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Expanding What Works: United Community Schools

United Community Schools' Interventions Yield Increases in Attendance, Language Acquisition, and High School Credit Accumulation

By Michael Mulgrew

A recent warning that more than 350,000 New York City students were chronically absent from school has elected leaders wondering how best to help the city's most vulnerable children.

One answer is bringing the community into the school to provide the academic support and services that children and families need – an approach that has worked with the UFT's United Community Schools (UCS).

United Community Schools – an initiative begun by the United Federation of Teachers – now serves more than 20,000 students in over 30 New York public schools. UCS schools, on average, serve higher proportions of economically disadvantaged students, English Language Learners, and special education students than traditional New York City public schools.

Even as many school districts are scrambling to find ways to help students overcome the losses and disruptions of the pandemic, UCS has proven effective.

In a recent study by Metis Associates of New York City, students enrolled in UCS schools for the three full years of the evaluation were found to have better attendance, greater high school credit accumulation, and higher language acquisition test scores than statistically matched comparison students in traditional public schools. The gains were achieved despite the pandemic.

The review analyzed student-level data from the 2018-19 school year through 2020-21.

- UCS students attended approximately 3 more days in a 182-day school year than their matched counterparts attending non-community New York City schools. The comparison matched roughly 10,000 UCS students with a similar number of non-UCS students.
- UCS students achieved 2.5 scale score points higher on the NYS English as a Second Language Achievement Test (NYSESLAT) than a matched group of non-

community school students. The comparison matched roughly 1,000 UCS students with a similar number of non-UCS students.

- UCS students earned 0.5 high school credits more than students in a matched group of non-community school students.
- UCS students also earn 0.5 credits more than the canonical 11 credits expected from students each year. The study matched roughly 1,700 UCS high school students with similarly situated non-community school high school students.

“A child who lost a parent or loved one to Covid, a hungry child, a child with undiagnosed vision or hearing problems – that child is struggling against significant barriers to learning. UCS is breaking down those barriers,” said UFT President Michael Mulgrew.

UCS schools are designed to address the educational, emotional, social and health needs of children by connecting all the groups in a school with community and civic resources.

UCS places a full-time community school director in each school building to work with principals, teachers, paraprofessionals and other staff, along with parents and members of the community. Together, they identify the unique needs of each school and forge partnerships with local agencies and organizations to meet those needs.

During the pandemic, UCS schools led food drives, vaccination, and health and mental services and organized vaccination clinics for students and their families.

UCS schools brought additional social workers into schools; leveraged grants to bring art and music and joyful programs to schools to once again engage students who may have been learning remotely since the start of the pandemic.

In 2019, UCS expanded outside New York City and now guides community school work in two Albany middle schools and provides professional development and technical guidance for six additional Albany schools.

UCS was one of only eight organizations in the nation to win a 2020 competitive federal grant designed to support “nationally significant programs to improve the quality of elementary and secondary education.” UCS was recognized for its ability to not only embrace but empower a student population with significantly more challenges than those in traditional New York City public schools.

New York State and New York City both see the value of this communal approach to learning and financially support UCS schools. Parents and educators are aligned in asking Albany to invest \$100 million in categorical aid to expand community schools across the state including a \$5 million allocation to UCS to offer statewide technical assistance and support.

It is an investment in what works. Our children are worth it.