music programs helped me evolve into a better student and a better person," said Chris. "They gave me the focus I needed to be the best I can be."

Teen Pregnancy Rates Drop, But Still Pose Problems in the Bronx

**SAFIYA
HYLTON**

Teen pregnancy rates have fallen in the Bronx, but the push to drop the teen pregnancy rate continues.

The latest figures from the New York City Department of Health (DOH) shows that teen pregnancies dropped 10 percent since 2012 and 37.6 percent since 2004.

"We attribute the drop in teen pregnancy to a decline in sexual activity and an increase in the use of

hormonal or highly effective birth control," the city's health department said in a statement.

Still, the problems persist in the Bronx, a borough with the highest number of teen pregnancies, according to the DOH. Babies born to teen mothers typically experience a lower quality of life, compared to babies born to older parents.

"Teenagers don't have the experience to take care of a child," said stay-at-home mother Diana Harris of Edenwald. Harris was surprised by the rates going down but insisted that teens need to focus on their education.

Still, rates of teen pregnancies remain the highest in the Bronx. Data from the DOH show there were 84.4 percent of pregnancies in the borough for every 1,000 females aged 15 to 19 in 2012, compared to the overall city rates which saw 59.9 percent of pregnancies per 1,000 females aged 15 to 19.

And while many adults are opposed to teen pregnancies, teen girls are just as opposed to teen motherhood.

Star Croney, a freshman at University Prep Charter High School in Mott Haven, said that it amazes her to know that kids nowadays are hav-

ing kids. "It's not their time to have children" she said.

Star believes that kids of this generation want to experiment with everything, never wanting to wait until they are older. Prevention is key but some students are unaware of the best resources.

Cierra Brown, who was a teen mother, notes that the doctor is the best resource to educate girls about birth control.

Planned Parenthood, a federally-funded clinic, has resources for teens wishing to learn about pregnancy. According to Louise Marchena, di-

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For Teens Finding Work, a Job Unto Itself

TAYRELL JACKSON

Teens looking for part-time jobs in New York City may have a hard time finding work because employers discriminate based on age, and the process is unfair, say some students.

Lerret Jackson is a 17-year-old high school senior who now works at Dunkin' Donuts but remembers the job search being difficult and the "constant rejection" a lot to deal with.

The Bronx resident is not alone. In the past 13 years, the number of jobs held by teenagers ages 14 to 18 has decreased by 33 percent. Nationally, that's an estimated 1.7 million teens unemployed from April to July of 2015, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Lerret said that patience and age helped her finally get an interview at Dunkin' Donuts. After a two-year search, she said turning 17 made a huge difference. It's almost impossible to find employment "unless you are 17 or have an immediate connection to someone who could get you a job", she said. "The process is unfair because there is such a large group of people in need of jobs, and there is not a lot of space but a lot of applicants."

According to the Pew Research Center, teens are finding more jobs in the food service industry rather than in the retail sector.

The struggle to find a paying job continues for other students.

Aspyn, who did not want to give her full name, is a 16-year-old high school junior still looking for work and trying to make sense of the application process. "It's hard because teens are limited to where they can work and how



File Photo

FINDING A JOB is tough work for teens, standing at a long line outside MMCC for a job through the city's Summer Youth Employment Program.

long they are permitted to work. Managers don't want to hire people who can't work whenever," she said.

Aspyn recalled how the summer of 2014 was particularly hard to handle. She was rejected from a summer youth jobs program. She also complained that the application process for these kinds of programs was also unfair. "Teens out there actually need the job and don't get it because it's a raffle, yet others who may not need the job get it," said Aspyn, referring to the job program.

Both Aspyn and Lerret agree that potential employers have stereotypes about teenagers. "Employers either think you are immature or can't work when they need you, so they hire more 'reliable' people who could work full time when it is needed," Aspyn said. "Employers also think that teens are immature, loud and bring trouble. But that's the opposite of what actually happens and how teens actually are."

"The reality," said Lerret, "is that managers like responsible and mature

workers who have flexible schedules, which isn't always the case for teenagers in high school."

"I have been looking for a while and it is really stressful because it takes a lot to get working papers," Aspyn said. Then, she said, the process of applying for job is "even worse because you can apply for hundreds of jobs and not get one callback, which sucks and then you're back at the beginning looking. And on top of all that, only about one in five stores hires 16-year-olds."

For Teens of Foreign-Born, Double the Pressure to Succeed

THOMAS POKU

Aaron Dumfeh is motivated to study hard because his parents immigrated to the U.S. from Ghana to ensure he had the best opportuni-

ties.

Aaron's parents are among the approximately 36 percent of foreign-born residents in the Bronx, according to statistics from the New York City Department of City Planning.

The Dumfehs are not alone in their high expectations for their children.

Immigrant parents with good in-

tentions often push their children to succeed. But at what cost? As some teens complain about the lack of a social life and limits on watching TV or using digital devices, researchers have cited that the emotional costs may be even higher.

"They believe I can achieve a great education," said the senior at Cardinal Spellman High School.

Aaron is an 80-and-above student and after graduating in 2016 he wants to attend Union College in Schenectady, New York.

Yet, according to research published in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology in November, there are positive and negative aspects of parents' aspirations for
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Curbing Teen Pregnancy

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rector of youth programs at Planned Parenthood of New York City, resources are available through the organization's Teen Advocate Program, a peer education program. Teens provide workshops and perform skits in their communities and schools, educating them on topics that include birth control options, guides for healthy relationships, and information on how to prevent sexually transmitted infections.

Once a teen is pregnant, Marchena says that there are many other resources available in the city for young expectant mothers. Planned Parenthood clinics in New York City also offer pregnancy testing as well as counseling on options including parenting skills, adoption and abortion.

Boys also can be included in the education of how to prevent teen pregnancy by taking lessons about healthy relationships, and hygiene, building on these lessons with age-appropriate information throughout middle and high school.

Students and adults agree that teen motherhood remains a problem and teenagers should help their peers. Many agree that teens are supposed to be changing the world, not changing diapers.

For Teens of Foreign-Born, Double the Pressure to Succeed

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their children's academic performance.

"Although parental aspiration can help improve children's academic performance, excessive parental aspiration can be poisonous," writes lead author Kou Murayama, PhD, of the University of Reading in England. "Unrealistically high aspirations may hinder academic performance."

Yet, despite parents setting high aspirations, not all children's academic abilities reach such expectations.

Stephanie Hernandez, 15, attends school at the Bronx Center of Mathematics and Science. Stephanie said that, overall, she knows she's been prepared for life's difficulties.

Many immigrant parents arrive in the U.S. to escape the hardships of their home countries. As they nurture their children, they emphasize education as a vital aspect of their lives. As they strive for their children to be successful, they are unapologetic about their expectations.

According to the Secretary for Church of Saint Luke for the Ghanaian community in the Bronx, who went by Mr. Danso, achieving

success is unconditional. "I want the best. Not 50 percent, not 70 percent, but 100 percent. As a parent, if I set the standard low, they perform poorly," said Danso.

Murayama's study warns that "simply raising aspiration cannot be an effective solution to improve success in education." She and others suggest parents should develop better ways to set realistic expectations for their children.

But some children accepted their parents being hard on them.

The pressure is "equally a burden and a help," said Meagan Owusu, 14. The student at Holy Cross School admitted that the parental pressure is "overwhelming, but it also motivates me to do better."

Many immigrant parents like Danso might also have led decent lives in their home country, but like Danso, may have left it knowing their children couldn't lead better lives there. The trick to that would be educational attainment.

Rosemond Serwah is the mother of boy and girl 15-year-old twins. She was a teacher in Ghana. When asked why she moved, she responded: "My country was falling; the opportunities were dwindling; and the fate of my children was at stake."

Although there might be miscommunication between teens and their immigrant parents, the slight show of encouragement in their children seems to do the trick. The support parents seem to put on them in their education, might seem unrealistic, but it teaches the value of hard work and resilience.

And some students understand that reality.

"They expect me to get good grades and prepare for my high school and college stuff. You try to do it, but sometimes it's a challenge for me so I have to go step by step," said George Danquah, 13. "It is helpful to me because my parents have to make sure I become better and not become a burden on them."



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Opinion

Last Leg of High School No Easy Feat

**ARLENIS
PENA**

Senior year is not what my friends and I imagined it would be. Instead of the fun of going on class trips, taking the perfect yearbook photo, or just cooling off after three years of high school, the 12th grade is surprisingly stressful.

According to a UCLA survey of college freshmen in 2015, 18 percent of students spent 16 hours or more with their friends each week during their senior year of high school. That's compared to 37.9 percent of students surveyed in 1987.

I can relate to that statistic. As a high school freshman

at International Community High School in Mott Haven, my friends and I expected to be more independent in the 12th grade. Yet, no one warned us about the responsibilities that come with being a senior and the added pressure of being a teen immigrant who aspires to go to college. I came from the Dominican Republic in 2011, and I've always set big goals for myself.

In 2016, I'll be applying to the University of Tampa in Florida. It's my dream college and it offers opportunities that will hopefully lead to a career in sports management.

But the thought of how to pay for school is stressful. One year's tuition is about \$25,000, discounting room and board. Financial aid is an option, but

the process is long. And even if I get some money, I would still have to apply for additional loans and scholarships, which are not easy to get. The emphasis on SAT scores and GPAs is understandable, but the system is a bit unfair.

As an immigrant, it is hard to stay on top of my grades while learning a new language. I know my friends and I are smart, but college administrators and even high school counselors do not understand the daily struggles immigrant students face. The process of adapting, doing work that you don't really understand, or being distracted by personal issues can sometimes bring our grades down. It doesn't mean that we won't be able to overcome all that and do really well in school.

I think that this should matter when applying for college. Colleges should look at each applicant as a whole person. Numbers can't sum up how good a student will be in college. Many students never get the chance to prove themselves because SAT scores keep them out. Even with impressive personal statements, completed high school credits, extracurricular activities and letters of recommendations, students are still not accepted. That's just not fair.

In a recent *Washington Post* op-ed, college administrator Kristin Tichenor explains why her school, Worcester Polytechnic Institute in Massachusetts, adopted a test-optional admissions policy in 2008.

She writes: "*Most gatekeepers in higher education continue to require standardized tests that we know correlate strongly with race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status. The irony is that for even the most selective institutions, ad-*

missions decisions are based primarily on the rigor of a student's high school course program and demonstrated academic achievement, not on test scores."

But unfortunately, most schools have not taken that approach.

We live in era where people are judged by numbers. Inside school it's about GPAs and SAT scores while outside of school it's about how many followers you have on Instagram or how many likes you get on Facebook.

When you are only defined as a number or statistic, it's tough for many students to get past that label. Some teens decide not to go through with college and instead get a job to support their families. International Community High School, an English Language Learners school, has many students that are brilliant with a lot of great ideas, but they lose confidence because their English is not always perfect by their senior year.

They are afraid to move forward with their dreams. This sometimes has an impact on their grades. Even though they study a lot, the language challenges can be a barrier to other opportunities. Many push forward but the stress is a lot for a 17-year-old.

We shouldn't be defined by numbers. The character of our actions should speak louder than a math score on an SAT exam. I expected classes to be harder. Tests didn't surprise me either in my senior year, but what I did not count on was the high level of stress. Yes, teachers are encouraging, but no one can prepare you for the reality of what applying for college really means and learning to be an adult.

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FOR AGES 17-24 WHO ARE OUT OF SCHOOL AND OUT OF WORK