

More Students Finish School, Given the Time

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Faced with 70,000 students or more who are years behind in obtaining the credits needed to graduate from high school, New York City is at the forefront of a movement to recognize that for a significant number, high school might stretch into five, six, even seven years.

In an effort that has expanded across Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg's second term, the city has spent nearly \$37 million to identify and cater to students who are at the biggest risk of dropping out and has already contracted for \$31 million more in programs.

The staggering numbers of those who are far behind cover almost a quarter of the city's public high school population -- students like Sunil Ragoonath, who at 18 had passed barely enough courses at John Adams High School in Queens to be considered a sophomore. He routinely skipped school. "All I had to do was walk out the door," Mr. Ragoonath said recently.

To get younger students who have failed many classes back on track, Schools Chancellor Joel I. Klein has created more than two dozen "transfer schools," and plans to open as many as 30 more over the next five years. The city also offers them intensive remedial courses.

For students past the traditional graduation age, the city has established special centers to provide counseling, night classes and an environment designed to avoid the stigma of being college age but in class with 14-year-olds. Some students also earn credits through summer school and community college classes.

When the programs began in 2004, they were serving roughly 2,000 students. That number has since ballooned to more than 7,000. Many students will graduate this week, after spending the summer earning final credits.

Mr. Ragoonath, now 19, plans to be one of them. Prodded by a guidance counselor, he enrolled last September in a center that runs night classes and promised him one last chance. Within months, he had earned a year's worth of credits. This summer, he toiled over economics online and attended a fiber optics class at Queensborough Community College. "At last, I think I can say I am done," he said.

New York is not unique in the vast number of students who are at risk of dropping out. In many large urban school systems, students, particularly poor minority students, can be as likely to drop out as to graduate, a decision that can have lifelong consequences. The

earnings of high school dropouts have declined nearly a third over the past three decades, according to Achieve Inc., a nonprofit group that helps states raise academic standards. For those with no diploma, median family income was \$32,379 in 1974, compared with \$22,476 in 2004, measured in 2004 dollars.

Portland, Ore., Chicago and Boston are all using grants from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to study their own dropouts to start programs for students who have fallen woefully behind.

But nowhere is the effort as far along as in New York City. "The first thing we had to understand was how many kids were over age and off track -- just to know the real size of the challenge we are dealing with," said Adam Tucker, a program officer with the Gates Foundation, which gave New York a grant to study dropouts. Most of the city's programs for dropouts are financed with taxpayer dollars.

New York officials acknowledge that students should complete high school in four years. But they consider every diploma a victory since the city's four-year graduation rate hovers at 50 percent despite an uptick in recent years. For all students, the efforts end at 21, when the school system is no longer required by state law to educate them.

The push for alternatives came in part because of a lawsuit from a nonprofit group, Advocates for Children, which charged that many lagging students were being pushed out of school against their will. The suit was settled, and schools now conduct "exit interviews" with students who want to leave the system and suggest alternatives.

When officials began studying the problem in detail two years ago, there was only sketchy information about who these failing students were. New York commissioned a \$2.6 million effort by the Parthenon Group, a Boston consulting firm, to find out more about those who left without diplomas.

With its data in hand, the officials roughly divide students into two groups. Younger students who are far behind enter the transfer schools, where smaller class sizes allow for personal attention. Students older than 17 who have enough credits to be considered at least a sophomore are sent to "young adult borough centers." They take classes in traditional high schools, but at night, and with more individual attention.

"If I have a problem in class, I can go to the teacher and talk about it, not just sulk around," said Monica Lopardo, 18, who transferred to the center affiliated with Lincoln High School in Brooklyn last year and expects to graduate in January.

School officials are convinced that with enough creativity, they can cobble together schedules to give the students the full platter of classes. "The transcripts come in a bit of a mess," said Michele Cahill of the Carnegie Corporation, who created these alternative programs when she worked for Mr. Klein. "There are some who are missing all their gym classes but have passed three years of math."

For those who work with these students, one of the most difficult tasks is convincing them that they can, and should, finish high school. "These are students who are really frustrated and ready to be out," said Edita Volovodovskaya, who runs the John Adams Young Adult Borough Center, which is attached to John Adams High School. "But it takes a lot of work. They weren't always willing to take a full load; they weren't always willing to show up to class."

That was precisely how David Dorsey behaved when he first started at the center. He was already 19 and half-heartedly thought he would have another shot at a diploma. But there were long stretches when he did not bother to show up. Then his phone would begin to ring. His counselor, a social worker from a local community center, called every day that he was absent.

"Finally I decided to pick up the phone, and this woman is on the other end saying, 'Where are you? Get in here,' " Mr. Dorsey said. "I just decided to show up to get her off my back -- otherwise she was going to be on my phone bill a lot." He graduated at 21 and has now finished a semester at La Guardia Community College.

Night school also helps with the frustration of being older than classmates in traditional high schools. "You start to feel like an old man with little kids," said Christian Alvarenga, who moved from regular school at John Adams to the night program after his fifth year of high school.

The embarrassment diminishes when students attend the borough centers. But they are still keenly aware that they are behind schedule.

Camry Petillo, 21, who finished the John Adams program in June, decided to forgo graduation. "I didn't feel like I had a lot to celebrate," she said. "I knew I should have been up there years ago."