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Other Winning Equations

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Life Without AP

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Only a few elite private schools, like **Sandia Preparatory School** in **Albuquerque, N.M.**, have the financial resources to offer alternatives to AP and IB. This month, while students across the country sweat out AP tests, Jessica Siegel, a Sandia senior, will be interning with an executive producer at National Public Radio in Washington, D.C. Siegel doesn't think she's missing out. Instead she says Sandia's AP ban means a more stimulating education. "Here, we'll go off on a little sidetrack and then loop back," says Siegel. That's exactly what Sandia's headmaster, Dick Heath, likes to hear. Although he once taught AP classes himself, Heath objects to what he sees as AP's "off the shelf" curriculum. Instead, his teachers design the school's signature interdisciplinary courses, which emphasize class discussion rather than test scores. That's possible because tuition (\$11,600 this year) and fund-raising finance a 9-to-1 student-teacher ratio. Sandia is one of a handful of private schools across the country that have avoided AP. Guidance director Bruce Hammond believes that many more would join them were it not for anxious parents who want their children's expensive private high schools to ease admission to elite colleges. But he thinks that at schools like Sandia, the real danger is not low expectations but exhausted kids.

A Real-World Education

School and real life shouldn't be separate worlds. That was the vision that led Dennis Littky and Elliot Washor to start the **Met Center** in **Providence, R.I.** (officially the Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center), in 1996. Littky and Washor thought they could get students at risk of dropping out to embrace education if learning wasn't confined to the classroom. Their idea has been so successful that there are now two dozen other schools around the country modeled on the Met and more in the works,

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- **EDUCATION: THE BEST HIGH SCHOOLS** 5/8/05: Guests: **Jay Mathews**, Washington Post Education Reporter; author of, "What's Wrong (and Right) With America's Best Public High Schools"; and **Sharon Alford**, Junior at Jefferson County International Baccalaureate School, Birmingham, Alabama.

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thanks to funding from the Gates Foundation. Students at the inner-city school learn through internships and quarterly assessments called exhibitions. "We concentrate on our kids' being doers and talkers," Littky says.

April was exhibition time and junior Noam Bar-Zemer took an hour to detail an internship at a packaging firm, a comparative-religion course at Brown University, work with a children's theater company and his senior thesis and college plans. Instead of conventional courses, he wove a discussion of math, science and even environmental policy into his talk. Bar-Zemer's parents sent him to four previous schools of all types but he either turned off or failed. Close to 40 percent of Providence's public high schoolers dropped out last year, and Bar-Zemer says he could have been one of them. At the Met—housed in six subschools around the city but counted as a separate district—just over 5 percent of the school's more than 600 kids left during the same period.

With Jay Mathews

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