

# Inside Schools Review of Mark Twain School for the Gifted and Talented (I.S. 239)

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<https://insideschools.org/school/21K239>

## Our Insights

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### What's Special

Strong talent program

### The Downside

Location, limited diversity

Long one of the city's most sought after middle schools, IS 239 Mark Twain offers demanding academics and high-quality talent programs to students from throughout Brooklyn and beyond.

While students arrive with test scores well above the city average and many go on to a Specialized High Schools, Twain admits children not on the basis of their standardized test scores or their grades but on their performance on a test or try-out in any one of 11 talent areas, ranging from sports to instrumental music to science.

Classes are composed of a mix of students with varying academic abilities in 6th grade, then divided more in the higher grades, as some children do honors and more advanced work. The school offers the algebra, Earth science and living environment Regents exams, as well as Spanish and Italian. A Department of Education report praised teachers for working to adjust material to match students of all academic levels. To help students cope with the school's size, a cluster system, spanning different talents, divides the children into groups of about 150.

Since becoming principal in 2011 Karen Ditolla has worked to update and improve Twain's 1930s building. The school has new labs, a black box theater, a mock courtroom that students use in a law and debate class, and coding labs intended to

look more like the offices of Facebook or Google than a Coney Island classroom. After providing students with iPads, Twain has switched to equipping all its classrooms with more computers, such as laptops or Chrome books.

Noting that many of her students have strong basic academic skills, Ditolla says the key is to move them beyond the basics. “Our kids are very good compliance learners,” she says, “but they need to think and innovate and go out and showcase that.”

Over the years Mark Twain has struggled to maintain racial diversity. Originally a largely black school, it became a magnet school in 1975. By 1996 black parents were complaining their children were largely excluded from Twain. Today, the school is disproportionately white and Asian with fewer low-income students than other schools, although Ditolla says it is more mixed than many gifted and talented schools.

**Special education:** Twain has five small “self-contained” classes for students with special needs as well as two team teaching classes on each grade that have both general and special education students.

**Admissions:** Students from anywhere in New York City are eligible. Students applying to any of the seven arts-based talent programs must complete an audition. The other four programs, including Athletics, Computer/Math, Creative Writing/Journalism, and Science, select students via a lottery. Check the [school's website](#) and the DOE's [Middle Schools Auditions](#) webpage for full details. (*Gail Robinson, from interviews and web materials, March 2019; admissions updated August 2022*)