

INSIDE SCHOOLS - NEW YORK CITY

Case in Brief

Any parent will tell you that evaluating public schools is tricky. Everyone knows that tests scores don't tell the whole story, but statistics are usually the only information made public about a school.

Insideschools.org, an online guide to New York City public schools sponsored by Advocates for Children of New York, was created with a grant from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation to help parents assess the performance of their schools. The site allows parents to find a school, learn about their legal rights, ask for advice or send complaints directly to a school. In its "find a school" section, Inside schools offers profiles of 1,200

New York City public schools with test scores, graduation rates, enrollment, attendance, and ethnic breakdown. Well beyond simple statistics, it also has "reviews" or descriptions of schools based on our school visits and interviews with hundreds of parents. Our eight reporters have visited 500 schools and plan to visit all 1,200 in the coming years.

We also invite parents to bring their comments to the "post a comment" section of the site. This feature serves as a sort of electronic town hall meeting where citizens— parents, students, teachers and community members— come together to share information about their experience in a particular school, its curriculum, or its leadership.

"Measuring success in public schools is more complex than measuring the success of other city agencies," said project director Clara Hemphill, a former Newsday reporter and author of New York City's Best Public Elementary Schools. "If trains run on time and if crime goes down, everyone agrees the MTA and the police are doing their job well in those areas. But the mandate of public education is harder to quantify: schools are meant to assimilate immigrants, to prepare children to be citizens in a democracy, and to ready students for a changing workplace— tasks that are impossible to measure according to a single number such as a school's performance on standardized tests."

When we evaluate a school for the site, we look for a school's general tone and its undertones, its stand-out teachers or lackluster programs. By highlighting a good program in a troubled school or noting a stumbling block in an otherwise stellar school, the site helps parents make informed decisions for their children, and helps keep schools accountable for the teaching and learning that takes place inside their walls.

The site also provides a forum of debate for how schools should be judged— with commentaries from parents and teachers on how their schools help children of different races get along, or teach children with disabilities, or guide new immigrants. We act as the watchdog to the school system, analyzing the performance indicators compiled by the city and state and identifying weaknesses in their assessment— with a news story on problems in the scoring of the state reading test for 4th graders, for example, or the faulty reporting by the city of the alternative high schools' performance on Regents' exams.

We want citizens to know what is going on inside each and every New York City public school: to shed light on schools that are failing, and highlight those that are succeeding. By gathering information from our school visits and conversations with parents, and synthesizing it with outside indicators such as test scores, Inside schools has created a resource for public school parents unmatched in New York City, or nationally. By offering such a wealth of information, and monitoring the school system with a careful eye, Inside schools is helping to hold schools accountable their students, and federal, state, and city governments accountable for their schools.

Written by Deborah Apsel. She is a reporter for Insideschools.org Reprinted with permission from the PA TIMES, monthly newspaper of the American Society for Public Administration (ASPA), www.aspanet.org.