

A Blueprint for Academic Success

Nov 16, 2011

by Kylie Jane Wakefield



Assemblyman Lentol, Designer Bill Harvey and Gazette Publisher Jeff Mann touring WHSAD
Photo by Vladimir Perez

Three years ago, the Williamsburg High School for Architecture and Design (WHSAD) was on the brink of failure. Today, it's an A-rated institution, achieving the fourth highest rating score among all the city's high schools.

In addition to traditional coursework, WHSAD offers students in grades 9 through 12 a four-year, comprehensive curriculum in architecture, including classes on historic preservation, drawing, computer-aided design (CAD), and advanced placement studio art. Emily Wilson, a math and historic preservation teacher said, "Because our unique program combines so many different disciplines, it really gives students a sense of how they could actually work in this field. The work they produce over the four years helps them build their professional portfolio, which they can use to apply to jobs or college."

In addition to specialized architecture courses, students are given the opportunity to participate in paid internships at places like Green-Wood Cemetery, Historic Trust of NYC, World Monuments Fund, and Park Avenue Armory. They also go on preservation-themed field trips, and have visited Fort Greene Park, Philadelphia, the High Line Park, and City Hall. "Architecture as a basis for our school has opened up opportunities for many of our students and teachers," said Giovanni D'Amato, who teaches history and historic preservation. "It has allowed teachers to expose students to experiences that might have not been there had the school not had a theme like ours."



Assistant Principals Bruno and McKenna working with students in Ms. Moos' art class
Photo by Vladimir Perez

The ability to use the city, and particularly Williamsburg, as a classroom gives the students numerous hands-on learning opportunities. “It is an area rich with locations for students to visit and to learn more about the importance of restoration and preservation,” said D’Amato. “There is architecture in action with all the development that is taking place.”



Sharlyn Galarza
Photo by Vladimir Perez

According to Principal Gill Cornell, who helped usher in the architecture program, recruitment focuses on students interested in the industry. While many of the students arrive with average or below average scores in traditional subjects, they excel in the program's courses, leading to improved results, across the board. D'Amato said, "Students that come in on a lower level are visual and kinesthetic learners. It becomes motivational to do better in English and math."

The school is open to students from all over New York City, but the majority come from Brooklyn. The original school was founded in 2004, and had an enrollment of 360 when Cornell arrived two years ago. Now, they have to turn kids away, as attendance stands at just over 500 students. "The culture of the school is good," he said. "Kids like being here and know that they're cared for. We changed the environment."



Photo by Vladimir Perez

In 2010, the graduation rate for city high schools was 65.1 percent, while WHSAD was at 88.2 percent. Students apply to colleges like Cooper Union, FIT, and CUNY City Tech, or take on apprenticeships before going onto university.

D'Amato believes that WHSAD is more than a high school, and that it gives students knowledge that lasts beyond graduation. "Our school is a community rather than a school. Students are very much aware that teachers have set goals for them and teachers and students collaborate to develop plans for the students. [These are] not basic plans just to get through high schools but plans that will get them to college prepared with the skills they need to remain in college."