

University Park Campus School, Worcester, MA

In 1997, when the [University Park Campus School \(UPCS\)](#) opened in Main South, the most economically disadvantaged section of Worcester, Massachusetts, most of the students were reading below grade level, and many were dropping out in the seventh, eighth, and ninth grades. About 65 percent of these students came from homes where no English was spoken, 70 percent qualified for free or reduced-price lunch, and 60 percent were students of color. Because of these challenges Worcester public schools partnered with Clark University to create UPCS, a school for the neighborhood's seventh to twelfth graders that would not only help them pass high school proficiency exams and prevent them from dropping out, but also would ensure that each student would be accepted into college. When UPCS graduated its first class six years later, every single student had received a college acceptance letter.

Driven by strong school leadership, UPCS has developed its own unique approach to teaching literacy. Rather than being a ready-made package, the UPCS literacy program has evolved out of numerous staff meetings, reflection on success and failure, and a good dose of trial and error.

August Academy

All incoming seventh graders must attend UPCS's monthlong August Academy, which focuses on intensive literacy development. UPCS teachers conduct informal classes where students engage in intensive discussion and analysis of literature. The different roles students assume in book discussion circles—such as “summarizer” or “literary luminary” (a group member who identifies unfamiliar words)—not only help students improve their reading comprehension skills but also help teachers identify individual students' strengths and weaknesses. Teachers and students take turns reading books aloud so teachers can model effective reading techniques as well as observe students who are struggling with phonics or fluency. If a student tests below the third-grade level, UPCS teachers develop an Early Literacy Intervention Plan for that student, which schedules special time for the student to meet with an elementary reading specialist and details basic literacy exercises such as phonics drills or sound charts that all teachers can use when they have that student in class.

Extended Time and Smaller Classes

During the school year, students in seventh and eighth grade have block schedules that allow them to spend the maximum amount of time in humanities, math, and science classes. In all classes teachers help students learn not only their subject matter but also the literacy skills required to understand and remember that subject. The two-and-a-half-hour blocks allow teachers to assign reading and writing intensive classwork so students can improve the literacy skills that will allow them to absorb the increasingly challenging material they will encounter in the upper grades. Even in high school, students' schedules are composed of sixty- and ninety-minute blocks, which allow teachers to monitor and reinforce literacy skills through assignments such as papers, journals, or oral presentations. Because the school and the classes within it are small (most classes have less than twenty students), teachers can focus sufficient attention on monitoring each student's progress. The small class size also facilitates the formation of close student-teacher relationships, which lead to students seeking homework help or special attention from a teacher if they are struggling with certain lessons or concepts.

Weekly Planning and Analysis of Student Data

One morning a week, the entire faculty, including the principal, meets to analyze student test scores and other work, while students take classes from itinerant district-level staff who teach subjects such as physical education and computers.

Teachers present informal progress reports on individual students so that teachers in all subject areas can assess that student's progress in every class. During weekly meetings, teachers and administrators also discuss general concerns, such as how to better integrate writing into daily lesson plans. Lastly, the principal also supervises an informal mentoring program between newer and veteran teachers. To ensure that teacher collaboration and professional development are most effective, UPCS takes steps to hire only the best faculty members. Before hiring a new teacher, the prospective faculty member is required to attend an informational meeting that includes both UPCS faculty and student volunteers.

Community Involvement

The only requirement for admission to UPCS is to be a resident of the Main South neighborhood; once students apply, they are chosen by a lottery. To understand and fit within the community, teachers are encouraged to explore the area where students live. The first year the school opened, the principal recruited students by going door to door. Once students enroll in UPCS, teachers hold conferences with parents to discuss students' progress. If parents' work schedules prevent them from meeting during the week, the teachers and the principal schedule meetings on Saturdays or arrange to talk with parents on the phone. Since many people in the community do not speak English, the principal makes sure that a translator is present for meetings with non-English-speaking parents. UPCS's partnership with Clark University also gives students access to university resources. Students can enroll in Clark classes while they are still in high school, and many Clark students and graduates tutor or teach at UPCS. And since paying for college is the biggest obstacle for many students, Clark University pledges to give any UPCS student who meets its tuition requirements a full scholarship for all four years of college.

College Preparation

All UPCS students must apply to college. As soon as students enter ninth grade, they are exposed to a rigorous college preparatory curriculum including a variety of honors and Advanced Placement classes. Also, UPCS has implemented a writing process model, a guide for students to write effectively across disciplines, so students will have practiced college-level writing before they graduate. During their junior year, students meet with their teachers, guidance counselor, and principal to discuss college options and requirements. Students arrive at the meeting with a list of colleges in which they are interested, and by the end of the meeting, with the help of the faculty, they have developed a detailed plan for their college application process.

Results

When UPCS's first class of seventh graders entered in 1997, more than half of them read below the fourth-grade level. As of 2004, every student at UPCS has passed the English/language arts section on the MCAS, the state's tenth-grade graduation exams. For the class of 2003, math MCAS scores ranked thirteenth out of more than three hundred schools in the state, and its English/language arts score ranked thirty-fourth. Averaging test scores from the past three years, 91 percent of UPCS students scored at proficient or advanced levels on the English MCAS, compared to 61 percent across the state. In eight years of operation, only one student has dropped out of UPCS. And one hundred percent of all UPCS graduates have been accepted into colleges, with 80 percent going on to four-year institutions including Georgetown, Dartmouth, and Brown, as well as Clark.

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