

# The Evolution of the Urban Assembly School Support Model



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## Introduction

Despite modest increases in high school graduation rates for all students, disparities still exist for some groups, such as students of color and students from low-income families who face systemic challenges in accessing high-quality public schools. Third-party “school support” organizations like the Urban Assembly have long focused on addressing this inequity. The Urban Assembly (UA) has been working with New York City schools since 1997. Currently, UA provides their schools with professional development to school-based staff using two formats – professional learning communities (PLCs) and coaching – focused on five main program areas: academics, leadership, social-emotional learning, postsecondary readiness, and alumni success. In addition, UA supports general school functioning in various ways, such as acting as a liaison to the New York City Public Schools (NYCPS) and providing hiring and staffing support.

Over the course of its 25-year history, Urban Assembly has remained steady in its mission to advance students’ preparation for postsecondary success, adapting its approach and activities to meet the changing priorities of its schools, its students, and the New York City Public Schools. Over time UA has made changes both to its centralized offerings and in its approach to working with individual schools to build their capacity to support student success.

MDRC is conducting a study of the Urban Assembly to understand its model and its impact on student outcomes. This initial discussion of UA’s evolution can be instructive for other organizations working to support schools to adapt in ever-changing contexts.

## The UA Model’s Evolution

Since its founding by Richard Kahan, UA has seen its school support model evolve through several phases, some of which overlap. These phases are:



The **school design** phase is characterized by NYCPS's increased focus on small high schools, which led to the formation of UA and its opening of 27 new small, theme-based high schools.

### NYC Context

In the early 2000s, New York City closed many large, failing high schools and opened small high schools. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (partnered with Carnegie Corporation and Open Society Institute) invested in small school intermediaries to establish small high schools of choice through the New Century High Schools Initiative.

In 2002, after bringing NYCPS under mayoral control, the Bloomberg Administration announced the intention to establish 200 small high schools. NYCPS elevated the role of the city's intermediary organizations by tasking them with supporting the development of new small high schools, providing them a great deal of autonomy in school design.

Beginning in 2008, NYCPS focused on strengthening and expanding their career and technical education (CTE) programming in both traditional high schools and standalone CTE schools.

### UA Context

#### AT THE NETWORK LEVEL

Originally founded to address urban poverty broadly in the South Bronx in the mid-1990s, the UA soon identified secondary schools as a central for creating economic opportunities for the neighborhood. UA opened its first school, the Bronx School of Law, Government and Justice, in 1997 (with support from the Annenberg Foundation) to help an historically underserved community in an innovative way. Afterwards, UA shifted its focus exclusively to creating and supporting small schools.

In 2001, the city approached UA to submit a proposal for the New Century High Schools initiative to design schools based on the core principles of academic rigor, personalization, and community partnerships.

#### AT THE SCHOOL LEVEL

During this phase, UA designed and opened a total of 27 small, theme-based schools, 17 of which were developed as part of the New Century High Schools initiative. UA's goals for these new schools included:

- Serving predominantly low-income students who would otherwise attend underperforming schools
- Serving as many students as possible, so long as UA could do so effectively
- Building a network of schools that support one another and contribute to a larger learning community

Toward the latter end of this phase (2011–2013), UA created some of the city's CTE schools, including the first CTE charter school in NYC.

## School Management 2008–2015



The **school management** phase is characterized by UA working to create a more centralized network of schools, shifting to an outcome-oriented approach, and ensuring that their schools became “mature schools.”

### NYC Context

In 2009, school support was streamlined, with schools choosing to partner with one of 55 networks, including UA.

In 2010, New York State adopted Common Core Standards, which emphasize college and career readiness.

Under the de Blasio administration, NYCPS assumed some of the roles that intermediaries were playing by granting superintendents more direct purview in supervising schools.

### UA Context

#### AT THE NETWORK LEVEL

As some of the functions of intermediaries were brought into NYCPS, UA became an official “school support organization” for its original 20 schools and several redesign schools.

UA provided a variety of supports to schools, including instructional support, college planning, partnerships, and school operations. UA also continued to focus on developing a connected network of schools, for example, by creating a principal advisory group.

#### AT THE SCHOOL LEVEL

UA focused on building the capacity for all its schools to become “mature” schools by July 2015, based on meeting long-term outcomes around school leadership, academic success, resource management, partnerships, and institutional college awareness and focus.

During this time, UA provided general support to their schools, which was individualized and responsive to specific school needs.

At the same time, UA began to develop and pilot various programs that they then expanded to more NYCPS schools within and outside their network, including the Bridge to College alumni program, the Learning Cultures literacy program, and the College Ready Framework connected to the Common Core. This strategy greatly expanded during the next phase.



The **school support and program development** phase is characterized by a shift from the generalist support model to a programmatic support delivery model, as a result of changes at the NYCPS related to the role of intermediary organizations.

### NYC Context

In 2015, NYCPS centralized school management by dissolving most networks and shrinking the role of private organizations. The remaining school support networks were granted “affinity group” status, and their role was reduced to mostly instructional support. NYCPS increased the role of superintendents in managing and supporting schools and opened borough-based support centers to provide operational support that the district no longer contracted out to affinity partners. Each affinity network was assigned a network superintendent, who monitored network performance.

In 2020, the Affinity Support Center was officially disbanded, although aspects of the affinity structure were left in place. Networks kept their dedicated superintendent, the central district office was closed, and schools were reassigned to borough-based support offices.

### UA Context

#### AT THE NETWORK LEVEL

In 2015, UA shifted from the holistic support approach characterized by the management phase to become a “Partnership Support Organization” with NYCPS. As part of this shift, UA pivoted to a programmatic support delivery model, where the support they provided to schools fell into discrete programs.

#### AT THE SCHOOL LEVEL

Within each program area, UA offered specific programs, which varied by year. Some programs that were consistently offered during this time include professional development and coaching around school leadership, data exploration, algebra instruction, and social-emotional learning.

UA's supports to schools began to follow a three-tiered structure from most general to most individualized: network-wide supports (tier 1), school-wide supports, such as professional learning communities and workshops (tier 2), and school-specific coaching to individuals or small groups (tier 3).

## Program Scale 2021–PRESENT



The current **program scale** phase is characterized by efforts to expand UA’s programming to schools outside of their network of schools.

### NYC Context

The Adams administration began in 2022 and instituted reforms aimed at streamlining the district’s bureaucracy.

### UA Context

UA continues to offer their network schools programming in five areas: leadership, academics, social-emotional learning, postsecondary readiness and support, and alumni.

UA has scaled some of its programs district-wide (for instance, Strong Resilient NYC, an initiative built on UA’s Resilient Scholars Program) and to new parts of the city (like Algebra Success in 20 schools in the Bronx).

## UA Today

Though the number of schools in the UA network has varied from year to year, UA supported 23 high schools during the 2022-23 school year, serving roughly 10,000 students throughout Manhattan, Brooklyn, and the Bronx. Since 2017, UA has expanded its programming nationally, starting with their Resilient Scholars Program, which provides curriculum for social-emotional learning in nine states. UA offers one model for school support organizations across the country, as urban districts have increasingly begun to rely on outside networks for critical resources and services.

As UA turns to scaling within schools they support in New York City, the programs that they developed earlier remain the focus of their work. Most schools choose to participate in multiple programs. The UA theory of change (illustrated below) posits that providing tools and professional development to schools, who in turn use these tools and systems to better support students, will result in improved student outcomes.

### Inputs

UA receives funding and support from NYCPS and beyond.

UA receives funding and support from NYCPS and other private foundations to support their work. They also provide professional development to their own internal UA office staff.

## Network Activities

UA provides school staff with professional learning communities and coaching.

UA provides professional development to school-based staff, using two formats: professional learning communities (PLCs) and coaching. The PLCs are multi-school gatherings where participating staff meet with peers at other schools to discuss common challenges and develop solutions together. UA coaching is more individualized, happening one-on-one or in small groups at schools. Specialized UA staff have extended engagements at specific schools to support and troubleshoot implementation of program activities. UA convenes a principal learning community and provides leadership training to principals. Beyond training, UA staff advocate with NYCPS for resources for their schools. UA also offers schools access to its data system with information about students and staff, supports school staff in interpreting the data, and provides guidance in using the data for decision-making.

## School Activities

Schools can participate in UA programming in five main areas.

All UA schools have the benefit of drawing upon the lessons and experience of the “family of schools,” the network of 23 UA schools. All are focused on students’ college and career trajectories and have an explicit goal of creating a positive school climate with a deep commitment to equity and social justice. UA offers schools five main programs that they can choose to participate in: leadership, algebra, social-emotional learning, postsecondary readiness, and alumni success. Each program area consists of several established approaches grounded in evidence-based reform strategies.

## Student Activities

Students should experience a positive school experience with well-trained and supported teachers.

By combining these program areas of support, UA schools seek to develop strong communities with trained and supported teachers who create a rich student experience. Students have increased access to high-quality instruction with rigorous and grade-appropriate learning tasks, all within a positive school environment with robust social-emotional supports. They have increased access to work-based learning opportunities, such as paid internships and career exposure events. Students create individualized college and career plans supported by guidance staff and receive mentoring from alumni. After high school, students have access to an alumni network and programming, such as workshops about study skills and financial management.

## Student Outcomes

Students should have better high school and long-term college and career outcomes.

Students' engagement in and experiences with these opportunities are expected to lead to better high school outcomes, including higher rates of (1) being on track for graduation by the end of ninth grade, (2) attendance, (3) passing the New York State Regents exams at the college-ready level, and (4) high school graduation. They are also expected to lead to better long-term outcomes, including increased enrollment and persistence in college, certificate earning, college graduation, employment, and earnings.

## MDRC's Evaluation

The MDRC research team is conducting a comprehensive study of Urban Assembly, as well as the broader landscape of school support organizations working with New York City Public Schools. The study is funded by the Institute of Education Sciences in U.S. Department of Education. In the coming years, MDRC will report on:

- UA model implementation, the fidelity of the model as implemented to the theory of action, and UA schools' engagement with the model components;
- the effects of enrollment in a UA school on student outcomes;
- whether the effects of UA enrollment differ across students and schools;
- the costs associated with implementing UA's school supports; and
- the landscape of school support organizations working with NYC public schools.

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