



As final year of college planning unfolds at Match: ‘What’s it gonna take?’

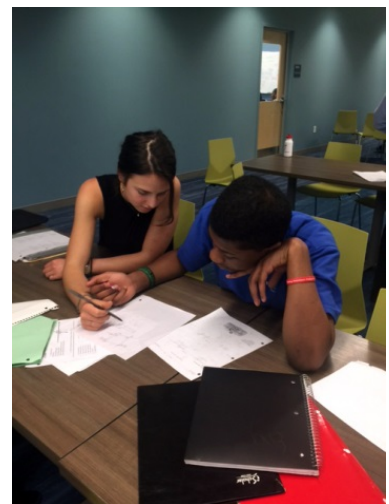
By Liz Willen | October 18, 2016

This story is first in an occasional series on the senior class at Match High School, a charter public school in Boston. The first story looks at the deadlines and challenges they face applying to colleges.

BOSTON — Just three weeks into the school year, seniors at Match High School are learning why their college counselor Shira Zar-Kessler advises students against applying “early decision.”

“If you get accepted to a college early decision, it’s binding and you have to go there,” Zar-Kessler explains during a college preparation class at the charter public school. “And you have to pay what they say, unless you claim extreme financial hardship and go through a whole appeals process.”

One student asks if appealing an early admission decision means going to court. Another wants to know it involves writing yet another essay.



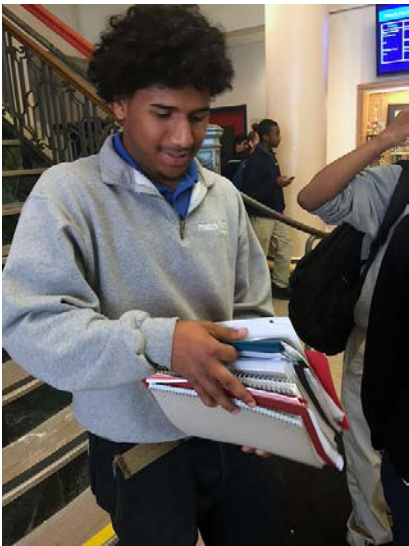
Their questions highlight a deep gulf many low-income, first generation students face as they attempt to navigate the mysterious world of higher education. Zar-Kessler and her colleagues have made it their mission to bridge that gulf for the 310 high school students at Match, who are selected by lottery and commute from all over Boston.

By many accounts, they've had admirable success at the 15-year-old high school: The school says 89.1 percent of its graduates since 2004 have gone on to a four-year college, including Ivies like Dartmouth and Harvard.

This year, The Hechinger Report is following the 43 members of the senior class at Match High as they navigate the monumental task of getting into college and paying for it. What are the secrets of success against tremendous obstacles, and can they be replicated nationally?

"You can stay after school. You can always talk to your tutors or your teachers. And if one of us is slacking, we'll all say, 'Do you want to be a statistic? Your life isn't a game. You don't want to be stuck.'" Brinda Lamarre, a Match senior

The largely low-income students at Match High are often first in their families to attend college and may not speak English at home. Meeting the tough demands of a challenging college prep curriculum is hard work; they don't all make it. Of the 78 students who entered Match as ninth-graders in the fall of 2013, 16 have moved, transferred or no longer attend, 19 are repeating 11th grade and one is repeating 10th grade for a second time.



"The odds against these kids are daunting," says Richard Kahlenberg, a senior fellow at The Century Foundation, a nonpartisan public research institute. Studies show that low-income students are more likely to drop-out of high school. By 2014, just about half of low-income students enrolled immediately in college, compared with 81 percent of high-income graduates, according to a new report from the Commission on the Future of Undergraduate Education.

Match, like many of its peers in the rapidly growing charter school sector, offers an extended day and demanding curriculum filled with Advanced Placement (AP) classes. But Match is also trying some ideas that stand out from the now-familiar charter model, including a personalized, "high-dosage" tutoring model that it developed, which is geared to identifying the individual weaknesses of each student, as well as their strengths.

On any given day, some 23 tutors (recent high performing college graduates from AmeriCorps, a national service program) are sitting with ninth and 10th-grade students during the school day, reinforcing lessons from class, re-explaining difficult topics and checking assignments. The so-called "Match Corps" tutors commit to a year of service and are given a living allowance of \$15,000 and

subsidized housing. They are trained and paired closely with students, developing trust and respect, something Match considers a key to its success.

Match's charter network, governed by a board of trustees, spans four campuses from pre-K through high school. Match has worked with school districts in Chicago and Lawrence, Massachusetts to replicate its tutoring model, while partnering informally with other charter networks to build tutoring programs.

The 'nag and the dream crusher'

In a recent twice-weekly counseling class for seniors, Serena Walkerjean is stuck on why she shouldn't apply early decision to her top choice school; she is applying to highly competitive schools and wants to take advantage of anything that might give her an edge.

"My parents are always asking where I will go and I always say I have to wait and see where I'm accepted." Humberto Rojas, whose parents — a chef and a housekeeper — are originally from Mexico

"Doesn't early decision improve your chances of getting in?" Serena asks Zar-Kessler, a Teach For America alum who previously worked at a school for disabled children in Uganda and is known as "Ms. Z.K."

"Yes," says Zar-Kessler, but quickly adds that early decision is probably not the right choice for students who will likely need substantial financial aid and want to compare offers.

Carefully marked-up whiteboards and calendars both in and outside of Zar-Kessler's office provide a snapshot of tasks marking fall's frenetic U.S. college admissions season: answering common application questions, writing multiple drafts of essays, re-taking the new SAT exams, visiting campuses, preparing for interviews with college reps and filling out endless financial aid forms — all before Christmas break.

Most Match parents have little experience negotiating applications and aid, so the school sponsors evening workshops for them. Seniors attend twice-weekly college counseling classes while juniors have two hours of SAT prep and practice every week.

Successful students will be most sought after and can hope for several offers. Those with lower grades may end up living at home and attending community colleges or nearby UMass Boston, where they may be eligible for government subsidized Pell Grants for students of families earning \$40,000 a year or less.

That's typical of low-income students, who increasingly tend to end up at under-resourced community colleges or even for-profit schools where they won't get a bachelor's degree, notes Kahlenberg, who regularly writes about inequality in education.

Students "in the middle," with high aspirations but insufficient grades and credentials for merit scholarships, remain the ones Zar-Kessler worries about most. She'll encourage them to reach high but remain realistic, with plenty of target and safe schools on their lists.



The frenetic college-application season at Match Charter Public High School in Boston culminates in “senior signing day,” when students reveal their choices with college sweatshirts. Photo: Courtesy Match Charter Public High School

“I am the nag and the dream crusher,” says Zar-Kessler, who is constantly monitoring the looming deadlines for Match seniors.

The highly personalized and supportive route to college at Match leads to an emotional “senior signing day” ceremony at nearby Boston University in May, when students clad in their college sweatshirts reveal choices before a packed audience.

“Everybody is rooting for you here,” says senior Brinda Lamarre, a B student who lives with 14 relatives in a two-family house and is already counting on having her “really, really big family,” from Haiti on hand for signing day. She hopes she’ll be wearing a UMass-Lowell sweatshirt, and wants to room with her longtime Match friend Michaela Notice if they both get in.

“I am feeling the pressure of senior year,” says Michaela, the youngest of four in a family from Jamaica. Michaela, captain of Match’s girls’ basketball team and a student council member, wants “the independence,” of going away to college but doesn’t want to venture out of state. She’s also worried about all the financial aid paperwork: “I keep telling my mom: ‘Get your tax forms together.’”

Humberto Rojas, a star student interested in math and engineering, has his heart set on MIT but also loved both Lehigh and Syracuse University when he visited — although he’s put off by their frightening “sticker prices,” annual estimated costs upwards of \$60,000. Humberto knows he could save a lot by choosing a state school and commuting from home.

“Everything will come down to cost and majors,” says Humberto, whose parents — a chef and a housekeeper — are originally from Mexico. “My parents are always asking where I will go and I always say I have to wait and see where I’m accepted.”

And how much aid he'll be offered; low-income students, on average, pay more than three-quarters of their annual family income out-of-pocket to attend a four-year, public or private nonprofit institution — nearly five times the proportion of wealthier families, according to new report by the nonprofit Education Trust.

A long school day

At Match High, classes begin at 8:30, but the day starts earlier with a call and response in the doorway, where the principal, Hannah Larkin, greets every student with the same question.

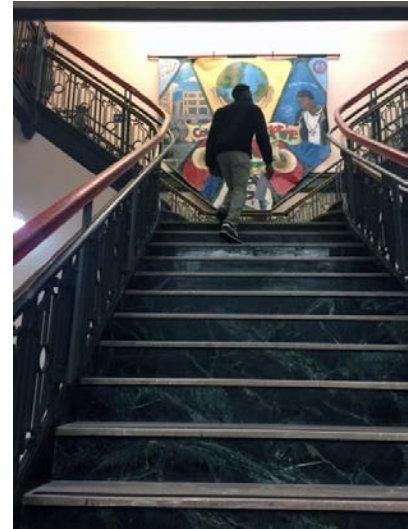
“Why are you here?” asks Larkin, a Stanford University graduate who came to Match as a tutor and trained in its teacher residency program.

“To learn,” each replies quickly, one by one by one.

“What’s it gonna take?”

“Courage, responsibility, perseverance,” each answers, so swiftly the words are indiscernible.

Those who aren't in uniform (white, blue, navy or gray Match shirts, khaki or black pants or a Match outer layer) must borrow from the office.



After that, it's on to classes, which are largely small and discussion oriented and take place in bright rooms with high ceilings. Classes don't end until 4:00 p.m. or 4:30 for senior seminars; many students stick around for homework labs and other activities.

Three-quarters of this year's senior class have either taken at least one AP or are enrolled in one. The college prep classes have frequent exams and assessments. Some seniors are taking additional classes at nearby colleges.

The staff touts studies showing that charter school students outperform their peers on several college-readiness indications, from state test scores to college entrance exams and acceptances. Struggling students may be steered toward alternative pathways, such as dual enrollment programs with area colleges so they can finish up their high school degree while getting college credit.

Match's small size, clear college prep emphasis and personal attention give students advantages missing from many public high schools, where a single public school counselor has a caseload of 491 students on average; in Massachusetts the ratio is 419 to one.

All students are expected to follow “house rules” that include being on time, leading discussions in class and respecting differing viewpoints. Those who don't may receive warnings in the form of demerits, which can ultimately lead to detention or other consequences. They can also receive merits for behaving

kindly, working hard or exhibiting bravery and generosity. Merits are redeemable for privileges like eating lunch out or credit at the school store.

Each classroom door is adorned with the name of the undergraduate college teachers attended. History teacher Tom Halpenny (Boston College) teaches AP world literature but on a recent fall day the class has only 12 students so Halpenny can go around and speak to them individually. In a later seminar, they discuss current events.

Participation, including finger snapping that indicates agreement, is expected. So is punctuality. U.S. history teacher Andrew Jarboe (Bates College) is not happy on a recent weekday when only five students are on time for a discussion of The Enlightenment.

“If you are coming to my class late, you are not going to pass,” Jarboe says, then gestures toward a student sipping from an oversized Slurpee. “Mental note: It’s not good practice coming to class with a giant beverage.”

One-on-one tutoring

In between classes, students in grades 9 and 10 spend time with their tutors. Some of the 109 Match Corps tutors, who work in the four schools of the Match charter system, will go on to earn teaching degrees and licenses from Match’s in-house graduate school of education. They’ll also be eligible for over \$5,775 in education awards they can use toward graduate school after a year of service.

“I think this model is one of the most special I’ve seen,” says Alexis Johnson, who began her career as a Match Corps tutor 10 years ago and returned recently as director. “The students I have tutored have been remarkably successful in college.”

Students also praise the tutoring system; senior Michaela Notice says her former chemistry tutor also printed out SAT practice tests for her and checked them repeatedly and explained why she got certain problems wrong.

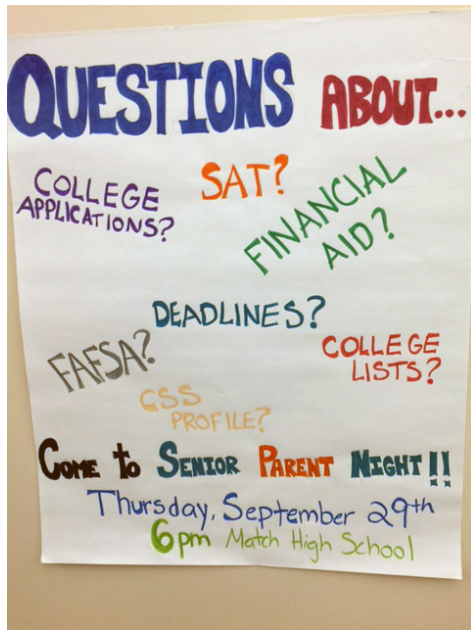
She remembers another tutor who called her mother in sixth grade to complain about her behavior.

“I was a little loose, I talked a lot in class and my tutor called home and told my mom: ‘Michaela got 12 demerits in a day.’ My mom yelled at me. But my tutor said ‘I’m doing it because I care about you,’ and that has turned me around,” she said.

Match’s tutoring approach initially came under criticism three years ago after tutors complained they were not being compensated sufficiently for working long hours. Match officials dispute the claim, calling it a mischaracterization, but say they’ve since clarified policies to avoid future confusion.

Goal is ‘no debt’

Match seniors may be used to individual tutoring and attention, but most are still finding the admissions ordeal nerve wracking. Zar-Kessler handed out all of their transcripts during a recent counseling class and warned them to look closely for errors.



Aneudy Miguel Polanco shook his head when he saw his. He still sweats his lowest grade from junior year, a C in AP language and composition; he wishes he'd tried harder.

"I'm worried that I won't get in anywhere," says Aneudy, who is originally from the Dominican Republic. If he does, he'll be first in his large, Spanish-speaking family: "It's like overwhelming because it's something new."

Aneudy is now focused on making sure some college coaches see him play baseball (he's a catcher in a Boston league). He worries about falling behind in homework; his household includes two little brothers "who are always running around in my room, and it's so loud."

Daniel Inoa, whose lowest grade last year was an A-minus, is afraid of setting his sights too high. He worries about costs at a time when more students are taking out loans and the median cumulative amount they owe increased 25 percent recently to \$20,400.

Daniel is taking four AP courses this year and hopes to study medicine or computer science at a top New England liberal arts private school like Tufts, Williams or Dartmouth. Teacher Tom Halpenny calls him "an exceptional student, a rock star who works his butt off," and wants to see him at a Stanford or University of Chicago.

Daniel isn't sure where he'll end up, but he knows one thing: "My goal is to have no debt, because it would put me in a better position for my career."

As fall unfolds, the Match seniors will get additional help from the school's director of college counseling, Joanna Sanborn, when she returns from maternity leave. The 11 special education students who are eligible for individualized services based on learning disabilities are also getting college guidance from Meghan Maloney, an academic resources teacher.

Despite its success with getting low-income students to college, critics note that charters like Match ultimately can help only a relatively small population of students. The model isn't easily replicated in school districts with large classes and few college counselors. In addition, critics of charter schools are quick to point out that Match's small size, clear college prep emphasis and personal attention give students clear advantages missing from many public high schools.

Others say Match has managed to successfully address a crisis that plagues schools nationwide: the lack of sufficient guidance counselors to help students navigate college admissions. Nationally, a single public school counselor has a caseload of 491 students on average; in Massachusetts the ratio is 419 to one.

"It's absurd — there's been a huge divestment in part because schools up until now haven't been held accountable for college-going rates; it's been test scores and other outcomes, and counseling hasn't

been invested in at all,” says Mandy Savitz-Romer, a former urban school counselor and senior lecturer on education at Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Most urban public high school guidance counselors fill so many roles they can’t focus on the vital, time-consuming demands of college admissions, Savitz-Romer says. “Students who most need the support get it the least.”



Aneudy Miguel Polanco, (left) and Humberto Rojas (right) share a laugh in class during their junior year at Match Charter High in Boston.

The charter debate has become particularly heated in Massachusetts recently, as voters will be asked to approve a highly contentious ballot question that would allow for the creation or expansion of up to 12 new charter schools per year. The state is receiving ethics complaints from partisans on both sides,

Nationally, charter, virtual and alternative high schools make up just 4 percent of all high schools; in Boston, charters educate roughly one of every six kids.

Proponents say successful schools like Match should be allowed to replicate. Critics say the advantages students find at schools like Match should be spread out to public schools, which could perform just as well if they only had the resources. They also complain that charters — which are privately run but supported by tax dollars — drain millions of dollars from traditional public schools that the majority of the state’s students attend.

Elsewhere in the U.S., charters are facing intense pushback. The NAACP — the nation’s oldest civil rights organization — ratified a highly controversial resolution on Saturday in Cincinnati that called for a moratorium on the expansion of charters along with stronger oversight of these schools. The Black Lives Matter collective — a chapter-based national organization — has also called for ending the “privatization of education.”

For the students at Match, though, this fall is all about staying focused. Brinda Lamarre is trying not to worry about where she’ll get in.

“Match cares, they pretty much prepare you for everything,” Brinda says. “We’ve been working on our personal statements since last year.”

Tutoring has helped, as have close relationships with both fellow students and staff. “You can stay after school,” Brinda says. “You can always talk to your tutors or your teachers. And if one of us is slacking, we’ll all say, ‘Do you want to be a statistic? Your life isn’t a game. You don’t want to be stuck.’”

As deadlines approach, Serena Walkerjean knows she’ll be feeling pressure both at home and at school.

“My mom, she has so much faith in me to get scholarships,” Serena says. “If I get an A-minus my mom says, ‘Ugh, you can do better.’ It’s annoying, but I also set high expectations for myself.”

Serena fell in love with Brown when she visited the Providence campus, but fears she won’t get in or be offered enough financial aid.

“I just want to have choices,” she says.