



COURTESY OF AUTHOR

A WINNING COMBINATION

BY ELIZABETH BOONE, MARLENE HARTZMAN, AND DIANNE MERO

What do schools that break through the barriers of poverty and disadvantage have in common? To help answer that question in a meaningful way, NASSP is adding 9 more schools' stories to the 12 that were told in *Breakthrough High Schools, Vol. 1*. The first profile features University Park Campus School, which is the impressive product of a partnership among Clark University, Worcester (MA) Public Schools, and the local community that serves a population of diverse, disadvantaged students from the inner city. A special summer edition of *Principal Leadership* will feature case studies of schools that meet the requirements to be a Breakthrough High School—50% of students are eligible for free and reduced price lunch, 50% of the student population is minority students, 90% of the students graduate, and 90% go to college.

Elizabeth Boone, Marlene Hartzman, and Dianne Mero are former principals with Montgomery County Public Schools, MD, and are currently project analysts for the National Association of Secondary School Principals' Breakthrough High Schools project (www.principals.org/breakthrough).



COURTESY OF AUTHOR

Beginning in seventh grade, students are taught to be responsible and disciplined in their work.

University Park Campus School...What is that? The smart kids' school? The University Park students' response to this question is always the same: "We're not smarter; we just work harder." After two years of this hard work, ninth grade students at this amazing 7–12 grade school are ready to tackle a rigorous honors and advanced placement curriculum.

In 1996, half of the seventh graders in this Worcester, MA, school were reading below the third-grade level; four could not read at all. In 2004, many first-time students will enter the school with similar disadvantages. How are students from such a disadvantaged community able to come so far in such a short period of time?

The Collaboration

In 1995, after years of conflict between Clark University and its adjacent neighborhood, the university traded "barriers for partnership and collaboration" and became part of the University Park Neighborhood Restoration Partnership (UPP). UPP was established primarily to stabilize the community by rehabilitating housing, making home ownership affordable, and encouraging small businesses. In addition, UPP focused on other distinct areas of urban redevelopment specifically needed in their community, including promoting public safety, establishing social and recreational activities, and creating exceptional educational opportunities. One of the most rewarding outcomes of this collaboration is the partnership between Clark University and Worcester Public Schools. This joint venture resulted in the creation of Uni-

versity Park Campus School, which opened in 1997 as a public school educational alternative for students from the challenging inner-city neighborhood directly adjacent to Clark. Tangible results have been achieved, ranging from the university president living in a renovated house in the Main South neighborhood to the sprouting of businesses on Main South corridor to local students being admitted to Clark University and other prestigious colleges and universities.

Focus on Students

The school was founded with a clear but unusual mission for students from such a deprived background—to prepare every child for the academic and intellectual demands of any competitive four-year college or university through rigorous, but supported, academic expectations. A major attraction for local families was the guarantee of free college tuition to Clark University for all neighborhood students who met the university's admission requirements. To reach that goal, the founding principal and two dedicated teachers focused on literacy and numeracy and developed the cultural norms that would make the school "an oasis of hope and opportunity within a rough inner-city neighborhood." In addition, these staff members were committed to teaching their students that desire beats adversity and that if the students were willing to work hard, promises come true.

The innovative August Academic Academy and an unusual extended day program offered during the first six school years were critical, fundamental elements for success

Older students are expected to model respectful behavior and hard work for younger students. The principal and teachers remembered and described numerous scenarios where middle level students would not have made it to ninth grade without the intervention and individual attention by older students.

because they provided additional time for teachers to bond with the students and gave teachers an opportunity to work on the missing skills needed for academic proficiency in high school. The academy was funded by grants written in collaboration with Clark University; the extended day program was funded by Worcester Public Schools and available at all of the city's high schools. Unlike the other high schools, however, at University Park the extended day was used to create 90-minute blocks of time for academic subjects. These blocks, in conjunction with required before- and after-school homework sessions for students, created valuable expanded segments of time to devote to instruction.

The young men and women who attend University Park demonstrate their belief in the school's social curriculum: respect each other and yourself. Older students are expected to model respectful behavior and hard work for younger students. The principal and teachers remembered and described numerous scenarios where middle level students would not have made it to ninth grade without the intervention and individual attention by older students. Seniors proudly recount how they are frequently called upon to work with at-risk seventh graders.

What immediately strikes a visitor to the school is how enthusiastically all the students and teachers are engaged in learning with purposeful activity evident in every room. Accepting the school's goal of college for each of them, students easily articulate what they are accomplishing to make this goal a reality.

It is clear that University Park is fulfilling the stated mission for its students. The school opened with 35 seventh-grade students; six years later, 31 of the original students graduated. Of the other four students, three left the area and one returned to the neighborhood high school.

Making School Personal

Personalized instruction. The staff at University Park is committed to connecting to each student's particular level of development through individualized instruction. To achieve this goal, classes are kept small, with an average of 17 students. This is accomplished partially through the partnership with Clark University in which masters of education candidates provide instruction for two classes a day and team teach other classes with full-time University Park faculty members. The additional staff allows small class sizes and greater individual attention for the students.

Support for students. University Park offers before- and after-school academic support through the homework center which is open from 7:00 to 7:45 each morning and again in the afternoon from 2:30 to 5:00. Beginning with seventh-grade students, teachers spend a significant amount of time

At the heart of University Park's strength is a sense of community and expectation of support at all levels.



COURTESY OF AUTHOR

establishing routines and providing stability. They keep in close contact with the parents regarding expectations and urge them to send their students for homework assistance. The center is staffed with a combination of paid University Park teachers, volunteers from Clark University, and peer tutors. In addition to the homework center and the August Academy, University Park has a whole array of special programs for students, including extensive summer programs, athletics, and cocurricular activities.

Safe and caring environment. The staff describes the school as an oasis in the community. Students no longer have to act tough because they all leave the “street life” at the schoolhouse door. At University Park, help is always available, working hard is expected, and “it’s cool to get good grades.” The teachers believe in the students and worry when they miss school. Daily attendance is expected, so when students are absent or late, teachers telephone parents, call cell phones, or contact friends to check on the students. Occasionally, teachers even pick up students from their homes and take them to school.

Professional learning community. Teachers find working at University Park energizing. Common planning time is provided every Wednesday, and the teachers use the time to review school and student data, work on curriculum development, and consult about individual student progress. The teachers are involved in school decision making and are given room to be creative. They are encouraged to write grants to bring new programs into the school. Clark University provides professional development through tuition-free graduate courses. The university also offers opportunities for teachers to work in their research programs during summers.

Making School Relevant and Rigorous

Uniform high standards and expectations. A veteran teacher describes the school’s high expectations this way: “We never expect less of a student because of his home life; we motivate all students and support them to achieve.” Each student is expected to succeed in an academic program of all honors or advanced placement courses. The teachers reiterate the seriousness of working hard to do well, and the students consistently report that everyone expects them to make it. Failure is not an option. As one teacher noted, “We don’t make excuses here because there are too many.” Expectations are high: Older students model the expectations for the younger students; classmates explain to new students that a B is not acceptable at University Park. There is a strictly enforced code of behavior and no tolerance for street talk or fighting at school. Expectation setting begins early with mandatory attendance at an information session before students can apply for admission. There, students learn

that they are responsible for two hours of homework each night and that they can expect a phone call or a visit if they are not in school on time. The resources available to the students and the parents are also explained as are the promises of free college for all who successfully complete the program.

Schoolwide focus on academics. University Park is all about academics. According to the founding principal, Donna Rodrigues, “We had to take a longitudinal look at the kids and get them reading. We knew that by ninth grade we wanted them all following an honors curriculum.” To this end, in the seventh and eighth grade, all teachers emphasize reading and math, helping students overcome deficiencies to be ready for honors level work by ninth grade. Student data is employed to individualize instruction for each student, and student portfolios begun in seventh grade are used by subsequent teachers to identify weaknesses and document student growth. Students also begin working on presentation skills in seventh grade. Learning to speak effectively and connect with an audience or group pays off for the University Park students. Visitors are impressed by how articulate every student is. The standards of performance are understood by all—students, teachers, and parents—because of the use of a consistent rubric. Writing is also emphasized in all classes and, again, a schoolwide format is used to teach writing skills.

Summer programs. The August Academic Academy prepares incoming seventh graders for University Park. The

University Park Campus School

Location: Worcester, MA

Grades: 7–12

Enrollment: 207

Community: Urban

Demographic: Asian 19.1%, Black 7.2%, Hispanic 32.8%, White 40.9%; 78% free and reduced price lunch

Special Features: Open admissions and lottery system, honors and AP classes for all students, partnership with Clark University, 100% graduation rate, 100% college admission rate

program begins by assessing each student's academic skill levels. During the entire month of August, mornings are spent on the Clark University campus, with recreational activities and time for community building. Afternoons are devoted to providing academic support. It is impressed on students from the very beginning of their school experience that they will succeed in college. The August Academy is one part of a systematic plan to have the University Park students feel that they are a part of the college campus.

Making School Collaborative

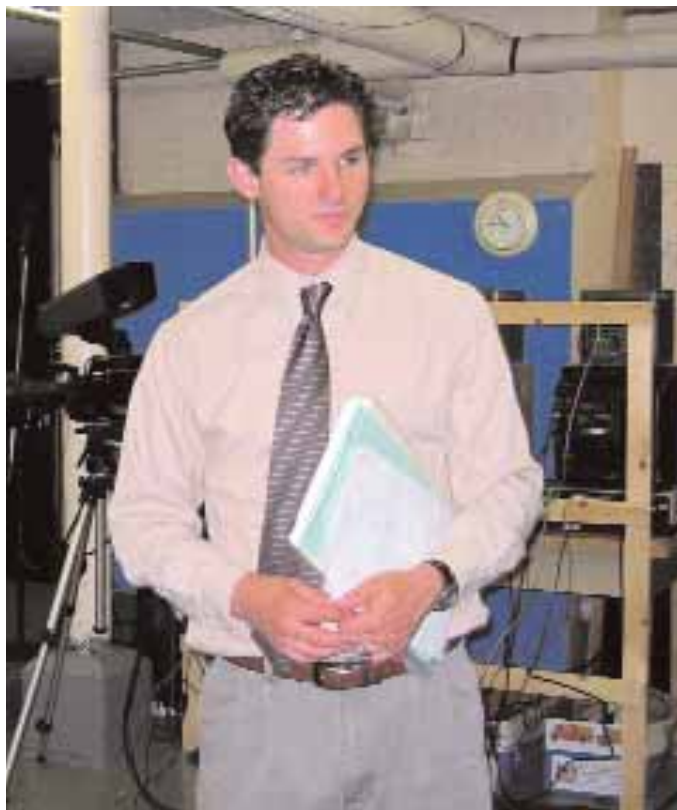
Clark University and Worcester Public Schools Partnership. The partnership with Clark University provides significant resources to University Park, its students, teachers, and community. Clark undergraduates observe and student teach at University Park. Through the university's Fifth-Year Free Program, masters candidates teach at the school as part of their masters program requirements, and University Park gains certified teachers. In addition, Clark allows teachers to take many graduate courses tuition-free. University Park students use Clark's gym and library, 11th- and 12th-grade students can take classes at the university, and graduating seniors who have met their entrance requirements are allowed to attend the college tuition-free.

University Park joint steering committee. The collaboration with the neighborhood, the university, the school district, and the school is managed through a joint steering committee. This group provides the governance that oversees staffing and school demographics.

The school council. The school-based governing board, made up of the principal, teachers, parents, and students, manages the day-to-day operations of the school.

Impressive Results

After seven years and two graduating classes, the data unequivocally define success for this school. To date, all University Park students passed the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) tests in math and reading the first time they took the test as 10th graders. In 2003, the school ranked fifth in the state with 97% of the students scoring at the advanced or proficient level in math. All of the students graduated from high school in four years and all were accepted to college. Students and teachers come to school everyday (96.2% and 99.6% respectively). The mobility rate has drastically improved compared to the neighboring high school (53% versus 35%). With all of this data defining the school's success, it is important to note that University Park is not a selective or "exam" school. It is a public school that accepts students only from its surrounding neighborhood through a lottery system with at least half of the students entering the seventh grade reading below the third-grade level. This school has proven to be about high expectations and student achievement.



COURTESY OF AUTHOR

Students pursuing a master's degree in education from Clark College teach—and learn—as part of the partnership between the college and University Park Campus School.

Sharing Lessons Learned

University Park provides lessons for any school looking for ways to improve educational opportunities for disadvantaged students. By keeping an uncompromising focus on its mission and utilizing resources available through the partnership with the neighboring university, the school prepares its students for college success. Clark University President John Bassett believes that every college in the United States can and should be involved in partnerships similar to the UPP. As if to prove that University Park's success can be accomplished on a larger scale, Worcester was named one of seven urban school districts chosen to participate in a five-year, \$8 million Carnegie Grant awarded to Clark University's Hiatt Center for Urban Education. This grant is aimed at addressing the disparity between the academic outcomes in high poverty-high minority urban high schools and their less diverse suburban neighbors. The grant focuses on the emerging shift from large comprehensive high schools to smaller learning communities and how students experience this transformation. Keeping a close watch on the University Park project, Carnegie's School for a New Initiative, and other promising university-public school partnerships that spring up around the nation should provide numerous exciting and innovative ways to improve high schools throughout the United States. **PL**