

NYNY

Families flock to Brooklyn for school

Families flock from far and wide to get their kids into Brooklyn's new—and challenging—Basis school

BY MIRIAM KREININ SOUCCAR

Gundula Brattke and her son Jakob were living in the Berkshires a year ago when she heard about a new private school opening in Red Hook, Brooklyn.

The school, Basis Independent Brooklyn, is a for-profit institution for grades K through 12, promising a more rigorous education than that offered at even the most elite New York City private schools. After meeting with school officials, Ms. Brattke—an entrepreneur who relocated to the U.S. from Berlin a decade ago—was hooked. She and Jakob moved to Park Slope, and he started his eighth-grade year at Basis last month.

“My son complained there was no recess, but the rigor appealed to us,” said Ms. Brattke, a handbag and accessory designer. “It’s more similar to what we are used to in Europe.”

Basis’ new \$40 million, 90,000-square-foot facility is still under construction in Red Hook, so the school was forced to open this year in a cramped, temporary location in Flatbush. Even so, the school is on its way to shaking up the competitive yet staid private-school establishment in New York.

Using the same curriculum as its successful sister chain of public



A MATTER OF COURSE: Priya Kumar and her family moved from Jersey City to Brooklyn last month so sixth-grader Palak (left) and first-grader Sanvi could attend the new Basis Independent school.

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charter schools across the U.S., Basis’ mission is to bring the level of American education back to equaling or exceeding its peers in other countries, especially in math and science. And it claims it can do that for half the cost of the city’s private nonprofit schools, which now come with the hefty price tag of upward of \$40,000 a year. Basis charges \$23,500, and its initial families will enjoy a price freeze for their kids’ entire education there.

‘Rigorous’ standard

“We’re offering something radically different from other New York City private schools,” said Mark Reford, chief executive of Basis Independent Schools, a for-profit venture that runs the Brooklyn school as well as a new one

CLASS COST

\$23.5K

ANNUAL TUITION at Basis Independent Brooklyn

\$40K+

AVERAGE ANNUAL TUITION in NYC’s private nonprofit schools



in San Jose, Calif. “We benchmark ourselves against the most rigorous global schools.”

A prime example of the difference in the Basis curriculum—and something that has grabbed a number of new families—is its approach to science. Unlike most American schools, which offer rudimentary science in middle school, Basis mandates its students take separate biology, physics and chemistry classes starting in fifth grade, as do many schools in Europe and Asia.

In addition, students take Mandarin as early as kindergarten and are introduced to engineering in first grade. Though physical education is offered daily, recess is considered a frivolity that ends in fifth grade.

The school shows prospective parents proof that its system works from the test results of the 7,500 students enrolled in Basis’ 12 charter schools, which are located in Arizona, Texas and Washington, D.C.

In 2012, students at the Basis charter school in Scottsdale, Ariz., ranked as high as the top students in Shanghai, the world’s best education system, as rated by the PISA test, or Program for International Student Assessment. The test measures 15-year-olds in math, science and reading in more than 60 countries.

Recess is seen as a frivolity that ends in fifth grade

Education consultants say these results are resonating. “Basis is hot,” said Emily Glickman, president of Abacus Guide Educational Consulting, which coaches families on getting their children into top New York schools. “Its emphasis on [science, technology, engineering and math] is in line with parental desires today.”

The school is also simply a welcome addition in a city where there are about 1,000 applicants for every 60 kindergarten spots in private schools—a problem that is even more pronounced in Brooklyn.

“There is such an overflow of affluent educated parents in Brooklyn who are looking for good private schools, and you really have just a handful,” Ms. Glickman said.

Still, many New Yorkers are wary of new schools, and Basis is still in its infancy. It received more than 500 applicants for its first year and currently has 200 students enrolled in grades K through eight. Next year, it will add a ninth-grade class, and the

school expects to double enrollment. At full capacity, it will have 1,000 students.

It is one of several new for-profit private schools in the city. Avenues, a for-profit private school that opened in Chelsea in the fall of 2012, focuses on educating kids who can compete globally and counts Suri Cruise as one of its students. Still, most of New York’s sought-after schools are nonprofits and have been around for decades.

Mr. Reford said some parents at first were skeptical of sending their kids to a for-profit school because they are not accustomed to that format. But once parents realize they won’t be hit up for annual fundraising campaigns on top of the tuition, and that for-profit schools can be better managed, they embrace the idea.

He said Basis is able to charge less than other schools because it runs with a leaner administrative structure, though he declined to give more details beyond contending that traditional nonprofit private schools are stuck in an antiquated model in which they spend a lot of money on development staff.

“The entire focus of our administration is on the kids and the learning environment, not fundraising,” Mr. Reford said. “It takes out that transactional, philanthropic relationship between the school administration and rich donors so everybody is on an equal playing field.”

More to come

Basis is so confident its model will become successful in New York that it plans to open three to four more schools in the next five years in the metropolitan area.

One selling point for some families is the school’s diversity. Basis officials say they are attracting international families or families where one parent was born overseas, because the school’s rigorous academic program is familiar. They are also attracting a broader range of customers because of the cheaper tuition.

Priya Kumar and her husband, Saurabh, moved from Jersey City to Brooklyn Heights a month ago, so their two girls, sixth-grader Palak and first-grader Sanvi, could attend Basis.

The parents, originally from India, were looking for a strong academic environment for their daughters. Ms. Kumar said her older girl gets two to three hours of homework a night, but that’s OK.

“We went there because they are rigorous,” said Ms. Kumar, a project manager for a hedge fund. “As soon as kids go to high school here, they’re exposed to a rigor they’re not used to. I like it that they are getting exposed at the onset.” ■