

In School for the First Time, Teenage Immigrants Struggle



Kirsten Luce for The New York Times

Fanta Konneh, who grew up in Guinea after her family fled Liberia when she was a toddler, first went to school at age 17.

Fanta Konneh is the first girl in her family to go to school. Not the first to go to college, or to graduate from high school. Fanta, 18, who grew up in Guinea after her family fled Liberia, became the first to walk into a classroom of any kind last year.

“Just the boys go to school, so I always knew I was left out,” said Fanta, a student at Ellis Preparatory Academy in the South Bronx. “But here, I am trying. I can say many things I did not know before. I can learn things more.”

New York City classrooms have long been filled with children from all over the world, and the education challenges they bring with them. But hidden among the nearly 150,000 students across the city still struggling to learn English are an estimated 15,100 who, like Fanta, have had little or no formal schooling and are often illiterate in their native languages.

More than half of these arrive as older teenagers and land in the city's high schools, where they must learn how to learn even as their peers prepare for state subject exams required for a diploma.

"They don't always have a notion of what it means to be a student," said Stephanie Grasso, an English teacher at Ellis Prep, which opened this fall and is New York's first school devoted to this hard-to-educate population. "Certain ideas are completely foreign to them. They have to learn how to ask questions and understand things for themselves."

The largest share of these students come from rural areas of the Dominican Republic, where they did not attend school because it was too far away or because they were working to support their families. Others fled religious persecution in Tibet, civil wars in West Africa or extreme poverty in Central America, often missing years of class while in refugee camps.

One of the 82 pupils at Ellis, Harunur Rashid, said he spent his first two years in the United States as an indentured servant to a Bangladeshi family, finally escaping. School officials believe that he was imprisoned, but have not pursued it because he does not know where he was held.

New York is one of the only states to identify these difficult cases, classifying them as Students with Interrupted Formal Education, but state education officials do not offer a suggested curriculum, provide any additional financing or track their progress. Last year, New York City provided a total of \$2.5 million to 53 schools with large populations of these students — about \$165 extra per person; they are entitled to the same extra services as others who are still learning English, but nothing more.

The number of students classified this way has swelled 50 percent from a decade ago. According to the city's Department of Education, the graduation rate of these students in 2007 was 29 percent, less than half the city's overall rate of 62 percent. (The 29 percent rate is for all students who enter the system lacking formal education, including those who start as early as third grade; the city does not separately track dropouts and graduations among those like Fanta who arrived as older teenagers.)

Educators who work with such students, and experts who study their problems, say that teenagers who arrive unable to read in any language face tremendous pressure to earn an independent living while racing to catch up on more than a decade of academic building blocks. Elaine C. Klein, a linguistics professor at [City University of New York](#), started a research project following 98 such students in 2007, and by the next year could locate only 48 of them: the others had returned to their home countries, left school for unskilled jobs or disappeared.

“This is the very literal definition of slipping through the cracks,” Professor Klein said.

About 60 percent of such teenagers attend the city’s large, comprehensive high schools. Others enroll in a dozen operated by the nonprofit Internationals Network for Public Schools for immigrants of all educational backgrounds. The international schools have graduation rates above the city average, but do not separately track the performance of those classified as having interrupted educations.

Maria Santos, director of the city’s office of English Language Learners, said small schools are not necessarily preferred, and that large schools with a “critical mass” of such students can create programs to help them.

Professor Klein and other experts agree there is not yet a consensus on what works best, but say the system over all generally does not serve these immigrants well. They cited examples of students discouraged from enrolling in a particular school, shunted inappropriately into special education programs, or spending years in class without progressing beyond grade-school work. Some teenagers are insulted at being handed picture books, while others are flummoxed by being asked to write three-page essays.

You can’t teach them about evaporation if they don’t know how water is constructed,” Professor Klein said. On the other hand, she said: “They already know the concept of a color, but they just need to know the name of the color. They already have the basic knowledge and they have been able to think quite well, thank you very much.”

At one Queens high school, she said, the principal eliminated two classrooms dedicated to these students. “He said, ‘Look, you have to understand my position: what this group does for my school is bring down my numbers,’ ” Professor Klein recalled. “But think about these children; who is going to serve them?”

Ellis Prep — whose name both evokes the island and is an acronym for English Language Learners and International Support — was created by Norma Vega, a social worker and a former principal at Bronx International High School. She recalled a young woman from Macedonia who spent four years studying at Bronx International but still, at 21, could not read better than a fourth grader, and was given a special education diploma. One young man, from West Africa, came to school every day until he was 22, then stopped showing up.

“If they were all sent to regular high schools, they would simply be lost,” Ms. Vega said.

Convinced that the students who did best were those who got special attention from adults, Ms. Vega hired four teachers and four academic coaches, three of them part time, who sit by students’ sides in class to walk them through lessons. On top of standard per-pupil funding, the school has a \$200,000, four-year grant from the Institute for Student Achievement, a national group that supports small schools, and \$76,000 this year from the city.

Ellis has the same graduation requirements as other high schools, and students take English, math, history and science for an hour a day each, along with violin or dance. Every six weeks, they present a “defense of learning” project, talking for 30 to 45 minutes about, say, how a rocket launches or the gods of Hinduism, then taking questions.

Despite the daunting mountain of ground they must make up, many Ellis students have big ambitions. Teenagers who can hardly read English speak confidently of futures as nurses, architects or chemists. There is constant talk of college even for those muddling through basic geometry.

“The most difficult thing is that they won’t all be able to make it,” Ms. Vega said. “Their work ethic is impeccable, but they may not be able to get there.”

Morry Bamba, who is 18 and, like his cousin Fanta, entered school for the first time when he arrived in the United States three years ago, is one of the most perplexing cases. He speaks with ease, eagerly telling a visitor: "I knew how lucky I was coming here. When I was in Guinea, all the kids I knew who went to school said it was the best." But Morry's academic progress is sluggish. "You give him a Cat in the Hat book, and he may not struggle with that, but he can barely read," Ms. Vega said.

Drawing on the philosophy of the Internationals Network, which began operating schools in the 1990s, Ellis students work often in small groups, with the newest relying on those who have been around longer for explanation and translation.

Shortly after he arrived at the school from Mali, Djibril Sumarei was taking instruction on how to construct a religion poster for history class from Mohammed Alesadi, who immigrated from Yemen two years ago and often writes words backward.

"I write in Arabic and you write in French," Mohammed directed him in English. Every few minutes, they exchanged quiet words in Arabic, the language of the Muslim school Djibril attended for a few years in Mauritania. The poster was covered in hard-to-decipher captions.

The state defines a "student with interrupted formal education" as anyone who has been out of school for at least two years, but many at Ellis might be more aptly described as undereducated: Djibril, for example, at times attended school a few hours a day, or in classes of 85, or studied only the Koran.

In an intake evaluation about a month after Djibril arrived, Annie Smith, an academic coach, tried to fill in the particulars.

"Are you here with your family?" she asked.

Djibril nodded yes. He supplied his address on Boston Post Road.

Yes, his siblings were in school.

Hobbies? Soccer. Chores? Looking after younger brothers.

“How is school for you?” Ms. Smith asked. “Is it difficult? Is it interesting?”

A student Ms. Smith had recruited to translate supplied the answer: “He doesn’t understand English. This is a big problem. But science, science is the most difficult.”

Then Djibril’s complicated migration story unfolded. Ivory Coast. Senegal. Burkina Faso. Mauritania. The hows and the whys — even the whens — of each move were not clear. Ms. Smith did not press too much.

Fanta is an example both of how far many of the students have come and of how much more they face. “I was not knew body in my class and lunch time,” she wrote in a memoir for Ms. Grasso’s class to explain how lost she felt when she first arrived. Eventually she made friends, Fanta wrote, and “how to do communicates in school now I know.”

In an interview, Fanta spoke confidently of a future in business. “If I have money, maybe I can send it back to Africa,” she said. “I can help my mother. I can come to school for that, too.”

But after a fall of perfect attendance, Fanta has not returned to school since New Year’s. Ms. Vega says she has since learned that she is five months pregnant.

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