

Benjamin Franklin High School (now the Manhattan School for Science and Math)

**260 Pleasant Avenue (aka 260-300 Pleasant Avenue,
500-528 East 116th Street), Manhattan
Tax Map Block 1713 Lot 1**

Built: 1940-1942

Architect: Eric Kebbon

Style: Georgian Revival

Proposed Action: Item Proposed for Calendar November 14, 2017



View of Benjamin Franklin High School over the Harlem River, Image Credit: Flickr: Pat M2007

Located on the eastern edge of Pleasant Village in East Harlem along the Harlem River, Benjamin Franklin High School represents the rich history of the social and political engagement of East Harlem in the mid-twentieth-century. Established as East Harlem's first high school – not a trade school or vocational school – under the leadership of the school leader, activist, urban sociologist, and East Harlem resident Leonard Covello, Benjamin Franklin High School was intended to be a citizen-centered community school that actively engaged its students and the broader community in social and political reform. Designed by Eric Kebbon, head architect of school construction for the NYC Board of Education, and completed in 1942, the grand two-block long brick and limestone Georgian Revival building, is a highly visible structure that is symbolic of a community focus and a commitment to the future of East Harlem.

Envisioned in the 1930s as a means to improve the opportunities of the Italian immigrant community through bilingual education and community engagement, Benjamin Franklin High School opened as the neighborhood began to experience significant demographic changes. The school not only became an important space to ease the increasingly tense race relations facing the community, but it also adapted its curriculum to meet the needs of Puerto Rican migrants by providing orientations in Spanish, forming a Puerto Rican cultural club, and actively engaging the Puerto Rican community. Throughout the brief life of Benjamin Franklin High School as a community-centered school, Covello and other progressive educators sought to improve the social and economic conditions of the neighborhood while providing for the welfare of the community. Despite the ultimate abandonment of the Benjamin Franklin High School “experiment,” the rich history of the school, from its conception to its reorganization as a standard comprehensive New York City public high school, is a revealing depiction of East Harlem during a period of significant change.

The building now houses the top-ranked Manhattan School of Science and Math, and the Isaac Newton Middle School for Math and Science. Positioned between the Harlem River, Thomas Jefferson Park, and the dense neighborhood of Pleasant Village, Benjamin Franklin High School is a substantial presence in East Harlem and continues to play an important civic role in its community and within the City.