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## For scholarship winner, 'A School' is no frill

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*Alternative High School senior Peter Schonning helps Paige Tarzia with math homework. —Jake Kara photo*

In a school designed for close to 2,000 students, it seemed inevitable that no matter how well many students do, the needs of some wouldn't be met.

That's the theory behind the Ridgefield Alternative High School, a one-room schoolhouse in Ballard Park that serves 20 students deemed at risk of failure at the more than 1,700-student Ridgefield High School.

"At 'A School,' it's all the same work," said Peter Schonning, an Alternative School senior who won a selective scholarship. "It's not that I wanted to get out of the work."

He's among this year's nine-student senior class, eight of whom have been accepted to colleges. He is also among 104 students nationwide awarded the \$20,000 Horatio Alger National Scholarship for demonstrating a commitment to academic achievement in the face of adversity.

Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas will present Peter and the other recipients with the honor in Washington D.C. this weekend.

Peter's siblings have had trouble in the public school system as well. His sister went the Harvey School and his twin brother attends that school now.

For Peter and many of the Alternative School students, it's difficult to articulate why they weren't succeeding.

Some cite the competitive nature of the school system, others found it hard to fit in socially, and some said, bluntly, that it was too easy to slack off.

Alternative School senior Jonathan "JP" Pryzby said he "coasted through" elementary and middle school without having to try hard, but when he entered high school, his study skills were nonexistent. He had a 1.8 GPA in his freshman year and enrolled in the Alternative School, which his brother had attended. Now as he prepares to graduate, choosing between culinary schools, his GPA more than doubled.

No low profile

At the Alternative School, there's no keeping a low profile in the back of class and hoping a teacher doesn't notice a missed assignment.

Classes gather around tables in the building's main room and students are on a first-name basis with their teachers.

"Dave, you're our inspiration," one of the seniors jokes with English teacher David Griffith, who walked in when they were discussing how they enjoyed a memoir writing project he assigned.

"Yesss!" he said, with a grin before diving into the discussion of Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. The assignment was for students to discuss in web posting the definition of "mental illness."

Students and teachers also have each other's cell phone numbers — so there's no excuse not to understand any part of any assignment and have it done on time.

Mr. Griffith asked Peter to share his response with the class.

"The term 'mental illness' is stereotyped far too often with schizophrenics, asylum patients, and good old fashioned, run-of-the-mill, straight jacket occupants," he began. "Despite the overabundance of generalizations, I believe that mental illness is far more common than is perceived and, most definitely, affects everyone."

Peter continued to argue that the term, defined by Webster's Dictionary as behavior abnormal enough to cause harm, is too general to be useful.

"We all suffer from our (and each other's) behavior, thoughts, and emotions; it is a part of our growth and humanity."

Like some other Alternative School students, Peter has been identified as having a mental illnesses.

"I, personally, have had enough experience with the stereotypical mental patient, having spent plenty of time in mental hospitals and been diagnosed with bipolar disorder myself. I've lived with, and gotten to know, addicts, schizophrenics, pyromaniacs, autistics, and countless bipolar patients and attempted suicides. These have been some of the kindest and most misunderstood people I've met."

The assignment was right up Peter's alley. He isn't sure what he wants to study, but leans towards English and psychology.

He's applied to eight schools, and been accepted to a number of them, including the University of Vermont, which offers additional money for Horatio Alger Scholarship winners. If he hears good news from Fordham, he said, "I'll be faced with a tough decision. In a way it'd be nice to just be accepted to one," he said.

Budget concerns?

In this year's budget discussions, the Alternative High School has taken some heat, with one person at a March budget hearing suggesting it be closed to save money.

But school and town officials consider the school a success story that also saves the district money in private school tuition that might be needed for some of the students.

First Selectman Rudy Marconi said closing the school "would be inappropriate." It operates in a Housing Authority building "that would generate no revenue for the town if they weren't there," Mr. Marconi said.

Superintendent Deborah Low said the school demonstrates the district's commitment to catering to all of its constituents needs.

"Some kids don't need it, don't want it," she said of the school in January. "Others, it gets them through the Ridgefield Public Schools."

"Public schools serve all students," she said, "not just most, or some, but all students."

She refuted the idea that the 20-student school is a "frill" and not a necessity.