

The truth about specialized high schools

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It's August 2nd, 1: 11 am. My school routine will not commence for another 38 days, 6 hours and 54 minutes; however, I'm already restless, in anticipation of my upcoming final specialized high school year. I attend one of the most competitive specialized high schools, not just in New York City, but in the entire nation. A school that boasts of having the smartest teens, the highest test scores, and the greatest opportunities for its' students. A dream school of many- the death of me and the majority of those who attend.

Every year, eighth graders are given the opportunity to apply to specialized high schools in addition to their regular high school choices. Your entrance into these high schools is based solely on what you get on the Specialized High School Admissions Test (SHSAT) and to these kids, making the cut off score is like a golden ticket. Determined to be categorized as academically gifted, kids everywhere spend years preparing for this exam. I had friends whose parents paid for two years worth of exam preparation classes. In comparison, I was woefully unprepared—having only prepared an hour a day, four days a week for just one month and the fact that I nearly finished the brutal 2 and a half hour exam, I was really taken by surprise when I opened my results in the dirty first floor bathroom of my junior high school before the school day ended, and saw the words that every kid was dying to see: Congratulations! You are being offered one of a small number of seats to one or more of the Specialized High Schools to which you applied and/or auditioned to. How excited I was- and how naive.

If only I knew what I was getting myself into and what was yet to come. Students say there is a triangle as to how you survive a specialized high

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school. Each vertex of this triangle contains an option, you can only choose two out of the three: Sleep, Social Life and Good Grades. After you choose two you must completely accept and disregard the third because you cannot have your cake and eat it too. You must suffer in one way or another- whether it be lack of sleep, no friends or horrible grades.

High school students shouldn't have to choose between success, health and happiness- but they make the choice, not knowing that the choice they makes completely denies them the full high school experience that they should have. There are social sacrifices you make if you want to go out with friends or stay home with family- whether it's your grades or sleep. If you attend that family outing, that paper gets a B, and if you go bowling Sunday night, forget passing that exam. The truth: my daily routine consists of waking up at 5: 30 am, to hop on a city bus for an hour and a half commute. School starts at 8: 00am and ends at 3: 00pm. Now if you go to school for extra help with your teacher, or participate in any afterschool clubs or sports, which you are encouraged and somewhat obliged to partake in, sometimes you can stay as late at 6: 00pm.

Since I have a long commute, I get home as late as 7: 30 pm, and, while many other kids from school use their “ free” time to do much encouraged volunteer work, I am the oldest out of four children, so my work consists of family responsibilities, such as watching my youngest brother and getting him ready for bed at night, assisting my mother with household chores, and sometimes even tutoring my younger brothers and sister. On top of that, we have a range of thirty five minutes to an hours-worth of homework and/or studying for each subject, so multiply that times six and that leaves students

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with less than three hours of sleep every night! Many misconceptions buzz about the atmosphere at these schools, especially the students. The kids must be naturally smart- organized and calm and attentive, right? The curriculum must be amazing, the teachers challenging but fair, the homework tolerable but fair game for these geniuses, wouldn't you agree? Yes the courses are more rigorous than your average high school class, and the homework is definitely ten times more arduous and time consuming than any other schools, but that's just about it now. When it comes down to it, it's the same austere teachers, pretentious kids, and crappy schedules. And although there are indeed similarities, these specialized high school do have their disadvantages. Kids from all over New York make sacrifices to travel to these schools once they get in and the attendees are scattered, masses coming from each borough.

If you're like me, the commute is approximately an hour and a half in the morning and an hour and a half at night. What that means is I spend three hours a day, 15 hours a week, 60 hours a month travelling to and from school. Do you know what 60 hours is? You're missing two and a half days a month! Days that could be spent with family, studying, sleeping, day that could be spent doing anything and everything more productive than sitting on a bus. When you choose to attend a school like this, this is a sacrifice you make and a choice you accept. If you use this time wisely, you could bring your grade which is what most people choose to do on the bus- study study study.

Yes that's right- specialized students must study! Which is another thing. everybody has this delusion that if a student attends a specialized high <https://assignbuster.com/the-truth-about-specialized-high-schools/>

school, they must be a natural genius. And of course everybody is smart, but not everyone is a genius. There's the "smart kids", the kids who get by decently with a mediocre amount of work. There's the "extremely smart kids", who are only extremely smart because they devote so much of their time and effort to their work and make many sacrifices to get there.

Then, there are the kids who are looked down upon, the ones who definitely are smart and have it in them, but chose to not perform the rigorous fruitless work (but who could blame them? They're probably the smartest ones...). So yes, technically everyone is smart, but just because they're smart, doesn't mean they have it easy. And if you don't push yourself to succeed, others will.

The amount of competition within these schools is astonishing, completely unhealthy, and not one bit friendly. The competition that consumes these students is venomous because everybody is in competition with one another, but no one will admit it. "Man that test was hard, I only got a 93. I'm so stupid! Oh you got a 81? That's not too bad for you right..."

"Did you study for this test? Only an hour, that's it? I mean, I guess that will be okay..." I know some kids who won't explain things to you when you ask, just because they want to be able to be better than you. Kids who will tell you they "don't understand it either man" but have the problem solved, "I don't know I just got it man, I can't really explain it". So then you have to do better, you have to get higher on the next test so that they'll have to ask you for help, and you'll have the opportunity to say the same exact thing back to them.

The game is on, the pressure is rising. The pressure, oh the pressure. The high expectations from not only your peers, but from your teachers, your parents, your family. The siblings that look up to you, the siblings you aspire to be. Your old friends who expect you to be smart enough to succeed since you were smart enough to get in. Pressure from the state and the country who tell you you're gifted, and if you don't show it, you're just lazy.

Pressure so high kids need coffee and adderall to focus. So tremendous it causes stress and anxiety. So extreme kids need alcohol and marijuana to cope with this stress and anxiety. What?! Drugs? Alcohol?! No! But alas it is true! There's this huge misconception that only run-down underprivileged schools in urban areas are rampant with alcohol and marijuana abuse, but you would be amazed at the amount of students in the specialized high schools who need a drink and a blaze to deal with all the academic pressure and stress. Freshman smoking blunts on the bus home, drug busts in the school bathrooms and weed brownies disguised as homemade treats. Friends who confide about how they lock themselves in their room and just drink.

Parties with red solo cups filled to the rim with alcohol. These kids come home from school, higher than you can even imagine- completely buzzed, but do their parents know? Of course not, all their parents see is the A's on the report cards, and they're satisfied, they wouldn't even think to question their kid- their kid is too smart, they have too bright a future. Three years (going on four) of sleepless nights, followed by daytime lethargy, permanent eye bags and frequent crying fits in between. Students with cups of coffee and discomfiting slouches, competitively seeing who got less sleep the

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night before, as if less sleep meant you had harder classes and were smarter and more studious than everyone else. Yes my dears, the life of a specialized high school student is not as glamorous as you would imagine.

I'm not bashing specialized high schools. The point I'm trying to make about these high schools is that the stress level is too G. D high for these bright eyed 13-14 year olds and it's absolutely preposterous that they're forced to either (a) endure it (b) flunk or (c) suffer humiliation by transferring out, because they don't want to be perceived as being a quitter. But is it worth enduring? People pride on the fact that it must look more appealing to colleges that you're from these schools. But is it really? Is it better to have mediocre grades and an okay average in these top notch schools while you could be excelling beyond comparison in an average school? Is it worth the lack of sleep, the long commutes, the pressure and coping risks, the struggling and expectations? Can you handle it?