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## Overcrowded times at John Dewey High

Posted by Philissa at 7:29 AM

Today Sam Freedman reprises his jeremiad from earlier this year about what happens to schools when large high schools near them begin to phase out. The only thing that's really different in today's story is the schools involved: Instead of Beach Channel accommodating students zoned for Far Rockaway, to apparently disastrous results, now its kids who would have gone to Brooklyn's Lafayette flooding into the unconventional, highly rated John Dewey High School. Freedman writes:

Faculty members, students and administrators at Dewey say that the students coming from Lafayette are academically deficient, although Education Department statistics show that the current crop of ninth graders performed essentially similarly to previous cohorts on the citywide reading test. Still, the perception at Dewey is that Lafayette students did not choose Dewey for its quality, but landed there by default because they did not qualify for any of the Lafayette building's mini-schools. With the overcrowding, Dewey students and staff members say, in many periods of the day there are several hundred students with no assigned room, often roaming the halls. A round of budget cuts this year sharply reduced staffing of the "resource centers." ...

The nadir for Dewey came in March, when a student — not newly admitted from Lafayette — was spotted by classmates and a teacher handling a gun and the building was put under police lockdown for several hours. Though the weapon was never located and no charges were ever brought against the student, a heightened sense of disruption continues.

Reading between the lines, it seems possible that administrators and students at Dewey are using Lafayette-zoned kids as scapegoats for trouble that's not always caused by them and that the problem is just as much a school program that is inflexible in the face of crowding pressures as it is the particular kids who have started enrolling.

But the DOE's response is truly ridiculous: to encourage more overcrowding and a wholesale abandonment of the progressive scheduling that has made Dewey special. Garth Harries told Freedman bringing enrollment down at Dewey is "absolutely a priority" — but implied that the way the DOE plans to execute that goal is by waiting for Lafayette's small schools to become attractive and large enough to draw more kids.

Even worse, Harries noted, "There are many schools that are over capacity, and more over capacity than Dewey, and they can program their students so everyone

has a place to be," he said. "I would be surprised that a school that has just 118 percent utilization has that many students unprogrammed." In other words, Dewey isn't that overcrowded -- why can't it just stuff more kids into its classes? When Insideschools visited in January 2007, school officials told us classes range in size from 28 to 34 students. It doesn't sound like there's much wiggle room in classes that large.

One other similarity between Freedman's story on Beach Channel and this one about Dewey: the sad fact that some at those schools think the pressure they're under is the DOE's way to destroy formerly successful large high schools. True or not, how can you teach or learn when that's what you're led to believe?