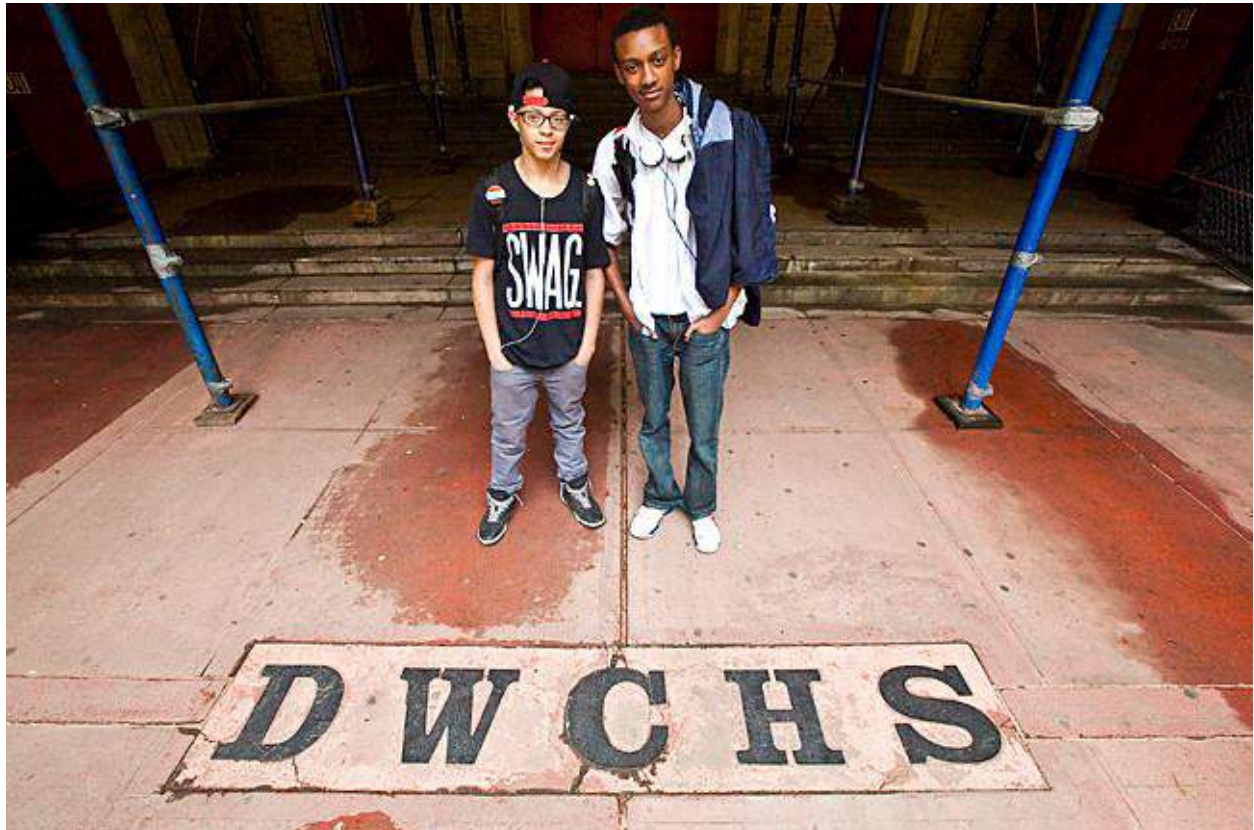


# The RIVERDALE PRESS

## New leader instills new spirit at Clinton

By Maya Rajamani

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Marisol Díaz/The Riverdale Press

Freshman Hector Castro and T.J. Silver, both 15, have positive reviews for their first year at DeWitt Clinton High School — which many feared would be the institution's last.

A year after Principal Santiago Taveras took the helm at DeWitt Clinton High School, many students say the "Castle on the Parkway" feels like a different school.

"Last year, it was more like a prison," said sophomore Alexander Cuesta, 15. "It got way better."

Three consecutive Fs on Department of Education (DOE) Progress reports left many thinking the school was doomed to close. But on a recent afternoon, students described a school with a revitalized

atmosphere — notwithstanding a March brawl that broke out following an incident between two ethnic groups.

Mr. Taveras confirmed the incident, which led to the arrest of global studies teacher Jack Israel. Mr. Israel was charged with assault and resisting arrest after he allegedly grabbed a police officer's arm as the officer broke up a fight between two students.

Students defended the teacher, saying that Mr. Israel grabbed the officer after he allegedly shoved a female student. During the aftermath, Mr. Taveras took to the overhead speaker to address students, asking them to help restore safety and respect in the school.

Pupils wrote letters to the principal with their thoughts on the racial motivation behind the brawl, voicing concerns they still had with the school. Mr. Taveras said he read the letter and is taking students' suggestions into account.

"He's very proactive," said senior Daniela Hernandez, 17.

On May 22, Alexander and his friend Deion Johnson, 16, said assemblies and pep rallies have instilled students with a long-absent sense of school spirit. They added that more help for academics and personal concerns is available, while the school itself is noticeably cleaner.

On its 2013-2014 Quality Review Report from the DOE, the once "underdeveloped" school was listed as a "developing" school.

Much of the credit, the students said, goes to Mr. Taveras' presence at the school. Students described him standing outside the building every morning to greet students as they come in. Many said Mr. Taveras is rarely in his office, taking time to speak with students in the halls and observe classes as they are in session.

"I didn't even know we had a principal until Santi came," said Deion, referring to Mr. Taveras by his nickname. "Before, you'd see kids walking in the hallway all periods because the principal didn't care about that stuff."

"He brings a positive vibe to the school," Alex said.

As a freshman, Alex was placed in Clinton's Governor Program, for students, he said, who were "bad kids."

When Mr. Taveras arrived at the school, he eliminated the program.

"I felt like an outcast last year," Alex said.

Mr. Taveras said the program was not a productive way to encourage students to change their attitudes and behavior.

"That's not allowing the students to demonstrate their ability to be responsible," he explained.

In addition to the improvements in cleanliness, attendance has gone up at the school, rates for each month except January coming in higher than they were the previous school year, Mr. Taveras said.

"That was a big improvement for us," said Mr. Taveras, though he acknowledged he is still working to improve the number of students who pass their classes.

Next year, Clinton will implement Small Learning Communities, which will place students into groups of 500 with the goal of enabling more personalized learning. This year, the student body was 2,746 strong.

## **Rebranding**

Mr. Taveras and his faculty are also working to rebrand the school, which garnered a negative reputation from poor DOE reviews, low attendance and fights at the school in the past. The school sent newly-minted "DeWitt Clinton" postcards to middle schools in the area, inviting students to visit and choose Clinton as their high school.

Meanwhile, the school has installed 25 new, electronic Smart Boards in its classrooms, and has increased the number of after-school clubs that are available.

Assistant Principal Doreen Kendall said when Schools Chancellor Carmen Fariña visited Clinton in April, she was pleased with improvements to the building. Ms. Kendall said the school is brighter thanks to electrical and lighting upgrades as well as new paint.

"I absolutely love the building. I love coming here," said Ms. Kendall, who was in her first year at Clinton. She said Mr. Taveras has been consistent with his message to students and expectations of the teachers. While many in the faculty did not know what to expect when Mr. Taveras became principal, she said the school has grown together over the past year.

"I guess the unknown was what terrified everyone," she said.

Like Alex, she said students rarely saw the previous principal; Daniela mentioned a friend who said she saw Geraldine Ambrosio for the first time at graduation last year.

## **Need for growth**

Mr. Taveras acknowledged the need for continual growth and improvement within the school.

"We are trying to get the school turned around," he said. "It is nowhere near where it needs to be, but we made a lot of progress."

Nevertheless, many students feel the school has already vastly improved since the previous school year. Freshmen T. J. Silver and Hector Castro, both 15, were excited about how many clubs the school has to offer. The groups include an environmental affairs club that both participate in.

"It turns out I love going to the garden. No man has ever said that," T.J. joked about the garden behind the school that the club tends. The students said Mr. Taveras remembers individuals' names and shakes their hands.

“He makes you want to come to school,” said Alex. “I feel like now, Clinton’s going to be the best school in the Bronx because of Santi.”