

1. **TITLE:**

University-Assisted Community Schools, The Netter Center for Community Partnerships

2. **LOCATION AND DATES OF OPERATION:**

Location: University-Assisted Community Schools is a program of the Netter Center for Community Partnerships, located at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, PA.

Dates of Operation: Penn committed to greater engagement with West Philadelphia in 1985; The Netter Center was not formally established until 1992.

3. **ABSTRACT AND KEYWORDS:**

Abstract: University-Assisted Community Schools is a program that is central to the mission and operations of the Netter Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Pennsylvania. Through the program, faculty and students at Penn form partnerships with public schools and community organizations that are sustained over time to work toward local problem solving and to enrich the quality of teaching and learning in both university and school settings. The concept is based on the following propositions: 1) that public schools, when reconfigured as community schools, have the potential to contribute to the making of free and participatory democratic societies and to local problem-solving, and 2) that universities are uniquely positioned to dedicate the resources necessary for the success of community schools, and 3) that collaboration between universities and community schools is mutually beneficial.

Keywords: community schools • university-assisted community schools • higher education • democracy • John Dewey • communal participatory action research • academically based community service • University of Pennsylvania • West Philadelphia

4. **TYPE OF CASE:**

Community schools are defined by the Coalition for Community Schools as neighborhood hubs—both a place and a set of partnerships—that offer a variety of services, supports and opportunities to children, youth, families, and communities and that are open beyond the regular school day.

The university-assisted community school concept builds on the community schools model and proposes that universities are well situated to support the efforts of community schools and that this collaboration is mutually beneficial. In this model, universities are one of the partners that collaborate in the offering of services and resources at the community school hub; universities are often the anchor partner and commit significant resources.

5. MISSION AND GOALS:

The Netter Center Mission:

“Bringing to bear the broad range of human knowledge needed to solve the complex, comprehensive, and interconnected problems of the American city so that West Philadelphia (Penn’s local geographic community), Philadelphia, the University itself, and society benefit.” (Netter Center Website)

University-Assisted Community Schools Mission:

“UACS educate, engage, empower, and serve not only students, but also all other members of the community in which the school is located. UACS focus on schools as core institutions for community engagement and democratic development, as well as link school day and after-school curricula to solve locally identified, real world, community problems.” (Netter Center Website)

University-Assisted Community Schools Goals:

- Solving community problems of local and universal significance
- Building civic and democratic capacity
- Enriching learning, teaching and research in universities and schools
- Participatory action research: working *with* the community, not *on* or *in* the community

6. CONTEXT:

Origins and Evolution:

- **WEPIC:** In 1985, an Honors Seminar about the Penn-West Philadelphia relationship developed the West Philadelphia Improvement Corps (WEPIC), in which schools functioned as neighborhood sites where school personnel and residents received strategic assistance from Penn
- **John P. Turner Middle School:** Initial focus on a school-based community health program through Penn’s first Academically Based Community Service Seminar. Much of UACS work still takes place through such seminars.
- **Netter Center for Community Partnerships:** In 1992, the University decided to dedicate more resources and energy to West Philadelphia and started the Center to direct efforts, with Ira Harkavy as director. The Netter Center is housed in the Office of Government and Community Affairs.

Organization and Operation:

University-assisted community schools are central to Netter Center’s mission, organization, and operations. Many other Netter Center programs make up pieces of university-assisted community school resources and programming, such as the Agatston Urban Nutrition Initiative (AUNI) and Moelis Access Science.

The establishment of a university-assisted community school partnership is usually established based on faculty interest in working with a particular school. Partnerships may

begin with an academically based community service seminar. To date, more than 200 such seminars have been offered, with 60-65 courses/year in recent years. Some of these become partnerships sustained over time as university-assisted community schools, and each partnership is made up of a number of different Netter Center programs and local collaborations.

Each school site has at least one Netter Center coordinator who works with school personnel and other organizational partners, depending on the location. Penn students participate in UACS activities through other Netter Center programs such as academically based community service seminars and community school student partnerships (CSSP)

7. PROGRAMS:

Focus: UACS programs have focused on the following topic areas: health and nutrition • the environment • conflict resolution • peer mediation • performance and visual arts • publications • technology • school-to-career programs • and reading improvement • fitness and recreation

Schools: UACS in West Philly include Comegys School, Huey School, Lea School, Sayre High School, and the West Philadelphia High School.

Example, The Lea School, Programs Include:

- Academic support and mentorship during the school day from Penn undergrads through academically-based community service courses and community school student partnerships (CSSP)
- Nutrition lessons and afterschool fruit stand through AUNI
- Recess Initiative co-sponsored by Fox Leadership Program
- Lea After-School program
- Summer program in collaboration with Philadelphia Freedom School curriculum



The Agatston Urban Nutrition Initiative operates in 20 Philadelphia Public Schools including the Lea School.
<https://www.nettercenter.upenn.edu/programs/agateston-urban-nutrition-initiative>



A collaboration with the Penn Men's Lacrosse Team at the Comegys School.
<https://www.nettercenter.upenn.edu/programs/university-assisted-community-schools/comegys>



Moelis Access Science works to improve STEM education in grades K-12.
<https://www.nettercenter.upenn.edu/programs/moelis-access-science>

8. ASSESSMENT:

Strengths:

- Penn has a lot of resources
- Mutually beneficial relationship (this is the case they make)
- University engagement is interdisciplinary
- Sustained partnerships
- Close connection to the national Coalition for Community Schools
- Support of multiple Penn administrations and Presidents
- Has been nationally adopted through the University-Assisted Community Schools Replication Project, 1994-2004

Weaknesses:

- Engagement can be limited and palliative
- Universities are cumbersome and sometimes slow to change
- Universities too often prone to top-down approaches to be truly engaged, participatory and democratic
- “Expertise” and authority may limit true democratic and collaborative engagement
- Involvement in particular schools comes down to faculty interest and commitment
- Students come and go as they graduate, which may result in lack of continuity
- Universities very concerned with funders, reputation
- No specific focus on place-based education or environmental literacy

Opportunities:

- Endless potential to be extended to new universities or to new organizations/schools for the same university
- Engagement not limited to a particular topic, such as environment or health

Threats:

- Programs could be threatened by a change in administration/Presidency at a University
- Drive for competitiveness and disciplinary fragmentation: “competition among American universities tends strongly to produce university-community conflict” (Dewey’s Dream)
- Penn’s history in West Philadelphia and lack of trust

9. LESSONS FOR TRANSFORMATIVE GREEN SCHOOLS IN PHILADELPHIA:

- Penn focuses on academically based community service, and active citizenship through real-world collaborative problem solving, as central to “*the twenty-first century undergraduate experience*”
 - We could, perhaps, make a case for green schools as “*the twenty-first century public education experience*”

- The Netter Center is very well established, and a national leader in the Community Schools movement; would make a strategic partner for our proposals
- Keys to success:
 - Sustained partnerships
 - Interdisciplinary engagement
 - Institutional buy-in
- While universities, and the Netter Center at Penn specifically, can make a strategic partner for community schools, universities are also driven by a need to enhance reputation and appeal to funders. For this reason, the role of the university should be carefully considered when trying to create a program aimed to achieve sustained engagement and neighborhood transformation over the long-term.

REFERENCES:

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