

Reference:

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Daring to Be Different

Reformers around the country have found new ways to motivate teens and they're inspiring others to break the mold

Tests aren't the only way to judge a high school. In the past decade, educators around the country have created dozens of intriguing models for reform. They include virtual high schools where all classes are online and "theme" schools based on environmental issues or the health-care profession. These schools tend to have "a strong identity shared by families and faculty alike," says Thomas Toch, writer-in-residence at the National Center on Education and the Economy and author of "High Schools on a Human Scale," published this month by Beacon Press. Some examples:

Urban Academy Laboratory High School, New York City: This public school of 120 students has made debate a teaching tool in every classroom. "What's your evidence?" could be the school motto; one of the most popular courses is officially titled "Are You Looking for an Argument?" Despite drawing a typically urban mix of students, with many minorities and children of low-income parents, the school has a 3 percent dropout rate, while 95 percent of graduates go to college.

Cristo Rey Jesuit High School, Chicago: Ninety-three percent of the 440 students at this Roman Catholic school come from low-income families, so Cristo Rey has found a novel way of financing private education that is now spreading to other cities. Per-student costs are \$8,450, but the tuition is only \$2,200. The rest of the money comes from students' own labor. Each of them puts in an eight-hour day, five days a month, in one of an assortment of banks, law firms and other private firms on Chicago's Loop, which pay \$25,000 a year for each clerical job staffed by four rotating students. The work ethic pays off in other ways as well; 85 percent of the school's graduates head for college.

Schools for Educational Evolution & Development (SEED) Public Charter School, Washington, D.C.: Drive past a small park in a low-income neighborhood of southeast Washington, and suddenly you find a brand-new prep school, resembling an old-line New England boarding school. The 230 students from mostly minority families live at the school all week in gleaming new dorms with computer connections, study halls and round-the-clock teachers. Two young management consultants came up with the idea, and it has created an atmosphere where distracted public-school children can finally focus on their studies.

Girard Academic Music Program, Philadelphia: This fifth-through-12th-grade school of 520 students in south Philadelphia draws mostly children from low-income families. Everyone studies music theory and "all of them can read and write their own music," says counselor Mae Pasquariello. Music lessons in every instrument (except piano) are free. There is also a strong emphasis on English, math, science and social science.

Marcus Garvey School, Los Angeles: A private school with 285 students, Marcus Garvey has a strong Afro-centric curriculum and scores that are often two years or more above grade level. It is in the Crenshaw district of South-Central Los Angeles, and some parents use the school to get their children up to the academic level of magnet programs in the public system.

Minnesota New Country School (MNCS), Henderson, Minn.: One of the first charter schools in the country, MNCS, located in a rural area 60 miles southwest of Minneapolis, proves that innovation isn't confined to cities. The school is run by a team of teachers (there's no principal) and students' work is project-based, says teacher Dean Lind, whose official title is "advisor." Students are required to make a 30-minute presentation in order to graduate. Topics for one recent senior class included "Building a Garden Pond," "History of Nursing" and "Theoretical Physics."

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By Jay Mathews