

Newsweek

What Makes a High School Great?

Gold stars: The answer depends on the school, and the student. With its annual list, NEWSWEEK honors top schools that help regular kids succeed in college.

By Barbara Kantrowitz and Pat Wingert

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May 8, 2006 issue - If you want to understand what's happening in some of America's most innovative public high schools, think back to your own experiences in that petri dish of adolescent social stratification known as the cafeteria. Were you a jock? A theater geek? A science whiz? Part of the arty crowd? Whatever your inclination, it defined where you sat.

Now imagine that each of those tables was a school in itself—with a curriculum based on sports, drama, science or art and a student body with shared interests and common aptitudes. That radical idea is transforming thousands of high schools. A one-size-fits-all approach no longer works for everyone, the new thinking goes; a more individualized experience is better. "We are changing the goal of high school and what it's possible to achieve there," says Tom Vander Ark, executive director of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's education initiative, which has spent \$1 billion in 1,600 high schools in 40 states plus the District of Columbia over the last six years.

For parents and students, these schools mean an often bewildering array of choices—small schools within larger schools, specialized charter and magnet schools for things ranging from fashion design to computer programming, even public boarding schools for budding physicists or artists. On the plus side, students get more adult attention and are less likely to be lost in the crowd. They can focus on subjects they really care about while still getting a grounding in the basics. But some educators think this boutique approach comes with a cost: the loss of a common experience that brings everyone together under one big roof. Maintaining quality is another major obstacle. "I think we're still flailing around," says James Anderson, a professor of educational-policy studies at the University of Illinois. "A lot of this is more theater than substance." Vander Ark agrees that the new schools need to prove they're providing a markedly better alternative to regular public schools. "We want to make sure people raise the bar," he says.

Educators have been demanding reform for decades, and it has often seemed as if ferocious policy debates were the biggest obstacles to improvement. Reformers in the 1980s wanted to make all students college-ready with a rigorous core curriculum. A decade later, school choice

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• **Plus: The Newsweek List of the Top 1,000 Schools**

Erin Patrice O'Brien for Newsweek

and testing were the big buzzwords, with some activists arguing that the entire public-school system should be dismantled. More recently, small schools—first proposed decades ago—have gained traction with funding from organizations like the Gates Foundation and the New Schools Venture Fund.

With our Best High Schools list, NEWSWEEK recognizes schools that do the best job of preparing average students for college. By dividing the number of AP and IB tests taken at a school by the number of graduating seniors, we can measure how committed the school is to helping kids take college-level courses. We think kids at those schools have an edge, no matter their economic background. But many schools not on our list are also challenging students in innovative ways—proof that the national experiment in high-school education is just beginning. Ask yourself, "What is high school really for?" Then look around at the options available to today's teenagers: diverse and compelling answers abound. Here are some of them.

Reach Out to Everyone

Creating a connection is even more important for kids at the opposite end of the economic spectrum who desperately need to be brought under the tent. **Denver Street School's** west campus serves about 50 students who have previously failed at high school because of drugs, fighting, pregnancy or other personal problems. It's a "second chance" school, with students referred by counselors, pastors, probation officers or social workers. The Denver school is one of 43 Street Schools around the country whose mission is to reach students in trouble. Despite the students' difficult backgrounds, the school is surprisingly violence-free. Founder Tom Tillapaugh says that's because the kids know that if they're kicked out, they won't be allowed back in. The school is faith-based; there's chapel once a week. That's as important to the school's success as behavior rules, says Tillapaugh. He hopes to teach them that "someone created me for a purpose—I matter," along with the basics of math and reading. This year, the Street School will graduate at least seven seniors—kids who made the most out of their second chance. That's the kind of success that could put any school at the top of the list.

With Dan Brillman, Michal Lumsden, Le Datta Grimes and Dave Kotok

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