

August 6, 2008

Where the Race Now Begins at Kindergarten

By [WINNIE HU](#)

Parents who sent their toddlers to the well-regarded Mandell preschool on the Upper West Side used to count on getting into the private school of their choice.

But with the recent boom in the city's under-5 set, the competition for kindergarten places can rival that of [Ivy League](#) admission. This spring, for the first time, several of the 43 Mandell preschool graduates found themselves without anywhere to go. So Mandell, which has been around for generations, decided to do its part to ease the kindergarten crunch by opening its own \$2 million elementary school, in a 17,000-square-foot storefront on Columbus Avenue at 96th Street.

"I think we've reached a crisis level in terms of capacity," said Gabriella Rowe, Mandell's head of school. "Although the majority of our families are still going to be able to send their children to their first-choice school, it's clear that it's going to become more difficult every year if these numbers continue to increase."

The new school, financed through bank loans, will start with 50 kindergarten students in two classes. Ms. Rowe plans to expand to 450 students through 8th grade by 2017. Tuition is \$28,000 for the 2008-9 school year, rising to \$30,000 the next year.

Despite mounting layoffs on Wall Street and the broader economic downturn, private schools in New York City continue to thrive, with administrators and consultants saying this year has been the most competitive yet for admission to kindergarten. Some estimate that several hundred children were rejected from every place they applied.

About 150,000 students are enrolled in private and parochial schools in New York City; about 1.1 million attend the city's public schools.

Emily Glickman, a private school consultant for Abacus Guide Educational Consulting, which helps parents gain admission to private schools, said competition had intensified not only for brand-name schools like Dalton, Collegiate and Trinity but also for lesser-known and newer schools, as more couples opt to have two or more children; more families remain in the city rather than moving to the suburbs; and the wealthy in New York get wealthier.

The Claremont Preparatory School, which started in Lower Manhattan in 2005, is expanding to seven kindergarten classes from three after receiving more than 1,100 applications this year, up from 700 the year before. Claremont, which has nearly 500 students in kindergarten through eighth grade, also plans to open a high school in September 2009.

In Brooklyn, a group of parents and educators in Fort Greene and Clinton Hill are also opening a new private elementary school, the Greene Hill School, which will emphasize hands-on learning in art, music, and physical

education and cost \$13,500 a year, according to Diana Schlesinger, the school's co-director and a former director of the education program at the American Folk Art Museum.

On the Upper West Side, the Mandell School was started in a brownstone on 94th Street in 1939 by Ms. Rowe's grandfather, Max Mandell, who had worked with runaway boys at Bellevue Hospital Center. Every morning, he stood outside in a suit and tie to greet his students.

Ms. Rowe, 42, a petite woman with red hair, grew up above the preschool and used to help empty the trash and paint the classroom walls. She attended the Nightingale-Bamford School on scholarship, then majored in French and European history at Bryn Mawr College. She worked as an investment banker at Merrill Lynch and as a management consultant before joining the family business in 1999.

Ms. Rowe said she began planning an elementary school five years ago to allow families to continue their education at Mandell, which emphasizes a progressive curriculum of academics, citizenship and community involvement. She pushed up the timetable in December when she saw the increased demand for private school slots. By February, she had received 50 applications for the first kindergarten class of 25, including two from children in Mandell's preschool. In March, she opened up a second 25-student kindergarten class, and received 100 more applications within 48 hours.

Colette Alderson, whose 5-year-old son was in preschool at Mandell, said that she and her husband, Scott, the president of a software company, looked at other schools but decided not to apply. "I knew the fit was right, so I didn't see a reason to change schools," said Ms. Alderson, 40. "I didn't really view it as a new school, but as an extension of a very established, well-known preschool."

Another parent, Cheryl Wischhover, chose Mandell's elementary school for her 5-year-old son over a public-school gifted program, saying she liked the focus on teaching to each student's strengths and weaknesses, the well-planned curriculum and the school's close relationship with families. Ms. Wischhover, 37, a pediatric nurse practitioner, said she applied to five other private schools for her son, but was rejected by one school and wait-listed by the other four.

"Many people I know got into at least one school, but I definitely know people who didn't," she said. "It was a really tough process."

Ms. Rowe has hired 20 new teachers, including specialists in fine arts, music, drama and physical education, and a psychologist, and promises a five to one student-teacher ratio for the elementary grades. She is also negotiating for an additional 47,000-square-foot space nearby for the upper grades.

She said she had been fielding calls all summer about kindergarten in the fall of 2009, though applications will not be officially available until Aug. 18. "I expect the real chaos will come in September," she said.

Mandell's preschool students are guaranteed a place in the elementary school, and seven families have already said they plan to attend in 2009-10, Ms. Rowe said. She added that she would continue to help preschool students get into other private schools if they prefer. This spring, five students were admitted to Dalton, four to Brearley, and three each to Chapin, Collegiate, Trinity, Spence and Nightingale-Bamford, some of the most competitive private schools in the city, she said.

With the first day of school looming, Ms. Rowe checked on the construction last week at two lower floors of the red-brick high-rise that will house the elementary school. She raced from one end to the other, pointing to empty spaces that would soon hold a first-grade classroom, an art studio, a music room, a nurse's office, a teachers' lounge and a school psychologist's office. "I know the floor plan in my sleep," Ms. Rowe said, stepping nimbly over construction materials piled on the concrete floor.

[Copyright 2008 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)