

NEW YORK

JUNE 9, 2003

30 **It's Not Easy Being Teen** By Melinda Blau

And it's even tougher if you have a learning disability or ADD. New York kids who've been tested and tutored to good effect as youngsters often, when they reach high school, rebel against the help and the drugs that keep them focused—and able to demonstrate how smart they really are. At the same time, schools geared to handle their idiosyncratic learning styles are few and far between. Getting into them can be tougher than getting into Harvard.



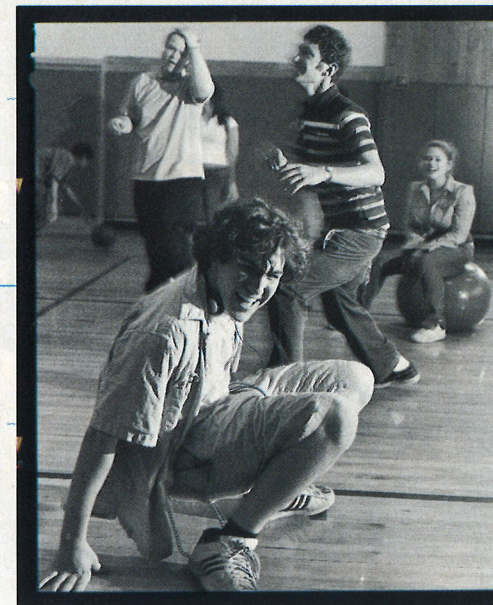
SAFE HAVENS: Winston Prep and Churchill are the city's only high schools exclusively for kids with learning disabilities. This page, Dylan Clark in the stairwell at Winston. Opposite; from left, Chris Ciobanu, Tom Gullo, Julian Gilbert, and Sarah Barnett in the gym at Churchill.

WHILE AN ARMY OF TESTERS AND TUTORS HAVE FOCUSED ON LEARNING-DISABLED CHILDREN, PAINFULLY LITTLE ATTENTION HAS BEEN PAID TO THE TEENAGERS THEY BECOME. OR TO THE FACT THAT TOO FEW SCHOOLS ARE EQUIPPED TO HANDLE THEIR CHALLENGES—NOT TO MENTION THEIR CREATIVITY.

Learning Curve

By Melinda Blau

Photographed by Livia Corona



Sean Manning, a senior at a private high school in Brooklyn, decided it was time to take his life back. So he fired Lynne Hacker, the speech-language pathologist who had been helping him deal with his learning disability and attention-deficit disorder since he was 12. He also stopped seeing the psychiatrist who monitors his Adderall (a stimulant similar to Ritalin) and stopped taking the medication—except when he feels like it. Cool, obviously intelligent, and stylish in a cashmere sweater and soft leather jacket, looking every bit the Upper East Side kid he is, Sean explains, “I’m keen on my privacy. I don’t want my parents knowing what I do. I don’t want Lynne knowing. I know my parents and Lynne want to help so bad, but they turn it on me, and it makes matters worse. I get angry because they want to get involved so much.”

Sean has been tested and tutored since nursery school. The issues his preschool teacher identified—speech problems, difficulties with peers, impulsiveness—dogged him throughout elementary school. “He just pissed everyone off all the time,” his mother recalls. “He would get everything wrong, never hear

you, ask the same question over and over. I remember going on field trips with his class, hearing kids say, ‘Okay, Sean, you asked me that six times.’”

Shortly after Sean began sixth grade, Hacker, who has been diagnosing and treating learning-disabled kids for over 30 years, found that in addition to a language disorder and deficits in “executive functioning,” particularly memory and organization, Sean had ADD, making him inattentive and prone to risky behavior. Sean saw Hacker two to four times a week on and off over the course of the next six years, and at first seemed responsive to therapy.

But by high school, he was becoming less and less compliant, establishing a pattern typical of many LD teenagers: He’d begin the school year with good intentions, promising to take his Adderall and keep up with the work. By mid-semester, he’d start to fall behind, and forget or

refuse (depending on who was telling the story) to take his meds. He traveled back and forth across town to whichever of his divorced parents' houses he chose on a given day and, in both homes, fought with the adults over rules and homework and what was best for him. He lavished time on photography, played his guitar, and wrote music, all of which conferred a sense of accomplishment that school did not. And he increasingly turned to pot. "It made me happier," he says. "When I'm stoned, I'm not conscious of being ADD."

Recently, Sean and his father struck a deal: Dad, a fund manager on Wall Street,

insulate himself from daily failure. Or maybe he (or she—though girls display subtler signs and tend to be diagnosed later, these are equal-opportunity disorders) is sweet but isolated, a kid who swims painfully alone in the social stream, blaming the alienation on himself.

And here's the cruelest irony: In a city rich with educational resources, the number of schools willing and able to handle their challenges is alarmingly small. Getting into a good private nursery school is child's play compared with the applications-to-admissions ratio at Winston Prep and the Churchill School, the only two high

schools in Manhattan established solely for kids with learning disabilities—and yes, both are named after the former prime minister of Britain, who was dyslexic.

Churchill, which expanded its program past middle school just two years ago to help meet the demand, stopped taking applications for next year after 150 had been received—for about eight slots. "Word on the street, one mother told me," says Kristy Baxter, head of the Churchill School and its related center, "is that we're harder to get into than Harvard."

To be sure, all children become more vulnerable as they slouch toward adulthood.

Social demands escalate, schoolwork becomes more sophisticated, and hormones wreak havoc. But kids with learning disabilities and ADD experience a double whammy: Just as they are beset by increased self-consciousness and a raging desire to strike out on their own, their academic struggles reach a crescendo. Going from the safety of one classroom to the confusion of many, given hours of homework and assignments requiring abstract thinking, youngsters who floundered in elementary school can find themselves drowning.

In traditional, upper-echelon private schools, teachers teach to the top third of

connections and gaining an increasing sense of competence, which Weiss calls the "most critical developmental tasks of adolescence," these kids feel constantly undermined by parents, teachers, and peers. "Often their response to so much negativity is anger, withdrawal, and depression."

Baxter witnessed this phenomenon two years ago when seventeen refugees from private and public schools entered Churchill's first ninth-grade class. At the beginning of the school year, Baxter recalls, "the new kids from the mainstream schools spent their time trying to be invisible. They didn't have a work ethic, didn't even know

belong to that club anymore. They don't want to be defined by their medications."

Not surprisingly, clinical depression, social anxiety, school phobia, obsessive-compulsive behavior, and other personality and conduct disorders are all overrepresented among the LD population. "These kids can get frustrated, sad, angry, and down," says Baxter. "Over time, these secondary issues can surface, especially if they're not in an environment that supports them."

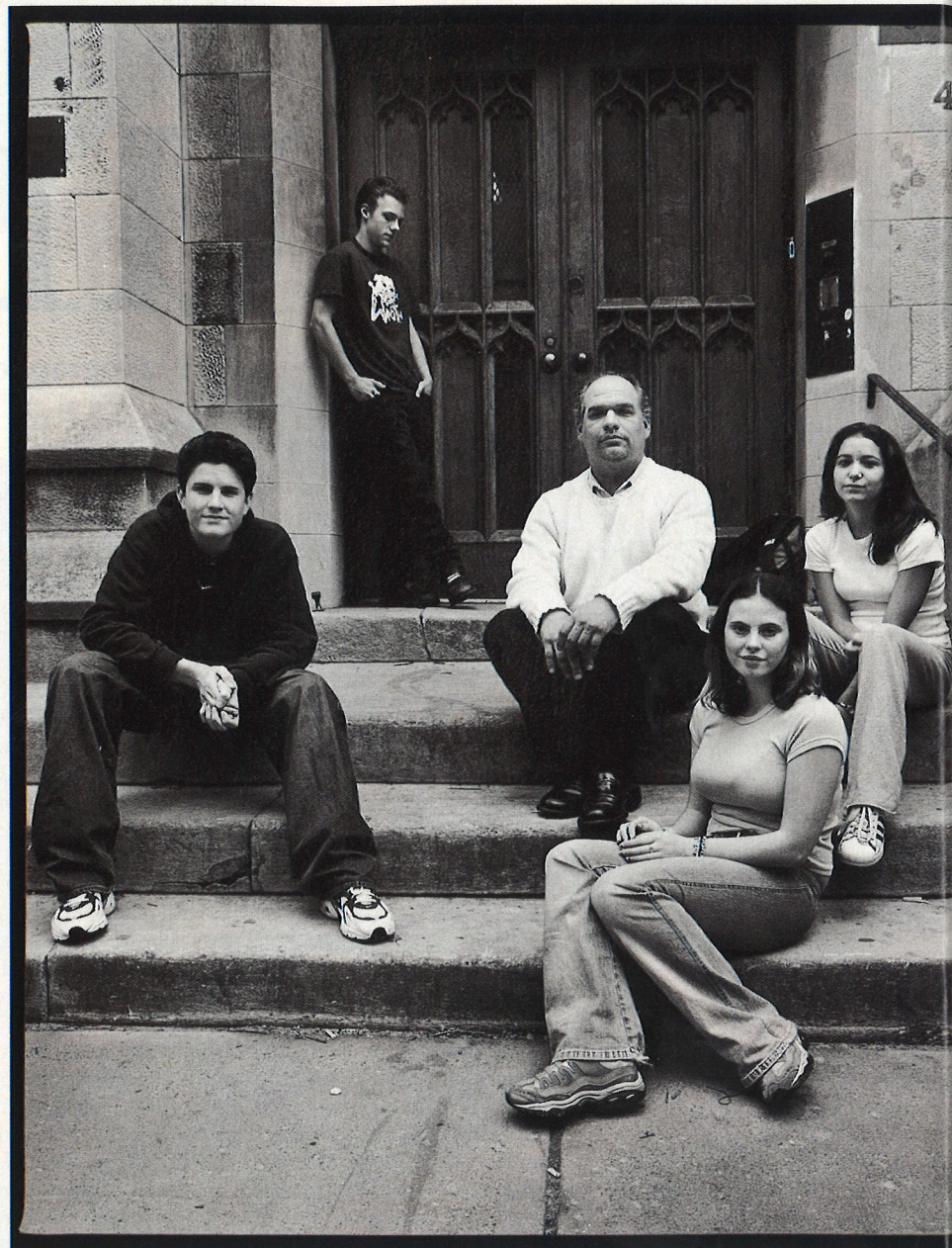
To find a supportive environment, teens with learning disabilities have two choices, each in extremely short supply: a

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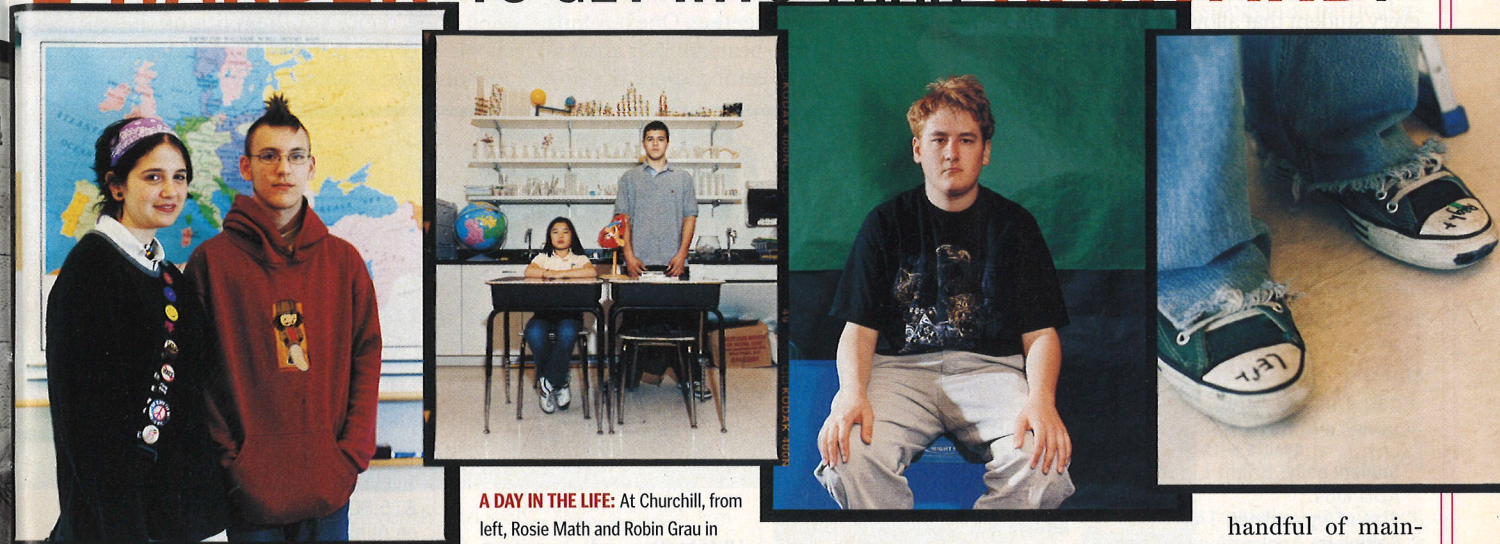
gives his son \$50 to \$100 when he gets an A or B; Sean pays it back when he earns a lower grade. So far, he's ahead. His parents are holding their breath. "The truth," his mother admits, "is that we're just trying to get him out of high school."

After more than a decade of research and press about learning disabilities and the controversial practice of medicating children as young as 4, New York private and public schools are alert, if not hypersensitive, to the earliest signs of trouble. At the same time, an ever-expanding legion of specialists is helping kids with learning issues decode language and handle the rigorous homework and exams that competitive private schools demand. All this attention allows many bewildered, underachieving elementary-school kids to make substantial gains and perform much more like the intelligent children they are. But when these tutored and tested and often medicated kids reach adolescence, many of them hit a wall. "Being identified early is not enough," Hacker explains. "This is a lifelong issue. Many kids come to me with tons of remediation behind them, but without the knowledge of what to expect in middle and high school."

Absent such preparation, says Hacker, the Johnny Can't Read kid has a good chance of becoming Johnny Who Doesn't Care. He's taller than his parents, he has a mind of his own, and he's a master at wearing them down. Maybe he's failing out of the private school his parents pulled strings to get him into and hired tutors to keep him in. Maybe he's spending more and more time with his skateboarding pals, thrill-seeking and smoking weed to



ONE STEP AT A TIME: Outside Winston Prep, from left, Thomas Lane, Dylan Clark, headmaster Scott Bezsilko, Danielle Reiff, and Chrissy Rault.



A DAY IN THE LIFE: At Churchill, from left, Rosie Math and Robin Grau in history class; Shumei Sebastian and her upper-school mentor Adam Katsale; Sam Rivers; and one student's jokey sneakers.

the class—even the top quarter in the most challenging schools. They assume that students read at grade level and possess the cognitive skills needed to handle the more complex material of the upper grades. "A kid with an LD might understand the words in a text but not the more abstract ideas—for example, how the burden of reparations affected Germany's economy after World War I and laid the foundation for World War II," explains Hacker. "And when teachers or friends talk in abstractions, he might not get the underlying concepts."

Even if our boy sees a therapist or tutor who helps him prioritize, organize, and master the skills of higher learning, he can still feel a step behind. "The biggest hurdle, and in fact almost more problematic than the micro insults around the learning issues, is the secondary consequences of continued criticism," says psychologist Howard Weiss, director of the Ackerman Institute for the Family. "The blows to their self-esteem accrued over time are enormous." Instead of solidifying their social

what school was fail and fail and fail come in with a lot of baggage—and by that age, they've given up."

Even early identification—the rallying cry of educators today—doesn't necessarily provide immunity in adolescence. Kids who have had what feels like a lifetime of tutoring and testing can bitterly resent the news that they now need even more help. "They're tired of struggling," says Susan J. Schwartz, clinical coordinator of the Institute for Learning and Academic Achievement at the NYU Child Study Center. "They just want to figure it out on their own. They don't want learning specialists and parents getting on their case."

And like Sean, many take their meds sporadically or quit altogether, observes pediatrician Ralph I. Lopez, author of *The Teen Health Book*. "ADD changes in the teenage years, and the kid says, 'I'm not hyper anymore—I don't need this.' Or they'll ask me, 'How long do I have to take this crap?' Teenagers don't want to

handful of mainstream schools that might be called "LD-friendly" or an even smaller number of special schools.

The LD-friendly schools have classes with twenty or fewer students and a staff willing to make accommodations for unconventional learning styles—allow extra time on exams, let students "read" books on tape, or demonstrate a grasp of material in oral rather than written form. Some LD-friendly institutions also offer, for extra tuition, a resource room staffed with a special-ed teacher and private tutoring sessions either during study hall or after school.

At special schools, which attract those kids with more serious disabilities, all the students have learning issues—and in some schools other disorders as well. Study skills are an integral part of the entire school day. Class size can be as small as four; twelve is the maximum allowed by law. The challenge at the upper-school level, particularly with a college-bound student body, says Glenn Corwin, principal of Churchill's high-school division, is finding teachers who not only are experts in their subjects but have been trained to help stu-

"I KNOW TONS OF KIDS WHO AREN'T 'LD' BUT CAN'T LEARN BECAUSE SCHOOL IS TOO BORING."

dents develop compensatory learning techniques—organizational and study skills that capitalize on their strengths. "We have to incorporate strategies that will enable our students to cope with a Regents curriculum," he explains.

Both Churchill and Winston group students according to their skills deficits and take care to ensure no one slips through the cracks. Every Winston student has a daily one-on-one skill-building session. "To do this model of education well, you need intensive collaboration," explains Scott Bezsilko, headmaster of Winston Prep. "We have an e-mail system, a chat room about every student that allows the faculty to tune in when kids are at risk. So if a teacher says that Johnny's sleeping through his morning

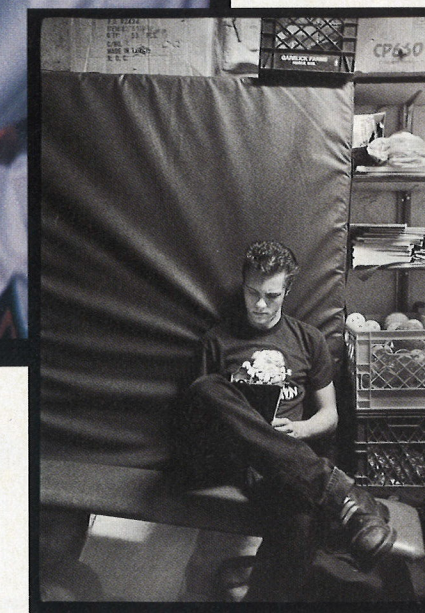
classes, and that's not like him, I'll ask him what's going on. Every day, I can read through 130 files to see what people said, what's going on, where teachers need support, where someone had a breakthrough that we can all learn from."

In a lively tenth-grade history class at Churchill, nine boys and two girls are exploring what the term *nationalism* means. Their teacher, Jason Wallin, uses humor, oral and visual cues, and rapid-fire questions to keep his students' attention. Hands shoot up some kids call out their answers. They look like typical high-school kids except for the fidgeting. One boy taps his heel to a staccato beat; another absent-ly uses his fingers to comb a shock of shiny

brown hair over his face; several others chew gum with jaw-numbing determination. (Gum is not allowed, Baxter later admits, "but you have to pick your battles.")

Many of these kids have been Churchill students since second grade; others arrived in the nick of time. "It was like a dream come true for me," says tenth-grader Julian Gilbert, who spent first through eighth grades at a private school known for its traditional curriculum and emphasis on foreign languages. "When I got here, I felt like I was at my tutor, only it was part of my school."

A sense of safety—and relief at not being out of sync—is high on most teens' lists when they recite the benefits of these schools. It comes from smaller classrooms, individualized attention, and teachers who



sy's untenable anxiety around schoolwork and social situations. "She had friends but a tremendous fear of rejection," her father explains. "Sometimes, when she felt nothing was going right, she'd get so flustered she'd have these momentary breakdowns." Betsy now takes anti-anxiety meds in addition to Adderall and attends an LD-friendly school where "the teachers have the time to show you personally what to do. But I still get a little anxious," she adds. "I can't change that—it's just the way my brain works."

Many private-school kids with learning disabilities who are struggling, particularly the disruptive ones, are "counseled out"—a euphemism, says Ronald Stewart, the outspoken headmaster of LD-friendly

York Prep, that can mean anything from a cold "We're not giving you a contract next year" to a compassionate "Let us work together to find a better placement."

While parents fault the independent schools for hustling their children out the door, specialists don't. In fact, Stewart and others charge that top-tier schools hold on to some students too long. "This is one of those hidden secrets in New York—that LD students are

respect that they learn differently and who help them understand themselves. Sam Rivers, the late artist Larry Rivers's son, was also part of Churchill's charter ninth grade. "Churchill was the fertilizer for a seed that was inside of me," he muses. "I've gained a lot of self-confidence. At my old school, I was the weirdo."

SMILE: At Churchill, from left, Nick Locascio, Adrian Ruiz, Jon Devin, and Cameron Del Giudice shooting an episode of their own television show. Right, Dylan Clark by the gym at Winston Prep.

The comfort level is so high that the kids here—smart, creative, and as vivacious as any teenagers—bristle at being singled out. "Why do you have to keep referring to this as a 'special' school?" a junior wanted to know when I visited Churchill. "Just because we learn differently, I'm still a normal kid."

Dylan Clark, a junior at Winston, made a similar point to an administrator: "This school shouldn't market itself as an LD school, but as a school that teaches interestingly. I know tons of kids who aren't LD but can't learn because school is too boring."

Here in "Tutor City"—a term coined by Richard Soghoian, headmaster of LD-friendly Columbia Grammar and Preparatory School—15 to 25 percent of students in private schools are kept afloat by therapists, tutors, and homework helpers. A Roper Poll conducted in 2000 helps

explain why: 48 percent of parents feel that having the LD label is more harmful than struggling privately with a learning disability. And in a city where children's schools are chits of social currency, observes Regina Price, a Manhattan attorney, "there are people who give their kids five days a week of tutoring and therapy for fear of not having the child at one of the right schools."

Parents whose learning-disabled children tough it out—with ample help—in mainstream schools tend to see it as a victory, but the emotional cost can be higher than they anticipated. Betsy Martinson, a quiet, self-critical girl diagnosed with ADD in the ninth grade, had managed to get B's and C's throughout middle school. It wasn't her ditziness (she'd sometimes study for the wrong final) that prompted a reevaluation after eighth grade. It was Bet-

maintained in schools where they shouldn't be through the artifice of tutors and the influence of money. But a child who is doing five hours a night of homework is not enjoying adolescence."

Winston's Bezsilko defends independent schools' right to be selective. "They don't claim to do all things for all people—they're set up to get kids into the Ivy Leagues. It's not that these private schools aren't serving kids well. They do reach out. The real problem is the lack of other options when it's not a good match of student and school."

Gavin Harrison, for example, languished for seven years in one of New York's most prestigious old-money schools. Despite tutoring since kindergarten and psychotherapy from second grade on, Gavin was initially diagnosed as clinically depressed; he couldn't write a (continued on page 79)

CLASS ACTION

SPECIAL SCHOOLS

THE CHURCHILL SCHOOL
301 EAST 29TH STREET
(212-722-0610;
WWW.CHURCHILLSCHOOL.COM)
GRADES K-12

Student body: Bright LD and ADD kids.
Size of high school: 144.
Getting in: Applications for next year's eight to twelve places were closed at 150.
Tuition: \$27,000.

THE CHILD SCHOOL/ LEGACY HIGH SCHOOL
587 MAIN STREET, ROOSEVELT ISLAND (212-683-3393;
WWW.THECHILDSCHOOL.ORG)
GRADES 8-12

Student body: Teens with LD and ADD as well as more severe emotional and social problems.
Size of high school: 97.
Getting in: 150 applications for 40 to 50 places.
Tuition: \$22,874.

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON SCHOOL
24 WEST 74TH STREET
(212-787-6400;
WWW.STEVENSON-SCHOOL.ORG)
GRADES 8-12

Student body: Students with a combination of LD, social, and emotional problems.
Size of high school: 75
Getting in: 200 applications for 25 to 30 places.
Tuition: \$28,000.

THE SMITH SCHOOL
1393 YORK AVENUE, AT 74TH STREET (212-879-6354)
GRADES 7-12

Student body: Kids with mild to moderate LDs and/or histories of depression, OCD, other disorders.
Size of high school: 40.
Getting in: Accepts 15 of about 30 applicants.
Tuition: \$22,700.

THE SUMMIT SCHOOL
187-30 GRAND CENTRAL PARKWAY, JAMAICA ESTATES (718-264-2931)
GRADES 2-12

Student body: LD kids; fully state subsidized.
Size of high school: 160.
Getting in: 300 applications for five places each year.
Tuition: None.

WINSTON PREPARATORY SCHOOL
4 WEST 76TH STREET (212-496-8400; WWW.WINSTONPREP.EDU)
GRADES 6-12

Student body: Bright LD kids.
Size of high school: 84.
Getting in: 200 applicants for two to five spots.
Tuition: \$31,950.

"LD-FRIENDLY" SCHOOLS

THE BEEKMAN SCHOOL
220 EAST 50TH STREET (212-755-6666; BEEKMANSCHOOL.ORG)
GRADES 9-12

LD-friendliness: Flexible scheduling and individualized

programs; 20 percent of students have mild LDs.
Size of high school: 90.
Getting in: 45 applications for 30 spaces.
Tuition: \$18,000.

THE CALHOUN SCHOOL
433 WEST END AVENUE, AT 81ST STREET (212-497-6500;
WWW.CALHOUN.ORG)
GRADES PRE-K-12

LD-friendliness: A progressive school with a diverse student body, small classes, individualized learning, and experiential instruction.
Size of high school: 176.
Getting in: 120 applications for 10 places in ninth grade; almost no openings in grades 10-12.
Tuition: \$22,700.

COLUMBIA GRAMMAR AND PREPARATORY SCHOOL
5 WEST 93RD STREET (212-749-6200; WWW.CGPS.ORG)
GRADES PRE-K-12

LD-friendliness: Individualized programs that include in-school tutoring and/or classroom accommodations.
Size of high school: 360.
Getting in: 1 out of 75 applicants is accepted in the LD track.
Tuition: \$24,000; \$44,000 for LD track.

THE DWIGHT SCHOOL
291 CENTRAL PARK WEST, NEAR 89TH STREET (212-724-2146;

WWW.DWIGHT.EDU)
GRADES K-12

LD-friendliness: Quest program, with mentors and daily tutorials, is used by 10 to 15 percent of the students.
Size of high school: 240.
Getting in: 75 applications for 15 openings per year.
Tuition: \$21,000 plus \$9,000 to \$15,000 for Quest, depending on number of sessions per week.

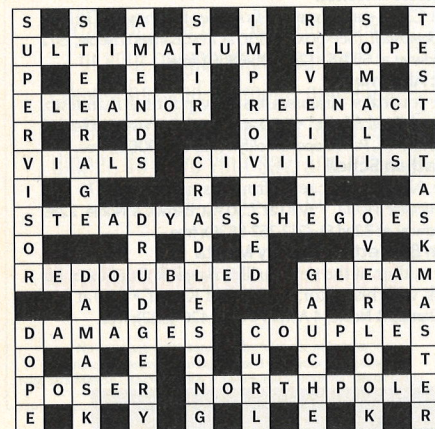
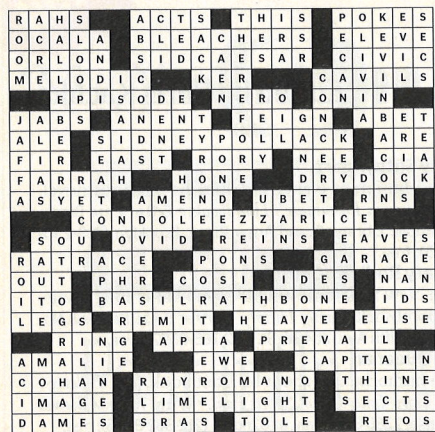
TREVOR DAY SCHOOL
1 WEST 88TH STREET
(212-426-3300;
WWW.TREVORNET.ORG)
GRADES PRE-K-12

LD-friendliness: Teachers accommodate different learning styles and meet with outside tutors.
Size of high school: 230.
Getting in: 350 applications for 20 places.
Tuition: \$23,000.

YORK PREPARATORY SCHOOL
40 WEST 68TH STREET
(212-362-0400;
WWW.YORKPREP.ORG)
GRADES 6-12

LD-friendliness: 25 percent of the students are in Jump Start, which includes daily study skills and meeting with a teacher twice a week.
Size of high school: 222.
Getting in: About 80 applicants for 20 spaces.
Tuition: \$23,300; additional \$9,800 for Jump Start.

Solutions to last week's puzzles



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THE MIX

Tours

The Road Less Touristed

Even for the hardest of natives, there's no shame in guided tours, provided your leader's "expertise" extends beyond a *Seinfeld* habit or a knack for ranting. For the wonkiest of urban adventurers, **Municipal Art Society Tours** are unparalleled. This coming week alone, a night-time "City Lights" tour invites lighting and design experts to offer color commentary during a grand tour of the night skyline; "Life and Gardens in the Loisa-da" visits the structured chaos of Alphabet City's blooming oases; *New York City Trees* author Edward Sibley Barnard details the surprising diversity of Central Park's woodland; and the society's third annual "Cultural Harbor Loop Tour" meanders into Jersey City's gentrifying industrial waterfront and Staten Island's Snug Harbor before docking at the Brooklyn Army Terminal—where there's nary a double-decker bus in sight. (See "Tours.")

Special Events

Tours

Municipal Arts Society Tours

This week sees four tours sponsored by the urban-planning society. (See box.) • **City Lights:** 6/4 at 8:30 P.M.; \$12. "Loisa-da": 6/7 at 2 P.M.; \$15. Harbor Loop Tour: 6/8, 11 A.M. to 4 P.M.; \$40. Central Park Trees: 6/8, 2 to 4:30 P.M.; \$20. Call 212-935-3960 for reservations and meeting places.

Green-Wood Cemetery Twilight Tour

The great "City of the Dead" is open late for a late-afternoon tour of famous graves and beautiful tombs. • 6/7 at 5 P.M. Meet at Green-Wood's main entrance, Fifth Ave. at 25th St., Sunset Park, Brooklyn (212-439-1090); \$12.

Mount Morris Park Fourteenth Annual House Tour

The open house offers self-guided trips through twelve residences and four houses of worship built in the glory days of the Gilded Age. • 6/8, 11 A.M. to 4 P.M. Pelham Fritz Recreation Center, Marcus Garvey Pk., W. 112th St. at Mt. Morris Pk. W. (212-369-4241); \$20 advance, \$25 at the door.

Benefits

The Conservatory Ball

The New York Botanical Garden's annual gala coincides with its peak blooming period. • 6/5 at 7:30 P.M. Conservatory Tent at Enid A. Haupt Conservatory, Kazimiroff Blvd. at 200th St., the Bronx (212-573-8933); \$1,000 and up.

Partnership for the Homeless Gala

Stage and screen star Ossie Davis emcees the twentieth annual gala benefiting the homeless-advocacy organization. • 6/9 at 7 P.M. New York Athletic Club, 180 Central Pk. So. (212-645-3444, ext. 121); \$500 and up.

Free Arts Celebrity Auction

Stars like Helmut Newton, Julian Schnabel, Beyoncé Knowles, David Bowie, and Bill Murray have taken Polaroids to sell at silent and live auctions during this evening of music and cocktails benefiting Free Arts for Abused Children. • 6/9 at 7 P.M. Chelsea Art Museum, 556 W. 22nd St. (212-974-9092); \$150.

"Dance With the Dancers"

The New York City Ballet's nineteenth annual benefit gala invites Deborah Harry to join its dancers for a performance at the gala. • 6/9 at 7:30 P.M. New York State Theater, Lincoln Center (212-870-5585); \$200-\$500.

Exhibits

"Harlem Lost and Found"

A wide-ranging exhibit traces the area's cultural history. • Through 1/4/04. Museum of the City of New York, 1220

HIGH LIGHTS: The resplendent Metropolitan Life tower is on the Municipal Art Society's innovative spring tour agenda.



Fifth Ave., at 103rd St. (212-534-1672); \$7 admission. **"What Gen X Watched: 1969-1985"** *Zoom*, *Schoolhouse Rock*, *M*A*S*H*, and *The Incredible Hulk* are but a few of the cornerstones of post-boomer culture screening this summer. • 6/6 through 10/5. Museum of Television & Radio, 25 W. 52nd St. (212-621-6800); \$10.

Other Events

BWAC Pier Show 11

The theme of this year's festival is "Carnival"—and after several weekends of food, music, dance, and affordable local art, closing ceremonies culminate in an actual carnival. • Weekends through 6/14, noon to 6 P.M. 499 Van Brunt St., Red Hook, Brooklyn (718-596-2507); free.

Murray Hill Block Party

Remembering the neighborhood's greatest act of patriotism—Mary Murray's legendary tea party that distracted British troops during Washington's retreat—the street fair abounds in British trinkets, bangers and mash, and even some bagpiping. • 6/7, noon to 6 P.M. 35th St. bet. Lexington and Fifth Aves.; free.

"Change Your Mind Day"

A piece of the park is given over to meditation and Eastern arts during an afternoon-long showcase of Buddhist traditions. • 6/7, 12:30 to 5:30 P.M. The Great Hill, nr. 103rd St. and Central Pk. W. (800-950-7008); free.

25th Annual Museum Mile Festival

The three-hour nine-museum open house kicks off at the Museum of the City of New York—with twelve-foot-tall puppets representing the five boroughs—and marches down past the Met. • 6/10, 5:45 to 9 P.M. Fifth Ave., 79th to 106th Sts. (212-606-2296); free.

Sports

Belmont Stakes

Brooklynite Funny Cide, winner of the Derby and the Preakness, will try to become the first New York-bred gelding to win the Triple Crown. Festivities begin with a fillie race and Broadway-star appearances. • 6/7, gates at 8:30 A.M., racing at noon, Belmont Stakes 6:30 P.M. 2150 Hempstead Turnpike, Elmont (516-488-6000); grandstand \$2.

BLAU *Continued from page 35*

paragraph, never read a book, and refused to do his homework. Embarrassed by his failures and feeling like he didn't fit in with the preppy student body, five-foot-four Gavin stuffed himself with soda and chips from the corner bodega and ballooned from being a skinny kid, his mother recalls, to 160 pounds. Despite his escalating misery, she says, the family delayed the process of switching schools. "His sister went there. I thought it was better for him to be with other smart kids and that at some point the coping techniques would all kick in."

"It was the worst time of my life," recalls Gavin. "I was a very violent individual, and I got into fights all the time." He has since sprouted up, thinned down, and transferred to an LD-friendly school where he is thriving and infinitely happier.

Finding an appropriate match between school and student leads to success, says Frank Leana, a teacher turned education consultant in Manhattan. "Some schools have an incredibly sophisticated component and others have one or two teachers.

openings every year. The same is true of LD-friendly schools—highly regarded Columbia Grammar admits 1 student for every 200 who apply to its LD program. The competition forces many bright LD students to commute to day schools outside the city (a third of the students at the Community School in Teaneck, for instance, are from Manhattan) or transfer to boarding school. Some families just give up and leave the city altogether.

Meanwhile, thousands of public-school teenagers are vying for the same precious few places in LD-friendly day schools and state-approved special schools. Even if you add in the best public-school programs and LD and LD-friendly boarding schools, notes Susan Luger, who heads the for-profit Children's Advisory Group, "I would estimate that it's still not enough to accommodate even 10 percent of the kids, assuming all those kids were to apply."

Public schools are mandated by the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act to educate all children in the "least restrictive environment." Hence, LD kids, who made

school (retesting every three years is mandatory). "You don't have to have an attorney, but it helps if you have a good one—someone who understands the subtleties," offers Miguel Salazar, program director at Resources for Children With Special Needs, a Manhattan referral-and-advocacy agency for children with disabilities.

"It becomes like a second job," agrees Marilyn Taylor, who has been battling the Board of Ed (which, under Mayor Bloomberg, has morphed into the Department of Education) since her son, now 16, was left back in first grade. She painstakingly documented his lack of progress and, with Luger's help, finally managed to get the CSE to pay for an all-boys LD boarding school in Vermont, where Ryan is finally making up for lost time. "He could have gotten help earlier, but they kept telling me he'd mature," Taylor recalls. "By junior high school, his case file was five inches thick, and someone at the hearing had the nerve to ask me, 'Why did you wait so long?' If I hadn't kept going until I finally found these people, my son would have been another kid who was washed out of the system."

"I'VE GAINED A LOT OF SELF-CONFIDENCE," SAYS SAM. "AT MY OLD SCHOOL, I WAS THE WEIRDO."

The question is what's going to work for a particular child."

Regina Price's son, now in eighth grade, transferred to an LD-friendly school five years ago, but he continues to need tutoring three times a week. "If he's still limping next year," Price says with reluctance, "we might put him in a special school. You can't leave a kid where he's getting hammered. You want him to have the success." Kristy Baxter meets many parents struggling with similar misgivings. "I always say to them, 'Until you settle *your* ambivalence about sending a child to a special school, you can't expect your child to be comfortable about it.'"

Many lower schools for learning-disabled students try to prepare their kids for the powerful changes adolescence brings. At Stephen Gaynor, for example, an LD school that goes up to age 13, the goal is to remediate and channel students to mainstream high schools, explains Yvette Siegel, director of education. She considers herself lucky to find high-school placements for Gaynor's graduates, 95 percent of whom go on to LD-friendly schools; the rest still need the intense support of special schools. "There are so few options."

Winston and Churchill offer, between them, only about ten to fifteen high-school

up more than half of the 29,000 students referred to special ed last year, are usually mainstreamed in general-ed classes and given an Individual Education Plan, or IEP, that outlines whatever additional tutoring, therapy, or accommodations are needed.

Naturally, some districts do a better job than others, and what looks good on paper doesn't necessarily live up to its promise. "We have parents who don't feel their child's IEP is working and who have borrowed money, mortgaged their houses, taken funds out of their 401(k)'s, borrowed \$1,000 from 25 different relatives to pay tuition," notes Luger. "And it's not because they don't want their kids to go to public school. They just want them to get an appropriate education."

Owing in part, Luger says, to the indefatigability of these parents and the assistance of attorneys and advocacy groups who understand the ins and outs of federal, state, and city laws, thousands of families received public funds last year to pay for private day and residential schools. But appealing to the Committee on Special Education (CSE) is not for the faint of heart. A thorough evaluation, which can cost anywhere from \$1,500 to \$3,500 if done privately, is a necessary first step, especially if the child was last tested in elementary

The LD kids who shared their stories with *New York* agree with 26-year-old Jonathan Mooney, co-author with David Cole of *Learning Outside the Lines*, which chronicles their trials as LD kids, that "professional services didn't make a difference in my life—people did." For Mooney, who has "the attention span of a gnat," it was his mother: "She helped me understand how my mind works and then taught me how to use my strengths to accommodate my weaknesses." For Natalie, a shy 15-year-old Russian immigrant whose advice to other kids is "Get friends who won't laugh at you," it was the seventh-grade teacher who smiled at her and admitted he had ADD, too. "Throughout the year, I felt very special around him," she says. And for Gavin, who is becoming a gifted writer, it's his tutor, Lynne Hacker. "I swore I wouldn't go to another tutor, but she was the first person who knew what I was thinking and really understood where I was coming from. She's helping me get through high school, and she's been able to help me feel like I can really write. It was definitely the right decision."

The names of some students and parents quoted in this story have been changed at their request.