

**A**n alternative school in Willowbrook that helped turn scores of potential dropouts into intermediate-school graduates will close its doors for good on June 28.

Federal funding has dried up for ELITE, an alternative school for eighth-graders that opened at the Elizabeth Connelly Center in Willowbrook in April 1993. Staten Island school officials aren't seeking renewal of the \$800,000-a-year grant from the U.S. Education Department.

Critics say Island school officials are turning their backs on a valuable program that served 78 teen-agers, many of whom were once hard-core truants and potential dropouts. ELITE graduated 28 of its 36 students last year; 85 percent of the 50 students are expected to graduate at the end of the month.

School officials say they aren't neglecting the program. They say the district is going after \$1 million in federal money to set up one class for troubled students and an after-school program in each of the Island's 10 intermediate schools. The Education Department hasn't reviewed the application.

"We want to take the ELITE philosophy and move it to 10 different schools," said Pat Camerlengo, an assistant to Superintendent Christy Cugini.

But the decision to close the Willowbrook school has infuriated founders of ELITE, who say the superintendent "butchered" the concept and never showed commitment to the alternative school.

ELITE opened in April 1993 in the throes of controversy. Federal money came to Staten Island in August 1992 when a school board committee chaired by former member Lilian Popp submitted a plan for the alternative school. Eight months later

when the school hadn't opened, Mrs. Popp accused Cugini of dragging his heels.

In the two weeks that followed, Cugini assembled staff and students at the Willowbrook site. The school opened in mid-April without permanent teachers, complete sets of textbooks and other supplies.

The school year ended two months after it began last year, so the district wasn't able to use all of its ELITE allocation. Cugini rolled the remaining \$300,000 into a summer program.

According to Camerlengo, half the money paid for summer classes last year and the remaining half will go to programs this year. He said the summer classes served hundreds of students from all over the district who had failed subjects in sixth, seventh and eighth grades.

"We tried to turn a negative into a positive and use the rollover," said Camerlengo.

Cugini's brother, Joseph, oversaw the summer and after-school programs, which were bigger than ever because of the ELITE funding.

The bolstering of summer classes led to more complaints by ELITE planners. They said the money did not go for direct services for children because the district had hired too many supervisors, one for every four teachers.

Mrs. Popp said the district's new plan is far removed from the

original concept.

"The philosophy of the program was not to leave the kids in the school where they were having trouble. The idea was to give kids a school with its own identity, and not make them face failure again and again in the same schools," said Mrs. Popp.

Camerlengo defended the proposal, say-

## Successful alternative school closing on June 28

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BY LAURA D'ANGELO  
ADVANCE STAFF WRITER

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ing on-site classes of 10 students will reach out to more kids and serve them closer to home.

Students will have access to school libraries and shop equipment, he said. The after-school program — which calls for the hiring of 10 teachers at 100 hours each — will encourage kids to make and market products. Students in similar programs make candy and greeting cards, he said.

"I don't think the physical place is the cause of student failure. It is more likely the instructional format where a kid is one of 34

members in a classroom," said Camerlengo.

Students and staff at ELITE said they were saddened by the imminent closing of the tiny school.

"As a group of teachers who put a lot of time into this program, we would hate to see it die," said ELITE director Ken Christiansen. Student Diane Scaduto said ELITE changed her academic life. Before she enrolled, she was in constant trouble, fought with other kids, cut classes and failed courses, she said.

"It was such a big school; you

didn't get to know each other," she said of her former intermediate school. "When kids goofed off, you couldn't learn. Here, if someone goofs off, then the counselor can look out for them and you could still learn."

Diane said she gets As and Bs now and is looking forward to entering New Dorp High School this fall.

"They shouldn't close this school. Kids who are failing have a better opportunity of graduating when they're here," she said.

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