

The Big Cram for Hunter High School

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By *JAVIER C. HERNANDEZ*

While their friends played video games in pajamas or vacationed in the tropics, a dozen sixth graders spent winter break at [Elite Academy](#) in Flushing, Queens, memorizing word roots. Time was ticking as they prepared to face the thing they had talked about, dreamed about and lost sleep over for much of the past year: the [Hunter College High School](#) admissions exam, a strenuous three-hour test that weeds out about 90 percent of those who take it.

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On Wednesday, the final day of test-prep boot camp before the Jan. 9 exam, there seemed to be nothing more terrifying to these 11-year-olds than the risk of failure.

Some had taken up coffee; others, crossword puzzles and cable news shows to glean vocabulary words. A few of their parents had hired private tutors and imposed strict study hours, and several had paid up to \$3,000 for a few months of English and math classes at Elite, a regimen modeled on the cram schools of South Korea, China and Japan.

The five girls and seven boys at Elite on Wednesday seemed to delight in their onerous routine, unwilling or unable to imagine life any other way.

“My friends think it’s wacko to do so much preparation,” said Akira Taniguchi, an aspiring [F.B.I.](#) agent who attends the honors program at Junior High School 54 on the Upper West Side. “But now I feel I’m really focused, thanks to this academy, and way more confident than I was when I first came here.”

Patryk Wadolowski, the brown-haired, blue-eyed president of his sixth-grade class at Public School 58, chimed in: “It just prepares us for life. Any obstacle we face we’ll be able to conquer.”

In a classroom decorated with maps and illustrations of vocabulary words (a string of z’s for “dormant,” a serene plateau for “salubrious”), the squad of high-achievers spent 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. dissecting English and math questions. As they progressed from sentence completion to reading comprehension, nearly every question posed by the teacher, Elisabeth Stuveras, elicited a garden of eager hands.

The puzzle of the moment was the word “resentment.” Some students had been stumped by it on the practice test, and Ms. Stuveras asked if anyone could offer a definition.

“Like, you resent having a fight with people?” Patryk hypothesized.

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No, that was “regret,” Ms. Stuveras explained. She searched for an example that might ring true for the students.

“Pretend your friends are applying to Hunter,” she said. “There’s a chance that the person who didn’t get in might feel a little resentment they didn’t get in. They are upset the other people got in, with a little jealousy.”

“ ‘Resent’ is a good word to add to your vocabulary,” Ms. Stuveras concluded. The students nodded in understanding, highlighting the word in unison.

At 1:15, they took a break, throwing aside lofty vocabulary to chat around the vending machines about their favorite rappers ([Jay-Z](#) and [Kanye West](#)) and coming school dances.

When prompted, they took a moment to reflect on why they wanted to get into Hunter. Some said it was an urge to become better students and be surrounded by bright peers; others said they had been told Hunter was a vital steppingstone to elite colleges and a successful career.

“Ever since I was in second grade, I always wanted to go to Hunter,” Patryk said. “I’ve always strived to achieve everything in every test.”

Most of the students came to the five-day winter break program at Elite after attending Saturday prep classes at the academy through the fall. Elite, which opened in 1986, is one of several cram schools in New York that has imported the year-round enrichment programs of the Far East, giving students the chance to forfeit evenings, weekends, summer break and winter vacation for test preparation.

While Elite limits advertising to Asian-language newspapers, about 50 percent of its students are non-Asian. (Asian students still predominate in the city’s top public high schools, including Hunter.)

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Many of the students in the winter break program were children of immigrants — from South Korea, Japan, Poland — and most attend city schools. Few things are kept private. Scores on practice tests are posted in the front lobby, and students freely share their homework scores and edit each other's essays. It is the first time many of them have received letter grades on assignments.

When it was time to hand back essays, Ms. Stuveras announced that four students had earned high-passes. "Ah, yes!" Patryk exclaimed.

Did anyone fail? "Well, yes," Ms. Stuveras explained. "You guys did pretty well, though; there were a lot of high-fails."

Joanna Cohen, a student at the [School at Columbia University](#) who peppers her sentences with words like "amiable" and "headway" and spits out math formulas faster than the teacher can write on the board, sipped on mint tea at her desk (most of her classmates preferred Pepsi or Mountain Dew). She smiled as she looked at her high score on the practice exam.

After class, she passed around her blue grammar book and asked some classmates to write their phone numbers in the front.

Outside, in the lobby, the students exchanged study tactics and traded recommendations on dictionaries and vocabulary books. (Joanna recommends "Webster's.")

A few said they were going to devote their free time to the thesaurus, looking for ways to spruce up ho-hum sentences. ("Our teacher said using high-level vocab will increase your chance of passing," Akira explained.)

And what if they were not among the fewer than 200 students who gain seats out of a pool of up to 2,000 test-takers?

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“I’ll be sad,” said James Lee, a student at Intermediate School 119 in Glendale, Queens, “but there’s still Stuyvesant.”