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## DNAinfo.com New York neighborhood news

### High School Admissions Process Often Daunting for Immigrant Families

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CONCOURSE — Last year, scores of parents with children in middle school struggled with the city's high school admission process, a daunting task of narrowing [a list of more than 400 high schools to a dozen top choices](#).

Among those parents was a Bronx mother, an immigrant from Mexico who had to navigate the process for her eighth-grade son with the added obstacle of not speaking English.

The woman, who asked that her name be withheld because some of her children still attend the school, tried to get help.

After meeting the guidance counselor did little to ease her anxiety, she turned to a program at the school run by the nonprofit [WHEDco](#), which guides parents and students through the high school application process.

The program paid off — her son landed a spot in a top-flight boarding school in Connecticut — but not before months of anxiety that included fears that the boy, whom the Department of Education didn't match to any school in the first round of admissions, would not be admitted to any school at all.

“At one point I said, ‘Why don’t we just go back to my country? What are we doing here?’” the woman said through an interpreter.

"I don't know how to use a computer. I don't speak English," she explained. "It's really difficult for me."

For any family hoping to land a child in the right high school, the city's admissions process can be demanding — it requires research and visits and, for some schools, entrance exams, essays, interviews and even auditions.

But for families where the adults, if not the children, are from outside the U.S. and may not be proficient in English, the process can seem nearly impossible, with language barriers, unfamiliarity with the system and limited resources tangling to create a knot of confusion and frustration.

"This whole process is completely foreign to them," said Nicole Jennings, who directs WHEDco's Project STEP program at P.S./I.S. 218 by 167th Street. "Even when you're English-speaking, navigating this stuff can be really challenging."

Public high school applications, on which students rank up to 12 schools of their choosing, are due Monday.

Students hoping to attend one of the city's nine, highly competitive specialized schools had to sit for an exam last month. Other, so-called screened schools look at students' grades, standardized test scores and attendance, and may also require an interview, essay or entrance exam.

The DOE publishes an [annual directory](#) with information about each high school and hosts informational fairs about admissions in every borough. For non-English-speaking parents, it translates the high school publications and offers some interpretation services.

Families with the time and wherewithal to fully engage in the process may use the DOE-provided resources, but they also rely heavily on the Internet and their social networks to find the best schools, and test-prep tools to ensure their child scores a seat in one.

Many immigrant families, especially those with limited English literacy, struggle to conduct similar research and may have fewer informed sources to turn to for advice, Jennings and parents say. Others work multiple jobs that leave them little time to invest in the search or money to fund test prep.

Some may find a free program like WHEDco's, but many rely on school guidance counselors for recommendations.

"We are almost putting ourselves in the hands of the counselor, because we don't have the knowledge ourselves," said Esperanza Vazquez, a Bronx mom who went through the process a few years ago with her oldest son, through an interpreter.

Vazquez, who is from Mexico and speaks only Spanish, said she benefited from her membership in the parent association of her son's middle school, which allowed her to seek guidance from school staffers, as well as her involvement in a parent organizing group, whose members traded advice.

But she said many other parents at her son's school were not so well-connected — and their children suffered as a result.

"Some of his classmates had really good grades," Vazquez, 41, added. "But they ended up in schools that are doing terribly."

WHEDco's Project STEP tries to prevent this from happening at P.S./I.S. 218, a dual-language school where many parents are immigrants and 44 percent of students are still learning English. Jennings and her staff offer parents free consulting about admissions to public and private high schools, and organize a high school informational fair.

For students in grades six through eight, they provide free test prep and help with researching and applying to high schools. Students conduct online research, visit schools and take entrance exams.

Without the program, many students would fumble through the application process on their own, Jennings said.

Quelcy Sanchez, an eighth-grader at the school, said her mother, who speaks limited English, asked the 13-year-old girl to take responsibility for her own application. Without Project STEP, Quelcy said she would not have known to scour schools' progress reports for their graduation and college-enrollment rates, or how to prepare for an admissions interview and exam.

"I was really confused by what I'm supposed to look for in a high school," Quelcy said. "Nicole [the program director] helped guide me to good schools."

Last year, about 72 percent of the eighth-graders in Project STEP were accepted into high-performing high schools, according to an analysis by WHEDco. Among eighth-graders not in the program, only 41 percent got into such schools.

Norm Fruchter, a researcher at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, said students from disadvantaged areas are often outmatched when applying to the city's best high schools.

"Those students are in intense competition with kids across the city for the limited number of good high schools," he said, citing the organization's finding that in more than half of the city's public high schools, 90 percent of graduates are unprepared for college.

In a [recent report](#), Fruchter and colleagues call for more school guidance counselors and community-based programs, like Project STEP, to help students identify and apply to quality high schools.

"And," Fruchter added, "you have to create more good high schools."

Read more: <http://www.dnainfo.com/new-york/20121210/concourse/high-school-admissions-process-often-daunting-for-immigrant-families#ixzz2EISsEX64>