

CITY CHARTER HIGH SCHOOL BEST PRACTICE BRIEF

This document is part of a series of best practice briefs that provide a close-up view of how innovative educational strategies are implemented at a highly successful urban charter high school.

Workforce Culture

Catherine Awsumb Nelson, Ph.D. April 23, 2012



City High

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What is workforce culture?

All aspects of City High’s design- from policies on schedule and dress code to formal curricular requirements- support a culture of professionalism that prepares students to succeed in their post high-school paths.

This document is part of a series of best practice briefs that provide a close-up view of how innovative educational strategies are implemented at a highly successful urban charter high school.

Other briefs in the series, examining one-to-one computing and competency-based staff promotion are available at the school’s website:
www.cityhigh.org

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A note on data sources and methodology

This series of best practice briefs is produced by Catherine Awsumb Nelson, Ph.D., an independent evaluation consultant who has worked with City High on research, data, and evaluation issues since the school's founding. In addition to City High, Dr. Nelson's current and recent clients include the RAND Corporation, the Ball Foundation (Chicago), Pittsburgh Public School District, The California Endowment, The Heinz Endowments, Boundless Readers (Chicago), and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. Her work focuses on helping educational institutions incorporate evaluation information into their decision making and organizational routines to foster data-based decisions about programs, resources, and performance.

At City High, Dr. Nelson worked collaboratively with the school leadership team to design an annual school report card that presents trend data on a range of school goals including academic achievement, post-high school transitions, and positive school culture. Some of the data from that report card (available on the school website www.cityhigh.org) come from annual surveys of students, parents, and staff that Dr. Nelson designs and administers. In addition to producing the annual report card, Dr. Nelson has worked with school leadership to investigate specific issues of interest including the transition from 9th to 10th grade and the factors that support successful student buy-in.

The topics for these best practice briefs were selected in consultation with the entire school staff to represent the consensus view on the school practices that are most innovative, effective and of potential interest to other educators. Some of the data in the briefs is drawn from the ongoing school evaluation, including survey data and a series of intensive student case studies in which twelve students in the school's first cohort were interviewed in depth three times in each of their four years at City High. Additional topic-specific interviews were conducted for each of the briefs, typically including two or more of the school's administrators, four or more faculty with specific experience/perspective on the topic at hand, and a sample of twelve or more students. All interviewees were promised anonymity.

All of the quotations (indicated by italics) in these documents are the actual words of City High students and staff. In the case of the vignettes presenting student and staff perspectives on the topic that lead each brief "What does it look like at City High?" the words of multiple interviewees have been melded together into a composite. All other quotations in the briefs are from individuals.

What does it look like at City High?¹

FROM THE STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

In 9th grade I remember the career class was going over a lot about what a "professional person" does, like how you are supposed to dress, how you act, how you speak. We also started researching what kinds of careers we might be interested in. My career plans have really changed because of the conversations I have had with teachers here. They expose you to a lot more options. They can relate what you want out of life and what you like to do to different jobs.

In 10th grade you do a lot of interviews and sometimes you have to be the employer. Being on the other side, that really helped me understand how an interview works. When we were doing the interviews, some people would deliberately be rude or be shy. First we would get the resumes and you would see if there is a grammatical error on there, what a bad impression that makes even before they come in. I'll always remember I had "Roxanne" as an interviewee and she was really rude, she answered her phone during the interview, she stuck her gum on the paper. It was bad. But that definitely taught me what not to do.

Also in 10th we did a big project planning your future, where you might live, how much it would cost, making a budget. It broadened your horizons to think about it that way. We are actually setting up our future. This is the school I want to go to. This is the GPA I need. I need to cover up my tattoos and not wear too much make-up. They taught us how to be professional and brought us closer to being able to do what we want to do.

In 11th we researched our top colleges and did cost comparisons. We had mock college interviews with a whole panel. They asked me questions about why I wanted to go to that specific school and it really made me think about what I would say.

The internship helps you decide what you really want to do, what it is actually like. For me, it confirmed my career choice, but for some of my friends they saw it wasn't what they thought at all. The best thing for me was, they treated me like an adult. They acted like I was one of them, like I knew what to do, and I actually did! They helped me, but I was a real employee. I guess there was more drama there than I am used to, people gossiping. But City High taught me to be professional and keep my mouth shut about that stuff.

I feel like, when it is time to look for a job, I am ready. City High basically gives you everything you need. I have a resume and a cover letter. I have these Microsoft Office certifications, so they know I can do stuff. I have practiced interviewing. I'm good to go. A lot of my friends from my old school, they haven't thought about any of that stuff.

¹ These narratives are composites of quotations from multiple interviewees.

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FROM THE TEACHER PERSPECTIVE...

One thing that attracted me to working at this school is that they are truly preparing all kids for life after high school, for all of them to be productive citizens. Career readiness begins the first day you get here and doesn't end until a year after you graduate. I've had places across the US call and say they want to do internships like we do and I tell them it is not stand alone. The internship wouldn't work without the career class. And that wouldn't work without the workforce rubric and the dress code, which keeps them thinking about what it means to be professional all the time, not just in that one class.

They walk into the internship ready because they have been used to those expectations here for three years. Dress professionally, be ready to work when you walk in the door, work with a purpose. If you have a problem, figure out how to deal with it. Advocate for yourself. When you complete a task, take initiative, don't just twiddle your thumbs. Do something that helps the organization. They are just used to working that way. Part of workforce readiness is knowing how to behave professionally and productively, how to resolve conflicts. If they can navigate City High, they can probably do it out there, on the internship and beyond. In a way this school is like one long four year simulation.

In a successful internship, students will gain confidence, clarity about their post-high school plan, career knowledge. Lots of mentors at the host sites say they wish they could have had these kinds of conversations and experiences in high school, that it would have saved them a lot of time and money in college. Maybe 20% of kids decide after the internship, this is not the field for me. Better for them to figure that out now. But 100% walk away with the basics we wanted them to get- communication and time management, functioning in the real world professional environment. That is going to serve them well on any path.

We ask them to explore at least three career clusters. Then you start having the reality conversation. Maybe if you hate school and hate to read and write, the law is not for you. What appeals to you in that field, we can find somewhere else.

Sometimes you are a dream crusher. You have to help them find a path that is realistic and achievable. I have spent 180 hours with these kids, they know I know them as individuals. I will give them realistic feedback about misalignment between their skills and interests and their stated goals. Look at better fits. You want them on a path where they can achieve success. I have to be the bad guy- tell them there are maybe 100 jobs in video game design and those are the crack programmers. So these proprietary schools that are marketing programs in that, it may not be in your best interest to go into a bunch of debt for that.

When they come in they all say "must go to college," but they have no idea why. We want them thinking about why. What do they want

to do and what education is required for that. We have a lot of conversations about what is realistic. We talk a lot about alignment. You never say you can't and you won't even if you think it is a long shot but you focus concretely on what is that realistic first step out of high school that is aligned with that goal. We have learned that you have to help them stress test the scenarios against the never-ending stream of life problems that come up. We want them to come out of here with a plan that is realistic and resilient.

How does City High do it?

At most high schools, workforce preparation and college prep are separate programs serving different populations. At City High, all students prepare for post-high school success by identifying a viable career path, determining its educational and skill requirements, and taking concrete steps on that path while they are still in high school. Although the majority of City High graduates (64% in the class of 2011) are accepted to 4-year colleges and universities, post-secondary education is thought of as a means to an end, not the ultimate goal. Because long-term career success is the defining goal for all students (not just those who are deemed "not college material"), workforce preparation at City High is better understood as an underlying culture, not a stand alone program. Although specific programmatic elements that contribute to the goal are described below, they function within an overall culture that reinforces professionalism in multiple ways.

City High's co-founders **Rick Wertheimer** and **Mario Zinga** explain that they started designing the school by creating a profile of the kind of graduate they wanted to produce. During the planning phase, they visited a range of companies and universities to ask them directly, "What are you looking for?" The answer, Wertheimer recalls, "was the same whether you were talking to the physics department and Carnegie Mellon University or the manager of the McDonalds on the corner: they need to be here on time, responsible in doing their work, work well with others, have good communication skills, and it would be great if they were problem solvers."

During its design phase, City High went beyond developing a traditional mission statement and detailed the attributes of the graduates they aim to develop:

A graduate of City Charter High School will:

- Possess foundational academic skills and the ability to access, synthesize and apply new knowledge.
- Have a comfort level with current technology and the confidence to adapt to future technology.
- Possess the personal qualities needed to be a self-assured, motivated, responsible young adult and to
- Possess the work ethic to succeed in post-secondary education or training.
- Effectively navigate through a variety of interpersonal situations in family, community, school and workplace settings.

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With those end goals in mind, the school's founders knew that a focus on what are now often called 21st century skills needed to permeate the overall design and the daily execution of the school. Some of the key elements include:

Culture made concrete: For incoming students, the clearest manifestation of the school's workforce culture is the dress code. City High students go to school downtown, sharing public transportation, sidewalk space, and building elevators with downtown workers. A professional dress code helps them fit into that environment, reinforces that the work they do each day is serious and important, and makes for an easier transition to the workplace, first for internships and later for employment. A school administrator admits that *"the idea of professional dress can be difficult for parents and students to grasp,"* and that there is a constant testing of the line with small infractions, particularly in students' first year. The school has considered uniforms but realized that the battle is worth fighting: *"They need to learn to define it themselves. You get things by practicing them. It is pulling teeth with the 9th grade but by 11th they are into it, they pride themselves. They know this makes them stand out from the rest and they like it."* City High also accustoms students to a workplace routine with its 8-4 schedule and year-round calendar.

Soft skills defined: While most educators recognize the importance of so-called "soft skills" like work ethic and time management, it is the hard skills that get graded. At most, course grades may contain a small percentage for effort or participation, the impact of which is difficult to see in the final grade. On the premise that what gets measured gets attention, at City High students receive a separate "Workforce Preparation" grade which is included in their QPA. This is a "live" measurement to which any adult on the grade level team can add or subtract points at any time (and which teachers, parents, and students can view at any time on the student's online record). In the school's early years, all grade level teams used a common rubric for determining the Workforce Grade, organized around the categories of:

- (1) Demeanor
- (2) Responsibility
- (3) Work Ethic
- (4) Independence
- (5) Readiness

Today, each grade level team has its own approach to Workforce Grades. The shift away from a single, centrally developed rubric is an example of City High's commitment to team leadership and ownership, as well as the premise that all "best practices" need to continue to evolve and adapt to reflect specific circumstances. As each team goes through a full 9th-12th loop, they learn lessons and develop shared understandings about what matters most for preparing their students for post-high school success. Each team now uses its own system for awarding workforce points, based on the values and behaviors they seek to emphasize. In the view of school leadership, al-

lowing each grade level team to evolve their own approach to making these broad areas concrete ensures deeper buy-in and consistency of application within the team. At the same time, ideas that are tested and found effective by one team can spread to the rest of the school. For example, one team began experimenting with the default approach of starting with a perfect Workforce Grade and taking deductions for specific violations. They added positive workforce points to incentivize behaviors they wanted to reinforce. This is an approach that has now spread across grade levels, although the specific lists of points and behaviors vary by team.

Consequential curriculum and assessment across disciplines: From the curricular point of view, the goals articulated in the graduate profile meant that City High classrooms could not be passive learning environments. Across subject areas, the hallmarks of pedagogy at City High are less teacher lecturing, more hands-on projects, oral presentations, and student collaborations. For example, at all grade levels students are presented with a "Problem of the Week," in math, something that takes planning and thought over time. A teacher reflects that *"The 9th graders really struggle with that multi-step process, chunking it out, to get the end result that truly reflects their ability, not trying to do it overnight. But it is so important that they learn to work that way."* Wherever possible, assessments are performance based: products, reports, presentations, even the real-world credential of Microsoft Office certification, of which City High graduates earn an average of three.

Explicit workforce curricular components: Besides these wrap-around elements described above, which reinforce workforce culture in ongoing, pervasive ways, there are three specific, linked experiences designed to prepare City High graduates for workforce success: the three-year career curriculum, the internship program and the office of transition planning.

(1) Career Curriculum: All City High students take a sequence of trimester-long (13 week) courses in grades 9-11 designed to introduce them to the world of work and support them in researching and developing their own career interests. The curriculum, which was developed in house and is continually evolving, was based on what one of the Career teachers recalls as *"two sentence guidance from (the school founders): 'Get them ready for the internship. Get them ready for the real world.'"* Briefly, the major concepts and experiences of each year are:

9th grade (Workforce skills and career research): Students develop workforce skills such as prioritization, time management, and negotiation, often through simulations. They also research potential careers, beginning with an ACT-developed career skills and interests inventory and culminating in a formal presentation about their chosen focus.

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10th grade (Work environment and the human resources process): Students create resumes and cover letters and participate in simulated employment interviews, learning about the entire human resources process from hiring to performance appraisal to termination.

11th grade (Post-high school planning): The curriculum becomes much more individualized and project based. Students develop an initial post-high school plan including identifying specific educational and/or employment targets, creating a budget, and completing applications.

The emphasis in each year of the career curriculum is supporting students in developing individualized, practical plans, experiencing steps in the process as realistically as possible, and actually walking away with useful products like resumes and completed applications.

(2) Internships: To graduate, all City High students must successfully complete an internship of at least 130 hours. City High faculty describe the internship as “the capstone of the career curriculum and the ultimate authentic assessment,” where students put their workforce skills to the test in real world, adult workplaces. To make this work, the school has two full-time internship managers recruiting and training host sites and mentors, managing the 35-45 students who are out on internships for 2 ½ hours a day each trimester, and negotiating appropriate placements for the group that will go out the following trimester. Students go through an interview process before receiving an offer for their placement. Each intern is paired with a trained mentor who evaluates them using criteria aligned with City High’s internal workforce rubric described above. Students complete a daily journal recording goals, activities, accomplishments, and learning, allowing the internship manager back at City High to monitor progress and identify any issues that need to be dealt with. The internship managers stress that the experience has to work for both sides: the student has to make a real contribution to the host organization while gaining real experience.

(3) Transition office: City High also has two full-time Transition Managers. Although they fulfill some of the same functions that college advisors might at other high schools, their role is much broader, in keeping with the school’s broader definition of post-high school success. Starting in 10th grade, the transition managers work with students, building on plans and experiences they are having in the career curriculum and internship, to develop and execute a specific post-secondary plan. Students are taken on tours of colleges and vocational training programs and supported with standardized test registration and preparation. By 12th grade, depending on the student’s goals, transition managers are helping students with the nitty-gritty of application requirements and

deadlines, whether that be for employment, training, the military, or college. This office also helps students navigate the financial aid system, playing a particularly aggressive role in making sure students and their families are aware of the requirements for the Pittsburgh Promise, a local scholarship program. When students graduate, the transition office continues to track their progress for at least the first year.

What are the non-negotiables?

For each of the best practices explored in this series of briefs, there are some fundamental assumptions that cannot be compromised if the practice is going to be effective. After ten years of experience, the research and analysis conducted for this brief suggests that the non-negotiables for building a workforce culture at the high school level are:

❖ **Make it universal:** After ten years of experience, City High leadership and staff believe strongly that their effectiveness at workforce preparation stems from the fact that all students participate, thus allowing it to become part of the culture of the school. There is no “vocational ed” for some students and not others. Workforce preparation and particularly the internship are crucial pieces of the school’s full inclusion special education model.² The internship is a graduation requirement, treated like a course, not just a nice resume builder. Students see that success in the workplace is the long-term goal for students aiming at academically competitive colleges and students seeking apprenticeship with a trade union and that many of the same skills and qualities are critical.

❖ **Make it integrated:** Also critical to the effectiveness of City High’s workforce preparation approach is the fact that it is an integrated sequence of experiences, not a one-off class or experience. The internship in particular is much more likely to be effective and meaningful when students have been systematically working towards it for three years, building skills, dispositions, and specific tools like a resume that will help them transition into the world of work. And transition counselors report that the post-secondary plans they help students develop are greatly enriched by what is learned in the internship experience: *“We consult with the internship manager and look at the internship information to make sure the transition plan is realistic. We learn a lot from those records, the daily journal and the final reflection of both the student and the mentor.”*

❖ **Professionalism is the norm, Inside the building and out:** Because City High students are expected to dress and conduct themselves professionally throughout their high school career, an expectation that is formalized in the “Workforce Preparation” grade, they are much readier than many teens to fit into a workplace. Little things like expecting eye contact and a firm handshake allow students to interact with adults confidently.

² See the best practice brief on Full Inclusion for more details on how workforce preparation works for students with disabilities.

One of the internship Managers reports proudly: *"If you set the bar so high here, they will be fine out there. People are so taken aback by our students, their demeanor, their work ethic, their technical skills. People don't realize they are high school students, not paid employees."*

- ❖ **Dream big, but reality check:** City High staff report that one of the most consistently challenging aspects of effective workforce preparation is to encourage kids to explore their dreams and ambitions, while also making sure they leave the school with a plan and specific next steps that are realistic and immediately actionable.

Why does City High do it?

Why might other schools want to?

Readiness, broadly defined: City High's mission is to prepare students for post-high school success. Rather than preparing some students for college and others for immediate entry into the workforce, the school focuses on developing the underlying skills and dispositions valued in the full range of potential academic and career paths. City High has not adopted or endorsed any particular framework or set of "readiness" standards; rather, their goals emerged from a bottom-up, common sense process of talking to colleges and employers about what recent graduates need to be able to do in order to succeed. The skills highlighted in City High's Graduate Profile do overlap significantly with discussions of "soft skills," "higher order skills," "cross curricular skills," and with the framework articulated by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, which includes problem solving, communication, information and technology literacy, adaptability, and initiative. Many of these same skills are prominent in the Common Core standards, recently adopted by 45 states including Pennsylvania. In fact the Common Core discussion has explicitly articulated the premise that college and career readiness are fundamentally the same.

A long term definition of success: For many high school students (and their anxious parents) college is the goal they are working towards. City High encourages students to view college acceptances as the beginning of the journey, one possible means to the desired end of fulfilling and self-sustaining work. For students who do get accepted at the school of their dreams, they have a more practical and specific view of why they are going to college and what they need to get from it.

"This is not a middle class school": City High's population is 61% low income, and many students will be the first in their family to receive post-secondary education. Many students may lack real world models of what it means to be "professional," relying instead on vague ideas garnered from the media, which may seem not to pertain to them. The four year immersive experience of City High's

workforce culture, combined with very concrete, practical steps like making sure students have a solid resume, paying for them to take entrance exams, and taking them on tours of colleges and training programs leaves very little to chance.

How does City High make it work?

Each of these best practice briefs provides practical advice about implementing the strategy. A few of the things City High has found that smoothed the way with establishing a workforce culture include:

- **Dedicated staff:** In addition to two certified classroom teachers who teach the trimester-long Career class in 9th-11th grades, City High employs two full time Internship Managers and two full-time Transition Counselors. This level of staffing allows a highly individualized approach to the planning and placement for each student, as well as developing and maintaining the school's relationship with hundreds of internship placement sites, colleges, and training programs. Administrators note that the skill sets and schedules of those non-classroom personnel can be quite different than those of a classroom teacher, making it difficult to blend the roles.
- **Tapping community:** Giving students exposure and experiences in real workplace settings requires ongoing outreach to the business community to develop and nurture relationships. City High's workforce program requires a steady stream of volunteers to make presentations about their fields, sit on interview panels, participate in simulations, and, especially, to host and mentor interns. One of the internship managers explains how a careful recruiting process yields both a steady supply of internship sites and other forms of support for the school: *"After 10 years, this Pittsburgh community has heard about our program and our students. One of the best practices employed in recruiting new internship sites is personal recommendation (often a result of networking). It is always preferred to have a personal recommendation for a staff member at a potential new site. When we locate a 'cheerleader' at the desired site, the school stands a better chance of being accepted for this partnership. The new internship mentor is invited to tour the school and see our school 'work'. We want them to know what they are buying into; we don't simply place unpaid interns out to provide free labor. Once the potential mentor(s) understand the City High 'way' they can then decide if we are right for them; through this face-to-face conversation, we can also decide if they are right for us. New adults and their worksites become part of the City High community. The new mentor is guided through program expectations and requirements. Sometimes potential partners are not the right fit, but many of these folks often still want to connect and support us. Whether we agree to partner for internships or not, visitors are given the opportunity to sign up as City High volunteers, to fill our panels for career class simulations and grad project panels throughout the year."*

³ <http://www.p21.org/overview/skills-framework>

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- **Consistency of execution:** City High's internship program is highly structured, and host sites know what they can expect year after year. When new sites are recruited for the program, individual mentors receive clear training and guidelines about providing an experience that balances real work of real value to the organization with a genuinely educational experience for the intern. By the time they reach the internship stage, students understand that they will be representing the school in the broader community, and that all of the aspects of professionalism that have been developed within the building (punctuality, appropriate dress, initiative) will come into play. The result, according to one of the internship managers, is *"Some of our sites tell us that they are dropping other high schools, but that we provide a reliable, competent program. If we say our kids will be there 1.30-4.00 Monday through Thursday, they will be there. They will have good workplace behavior and communication skills. For the employers, they value the one-to-one connection. They want to be part of the future of the region. They know the kinds of kids we are going to send."*
- **Content teachers support the mission:** Workforce preparation at City High works because it is a cultural orientation, not a program. Members of the workforce team emphasize that the experiences they provide students would be far less effective if they occurred in isolation from the rest of the curriculum. It is the continuity in expectations throughout the building, and beyond in the case of the internships, that allows professionalism to become second nature for a group of urban teenagers. One of the internship managers notes that, *"In a typical high school setting, the teachers are content experts. That is what they do: math, history. Here, every teacher is focused on that broader mission for students, what kind of graduates we are trying to produce. My advice to a traditional school that wanted to do internships right would be to start small with something like an integrated graduation project that gets teachers to expand past their subject focus and think about the underlying skills they want all students to develop."*
- **Incentivize the nitty gritty:** Although most educators acknowledge the importance of "soft skills" in students' future success, most high schools are not set up to develop and reward those skills in any systematic way. At City High, the steps that students need to take to prepare for the future are part of the curriculum, show up on their report cards, and are included as graduation requirements. The Workforce Grade students receive makes the vague notion of "professionalism" very specific and immediate for students, and gives them regular feedback as to how to attain it. The career class includes as assignments concrete steps in the transition planning process such as developing resumes and cover letters and filling out college applications. Teachers stress that in career class in particular, *"Nothing should just be an assignment that gets turned in for a grade- it should have a practical application."* The internship also is a graded class, with clear criteria and written assignments.
- **Give them immediately marketable skills:** By the time City High students go out on internships, and even more so by the time they graduate, their resume shows skills that are immediately valued in the adult world of work. Most concretely, all students have achieved multiple Microsoft Office certifications, having passed an exam that demonstrates advanced capabilities in those widely used workplace productivity applications. Because technology is thoroughly integrated into the academic curriculum, students can point to examples of using common workforce technology tools to accomplish real tasks.
- **Expose students to more options:** Like many young adolescents, most students enter City High with fairly vague ideas about the world of work, often shaped by the "glamour professions" spotlighted on TV: doctor, lawyer, and, these days, forensic pathologist. An administrator explains that in the early stages of career exploration, in 9th grade Career class, *"we back them up to their skills and interests and what am I good at and what do I like to do and where does that point me in the broad world of work."* The staff has adopted the language of "career clusters" to encourage students to think about the full range of jobs in a field and the levels of preparation required.
- **Brutal honesty:** Part of the value of the "career clusters" approach is that it allows students to calibrate their aspirations against current progress and develop realistic alternatives: *"We don't want to pigeonhole or be a dream crusher, but we want every student to have an achievable goal when they walk across the stage (at graduation). Not, 'I hate science but I want to be a doctor because they make a lot of money.' We have to show them how their nitty gritty daily decisions connect to what they say their goals are. Pull them back to comparing their behavior with their goals- talk is cheap. Show me you are really pursuing it."* The "reality cure" approach is also the guiding principal of the mock employment interviews students do in 10th grade, with outside volunteers: *"We ask these adults they have never met before to be brutally honest with the kids, calling them on chewing gum, a limp handshake, no eye contact. It is one thing for them to hear it from us, but when they hear it from an outsider, that is something they remember."* Learning such lessons in a realistic but low risk simulation gives students increased confidence and specific strategies when they walk into the real thing.

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How does City High know it is working?

Each of the best practice briefs in this series provides suggestions about how schools implementing the practice can monitor its effectiveness.

Interns go into the workplace prepared and perform well over the course of the experience: To track both preparation and performance of the interns, mentors are asked to complete an evaluation of their interns after weeks 2 and 12. Mentors are asked to assess their interns using a rubric aligned with the school's internal Workforce Preparation rubric in the broad domains of Work Ethic, Demeanor, and Responsibility. Over the last two years, City High interns have received average ratings of over 90% in all three domains at Week 2, indicating that they make a strong first impression. Scores are even higher at the Week 12 mark, indicating that their performance is consistent with those positive initial impressions.

Average mentor ratings of City High interns over 2 years			
	Work Ethic	Demeanor	Responsibility
Week 2	93%	94%	93%
Week 12	95%	96%	95%

City High continues to think about the most effective ways to assess and improve the internship program and maintain alignment between what is valued in terms of workforce preparation and what is valued in core courses. Starting in the 2011-12 school year, mentors were also asked at the end of the internship to rate students on their ability to learn and perform independently, a skill set that has been an area of increased focus within the academic curriculum recently. Mentors use a modified version of a rubric developed by teachers to assess students' independent learning in academic courses. In the first year of this new rating, the average scores for all interns were:

Average mentor rating of interns' independent learning performance on 1-4 scale. 1—Needs significant improvement, 2—Nearly proficient, 3—Proficient, 4—Advanced.	
(1) Breaking down and organizing tasks	
a) Understanding tasks	3.6
b) Creates a timeline	3.5
c) Gathers resources	3.5
d) Accesses previously learned information	3.6
(2) Completing tasks	
a) Managing time	3.4
b) Maintaining organization	3.5

Internship sites want to work with City High: City High currently has a roster of 127 viable placements for interns, developed through the careful recruiting process described earlier. Twenty two of those are new sites this year, meaning over 100 are sites that have been in the program for multiple years. Over the last four years, 46 sites were "retired." Forty of those withdrawals were due to changes unrelated to the satisfaction with the program or its interns (business sold, relocated, or changed hours of operation, changes in the bus schedule made it too difficult for interns to reach the site, or City High did not renew the site because the experience was insufficiently educational for the students). With 100+ sites retained each year and an average of 1.5 choosing not to renew, the average has been 98.5% of internship sites agreeing to host again. The table below reports the satisfaction ratings of mentors in the most recent year:

Mentor Satisfaction Rating			
	5-Excellent	4-Above Average	3-Average
Satisfaction with student	60%	35%	5%
Satisfaction with program	73%	27%	0%

Transition plans: City High's bottom line is for students to succeed post-high school. The most immediate measure of that is that they all walk across the graduation stage with viable plans for the next steps in their careers. For the previous two years, those plans have broken down as follows:

Transition plans of City High Graduates	Class of 2010	Class of 2011
4 year universities/colleges	68%	64%
2 year colleges/tech schools	23%	21%
Training/Military/Employment	9%	15%

The successful placement of graduates is a reflection of the entire City High program and approach, not just the workforce culture. However, staff argue that the emphasis on developing soft skills and the structured support for developing concrete, realistic career plans are an important contributor to these numbers.

Tradeoffs and challenges (and how City High addresses them)

To give readers of these briefs the benefit of City High's experience with the featured practice, this section attempts to capture some of the pitfalls the school has encountered in developing a workforce culture and the strategies they have used to work through them.

Defining the parental role: Defining and encouraging the right level of parent involvement is tricky for all high schools, but especially so for charter schools that draw from a wide geographic area. City High has struggled to realize the aspiration of making parents full members of their students' transition planning teams. With opportunities for parents to be physically on site few and logistically challenging, the school has endeavored to use electronic communication to keep parents in the loop. But keeping parents informed is not the same as having them actively involved. One of the transition counselors acknowledges bluntly that *"Most of our parents are not involved in the planning process,"* and that socioeconomic status plays a role: *"The higher end students tend to have more parent involvement and more financial options. For me I just end up sending out the transcripts. They have somebody else talking to them about it. The ones that are high achievers but without parental support, they are not good at telling their story and the counseling is so important."* In helping students develop and begin to execute a specific plan for their future, the workforce team must maintain the tricky balance of keeping parents informed and not stepping on their toes, while making sure all students have the advice, guidance, and support they need. A teacher articulated the dilemma: *"Are we being too pushy and getting in their space or is that involvement not there and we need to step in and provide that support for kids? It is hard to be sure of the right role."*

Making tough matches: By the time students are placed in an internship, they have been through a three year process of researching and focusing career options, polishing skills and resumes, and going through internal interviews to narrow down their choices. When the internship office makes the student an offer, it is rarely a surprise. The internship managers estimate that *"with less than 10% of students do we struggle to find an appropriate placement, but those cases can take up a lot of your time."* In some cases the issue is a mismatch between aspirations and qualification, in which case, says an internship manager, *"this is the reality office, where we have that tough conversation, and help them find a placement where they are more likely to succeed."* In other cases, students remain unfocused and/or unmotivated, requiring an extra push from the internship manager. The bottom line is, *"If they are dismissed or fail to attend, it is treated like a class. If they want a City High diploma, they have to complete an internship."* Sometimes that push is just what is needed: *"Some students who don't do well in the school walls turn out to be excellent interns. They are doing real work that they see having real impact on an*

organization and they flourish, they spread their wings."

Letting go: The flip side of City High's supportive culture, particularly the close relationships students develop with adults because of the looping structure that keeps them together for four years, is that students can become dependent on that support. There has been an increasing consciousness within the school of scaffolding independence, or, as one of the transition counselors described it, *"empowering not enabling. At a certain point all the support becomes counter-productive. They need to learn how to navigate financial aid and course registrations at their own institutions without us. Self-advocacy is something our students struggle with because our environment is so supportive. They have to learn there will not always be someone around to make sure things happen."*

Supporting dreams without setting students up for failure: As discussed throughout this brief, the balance between supporting students' aspirations and tempering them with reality is a constant challenge for the workforce team. Forced to choose, however, the faculty as a whole, has come down firmly on the side of reality. City High is committed to making sure every student has an achievable post-graduation plan and that they are actively making steps to make it happen.

Lessons learned

City High's comprehensive support for a workforce culture has evolved over time to reflect the following lessons learned which may be of use to other schools considering adopting this approach. These are adaptations the school has made along the way which other schools may be able to take advantage of upfront.

Don't over-privilege "college" language: As part of their "research and development" orientation, City High uses means from Facebook to systematic surveys to individual e-mails to national data sets to track the outcomes of their graduates. In recent years these data have led to increasing concern about the portion of their population who do not immediately enter higher education. Specifically, data suggested that these students tended to have plans that were less resilient, more likely to be derailed by unforeseen life challenges. In response, City High staff have made a conscious effort to broaden the definition of success beyond college and ensure that students for whom college is not the best next step are given the same focus. A member of the workforce team explains, *"At first everyone was talking about college but we really worked to change the language to 'options and opportunities for education and employment.' We didn't want some of them to think they were getting less."* There has been an effort to diversify the professions of outside speakers who come in to give talks in the career class, to reduce any perceived stigma around jobs that require less than a college education but offer solid opportunities.

CITY CHARTER HIGH SCHOOL BEST PRACTICE BRIEF

Workforce Culture

One of the transition counselors summarizes the shift in the culture: *"College is not the way for all to be successful. I see change in how the administrators talk about it to students, how they talk about it in career class, in advisory. Kids used to say what they thought we wanted them to say: 'I want to be a doctor or a lawyer.' I think they feel ok to say now college is not what I want to do and I can still be successful and here is my plan."*

Make the most of the advisor role: From the outset, City High has had an advisory program in which teachers meet at least weekly during the lunch/clubs period with groups of students from their grade level team. Advisors always played a role in monitoring grades and discussing goals, but there was no formal curriculum, expectations were unclear, and the way teachers operationalized the role varied widely. Most importantly, there was a disconnect between the advisory role and the workforce program, although both shared the goals and responsibility for helping students prepare for the future and stay on track. Over time, the school has developed a loose curriculum for the advisory period, enabling some of that time to be used for specific tasks in the post-secondary planning process in coordination with the flow of the workforce team.

If you want to make sure it gets done, make it a curriculum, and give it a grade: From the beginning, career preparation has been part of the formal curriculum for all City High students in grades 9-11 and the internship has been treated like a graded class. As the school realized that some important planning tasks for some students were falling through the cracks, they made those steps part of the curriculum for the advisory program. This made sense because students and advisors are in weekly contact, whereas students are only in Career class one trimester each year. Most recently, the school has decided to formalize 12th grade post-secondary planning, formerly handled in one-on-one meetings, into a seminar style class. Explains one of the transition counselors, *"It is an opportunity to build those relationships, know those kids better as you help them develop their plan. It will be more set time with them, less hit or miss. We won't have to chase them down. You are getting graded for this now. It transforms that series of information and deadlines into a curriculum."*

What other City High best practices does it connect to?

Ideally, no "best practice" stands alone but is an integral part of a coherent educational approach. Workforce culture at City High is buttressed by the presence of several other key innovations that support the underlying goal of a school culture where students take ownership of their learning and their futures. See other best practice briefs in this series for more specifics on these other practices:

Looping: City High's looping structure, in which teams of students and teachers stay together throughout the four years of high school, enables teachers to know individual students extraordinarily well. Although the members of the post-high school planning staff sit outside that looping structure and work across grade levels, they are able to draw on the knowledge of the core team teachers as they counsel students in developing their individual transition plans. And as teams of teachers go through the loop together, their shared understanding about effective practices in post-high school preparation shows up in how they customize both the advisory program and the criteria for Workforce Grades.

Full inclusion: From the design phase, City High has held firm to the premise that schools work best when all students are included in the same educational experiences. This puts the responsibility on the school and its educators to know their students well enough to provide the right supports for them all to be successful. It also allows the maintenance of a culture that is consistent in the messages it sends about values and expectations. This idea of inclusion applies to the school's workforce culture for two populations that are often treated differently with regard to post high-school planning. For students who are college bound, the experiences of the career curriculum and the internship give concrete focus to their aspirations and their reasons for going to college. The right internship placement is particularly crucial for special education students, giving them a supported experience in a real work environment. City High's special education teachers are also heavily involved in developing transition plans for the students they work with and making sure their students are taking concrete steps to make those plans happen before they leave the school. As both the internship and special education programs at City High have grown, the relationships that have been nurtured with employers, training programs, and local educational institutions have provided a powerful network for disabled students after graduation.

Transfer questions

Issues to reflect on in considering adapting this practice in your school...

How will we define workforce readiness in a way that applies to all of our students?

How will teachers in all content areas support our vision of workforce readiness in concrete ways?

What scheduling and personnel changes will need to happen to support an internship program that is substantive and consistent?

How many of our students leave our school with realistic post-high school plans?

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