

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

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 with Neoclassical elements

Proposed Action: Item Calendared November 14, 2017; Public Hearing February 13, 2018



Benjamin Franklin High School, Pleasant Avenue facade, Barrett Reiter (LPC), 2018

Located on the eastern edge of 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 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, and provided the education and recreational activities that are now typical in public education. The grand two-block long brick and limestone Georgian Revival building with Neoclassical elements, is a highly visible feature of the community, and was meant to reflect a commitment to broad community service through education. It was designed by Eric Kebbon, head architect of school construction for the NYC Board of Education, and completed in 1942. The school's Georgian Revival design can be seen in its symmetrical, axial arrangement, its contrasting brick and limestone cladding, and in the use of simplified classical details. The building's monumental features include Neoclassical elements, such as a dominant full-height entrance porch, which was a popular feature of Neoclassical design, particularly for civic buildings, and the inclusion of a cupola that is inspired by the Choragic Monument of Lysicrates in Athens, Greece. In New York City, a number of large high schools were constructed in the Georgian Revival style due to its strong connotations with democratic ideals and an American identity.

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 change. The school not only became an important space to ease the increasingly tense race relations of 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 new families of East Harlem. Throughout the brief life of Benjamin Franklin High School as a community-centered school, Covello and other progressive educators sought to strengthen their community through improving the social and economic conditions of the neighborhood. 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 Center for Science and Mathematics 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.

