

Harlem's Witness for the Chancellor

If there is any proof that the smaller, more specialized public high schools proposed for New York City can work, consider the school that Deborah Meier built.

Working with largely poor, minority students whom other schools have written off, Ms. Meier's project, Central Park East Secondary School, has won widespread praise. In a city where just 38.9 percent of students graduate high school within four years, Central Park East, which opened in 1985, graduated 71 percent of its ninth-grade class in four years.

In the plan Schools Chancellor Joseph A. Fernandez unveiled last week to reshape New York City's high school dinosaurs, he is relying on people like Ms. Meier, who will help create 10 of 30 alternative high schools. Ms. Meier and Theodore R.Sizer, a Brown University professor, plan to raise \$3 million over the next three years to finance a cluster of 10 schools, officials said.

The schools will offer a grab bag of educational approaches and partnerships with everything from businesses to unions to churches. But some of the core beliefs underlying the project — that smaller schools in which everyone knows everyone combat violence and lower dropout rates while raising intellectual expectations, that students and teachers do better when they choose the school where they want to be — draw on education theories brought to life at Ms. Meier's school in East Harlem.

Ms. Meier, 61 years old, is among the nation's most famous high school principals — winner of the prestigious MacArthur fellowship and a frequent panelist, conferee and debator when the topic is education reform. This latest project, by far her most ambitious, is her attempt to bring her ideas into the mainstream.

"People were saying to me, 'This may be wonderful, but what are you going to do for the kids in the big high schools?'" Ms. Meier said in a telephone interview from her summer home in upstate New York. "It's been like a side show to the main show. We're trying out a strategy to transform large high schools."

Critics of the plan have questioned whether the curriculums of such small schools would be too specialized, and whether graduates would be sufficiently prepared to attend traditional colleges.

Ms. Meier's Central Park East Secondary School, at 106th Street and Madison Avenue, is a far cry from the type of high school that most Americans may remember. Students study a core curriculum — no shopping around for that easy course on principles of physical education, no shunt-

ing students with poor grades off to auto mechanics. Classes routinely run two hours, and no bells ring.

Every full-time faculty member is responsible for getting to know a group of 15 students and their families well enough to help them through the inevitable teen-age crises. Teachers, not central-office bureaucrats, make all decisions, including what to teach. Students do not graduate simply by toting up credits for courses taken — they must prove they have the knowledge and intellectual tools the school requires through presenta-

Central to Fernandez's plan is the example of a remarkable high school principal.

tions to graduation committees.

The courses, too, are not the ones most Americans grew up with. Students do not study historical events in chronological order; rather, they study a few topics in depth organized around thematic questions. A look at immigration, for example, explores questions of what it means to be an American and whether that means giving up an ethnic identity.

All these changes rest on a core conviction — that all students, but particularly poor students, need a school small enough to instill the sense that someone cares about them and holds them accountable. This principle underlies even those smaller schools with themes that may sound offbeat or less intellectually rigorous than Ms. Meier's own — a point critics are making about some of the schools in Mr. Fernandez's high school project, which include ones focused around community organizing and studying New York City.

"Most human beings need to be known, and it is more critical when other things are also fragile," she said. "Kids are dying in these large schools. They may be reading a textbook which is harder to laugh at, but since none of the kids are reading or doing it, none of the kids are being reached at all."

These will be the principles underlying the New York City high schools project. To carry out radical changes, she plans to take ninth-grade classes, build them up into small schools, and then gradually move each of them back into the buildings of the main high schools.

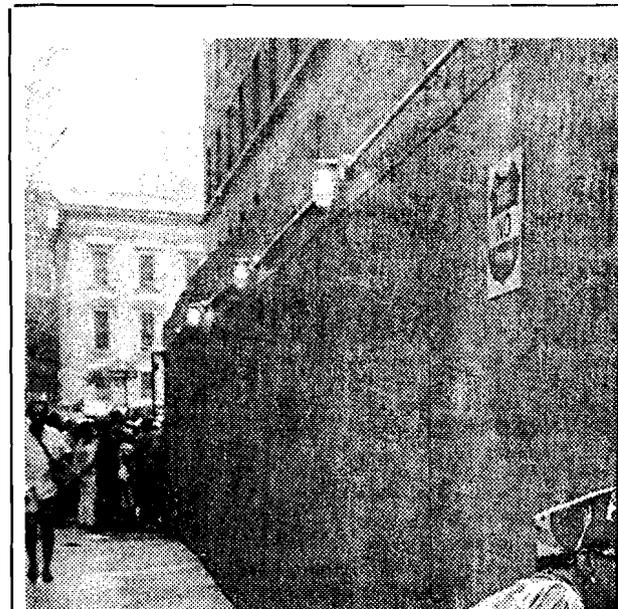
Her partners in the project will be Marcia Brevot, principal of another well-regarded alternative high school, City as a School in Manhattan, as well as Mr. Sizer.

In the end, this group of educators hopes not only to change the shape of the traditional high school, but also to challenge other orthodoxies — demonstrating better ways to train teachers and proving that schools can be run with far less bureaucratic interference, so that part of the money spent on central administration could go directly to schools.

Perhaps because of Ms. Meier's prominence, few educators criticize her openly. One former Board of Education official who now holds an academic position said Central Park East could be far better than it is, and found the curriculum somewhat haphazard. "Can somebody prepared in the 'Debbie Meier environment' mesh with the rest of the world?" he said.

Central Park East's first senior class graduated in 1991, and the results so far look promising. Fifty-five percent of its first graduating class went on to college, compared with an 80 percent average in city high schools. Out of 50 students, 48 went on to college, 46 of them to four-year colleges, most to state universities but some to schools like Columbia University, Brown University and Smith College. Five or six of the 48 students did not finish the school year, Ms. Meier, some because of family crises, some because of academic problems.

But Ms. Meier is probably her most severe critic. "There is not a single thing that we do in this school that I don't think needs serious improvement," she said.



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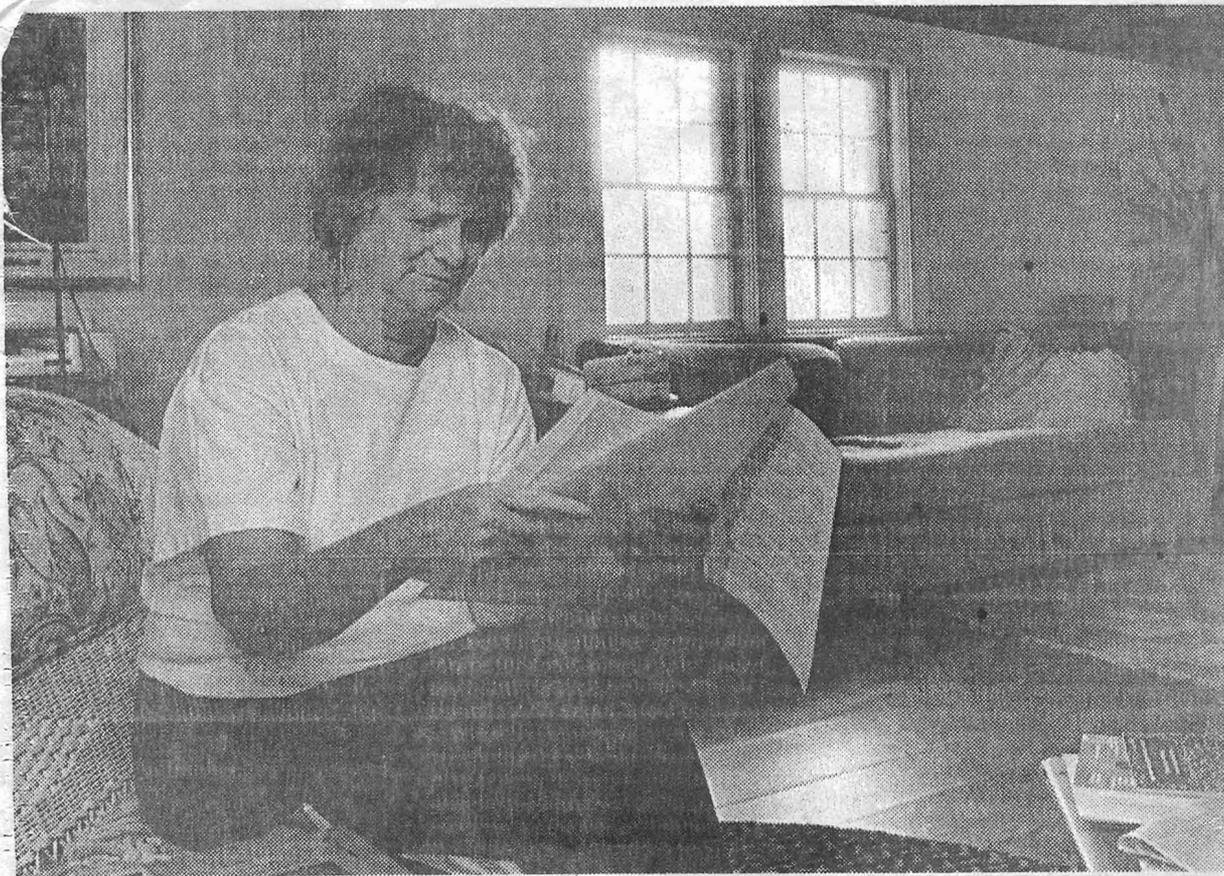
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David Jennings for The New York Times

In the plan Schools Chancellor Joseph A. Fernandez unveiled to reshape New York City's high school dinosaurs, he relies on people like Deborah Meier, above, who will help create alternative high schools.

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