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TOPICS

ABOUT



## High School Reform

# ***This is how you start a school***

*A look at a new school through the eyes of the principal, a teacher, and a student and his family*

by **SARA NEUFELD**

December 7, 2015

**PART ONE: THE PRINCIPAL*****The Past Is Always With You***

**N**EW YORK, Nov. 22, 2015 -- To return to Brooklyn to open a high school, Melissa Jarvis-Cedeño had to make peace with her past.

She remembers the New York City borough as the place where relatives abused her as a young girl, where she lived with her alcoholic mother in a shelter, where she would have done anything to escape. When she finally did get out as a teenager, she vowed never to return.

By age 18, she was pregnant with her second baby when she arrived upstate for college. She went on to marry, earn two degrees, and launch a career as an English teacher and school administrator — only to watch her first-born son sucked up by the streets in Albany. He dropped out of high school in his freshman year and at 21, he was shot. He survived, only to be [arrested on gun possession and drug charges](#). He's 26 now, serving a seven-year prison sentence.

A few years ago, Jarvis-Cedeño scaled back her career to care for her husband ailing with lung cancer. But when an opportunity came her way to help kids in her old

**The series**

For six months, Sara Neufeld of *The Hechinger Report* followed a principal, a teacher, and a student and his family as their new high school was born. Here are their stories, initially reported in segments last month on National Public Radio and our site.



**Melissa Jarvis-Cedeño returned to her hometown to start a high school with the hopes of preventing teenagers from following her son's path to federal prison.** Photo: Julianne Schaer

community, she began to reconsider that vow she had made a quarter-century ago. At first she thought she couldn't bear to revisit so much heartache in Brooklyn. Yet as she read the horrific crime statistics for the area, she saw the chance to prevent teenagers in her hometown from following her son's path.

So at 43, she is the founding principal of a charter high school that opened this fall in Brownsville, an impoverished Brooklyn neighborhood adjacent to where she grew up in East New York. Of all the educators in all the cities trying to get school right for students at risk, she brings the rare vantage point of someone who has learned not only from professional mistakes but tragic personal ones as well.

And she's opening herself to be vulnerable again. As the Obama administration calls on schools to stop obsessing over standardized tests, Brooklyn Ascend High is rolling out a liberal arts curriculum that [promotes critical thinking over exam prep](#). Jarvis-Cedeño believes that could have made the difference for her son Josef, along with other key attributes of the school's design: an unconventional discipline and character-building system, stellar teachers and a beautiful building where every student is well-known.

Half Puerto Rican and half Cuban, she offers the 66 black and Latino ninth-graders in her first class the lesson that you can't run away from your problems, but you can shape a different destiny.

"The brown boys like my son, they need a different



*This story also appeared in National Public Radio*

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future than the one he had,” said Jarvis-Cedeño, who has wavy hair and glasses and is quick to offer a smile or a hug. Her demeanor is more subdued than the ebullient teachers on her staff who have not experienced the same sort of life hardships, but as she explained to students at orientation, “I’m fired up on the inside.”

Her students — 33 boys and 33 girls — are the same age Josef was when she saw his path to destruction become irreversible. She wishes she hadn’t delayed in pulling him out of public school when he started stubbornly clashing with teachers who branded him a failure. Her younger son, Elijah, attended parochial school starting in first grade, and while she says he gave her plenty of headaches, too, today he is enrolled in a master’s program in public health.

Josef never learned to think for himself, she said, so it was all too easy for him to be lured into a gang.

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Ascend, the first high school in a small network of charters, public schools run privately, has a different mission than many peer institutions. High-scoring urban charters often focus on memorization for state tests, practice strict discipline and sometimes discreetly counsel out the low-performers. Numerous themed high schools in New York City and cities nationally prepare students for specific career paths in fields where there will likely be

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postsecondary jobs.

Ascend is designed to give teenagers the chance to do anything.

“Had Joe understood the value and power and liberation that comes from having that type of education ...”

Jarvis-Cedeño said, her voice trailing off imagining what could have been.

“It’s just profoundly different what the trajectory looks like for a brown kid.”

## The brown boys like my son, they need a different future than the one he had.”

Principal Melissa Jarvis-Cedeño, whose elder son is in federal prison

To better prepare students for survival at college and in life, Ascend requires them to take responsibility for their actions in school rather than rushing to suspend. They all attend a daily advisory session to build relationships with faculty and diffuse problems before they escalate, plus a thrice-weekly “civic reflections” seminar to grow critical thinking and emotional fortitude.

Jarvis-Cedeño is one of the civic reflections teachers. For her opening day lesson, she had students [analyze an article](#) about a man on a plane that crashed into the Potomac River who continually passed lifelines to other passengers until he drowned. This was to introduce the concept of *seva*, or selfless service, which the faculty chose as a



“The brown boys like my son, they need a different future than the one he had,” says Melissa Jarvis-Cedeño, who wants each of her 66 students recognized and known in the school. Photo: Julienne Schaer

value to guide the school. Students and families are selecting four more words to live by.

During a student orientation to Ascend's disciplinary system, an approach **used internationally** and **proven to reduce misbehavior**, she asked for "a few brave souls" to share what they've done to harm others at previous schools. "We're not going to hold that against you," she said. "It's in the past."

A boy in the front row with an upturned nose and big black backpack told of getting in a fight and telling off an administrator. A second boy said he was suspended after speaking negatively about a teacher.

"Do you think that's fair, how the adults handled you?" she asked.

"No," the second boy replied. "I missed out on school."

She nodded all too knowingly. When Josef was in seventh grade, he was assigned to a class of students with disciplinary problems at the public junior high. Then, finally, she enrolled him in parochial school, but he was quickly expelled after clashing with a nun. She tried boarding school, but he was kicked out after cursing at a teacher. At that point, even though she continued desperately to seek help elsewhere, "it was over," she said. "The story was written already.... The experience with failure, it never left."

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When Jarvis-Cedeño was young, she dreaded attending the public high school in East New York, notorious at the time for its violence. She was able

to use her father's address on the Upper East Side of Manhattan to enroll in a safer school there. Her father insisted that she apply herself to get into college no matter how hard life was, even after she became a teen mom.

Ascend students, whose parents clamored to get them a spot in the school's admissions lottery, will undoubtedly have advantages over their peers in struggling neighborhood institutions. Occupying the sixth floor of [a beautifully restored historic theater](#) that now houses three schools in the Ascend charter network, its physical space rivals that of an elite private academy. The network's leaders believe looks matter in giving students the message that they are valued.

Beyond that, Jarvis-Cedeño spent most of her budget hiring accomplished, experienced teachers, in line with research suggesting that high-quality teachers are perhaps the most important ingredient in closing the achievement gap. Four of the five teachers on her staff came together from another school with the vision of creating well-rounded citizens who serve their communities.

Will that be enough to give students the kind of life she dreamed of when she was growing up in Brooklyn?

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Few high schools with demographics like Ascend's consistently



produce students who achieve college diplomas — college admissions, yes, but then all too often, social and financial barriers prove insurmountable and they drop out.

Even with its innovative structure, Ascend faces plenty of challenges. Students, half of whom came from an Ascend middle school, are at various academic levels, but most are behind — further than Jarvis-Cedeño and her staff anticipated, and teachers say they have had to slow the pace of their lessons way down. What's more, adjusting to [the suspension-alternative model](#), teachers are spending class time on reflective circles when disciplinary problems (relatively minor so far) occur. Some students are coping with the same types of trauma their principal did as a girl, but she can't afford to hire a counselor this year.



Still, Jarvis-Cedeño preferred to start a school with a small class and budget than to admit more students and have more money. (Public

school funding is based on enrollment, so Ascend's budget will grow as it adds a new ninth-grade class each year.) Over the summer, every family had a personal meeting with her or a second administrator she brought on to help oversee instruction and student services and troubleshoot wherever needed.

Her office goes unused; instead, she parks herself and a laptop at a student desk in the hall outside her school's four classrooms so she can keep tabs on everything going on. An aversion to suspension doesn't mean students can get away with more. On the contrary, Ascend's small size means teachers can quickly spot misbehavior, with Jarvis-Cedeño providing backup from her central vantage point.

These choices partly stem from her experience starting an [all-girls charter school](#) in Albany with both ninth and 10th grades in 2009. Bad habits among the older students were too deeply entrenched, she said, and she didn't sufficiently sweat the small stuff, like procedures to get everyone to class in an orderly fashion. Answering to a board that did not provide necessary support, she was never able to establish the culture or performance she wanted, and [attrition was high](#). She left after four years, though the school remains open.

**Related:** [Once sold as the solution, small high schools are now on the back burner](#)



**To keep tabs on everything going on at her new school, Melissa Jarvis Cedeño sits at a student desk in the hallway instead of using her office**

Photo: Julienne Schaer

In 2013, Jarvis-Cedeño moved back to the Bronx when her husband became ill. She took a less demanding position in mid-level administration at a Bronx charter school, but she longed to make a bigger impact for youth. Then a colleague she respected left to design Ascend’s high school. Impressed by Jarvis-Cedeño’s work ethic, humility and ability to build trust easily, she urged her to come along.

Making her decision, Jarvis-Cedeño was moved by a [TED talk](#) by a defense attorney for death-row inmates about how to prevent his clients from ending up where they do: with a nurturing environment from the womb through high school.

For a troubled child, high school can be the end of the line. Yet for her own son, she prays the future will still change course.

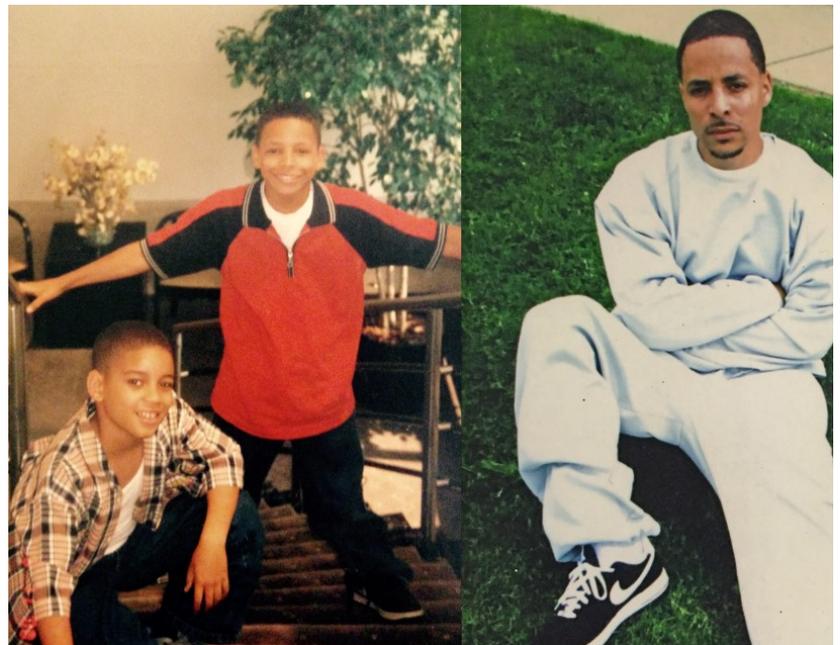
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Josef Jarvis has been held in a maximum-security federal prison in Allenwood, Pennsylvania, that permits 300 minutes a month on the phone and email only through an encrypted system.

“I’m surrounded by people who are never going home to their families,” he wrote in an email interview last month. “This system is designed to break you! It’s up to you to stay strong and make the changes.”

**30: minutes a month Josef Jarvis**

He views success or failure in school as a



**as allowed to  
speak on the phone  
from maximum  
security federal  
prison in  
Allenwood,  
Pennsylvania,  
where he has been  
serving time for  
an possession and  
an charges**

similarly  
personal  
decision,  
saying he  
chose his  
own path and while his mother should  
encourage her students to persevere, they  
will make their own decision. “All you can  
do is pray that they make the best one,” he  
wrote. “I believe in God and that he has a  
plan for everyone.... There’s no getting  
around it!”

**At left, Melissa Jarvis-Cedeño’s two sons as boys: Josef Jarvis, standing now incarcerated while Elijah Cedeño is in a master’s program. At right, Jarvis at the maximum-security federal prison in Allenwood, Pennsylvania where he was permitted to go outside and wear civilian clothes for a visit.** Photos courtesy of Melissa Jarvis-Cedeño

Online prison records show his release date scheduled for April 28, 2018, but according to his mother, he has received notice that he will be eligible to get out early, tentatively next September. And this weekend, he was transferred to a less secure facility in preparation for the transition.

While opportunities for ex-offenders are extremely limited in American society and recidivism is rampant, Jarvis-Cedeño is hopeful based on her son’s frequent reflective emails that he is ready for a new chapter. Guided by faith and having learned a lot from his mistakes, he says, he wants to find work in real estate, mentor underprivileged children and have kids of his own.

“Every mother wants to believe her child has changed,” Jarvis-Cedeño said.

As she can attest, the past is always with you, but it’s never too late to go home and start again.

## **PART TWO: THE TEACHER**

## Educating Other People's Children

NEW YORK, Nov. 23, 2015 -- The two births that would change everything for Taylor Delhagen were due to occur 24 hours apart. If all went according to plan, his school would come into being one day, followed by his first child the next.

The baby boy's impending arrival had the vivacious 31-year-old contemplating the gravity of his role as a teacher opening a charter high school in one of New York City's poorest neighborhoods: Brownsville, Brooklyn. Four of the five founding teachers, Delhagen among them, came together from a nearby charter where they had success producing high test scores among low-income students but felt stifled in what they see as [a more vital task](#): developing human beings.

Now comes the chance for Delhagen to more freely offer an education he would want for his own son in a community four miles and a world apart from Brooklyn's gentrified Fort Greene, where rent on his family's two-bedroom apartment just spiked 18 percent.

He and his colleagues were heavily involved in designing Brooklyn Ascend High School, which began classes Sept. 8, the day before his wife's due date. Principal Melissa Jarvis-Cedeño spent most of her budget on accomplished, experienced educators, rather than saving money with rookies. She hired just one teacher relatively new to the



**Planning lessons while holding his newborn son, Taylor Delhagen won how he can juggle the roles of teacher and father without compromising himself professionally or personally.** Photo: Julienne Schaer

profession, in his third year, to teach math.

Delhagen, the social studies teacher, wants to help Ascend's 66 ninth-graders not just to dodge the life of poverty and crime that sucks in so many around them, but to exercise real choices about their futures. He is keenly aware that each one of them is someone's child, with all the hopes and dreams that entails.

But as a new father, he can no longer work until 9 o'clock every night like he did when he started teaching a decade ago, or get so emotionally invested in his job that he makes himself sick.

Nationally, one of the biggest reasons education is so inferior for poor, minority students is their schools' inability to keep engaging, effective teachers like Delhagen, whose class can feel like a theatrical production as he stands on a chair directing charges scurrying about. Burnout among young, ambitious educators is common within a few years, and especially once they start families of their own.

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Jarvis-Cedeño knows that of all her school's innovative elements — from a liberal arts curriculum to a beautiful building to a discipline system stressing character-building over suspension — nothing is possible without excellent teachers. She is trying to make the job sustainable for them, and for herself as she cares for a husband with cancer, in ways like supporting Delhagen to take whatever paternity leave he needed.

Will they be able to “teach in balance,” as Delhagen often signs his emails (alternating with “be well, and teach like hell”), and still deliver on a monumental task?

On Aug. 28, Delhagen was feeling optimistic about the prospect and surprisingly calm as he decorated his sixth-floor classroom in a restored old theater that now houses multiple charter schools. On the front wall, he hung a self-made timeline of world history from distant past (“1100: BOOM! The Chinese use gunpowder in battle”) to recent past (“2011: Osama bin Laden is killed in northern Pakistan. Does this really make the world peaceful?”). On the back wall, he put a poster of the Berlin Wall with the Pink Floyd lyric, “Mother, should I trust the government?”



**On the first day of school, Taylor Delhagen directs his ninth-grade students to write “tweets” about Michael Brown’s killing in Ferguson based on different depictions of events he posted around the room.** Photo: Julie Schaer

He kept his green-cased cell phone by his side should his wife, a middle school English teacher he met on their college track team, go into labor early. He planned to take off three days when the baby arrived, and then work half-days for four weeks. (“And you *will* go home,” his principal told him. “Will you really?” his wife asked.) His lessons were planned for the first 14 days of instruction, all focusing on the danger of studying history from a single perspective, the subject of his research when he did [a Fulbright fellowship in India](#) last year. He had a schedule to alternately run and bike to work, despite having been hit by a car on his bike last spring, to stay fit with minimal free time.

Five days later, 18 high school freshmen shuffled tentatively into that room for an orientation activity. “*Namaste*, everybody,” Delhagen said, using the Sanskrit greeting for “the light in me honors the light

in you.” He was in a plaid turquoise shirt and navy tie, his arm around a boy taller than he is. Once they were seated in a circle, he said they would have three to four minutes to write answers to the following:

1) *What do you want to do with your life?*

2) *Who are you? Who do you want to be?*

3) *What do you stand for?*

Many students found the first question the easiest. “Shouldn’t you know who you are before you know what you want to do?” Delhagen probed them.

“What do you mean?” asked a girl with glasses and braids. “I’m Courtney.”

“That’s all you are? Your name?” Delhagen asked. “You didn’t even choose your name.”

“It defines who you are,” she replied.

Asked what he stands for, a boy in a hoodie mumbled his answer.

“Be loud, be proud,” Delhagen said, requiring him to stand up and repeat his answer without his hand in front of his mouth. And then again: “I still can’t hear you.”

**Shouldn’t you know who you are before you know what you want to**

“I stand for life,” the boy said for the third time, audible finally. “Even though I’m young, I still have stuff to do.”

Delhagen and the special education teacher, there to offer support, passed out

lo?”

ocial studies teacher Taylor  
Delhagen, to his ninth-grade  
students

papers listing 60 values, from respect to achievement to adventure, and asked the students to circle five that mean the most to them. They then divided the class into groups to agree on five collectively. It was

the beginning of an extensive process to get the students and parents to choose four core values for the school.

Over the summer, the teachers and administrators voted on a fifth value, selecting the option suggested by Delhagen: *seva*, another Sanskrit term he defined as “joyous service.” (“Selfless service” is also a common translation.)

At a Tuesday night planning session in late June as everyone munched wasabi pea crisps, one teacher questioned whether they all can live in joyous service every day.

“Aspire to it,” Delhagen replied.

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The middle child of a progressive Presbyterian minister and a social worker, Delhagen heard a lot about service growing up in places including Philadelphia and a tiny orchard town outside Rochester, New York. At the College of Wooster in Ohio, he majored in political science and international relations and figured he would do Teach For America for two years before pursuing a law career.

He remembers the students who changed his mind. One was named Princess, and she was in his global history class at the small Brooklyn high school where he was assigned. As he taught a unit on the Haitian revolution, “she just knew so much more than I did,” he said. “I felt so ill-equipped ... so culturally irresponsible.” To be of service,

he couldn't just show up to teach. He had to throw himself into the profession wholeheartedly.

By age 23, Delhagen was part of a group of young teachers starting a high school in a chain of so-called “no excuses” charters, with a rigorous discipline code and high academic standards geared toward passing standardized tests. He proved brilliant at preparing his students to score well on tests and was showered in teaching awards for his results, one of which paid for his wedding and honeymoon to Croatia.

But the testing culture felt “dirty,” he said; he was urged to spend too much time teaching students to be quiet and convincing them that, “if you score well, your life options will open up.” No-excuses discipline felt ridiculous at times — wearing black shoes with silver eyelets around the laces violated the uniform standard of solid black, for instance — and he said he saw low-performing students counseled out.

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During his sabbatical studying in India, he met the CEO of an organization fighting educational inequality in that country. He was inspired when he heard her asking kids who they want to be and how school can get them there. Early this year, he seriously considered taking a position with that organization in Mumbai, until he got



**As principal Melissa Jarvis-Cedeño looks on, Taylor Delhagen directs students to various stations around his classroom. His global history can feel like a theatrical production.** Photo: Julienne Schaer

another appealing offer close to home.



Betsy Olney Goldfarb, the administrator planning the first high school in the small Ascend charter network, was on the hunt for exceptional teachers interested in providing a broad liberal arts education. Test prep would be just one part of that, and the new school would hold students responsible for their actions, not rush to suspend for misbehavior. Delhagen, who now spends his summers training new teachers for Teach For America and lectures at a graduate school of education, was a prime candidate.

From their first coffee meeting, he was clear he would be a package deal with his friend Dan Sonrouille, who had taught science alongside him since the founding of their last school. A second must was meeting the principal. The two white men were inspired by Jarvis-Cedeño, a Latina leader for a school serving black and Hispanic students. They helped recruit an English teacher and a

special education teacher. It felt like a dream opportunity to start a school together based on their shared beliefs, even as Sonrouille had just become a father and Delhagen was about to follow suit.

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On the first day of school, Delhagen had his students assume the role of reporters in Ferguson, Missouri, covering the fatal police shooting of 18-year-old Michael Brown. They were to construct “tweets” — even though no one admitted to actually having a Twitter account — based on different photos posted around the classroom. Brown was depicted on camera robbing a convenience store, in his high school cap and gown, and smiling with his family. Depending on which photo was provided to the press, he could be portrayed to the public as a thug, a scholar or someone’s child. The whole truth, students learned, involves multiple points of view.

On the second day of school, the baby did not come. Not on the third or fourth day, either. Principal Jarvis-Cedeño breathed a sigh of relief, having made it through the first week with her staff intact.

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That Saturday morning, Tiffany Delhagen went into labor at the farmer’s market. She endured 36 hours with no pain medication before giving birth on the night of Sunday, Sept. 13 to Rumi Miles Delhagen, who was 7 pounds, 3 ounces.

In a haze of love and sleep deprivation, the new father worried he’d been overly ambitious and devised a more realistic plan for returning to work. He went in to brief a substitute, one of the school’s two administrators, when Rumi was just three days old, but otherwise

took off a week and a half. The birth fortunately coincided with school closures for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, so he missed just four days of instruction.

“Whew. This parenthood-teacher thing is no joke,” he wrote in an email on his first day back on a half-day schedule, teaching his three world history classes in the morning but using substitutes for a character seminar and yoga elective he leads in the afternoon.



**Rumi Miles Delhagen resembles his vivacious father when he waves his arms in animation. Rent on the family’s two-bedroom apartment in Ft Greene, Brooklyn, just spiked 18 percent.** Photo: Julienne Schaer

He returned full time Oct. 20 to a staff jolted by an unexpected setback: The math teacher had quit after being threatened at a corner store near the school on his lunch break. Delhagen offered to accompany him to and from work daily, to no avail. The school’s second administrator is now teaching math until the principal finds the right fit for the job. She made an offer to a promising candidate on Friday.

In February, Delhagen is scheduled to moderate a panel on teacher retention at Teach For America’s 25th anniversary conference in Washington. He finds it offensive when people ask him, as they do frequently, when he’s going to become a principal or do something else. Teaching is fun, he says, and it’s his calling. Why would he leave?

Yet evenings as he finds himself typing lesson plans on a laptop with one hand and holding Rumi with the other, he wonders how he can

handle both roles well.

He wants to be fully present for his son, to challenge him as he challenges his students, to teach him to be kind to others. At school he can't wait for his wife's text messages with photos and videos capturing the moments he's missing.

And while he could get by spending far fewer hours than he does planning lessons and preparing class materials, he won't let up on himself there, either. For other people's children, he can demand no less.

### PART THREE: THE FAMILY

## ***Denied A Diploma, Dreaming For Her Son***

NEW YORK, Nov. 24, 2015 -- Last year, when Jann Peña was in eighth grade at a public school and his little brother was in second grade at a charter school, the little brother got more homework.

That was just fine with Jann, an easygoing 14-year-old who passed his ample free time racing cars on his Xbox, but unacceptable to the boys' mother, Jovanka Anderson, a Dominican immigrant who wants to give her children a better life than she has. Without his knowledge, she entered his name into a lottery for a new charter high school in their neighborhood, the impoverished Brownsville section of Brooklyn. The school had seven applicants for every student accepted into the



**Jann Peña, 14, shows a quiet confidence around physically bigger peers. He is proud of his Dominican heritage in a predominantly black school.** P

Julienne Schaefer

first freshman class. Jann was one of them.

And so this fall, he had to adjust to wearing a uniform every day (his last school required one, but he says there were more dress-down days than not) and staying in class an hour and a half later each afternoon. As one of only 66 students at Brooklyn Ascend High, he gets a lot more attention from adults than he did at a middle school of more than 900. Although that was a magnet school for kids deemed gifted and talented, its state test scores were mediocre and Jann says it was easy.

At Ascend, where most students entered below grade level, Jann's skills are about average. He tested at a sixth-grade reading level on the school placement exam in August and at midway through fifth grade in math. On the first progress report, he got A's and B's in every class except math, which he was failing.

His principal, Melissa Jarvis-Cedeño, shares his mother's desire to unearth his potential. She raised two boys who are half Latino, half African-American and knows all too well how critical the next few years will be in shaping Jann's path. One of her sons is now working toward a master's degree in public health. The other is serving a seven-year federal prison sentence after being convicted of gun possession and drug charges.

Across the country, high schools face their biggest challenges with poor, minority boys. Ascend aspires to break the mold of failure with an innovative design stressing critical thinking and character development over test prep, helping students discover who they are and what they want to become. Those who act out are supposed to make amends, not serve a suspension.

**Related:** [The heartbreaking story of kids least likely to succeed in](#)

## college

Jann, who is shy but exudes a quiet confidence around physically bigger classmates and takes pride in his heritage at a predominantly black school, plans to be an auto mechanic. He trudges with a big red backpack to all his classes and methodically submits his assignments in thin, neat penmanship. He knows he could push himself harder but doesn't see the point. "I've never felt inspired before, so I can't really relate to that," he said. He can't name a source of motivation; he says he simply does as he's told.

His chosen career would at most require an associate's degree, and a vocational high school program could prepare him for that field specifically. But he is open to aiming for a bachelor's, and Anderson, his mother, wants him to have the middle-class option of changing his mind.

Her heart is still broken over having her own high school diploma denied. Growing up in the Dominican Republic, she completed the courses required for high school graduation back in 1999, when she was 18. To get a degree, however, she would have needed to pass an exam. A month before she was scheduled to take the test, her father in New York sent for her and her sister.

Anderson says that when she inquired about GED programs, she was told she would need to repeat high school in the United States. That was likely inaccurate, but she accepted the answer as final. She once



**Jovanka Anderson would like to further her own education someday when her three kids are grown.** Photo: Julienne Schaer

dreamed of being a pediatrician or veterinarian. At 34, still pretty and petite, she works grueling hours as a home attendant to the elderly and feels constantly overwhelmed keeping up with her three kids.

**“I’ve never felt inspired before, so I can’t really relate to that.”**

Jann Peña, age 14

“I’m rushing all day, every day,” she said. She still hopes to further her education when her children are grown, but “my job now is to push them to do...”

Jann cut her off dryly: “What you failed to do.”

Her husband — father of Jann, 8-year-old Jeremy and a 2-year-old girl named

Emaily — is an Uber taxi driver who also dropped out of high school due to family obligations. Emilio Peña would have liked to be a mechanic, too. He and Anderson moved briefly to Maryland when Jann was a baby in search of better opportunities but found upward mobility impossible without a degree. In Brownsville, their family of five shares a single bedroom in an apartment Anderson keeps meticulously tidy to create a peaceful feeling in an otherwise decrepit and chaotic high rise.

The parents hope that charter schools, public schools run privately, will give their children a better life. At a June meeting for incoming Ascend families, where Anderson sat alone since she had not yet told Jann of his admission, she listened intently to the new principal speaking: “I’m committing a promise to you that we’re going to get them to college.”

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While Anderson viewed all local charters as superior to other public options, she chose two with different educational philosophies. Jeremy attends a “no excuses” school with zero tolerance for misbehavior and consistently high test scores, the result of extensive preparation. Ascend is the first high school in a small charter network emphasizing the liberal arts and an alternative discipline system. Anderson likes that it’s new and close to home.



In third grade at a “no excuses” charter school, 8-year-old Jeremy Pe still gets more homework than his older brother, Jann. Photo: Julienn Schaer

## number of applicants for every student accepted by lottery into the first freshman class of Brooklyn Ascend High School

While Ascend elementary schools have not scored as well as their no-excuses counterparts, their leaders are banking on the idea that well-rounded, culturally-versed citizens will be able to navigate social and economic pitfalls in college and life. That goal often eludes even the highest-performing American high schools serving students in poverty.

Living in a two-parent household, Jann has fewer risk factors than some of his classmates. According to teachers, one girl has had crying episodes in class; another is coping with the recent death of her mother. But principal Jarvis-Cedeño, whose husband was also there as her sons were growing up, worries most about the boys, for whom it is all too easy to find a sense of belonging in a gang and get trapped in the

criminal justice system. That's why she believes so strongly in the concept of school community and collective responsibility.

Jann agrees it is important for administrators to help students work through their problems, but he'd prefer to be held accountable for his own behavior only.

One Friday in September, he was annoyed at classmates who goofed off at lunch and caused the entire school to earn 19 minutes of detention; he didn't understand why everyone had to be punished. That same week, the school dean's cell phone went missing. He eventually realized he had left it in the copier room and apologized publicly, but not before all classes came to a halt and everyone became a suspect of stealing.

Jann didn't mind that his mother was unable to bring him to a weekend retreat the school hosted upstate during Columbus Day weekend to get parents and students dreaming about the future and planning how to get there. He was happy not to give up cell phone reception for two days. Anderson would have liked to join the 20 families who went on a blindfolded "trust walk" in an open field and revealed what they'd like to change about their lives, but she had no childcare for her younger kids.

**Related:** [The tragedy of our near-million high school dropout rate, and how to end it](#)



Attending a new charter school, Jann Peña has had to get used to wearing a uniform daily and being in class an hour and a half later each afternoon. Here, he watches classmates during a group project. (Photo: Julienne Schaer)

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She was part of a huge turnout for the school's first parent conferences in mid-October, shortly after Jann's math teacher was threatened at a corner store on his lunch break and unexpectedly quit. Not only is math the subject where Jann has long struggled, it was the one opening where administrators hired a third-year teacher rather than someone with extensive experience.

Jann persuaded his mother not to go talk to the dean, who is filling in as the math substitute, since he'd only been in the role a few days. She met his teachers in science and, his favorite subject, English. The science teacher praised Jann's astute perceptions and willingness to speak when called on, writing in his progress report: "He is solid in class. I feel like he is just starting to tap into his potential."

In English, Jann recently completed an essay about his age and ethnicity. He wrote that he's happier now that he's old enough for privileges like staying home alone and

going outside by himself, and he enjoys surprising people with his ability to speak Spanish. “Being 14 years old is very important to me because it shows people a sign of maturity and respect that’s growing inside of me,” he wrote.

Jann likes all sports, which are often a hook for otherwise indifferent students. He chose yoga as his school elective since he’d heard flexibility can improve athletic performance. Disappointed that Ascend does not yet offer gym class, he signed up for soccer and flag football after school, only to quit both activities because most afternoons his parents need him to pick up his little brother.

While Jann estimates that he spends up to four hours a night on homework this fall, compared with “barely an hour” last year, he says Jeremy still gets significantly more. In third grade at Achievement First Brownsville Charter School, Jeremy recently had an assignment on latitude and longitude that Jann found similar to one of his in ninth grade. Still, the little brother often turns to the big brother for homework help.

Hanging out with friends from other high schools, Jann envies an academic day that is two hours shorter than his. The Ascend faculty must prove to him and his classmates that a future with options is worth extra time invested.

Without a dream to pursue, Jann opts to spend many weekend days



**Jovanka Anderson enrolled her son Jann Peña in a new charter high school without his knowledge.** Photo: Julienne Schaer

inside sleeping, except when he has to go with his family to church. Adulthood, in whatever form it takes, will likely require hard work, he figures, and that will come soon enough.

*These stories were produced by [The Hechinger Report](#), a nonprofit, independent news organization focused on inequality and innovation in education. Read more about [high school reform](#).*

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### **Sara Neufeld**

Sara Neufeld is a contributing editor. She was first assigned to the education beat in 2000 while interning at the San Jose Mercury News; her... [See Archive](#) →

@saraneufeld

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