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## Meet the Staten Island elementary school determined to start college-readiness in kindergarten

by MONICA DISARE



Zubaidah Bhello, Joselyn Quinteros and Jade Johnson attend the grand opening of P.S. 21's college center. (photo Monica Disare)

Zubaidah Bhello has visited colleges, decided New York University is her top pick, and plans to become a dermatologist.

And she's only 10 years old.

Bhello is part of a bold new experiment at a Staten Island elementary school that attempts to prepare students for life after high school as soon as possible — even as early as kindergarten. The school, P.S. 21, has built college preparedness into its curriculum and launched its new college and career center on Thursday.

“It helps you with college and getting ready for the next grade,” Bhello said. “And it helps you pick what you want to be when you grow up.” (Bhello determined, for instance, that dermatology is “less disgusting” than some other medical jobs.)

The new center, a first floor room adorned with college pennants and bean bag chairs, is meant to be a hub of college-related activities. Students may come to take a virtual tour of Harvard, or meet with students from nearby Wagner College.

While even the youngest learners are expected to participate in college activities, students at different ages will have different tasks, Principal Anthony Cosentino said. Kindergarteners design college pennants, while fifth graders create digital portfolios that explain their background, goals and what it will take to get there.

The purpose of the center is twofold: Energize students about their futures and use that excitement to help them stay on track academically. For instance, if a student decides she wants to become a mechanical engineer after visiting the center, she will work harder to master fractions and ratios, reasons Cosentino.

“The world is too complex and diverse of a place where a kid should just be told, ‘You just need to do it for a test.’” Cosentino said. “That’s unacceptable. Kids need to know what are they learning, why are they learning it, and how this will impact them down the road.”

The early focus on college is a new attempt to solve an old problem: By the time many students leave high school, they have often been falling off-track for years. Only about 64 percent of New York City graduates are considered “college-ready,” or are qualified to avoid remedial classes at CUNY colleges. Students at P.S. 21 may be particularly at risk for falling behind. Last year, 100 percent of students at the school were in poverty.

P.S. 21 staff work with a local middle school, high school and Wagner to make sure the program is as relevant as possible. A staff member from Wagner College visits P.S. 21 on Thursdays to coordinate college-related activities, such as a research project about the college, tours of campus, and tickets to basketball games. And students from the college, high school, and the middle school mentor the elementary school students.

“This is about helping young people see real pathways from one part of their education, to another part of their education, to their futures as adults,” said Deputy Chancellor Phil Weinberg, who attended the center’s grand opening on Thursday.

Jade Johnson, a fifth-grade student at P.S. 21, nodded vigorously when asked if she enjoyed the college field trips. Johnson, who wants to be an emergency medical technician, said they helped her picture what it will be like to attend college someday.

“We can see other kids, how they’re working hard and stuff,” Johnson said. “When I see that, I want to be just like that.”

If students change their mind about their dreams and aspirations, that is perfectly natural, Cosentino said. The idea is to give education a purpose so students will have something to strive for in school, he said.

“It’s not just about college,” Cosentino said. “It’s about kids setting goals for themselves.”