

Current/Former MS54 parents representing NYC *non*-specialized public high schools:
 Bard, Beacon, Columbia Secondary, Frank McCourt, High School for Art and Design, Manhattan Center for Science and Math, Manhattan Hunter Science High School, Millennium, Nest+M and Academy for Software Engineering

Bard Early College Queens

Debbie Baron, daughter is a Junior at Bard Queens

Very rigorous program, with lots of support available. Half HS / half College – graduate with both a HS diploma and an associate’s degree. Most teachers are PhDs. The school is small, 160/grade, so can get to know the teachers well and have an impact on the school (daughter is in student government and SLT). Multiple advisors available: one main person for all 4 years, and another for college. Most classmates are from Queens and Brooklyn.

Like most: small size; diversity; when you enter “college” (junior year) you get a catalog of courses and get to pick

Like least: hard on time management, particularly for kids that do a lot of other things

How much HW: it depends on teachers and students, but do need good time management; guess 2 hours minimum, has seen it be 4-5 hours but not the norm

Beacon

Kathy Morgenstern, both son and daughter are Juniors at Beacon (also G7 parent)

Project-based learning, there are no regents exams – instead they do research project and present to the teacher. Climate of school is friendly, but it was hard at first to make friends for one of her kids. There are cliques: people coming from different boroughs might travel together. There are no numbers to the grades, which they are finding now that they are applying to colleges (colleges may understand, kids less so). Great new building, gym, lots of sports and activities. It can be cold, bring sweatshirts.

Like most: Location

Like least: communication with the school is very sparse

How much HW: one kid says 1 hour/night, the other 2 hours; will vary by kid/class

Advice: Just remember to select schools based on your kid, not by the name of the school.

Who is Beacon NOT right for?

It’s a very liberal school – it’s not known for STEM (though has strong math and science); it’s more thought-based and humanities focused. It also might be harder for kids that don’t have strong executive functioning skills.

Columbia Secondary School (CSS)

Justine DiCostanzo, daughter is a Freshman at CSS (also G7 parent)

Small, “nerdy” school. Workload is hard: if you’re used to getting 95+, be prepared for 85+. The teachers are The Best, hands-down, compared to all the schools she’s been to, and give individual attention. Can take Columbia classes for free, great for helping kids find what makes them tick.

Like most: the teachers; have a philosophy class (unique for HS)

Like least: small school so may not have the sport you want

How much HW: it depends on organizational skills but sometimes get some done during school day; maybe about 2 hours

Frank McCourt (FM)

Marc Nioche, parent of a Junior at FM (also G7 parent)

UWS on 84th street. Very friendly school, 110/grade, with mix of grades in upper classes; diverse school. Peer group community of juniors and seniors that hold weekly meetings to help Freshmen adjust. Project-based learning in groups – there are no individual projects. Outcome-based grading based on 7 outcomes – it's not traditional and hard to know how you're doing on subject matter, but the philosophy of the school is to get the kids away from subject and focus on the outcome of results, and they DO open up the translated grades for a week at the end of each marking period. Teachers are great and accessible, and could have same teachers in different years. Also "intersessions" of 6 weeks between semesters to focus on a single topic.

Like most: Teachers; peer support; half-day Fridays!

Like least: nothing

How much HW: average 2-3 hours/night, but also group based so need to collaborate with others, which can be hard. Somehow, teachers know who's carrying the weight.

Anything you wish you were told before you went there? FM has a reputation for not being very rigorous, but it really does have a good rigorous program.

High School for Arts and Design

Veronika Surla, parent of a Sophomore at HSAD (also G7 parent)

An artsy school with a very creative atmosphere, but also very academically challenging. It's a hidden gem. There's about 250/grade, newish beautiful building, clean. Great experience. Lots of opportunities for internships; companies come to engage kids in real-world projects. All kinds of art that account for ~2 classes per year, and rest is academic. (note: her kid will probably not pursue art further, will do science)

Like most: the teachers

Like least: no music options at all, not even in after school/clubs

How much HW: some nights harder than others; need organizational skills to plan for long term projects; not horrible but not nothing

Manhattan Center for Science and Math (MCSM)

Elizabeth Ross, son is a Junior at MCMS (also son that graduated from Beacon; G8 student)

Son transferred from Stuyvesant to MCMS as a sophomore for social reasons (not academic) and now loves it. Supportive environment; they go out for lunch. Taking 3 AP classes now – it's easy to get the classes you want (unlike Beacon where there aren't many AP). A hidden gem; similar to Booker in size and feel. The teachers are great, small class sizes. There is an advisory group all 4 years.

Like most: isn't crazy competitive and kids support each other

Like least: it's hard to get to from Midtown West

How much HW: 1-2 hours/night, not a heavy load

Anything you wish you were told before you went there? Didn't know about it; in the transfer process worked with the DOE to find schools with spots and this was recommended. They visited and loved it.

How are teachers at MCMS? They're great; back to school night and teacher conferences have more time for discussion; teachers are involved and accessible.

Manhattan Hunter Science

Anne Sawyer, daughter is a Junior at MHS

Small school with 104 kids/grade, with senior class going to Hunter College. Part of MLK campus with 6 HS in the building with metal detectors (which isn't an issue). It's incredibly diverse, every race and religion. No bullying. Academically demanding, but students are self-motivated. Competitive, but grades aren't constantly available. Kids have to finish all their AP/Regents in 11th grade because they start college in 12th, but have great process and support around this.

Like most: academics and community (kid); community and ability to get funding for whatever they need (parent)

Like least: uniform (kid hates; parent doesn't mind); ton of HW (parent)

How much HW: first year, until 930-10; principal claims and hour first year, 2 second year, but usually more; Happier as junior with study hall.

Anything you wish you were told before you went there? Didn't know about Hunter until the guidance counselor mentioned it. Glad they added it!

Millennium

Benjamin Bussenault, son is a Senior at Millennium (also G6 parent)

Small school, 600 kids total, down near wall street/battery park. Nurturing teachers, with lots of communication from the school. Son made good friends.

Like most: Communal area for kids to bond; great communications with school especially during this college applications time

Like least: the elevators

How much HW: maybe 2 hours

Anything you wish you were told before you went there: son did Varsity soccer for all 4 years, and it was hard to adjust to the work load at first to keep up with homework and studies – have to know that colleges look at all 4 years of grades

NEST+M

Kelly Nassar, son is a Senior at NEST+M (also son that graduated from NEST+M, and another son is a Junior at Academy for Software Engineering)

School is friendly and helpful; a strong common core with access to AP. Can go out to lunch. Teachers are great and care a lot about the students. They used to not have HW on the weekends, but now they sometimes do; used to have to take a G&T test to get in, but not anymore for HS.

Like most: K-12 school (which originally thought was a negative)

Like least: don't love the neighborhood

How much HW: at least an hour/night

Academy for Software Engineering

Kelly Nassar, son is a Junior at Academy for Software Engineering (two other sons, a Senior and a Graduate of NEST+M)

Small engineering/tech school on Irving Place. Decided to go here instead of Special Music School. Just discovered they don't have lockers (which is the same as Booker)

How much HW: Fairly inconsistent, but on average about an hour.

AUDIENCE Q&A

Do any of your schools have strong drama department?

YES: beacon, bard. CSS and NEST+M have shows and afterschool. All schools probably have something with drama...

Can you talk more about the grading systems at Frank McCourt and Beacon?

FM: outcomes-based grading, using a scale of 1-4 on 7 measures that include being precise, collaborating, communicating, interpreting, justifying... The system converts these grades to individual scores for students/parents to see for a week at the end of marking periods, and they also convert them for the transcripts sent to colleges

Beacon: They use letter grades. Also, the school is project-based so instead of a typical final or Regents exams, the students do projects with term paper and presentation, standing up in front of teacher and explaining to demonstrate what they've learned

For the larger schools, what has been the impact of a larger school environment?

MCSM: smaller than beacon but still feels big/doesn't feel too small; class sizes are 30-34/class but get smaller for some like APs; feels like a good size.

Beacon: the current Juniors are ~375, the biggest class at Beacon; didn't feel any bigger than Booker; school manages it well as the building easily accommodates them (and could probably even fit more)

Any favorability to getting into Columbia/Barnard from CSS, or Hunter College from MHS?

CCS: kids can take free Columbia/Barnard classes and are exposed to staff, which is an advantage. *(added from Open House: 1-7% of CSS students go to Columbia or Barnard)*

MHS: kids go to Hunter College senior year, which is an advantage.

Bard: kids graduate with an Associate's Degree, which is taken for credit at some schools and thus could have two years of college completed.

Did you choose your school over a Specialized HS, and if so which one and why?

Elizabeth: son chose Stuyvesant over Beacon, and then transferred to MCSM as a Sophomore. Wanted to change and had to go through a huge process with the DOE and find a spot in another school. Didn't know about MCSM beforehand/when applying: it was recommended by the DOE, and upon visiting, it felt right. Very happy there.

Kelly: son chose Academy for Software Engineering over Special Music School

Sawyer: Daughter chose MHS over HSMSE after they went on the tour (after acceptance), and MHS just felt right compared to HSMSE