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Hello Mr Chips

Ever since Harry Potter's first term at Hogwarts, New Yorkers have fallen for the idea of a proper English education. Step forward Elizabeth Perelstein, who's magicked up a British school in Manhattan.

Edward Helmore does his prep

It's sometimes called Hogwarts on the Hudson, a term de facto headmistress Elizabeth Perelstein doesn't like very much. There is no Quidditch pitch here, no basils in the basement, and her school's central purpose is only to teach a selection of Manhattan children in the style of a British education. But with the British International School of New York set to open in September, and parents bringing their three- and four-year-old offspring in for admissions interviews, Perelstein, who is in every aspect of deportment and manner like a friendly governess, is hoping to provide a haven of studiousness away from the strange customs of the often brutal Manhattan private education system.

The question for New Yorkers is, is the British system, with its academic curriculum, customs, uniform and un-American spellings, less peculiar? Perelstein, who has spent most of her career in Britain finding places for children at British schools, says she was surprised to learn that a city as cosmopolitan as New York did not offer the more structured, somewhat more intellectually rigorous British National Curriculum.

'Until now, if New York parents wanted their children to follow the British curriculum, they had no option,' she said recently. 'We are excited

by the prospect of providing an attractive new educational alternative for discerning New Yorkers.' The school is in a complex that looks a bit like the Barbican. It is comparatively spacious with views, a playground and a swimming pool, and will take children from four to seven years, before extending to take those up to 13 in 2007. Students will start learning French aged four. Mandarin and Spanish will be offered at after-school clubs, and boys will wear grey wool trousers and girls tartan skirts.

One of the founders is Andrea Greystoke, the first female teacher at St Paul's School in Barnes. New Yorkers seem to like the idea of an English education – or at least the correct use of the language being taught. The success of Harry Potter has helped to make the accent less intimidating, the education system less austere, and has reduced the association with foppish homosexuals and Cabinet politicians into 'E & M'. It is also true that the British education curriculum offers a more structured approach to learning.

It's an odd contradiction, given how competitive New York parents tend to be, that American schools usually follow a developmental approach, meaning children are allowed to develop at their own speed and may not start reading until five or six. 'Because the parents are intense, and they want their children to be the



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best, if there's any question of them not being ready for school, the custom is to hold them back.' Typically, British children entering US schools are ahead of their American classmates.

Still, the notion of introducing our education system, with all its connotations of social advantage and elaborate systems of hierarchy and punishment, to a city that has its own complex and highly competitive arrangements for educating its young, is a leap for some. One American writer seems obsessed with the question of whether the school will introduce American children to toad-in-the-hole or spotted dick (they won't) in the cafeteria. But to some British in Manhattan, the idea of a British school is a touchy subject. Gavin Brown, an art dealer, told *New York* magazine he would never enroll his four-year-old, calling it 'another way to spread

another layer of class over New York'. The city already experiences severe admissions rituals that make the old-boy, old-girl network seem benign. At 18 months old, children are given personality and aptitude tests, although this is really just a cover for scrutinising the parents. The Manhattan baby boom over the past few years (there are 25 per cent more under-fives) has not been matched by an increase in school places, with

the result that getting your child into a desirable private school has become an exercise in social and professional mountaineering.

Four years ago, it came to light that Jack Grubman, an analyst at Citigroup who made his name as market maker of wildly overvalued telecom stocks in the late Nineties, had upgraded his investment rating of AT&T. He had previously rated the stocks much lower, and the upgrade was part of a deal with his boss, former Citigroup chairman Sandy Weill, to get Grubman's twins into the pre-school at the fashionable 92nd Street Y community centre. Weill had Citigroup donate \$1 million to the school; the children were later admitted.

That an analyst would recommend a stock to curry favour with his boss, who might then

help get his children into nursery school is an extreme example of the pressure Manhattan parents face. It's not the expense that grates (Perelstein's pre-school is a steep \$26,000 a year), but that anxiety that if you don't get your child into the right kindergarten, then the child's whole education will be derailed. Some Manhattan parents believe the admissions tests given at four determine the future because a nursery school director exerts considerable influence over admissions to a school, which in turn gets the student into an Ivy League university such as Harvard or Yale. Pre-school admissions tests have become elaborate. Two well-known artists said their child, a two-year-old boy, was given a bowl of warm water and a doll in a test at City & Country, a well-known

pre-school. Instead of bathing the doll, the child spilled the water.

He failed the exam, designed (presumably) to test for empathy, and was refused a place. A successful Manhattan executive was asked to write profiles of his 18-month-old twins. The

pressure forced him into these two faintly ludicrous descriptions. Of one, he wrote: 'He knows that birds like to sit on rooftops when they are not on the ground, and that cats and dogs like to be petted.' Of the other, he said: 'He is happy to point out all his body parts when asked.' He added the toddler is 'a thinker and a mischievous lover'.

Fifty-something Elizabeth Perelstein, the major investor in her school, is a professional educator, having worked as a teacher and a school and university administrator. She has two masters from the University of Chicago. She promises to make admissions less torturous. But in terms of education, the school will be attuned to British and international baccalaureate syllabuses. That doesn't mean native New Yorkers can't send their children there. The difference perhaps is in priorities. A typical multicultural US education means young students learn a great deal about Martin Luther King; and the Civil Rights Movement of the Sixties but little

about, say, ancient Rome.

'There's a standing joke about New Yorkers being very insular,' says marketing director Judson Scruton. 'They feel the world stops at the Hudson.'



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Londoners would never think the world stopped at the Thames.' It's not, he adds, that New Yorkers aren't cosmopolitan. 'They are, but there's a sense of international sophistication that foreigners here miss.'

But the combination of Manhattan's runaway wealth and the urban baby boom probably means the British International School of New York will be

sucked into the insanity of private nursery school admissions before long. 'The reality is, you have to be sure the school is reinforcing what you want reinforced as a parent,' advises Scruton. 'It's a bit of a mistake for parents to base their choice of school solely on their social needs. You have to go a little bit deeper and look at the academic and values mission of the school.'



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