

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.

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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 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 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.



Create Good Citizens

Everyone pays for public schools, so it makes sense that a primary mission should be teaching students to participate in the democratic process. A generation ago many schools required civics courses; far fewer do so today. "There is so much emphasis on preparing kids to survive economically," says Constanca Warren, senior program officer and director of urban-high-school initiatives for the Carnegie Corp. of New York. "As a result, are we really preparing kids for citizenship?"

In the past decade, many schools have started requiring community service. The César Chávez High School for Public Policy pushes that idea all the way to Capitol Hill, which, fortunately, is within walking distance. In addition to a rigorous college-prep curriculum, students work as interns in Congress, at think tanks and advocacy groups in Washington. As seniors, they write a thesis on a public-policy issue and give a presentation before an audience that forces them to defend their stand.

The school is the brainchild of Irasema Salcido, who emigrated from Mexico as a child and now holds a master's degree from Harvard. "I saw that the young people who live here were not included in the world of policymakers," says Salcido, who had been an assistant principal at another public school. "But who better than these students to develop policy changes that would affect the quality of their lives, in terms of poverty, unemployment, crime?"

Chávez now has 500 students, the majority from low-income families. They're budding activists like 17-year-old Eusevia Valdez, who had no idea what public policy was when she enrolled in the fledgling charter school as a freshman. Four years later, she not only understands public policy, she lives it. She wrote her senior thesis on flaws in immigration laws, something she understands from personal experience. Her parents are legal immigrants and she was born here, but the family has struggled to bring her older siblings to the United States from their native El Salvador. Her oldest sister was 21 before the paperwork was approved and, as a result, has been refused permission to immigrate. Her years at Chávez, she says, "taught me to fight for what I believe in."



Celebrate Liberal Arts

Practical concerns—like helping kids figure out a career path—were not on the minds of the founders of Tempe Preparatory Academy in Arizona a decade ago. Instead, they created a charter school whose goal is to turn out students engaged in "the lifelong pursuit of truth, goodness and beauty," according to the school handbook. For 330 students in grades 7 to 12 that means providing a strong foundation in the arts, science and the humanities. The curriculum is based on the Great Books concept—the basis of Western Civilization, starting with the Greeks. "We don't want kids to specialize," says Daniel Scoggin, CEO of Great Hearts Preparatory Academies, the organization behind Tempe and two other similar schools in the Phoenix area. "We want them to get a broad, well-rounded education." All students take music, art, drama, math and science, languages (including Latin or Greek or a modern language), English and history.

Tempe's rigorous program impresses other educators. "It feels like a private prep school," says Stephanie Saroki, education analyst for the Philanthropy Roundtable, "but it's free and available to kids living in a lower-middle-class area." The school is so popular that there's a lottery for admissions. The education is a hard six years, but worth it, says senior Joseph Irvine, 17. "They don't just feed us information," he says. "They teach us how to learn." Irvine recently put that spirit to good use for the school. There are no computer courses, so he proposed an independent-study project on programming in his sophomore year. He spent that time creating a software program for the admissions lottery. The school used Irvine's program this year to select the incoming class at Tempe Prep and the other Great Hearts schools—a very practical benefit of a lofty goal.

Prepare for Work

Most high-paying jobs require some education beyond a high-school diploma, but kids from many families often struggle to get a college education. Early-college high schools can get them on track. By taking a combination of high-school and college courses over four or five years, students graduate with both a high-school diploma and an associate's degree—the equivalent of the first two years of college—at no additional cost. From there, they can enter the work force or finish the last two years of college. In North Carolina, Gov. Mike Easley is trying to expand that concept to include students from all of the state's 100 counties by 2008 (there are just 13 of these schools now). North Carolina's Learn and Earn schools, Easley says, are based on the theory that if you learn more, you earn more. "In North Carolina, a lot of

people grew up expecting to work in the textile mills, just like their parents did, and their grandparents did," says Easley. "But now, those jobs have gone to Asia." Education is the answer, he says: "We're trying to create the best work force in the world."

The early-college concept has its critics. "No one knows what the right model is," says Saroki of the Philanthropy Roundtable. "We're still very early in the process." Many admissions officers at elite colleges don't like it much, either, because they generally want students to take all their courses on campus. "I think they're just trying to rush them through all of this quicker," says Cliff Sjögren, former dean of admissions at the University of Michigan. "If this is the way we're going to go, then I feel sorry for the future of the country." But early-college supporters say the concept could inspire students. "This may be enough to flip the switch for some kids and provide them with a sense of motivation," says Vander Ark.



Help Boys and Girls Succeed—Separately

The first American public high school, established in Boston in 1821, was only for boys. But as the high-school movement spread, new schools quickly became coed, says David Tyack, an education historian at Stanford University. "Almost right from the beginning, society believed in integration by sex," he says. Now a small group of educators—bolstered by studies that show boys and girls learn differently—are turning to single-sex classrooms as a way to re-engage students, especially in low-income communities. One of the first to gain national attention was the Young Women's Leadership School in New York's East Harlem, now considered one of the best public schools in the city. Research on the effect of single-sex schools is mixed, and there are no studies on single-sex classrooms in schools. Experts who study single-sex schools say there's considerable evidence that smaller class sizes would help just as much, especially for middle-class kids. But for boys from poor families, that extra attention and focus can make a difference, says Cornelius Riordan, a sociology professor at Providence College who is directing a study on single-sex schools for the U.S. Department of Education.

Schools all over the country are experimenting with the idea. At Lloyd Memorial High School in Erlanger, Ky., freshmen and sophomores were separated by gender last fall for all classes except one, their elective. At the end of the year, the consensus among teachers and the principal is that single-sex works. Students have mixed views. "You don't have the distraction of boys sitting in your classroom," says Katie Brown, 15. "You can just come to class and you're actually in it to learn, not to

impress." But after an exuberant all-boys science class (the centerpiece was a generator sending off electric sparks), 14-year-old Zack Craddock thought he would have had just as much fun if there were girls in the class. "I think it's personal," he says. "Some guys would have acted the same and some guys would have acted different. I would have been the same." Principal John Riehemann originally backed the idea as a way to help boys, who were consistently lagging behind in reading. One issue: too much of the material was girl-oriented. That led to the even more radical move of segregating almost all classes. Riehemann said there were no objections from parents or teachers, and the experiment has worked so well that they're expanding it to juniors in the fall.

Emphasize Science and Technology

Competency in science and math are critical to the nation's economic strength, and districts around the country are looking for ways to get as many students as possible ready for technical careers. "High-school reform used to be the province of bleeding-heart liberals," says Van Schoales of the Colorado Children's Campaign. "Now it's different because the stakes are higher." That means reaching kids who might not have thought about science as a career. The Denver School of Science and Technology, an 18-month-old charter school, has attracted 229 students in grades 9 and 10—about 60 percent minority and 45 percent from low-income families. The plan is to expand by a grade each year. With a sleek brick façade, the school looks more like it belongs in Silicon Valley than a Denver neighborhood in the midst of redevelopment. Every student gets a tablet laptop for taking notes and the whole school has wireless access.

A big hurdle, says head of school Bill Kurtz, is getting every kid to the same academic level. Some of their previous schools had little math or science or even good reading programs. Summer courses, small seminars and a tutoring program taught by local college students help fill that gap. The day begins with a morning meeting, where all students gather and get a chance to talk about what's on their minds. "At this school, everybody knows everybody," says 10th-grader Nico Lujan, 15. That community support has inspired him to aim for a career in engineering.



Reach Out to Everyone

When Britney Spears first appeared in Omaha for a 1999 concert, she didn't tell the screaming teens in the audience that she was a recent graduate of a Nebraska high school. But the Louisiana native is one of many teen celebs who've earned diplomas

or class credits at online high schools that trace their roots to a correspondence course started in 1929 as a way to bring high school to far-flung ranch and farm kids. Andrea Bowen (Julie Mayer on "Desperate Housewives"), Justin Timberlake, Emmy Rossum and Andy Roddick all signed up for the University of Nebraska's Independent Study High School. The public school's student body is spread out over all 50 states and 145 countries (mainly Americans overseas). Callaway McCann, a 16-year-old pro-tennis hopeful from Kentucky, signed up so she'd have more time to practice. "I've been in school my whole life and I loved it," she says. "But I love this more." It costs her \$1,500 (Nebraskans get a 10 percent discount) for five classes: English, chemistry, Spanish, government and geometry. And she's still going to the prom with friends from her old school. "It's like I never left."

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's 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.

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