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URBAN ACADEMY:  
*A Success Story*

Urban Academy incorporates a number of the features currently recommended in the literature of transforming high schools. A small school enrolling 100 students in downtown New York City, it is a “focus” school with a strong commitment to inquiry learning that pervades its program and unites its staff. It is a school chosen by its constituents, both students and staff, and enjoys greater autonomy than most by virtue of two affiliations:

- As a part of New York City’s Alternative Schools Office, it is freed from a number of the city’s bureaucratic constraints
- As a member of the Coalition of Essential Schools, it is freed from many of the state’s programmatic requirements.

Both of these affiliations also yield more external support and exchange than most schools enjoy. Urban Academy is thus a good place to ask whether such recommended features can make a difference.

Urban Academy is a highly successful school in several respects.

First, it works for a typical inner city population—largely minority students from working class or underclass homes—as well as for the

sprinkling of middle class white youngsters who find their way to the Academy.

Second, it is successful in enfolding marginal students into an intellectual community, and in eliciting genuinely thoughtful effort from them.

Third, it avoids most of the more immediate problems plaguing urban high schools: dropouts, violence, and confrontational disciplinary incidents.

Finally, Urban Academy maintains a proud and confident staff that appears to relish the challenges it faces and meets them thoughtfully and well.

Many of Urban Academy's students have a background of difficulty with authority. They come from all over the city, many from neighborhoods where violence is a constant, many from households that are dysfunctional at best, and some from group homes. Even though they chose to enter, most students see Urban as "Last Chance High" when they arrive. Virtually all appear at risk of dropping out and most see themselves as deficient in academic ability as well as interest. Nonetheless, a range of ability levels is represented; the student population reflects the full low-to-high ability gamut.

Urban Academy manages to make its students part of an academic community, awakening many to see themselves for the first time as intellectual beings. At the same time that they are learning how to analyze, how to raise increasingly penetrating questions, how to appraise and synthesize information from various sources, students are also learning to recognize the power of their minds and becoming confident in using them—no small accomplishments for youngsters who have come to believe themselves somehow mentally deficient.

Urban Academy is a high school where students' good-natured complaints and banter and staff members' willingness to negotiate have replaced intense confrontations and anger. Students and staff members don't always see eye to eye, but students can count on their complaints being heard. They know they will be treated respectfully and their views taken seriously, even if they do not prevail. Accordingly, there is little of the adult vs. adolescent, us vs. them orientation that lurks not far from the surface in many schools.

Urban's teachers unanimously view the school as a prize assignment. All report experiencing more autonomy here than in other schools, despite far more responsibilities and substantially less privacy about

what takes place in one's own classroom. In many ways, teachers reflect the belief that they have embarked together on a difficult and demanding effort of the utmost importance—and the conviction that they are handling it well. Staff morale is high at Urban Academy, and despite the obstacles they confront daily, this staff believes in its own power to succeed at an enormously challenging task.

## RETHINKING FOR SUCCESS

What accounts for these accomplishments? In addition to the features identified at the outset, a number of other factors seem to play a part in explaining the success.

First, the Urban Academy staff members have together done substantial re-thinking about schooling. As a result, they treat students differently, they treat content differently, they assess student progress differently, and they treat problems and challenges differently.

A great deal of thought has been given to the purposes of a high school and its operation. Many of the time-honored practices and assumptions associated with secondary school education have been replaced. For example, Urban is making education more accessible by making it sufficiently attractive and compelling to engage students, and designed so all students will succeed. The Urban Academy attempts to provide students with whatever support is necessary to avoid the failures that call for remediation and the stigma and self-doubt that might be attached to those students who do need remediation.

According to educational tradition, once an organizational structure is adopted, it remains fixed and serves as the framework into which programs, staff, etc., must fit. Almost the reverse is assumed at Urban. Virtually everything is flexible, and organizational structure must serve programmatic and instructional purposes. When it doesn't, the structure, not the program, must be made to conform. Thus, frequent structural changes include adding new kinds of classes, such as seminars, organizational tutorials, and specialized labs appended to classes for different reasons in different semesters.

There is also a deliberate preference for a variety of schedules. Classes are not of equal and invariant length, but can be tailored to fit needs. The time of day a particular class meets usually changes during the week, and the schedule framework itself is re-fashioned each semester.

A final, fundamental way in which schooling has been re-thought at Urban Academy is that staff members see disciplinary problems in other terms, converting them into pedagogical challenges. A student who is chronically tardy or simply acting out is more likely to be seen as an instructional challenge than as a candidate for detention or other punishment. Yet Urban is not a particularly permissive place. Staff members have managed to create an ambiance of considerable informality with a great deal of consultation and frequent negotiation with students, but followed by staff decisions, not student vote or choice.

## WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE?

What do such assumptions mean in terms of the way students are treated? The kinds of regulations that restrict students' freedom of expression elsewhere are relaxed so students are freer in what they say, how they say it, how they dress, etc. But Urban students are expected to be serious workers, and lapses are quickly identified and challenged. Thus, the school represents a mix of autonomy and coercion and at least some students are aware that they are both more and less free than in previous schools. They are also quite conscious of the fact that they are seen and treated as individuals. They have ready access to teachers and collaborative efforts with both teachers and fellow students are fundamental to the program.

Teachers are also treated differently at Urban than at most high schools. In fact, in some ways teachers and students enjoy the same treatment: the personalization, the reliance on norms instead of rules, the respect for individual preference and personality. Urban is a place that evokes commitment.

Little formal differentiation by status exists at Urban; its small staff makes that unnecessary. (The school has seven teachers and two co-directors who also teach classes.) Staffing totals correspond to New York City's student-adult ratios as adjusted to reflect the entitlements of special needs populations, but the school allocates its staff differently than do typical high schools.

One informal distinction separates veteran Urban staff members from newcomers. New staff members, including new but experienced members, audit courses taught by "senior" staff. Or they may be assigned to co-teach with senior staff members, or to conduct a lab for a course taught by senior staff members. They meet weekly as a

group with one of the co-directors. Thus, the induction of new teachers into the school's culture is careful and systematic. The "senior staff" category is not exclusive or restricted to longtime veterans, so it seems to arouse no resentment.

The school is serious about "inquiry learning," which has implications for curriculum and pedagogy, since inquiry requires intensive engagement with content.

The first several days of a new Urban Academy student or teacher at the school are spent as a member of a team investigating a new topic. The project topic occupies the full school day for the first three weeks of each semester. All of the school's constituents pursue some facets of the topic, while small groups work separately on subtopics of their choice.

For example, one recent project topic was, "What makes for a good subway system?" The investigation began with activity intended to answer questions about the location of different resources (e.g., the garment district, the main library) and the fastest means of reaching each. Then the entire school community saw videos about tunnel construction, visited the Transport Museum, heard New York City figures argue the question, "Should the subway system be abolished?", and did some related reading. Students then selected different subtopics for small group inquiry (e.g., "How healthy is the subway?" "Subway advertising," "Rerouting the New York City Subway System"). Only after this multi-faceted research had been completed, findings exchanged, and conclusions jointly considered, did the semester's classes begin.

Some Urban Academy courses bear familiar titles such as American history, biology, and algebra, but most represent cross-disciplinary topics such as "Popular Culture," "Utopia/Dystopia," or "Animal Rights." The sequencing of content within classes departs from the traditional in that courses don't usually begin with just the fundamentals and end with more reflective and interpretive matters. Issues that genuinely elicit thought are carefully interwoven with less engaging, less intellectually demanding fare right from the start.

Thus, a course or a unit is likely to open with a discussion or debate presented by an outside panel of experts, or it may open with a "sort"—a technique Urban has perfected to generate new ideas or information about a topic at the same time that it asks students to take an initial look at and commit themselves to relevant positions.

The topic may unfold further as students receive carefully selected sets of readings that ordinarily reflect an array of perspectives and information—sometimes complementary, sometimes conflicting.

Perhaps as novel as any feature of this rather atypical high school is the way in which it addresses challenges. Inquiry is the standard mode of operation for staff and the process students are asked to pursue. It is collective inquiry, tackled by the entire faculty. Staff meetings are held every Wednesday from noon to 3:00 p.m. while students perform volunteer community service, and on alternate Tuesdays from 3:00 to 5:00 p.m. (curriculum sessions). Both are problem-solving sessions.

For example, a question brought by one teacher—about why students weren't fulfilling an assignment to analyze, and what would enable them to do so—got first consideration on the meeting agenda and claimed 45 minutes, a quarter of the meeting time. The result was agreement on further inquiry, and while there was no closure, the staff had engaged in thoughtful discussion that influenced subsequent talk and behavior.

It is this sort of collective viewing of problems as shared challenges, to be collaboratively resolved with jointly implemented solutions, that is standard at the Academy.

Urban Academy realizes traditional educational aims in new ways, responding effectively to what have seemed to be education-resistant students. The broadening and cultivation of the intellect is the clear mission of this high school. Just one indication of its success lies in the fact that all Urban Academy students complete high school. Indeed, almost all go on to college.

## SUGGESTED READINGS

- Gregory, T. B., and Smith, G. R. *High Schools as Communities: The Small School Reconsidered*. Bloomington, Ind.: Phi Delta Kappa, 1987.
- Louis, K. S., and Miles, M. B. *Improving the Urban High School: What Works and Why*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1990.
- Sizer, T. R. *Horace's Compromise: The Dilemma of the American High School*. Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1984.