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Dominican Children In New York City Schools Face Two–edged Sword Of Difficulties

By Patricia Hawke

Residents of the Dominican Republic, especially the impoverished ones, have long viewed the

United States and especially New York City as a land of limitless wealth. All you have to do is live there for a few years, and you too will be wealthy.

This erroneous vision was fostered in the 1980s with the crack epidemic centered in Washington Heights, an area located north of New York City and predominantly populated by Dominican immigrants. Thousands of dollars in cash were sent back to the families, who still lived in the Dominican Republic.

Though the days of easy money have passed, the Dominican poor still believe that, if only family member can reach the U.S. and remain for a few years, he or she could bring the entire family remaining in the Dominican Republic out of poverty. Thus, the Dominican Republic is the largest exporter of immigrants to the New York City schools. Dominican immigrants now comprise ten percent of the 1.1 million students in the New York City schools.

These young New York City schools immigrants face particularly difficult problems as they attempt to acclimate into American society. They face the pressures to integrate at school, while facing the pressures to remain the same at home. Parents too face challenges with the New York City schools.

The first problem is culture shock. In the Dominican Republic, children always must defer to their elders and hold their tongues, having no way to express their own feelings or opinions. In contrast, children quickly learn in the New York City schools that American children are vital members of society, like any adult. They realize that adults care what they think. They become more outspoken both at school and at home, finding the social freedoms compelling and liberating.

Parents feel themselves losing control of their children, who are shedding their cultural restrictions. They view New York City schools children as arrogant and flamboyant, with no respect for their elders. Such contrasting expectations between children and parents cause stress at home. Of course, many parents blame the New York City schools for their children adopting these attributes, where they did not wish to send their children anyway.

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The Dominican immigrant home environment is not always conducive to learning. For impoverished families in the Dominican Republic, education is not a priority, as it is with the wealthy families there. Though early schooling is free for children, it is seen as a costly endeavor for families just trying to make ends meet. Clothing for school, meals, school supplies, books, and transportation are luxuries for such families. According to the World Bank, 13 percent of children ages 7–14 work outside the home, rather than attend school. According to Unicef, 16 percent of children ages 10–17 are illiterate. Usually, one or both parents have little or no education, due to less long-term educational exposure for children of poorer families. Is it any wonder they may resent the mandatory law for their children to attend the New York City schools?

Though cultural differences present a major obstacle, language is the biggest difficulty for these immigrant children in the New York City schools. According to Robert Mercedes, Principal of Middle School 390 in the Bronx and President of the Association of Dominican–American Supervisors and

Administrators, Dominican children arrive at the New York City schools lacking the basic native-language skills of the Dominican Republic. This makes transitioning them into the English language even more difficult.

They feel like outsiders in the New York City schools. They are in a language and cultural isolation. They are generally dumped into bilingual classes at low-income schools, and feel more of a burden to the New York City schools than an equal to the other students. The victim mentality takes over for many of these youth, who separate themselves into close-knit ethnic groups. They are especially vulnerable to street gang recruitment, which pervades the areas around the ghetto-like atmosphere of some of the New York City schools they attend.

On one side, the New York City schools are a haven of new opportunities for the Dominican children and their parents. Yet, these same opportunities can be the downfall of the immigrant family values and the children, as well. It is a dual-edged sword, afflicted with stressful difficulties and insurmountable obstacles for many.

Patricia Hawke is a staff writer for Schools K–12, providing free, in-depth reports on all U.S. public and private K–12 schools. Patricia has a nose for research and writes stimulating news and views on school issues. For more on New York City schools visit

<http://www.schoolsk-12.com/New-York/New-York/index.html>

Nea Gives New York Schools A Failing Grade

By Patricia Hawke

Though public schools across the nation are improving their school environments for students, the New York schools are falling behind, according to the National Education Association (NEA). In a recently posted web page, the NEA cited many failings of the New York schools. Here are some of the challenges that the New York schools continue to face during the 2006–2007 school year.

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Average Sizes for Schools and Classes

The elementary and secondary New York schools continue to be among the largest schools in the nation. The average size of an elementary school within the New York schools system is 27 percent higher than the national average. With an average of 558 students per elementary school, the New York schools rank fifth to have the largest elementary schools on average in the United States. Their high schools are even larger, averaging 1004 students per school. That is 33 percent higher than the national average, making the New York schools system the eighth largest in average high school size.

The class sizes in the New York schools also are among the largest with an average of 22 students per class. The NEA ranked the New York schools as the tenth largest in average elementary class size nationally.

Poor Infrastructure

In addition to the overcrowding in the New York schools, their crumbling and aging infrastructure is in desperate disrepair with a third of the facilities in need of extensive repair or replacement. The costs to complete construction and repair needs on school buildings and facilities are estimated to be as high as \$15 billion. During the 2006–2007 school year, the New York schools will have literally tens of thousands of students attending class in mobile trailers, storage areas, and converted bathrooms — not the most conducive environment for learning.

The New York schools rank among the bottom ten states in the percentage of schools with at least one unsatisfactory environment condition. Seventy–six percent of the New York schools fall into this category. There are 36 percent with poor ventilation that is bad for children with respiratory ailments, such as asthma, and contributes to higher illness rates of children and staff from passing viruses back and forth through the stagnant air. Additionally, 28 percent of all New York schools have bad plumbing and 31 percent of the schools have roofs that are crumbling.

As important as computers have become to educational opportunities in the United States, more than a third of the New York schools lack adequate outlets and the necessary wiring for computer use in the classroom.

Teacher Salaries

Teacher salaries in the New York schools continue to decline. While other public school systems across the nation have increased salaries over the past ten years, teacher salaries in the New York schools system have decreased in constant dollars by eight percent. This means that many of the

quality teachers are either moving out–of–state to teach or moving into new career fields that pay better. The NEA has designated the New York schools as one of the four worse states for allowing real teacher salaries to decline.

As the NEA points out, the New York schools have many challenges yet to face in order to provide a quality education to the youth within the state of New York.

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