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From Bank Street to High School

By **Evie Gurney**, *Director of Secondary School Placement*

“I’m nervous, but excited.” This is how one 7th grade boy expressed his feelings about looking for a high school. Some families anticipate that the process will be stressful, and it can be, especially in a city like New York, where the options are vast and varied. At the same time, the average 13-year-old is ready and eager to explore the wider world, hence, the excitement. At Bank Street, moving from 7th to 8th grade means students begin to realize they will have to leave, but they have no idea, at least initially, what the process of leaving really looks like. So begins a search that can be characterized for Bank Street families by three essential qualities: imagination, inquiry, and self-knowledge.

Imagination

When a family begins to think about high school options, a natural starting point is to consider how it will be different from Bank Street. Many of our students have been at the school since they were toddlers, and they and their families don’t know any other model. The prospect of change can be invigorating but also a little scary. Students have to learn to envision their high school selves, and imagine how a particular school would work for them, with only a limited exposure to its culture and environment—it’s kind of a guided leap of faith. Teachers and counselors at school are in ongoing discussions with families about their choices, but families do a lot of the legwork and brainwork, visiting schools and sizing up their various options. Families may take into consideration many factors beyond the academic program: the social and emotional milieu, extra-curricular activities, social justice and community service opportunities, along with practical elements like commute, size, and cost. We work with students to draw on the natural strengths we have observed over their years at our school. A child may have specific talents that can’t be gleaned through test results. So while the students are imagining themselves as the high schoolers they want to become, we help the schools visualize the future student at his or her best.

Inquiry

Students want to know what makes each high school unique. At Bank Street, they are encouraged to dig deep all the time, and so this applies to looking at school options too. Our families approach the high school search with some healthy skepticism, but also with vigor and curiosity. Bank Street students love a challenge, and

they especially love to observe and to ask questions. One student remarked that he paid special attention to how students at each school used the library: was it a quiet workspace, a social scene, a nap zone, or a bit of everything? Another student said, “I liked looking at the younger kids at the schools I visited and tried to imagine them in high school at that same school.” Yet another student commented on the amount of time schools allotted to interviewing and touring. School A “was like a deli line,” he said, and School B “was like a doctor’s office – next!” Coming from a progressive school, the question is often how much will be the same and how much will be different. Some children want an environment as close to Bank Street as possible; some want something very different for high school. “I’m ready for grades!” one proclaimed. Many kids are looking for the same values, and felt most positively about schools where the current students seemed excited to be there. In addition to learning about the schools, students often learn about themselves. As one student put it, “I always waited until the last minute, and I learned that I can’t do that.” Another said: “It really helps to be organized.”

Self-Knowledge

While we tell parents and students that there is the right school for every child, finding that right fit can be a challenge. It helps enormously when students have a solid sense of themselves and how they relate to the larger community. Bank Street



Bank Street Upper School students

students are used to participating in community service activities in school and beyond; they embrace the importance of community. From years of morning meetings and from the thousands of group work experiences they’ve had, they know how to collaborate. But they have also been asked, especially in their 8th grade year and as leaders of the student body, to think about who they are as individuals. They write about

themselves at some length and talk with their parents, teachers, with each other, and with me. They practice interviewing with the Coordinator. As they are learning the skills of being a high school applicant, they begin to develop some expertise; they

step into these new shoes and find that they fit. They begin to take ownership of the process. We encourage parents to be partners with their children in pursuing schools that would be appropriate options. One parent had the right idea when she said, “I told her she’ll be making the choice, but that we wouldn’t let her make a bad one.”

Parents and students are often surprised to discover that where they started is not anywhere near where they end up. While they have expended a lot of time and energy, they are also stimulated by the active and interactive nature of the search. It is a wonderfully fluid process, saturated with communication between the school and families, parents and children, students and peers, and graduates and students. Most parents are struck by how supportive the Bank Street community is throughout, and express admiration for the fact that students treat each other with sincere sensitivity. Going through the process together as a grade, they’ve had opportunities to share and empathize. By the end of school, students have a deeper understanding of who they are, what they want and where they are going. They are thoroughly prepared for the transition to high school. Understandably, as with all major life changes, there are mixed emotions. They are sad to be leaving Bank Street but they are ready for the next chapter. Echoing the words of his 7th grade peer, a graduating 8th grader summed up his feelings about going to high school: “I’m nervous, but excited.”