

---

## DNAinfo.com New York neighborhood news

### Demand for Pre-K Programs Runs High in the South Bronx Updated 3 hrs ago

March 4, 2013 6:59am

By [Patrick Wall](#), DNAinfo Reporter/Producer

#### Neighborhood Buzz



Photo credit: WHEDco/Samir Abady

SOUTH BRONX — When it comes to pre-K programs in the South Bronx, the problem isn't quality — it's quantity.

"The options for the most part are very good," said Rose Rivera, director of the [WHEDco](#) Early Childhood Discovery Center, which includes a pre-K program. "But, unfortunately, there aren't enough placements for children."

WHEDco's waitlist, for instance, was 200 children deep this past year, Rivera said.

Each of the 30 South Bronx public schools with pre-K programs received more applications in 2012 than they had spots to offer. (Some 50 private agencies also run pre-K programs in Districts 7 and 9, but the Department of Education does not publish their application numbers.)

This seat crunch can have an outsized impact in the South Bronx, where many parents work multiple jobs and may have scant time or resources to prepare their children for kindergarten, making pre-K critical, said Jessica Torres-Maheia, principal of Mount Eden Children's Academy.

"In this neighborhood, I think it makes a huge difference," she said.

Parents have much to consider when filling out their pre-K applications.

They should look at each program's location, hours and facilities, as well as the track record of the school or organization running it, the balance of social and academic learning, whether it serves English

language learners and how it involves families, said Neyda Franco, president of District 7's Community Education Council.

"Do your research, see how the program is, speak to parents," she advised.

Quality programs introduce children to letters and numbers, colors and shapes, but also to social skills like sharing and problem solving and academic behaviors such as collaboration and concentration.

"Pre-K is the basis of their school careers," said Lourdes De La Cruz, a pre-K parent at Mount Eden Children's Academy.



Photo credit: WHEPco/Samir Abady

Without that mix of social, emotional and academic learning that solid pre-K programs provide, children may start school behind, said Kenneth Golden Sr., director of the [Highbridge Advisory Council](#)'s Head Start program.



"It doesn't matter how smart a kid is," Golden said. "If they can't follow directions, sit still or interact with peers in a positive way, then no one will be able to bring the genius out of them."

Here are some of the South Bronx's noteworthy public and nonprofit pre-K programs:

**P.S. 555, The Mt. Eden Children's Academy, 1501 Jerome Ave.**

This pre-K-to-first-grade school (it will add more grades over time) opened in the fall of 2012 inside a sprawling new \$100 million school and community center run by the nonprofit housing and social service agency, New Settlement Apartments.

Beginning in September, the school's two half-day pre-K programs will both become full-day.

Highlights include daily art and dance lessons, weekly hands-on science classes and a Spanish-speaking teacher's aide who can help communicate with parents.

Principal Jessica Torres-Maheia said that in addition to the academic work, "risk-free" playtime is essential for 4-year-olds.

"I want their first experience in school to be fun — a place they want to go back to every day," she said.

Seventy-four families applied for 36 spots last year.

**[P.S. 5](#), The Port Morris School, 564 Jackson Ave.**

An elementary that is expanding to include a middle school, P.S. 5 recently added a new playground and renovated its auditorium.

Pre-K students work collaboratively on hands-on assignments tied to the new Common Core standards, often using computers and physical objects.

“Our classrooms provide an atmosphere where self-concept is enhanced, independence and choices are encouraged and self-discipline is gained,” Assistant Principal Alicia Barinas wrote in an email.

More than 120 families applied for 36 spots last year.

**[P.S. 25](#), The Bilingual School, 811 E. 149th St.**

Led by the [inspiring Principal Carmen Toledo-Guerrero](#), the city’s first bilingual school offers pre-K programs in English and Spanish.

Beginning in the fall, the programs will switch to full-day, which should please working parents.

Parent involvement is a focus for the school, which serves many immigrant families and offers workshops to ease their transition into the city’s school system.

About half the school’s kindergartners start in its pre-K programs — and it’s obvious which half, said Toledo-Guerrero.

“They have a stronger foundation on which to build,” she said.

Last year, 112 families applied for 36 spots.

**[Highbridge](#) Advisory Council Head Start, 880 River Ave.**

This South Bronx-based nonprofit, which runs seven sites that offer pre-K programs, bills itself as the borough’s largest community-based early childhood education agency.

Students at the free Head Start site stay at the center daily from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., with two-and-a-half hours of that time devoted to pre-K (per government requirements).

Off-site trips to museums, zoos, farms and ice-skating rinks are common.

Parents are encouraged to visit the center and volunteer in the classroom or on trips whenever possible. Four former pre-K parents have since become staff members.

About 80 children are enrolled at the site.

**[Little Angels Head Start, Saint Rita's, 452 College Ave.](#)**

St. Rita's well-regarded Head Start program has operated for nearly four decades.

Once a Catholic elementary school, the standalone program now is part of a dozen-center chain of Little Angels Head Start programs in The Bronx and Manhattan, formerly run by the Archdiocese of New York, but now affiliated with a nonprofit agency.

Much of the staff is bilingual and hosts parent workshops on child-rearing, nutrition and the kindergarten application process.

Students attend the free program from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. daily.

Roughly 140 students are enrolled at the site.

**[WHEDco Early Childhood Discovery Center, 50 E. 168th St.](#)**

Run by the Bronx-based nonprofit WHEDco, this free, full-day Head Start program, now in its 15th year, serves 111 students from 18 countries.

The children engage in a daily physical activity and a weekly gym class, academic work in centers, computer and hands-on science learning and daily art and music lessons.



Bilingual staff members are able to communicate with parents who don't speak English, many of whom are immigrants, and provide workshops on the school system, childcare and health.

Roughly 200 children were on the center's waitlist this year.

Read more: <http://www.dnainfo.com/new-york/20130304/high-bridge/demand-for-pre-k-programs-runs-high-south-bronx#ixzz2MaDxRKUV>