



# DOWNTOWN DIALOGUE

## 53,000 Students Hit the Books In City's Fastest-Growing School Zone

BY LIZ BERGER

I just went to my 30th college reunion, yet I still organize my year by the school calendar! Just as I'm settling into Lower Manhattan's great summer routines—eating al fresco with an after-dinner stroll along the Battery Park City esplanade, snagging a lounge on the fantastic Pier 15, taking a ferry ride to Governors Island, enjoying a River To River concert—fall is fast approaching.

Summer vacation is over with a sigh, and students of all ages are back to the books in Lower Manhattan. As the fall semester begins, more than 53,000 students—from toddlers just starting out to adults resuming their studies—have returned to classes in schools all over the district.

The under-18 crowd is growing in Lower Manhattan. In a 2010 Downtown Alliance survey, 76 percent of households with children said the quality of neighborhood schools was a key factor in their decision to live here. South of Chambers Street alone, there are 8,200 pupils in nine preschools, eight elementary and middle schools, and six high schools. For kindergarteners through fifth graders, not only are there the well-regarded PS 89, PS 276, PS 397 and PS 234—my children's alma mater—but other options as well, including the Blue School and Léman Manhattan Preparatory School.

There's more on the horizon. Next year, the Lower Manhattan branch of the Mandell School will open on Broad Street. And, it's back to future for the long-awaited Peck Slip public elementary school, scheduled to open in 2015 only a few blocks from the city's first public school: New York Free School No. 1 opened in 1806, with 42 pupils packed into a tiny apartment on Bancker Street (now Madison Street) near Pearl. We've come a long way.

A significant story is that Lower Manhattan has become a college town. Pace University, NYU's School of Continuing and Professional Studies and the Borough of Manhattan Community College alone enroll more than 40,000 students here. Pace has three dorms—housing 1,200 students—and is building two more, on Broadway and on Beekman Street, to house another



The new Fiterman Hall at BMCC

1,200. The university also has plans for an undergraduate performing arts center with a first-floor theater, open to the community for special performances, on William Street.

All told, there are 10 colleges and universities represented below Chambers Street. This academic year marks an especially big milestone for BMCC, which launched the current semester with the reopening of Fiterman Hall, 11 years after the destruction of the original building in the attacks on the World Trade Center. With 80 classrooms, state-of-the-art conference space, a cafe and street-level art gallery, the new 15-story Fiterman Hall, designed by Pei Cobb Freed and Partners, is a symbol of our community's dramatic resurgence.

I grew up in New York City, and attended PS 40 in the 1960s; famous graduates include David Axelrod and Tribeca's own Drew Nieporent. Back in the day, kindergarten was all play and learning to sit still. Reading wasn't taught until first grade, starting with Dick and Jane—yes! really!—and, at our school, quickly progressing to Bank Street readers. To this day, I remember the first sentence I mastered: "People live in communities." As I think you know, it is a phrase that has stuck with me for all of my life.

*Liz Berger is President of the Downtown Alliance*