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East Side parents teach a lesson

Parents who wanted a new high school on 76th St. on the upper East Side to be open to all students in District 2 won their battle late Wednesday night.

In a compromise worked out at the Board of Education, the topnotch school will reserve 80% of its seats for the highest-achieving students. But everyone in the district will be eligible to apply.

That means kids from lower Manhattan, not just those from nearby middle schools, will be able to try to take advantage of a high school featuring "a challenging college preparatory program where students are encouraged to develop their intellectual, esthetic, emotional and social growth," in wording approved by the Board of Education.



Excuse me, but shouldn't this be the charge of every public high school?

Knowing that this clearly is not the case with most New York City schools, the East Side parents fought for years to be sure their children had a solid place to learn. Why, they asked, should they have to spend money to send their children to private or parochial schools when they are paying taxes for public schools.

Kudos to the parents. They may not have gotten everything they originally sought, but they proved that moms and dads who get involved can get results.

They also brought attention to a disturbing truth.

New York's is a school system divided. It is a tale of two cities — very separate and very unequal.

This victory is one where the rich get richer. District 2 is already one of the best in the city, with 67.7% of its students meeting or exceeding the state standard in English and with only 6.2% falling into the very lowest performance level. It is second only to Queens District 26 in this area.

In math, 61.5% of District 2 students are at grade level. Citywide, fewer than 50% of kids can do math on grade level.

District 2 is 67% white and Asian. The citywide school population is more than 80% black and Hispanic.

What about the rest of the city's kids? Where are the high schools like Stuyvesant or Bronx Science for Harlem or Brooklyn's Brownsville?

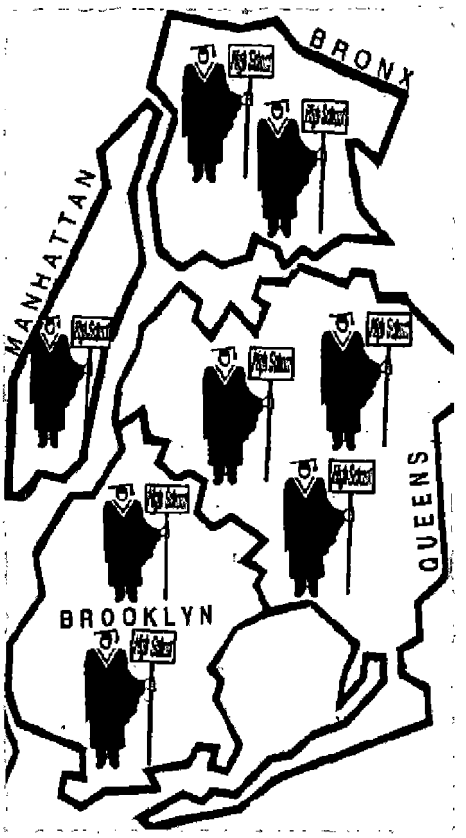
The East Side parents and community leaders had to fight for their school. Is a victory like that possible in the Harlems and Brownsvilles of the city?

A tough question. I would like to say that it is. I know parents in those depressed areas care just as much about the education of their children as parents on the upper East Side. But maybe they don't have the organizing power to get things done.

Strong leadership can certainly make a difference. In the 1940s, Adam Clayton Powell Jr. was a minister in Harlem when people all around him were being evicted from their homes. He started a rent strike. It led to a change in the way tenants are treated, and it led Powell himself on to Congress and greatness.

There was no such towering leader on the East Side. But the parents did unite behind one idea. They got their congressional and City Council representatives involved. And they didn't give up. This is a clear case of the squeaky wheel getting the grease.

So there are different models — each neighborhood must find its own way.



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The bottom line is that the city needs more parents to say, "Hey, these are my kids, and I want to make sure that they have the best." The city needs more parents to fight like hell for the education of their children instead of waiting for a do-nothing Board of Education to do something for them.

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