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By *MICHAEL LUO*

For children of Asian descent growing up in and around New York City, cram schools are a part of life.

Starting in the third grade and continuing through high school, hundreds of students drag themselves to these private tutoring classes, long a tradition in the Far East, day after day, after school, on weekends and over the summer.

The goal? The schools' signs, dotting storefronts in Flushing, Queens, and other communities with large populations of Asian immigrants, clearly state their ambitions: "Ivy Prep," "Harvard Academy," "Best Academy."

Now, growing numbers of non-Asian parents are enrolling their children in the schools, hoping to emulate the educational successes associated with Asian students.

Anna Connelly, who is white and lives in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, started her son Matthew, a ruddy-faced 13-year-old, in Elite Academy, a Korean cram school in Flushing, last month. Asian students, she said, are great role models.

"They study hard, they will have more of an edge, so let's learn from them," she said as she waited for her son to get out of class.

And Norma Murray, who is black, has spent the last three summers driving her two children in from Baldwin, in Nassau County, to attend Elite. She credits the school with helping her youngest win a math award recently.

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"Some kids don't need it," she said. "My kids need a little push, a little shove."

In fact, this past summer, about a quarter of Elite's 400 students were neither Korean nor Chinese, the two groups that have traditionally filled the schools. Instead, their ethnic backgrounds ranged from Indian to Greek to Hispanic to African-American. Bayside Academy, a popular cram school in Bayside, Queens, that is run by Korean-Americans and has 350 students, had a similar percentage of non-Asians. At Mega Academy, in Flushing, arguably the best-known Chinese-run school, about 15 percent of the students this summer were of neither Chinese nor Korean descent.

The enrollment shift is surprising, cram school officials say, because the schools run by Asian immigrants have done nothing to go after the mainstream market, and are still advertising only in Chinese and Korean-language newspapers.

"They hear through word of mouth," said Joyce Choe, the director of Bayside Academy.

Even schools that are explicitly focused on Asian children have had their share of non-Asian students. Sung Yoo recently started his own school, Seed Learning Center, in Cresskill, N.J., after teaching at another one for more than a decade. He wants his new school to go beyond test preparation, building cultural awareness among Korean-Americans by offering elective classes on subjects like Korean percussion and Asian-American history. Despite the special focus, a smattering of non-Asian students enrolled for the school's inaugural summer, mainly because of Mr. Yoo's reputation.

In Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, where competition for college entrance is fierce, most children attend cram schools from an early age. Rigid discipline and rote memorization are typical of their experience.

Asian immigrants brought the concept with them when they settled here. The schools typically prepare students for specific tests, like those required for admission to colleges and New York City's specialized science high schools. But most emphasize reinforcing lessons learned in school and teaching children how to study rather than concentrating on test-taking strategies.

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Young Dae Kwon, a father of two, founded Elite in 1986 to help his children do better in school. He started with 16 students. Today, Elite offers classes in writing, math and English, along with tutoring for those who want to succeed on the American High School Mathematics Examination, a nationwide contest.

In contrast to Elite, which has several classrooms in a Flushing office building, many of the 138 cram schools listed in a Korean business directory are tiny storefront operations. But even the larger schools retain a mom-and-pop flavor, which parents say they prefer because their children get more individual attention, compared to the classes at large mainstream tutoring and test preparation centers.

The Asian cram schools also offer more class time for the price, according to parents who have shopped around. A weekend SAT prep class at Elite meets 14 weeks, four hours a day, for \$760; mainstream SAT prep courses cost a similar amount for just six to eight weeks.

Do cram schools work? Arthur E. Levine, president of Columbia University's Teachers College, said he knew of no research done specifically on the success of the Asian-run schools. Still, he pointed out, "Tutoring helps with all kinds of things."

"Asians have frequently been called the 'model minority' and have records of successful academic achievement," Dr. Levine said. And because stereotyping does exist ("People look for Jewish doctors," he noted), he thinks the cram schools are inadvertently benefiting from the "model minority" label.

Elite's proof that cram schools work is that it sends about 100 students every year to Stuyvesant High School, the Bronx High School of Science and Brooklyn Technical High School; about a dozen of its middle school pupils get into Hunter College High School; and some of its high school seniors go on to prestigious universities like Harvard, Yale and Stanford.

Although they charge less than mainstream after-school study centers, cram schools usually hire trained teachers to conduct their classes. Most teach full time in area schools.

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Matthew Connelly's math teacher, Danielle Galanaugh, used to teach at a private school in Connecticut and is now working toward certification in New York. Ms. Galanaugh began working at Elite two summers ago, after a friend referred her.

The first time she visited Elite, she said, she was shocked to see so many pupils spending their summer vacations studying. But for a teacher, the students are a dream come true.

"They're like sponges," she said. "They love to learn."

Unlike regular schools, cram schools can reject underperformers. At Bayside Academy, Ms. Choe, the director, said that she must sometimes turn away students if placement tests show they are too far behind their peers.

And, at least for now, the schools are not obviously changing their ways to accommodate non-Asian students. At Elite, the receptionist answers the phone in Korean. An article on the bulletin board advertising a workshop on writing college essays is written in Korean. As parents mill about in the lobby, waiting to pick up their children, mostly Korean is heard.

But rather than feeling out of place, many non-Asian parents see this as one of the school's primary draws. "You go to the library, those are the kids that are there," said Dimitra Pangopoulos, whose 13-year-old son is studying at Elite this fall. "They're the ones interested in learning."

Classes for the younger pupils are the ones becoming increasingly diverse, said Amy Yoo, Elite's director. But the high school classes remain mostly students from Asian families, she said, possibly because of the extra devotion required, given teenagers' already busy schedules.

Ms. Murray recognizes that her two children are giving up a lot of free time to attend, but she does not see it as a loss.

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"What are they going to do?" she said. "Sit around and play Nintendo?"

Still, she said she thought some Asian parents do push their children too hard. Trying to maintain a balance, she took her children out in the middle of the summer for vacation, and she keeps them out during the school year because they are busy enough with regular school.

But on a recent Saturday morning, Elite was in full swing. In one room, a group of sixth graders grappled with a difficult Ray Bradbury short story and went over vocabulary words written on the board: apparition, blasphemous, cavernously. Down the hall, Matthew Connelly and the rest of his class tackled geometry.

When the teacher asked if anyone knew the definition of "circumference," Joni Powell, Matthew's lone black classmate, raised her hand.

"The perimeter of a circle?" she offered.

Some non-Asian children admitted to feeling out of place initially, but Joni, Matthew and others said they quickly fit in.

And several non-Asian parents said the cram schools offered another benefit: learning about different cultures.

"I think," said Robin Anerella, whose daughter Jackie is in Matthew's class, "it makes my kids richer."

Taking Lessons From Another Culture; For Students of Many Backgrounds, a Study Tool From the Far East

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