

Preface

In 2003, I co-led a planning team consisting of New York City public school teachers, students, parents and representatives of a community based organization (CBO). We designed in some detail an innovative public high school that would be based on the principles of collaboration and dialogue. My ideas for the school were modeled primarily on Humanities Preparatory Academy, where I was then teaching and serving as United Federation of Teachers chapter leader. Humanities Prep is a member of the [New York Performance Standards Consortium](#) and the [Coalition of Essential Schools](#). On behalf of the planning team and based on input from all its members, I wrote the executive summary that follows. I revised the text in June 2015 to make the plan more generally relevant beyond its original planning context.

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Design for United Community High School ***Executive Summary***

Mission

United Community High School aims to prepare high school students for college and to develop their full human potential in a context of dialogue and collaboration. Our core values are love, pursuit of truth, commitment to peace and justice, and appreciation of diversity. We envision a learning community in which all members share experiences of living these core values, and where the unique gifts of every member are recognized, valued, cultivated, and offered in service to others. We seek to develop the intellect through cultivation of the whole person, and to prepare students for responsible participation in an increasingly interdependent world.

We anticipate a large gap between our students' incoming levels of motivation, social skills, and academic skills, compared with the levels necessary upon graduation for future academic and professional success. We envision our school's culture of dialogue and collaboration as the single most important factor in supporting the personal, interpersonal, and academic growth required of all our students.

School Culture

We envision a school culture in which students, staff, and all with whom we interact learn to recognize every encounter between people as an opportunity for holistic personal and interpersonal growth. Our human relations program, implemented one period per week in family group (advisory), is entirely and exclusively focused on building, maintaining, and advancing this kind of school culture.

Our human relations curriculum will include such skills as active listening and conflict transformation. These skills will be learned in the context of such activities as skits, personal growth journals, and the sharing of personal experiences.

Individual family groups on a rotating basis will have the responsibility of preparing to lead a larger meeting of several family groups. These larger meetings, which will occur every two weeks, will feature human relations issues as well as performances and exhibitions of student produced drama, music, and other art, as well as student led debates and discussions of political and ethical issues affecting the school, the local community, the nation, and the world.

United Community High School every year will begin to recreate a culture that mirrors our mission during three weeks of staff development in August. Incoming students will become oriented to our school's culture through a three day retreat in September.

Instructional Program

Standards and Curriculum. We envision a constructivist and project-based approach to curriculum. The aim of this approach is to give students and teachers as much latitude as possible, consistent with the core skills and content knowledge of the New York State Regents curriculum, to shape what is studied in the classroom and how it is studied. We envision adopting standards similar to those developed by the New York Performance Standards Consortium.

Teaching and Learning. United Community High School envisions teaching and learning that, in addition to being project based, is interdisciplinary and centered on collaborative classroom activities. A substantial part of most class sessions will be devoted to working on projects, including the oral presentation of projects. We envision a powerful synergy between our project-based and collaborative approach and the principles of youth development. By contrast with traditional pedagogy, which is centered on direct instruction, projects give students a more active role in designing and implementing work that they will find engaging and in actively shaping their curricular environment. By contrast to traditional chalk and lecture classrooms, the project based classrooms we envision will create innumerable opportunities for teachers to respond to the unique learning needs of individual students, thereby: (1) fostering caring relationships between students and their teachers; and, (2) enabling teachers to set high expectations of all students, from the learning disabled to the gifted.

Our constructivist and project based pedagogy will enable us to address special needs of all kinds more effectively than a traditional "one size fits all" approach. These special needs range from those of English Language Learners and other students with inadequate skills in key areas to the special needs of gifted students. In addition, we plan to offer extended learning experiences—our after school enrichment program—especially designed for students with special needs. This will involve 50 minute tutoring sessions in all subject areas, and will be staffed by different teachers on a rotating basis as well as volunteers from our community partner organizations.

These principles also reflect our commitment to heterogeneous classrooms and our desire to avoid tracking. We recognize the practical challenges of such pedagogy, and see the human relations aspects of our program as playing a central role in meeting these challenges.

Literacy and Numeracy. Our strategy for building literacy and numeracy, consistent with the NCEE mandates for entering 9th graders, is to incorporate literacy in an integrated humanities program (English, Social Studies, and Dramatic Arts) and to institute extended instruction in mathematics. We also intend to incorporate ongoing preparation for the Regents exams into our schoolwide literacy and numeracy programs.

Our focus on literacy and numeracy will not involve a neglect of science, drama, and other subjects. Indeed, our commitment to interdisciplinary curriculum development means incorporating science and humanities content into basic skills instruction. Our after school enrichment program will provide additional, individualized academic support for students with special needs, including students needing support in literacy and numeracy.

Assessment. Our school is committed to using diverse forms of student assessment, including portfolios, oral presentations of portfolio work, and tests. Our assessment approach will revolve primarily around portfolios and presentations for the following reasons. First, because our vision of education embraces the whole person, and not only the intellect, we seek methods of assessment that can gauge such holistic development, including multiple intelligences and the social, moral, and aesthetic aspects of human excellence. Secondly, portfolio assessment is better aligned than conventional testing with our largely project-based curriculum and pedagogy, as described above. Third, projects, portfolios, and presentations are highly relevant preparation for college, where students are expected to appropriate subject matters for themselves and to communicate their own understandings—orally and in writing—in a logically consistent manner and with reference to supporting evidence. By contrast, a curriculum that is primarily test-oriented and a system of assessment that relies primarily on tests would not develop such college relevant skills to the same degree.

We envision students presenting projects and portfolios primarily during their regularly scheduled classes, but sometimes after school, especially when necessary to accommodate the schedules of parents, members of community partner organizations, and others who may wish to serve as co-evaluators. As much as possible, we aim to proactively appropriate aspects of the Regents curriculum in ways that can support our primarily project based program, thus also preparing students for the Regents exams.

Our assessment calendar will include a preliminary pass-fail progress report given to students and mailed to parents every October and March, and final term report cards in January and June that will include a letter grade and some narrative assessment in each subject. Faculty teams will review school-wide data and develop necessary action plans on a continuous basis in weekly team meetings as such data become available.

Professional Development

We anticipate scheduling time for the following professional development activities: (1) monthly meetings of the United Federation of Teachers chapter; (2) weekly curriculum development meetings, generally in interdisciplinary grade level teams, but sometimes by discipline; (3) weekly faculty team meetings on the progress and needs of individual students; (4) weekly team teaching and intervisitation; (5) a fall and a spring staff retreat; (6) collaborative programs with parents; and (7) special staff development sessions (e.g. in various content areas or pedagogical methods, and for enhancing school-wide culture around such areas as technology, literacy, or the arts). Students, parents, and members of our community partner organizations will be invited to faculty team meetings as appropriate, and play integral roles in the School Leadership Team and in the school retreats.

School Organization/Schedules

Our academic courses will meet four times per week, for 55 minute periods. 10th, 11th and 12th grade students will have five such periods per day, plus lunch. The typical 9th grade student schedule will consist of five academic courses (including a double period of math), one or two periods of family group per week (including larger meetings of family groups every other week), and four periods of gym. After school enrichment will include academic support for students with special needs, including gifted students, and will involve volunteer tutoring from our community partner organizations.

The typical weekly teacher schedule will consist of four sections of a subject course, as well as team teaching (two periods), intervisitation (one period), holistic student care meetings of faculty teams (two periods); two periods of curriculum development, and a daily lesson preparation (“prep”) period. In addition, each teacher will organize and conduct one after-school enrichment session per week for 50 minutes, and attend one after school professional development meeting of 50 minutes per week.

Staffing Plan

Our hiring process above all aims to identify teachers and other professionals who understand and will commit to our school’s core values and principles of dialogue and collaboration. This includes a willingness to participate in intensive professional development. All members of the staff—faculty, support staff, and administrators—are expected to participate in the collaborative culture of the school.

Other qualifications of pedagogical staff include commitment to and ideally experience with: (1) portfolio and project-based pedagogies; (2) collaborative learning among students as the most fundamental process of classroom instruction; (3) interdisciplinary curriculum development; (4) embodiment and teaching the principles of dialogue and collaboration in family group; and, (5) ongoing communication with faculty, parents, and the students themselves about the needs and progress of individual students. Every member of the faculty is of course expected to demonstrate competence in his or her license area including content knowledge and general pedagogical competence.

Student Recruitment

The features of United Community High School that will be most salient in our recruitment materials are:

- The school's core values, culture of dialogue and collaboration, and family group structure, including our human relations program;
- The college preparatory orientation of the school;
- Our project-based approach to teaching and learning;
- Our after school enrichment program, supporting the full spectrum of students with special needs, including gifted students;
- The incorporation of theater games into our school culture, and our philosophy that learning should be fun.

School Leadership

The Principal. The most important role of our principal is to model the practices of dialogue and collaboration that are the basis of the school's mission, culture, and governance. In addition, specific qualifications of the principal include familiarity with relevant and state of the art theories and practices in the following areas: (1) collaborative pedagogies; (2) youth development; (3) literacy and numeracy programs; (4) authentic assessment; (5) effective, alternative approaches to school discipline; (6) accommodation of students with special needs; (7) school wide incorporation of technology and the arts; (8) office and personnel management; (9) security and physical plant management; and (10) administration and budgeting.

While the principal is expected to take final responsibility for school policy decisions and implementation in each of these ten areas, it is essential that he or she continually create a context of dialogue and collaboration such that the school's decisions reflect the highest quality input possible from all the school's stakeholders. Only in this way can all constituencies have a sense of shared ownership of the school, and thus a stake in implementing decisions, evaluating outcomes, and proactively generating new policy initiatives.

School Governance and Decision-Making. In order to empower every constituency to initiate and implement activities and projects that enhance their growth and involvement as members of the school community, we envision four autonomous organizations: (1) the United Federation of Teachers Chapter; (2) the Student Council; (3) the Parent Association; and (4) the Community Partner Association.

Representatives of these four constituencies will meet with the school's administration once per month in the School Leadership Team, bringing ideas and information to the team from their constituencies, and bringing ideas and information from the team back to their constituencies.