

**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.

**Looping**

**Four-year Looping in High School**

Catherine Awsumb Nelson, Ph.D. June, 2011



**City High**

June, 2011  
Catherine Awsumb Nelson, Ph.D.

## Four-year Looping in High School

### What is looping?

*City High students and teachers stay together as a team from 9<sup>th</sup> grade thru graduation.*

### Contents

What is looping? .....	1
A note on data sources and methodology .....	2
What does it look like at City High? .....	2-3
How does City High do it? .....	3-4
What are the non-negotiables? .....	4-5
Why does City High do it? why might other schools want to? .....	5-6
How does City High make it work? .....	7-8
How does City High know it is working? .....	8-9
Tradeoffs and challenges (and how City High addresses them) .....	10
Lessons learned .....	10-11
What other City High best practices does it connect to? .....	11
Transfer questions .....	11

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, looping and competency-based staff promotion are available at the school's website:  
[www.cityhigh.org](http://www.cityhigh.org).

## 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](http://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?

### FROM THE STUDENT PERSPECTIVE (GRADUATING SENIOR)...

*When I started 9th grade and heard we would have these same teachers until we graduated, I was like 'Are you serious? This is going to kill me. I can't take some of these people another year.' But now I think 'I really understand where the teacher is coming from and I try to relate to them the way they are relating to me.' I thought I would get sick of seeing the same people every day. Now I think it is helping me learn better because my teachers know who I am.*

*The main thing is, it is easier to get help and guidance when you really know them. It makes it easier to learn. Asking for help is the big thing. You just don't think twice—you are not scared what they might say or if they might think you are dumb. Presenting in front of the class used to scare me more than anything in the world. Now I was a little jittery but I am just so used to these students and teachers, it is much more comfortable. In the 9th grade my heart would beat so fast and I wouldn't know what to say but now I trust no one is going to make fun of me. They know me. They are actually interested in what I am going to say. Now with teachers, I can be joked with. I never really had that with adults before. It used to bother me when a teacher would joke with me—it would make me scared to talk to them. Now it makes me want to work harder, like they are teasing me because they want to push me a little, because they care that I am going to do well*

*I mean they know when you have a real problem and are not just making excuses. It is more economical because they are not wasting so much spare time and energy trying to figure you out, which lets the whole class learn more. I think it must take the stress load off the teacher really understanding the students and why they are acting that way. In 9th grade they had to be a lot stricter and by the book but each year the whole relationship gets more relaxed and comfortable. It is more like a family environment because they know our quirks and our good qualities. It is a more warm and welcoming feeling. They have more experience with us so they understand our day to day problems that affect how we learn. It just takes a while to get to that point and after 9th grade we started the year already there.*

### FROM THE TEACHER PERSPECTIVE...

*Teaching so much different content is the biggest challenge. As a science teacher we have to have all the certifications. My background is physics so teaching biology was difficult. The first loop was very hard, staying ahead of the content, always teaching out of my comfort zone. I was looking for another job after my first trimester. But having gone through once, it is much easier. I am focusing less on managing the classroom and more on the curriculum. The first time through I was reading a unit ahead of the*

*students; I had to restudy it myself. But in doing that I really enjoyed it because I was learning new things I was excited about and passing that along to the students. In teaching the same thing year after year you get bored.*

*Now that I have seen the whole curriculum I see the big picture, the end result of what I am looking for. Physics is less important than problem solving and experimenting and what science really is. Not knowing equations but: can you use these tools to solve a problem? In my mind teaching the whole loop redefined what science is to these kids. Moving through the whole science curriculum with a group of kids changed my focus more to helping them to see that this thing we do can be useful to them in their life...trying to find real everyday applications. Not teaching to the test, teaching to their life. I feel like a changed teacher. Going through the loop changed my whole idea of what the science is and how to teach it to them—more the skills and concepts. By seeing the growth of the students and how they progress, it helps me envision how other students may progress and plan accordingly.*

*The powerful thing is, if they aren't getting it, you can't just move them on and not worry about it anymore—that is your problem. You can't ignore the gaps—it gives you some type of long term responsibility to get them where they need to be. That is so important—so missing—in urban schooling generally. Plus you have the deep knowledge of the learner to do it. Not just the relationship part—although that is huge. It is by far the most different and important and powerful thing about this school—not just the relationship but the responsibility you feel. I will take these kids through. When they take the state exams we will see how I have done. That increased accountability benefits the kids and it really lets me see the impact I am making.*

## How does City High do it?

The premise of looping—that teams of students and teachers move through the grade levels together—is simple, but the implications for every aspect of a school's functioning are radical. From time immemorial, high schools have been structured around delivering subject-area content with the department as the key organizational unit. A looped high school is organized around teams of students and what it takes to meet their needs and get them to graduation. The use of time, space, instructional materials, and all other resources are dictated by the needs of those students.

City High's co-founders Richard Wertheimer and Mario Zinga describe looping as “the cornerstone of the school's design.” In a 2009 internal survey, faculty and staff were asked to name the three practices or structures that are most central to City High's success in achieving its mission: looping received 38 of 45 1st place votes (the other votes went to technology, student support, and the

schedule). Because school staff understand how important looping is to developing the kind of school community in which students flourish, the looping structure is the unchangeable center from which other City High decisions and policies flow.

## The grade-level team

At the core of the looping design is the grade-level team: approximately ten staff and 156 students who stay together for four years. The faculty team includes teachers of the six core subjects in City High's curriculum: English/Social Studies (who teach an integrated block called Cultural Literacy), Math/Science, and Research/Career. Special education teachers and paraprofessionals also move with the team. Technology—where the curriculum becomes more specialized in the higher grades—is partially looped. Teachers of electives such as Spanish and Art float between teams.

Rather than discipline-specific departments (English, Math, etc), **these grade level teams are the primary decision-making unit at City High.** The centrality of the grade-level team is most evident in how the school uses space and time: each team has its own floor of the building and there is little mixing between floors. Each faculty team has a shared office space on their floor. The schedule is designed to give each pair of content partners a 2 hour block of shared planning and development time every single day. When teams reach 11th and 12th grades, clustering student electives and internships in the afternoon provides a common planning block for all six core subject teachers who work with those students.

Although this block is labeled “planning time” in the common parlance of schools, at City High it is used for much more than grading and lesson planning for teachers' individual classes. As one teacher described it, “because you are in that office space together instead of alone in the classroom, you share lots of ideas, talking almost every day about how did that group or that kid do for you today, what is working for you with this kid.” A school administrator elaborates: “Never be surprised if half of that time you are actually dealing with kids, not planning. In a traditional school you are in your room alone during your prep period and no one knows you are there. At City High you are in the team office, working with kids who need help. It is not unusual if a kid is having a problem in the afternoon and you get along with that kid the teacher may pull you in to help. Rather than sending the kid to the administrative office we send them to the floor office.”

## Owning the floor

Crucially, **almost all discipline, management, and administrative issues are decentralized to the floor level and handled by the team** in that shared space during that shared time. School leadership makes it clear that each team “owns their floor” and is empowered to run it as they believe will work best for their kids.

One of the school's four administrators is designated to work with each team as a facilitator and liaison. Even when there are master teachers on the floor, they do not necessarily serve as formal team leaders. Typically, team meetings may have a designated facilitator to move the agenda along but decisions are made collaboratively.

As owners of the floor, each faculty team creates its own policies and systems for everything from bathroom breaks to technology management. Except in the most extreme cases, discipline is handled on the floor as well. School administrators reflected that floor-level ownership of discipline took time to emerge: "In the early years, teams were sending many more kids upstairs. Over time they realized they could and should handle more of those issues themselves." Teams also decide for themselves how to divvy up responsibilities for everything needed to keep the floor running smoothly, from keeping attendance to data management to planning field trips, matching the strengths and interests of team members to the needs of the grade.

### Focusing on walking across the stage

One of the most important functions of the grade level faculty team is the WATS list—a tool unique to City High and developed in response to its most pressing issue: keeping all students on track for graduation. The acronym **Walk Across The Stage** summarizes the shared commitment of the team to shepherding every one of their students to graduation. The WATS list is a frequently updated spreadsheet of students with academic, behavioral, or personal issues that put that goal in jeopardy. The spreadsheet captures an array of relevant quantitative data on students' grades, failures, assignments not turned in, workforce grade (a school-specific assessment of motivation and buy-in), and attendance. The WATS list also includes annotations for any disciplinary incidents or situations in the student's life that may be influencing their commitment to school. Teams review the list weekly, developing or checking status on action plans for each student on the list, with the goal of catching problems early. A teacher described how her team uses the list:

*"If a student's grades suddenly drop, their name would come up in the team meeting or even informally in the morning when we are all here in the faculty room. (We would ask) 'Has anyone else seen the same issues or is it a specific class? Has this student confided in anyone about an issue they are having?' Then we would think: 'who is this student close with, who is the best person to work with them?' We might bring the counselor or an administrator into it too. Once they are on that list, one of us is assigned to check in with them once or twice a week. The idea is to be both a cheerleader and voice of reason—'this is what you need to do to get back on track'. Then we check back with each other about what we are doing and how it is working. That way the student is not bombarded by all of us but knows all of*

*us are aware of the issue and want to help."*

The level of ownership that City High teacher teams develop for their students is perhaps best demonstrated by the fact that the school never uses substitute teachers. As an administrator commented, *"I'm surprised how little complaining there is about covering for people who are not here. Faculty cover for their own teams, which is a radical shift from how most schools do it. It is really about the responsibility they feel—they know their kids and they don't want them sitting with a stranger. That is not acceptable to them so they give up their planning time to make sure the kids are with someone they know and who knows how things go here."* One of the keys to not using substitute teachers is the inclusion of paraprofessionals on the grade-level teams. Through being in the classroom every day supporting individual students and participating in team meetings, these educators gain deep knowledge of the students on the team and the content being taught. The vast majority of paraprofessionals at City High are certified teachers, and covering classes gives them an opportunity to "stretch their legs" in a full-class situation.

### What are the non-negotiables?

*For each of the best practices to be explored in this series of briefs, there are some fundamental assumptions that cannot be compromised if the practice is going to be effective. After eight years of experience, the research and analysis conducted for this brief suggests that the non-negotiables for making looping work are:*

- ❖ **Teaching students, not content.** Looping upends the traditional understanding in education that elementary teachers teach students, while secondary teachers teach subjects. Teachers at City High have to be willing to learn broader swathes of content as they progress with their students through the grade levels. For many teachers, that means they have to be willing to spend the majority of their time "teaching out of their comfort zone," teaching areas of their discipline outside of their particular specialty.
- ❖ **Faculty ownership.** Moving with their students means that City High teachers accept a greater responsibility for their success. Teachers can neither blame the inadequacies of last year's teachers nor pass along students with crucial gaps in skills or knowledge. Faculty ownership of their students' success extends beyond the classroom to meeting their needs as human beings.

❖ **Working through difficult relationships.** Like in families, like in life, sometimes City students and teachers must work with people that are not easy to get along with, whether that be teachers on a team who see things differently or a teacher and student who just rub each other the wrong way. Within the team structure, and taking the long view, the looping structure encourages students and teachers to commit to making those relationships work rather than shuffling people around.

## Why does City High do it?

## Why might other schools want to?

Organizing a school to meet the needs of a team of students rather than to deliver units of content means taking the long view. In a sense all of the other benefits of looping flow from that investment that teachers and students are making in each other, that commitment to a relationship that is both longer in time, deeper in knowledge of each other, and broader in scope than can be established in the context of a semester-long “course.”

Although looping for a few years is sometimes done in elementary schools and the approach has some elements in common with the middle school teaming model, it is almost unheard of in secondary schools, where the specialized content demands are assumed to be too great. While teaching in a traditional public school, one of the educators who went on to found City High came across an article about a network of German schools that were using looping.<sup>1</sup> The article emphasized the level of community that developed among and between teachers and students and how that community facilitated greater academic and personal growth for students. Having always wished he could teach the same kids over multiple years, he was now convinced that it was possible to develop and capitalize on those kids of close, trusting relationships in an academically rigorous high school. Thus looping was the core of the City High design from the start.

Today, City High students and faculty speak powerfully about how they have benefitted from looping. Although some recall initial doubts—“What if I just don’t like my math teacher and then I am stuck with him for four years?” “I’m a geometry person—I can’t teach calculus!”—students and teachers are unanimous in describing how they worked through those issues in the context of a long-term commitment to the team and found huge payoffs in doing so.

As reported by City High students and adults, the biggest **benefits of looping for students** are:

❖ **No one falls through the cracks:** The team looping design of City High is explicitly meant to avoid the anonymity and impersonality that too many students experience in traditionally structured high schools. As many students have commented over the years, at City High, you can’t drift and you can’t hide. Multiple adults know not only your name but what you are capable of and how you are progressing. An 11th grader noted that *“In other schools, students are like—you’re a teacher, you don’t know about me. It can’t be that way here. You know that the teachers here do know you. You can’t shut them off. Me, myself, I went through an ‘I don’t care’ phase. But my teachers knew that I really did care because they know me so well. At another school, if the teachers don’t know you, they just think that you really don’t care.”*

❖ **Trusting relationships:** While some students initially push back against being so well known, complaining that *“the teachers here are always in my business,”* almost all come to reinterpret this over time as the teachers sincerely caring for them and their future. Reflecting back on her time at City High, one 12th grader put it this way: *“We get a good learning experience and we really get to bond with teachers. Now that we have been with each other a while, we can take shortcuts, say things we might not say if we didn’t trust each other and feel comfortable. No one is going to tell or make you look stupid—it stays in the room.”* Another senior commented about looping that *“the advantage is you establish a strong relationship and that really helps you in a lot of ways. You know how to approach your teachers. You are more likely to bring a problem to them or admit it when you don’t understand something.”* Those kinds of relationships take time and continuity to develop, particularly for students who may not have many such connections to adults in their lives. Comparing City High to a traditionally structured high school, a teacher commented that *“in most schools by the time you get through to a hard-headed or untrusting kid, it is over just as you are making headway. The kids that the school benefits the most are the ones that it takes a while to win that trust.”*

❖ **Safety to learn:** School administrators emphasized that the trust and comfort that develops within the teams is not just a feel-good thing: *“Looping creates a culture where learning can take place. If they trust you, getting them to do the work that is required is so much easier. They are more willing to let you know they don’t understand—they don’t put up smoke screens. They trust you not to embarrass them, so you can give them the next harder thing.”*

<sup>1</sup>Ratzki, A. (Spring, 1988) “The Remarkable Impact of Creating a School Community: One Model of How it Can Be Done,” *American Educator*.

❖ **Every learner is known as an individual:** As one senior insightfully commented, *“The advantage (of looping) is they know you, your needs, how you will react to things, what you are good at, what you still need to work on. They don’t have to learn that all over again every year so they can start from a higher level. Their expectations are more specific to you.”* Another student commented that *“I guess I like the idea that they know how much you’ve learned and grown. They can help you more because they know what you have been through.”*

As described in faculty interviews, looping also has tremendous **benefits for teachers**, redefining their job and how they relate to students, content, and colleagues:

❖ **Deeper content knowledge:** Although teaching the full four-year sequence within their content area is initially one of the things about looping that most intimidates some teachers, most ultimately find it one of the most rewarding aspects of looping. In the perspective of one of the school’s founders, *“In the short term the content is a challenge. But you see where you’ve been and where you are going. You are going through the curriculum like the kids are, growing in breath and depth. You gain that big picture of where you started and where you want to end up, which is powerful.”* A current administrator who is not only the school’s co-founder but went through the first four-year loop in the classroom as part of the Cultural Literacy team, elaborated: *“Textbook companies are usually the ones developing the scope and sequence across four years. We get that from the teacher, not an outside organization—the teacher sees that scope because they built it and are the common denominator. You can refer back to what you did with them in a previous year, and make the kinds of connections that never get made in school. You don’t address your curriculum in isolation because you know what comes before and after and, crucially, you have those reference points in common with the kids.”* Many teachers also reported that teaching out of their content comfort zone is a challenge that stretches them, keeps them fresh, and ultimately deepens their knowledge of the discipline in which they teach: *“I personally think it is not good to just teach the same material. Especially in my content area (science) you have to be up to date. Things change. This forces you to confront that, can’t get into a rut and get complacent and bored. You have to keep fresh on what is new.”*

❖ **Being part of a team:** The isolation of most teachers from other adults is one of the most frustrating and burn-out inducing aspects of the profession. Nationally, there is an ongoing effort to create time and structures for teachers to have more of the kind of professional collaboration and support from colleagues that enriches their practice. Looping provides that structure organi-

cally, and City High teachers find that being part of a team is one of the most rewarding aspects of their job. As one teacher who moved from teaching electives to being part of the core grade-level team described it, *“Others are willing to help—you are not in your own little world. You have that shared responsibility for the success of these kids. At City High you interact a lot more with adults than at a typical school. All the time you run ideas by people, get second opinions, commiserate. When you are alone in your classroom and never talking about what you do, it is easy to get into a rut with your ideas. Talking to other adults you get a lot of creative ideas.”* Another teacher emphasized simply that *“Everyone has your back. Everyone knows if you are having difficulty with a kid and that is not just your problem because that kid is all of our responsibility.”*

❖ **More time to teach:** Think of all the time that the typical teacher spends getting to know all of the new students who show up in their room each semester, personally and academically. Figuring out what motivates them, what they are capable of, what is going on in their lives that might be interfering with their focus in the classroom. Teachers also invest enormous time each semester establishing classroom routines and disciplinary expectations (and having those expectations tested). At City High, as one teacher put it, *“You invest in training them once in how things work in this classroom and then it is done and you can teach!”* One of the school’s founders reflected that *“In terms of efficiency, looping is phenomenal—when those kids come back I don’t have to train them on the routine. So I am not using the month of September to develop an efficient routine to help their learning—that is already done—it is amazing how that lets you just get to work. Kids know the expectations in that room—assignments, the kind of work, what is going to get you into trouble. They tend not to repeat the same missteps.”* Beyond the efficiencies of engrained routines, deep knowledge of the individual learners also provides benefits: *“It is a very different relationship that you build. You understand their dynamics in and out of school. You go through that once with them and then the pain is over and you move with them and grow with them.”*

❖ **Ability to truly differentiate instruction:** Differentiating instruction to meet the needs of and provide challenges to every student is a goal of every good teacher. Differentiation, however, must be grounded in specific knowledge of the learners, and is therefore limited by the organization of most high-schools, where a teacher may be expected to get to know 150 or more new students each year. These sheer numerical facts tend to favor teaching content over teaching kids. To some extent, most high schools deal with the issue of differentiation by tracking students by ability. City High goes in the opposite direction, with heterogeneous classrooms but the time to establish a relationship with each student. A teacher commented that *“I get to understand every kid’s skill level and where their gaps are,*

# CITY CHARTER HIGH SCHOOL BEST PRACTICE BRIEF

## Looping

what they struggle with, what motivates them, who they can and can't work with." Another noted that "I have friends who teach in the public schools and they say by the time they get to know students they are gone, so they are always starting over. Staying with the same kids, I know where they started and how much progress they have made. I really know their strengths and weaknesses, which allows much more customization. I think it is a big plus for their learning."

- ❖ **The rewards of accountability:** The school founders emphasized that one of the original reasons for the looped structure was to "force the accountability issue—to make it clear that these teachers own this group of kids and are responsible for their success." Or as a student succinctly put it: "They really can't give up on you because they are stuck with you." While that level of accountability can be intense, even intimidating, most City High teachers find it a meaningful and rewarding challenge:

—"I think you are more motivated to teach the students well because their success ultimately reflects on you."

—"I like feeling like this is my class and let's see what they can do on the state test and on the ACT. I am their math teacher

—there isn't any one else. It is all on me and that is scary but I kind of like it. It is very evident if you are not doing well with them but at the same time that is very empowering."

- ❖ **Seeing the fruits of your labor:** The flip side of accountability is ownership. City High faculty described deep, almost parental, satisfaction in seeing "their kids" walk across the stage at graduation. Before that final payoff, they reported increasing returns over time in the investment they make in their students: "It is an amazing pressure release knowing you have those same kids again—it allows you to take the long term view in terms of their skills and dispositions, the changes you want to help a kid through. It was so validating for me how much they kept the skill set from year to year—you could see the continuity and build on it. It is very reassuring to see the time and effort you put in yielding results. A traditional teacher rarely sees that or gets to take advantage of it."

## 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 looping include:

- Defining roles:** One important change City High has made in the implementation of looping is suggesting to teams that they allocate a variety of specific roles. As an administrator noted,

"We are more cognizant of the team roles needed to run the floor and the skill sets that go with them: managing data, facilitating meetings, managing the halls. In general, people know what they are good at but we found they needed a little more structure to make sure all the bases are covered and responsibilities are both clear and fairly shared." The current list of team duties was developed by one of the teams and passed down to others.

### Key roles include:

- Facilitator (creating agendas, communicating with administration about key decisions)
- Staff technology manager
- Student technology manager
- Workforce program manager
- WATS list coordinator
- Data/Records manager
- Field trips and activities coordinator
- Classroom coverage coordinator
- House manager (Discipline, hallways, bathrooms, etc)
- Club Coordinator

**Keeping leadership flat/distributed:** One role that is NOT on the standard list above is "Team Leader." This is very much by design, but school leaders recalled that early teams struggled to find the right approach to leadership and decision-making within the team: "Because each team has a Master Teacher, many people assumed that person would lead the team. Well they didn't necessarily have that skill set or training. People love to think hierarchically—assume the person at the top of the chain is in charge. I never assumed that; I thought a flatter team structure would emerge naturally. But we went down some blind alleys before we began formalizing roles." Team leadership remains informal and emergent, and finding the approach that works for them is an important part of teams cohering. Often, but not always, teams designate a "Facilitator." Having someone responsible for developing agendas, running meetings, and communicating decisions allows someone with organizational talents to keep the team running smoothly. People with other talents and interests choose how they want to contribute, and ideally the negotiation of roles produces a balance of responsibilities that all team members feel comfortable with.

**Keeping the schedule simple:** On a very practical level, City High's block schedule makes it easier for teams to do everything from managing class coverages to finding consistent time to work together to knowing where every student is supposed to be at a given time. Groups of individuals need dedicated time together to become and function as a team. City High's schedule provides such time through daily morning check-in's, designated weekly team meetings, and monthly team time on professional development days.



# CITY CHARTER HIGH SCHOOL BEST PRACTICE BRIEF

## Looping

**Providing defined physical space for teams:** City High is located in a downtown office building. The realities of a fairly narrow vertical space made it possible for each grade-level team to have their own floor of the building and to stay there throughout their four years at the school. School staff reflected that this has proved a surprisingly powerful factor in team cohesion. Within the team space, open, shared office space for faculty is a significantly facilitator of collaborative management and problem-solving.

**Deliberately capturing learning:** One of the major reasons looping is powerful is the big-picture perspective it gives teachers on what it takes to get a group of students from 9th grade to graduation. Over the years City High has developed various mechanisms to capture and share that learning, about both the academic and relational side of supporting student progress. The team that has just completed 9th grade reports to the entire faculty on what worked and what changes they are making for the next year, giving all of the teams food for thought about their policies and practices. The team that has just completed the four-year loop and graduated a group of students engages in a week-long reflective retreat, facilitated by administrators, to surface what they have learned. As they prepare for a fresh start with a new group of 9th graders, the focus is on re-defining roles and rules and what is non-negotiable. Out of these retreats have come changes as large as how a team works with special education students and as small as bathroom rules, all aimed at creating a team culture that supports the development of all students on the team

### 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.

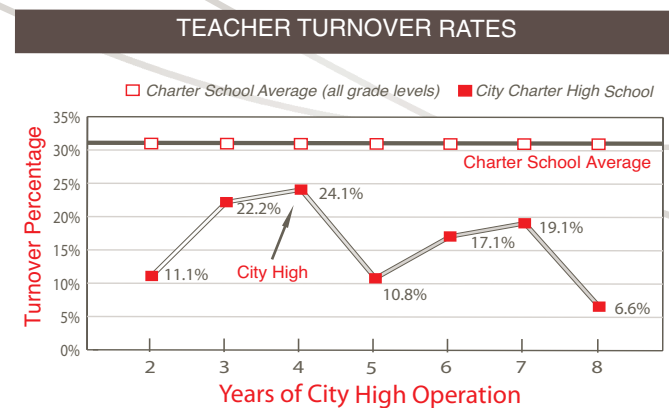
The bottom line on looping is clear: graduation rates. City High invests in looping to form the kind of academic and personal relationships that will get more students to **Walk Across The Stage** at graduation.

The following table shows City High's **graduation rate**, along with several other measures of student academic commitment. These are measures for the 2008-09 school year as reported by A+ Schools, an independent community group. For comparison, the table also displays the average for all Pittsburgh Public Schools high schools, the district from which the large majority (82%) of City High's students are drawn:

GRADUATION RATE		
	City High	PPS High School Avg.
Graduation rate	95%	85%
Average daily attendance	95%	86%
Student Stability	95%	82%

Obviously, it is not possible to make a direct causal connection between looping and these measures, and looping is certainly not the only factor at play. However, given that looping was built into the original design of the school specifically to support student commitment and that the overwhelming majority of current faculty report that it is the element of the school's model most central to City High success, these measures serve as top-level indicators of success. Put simply, one of the school's founders stated that "if you stay at City High you will graduate," and looping is integral to keeping students enrolled and engaged in the school.

City High also monitors **teacher turnover** as an important indicator that the looping model, despite its demands, is working for teachers. Nationally, charter schools have higher turnover rates than traditional public schools, in part due to an overall younger teaching force. In research conducted in seven states (including Pennsylvania) over nine years, the Evaluation Center at Western Michigan University reported an average teacher turnover rate of 31.3% in charter schools.<sup>2</sup> (This average is for school's serving all grade levels. The study found that a charter high school teacher was 1.65 times more likely to leave in a given year than a charter elementary school teacher.) The chart below shows annual faculty turnover at City High for each year of operation after the school opened in 2002-03 school year.



Another finding in the 7-state study helps to explain City High's consistently lower turnover and how looping is related to it. The study found that teachers who left charter schools reported higher "relative dissatisfaction with the school's: 1) Mission; 2) perceived ability to attain the mission; and 3) administration and governance."<sup>3</sup> City High leaders contend that looping is integral to the school's mission attainment and approach to governance, and thus a central factor in teacher satisfaction and retention.

In addition to the bottom-line outcomes of student graduation and teacher retention, City High monitors (and publishes in their yearly report card) a number of survey-based indicators of **school**

<sup>2</sup> Miron, G. and Applegate, B. (2007) Teacher Attrition in Charter Schools. East Lansing, MI: Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice.

<sup>3</sup> Miron and Applegate (2007), p.24.

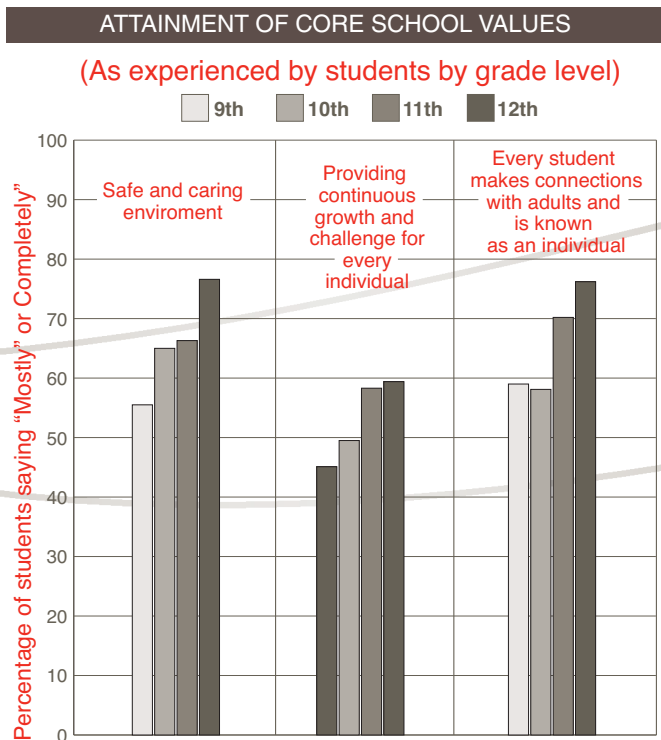
# CITY CHARTER HIGH SCHOOL BEST PRACTICE BRIEF

## Looping

**climate** that help them take the temperature of looping. These include indicators of:

- Teacher/student trust;
- Extent to which students feel safe and cared for;
- Personalization of classroom experiences and supports to the needs of individual students; and
- Student-centered instructional practices.

In each of these areas the leadership team looks both at the overall school trend over time and at student growth the longer they are at City High. Drop-offs in either of kind of measure would signal challenges in the implementation of looping that need to be addressed. A sample of school climate data from the 2009 annual report strongly suggesting the impact of looping is below. This chart shows the percentage of students in each grade who responded in the student survey that each three core school values had been achieved “Mostly” or “Completely” (the top 2 points on a 5-point scale.)



The most profound effect of looping appears to have occurred during the initial team of teachers' **second loop**. Having guided one group of students through four years of high school, this teacher team took the opportunity to step back and crystallize their learning before beginning the journey with a new cohort of students.

Shortly after graduation in 2006, the 12th grade teachers went on a one week retreat where they evaluated their accomplishments

with their first graduating class and discussed how they wanted to approach their new cohort of 9th graders. The discussion focused on distilling lessons learned, particularly how their policies and approaches would change based on knowledge gained.

Specifically one teacher said *"if we knew then what we know now, we could have graduated many more students"*. The effect of working with a cohort for four years gave the team valuable longitudinal perspective on the maturation of teenagers academically, socially and psychologically. The teachers used the retreat to plan how this second loop would take advantage of this knowledge. Changes that occurred after having gone through the first loop include: designation of team roles, more accurate record keeping (the WATS list), more attention paid to individual students, an improved advisory program and more of a long term approach to student maturity and achievement.

That teacher team has now graduated their second group of students, and comparing statistics on the graduating classes of 2006 and 2010 suggests how the wisdom of experience paid off:

STATISTICS		
	Class of 2006	Class of 2010
No. of students entering cohort	156	156
No. of graduates <sup>4</sup>	93	115
No. accepted to 2 or 4 year colleges, universities, or training programs (%)	80 (86%)	99 (91%)
No. accepted to 4 year colleges (%)	54 (68%)	74 (68%)
No. of students <b>with</b> MOS certifications	111	126
No. of MOS certifications	310	369

With the same number of students entering in the 9th grade, this teacher team graduated 22 more students on their second loop. The team attributes this increase to the knowledge gained during their first looping experience and the policies and practices adjusted based on that learning. The school will continue to look at second loop graduation statistics as an indicator of how well looping is working.

<sup>4</sup>City High does not accept students after February of a cohort's sophomore year. Thus students who move or transfer schools are not replaced. The number of high school drop-outs from City High is extremely low. The graduation rate is over 95%.

## 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 and the strategies they have used to work through them.*

- ❖ **Working through difficult interpersonal dynamics:** One of the first questions people have about looping is “What if a student and teacher just don’t get along? Are they stuck together for four years?” City High’s answer is, because they remain together for four years, they will find a way to get along, and that is an extremely valuable life lesson. In difficult cases, administrators work with students and teachers, mediating their attempts to reach a common ground.
- ❖ **Veteran teacher buy-in:** In City High’s experience, teachers for whom this is their first teaching experience have difficulty imagining why a school would be set up any other way. For them, being part of a collaborative team and taking deep ownership of a group of students is just part of the job. But for teachers coming from a traditionally structured school, the differences in their roles, responsibilities, and daily work routines can be jarring. Most are eager to adopt this new way of working but it is important for both administrators and teammates to be conscious and understanding of what a shift they are making.
- ❖ **Mastering the content:** City High teachers do not have the luxury of teaching the same course year after year. Science and technology present the greatest content challenges as they are disciplines that are typically most specialized and where knowledge evolves most quickly. High schools that loop must be prepared to invest extra resources in the professional development and ongoing certification of such teachers. With technology, City High has experimented with only partial looping to reduce the content challenges. However, both student and teacher input suggests that the pros of a cohesive four-year team outweigh the difficulties for technical teachers of mastering four years of content. Thus the school is currently integrating technology teachers into the grade level teams to participate in the loop.
- ❖ **Avoiding second class citizenship for non-looping teachers:** City High’s core curriculum (4 year sequences in Cultural Literacy, Math/Science, and Research/Career) is different by design. Beyond the core the school also offers students a range of electives including Spanish, Music and the Arts. Since these subjects do not follow a four-year sequence and are not taken by all students, elective teachers float between the grade levels. Given the intense bonding that goes

on among and between teachers and students over a four-year loop, it is not surprising that non-looped teachers can feel like outsiders. As one teacher who moved from teaching electives to a core subject reported: “It is completely different to be in the loop. As an elective teacher, kids are quick to say, ‘you are not one of my real teachers and that is not the way we do it.’ They see you as an outsider. Even with other teachers there is not quite the same view that you are a part of that team with them and with the kids, that you are not as invested emotionally in the kids as the core team members.” School leadership continues to experiment with structures that will allow electives teachers to both contribute to and reap the benefits of looping.

- ❖ **Minimizing the impact of teacher turnover:** Many of the benefits of looping flow from the stable relationships it fosters. While City High works hard on and is proud of the stability of its teaching staff, life does happen and sometimes teachers leave mid-loop. Inevitably, staff changes are more disruptive at City High than they would be in a more atomized structure. That is a tradeoff a looped school has to face and manage, through paying special attention to both adult and student relationships when a new member is becoming part of a team.

## Lessons learned

*City High’s implementation of looping 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:*

**Adults need explicit team-building support:** Over the years, City High has increased the amount of attention paid to building and supporting well-functioning teams. One might almost say that the time and energy administrators at a traditional school spend on top-down leadership is re-allocated into providing the kind of behind-the-scenes support that teams need to operate well. As one administrator notes “*We didn’t thoroughly understand the different functions of the team or think through how a leadership structure would emerge. We didn’t create that for them—no training on how to be a team, no structure. In retrospect, it seems obvious—teachers are used to working alone and are not natural team builders with other adults. Honestly, we did a poor job on this at first. It is the part we have learned the most on.*” The leadership team (administrators and Master Teachers) now spends a lot of time looking at the strengths and weaknesses of each team and how to staff them. Now that the school is much clearer on all the functions a team needs to fulfill to make looping work, administrators pay much more attention to team make-up. City High has also moved to a model in which one administrator is a designated liaison for each team. The school now also asks each team to present a monthly status update/needs assessment to the leadership team.

There is no specified format but teams tend to present what is going well, what concerns they have, which kids are struggling, and where they need help/back-up.

**Hire for the mission:** The looping model requires City High teachers to have a different skill-set than that of a standalone classroom teacher. Specifically, to succeed at City High teachers have to work well with kids AND know content AND work well with other adults. Some teachers are not interested in taking on the intense relationships and accountability that comes with taking students all the way through high school. Some don't want to break out of their content comfort zone. And some are frankly not interested in or good at being part of a collaborative team of other adults. Being as explicit as possible about these aspects of the looping model and how they shape the role of a City High teacher helps the school screen out bad fits.

**Capitalize on the fact that parents loop too:** One benefit of looping that school founders failed to anticipate the power of is the deepening of parent-teacher relationships. As one of them commented, *"When you only interact with a family once in a while it takes a lot of time for them to trust you are not calling to put their kid down. Over the years the parents came to that I wanted the best for their kids. At first a kid will always say 'Mr Z hates me.' If you don't really know the family they may believe you are picking on their kid. Only after you build that kind of relationship, any kid's parents I called, they would say "tell me what I have to do." It made us a team—the kid knows 'your parents and I are about getting you graduated.' It makes life a lot different—I wouldn't have known that in advance."* Having learned that lesson, City High can now seek to cultivate more deliberately the kind of parent-teacher partnership that looping supports.

## 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. See future best practice briefs in this series for information on how looping at City High connects to other featured best practices including:*

**Team teaching in the big room:** This brief will explore the Cultural Literacy curriculum, a thematic English/Social Studies block in which two teachers work with a group of 50+ students in a two-hour block of time. The fact that these teachers and students work together in this structure for four years provides important opportunities for depth and integration.

**Building student academic buy-in:** Supporting students in becoming oriented towards the future and taking ownership over their academic lives is a large part of City High's mission. Looping

provides the continuity of relationships and expectations that undergird other aspects of the school's academic culture.

## Transfer questions

*Issue to reflect on in considering adapting this practice in your school...*

How can you best use your school's time and physical space to support team ownership and cohesion?

What kinds of internal and external professional development will your staff need to meet the content demands of looping?

What roles and responsibilities that are currently handled by administrators can now be managed by teams?



High School at *Life Speed*

City Charter High School  
The Clark Building  
717 Liberty Avenue, Suite 900  
Pittsburgh, PA 15222

Phone: (412) 690-2489

Fax: (412) 690-2316

[www.cityhigh.org](http://www.cityhigh.org)

