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Disrupting the World of Private School With Tech and Guinea Pigs

By **Kate Taylor**

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Long dominated by a small group of elite institutions, New York City's private schools have limited seats, annual tuition approaching \$50,000, and an admissions process that can drive even the most levelheaded parents to teeth-grinding anxiety. The schools range in philosophy from traditional to progressive, but in general, they change slowly, if at all.

Now, a rash of start-ups say they can offer more 21st-century alternatives — and make a profit in the process.

They are entities like AltSchool, a San Francisco-based start-up that says it can use technology to revolutionize education. It opened its first “micro-school” in New York in 2015, and has opened two more since then.

There are the cost-cutter schools, like the tiny Portfolio School, which opened last year in TriBeCa and uses technology to keep administrative costs down but emphasizes experiential learning, like having students design a home for the class's pet guinea pigs. BASIS Independent Schools, with campuses in Brooklyn and Manhattan, offer a traditional curriculum, with an emphasis on science, for about a third less in tuition than the city's most prestigious private schools.

And there are schools devoted to cross-cultural efforts, like the Wetherby-Pembridge School, an offshoot of a British school that boasts Prince William and Prince Harry as alumni, which appeals to members of the global corporate class who might be in New York this year and London the next.

Then there's the newest entry in the field, from WeWork, the office space-sharing company that recently jolted New York's retail universe with its purchase of the Lord & Taylor building. This month, the company announced that it was starting its own school next year, called WeGrow. One of the company's founders, Rebekah Neumann described WeGrow in a blog post as “a new conscious, entrepreneurial school committed to unleashing every child's superpowers.”

WeWork envisions its educational and real estate businesses as mutually reinforcing, offering parents the chance to drop their children off at school in the same building where they work, and where they could possibly meet them for lunch. In the long run, the company foresees replicating

the school in many of the 52 cities where WeWork operates, so that parents who need to travel or move for work purposes could transfer their children from one WeGrow outpost to another, as easily as plugging in a MacBook Air at a new location.



Kindergarten students practicing math at Wetherby-Pembridge, an independent school on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. Elizabeth D. Herman for The New York Times

Unlike most of New York's private schools, these newcomers are all for-profit businesses.

Matt Greenfield, a managing partner of ReThink Education, a venture capital firm focused on education technology, said that this group of new schools seemed to reflect a mix of passion projects, started by parents frustrated with the available options who want to create their dream school, and cold-eyed business ventures.

"Schools are not an inherently bad business," he said. "New York has a scarily high real estate cost, and other costs are high, too," but the tuition a school can charge in New York is high, as well, he said. "So I think those are not implausible businesses."

Of course, success is not guaranteed, and some schools have already stumbled. AltSchool, which counted Mark Zuckerberg, the chief executive of Facebook, among its investors, recently announced that it was closing two of its campuses, including one in the East Village, reflecting the company's decision to, in start-up parlance, "pivot" from building a national network of schools and instead focus on licensing the educational software it is developing. The company said that the schools themselves, despite tuition at the New York campuses of \$32,000 for elementary school and \$37,500 for middle school, do not break even.

Other for-profit schools that have opened in the last decade or so have changed hands. The Mandell School, a preschool that had expanded into the elementary grades, abruptly closed its elementary school at the end of the last school year. BASIS now occupies its former building on the Upper West Side.

The for-profit school that drew the most attention in recent years for its ambition and eye-popping tuition was Avenues: The World School, which opened in 2012. Avenues promised to prepare students for a global world by offering bilingual instruction in Spanish and Mandarin. Its founders described an eventual network of 20 campuses around the world.

Avenues has succeeded in attracting students — 1,600 children are enrolled in preschool through 12th grade at its campus in Chelsea — but its international expansion has not gone as planned. So far, the New York school is the only one operating.

A few of the newer schools — in particular Wetherby-Pembridge, which follows the English national curriculum, down to teaching British spelling, with its "u" in "colour" — are also trying to appeal to globe-trotting parents. Polis World School, which is looking to open next year, says it will offer Mandarin immersion within a Montessori setting. It is seeking "founding families" — the educational equivalent of seed-stage investors — to get off the ground.

Some observers are skeptical of the new crop of schools. Amanda Uhry, the founder and owner of Manhattan Private School Advisors, which helps families with the admissions process, said she discourages parents from applying to for-profit schools, because she doesn't have confidence in the long-term stability of those schools.



Students at the Portfolio School working on music for a film project. Elizabeth D. Herman for The New York Times

“There are people who these schools obviously attract and obviously go there,” she said, but only because they don’t get into the more prestigious nonprofit schools. In her experience, she added, many families “would rather go to public school than go to a privately owned new school that has no history.”

Still, WeWork seems confident it will find a market. An adviser to its school effort — whom the company provided to speak only on the condition of anonymity because the details of his employment have yet to be worked out — said that the pedagogy would draw from progressive models, like Waldorf and Montessori. Students will practice yoga and meditation. They will regularly visit the Neumanns’ 60-acre farm in Pound Ridge, N.Y., and cook with ingredients procured there.

Ms. Neumann and her husband and WeWork co-founder, Adam Neumann, have five children, and in their family, she said in an interview with Bloomberg, “there are no lines” between office and home life. Similarly WeWork offices blur the line between work and leisure with foosball tables and beer on tap.

Ms. Neumann told Bloomberg that students would be mentored by the entrepreneurs who rent space from WeWork and encouraged to start their own businesses. Ms. Neumann said that an 8-year-old in a small pilot school that WeWork has been running this year made T-shirts to sell at a farm stand the children run and would soon train as an apprentice with fashion designers who work in WeWork offices.

The school will likely start inside the WeWork space on West 18th Street and later move to its future headquarters in the Lord & Taylor building on Fifth Avenue. The design, by the Danish architect Bjarke Ingels, will seek to “undo the compartmentalization often found in traditional school environments,” according to Mr. Ingels’s firm.

WeWork is aiming to begin next year with about 70 students from age 3 to fourth grade, and eventually expand to 12th grade.

Mr. Greenfield, of ReThink Education, said that, from what he has read, Ms. Neumann seemed sincere, and that he thought exposing students to business and other possible careers was beneficial.

“That doesn’t mean that it will work,” he said. “But I doubt many children will be drastically harmed in any way if it doesn’t.”

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