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URBAN COLLEGES MOVE INTO K-12 SCHOOLS TO HELP KIDS AND THEMSELVES

New schools aim to improve neighborhoods near campus, boost student pipeline

By Melissa Korn
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Colleges have long encouraged students to tutor area children and funneled aspiring teachers into nearby classrooms for training. Some operate pricey private “lab” schools to test new pedagogy like play-based learning or bilingual instruction, or to attract faculty with families.

Now they are taking over entire public schools.

The University of California, Los Angeles, Johns Hopkins University and others are lending their names to new charters or [partnering with districts to overhaul troubled institutions](#), often investing millions or tens of millions of dollars in cash or faculty time.

They say the K-12 work is about testing education theories, such as the value of socioeconomically diverse classrooms, and being good neighbors, but acknowledge the engagement is far from altruistic. It is also about improving blighted blocks that abut their campuses and strengthening the pipeline of students who could eventually enroll at their institutions.

The strategy has risks and sometimes doesn’t pan out, as shown by a University of Southern California experiment that was called off in 2012 after five years and stumbles at a Baltimore school in which Johns Hopkins has invested millions of dollars.

Aiming to avoid the potential headaches of working within the confines of a school district, Purdue University invested \$1.1 million for startup costs at the Purdue Polytechnic High School, a science, technology, engineering and math focused Indianapolis charter school opening this fall. It has also pledged \$1.7 million over the next five years to cover faculty advising on the hands-on curriculum and an emergency backstop if enrollments don’t pick up quickly.

The school, about 70 miles away from Purdue’s main campus and in Indiana’s largest city, was created in part “to increase significantly the unacceptably low number of Indianapolis Public School students who are qualified to succeed at Purdue,” said university President Mitch Daniels.

The City University of New York had a similar goal when it began setting up early college high schools, which allow students to earn two years of college credit before graduating, in partnership with the New York City Department of Education. It started with two schools, in 2003. There are now 17.

"A stronger public school system leads to stronger students coming into the CUNY system," said Cass Conrad, dean of K-12 initiatives at CUNY, which invests upward of \$4 million a year in the high schools.

Roughly three-quarters of incoming freshmen at CUNY schools are graduates of the city's public high schools.

A new prekindergarten through 8th grade public school in Orlando's poor Parramore district will open in August, with backing from the University of Central Florida, the Orange County Public Schools and several community groups. It is across the street from where UCF recently broke ground on its downtown Orlando campus.

The \$41.3 million Parramore school is funded and operated by the district, but UCF is providing curriculum guidance and teacher training, staffing social work and speech pathology interns and helping with overall strategy and operations. The school said it couldn't put a firm dollar amount on the investment as more students and faculty likely will continue to get involved.

The Parramore project is based on a model that UCF used to turn around a high school in another underserved Orlando neighborhood. Since UCF and its partners took over what is now Evans Community School in 2012, enrollment increased by 17 percent, while the graduation rate rose to 88 percent from 64 percent.

Last year, 28 students from Evans were admitted to UCF, up from two in 2011-2012.

UCF has gotten more than \$4 million from the state legislature over the past four years to fund its Center for Community Schools, which now works with 18 Florida districts interested in pursuing the model that teams universities with local health-care providers, school districts and social service nonprofits.

Meanwhile, UCLA announced in February that it will help a Los Angeles middle school expand into high-school grades, and revise its curriculum to emphasize project-based learning; enrollment fell by 60 percent there in the past five years as families were lured by charter school alternatives.

The school, funded by the Los Angeles Unified School District but granted more autonomy than most public schools, has been renamed the Horace Mann UCLA Community School. UCLA doesn't make any direct payments for the core academic program, but does support enrichment programs through donor funds, and faculty, staff and students annually contribute thousands of volunteer hours at Horace Mann and at a similar type of school UCLA launched in Koreatown eight years ago.

Johns Hopkins President Ronald Daniels acknowledges "growing pains and stumbles" in the rollout of the \$54 million Elmer A. Henderson: A Johns Hopkins Partnership School in East Baltimore, near the university's medical campus.

Johns Hopkins contributed \$12 million toward school construction between 2011 and 2014. The university continues to provide \$750,000 in annual operating funds for the K-8 school via unrestricted donations, foundation support and the School of Education budget.

But Mr. Daniels said the school isn't yet "where it should be."

It isn't as economically diverse as leaders first envisioned, as construction was delayed on new middle-income housing included in a broader East Baltimore development project. And test scores, while on the rise, match those at schools with similar demographics and trail the city average.

The school, which is known as Henderson-Hopkins and operates as a contract school with the district, underwent a reboot last year with a new executive director, principal and curriculum that focuses more on nonfiction texts and critical reading.

University staffers are getting more involved, too, by offering leadership mentoring for administrators and sharing research on mindfulness to help students stay engaged.

"Starting a new school turns out to be difficult," said Mr. Daniels, though he added that Hopkins has no choice but to be in the game.

"Our fate is inextricably linked to the fate of Baltimore," Mr. Daniels said. "As goes Baltimore, so goes Hopkins."