

Designing a University–Assisted Community School: Figuring Organizational Change through Personal Relationships

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Abstract

This article reports on the year-long design process to develop a University Assisted Community School (UACS) through a partnership between Buffalo Public Schools and the University at Buffalo, SUNY. Drawing on prior reports on UACS partnerships, we found it helpful to analyze our process in terms of *relationships between organizations* and *relationships between people*. We were particularly interested in how the organizational logics of the school district and those of the university shaped our identities and interactions within the UACS design committee (composed of public school and university faculty), and how the relationships we formed within our committee created the potential for transformation of the school district and the university. We conceptualize the university and the school district as figured *worlds*, socially- and culturally-constructed conceptual spaces which shape how participants interpret themselves and their roles. Using a participatory case study methodology, we analyze four vignettes from our school design proposal. These vignettes align with the four key strategies identified through our proposal: personal growth and relationships, authentic inquiry and democratic decision-making, computer science as an interdisciplinary nexus, and infrastructure supporting the school-university partnership. Our findings identify several mechanisms by which trusting relationships among committee members are helping to catalyze institutional change.

Introduction

In the Summer of 2024, administrators and faculty from Buffalo Public Schools (BPS) and the University at Buffalo, SUNY (UB) were brought together by both organizations' leaders and charged with designing a new university-assisted high school. Sitting at the table in the initial meeting, Principal Angela Cullen led with, "We are not broken, and we don't need to be fixed." Angela is the Principal of Research Laboratory High School (RLHS), a small high school of 200 students. The school offers a research-oriented science curriculum, boasts an 89 percent graduation rate (compared to 74% citywide), and has, for the past decade, collaborated with UB to provide STEM learning experiences. Angela explains that their school is more than its program or its partners; the adults and students in the school represent a deeply interconnected, thoughtful community where faculty integrate research and data science into everyday routines like gym workouts, students play ping-pong in a community hallway, and teachers organize the after-school clubs. Most of the school's teachers and staff have worked at the school since it was founded in 2016. They worked through COVID schooling together. The building leaders are proud of their students' achievements and the school's reputation. In partnering to become a university-assisted community school, they saw an opportunity to strengthen their academic program and support students' transitions to postsecondary college and career.

UB faculty members joining the committee saw an opportunity to support a school community redesigning itself to provide students an excellent education while working to address chronic issues such as environmental contamination, segregation, and disparities in health and economic opportunity. They saw the potential to contribute their own research expertise to this work: computational literacies (Proctor), community-engaged social studies and digital civics (Monreal), democratic schooling and residency-based teacher preparation (Cipollone), and critical pedagogy and environmental justice in science education (Schindel). However, the UB faculty were also wary of working with a school district often seen as bureaucratic and opaque. They had all been part of prior district collaborations in which all stakeholders were seemingly enthusiastically on board until the project was summarily cancelled. They were also wary about who would benefit: university-community projects have historically been connected with the conversion of Black and immigrant neighborhoods into "chic university neighborhoods" contributing to the knowledge economy (Taylor, Jr. et al., 2018, p. 6).

Together, the Research Lab High School and UB faculty formed the UACS design committee. They met weekly between May 2024 and September 2025, gradually building trusting relationships and a sense of cautious optimism. In January 2025, the Board of Education approved the committee's proposal for a newly imagined University-Assisted Community School. A memorandum of understanding between BPS and UB was signed, and the design team shifted to planning for the first cohort of students.

With this brief background as context, this article reports on designing a University-Assisted Community School (UACS) that from its inception has sought to both (a) develop a praxis that models and strengthens justice-centered democracy within schools and (b) transform both institutions (the public school and the public university) in the process (Harkavy, 1998). We began from the premise that schools are key potential sites of participatory democracy, as conceptualized by Dewey (1916) and later Harkavy (2006), although we are also influenced by critical scholarship that recognizes the power differentials which make participatory democracy in public sphere(s) a complicated ideal and praxis (e.g. Fraser, 1990). We understand the importance of connecting public schools with universities (engines of opportunity to which access remains inequitable), and see UACS as a compelling model.

Decades of work have gone into UACS partnerships (Harkavy et al., 2013), yielding precedents and design lessons which inform our work. The focus has always been on fundamental transformation of both the schools and the university—Harkavy and colleagues make two blunt assertions: “no effective democratic schooling system, no democratic society,” and “no radical reform of American higher education, no successful education reform” (2013, p. 525). However, many past UACS partnerships have tended, in practice, to work around the edges of each institution’s organizing logic—in schools, UACS work tends to begin with extracurricular or electives instead of the core subjects, and in universities, UACS typically form from committed individuals, not by a structural institutional commitment of faculty time, curriculum, or policy. Lawson (2010) makes clear that the model, by being enacted in and with the local context, is ‘dynamic by design’ (p. 6) with impacts not immediately measurable. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to aim for this dynamism to engage in structural transformation of the organizations involved.

Our own UACS design process was motivated by recognition of the need for radical transformation of both K-12 and postsecondary education, but it was also informed by our awareness that both systems are resistant to change. The first meeting of faculty from Buffalo Public Schools and UB, described above, underscored the need to understand each other’s worlds as a prerequisite to outlining the project. This paper addresses two questions which feel urgent to our ongoing work:

1. How has the organizing logic of the school district and the university shaped the work of the UACS design committee?
2. How has the committee’s work created the potential for transformation within our collaboration and, more broadly, of the school district and the university?

In the following sections, we provide context for the project and then develop a theoretical framework which frames the relationship between schools and universities in terms of *relationships between organizations* and *relationships between individuals*. We draw on the concept of figured worlds to help us understand how the worlds of school district and university shaped our interactions on the committee, and also how the relationships we have built within the committee create the possibility for organizational change. As will be further defined below, figured worlds are socially constructed contexts through which individual and organizational roles and meanings are interpreted. We illustrate how these dynamics emerged in our committee by tracing four themes which have become central to our conceptualization of the new school: personal growth and relationships, authentic inquiry and democratic decision-making, computer science as an interdisciplinary nexus, and infrastructure supporting the school-university partnership.

Context

The Research Laboratory High School of Life Sciences and Bioinformatics (RLHS) opened in 2016 as a socio-economic integration model to support pathways for students interested in STEM and respond to a demand for more academically rigorous high schools. Founded out of a BPS math and science high school, the small, science-focused school was supported by a partnership with UB, specifically UB’s New York State Center of Excellence Bioinformatics and Life Sciences, to foster inquiry-based learning, science research activity, and real-world problem solving. The program was designed to be both college and career focused, modeled after the success of magnet programs in the city. Enrolling an average of 50 students

per grade, RLHS has maintained high graduation rates and a curriculum centered on science research; however, despite many conversations, a mutually-agreed upon space for co-location on a UB campus was never identified, and supporting student research over the summer proved challenging. Initially co-located in a building with another Buffalo high school, Research Lab now occupies a temporary location on the ground floor of the Tri-Main Center, a multi-purpose building of non-profits and art studios, a mile from the University at Buffalo's South Campus and less than five miles from the University's Downtown Campus. Though students use public transportation to engage in partnership activities on the Downtown Campus, the Research Lab leadership team expressed a desire to re-envision how the school interacts with its community, in particular the university. Principal Cullen explained that, since 2016, their school has evolved to meet the needs of its students and seeks enhancement of the academic program, including through a more transparent, dynamic, and ongoing relationship with its higher education partners.

School leaders describe RLHS as a community school, one in which the small size and inclusive culture allow them to develop strong relationships with their students. Although students choose the school through the citywide lottery (therefore challenging the idea of a community school serving a specific geographic area), leaders build community through a summer bridge program, after school clubs, social-emotional supports, regular school-community events, and legal aid programs for families. Like other BPS schools, Research Lab operates using the shared governance model: a School Based Management Team, including a parent liaison position, and a participatory budgeting process. Though leaders see parents and families as active partners in their community, they acknowledge that parents are not generally able to visit school outside of special events and programs; when RLHS distributes the district's annual school climate survey, they receive few parent responses. One goal of the UACS partnership is to increase family engagement and agentic participation.

Although UB has forged various partnerships with the district (including RLHS), they have often taken the form of stand-alone summer achievement programs or scholarships for high-achieving students (Anzalone, 2009). However, the relationship between BPS and UB's Graduate School of Education began to change in 2019, when together they engaged in an innovative partnership to prepare educators to teach in the district. Known as the University of Buffalo Teacher Residency program (UBTR), this program recruited candidates with bachelors degrees in something other than education who were interested in becoming BPS teachers and provided them a paid opportunity to do so. Selected candidates (residents) completed a masters degree in 18 months while also participating in a year-long placement with an expert teacher. Upon successful completion of the program, residents were hired by the district and required to teach for three years (as part of a service agreement), with the ultimate goal of them completing their careers in Buffalo. Between 2019 and 2025, UBTR prepared more than 100 educators, many of whom remain in the district, and was also the primary pathway through which educators of color became teachers in the district. Program evaluation data shows that UBTR-prepared teachers have better outcomes than their peers, recording fewer disciplinary referrals, better student attendance rate, and higher student GPAs.

The decision to transform Research Lab High School into a UACS emerged from the trust built over those six years of the UBTR program, as well as several years of conversations between Suzanne Rosenblith, Dean of UB's Graduate School of Education, and Will Keresztes, a member of the BPS superintendent's cabinet and later BPS Interim Superintendent, discussing how BPS and UB could more effectively and equitably connect Buffalo's K12 education system to the university. Similar to other large urban research universities, UB operates as a discrete institution from the city; since the 1960s, the University's undergraduate programs have been located in a suburb which feels inaccessible and unwelcoming to many Buffalo youth. District leaders expressed a vision in which cross campus connections are formed during high school, increasing students' access to and active participation in higher education. Early in the process, they sought support from the Netter Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Pennsylvania. Between fall 2023 and spring 2024, Netter Center leaders made several trips to UB, including a talk by Dr. Ira Harkavy to UB's deans and other university leadership; a conversation was also held over Zoom with Penn's Provost and Vice Provost for Faculty. Groups of UB faculty and leaders from BPS also made two trips to the Netter Center to participate in planning workshops and school

visits. This initial stage culminated in May 2024 with the creation of the UACS Design Committee, made up of faculty members from BPS and UB.

Conceptual Framework

This case study was motivated by our desire to understand the process we have been through over the last year, specifically how we have built trust and shared understandings, despite starting out with different practices, perspectives, and priorities. *How were we able to start building something new, when we are working within two organizations (the school district and the university) which are so set in their ways?* Drawing on Lawson's (2010) analysis of the developing UACS model, we found it helpful to focus on *relationships between organizations* and *relationships between individuals*. We then draw on figured worlds to explain how the relationships we have built within our committee create the possibility of organizational change. Our conceptual framework is illustrated in Figure 1.

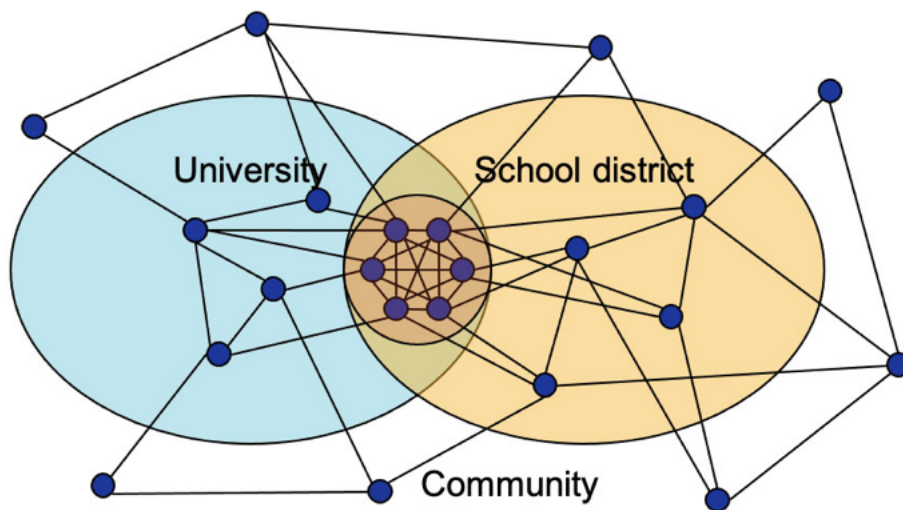


Figure 1. Conceptual framework showing our UACS design committee (center) at the intersection of *relationships between organizations*, and embedded in a network of *relationships between people* spanning both organizations. The committee members at the center simultaneously participate in the worlds of the school district, the university, and their own committee, loading their actions with different meanings in each.

Relationships between organizations

Our design committee was charged with designing a collaborative project which would meet the needs of both organizations. Traditional School-University Partnerships (SUPs) tend to focus on institutionalizing organizational relationships to support clinical experiences in teacher preparation, professional development, and classroom instruction (Dresden, Ferrara, Neapolitan, & Yendol-Hoppey, 2025). Although such partnerships must be institutionalized if they are to be sustainable, they frequently lack this infrastructure (Zeichner, 2010). Another challenge to creating institutionalized partnerships is that the organization's structure and ways of working may be in tension with the project's goals. For example, taking stock of a twelve-year partnership between Ball State teacher education and the Black community of Whitely, members arrived at the "critical conclusion that rectification of the increasingly undemocratic spaces in which children spend their formative years lies in the wisdom located outside of the system" (Cipollone et al., 2022, p. 75). In this context, educators decided to seek different solutions by redirecting their efforts to spaces where children are understood. As we studied UACS partnerships through the Netter Center's UACS National Network, we learned that many focused their work in electives, extracurriculars, and after school—on the margins of the "grammar of schooling" (Tyack & Tobin, 1994) imposed by accountability-based assessments and scripted curricula.

SUPs often focus on improving the schools, but our broader goal of justice-centered democracy also requires that the university "abandon its aloof, detached approach to knowledge accumulation and teaching and become engaged in the affairs of its local community" (Taylor & McGlynn, 2008, p. 56). It was important that the design of our UACS be embedded within the infrastructure and priorities of both organizations, requiring us to draw on our expertise with the

distinct “grammars” of the school district and the university. At the same time, if we had foregrounded our organizational identities in this work, we would likely have ended up in an adversarial stance and the design space would have narrowed to the (miniscule) intersection of the two organizations’ existing practices.

Relationships between people

As we visited existing UACS sites and spoke with Netter Center staff, one theme was regularly repeated: the importance of individual relationships. This resonated with our own commitment to creating democratic schooling through democratic means. However, Cipollone and colleagues (2022) note that “an individual’s right to exert voice and exercise agency in matters affecting the course of their lives, while logically incontestable in a democratic state, seems more and more elusive, particularly in schools and particularly for members of society who have been traditionally marginalized” (p. 62). This has been true in Buffalo: Taylor and colleagues (2013) use the city as a case study for how a “local education regime” controls the schooling process. Structural factors such as school choice¹ (meaning a school’s students come from across the city rather than a specific geographic community) and distressed neighborhoods (characterized by structural joblessness and dismantled social infrastructure) have made democratic participation in local educational decision-making more difficult.

While acknowledging the persistence of these structural barriers, the design team sought to connect by exploring how to operate between their respective institutions. Meeting as a committee afforded members a new space, a third space (Zeichner, 2010), in which to work. Third spaces are conceptualized as innovative and collaborative spaces (Bhabha, 1994). The committee provided a regular social encounter; it offered a place for researchers and school leaders to discuss and observe—often in real time as they interfaced with district officials—some of the limitations of their own ideals for the project. It also offered a place for members to be vulnerable and open about the possibilities and obstacles. During the design process, many committee conversations seemed circular, or incomplete, until they were not. The meetings were characterized by layers of talk and questions that members did not have answers for. At times the work was uncomfortable and confusing, and practices such as setting agendas, taking notes, inviting the sharing of emotions, and making space for off-task talk through which we shared other facets of our identities had to be negotiated and made explicit. But in the routine of relating, of bringing their selves, committee members built care and understanding. Encounters that could have easily stalled for lack of clear pathways, instead grew as members expanded their shared geography and built new knowledge. “In the openness of third space, ensuing creative combinations and restructuring of ideas can provide new alternatives to oppositional thinking” (Soja, 1996, as cited in Martin, Snow, & Franklin Torres, 2011, p. 300).

Figured worlds

In the beginning, the committee comprised a loose collaboration of individuals facing a landscape of inaction, except that everyone agreed they wanted change. But envisioning change and planning for change entailed negotiating selves, understanding roles, and learning who, in each organization/world, was connected to particular pathways/levers of making change. Framing change meant newly framing ourselves, as the questions of the task at hand drew on questions of identity, norms, and social capital. In this way, we began to understand this developing space/project as a “figured world.” Figured worlds are the conceptual space in which our individual and organizational selves could meet/re-form. Figured worlds are “a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others” (Holland et al., 1998, p. 52). In other words, figured worlds shape which identities and practices are normal, routine, and valued in a given space. We adopted figured worlds as a primary way of thinking about the significance and stake of relationships within the several worlds we navigated as we worked.

¹For an explanation of the school choice process, see <https://www.buffaloschools.org/o/dept-admissions-registration/page/admissions-registration>. For more research on how the school system has limited opportunity for marginalized students, see Orfield and colleagues (2015).

We chose to use the figured worlds framework because we found that collaborating across the domains of university, school, and community involved more than just mediating competing priorities from different positions within hierarchies of power and privilege—a substantial but familiar challenge. Additionally, we found that each of these worlds operates quite differently and recognizes different forms of identity and assigns different kinds of meaning to actions. Building relationships with each other involved moving between these worlds and participating in multiple worlds simultaneously.

Results from our UACS Design Process: Learning from Converging

The result of our yearlong design process was a proposal for a restructured UACS school. This proposal that identified four key strategies. Utilizing a participatory case study approach (Reilly, 2010), we present four vignettes below, each grounded in one of the four key strategies, which illustrate how the development of personal relationships created possibilities for change in organizational relationships by refiguring their worlds. Participatory research disrupts traditional research relationships by involving participants and communities in all aspects of the research process (Reilly, 2017; Tolbert et al., 2018). Participants and researchers work to decenter power relations through jointly framing problems, developing shared objectives, sharing expertise, and co-developing knowledge (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001). Our case study documents the lived experiences of university and public school partners who engaged in co-developing a school redesign. Our study documents our participation and efforts and is written in the collaborative “we.”

Personal growth and relationships

While the UACS model makes clear that connecting individuals forms the core strength of organizational collaboration, our design committee was built of two respective teams from UB and BPS, joining cohorts who worked extensively together within their own organizations but whose interactions with the other were circumscribed. As a new formation, the design team proceeded with excitement: members shared a vision of school innovation. But the planning was immediately stymied by a lack of familiarity with each others’ institutional worlds. In the world of the university, the researchers imagined, even assumed, that procedural documents—vision statement, proposal, memorandum of understanding (MOU)—would drive the agenda. In the world of the district, however, leaders’ working identities were more clearly embedded in the bureaucracy, in which steps toward a new curriculum, for example, deferred to the chain of command. In a world in which the school did and did not yet exist, the design team was only an idea. In the world of the university, ideas themselves serve as powerful moves in terms of project planning and research pursuits, ways for faculty to leverage their expertise and career ambitions. School leaders expressed some skepticism at how exciting ideas had previously fallen through. They were careful about describing what commitment and presence entailed in their spaces. For example, to bring new ideas into the district, it was useful to collect champions, use the chosen language of decision makers, and define this project in terms of the Board of Education’s priorities. The process would be careful, quiet, and sidestep potential opposition—at least until the Board approved the proposal.

Six months into our process, we earned approval from BPS and our core group of faculties traveled together to Philadelphia to attend a UACS conference, visiting a UACS school, and learning with and from partners and key stakeholders at the Netter Center and others in the UACS National Network. At the conference, our team learned more about the fabric of UACS partnerships—how they are multi-faceted, built through sustained contact over time, and supported by extensive administrative planning and maintenance. That is, the relationships between entities must be given time and space to meet, explore, and merge. The process is not straightforward and is subject to the powers of key visionaries and those who can authorize spending. At Netter, this work is supported by a long-standing administrative structure of the Center itself. In some ways, the details of sharing resources and planning work, teaching, mentoring roles and curricula between entities seems impossible without the sustained development of a formalized intermediary. Yet our team was only in possession of a vision statement and verbal commitments from our respective institutional leaders.

At first, our UACS committee/team expressed a mix of intimidation and frustration with the size of the Netter Center’s investment and its institutional innovation. Through the Netter Center, Penn had found a way to embed itself into specific

city neighborhoods and schools, sustaining engagement across decades of seasoned relationships. There was extensive advice about what not to do, descriptions of pitfalls and contextual challenges. It was difficult to imagine our partnership flourishing in the short term or envision what form it might take when confronted with something so established. However, seeing the Netter Center and its influence enabled our committee to open up to each other: together, we could confront the scope of what we might be doing and bond over what seemed difficult to imagine and also what seemed possible—the nerves and the unfamiliar provided us moments to share and reflect about the contours of our own organizations and their shortcomings. We talked about resistance, and the ways in which our own university and district systems were impervious to change. In this space, school leaders Kira and Angela were able to be more open about their frustration with some district procedures. We speculated about how much investment a center would take, materially and figuratively. (e.g., *Which faculty at UB would teach an ‘Academically-Based Community Service (ABCS) course’? Would the university actually pay professors to co-teach high school students?*) The UB faculty tried to merge this version of an endowed community-engaged center with its own public institution, whose explicit goals centered around the production of ‘world class’ research, where the public benefits were more indirect. The school administrators (Angela/Kira), however, recognized the power of learning with a team of college students and faculty inside the K-12 environment, and immediately began to discuss how they could see the innovation of ABCS teaching activate their own students.

Authentic inquiry and democratic decision making

For the first half of our design process, we kept our core design team relatively small and closed until we received the official confirmation that the school could move forward from both of our institutions. This closed process, however, invited discussion and ongoing questioning around whether, when, and how the committee could engage the broader community. What relationships are possible between insiders and the communities for whom they speak? All the committee members were insiders to UB or to BPS, positioning themselves as acting on a sort of public trust. Direct community involvement was not part of the initial design process, because the committee’s initial task was to broaden the existing research curriculum, to involve disciplines beyond medicine and bioinformatics. In working together, each member frequently drew on their own relationship to the city, the schools, or the community while trying to imagine what innovative practices or expertise the faculty might contribute. Researchers practiced deference in recognizing district processes. At the same time, Angela called on BPS members’ expertise—identifying who else needed to be informed, like the Board president, in order not to feel left out when the proposal actually went up before the Board in January. The school admins also frequently explained how they partnered with their staff to support students and create community. In this way, members of the committee engaged in a specific identity work by performing and practicing representation. This work is in alignment with the values of community schooling and shared decision-making but demonstrates how stakeholders consider who is not at the table, negotiating what we call *shouldering*: a process of bridging our separate social infrastructures to make the dynamics of power explicit. Aware that the UACS partnership would need to operate within multiple figured worlds, committee members who are central participants in these worlds engaged in *shouldering*, carrying the weight of designing the partnership for the participants of those worlds, and making this interpretive and design work legible to their colleagues by articulating how their worlds work. While this process posed many risks—the risk of assuming outsider positions and desires, and the risk of protectionism—it also kept the discourse ‘honest,’ in that no pitch, statement, assumption or contribution was typically expressed without some robust critical reflection and productive speculation: *How would this go over? What would the students/families/stakeholders say, need or require?*

Shouldering involved articulating what the school leaders understood about their school community, speaking on behalf of their career interactions with parents, staff, and district officials. School leaders also shouldered the school’s self-image: small and somewhat misunderstood within the district community. They also expressed frustration with how the district’s lottery process was confusing to parents and made it more difficult for them to build up their freshman cohort. For the members of the university, faculty negotiated how this work fit into their research, teaching, and service duties with the Dean, while defining their identities within the committee by drawing on their own citizenship, parenthood, or relationship

to the district. (For example, Tim Monreal serves as a parent liaison in his children's elementary school.) Other faculty often consulted and deferred to those with embedded knowledge of the local contexts and how 'convergence' might work.

Shouldering, however, runs risks inherent to any idealized and imperfect social process—misunderstanding stakeholders, keeping them at bay, pursuing paths that ultimately receive pushback or rejection. When we shared a status update at a UB faculty meeting, for example, one colleague challenged us on the lack of parents, students, or community members on the design committee. Although we could explain the pragmatic reasons for this absence, this faculty in particular felt uncomfortable with the situation, since the term equity implies partial ownership. Substantial outreach and education, however, needs to be done to create the conditions for meaningful community participation in a design process, especially when so many hierarchies exist between stakeholders (Cipollone et al., 2022). The school leaders on our committee are more comfortable designing for and on behalf of their constituents, based on strong district cultural norms and their awareness that many of their students' families simply do not have time to participate.

Computer science as an interdisciplinary nexus

During the course of planning Research Lab's curriculum edit in the Winter of 2025, members grappled with how to shift the school toward their vision of an inclusive research program and capitalize on the UB education faculties' expertise. While UB championed the transformative potential of computational literacies (Kafai & Proctor, 2022) to create a responsive interdisciplinary culture of inquiry and prepare students for college computer science coursework, school leaders needed help envisioning what this could look like despite their general enthusiasm. Computer science was not commonly taught in the district, which has just three certified computer science teachers. Moreover, the district views computer science as part of career-technical education (CTE), rather than as part of integrated college-preparatory STEM education. In this scenario, adding a course under the code of computer science was a significant hurdle; Angela was uncertain about the viability of finding a certified teacher in time for Fall 2025. Accepting this, the committee explored ways in which the new course could creatively incorporate the team's design; they also frequently discussed when and how to incorporate the views of the Research Lab teaching staff. Here, Chris shouldered the worlds of high school and university computing education, into which he hoped to invite the school and its students. But higher on school leadership's priority list was securing the approval of the district's curriculum head and getting the right people on board who could help secure the re-design process inside district bureaucracy.

Initially, Angela invited a science teacher to participate in a curriculum meeting. The committee then took steps to begin writing a course syllabus and teaching document, building excitement about the ways each subject area might incorporate and build on an interdisciplinary emphasis on computing. But later, when Angela presented the new computer science course to the full teaching staff, there was immediate suspicion and pushback. While Angela explained it as hesitation about the 'unknowns,' teachers expressed more skepticism about how their students, who often arrive in high school with low reading and math scores, would manage in a course of higher level computer science concepts. Some teachers approached the new computer science course through the overlapping and competing figured world of organized labor, with primary interest in who should be entitled to teach the course and benefit from its attached course release time for curriculum development. Despite the efforts of the committee to shoulder the interests of those outside the room, the reality was that shouldering also presented risks by championing some ideas, intentionally or not, or edging other voices out of the way until better timed to participate. In this event, the vision developed through months of meetings inside the committee was simply not embraced warmly by school staff. In these encounters, the design team was continually confronted with the problem of whose vision was moving forward, how the school community would accept change, and what transformation could happen within the desired timeline?

Infrastructure supporting the school-university partnership

The three themes discussed above (personal growth and relationships; authentic inquiry and democratic decision making; computer science as an interdisciplinary nexus) are oriented inward on designing the curriculum and culture of the school,

and require only passive consent from the university and the school district. The fourth theme, infrastructure supporting the school–university partnership, requires more institutional change. Indeed, building infrastructure within both institutions to ensure sustainability of the partnership and to engage in institutional transformation would help the university and district serve as “democratic anchor institutions” (Benson et al., 2017). The focus here is on our second research question, exploring how our committee’s figured world creates the potential for transformation of the school district and the university.

Our mentors at the Netter Center repeatedly emphasized the importance of building relationships, the institutional challenges to such relationships, and the need for infrastructure to sustain them. Liaisons are needed within both institutions who are centrally concerned with the partnership. On the UB side, Dean Rosenblith was able to gain the support of the University’s other deans, proposing that an office be created under the Provost to coordinate UACS partnerships across UB. We were aware that community-engaged scholarship may not be familiar, legible, or valued by existing tenure and promotion processes, especially outside the Graduate School of Education. Therefore, this office would help the UB community learn about UACS, recruit faculty partners from across the university, and handle the logistics of onboarding and coordination. This work has been part of Research Lab’s partnerships with UB for the last decade; we see the creation of a UB UACS office as an essential step in the future success of this project. Unfortunately, at the time of this writing, the funding for this new office is on hold due to budget cuts following the federal government’s hostility to international students and its retraction of research grants.

Building infrastructure for sustainability and transformation within the school district has been even more challenging. Those of us who were not district employees quickly learned that overlapping domains of regulation (city, state, and federal mandates, union regulations, oversight from multiple district offices) creates a tendency toward stasis; insiders navigate this system through personal relationships, private conversations, and informal arrangements. As a result, written documents are only powerful to the extent that the existing hierarchy chooses to honor them. Despite a memorandum of understanding signed by the district superintendent charging the school with developing UACS practices such as modifying its own curriculum, district employees do not act if they have the authority or the responsibility to make changes. Despite substantial recruitment efforts, there were no applicants for our initial computer science teacher/UACS coordinator job posting—when such specialized jobs are posted, it is assumed that the candidate has already been selected so there is no reason to apply. These dynamics do not obstruct informal work within the school, but such work is tenuous when it needs to interact with the broader district bureaucracy. Furthermore, university faculty must take care not to expose our colleagues from the school district to career repercussions from perceived insubordination as we push for change.

Our work has clear parallels to the challenges faced by UCLA’s community school, whose founders we had the opportunity to meet at the Netter Center’s conference on community schools and UACS. We learned how UCLA enacted its commitment to democratic teaching through a memorandum of understanding asserting the school’s autonomy from the district. In UCLA’s agreement with Los Angeles Unified School District (which informed ours), school autonomy was not about evading accountability; it formed a necessary first step to giving teachers and educators the agency required to become an authentic community school and build community-powered teachers (Quartz, 2023). UCLA’s teacher-powered school infuses relationships with trust by removing hierarchies and creating participatory roles where teachers have input over scheduling, curriculum building, and assessments. Instead of adopting a district vision of teachers as implementers (of a system-built curriculum), these teachers use the UACS partnership to practice improving learning together.

Although the UCLA community school’s leadership urged us to seek full autonomy from the school district, we decided against this course for several reasons. First, we had several district insiders on the committee; they made it possible to move forward (albeit in a limited way) via existing practices and they felt that seeking autonomy would be a nonstarter. Second, the scale of transformation envisioned by Dean Rosenblith, and the UB resources potentially available to support UACS partnerships, demanded corresponding systemic change on the district side as well. By engaging with the district bureaucracy, we are working toward future UACS partnerships at other district schools, and hopefully also laying the groundwork for districtwide change.

Conclusion: Converging nexuses

If a district and university are to realize their potential as democratic anchor institutions, a shared space of meaning will have to be created across both institutions in which the identities of participants and the meaning of actions are legible within the worlds of the school, the university, and the broader community. In conceptualizing our UACS committee's design work as a figured world, we brought into focus both the challenges of creating institutional change, but also the potential for doing so. A figured world is characterized by and sustained by a "nexus of practice" (Scollon, 2002), a stable pattern of identities and practices expected of participants. However, Peppler and Wohlwend (2018) recognize the disruptive potential of moments when stable nexuses converge: "conflicts and slippages among their disparate expectations have the potential to disrupt stagnant practices that have been at work in a field that might otherwise be impervious or slow to change" (Peppler & Wohlwend, 2018, p. 4). As the design team evolved over the last 18 months, so too have the relationships between the institutions and the relationships between the individuals. We can say that we no longer safely inhabit the world of the university itself or the district alone, but that we have gained a new reverence for how the complexity of change necessarily involves not just educators, or researchers, or officials, but ourselves and our growing experience with this new social infrastructure. We hope that this evolving figured world of the UACS becomes the next Research Lab High School.

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