

# News

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## Automotive Technology Program at JFK in Jeopardy

By Robert Lebowitz  
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Amidst the traditional classes at John F. Kennedy High School is a row of rooms where car chassis hover over desks and students are bent over engines instead of test papers. For a moment, a visitor might think he had just entered an auto body shop. And, in a way, he might be right.

For decades, the automotive technology program at JFK has been a refuge for the more practical and technical-minded of the school's 5,000-plus students. It is here that many who have had a passing interest in how a car works can begin to focus upon a future career, increase consumer awareness, or be recruited for a technical school. For some, it is the sole reason that they come to school. It is possible, however, that the program will be shut down for good this June.

Lately, there has been much talk about eliminating the automotive mechanics program in an effort to secure more space for the school. Already crowded, Kennedy has taken under its roof two new small schools, the Marble Hill School for International Studies and the Bronx Theater, as part of the new initiative to create small schools within pre-existing learning environments. Additionally, Kennedy also houses two programs, Law and Finance and Gateway, which might become small schools in the future.

Many in the JFK community have reacted strongly to the possibility of replacing cars with computers, even if it means that more traditional academic classes would become available. A recent petition sent among students, parents, and alumni garnered 800 signatures.

"It's a real disappointment," said Joel Martinez, a 12th grader at JFK who plans to pursue a career in automotive technology upon graduation. "When I came to Kennedy, I really had no idea what I wanted to do. I'd always liked cars and had done a little work on engines, but when I hit this course, it was then I knew I wanted to do this in my future."

Juan Vicente, a 2000 alumnus, recently visited current students in the program, eliciting "oohs" and "aahs" when he pulled up in a 2003 Mercedes-Benz. Vicente works for the company and had gotten the car at reduced cost. Although the car spoke itself of his successful career path, Vicente pointed out the opportunities that training in automotive technology affords.

"From Kennedy, I went to Lincoln Tech in Montvale, New Jersey," he explained. "I now own a Mercedes-Benz and I'm only 22 years old. There are thousands and thousands of jobs available in the automotive industry right now."

Recent statistics from the U.S. Department of Labor bear out Vicente's remarks. According to an article in the March, 2004 issue of *Car and Travel*, 100,000 new mechanics will be needed next year. Many in the field blame the shortage on teachers and counselors who discourage students from entering a field seen as low-paying or "greasy." On the contrary, according to an industry expert quoted in the *Car and Travel* article, master technicians can expect to earn from \$70,000 to \$100,000 a year and deal predominantly with computerized equipment rather than with grime and oil.

Although JFK principal Anthony Rotunno refused to comment on this issue, he has spoken recently of his efforts to make JFK into "more than a cold institution" and to be "parent-friendly, kid-friendly, and neighbor friendly." While the move to create classroom space in the automotive technology rooms reflects Rotunno's desire to give students more individualized attention, it also makes many invoke the old adage, "if it isn't broken, don't fix it."

"I would be really sad to see the program go," said one member of the JFK community. "I've never seen people try so hard to take away something that the students really want."

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