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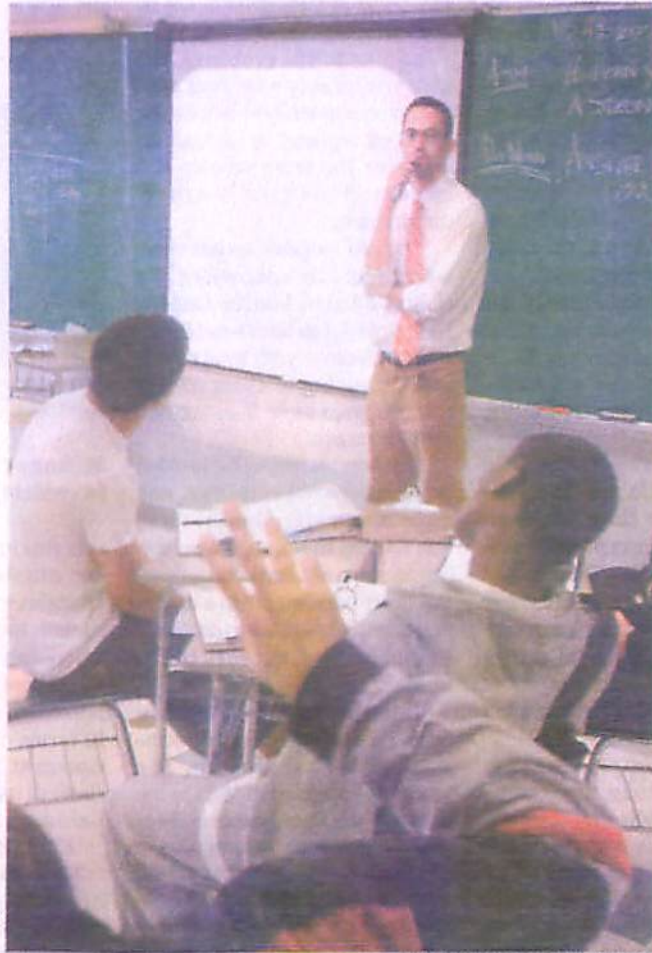
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# The Boston Globe

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JOE TABACCA FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

History teacher Patrick McGillicuddy with students at South Brooklyn Community High School in New York.

## Tuning in can stem dropping out NYC program keeps close watch on students

By Tracy Jan  
GLOBE STAFF

NEW YORK — Ten minutes after the morning bell rang, several young counselors departed from the high school's spotless lobby, down the front steps, and onto the desolate streets of Brooklyn's Red Hook neighborhood.

Outside, they playfully cajoled and generally herded a reluctant collection of teens into the building. One counselor sat on a curb next to a girl crying on her cellphone. The principal colared another girl smoking a cigarette. "Come on, love," she said.

"They're going to harass me like the cops," the girl joked — complaining the way she might of a favorite aunt. She took a final drag before trudging toward the brick building, a trek that officials all across New York have feared she and thousands of others like her wouldn't make.

The morning roundup is but one aspect that makes South Brooklyn Community High School unusual. The staff at the experimental school is charged with getting involved in some of the

**DROPOUTS, Page A6**

# Staff's intense involvement helps pupils make grade

## ► DROPOUTS

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most personal details of students' lives, going so far as to show up at the homes of those who fail to report to class.

The five-year-old school and more than two dozen like it in New York are this city's most innovative attempt to remedy a dangerously high dropout rate — a problem that not only wreaks havoc with the students who quit, but with the society that ends up supporting them. It is a problem that school officials in Boston are beginning to confront aggressively.

In New York, where only half of all high school students graduate in four years, the South Brooklyn Community High School represents a sanctuary of sorts from students' past failures and fading hopes. The school takes some of the city's worst students — those who have been chronically truant and struggling academically. Yet, 69 percent of them graduate. If they remained in a regular high school, their chances of graduating would have slipped to 19 percent, according to the city's

Department of Education.

All of the 150 students have a counselor checking in every day, pushing them forward every time they slip on the long march toward a diploma. The students, mostly Latino and black 16- to 21-year olds, transferred to the intimate school after floundering in large high schools where they were lost in the crowd. Some had previously dropped out.

Counselors regularly greet students with reports on grades and attendance. They call the cell-phones and homes of students who fail to show. Once in class, students are taught lessons that relate to their lives. In a recent science class, for example, they analyzed their thumbprints under a magnifying glass during a forensics lesson. An English teacher paired "The Great Gatsby" with "Bodega Dreams," a novel about a drug dealer in Spanish Harlem.

One student, Jonathon DeLaTorre, 18, said a counselor once showed up at the door of his ninth-floor apartment in an area housing project after he missed school with the flu and forgot to



JOE TABACCA FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Counselor Kristen Washington went over Jonathon DeLaTorre's grades recently at South Brooklyn High School. "The teachers and counselors don't let us slip away," DeLaTorre said.

call.

"The teachers and counselors don't let us slip away," DeLaTorre said. "Every time I didn't want to come to school, my counselor said, 'No, you need to. You got two kids to support. You need to think about them.'"

Eyeing New York's progress, Boston, with its own abysmal dropout rate, is searching for its

own solutions. Only 59 percent of high school students graduate in four years — far below the average in Massachusetts of 80 percent. The number dips to 53 percent when the three exam schools are excluded.

While school districts nationwide are trying a variety of approaches to combat high dropout rates, three common themes have

emerged as keys to success: intense one-on-one attention; frequent testing to ensure steady progress; and partnerships with nonprofits that provide resources not available in most urban districts.

The stakes for students are too high for districts, or cities, to ignore. Students who quit school are more likely to face a lifetime of poverty, earning an average annual salary of \$15,000, nearly \$10,000 less than a high school graduate and \$34,000 less than a college graduate, according to a report this year by the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University. The impact on society is grave as well. Dropouts have a greater chance of landing in prison and depending on public assistance for housing, food, child care, and medical care while paying fewer taxes, the report said.

In New York, the philosophy behind their elaborate anti-dropout programs is a simple one: Make students aware that somebody cares about their lives and futures. The school system spends more than \$33 million a year on

its various dropout-prevention programs in addition to the schools' regular operating budgets. South Brooklyn's six counselors, college graduates in their 20s who welcome students each morning, guide them through their myriad problems, and prod them on their academics, are funded by Good Shepherd Services, a community organization that helped found the school.

"You're doing good today coming in," counselor Jennifer Celestin told an 18-year-old in a black T-shirt with "Brooklyn" sparkling across the front. He was 10 minutes late — better than the hour he had been the previous morning. Progress sometimes comes in small doses.

"Yeah, yeah, I was supposed to be here earlier," replied Freddie Perez, who transferred to South Brooklyn last year.

At Perez's old school, the 2,500 students were greeted by a security guard and a computer when they swiped their IDs for attendance. Perez routinely cut class to hang out in the lunchroom or trash-strewn hallways marked by graffiti. Some days, after checking in with his ID, he headed right back out the door, under the security guard's nose. He tossed report cards with F's in the garbage before his mother could see them.

"No one cared," said Perez, who is on track to graduate in March.

At South Brooklyn, students said, teachers show them respect. Students call teachers by their first names and often treat them as confidantes. DeLaTorre is so close to his English teacher, Sydney King, that he confided a crush on a classmate and asked for advice.

"The buildup of trust helps them to do what we say, like read books," King said. "They're not used to trusting adults because a lot of adults in their lives have fallen short in their responsibilities."

Other districts believe schools need to launch programs in earlier grades to keep students on track toward graduation.

Teachers at Feltonville School of Arts and Sciences, a middle school in a low-income neighborhood of northern Philadelphia, submit a report of each student's grades, test scores, behavior, and attendance every two to six weeks.

Laminated charts of students' test scores and reading levels fill the walls of a conference room adjoining the principal's office, as well as in private rooms throughout the school. Teachers meet three times a month to pore over the charts and discuss students' progress. Those who are struggling land on a watch list, get extra doses of math and reading, and are connected to social services.

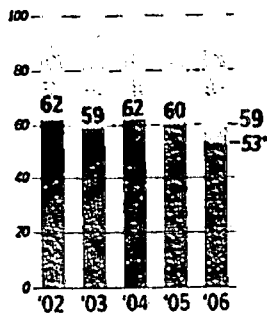
If the new strategies work, the district plans to spread them to all 126 schools that serve sixth-through eighth-graders. Preliminary data from last school year show that monitoring improved behavior more than attendance or academic performance.

"It's imperative to have our staff understand that getting a kid to graduate from high school is a grades 6-to-12 endeavor," said Alie Mulvihill, senior program director of the Philadelphia Education Fund, a nonprofit partner in the dropout prevention plan. "The dropouts are incubating right in front of them unless we intervene."

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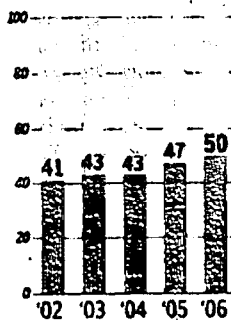
## Graduation rates

Four-year rate in BOSTON



\* Rate is 53% excluding exam schools

... and in NEW YORK CITY



SOURCE: Boston Public Schools; New York City school system GLOBE STAFF