

# Scholarship group probes Bridgeport gains

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**BRIDGEPORT** — On Wednesday, Day 2 of a three-day visit to determine if Bridgeport should win \$500,000 worth of college scholarships for its Class of 2007, a panel of judges spent the morning combing the halls of Central High School in search of answers.

Why? Heather Zavadasky, project director for the National Center for Educational Accountability wanted to know, do inner-city students here fare better in reading and math than most students across the country in the same socio-economic situation.

How is it, wondered Joe Bage, a former Brockton, Mass. school superintendent, that Bridgeport's achievement gap between minority and non-minority students is slowly shrinking.

"What we know for a fact is that Bridgeport is leading the pack of urban school districts in terms of making improvements in student achievement," said Erica Lepping, a spokeswoman for the Broad Foundation, which is handling out the prize money.

The national Broad (pronounced "brode") Prize for Urban Education is to be handed out in September to the district making the most strides toward improving student achievement among ethnic groups. Already one of five finalists, Bridgeport will receive at least \$125,000 in scholarship money for students.

Other finalists are New York City, Boston, Jersey City, N.J., and Miami-Dade County, Fla.

Lepping said the honor is not meant to suggest Bridgeport is among the best urban districts. Rather, among the largest 100

districts faced with the most serious challenges, it stands out for the progress it is making.

"What we're looking for are best practices so we can empower other districts to do what they're doing," said Lepping.

The group spent Tuesday talking to officials, teachers and parents. Lepping said the school's financial situation came up in every conversation.

Whether funding cuts factor into the decision depends on how it affects the progress Bridgeport has seen, Lepping said.

Wednesday the group split between Central, Hall and Wilbur Cross schools. The group at Central, a 2,450-student school, was led by Principal Dudley Orr, who stopped frequently at bulletin boards to point out awards and artwork by students.

In the hallways, the visitors dodged the occasional broken

locker and were under the constant watch of security guards.

David Cheatham, 18, a Central senior who greeted the visitors, said he knows a lot of deserving underclassmen — "really smart kids" — who could go far with a little financial aid.

"At Central they really push the envelope, making sure students understand the importance of learning. I love it here," he said.

Once the group visits all finalist school districts, their findings will be presented to a selection jury comprised of government officials and business leaders who will decide on the ultimate winner.

The scholarship money will be distributed to college-bound seniors based on financial need and academic improvement during their high school careers. Applications will be available to students in November.