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Manhattan School in Zoning Battle Is Struggling, but It Has Its Fans

By **KATE TAYLOR** NOV. 8, 2016, New York Times



Andrew Chu walks his son to Public School 191 on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Mr. Chu said he has found the school to be quite different from its negative reputation. “The atmosphere is very positive,” he said. Credit Christopher Lee for The New York Times

When Andrew Chu first took his son to prekindergarten at Public School 191, he was unsure of what he would find: How good would the teachers be? Would parents show up for school events?

The school, on Amsterdam Avenue and 61st Street, has been at the center of [a bitter fight over school zoning](#) that is now stalled [in its second year](#). Central to the battle is the resistance of well-off families who are currently zoned for

Public School 199, a crowded and celebrated school where most of the children are white, to sending their children to P.S. 191, an underenrolled school with mostly black and Hispanic students and a history of low academic achievement.

In public hearings, P.S. 191 has been described as dangerous, an academic failure and, in the words of one particularly caustic speaker, “a cesspool.”

But, in fact, some middle-class parents, including Mr. Chu, already send their children there for prekindergarten. There are few prekindergarten seats in the neighborhood’s other elementary schools, so some families who live nearby and want to take advantage of the city’s program go to P.S. 191. The school’s four prekindergarten sections are often majority white, but many of those children leave after one year.

Mr. Chu said he found the school to be very different from its reputation: His son’s teacher is excellent and very responsive; parents are involved and energetic. In fact, he has been so pleased that he decided to join the school leadership team, of which he is now a chairman.

“The atmosphere is very positive,” Mr. Chu said. “That’s kind of the foundation, the bones of building something. If the character of the people isn’t there, you don’t have much to work with.”

The zoning battle is being waged in one of New York City’s wealthier and higher-performing community school districts, District 3, which runs from 59th Street to 122nd Street, encompassing the Upper West Side and part of Harlem.

Over the coming months, The New York Times will be examining the district to look at the forces that shape the racial and economic makeup of the city’s schools. Unlike in many parts of the city, in District 3 people from different races and income levels often live near one another. The schools, however, are sharply divided, with P.S. 191 and a group of schools at the district’s northern end being overwhelmingly black and Hispanic and poor, with low academic performance, and other schools, including P.S. 199, being mostly white, well off and high-performing.

Some advocates for integration see the [Education Department](#)’s proposed rezoning of P.S. 199 and P.S. 191, which has now grown to involve 15 schools in the district, as an opportunity to start to change that status quo.

But the level of outrage the proposals have instigated shows just how difficult that can be given the potent mix of race, class and parental anxiety involved. Families who live in the zones of the most successful schools see attending them as a right bought along with expensive apartments. They vociferously resist any zone changes that would shut them out of their chosen school and put them in the zone of one they see as inferior.

Typical are the comments of Megan Arazi, a parent whose building would be part of the P.S. 191 zone under all three plans the city has put forward: “My husband and I support public school education but not at the expense of our children’s educational and physical well-being,” she said at a meeting in September.

Perception vs. Reality

The Education Department has done little so far to reassure parents about P.S. 191, which at one point was labeled “persistently dangerous” by the state. That has left the burden of defending the school largely on the principal, Lauren Keville, who took over in 2014.

Ms. Keville and other staff members at P.S. 191 say that most of those criticizing the school have never been inside it.

“It is hard to hear people say these things about our school, of course, but I really don’t focus on that because it’s not reality,” Ms. Keville said in a recent interview.

According to the city’s [2015-16 School Survey Report](#), parents at P.S. 191 are mostly happy with it, with 94 percent describing themselves as either satisfied or highly satisfied with their child’s education. In interviews, parents and teachers described the atmosphere as friendly and collaborative.

Charles Taylor, co-president of the P.S. 191 parent teacher association, whose son came to the school for middle school (it goes through eighth grade), said that as a former director of youth programs at the Harlem Y.M.C.A., he had been in schools that lacked energy, where students were bored and teachers seemed tired of their jobs. P.S. 191 was the opposite.

“I feel good when I’m in there,” Mr. Taylor said.

But the school, which as part of the rezoning would move into a building now being finished a little over a block away, faces significant challenges.

P.S. 191’s zone includes some of the fanciest apartment buildings in New York, but the children who live in them do not go to the school. In recent years less than half of the kindergartners who lived in the zone and attended public school went to P.S. 191, according to the Education Department. (The agency does not track children who go to private school.)

Photo



Lauren Keville took over as principal at P.S. 191 in 2014. “It is hard to hear people say these things about our school, of course, but I really don’t focus on that because it’s not reality,” Ms. Keville said. Credit Katherine Taylor for The New York Times

Many of the others went to other schools in the district, some of which have [gifted and talented programs](#) or are unzoned; and some went to [charter schools](#). At the same time, other parents — from Harlem, the Bronx and even the P.S. 199 zone — chose to send their children to P.S. 191, preferring it to their zoned schools.

The result is a student population that is much poorer than the school’s zone: Last year, 73 percent of students attending P.S. 191 qualified for free or reduced-price lunch. Meanwhile, only about half of the children living in the zone who attended public school were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. In the 2014-15 school year, more than a fifth of students in the school lived in temporary housing.

Homelessness often drives absenteeism. Last year, P.S. 191’s chronic absenteeism rate — the proportion of students who are absent more than 10 percent of the time — was 34 percent. The citywide average was 24 percent.

While roughly 20 percent of the children zoned to P.S. 191 and attending public schools are white, only 11 percent of P.S. 191 students are white, a percentage skewed by the relatively large number of white children in the preschool.

Grim Test Results

P.S. 191's test scores have not been good. In 2014-15, just 12 percent of the school's third through eighth graders passed the state reading test and 11 percent passed the math test. That was well below the citywide passing rates of 30 percent and 35 percent. At P.S. 199, which runs only through fifth grade, the passing rates were 74 percent and 87 percent.

Ms. Keville has introduced a new math curriculum and adopted the Teachers College Reading and Writing Workshop for reading and writing instruction, a widely used approach. The school had used the same programs under previous principals, then abandoned them.

Ms. Keville's efforts have yet to show definitive results, and the school staff is still learning how to put the new programs into place. The test results for last school year — which predated the introduction of the new math curriculum — were better in reading but worse in math.

While the academic statistics are grim, on a recent visit the mood in the school was not.

The students generally appeared to be engaged. A table of prekindergartners played bingo based on identifying the first letters of words. Kindergartners eagerly paged through books while a teacher pulled certain students out for small-group instruction, a core practice of the Teachers College approach. Second and third graders played addition and subtraction games. Fifth graders parsed the Bill of Rights and made notes to summarize the meaning of each amendment. Ms. Keville greeted students warmly in the hallways.

Teachers' views of the school have improved in the two years since Ms. Keville started, according to the school survey. In 2015-16, two-thirds said that order and discipline were maintained in the school, and the same percentage said that they would recommend the school to parents.



Loretta Williams, a paraprofessional, helps Kimani McNamee, center, and Ciimanue Myles, both 7, with a math game at P.S. 191. Credit Katherine Taylor for The New York Times

If the rezoning takes place, and if enough middle-class parents decide to enroll their children in P.S. 191, the concentration of poor students in the school could significantly decrease. All three plans the Education Department has shared so far would not only move more market-rate buildings into P.S. 191's zone, but also distribute children from the Amsterdam Houses public housing project, who are currently almost all zoned for P.S. 191, among three schools. Unlike in Brooklyn, where the rezoning of a mostly black and Hispanic school [led to an outcry](#) from parents concerned about the school's being taken over by white newcomers, residents of the Amsterdam Houses have largely been silent about the prospect of being split among three schools.

Amy Stuart Wells, a professor of sociology and education at Columbia University's Teachers College, said demographic change on its own would boost the school's test scores, in part because upper-middle-class children [enter kindergarten](#) already academically far ahead of their poor counterparts.

"What the tests are really measuring, or partly what they're measuring, is the privilege of the children and the parents' educational level," Dr. Wells said.

Wait and See

The performance of black and Hispanic students could also improve, as researchers have found that those students [benefit academically](#) from attending schools with children of other races and ethnic groups.

Clara Hemphill, the founder of [InsideSchools](#), a school rating and advocacy site, who has [written in favor of the rezoning](#), visited P.S. 191 recently after last doing so a year ago. Ms. Hemphill said that Ms. Keville had clearly improved the school climate and the quantity and quality of students' writing, but that she still had a long way to go before the school would be as good as P.S. 199.

"If the zoning plan is going to work, we need to put improvement on steroids, and she can't do it all by herself," Ms. Hemphill said.

Dorita P. Gibson, the Education Department's senior deputy chancellor, said in an interview that the agency would provide funding, starting this year, for an instructional coach in math and literacy and a technology teacher at the school. It is also going to start a gifted and talented program in the third grade. Gifted programs can attract wealthy parents to a mostly poor, nonwhite school.

When it comes to actually redrawing the zone lines, though, the city has dithered. After presenting several draft plans in the summer and fall, the city has delayed presenting a final plan to the Community Education Council, the volunteer body that votes on zone lines. One is expected to be presented at a meeting on Wednesday night. The clock is ticking, as families can begin applying for kindergarten spots on Nov. 30.

If the final plan follows the contours of the draft proposals, Mr. Chu's building would be moved into the P.S. 191 zone from P.S. 199's. He said he and his wife had not yet made a decision about whether to continue at P.S. 191 for kindergarten if they are rezoned, and they have signed up their son to take the gifted and talented test in January.

Still, Mr. Chu said he planned to share his optimism about the school with his more skeptical neighbors. "I think there's so much potential here to do something really potentially transformative," he said.