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### Passion Fuels Change at Williamsburg Renewal School, Principal Says

By Gwynne Hogan ([//www.dnainfo.com/new-york/about-us/our-team/editorial-team/gwynne-hogan](http://www.dnainfo.com/new-york/about-us/our-team/editorial-team/gwynne-hogan)) | December 13, 2015 4:49pm

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New principal at J.H.S. 50 John D. Wells is working to bring student and teachers' passions into everyday curriculum to reinvigorate the troubled school.

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DNainfo/Gwynne Hogan

SOUTH WILLIAMSBURG — Once a vibrant pillar of the community for students and families on the south side of Williamsburg, the historic middle school J.H.S 50 John D. Wells (<http://schools.nyc.gov/SchoolPortals/14/K050/default.htm>) has since struggled with declining enrollment, poor attendance and substandard test scores.

A year ago it was included on a list of 94 failing schools called "renewal schools" (<http://schools.nyc.gov/AboutUs/schools/RenewalSchool>) that would receive a boost in funding to extend the school day by an hour, add summer learning opportunities, and increase parental involvement and professional development.

Ben Honoroff, brand new principal who began this fall, has "hit the ground running" with the extended school hours, team meetings with staff to talk about best practices and staff visits to all students' homes to get parents more involved in their childrens' education.

Honoroff came to the school after overseeing 10 schools participating in the Department of Education's Middle School Quality Initiative (<https://sites.google.com/site/schools-nyc-gov-msqi-teams-edition-backup/home/aboutMSQI>). Before that, he taught history at the ACORN Community High School in Crown Heights.

(<http://schools.nyc.gov/SchoolPortals/13/K499/AboutUs/Overview/What+is+A.C.O.R.N.htm>)

In addition to the "renewal school" program, J.H.S 50 is part of the mayor's Community Schools Initiative (<http://www1.nyc.gov/site/communityschools/index.page>) where the nearby community human rights organization El Puente (<http://elpuente.us/>) is paid by the city to organize programming for kids and provide additional support to school staff.

And while it's too soon to measure the long-term effects of the new initiatives, attendance has improved to roughly 93 percent from 89 percent last school year ([http://schools.nyc.gov/OA/SchoolReports/2014-15/School\\_Quality\\_Snapshot\\_2015\\_EMS\\_K050.pdf](http://schools.nyc.gov/OA/SchoolReports/2014-15/School_Quality_Snapshot_2015_EMS_K050.pdf)).

Honoroff credits that to the wide array of elective classes offered in the extra school hour. Dance, crocheting, spoken word, robotics and more have students more excited to be at school.

DNainfo New York talked to Honoroff about what it means to be a "renewal school," how he's working to improve the school's climate and how he lets the individual passions of students and teachers guide curriculum.

*This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.*

### **What have the first few months been like as principal of M.S. 50?**

We've faced struggles. Our data, our proficiency rates haven't been where they need to be. But I can't imagine coming into a better situation. I'm so excited to be coming on board as principal here. I have a staff that works tremendously hard and I have a dynamic community-based organization with deep roots in the community that's been with the school for 20 years and now is even more aligned and embedded.

### **What did you consider when planning for activities in the additional hour of school?**

I wanted to use this expanded learning time that we have to build on teacher passions and student passions and add to our school day and develop a rich array of enrichment activities that build on academic skills we want to teach, such as debate.

I left that first day really inspired because the teachers had tremendous amount of ideas, tremendous amount of passion that they wanted to bring. We have debate, we have robotics, we have spoken-word, we have podcasting, we have crocheting, we have video game design and computer coding. This is all part of the expanded learning time.

It's really essential that the teacher wants to do it and love it and buy in and my teachers really, really do. Teacher after teacher had ideas, "Yeah I'll stay, I want to do a robotics course. Yeah, I'll stay I've always wanted to do crocheting with students."

### **How did parents and student react to an longer school day?**

I was worried on the first day of expanded learning time because we had the school day went up to 2:40 last year and now the school day goes to 4:00, a significant increase in the school day. I was worried that students, they just were not going to stay. I remember telling our dean, "We have to watch out for kids trying to cut out," and not one, not a single student has wanted to leave early because they enjoy their expanded learning time activities.

We give them choice, we give them a menu and they get to select their top five choices.

Parents have been super excited. We had zero pushback. Parents are excited to have their students highly engaged. They're excited to have this wide array of activities.

**You've put an emphasis on debate — why?**

Debate teaches all of the skills that I hope my students will learn: reading comprehension, research writing critically, thinking critically, civic engagement, political consciousness.

I remember as a teacher our debate team lost to a suburban school in a tournament and the students who won were using this argument from Foucault. Back at school, my students came up to me and begged me over lunch to teach them Foucault. It's this external motivator that students really want to succeed and do well.

At the middle school level, I preach to the students, debate is as much about listening as it is about speaking. It's about hearing your opponent and understanding their argument, taking notes and then refuting that argument. It's all the common core line skills that we're teaching in our classes about identifying arguments, citing textual evidence, using academic language.

All of those are really reinforced in debate. It just makes a lot of sense to have debate be a central piece of our school.

**What's been the biggest challenge in the months since you've become principal of M.S. 50?**

I feel really lucky that the staff has been very open and welcoming and excited and embracing of new ideas. They've embraced debate. They've embraced expanded learning times. They didn't have to have to a participate or attack it with such passion as they did, but they have. It's just, you feel like there's not enough minutes in the day to do all the work that we want to do. I think that would be the biggest challenge. I just

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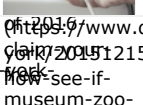
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### Gowanus Principal at the Forefront of Making City Schools More Diverse

By Leslie Albrecht (/www.dnainfo.com/new-york/about-us/our-team/editorial-team/leslie-albrecht) | December 6, 2015 6:49pm

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Arthur P. Mattia, known as Mr. Artie to his students, is principal of P.S. 372, also called The Children's School, in New York City; the school teaches special needs students and general education students.

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DNainfo/Leslie Albrecht

**GOWANUS** — Many schools claim to be special, but the Children's School is truly unique in the city.

General education and special needs kids learn side by side in every single classroom through a one-of-a-kind partnership between Brooklyn's District 15 and District 75, which serves special needs children.

Next fall, the school will take another step toward embracing a varied student body when it joins six other schools citywide participating in a pilot program to boost diversity (<https://www.dnainfo.com/new-york/20151120/fort-greene/7-brooklyn-manhattan-schools-win-fight-for-diversity-based-admissions>). A third of the school's seats will be set aside for kids who are learning English and kids who receive free or reduced price lunches.

Principal Arthur Mattia, known as Mr. Artie, has been at the helm since the school opened in 1992 with just two pre-K classes and two kindergarten classes. Today the Children's School, also known as P.S. 372, has 480 pre-K through fifth graders and attracts 500 to 600 applicants for 15 to 20 kindergarten seats. The school also has a campus in Fort Greene for 55 students with autism spectrum disorders.

Mattia says he wants his students to leave The Children's School (<http://inclusions.org/>) on solid academic footing, but it's most important to him that they have a real respect for difference.

"I want them to also walk out of here with that acceptance and tolerance of others, and to not just do it here at our school, but when they have left here," Mattia said. "Are they recognizing and accepting others for their individualities and their differences? If they are doing that, then the mission of the school is being carried out."

DNainfo New York talked to Mattia recently in his office about his background and work at The Children's School.

**Q: How did you get into education?**

A: When I was in college my field was physical education. I was going to start teaching in my old Catholic elementary school when I graduated. Right before I was going to start teaching, my brother, who was a commodities broker, told me they needed another broker [at his company]. The money was phenomenal. I became a broker. I did that from 1975 to 1990.

When the company moved to Florida, I had to make a decision: 'Do I want to stay in this or do I want to get back to what I really love doing — being with kids?'

I took a tremendous pay cut and worked as a physical education teacher for about two years in East New York. I'll never forget on my first day. I was given a broken hula hoop and a deflated ball and a [small] room, and they said, "Teach P.E. to emotionally handicapped students.'

**Q: What drew you to working in special education?**

A: It was by chance. One of my emotionally handicapped students spit at me. I took him into the office and said, "I think he's having a hard time." My principal said, "You are cut out for special education."

As I went along, I realized that what these kids needed was not a strong hand, but just somebody that would look to understand them and give them a voice and respect them.



Leslie Albrecht · DNainfo Reporter

What do you think about how the Children's School is addressing diversity?

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**Q: Why is The Children's School so popular now?**

A: The philosophical belief is that all children can learn regardless of their disabilities. Our whole mission is to show how we can learn from one another.

The beautiful thing is that if a special needs student is having trouble trying their shoelace, the general ed student is coming over and assisting them.

That's the whole premise of what we want to put into this program. That's our mission, that's our philosophy, that's our passion.

**Q: How did The Children's School's participation in the diversity pilot program come about?**

A: When this school first opened up, the student body was supposed to represent the District 15 ethnic breakdown. If District 15 was 50 percent Hispanic, theoretically we should have 50 percent Hispanic students.

As our school became more popular, we found that more white families were applying to our school. The Hispanic population was more down in Sunset Park, the Red Hook population was more African-American. People were less likely to put their children on a bus to come a school that they didn't know about when they had a school right in their area that was doing well.

Our Diversity Committee had been going out [to neighborhoods around District 15] trying to get people to come see our school, inviting people to open houses and tours. We were successful somewhat, but not as much as we would really like to have been.

We felt it was important for us, so in the spring of 2014 we put in a proposal [to the Department of Education] and then in October 2014, the Chancellor had a meeting with schools interested in looking at diversity (<http://www.dnainfo.com/new-york/20141211/fort-greene/city-is-failing-improve-school-diversity-parents-advocates-say>). Then a couple of weeks ago, they announced the seven schools in the pilot program (<https://www.dnainfo.com/new-york/20151120/fort-greene/7-brooklyn-manhattan-schools-win-fight-for-diversity-based-admissions>) and my school was one of the seven.

A third of our seats will be set aside for students that are free and reduced lunch as well as students that are English language learners. We're hoping that as a result we're able to see different communities being better represented in our student body.

**Q: What special programs does Children's School have?**

We're very big on the arts. We have a dance teacher who's been recognized across the country for the work that she's done. We have a music program. One of our paraprofessionals does an afterschool program with bongo drums and guitars, and she puts together a little band and they perform at some of our events.

What's so beautiful is that students that struggle socially, and students that struggle academically, when you see them performing, watching them be part of that, it brings tears to my eyes. When you see things like that, you say, what you're doing here is just so well worth it.

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