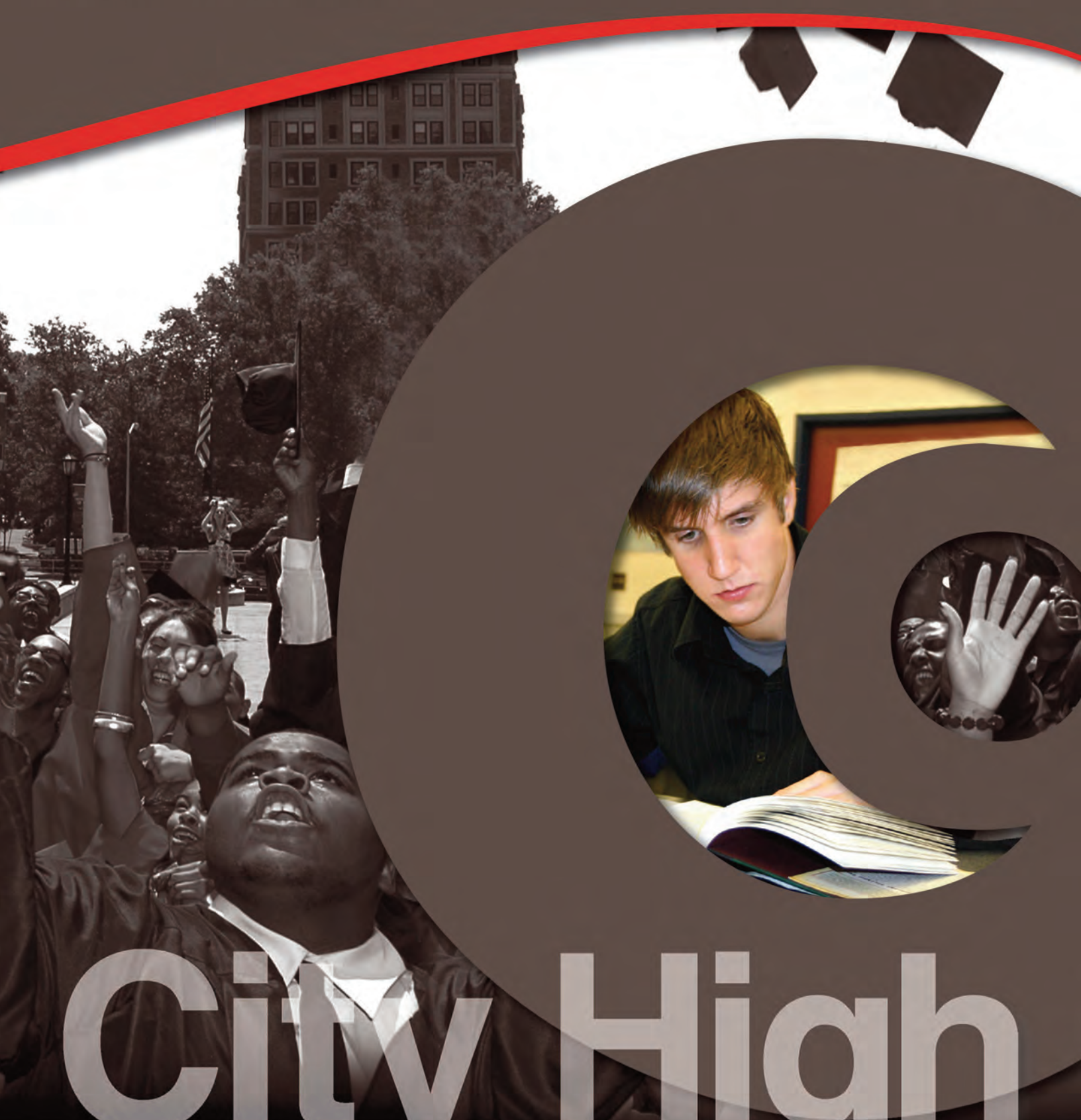


**CITY CHARTER HIGH SCHOOL
BEST PRACTICE BRIEF**

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.

**Cultural Literacy
Curriculum Integration and Team-teaching
in High School English and Social Studies**

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City High



December, 2011
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What is the cultural literacy course?

Cultural Literacy is a team-taught, two hour block course integrating social studies and English in a four year sequence. Through the use of essential questions, authentic sources, and project-based learning, students develop skills and independence in reading, writing, discussion, and community engagement.

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, performance-based teacher promotion, and the looping of teacher-student teams from 9th to 12th grade are available at the school's website: www.cityhigh.org.

Cultural Literacy: Curriculum Integration and Team-Teaching in High School English and Social Studies

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A note on data sources and methodology

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

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

Nelson's co-authors on the Cultural Literacy (CL) brief are City High teachers Ryan Oliver and Cristine Watson. Both have taught in the school's Cultural Literacy program for six years. With Oliver as the Social Studies specialist and Watson as the English specialist they worked together as teaching partners for the full four year CL loop for the class of 2010. Oliver spearheaded the development of the 11th and 12th grade social studies elements in the CL curriculum.

The topics for the full series of 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 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.

What does it look like at City High?

7:15 AM—Reviewing the Plan: *At our side-by-side desks in the grade level team office, my teaching partner and I pull up our semester plan and week-by-week calendar to review the 10th grade's progress in exploring one of the "Essential Questions" at the core of our current unit on America Between the Wars: "What is the American Dream?" The Special Education teacher and a Paraprofessional designated for Cultural Literacy join us to discuss how they will support particular students in today's planned activities.*

8:00 AM—Diving in: *More than 50 10th graders have entered the double-size room and found their seats at pairs of tables arranged to encourage collaboration. My partner, strategically stationed in the center of the room to see the full space, provides a reminder about the opening activity. Students begin opening laptops and scanning newspapers, looking to one of the two white boards that bookend the room. At one end of each board is written: "Current Events Reflection Prompt—Are people in Pittsburgh getting closer or further away from achieving the American Dream?" At the center of each board is written the day's agenda:*

- I. **Current Events**
 - 2-3 Articles Related to the Prompt
 - Main Ideas and Evidence
- II. **Exploring the American Dream Document Analysis**
(Continued from Yesterday)
- III. **Reading Groups—Their Eyes Were Watching God**
- IV. **Wrap-Up**
- V. **Ticket out the door: Document Analysis Sheets**

8:10 AM—Current Events Reflection: *All students are reading articles and typing notes on their Current Events Notes Templates, accessed through the on-line course page. I switch places with my teaching partner, keeping a view of the entire group and taking attendance while she works the room with the Paraprofessional, checking in with individual students and passing back assignments. The Special Education teacher takes a small group of her students to the hallway to read two articles together aloud. My partner calls all students who have chosen to do English Honors to join her across the hall for a discussion of The Great Gatsby, which they are reading independently to deepen their exploration of the "American Dream" question.*

8:30 AM—Discussion of Essential Questions: *After another 15 minutes of silent reading and note-taking, I announce that students should save what they have and drop their laptop lids to "half-mast". I then ask for volunteers to discuss articles they found in relation to the prompt. One student raises her hand and describes a front page article discussing Pittsburgh's classification as the "Most Livable City" in America for the second time in a decade. She suggests that this is evidence that people in Pittsburgh are getting closer to the American dream, especially in terms of "prosperity," one of the three terms we have used to define the "dream."*

Another student counters the claim by pointing out an article showing that the death rate among African-Americans in

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Pennsylvania is higher than in any other state. He says that while some people may be closer to achieving the American dream in Pittsburgh, African-Americans are farther away because of the levels of violence; this shows a lack of “equality,” another of the terms used to define the dream.

A short, but spirited string of comments follows as I moderate to ensure respect and thorough use of evidence in responses. Just as I call a pause to discussion and remind students to keep careful notes and write their ideas down in preparation for Friday’s Current Events Reflection, my teaching partner returns to the room with her honors group and we transition to the next activity.

9.00 AM—Exploring the Documentary Evidence: Students are asked to go to their tables where the Paraprofessional has set out the readings and images to be used in the next activity. As we are currently focusing on the 1920’s and ’30s, the artifacts range from an excerpt from *The Great Gatsby*, to poetry by Langston Hughes to two fictional journal entries by teens living in the 1920’s and 30’s combined with images of period advertisements. “Pull out your analysis sheets from yesterday and turn to the artifact you left off on,” I boom out. I remind them of the process: first just observe the artifact, writing down everything you notice. Then read and/or discuss together as a group, responding to the guiding questions about the American dream in relation to “Liberty, Equality, and Prosperity.” My teaching partner finishes the instructions by reminding students to look for metaphors in the poetry and other literary artifacts that might help them make connections to the idea of the American dream.

All four adults in the room are circulating among the groups, asking questions and pushing students to look more carefully or answer questions with more detail and depth. The Special Ed teacher focuses on her students who are distributed throughout the room in mixed ability groups. The Paraprofessional also focuses on specific students designated as struggling but not Special Needs. Occasionally we will ask one another questions regarding the subject matter, or pose interesting challenges brought up by students, modeling intellectual curiosity and collaboration among peers.

To wrap up the activity, each group is asked to explain at least one connection they found to the American dream to their side of the room. My partner and I each facilitate this reporting out, asking questions to challenge interpretations of evidence and pulling out main ideas as two students write class notes on a sticky poster on each side of the room. Following the report out, the student note-takers bring their posters to the center of the room to present to the opposite side.

9.40 AM—Supported Reading: Students re-shuffle into one of four reading groups and take out their copies of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Each group is led by one adult with a level of support differentiated by student needs. One group reads silently and independently, needing only occasional redirection or clarification of dialect. The Special Education teacher reads aloud with a group including both students with IEPs in reading and others who struggle with comprehension. Two other groups use a mix of

read-aloud and silent reading. In all groups, students use post-it notes to mark details related to the main character, Janie’s, achievement of the American dream, with a special focus on the ideas of “Liberty, Equality, and Prosperity.” Students occasionally pause to jot down page numbers with an idea related to the reading journal prompts for the week.

10.05 AM—Tickets out the door: Moving back to the center of the room, my teaching partner announces that it is time to put books and folders away and clean up tables. Once they are re-assembled, we remind students about upcoming assignments and quizzes before we each walk to one of the two doors leading out to the hall. As students file out, each hands over their notes from the documentary analysis, allowing us a quick check on their focus and comprehension before tomorrow.

How does City High do it?

City High’s four-year Cultural Literacy (CL) course is distinctive in its goals, content, and structure:

- The **goal** of the course is to develop a deep and broad understanding of human culture. As one longtime CL teacher put it, developing cultural literacy means having “an ability to read the world around you, use what you know to figure out patterns, interpret meaning, and then participate.”
- The **content** of the course is a fully integrated blend of skills and concepts typically covered separately in the disciplines of English, History, and Social Studies.
- The **structure** of the course is best described as “doubling up”: two certified teachers (plus a learning support teacher and a paraprofessional) working with a double-sized class (50+ students) in a double-sized room for a two-hour period each day.

More specifically, the key elements of the course include:

True Team Teaching: Two certified teachers serve as the core of the Cultural Literacy room, one with training in English, the other in Social Studies. Because teachers and students at City High loop together through all four years of high school, this team will work with the same cohort of students from 9th grade through graduation. The team begins the 4 year loop with in-depth dialogues about their aims and expectations, building from curricular maps developed by past CL teachers. Common syllabi, projects, and final exams are developed collaboratively. Teachers work as equals in the classroom, switching roles from co-teacher, to lead teacher, to support depending on the activity and focus. It is essential that both teachers take an active role in participating in all academic activities regardless of the content focus. For instance, the English certified teacher engages just as fully in the conversation on current events, asking questions and making observations, even though the Social Studies teacher may be the primary facilitator for this activity. Likewise, the Social Studies teacher facilitates one of the small groups in which students read and discuss literary works.

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Content Integration: Content in each discipline is consciously designed to interrelate. Novels and other literature are chosen by the English department to relate by time period and/or theme, allowing for meaningful connections in course work. For example while learning about World War II students read the Holocaust novel *Night*. A detailed four year curriculum map (see appendix) was developed through the collaborative efforts of the English and Social Studies departments including essential content (historical time periods, events, and themes), related literary works, common projects, and Essential Questions. Each Cultural Literacy pair uses this map as a general guideline within which to develop their own curriculum. For Zinga, the school's co-founder and member of the inaugural CL team, integrated curriculum seemed like an obvious step: *"Why not converge? Why not use the topics you are going to read about to reinforce the skills you are trying to develop? Why would you read a book out of context? If you are going to be studying about World War II, let's read a novel about it and come at it from that perspective at the same time."*

Exploring Essential Questions: Each unit of study is organized not only around a theme (Education in America, Immigration and Industrialization), time period (Westward Expansion, America between the Wars), or geographic region (Africa, Asia) but also around what CL faculty call Essential Questions. For example, the unit on Westward Expansion continually brings students back to the questions: What is power? Under what conditions should a country expand? These questions provide a common point of reference for the subject matter and a means of developing habits and skills of interdisciplinary thinking. They are designed to provide a lens on both historical information and fictional representations of the same period or issues. Reference is made to the Essential Questions in presentations, projects, discussions, and writing assignments. For example, in a book discussion a teacher might ask, *"How would this author respond to our essential question?"* At least one Essential Question serves as the prompt for the long essay on each trimester's final exam. These essays require students to use evidence from both historical and literary sources.

Common routines, diverse activities: CL teachers have learned through experience the importance of structuring the two hour block to include both consistent routines and a mix of different learning activities. Routines—such as starting each period reading and taking notes on newspaper articles—provide structure and expectations that keep students focused. Making sure that each block includes a range of learning modalities—from silent reading to small group projects to large group discussions—helps to sustain engagement and address a variety of learning styles. A student from City High's first cohort recalls that *"teachers learned to keep the time pretty tightly scheduled and have a routine you move through every day. They posted the routine on the wall. Creating a sense of predictability helps to maintain order in a situation like that."*

Teaching skills in context: CL teachers from an English background focus on identifying opportunities to reinforce core reading, writing, and textual analysis skills as students work with Social Studies content, rather than as isolated exercises. For example, when the Social Studies specialist in the first CL cohort

wanted to introduce a daily current events activity, the English specialist saw it as an opportunity: *"The value of the newspaper is seeing if students can pick out the main idea and three supporting pieces of evidence. When we are working on an event or concept in history, I look for a way to talk about synonyms or metaphors. Poetry is an opportunity for vocabulary development. You have to abandon the idea of repetitive exercises. You are creating a curriculum with thematic meaning, not following a text."*

Scaffolding skills towards independence: As the CL course has evolved over eight years at City High, the faculty has become more explicit about the skills they want students to attain, and how they expect those to develop over the course of four years. The curriculum map attached in the appendix lays out a grade to grade progression of skills in four areas: reading, writing, discussion, and action (increasingly complex projects that culminate in a public citizenship project on the social studies side senior year). While reading and writing are cornerstones of any "English" course, the focus within CL is on supporting each student to pursue those activities at ever higher levels of analysis. Development in these traditional forms of literacy is buttressed by extensive experience with discussion and increasingly self-directed research and projects. A member of the class of 2010 reflects that *"The way they taught the class changed a lot over the four years. At first we were mostly doing things all together—the same topic and the same task, but it became much more small group and individual work. More thinking and reacting on your own. We would all have the same broad topic but each pick what we wanted to focus on and how to approach it."*

Using authentic sources: Traditional textbooks are not used in either subject area. Instead the Cultural Literacy curriculum draws upon primary sources and full literary works, with supplemental readings from respected secondary sources and the occasional on-line or hard copy reference publication for general introductions to a topic. A recent graduate explains: *"There were no textbooks ever. We had some handouts and a lot of online resources. It was kind of like we were putting together our own textbook. We could put in what seemed important to us about the topic and organize it how we wanted. Each student's would be different. Then you could use those sources for evidence or quotes to support ideas when you were taking a test."* Students are taught early on to seek out diverse perspectives and identify primary, secondary, and tertiary sources. MLA citation style is taught and required across all subject areas where research and analysis of sources is required.

Using contemporary sources: CL source materials are also distinctive in their clear emphasis on accessibility. As an English certified CL teacher states unapologetically, *"This course is about literacy, not literature. I am glad I don't have to teach the canon, teach all of those books out of context. I am setting students up to become readers and really use information in their lives."* Mario Zinga, who co-founded the school and was part of the first CL teaching team, elaborates on why CL incorporates little of the canon: *"With older books the difficulty is in the language and writing style. So I am teaching kids how to interpret the outdated language and writing style, not what Sinclair Lewis is really trying to do in the*

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Jungle, what does it mean about urbanization and industrialization. I don't think Romeo and Juliet works in this program because you end up with a much more teacher-driven experience. I have to give them so much background knowledge. This is not a teacher-centered curriculum. The goal is for students to have the skills to access reading and writing without me."

Taking advantage of technological tools:¹ Because all students at City High are provided with laptop computers, technology is integrated into the Cultural Literacy curriculum in multiple ways. Organizationally, teachers communicate expectations and assignment guidelines through the on-line course page. The course page is also where students go to download materials such as note-taking templates, study guides, or supplemental readings. In class, students use technology to access diverse sources for research and exploration, from the daily Current Events articles to longer term research projects. Providing structured and thoughtful access to diverse resources on the Internet is one of the main ways CL faculty are able to move beyond teaching that is driven by the static structure of a textbook. Students also rely on the Microsoft Office products provided on their laptops to do everything from completing a note-taking template to producing a multi-media presentations. Some CL teachers are also beginning to experiment with various formats of on-line discussion.

Incorporating community engagement: Connecting students to adults with leadership and life experience in diverse fields is a core element of the Cultural Literacy program, one that builds and deepens over the four year curriculum. These experiences make themes addressed more than academic and provide an illustration of how City High lives out one of its six core values: connecting learning to the real world.² The community engagement component begins with educational outings to community events and performances with literary and historical significance, then builds to projects that require conversation and interviews with adults close to their lives—neighborhood projects, oral histories of the 50s and 60s. In later years the curriculum layers on interviews with adults who have direct experience of cultural groups and historical events such as members of local Native American tribes, the Holocaust, Cold War, Civil Rights Movements, and Vietnam. Contacts with local organizations such as the World Affairs Council and City of Asylum Pittsburgh provide 11th graders with connections to a range of figures with international experience.

In the 12th grade, students use a curriculum called Values in World Thought, developed collaboratively by a City High teacher and his former high school teacher at a small private school in California. The base of the curriculum is a selection of interviews with leading thinkers from diverse disciplines conducted by journalist Bill Moyers and reprinted from his book "World of Ideas." Despite the radically different student populations of the two schools involved in this collaboration, both have found that their seniors benefit from exploring how leaders have wrestled with key ethical dilemmas of our time. In the 12th grade students have the opportunity to hone their own interviewing skills in live group dialogues with leaders from a variety of fields. In these conversations students work to understand what holds meaning for their subjects and how they

approach the Essential Questions of the year.

Using the power of the loop: At City High, teams of teachers and students progress through the four years of high school together.³ Rather than identifying themselves as "the American History teacher" or "the 11th grade English teacher," CL teachers will say they are "The Social Studies (or English) teacher for the class of 2011." In that statement is embedded a great deal of ownership and responsibility both for the content and for their students. Having a team of teachers responsible for the full four-year sweep of a group of students' development in their disciplines has two kinds of power: First, it enables the kind of deep differentiation that is only possible when teachers come to know their students well as individual learners. (Along with this comes the tremendous efficiency of teachers not having to start from the ground floor with a new group of students each year.) Second, teachers have more ability to let skills and concepts develop over time, building on experiences they know their students have had and making multiple connections. An English teacher stressed that "Developing proficient writers is so much easier if you don't spend the first 6-8 weeks of each school year getting a sense of where they are, are the issues a matter of ability or attitude. They can't BS you. You know what they are capable of. To know the skills they are bringing to the table, it really lets you differentiate." In a similar vein a current student reflects that "It would be very different if you had new teachers each year. You are growing with them. They know how you talk, how you present who you are, and what you are good at. They can help you where you are really struggling, challenge you where you need to be challenged."

Cultural Literacy —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 the Cultural Literacy program work are all in some way supports for true disciplinary integration. Specifically, those essential supports are:

❖ **Daily collaboration through common planning time:**

Common planning is one of the most vital components of making the Cultural Literacy concept work. The team of Cultural Literacy teachers must be able to meet daily to discuss successes and areas for improvement, collaborate on student instruction and discipline, ensure all skills are being taught, and plan for upcoming lessons and projects. City High's block schedule affords the CL teachers dedicated common planning time of two hours and ten minutes every day. While some of that time is consumed by individual tasks such as grading and communicating with parents and students, shared time out of the classroom is also used to collaborate on unit and lesson planning, assessment, and student development. The special education teachers and paraprofessionals who work in the CL classroom are also involved in this communication.

¹See Best Practice Brief on One-to-One computing for more information about how City High uses technology. ²City High's other core values are: Providing a safe and caring environment, students taking responsibility for their own learning, collaborating around common goals, continuous growth and challenge for every student and adult, and all students making connections with adults and being known as individuals ³See Best Practice Brief on Looping.

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❖ **A joint syllabus with integrative activities and assessments:**

Although CL students do receive separate grades for English and Social Studies, and the teacher certified in that area insures that subject area standards are addressed, CL emphasizes students' ability to make the connections between the skills and content of the two disciplines. Routine activities such as Current Events, Integrated Projects, and Thematic Final Exams reinforce these habits of mind. It is not uncommon to walk into a Cultural Literacy classroom to find the history teacher running a reading group or the English teacher holding a history discussion. Students must see the class as a whole as opposed to two separate subject areas.

❖ **Focus on the big picture:** One of the ways that Cultural Literacy looks most different from the typical approach to social studies in high school is the lack of focus on facts and dates. The design of the course makes a clear bet on depth of understanding over breadth of coverage. As one Social Studies Specialist put it: *"If you pick a few issues to examine in depth, kids just learn better. Research supports this kind of learning. I hated history in high school, having a bunch of dates and events crammed down my throat. I don't remember any of it and I certainly never thought I would be a Social Studies teacher!"* Another teacher provided an example of the "big picture" approach by saying *"I want my students thinking about what the Cultural Revolution in China tells us about power, not trying to remember who were the specific players and what were the dates."*

❖ **Extended instructional time:** Cultural Literacy runs as a two hour and ten minute double period. This double period gives teachers more flexibility to cover all necessary skill sets and content while providing the attention and individualization required for the success of all students. Most importantly, it frees teachers from the tyranny of the bell and affords them the ability to let work play out in depth. Rather than being locked into discrete periods dedicated to different subjects, CL faculty can re-arrange the building blocks of time and activities differently each day. Some days students may have large chunks of time to dig into independent or small group projects while others are a mix of whole-group, small group, and independent work.

❖ **Large, open room:** The "big room" is one of the most immediately distinctive elements of Cultural Literacy at City High. It is also one that both students and teachers are initially likely to struggle with but ultimately come to see as integral to this way of teaching and learning. In the 9th and 10th grades, Cultural Literacy is taught by two teachers to twice the typical number of students in one large, open room with no separating door. While this configuration presents some management challenges, CL faculty have found that this fosters a team approach for both the teachers and the students. In order for the collaborative culture and curriculum to develop and operate, all aspects of English and Social Studies need to be integrated. A school administrator emphasized, *"It would never be truly interdisciplinary if it was two classes. If it is my class it is my class and not a class I share or team teach."* The big room also provides the flexibility for

various configurations needed to conduct numerous types of instruction.

❖ **Integrated learning support to lower the ratio:** Even for two teachers, a class of more than 50 adolescents in one room can be daunting. City High's strong commitment to heterogeneous grouping can increase the challenge because of the diverse range of learners in the room. After experimenting in the school's early years with different ways to support struggling students, City High has concluded that having a dedicated special education teacher **and** a paraprofessional in the room makes instruction work better for all students. In City High's full inclusion model, the special education teacher is a valued part of planning and instruction and often works as a team teacher in the classroom as well. Not only is this helpful in focusing on the adaptations and modifications needed for the learning and emotional support students but also in differentiating for the learning styles and abilities of all students. The paraprofessional assists with the effort to identify and provide targeted support to struggling students early in 9th and 10th grade. As a consistent, valuable member of the Cultural Literacy team, the paraprofessional is able to provide additional one-on-one interaction and assistance where needed.

Why does City High do it? Why might other schools want to?

An integrated Cultural Literacy course was a fundamental part of City High's initial design. The course plays a central role in both the academic and personal development of the students and the establishment of a cohesive culture among the grade level team. One CL teaching team described their goals for students as follows:

Cultural Literacy aims to develop engaged and knowledgeable citizens, prepared to address complex life questions using literary, historical, cultural, and social scientific evidence through writing, discussion, multi-media presentation, and direct action. Students who complete the Cultural Literacy curriculum at the Proficient level should be fully prepared for future academic work at the college level in the disciplines of Literature and Social Studies. All graduates should be ready for the critical analysis and reasoned action expected of citizens in a functioning democracy.

In addition to the overarching goal of developing students who are literate in the broadest sense, City High has found that the CL approach yields a range of other benefits:

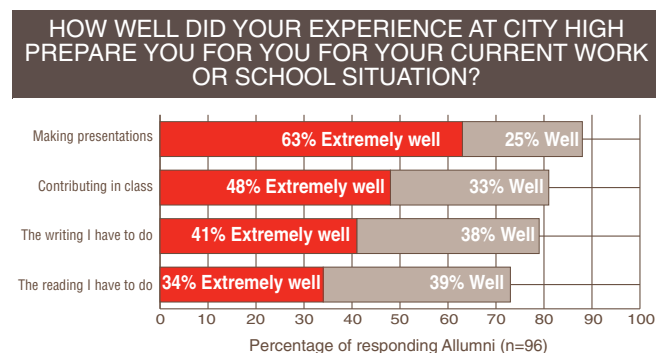
Increased experience with reading, writing and discussing:

Students are required to read, write and discuss on a daily basis regarding topics ranging from current events to modern literature to Civil Rights. Students learn how to express and support their views and beliefs through reasoning and textual evidence. There is a deliberate focus on expression of ideas rather than correct form. According to Zinga, *"Being able to express a concept coherently*

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and from beginning to end is more important than do you correctly use a comma. We do not treat writing like a technical activity—it is a way to explore the big picture. We never do an activity like, punctuate these ten sentences. But look at our writing scores on the state test—we get there.”⁴ City High graduates report that they have had far more experience with reading and writing in depth and at length than most of their peers. The chart below reports responses from a recent alumni survey regarding how well City High prepared them:



Through repeated experiences, CL students learn to speak confidently in group discussions and make formal presentations of research projects, tasks that are daunting for many college freshmen or new employees. A recent college graduate who was in City High’s first cohort reflected on how the CL curriculum prepared him for college: *“The big goal was a smart one: getting students prepared for discussion-based critical thinking. Reading critically, taking a position, reading a lot of documents, being able to pull out the thesis. That is something a lot of incoming college freshmen don’t know how to do. City High was fantastic equipping you with those skills. Debate is a fantastic learning tool. You have to be so prepared and really think things through.”*

Making connections: Traditionally, English and history, while taught separately, focus on the same skill sets and historical periods, although often not simultaneously and rarely deliberately. Combining the two subject areas into Cultural Literacy and incorporating frequent cross-curricular discussions and projects encourages students to make connections between the topics and skills both inside and outside of the classroom. As a recent graduate reflected, *“the big difference is you are learning about one thing from two different perspectives. You are not learning one thing in one class and then going across the hall and talking about something totally disconnected. The work goes together, which lets you take ideas from both classes and intertwine them to make your own ideas. I think it makes it easier in the long run.”* CL teachers believe strongly in the power of those connections for deepening student understanding: *“With any kid’s brain, more connections deepens understanding. The knowledge is less compartmentalized and random.”* A Learning Support teacher on a CL team felt that the connections are especially powerful for students with learning challenges: *“Team teaching and planning really supports their needs. It makes you really focus on what it means to get these concepts across to*

students with these particular needs. If we had separate English and Social Studies curricula, the students I work with would struggle a lot more because there would be more fragmented concepts for them to have to grasp. This approach drives home what is really important and allows them to reference things they have already learned. I think it really helps them to grasp the content.”

Transferable process skills: Integrated planning for a four year sequence of English and Social studies requires faculty to identify common process skills and create a coherent long-term plan for their development. Skills such as reading, writing, analysis, research, presentation, and discussion can be taught in either subject area or both with cross-over benefits. If teachers are clear and consistent in their expectations regardless of the discipline through which the skill is practiced, students develop fundamental habits of thinking and doing that they can employ in a variety of contexts. For instance, procedures for small group text-based discussions are taught and practiced primarily in the area of English for the first three years of the curriculum, but students use these same skills with ease in the 11th grade United Nations Simulations and the discussion heavy Politics and Civics 12 curriculum which begins in 12th grade.

Teamwork and relationship building: The Cultural Literacy classroom functions as a team. The teachers work collaboratively, modeling effective teamwork and adult relationships, and the students are expected to learn to work together towards joint aims as well. The frequent use of project—and inquiry-based learning approaches is critical in this realm. One important aspect of developing as a team member is for students to attain a sense of their own strengths and weaknesses and then translate them into effective group roles. Group role selection and dynamics are facilitated by the teachers initially but eventually opened up to student selection and discretion. The goal is to foster life-long cooperative skills such as communication, patience and compromise. CL teachers comment that the ability to work productively in self-managing groups is one of the areas where they see most growth from 9th to 12th grade.

Making reading “legitimate”: National statistics show clearly that many high school students continue to struggle with reading. Beyond those who have fundamental comprehension problems, many more struggle with the “reading to learn” skills needed to work with subject area texts. But because “reading” is considered an elementary school subject, high schools usually only address it directly for small numbers of students in remedial classes. The CL curriculum is based on the premise that many more high school students need instruction and experience to become deep, critical readers. Initial course designer Zinga, who has a background in elementary school reading, explains that *“I think reading has to be a legitimate subject, like in elementary school when you are reading stories the kids are interested in. I hate the term English. What is an English class? I always wanted to call it reading and writing, but that is considered too elementary school.”* His solution was to emphasize selection of books that are accessible and have clear thematic connections to the content in order to increase

⁴ See City High’s writing scores on the state test in the section below on “How do we know it is working?”

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student interest. Zinga also stresses that he “*wanted to get away from reading book excerpt—a chapter here and there. Usually only students in gifted programs get to read whole books and I thought all of our students needed that sustained experience.*”

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 an integrated Cultural Literacy curriculum include:

Invest in teaching kids to be students: With its merged faculty, schedules, spaces, curricula, and assessments, the Cultural Literacy room often serves as a catalyst for developing team culture and setting the tone for the floor.⁵ City High students are expected to take a much more active role in their own learning than they may be accustomed to. For many students, including some who have previously been “*A students*” largely by following instructions and not causing problems, the transition is challenging. In 9th grade, CL teachers invest heavily in developing routines (such as the current events reflection) and skills (such as note-taking) that will continue to pay off throughout the student’s academic career and across disciplines. A CL teacher explained that “*A lot of what you are doing that first year is training, establishing the culture. The whole point of 9th grade at City High is learning to be a student, and a lot of that work happens in the CL room. I have gotten that feedback from the school’s founder and it was helpful to me as a teacher to hear that. And because you have the same kids for four years you really get to see the payoff of that investment.*”

Maintain consistent discipline: Establishing consistent disciplinary norms is another important aspect of learning to be a student. Not only is the curriculum tackled as a team but so is classroom management and discipline. Teachers jointly develop expectations, routines and procedures and mutually maintain them. Coordination is essential to smooth flow and positive behavioral development, particularly in a large space with double the number of students and double the time of a traditional classroom. A CL teacher recalled that “*My first time through the loop my partner and I did not have a compatible sense of classroom management. We definitely had different tolerances for noise levels during group work for example. This time we are much more in sync about how the room should be. You have to have a team approach to behavior issues, establishing and reinforcing norms. At any given time if one teacher is doing a lesson, another is circulating to make sure everyone is on task, maybe pulling a kid out if needed. You can’t think, ‘this is my time’ and that division means different management styles. That is not going to work.*” Having more than one teacher in the room means teachers can remove a child to talk privately in the hallway for a brief moment as necessary, reducing the flow of minor disciplinary issues to administration and maximizing learning time.

Keep kids moving: Like many schools who have tried some form of block scheduling, City High realized early on that a double period shouldn’t mean stacking two traditional lesson plans on top of each other. Planning explicitly for a two hour block means being conscious of the need to incorporate different learning modalities. One teacher stressed: “*You have to think about the student experience. You can’t have them sitting on their butts for two hours. Who wouldn’t fall asleep? You have to vary the instructional methodologies, make sure they are getting information in a variety of ways.*” In order to maintain high levels of engagement teachers plan a variety of activities for each day, keeping students moving between individual silent activities, to full group teacher-directed activities, to small group projects, to pair based discussion, to student presentations. This has the added benefit of stretching teachers to improve their practice and work collaboratively to design engaging lessons. Zinga believes that having the two hour block “*forces everyone to look at it as project-based not lecture-based, stand and deliver. Planning for a two hour experience, I can do all sorts of things. I now have time to let kids really read and write in class. No one is going to stand and lecture all that time. You have to really mix it up.*”

How do we know it’s working?

The Cultural Literacy program has multiple, complex goals for its students, so monitoring success requires a portfolio of measures. Some of these are as clear and simple as scores on state mandated reading and writing exams. Others, more aligned with success in future education and citizenship, are qualitative such as development in writing, discussion, and reasoning skills.

Standardized test results

All City High students take state mandated PSSA exams in the 11th grade in the areas of Math, Reading, Writing, and Science. City High students have consistently outscored schools with similar demographics on the Reading and Writing exams. Reading and writing occurs across the curriculum at City High so Cultural Literacy cannot claim full credit for these results, but it is the area in which the most explicit instruction is given in these skills.

The table below presents City High scores compared with surrounding schools with similar percentages of economically disadvantaged students:

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City Charter High School	Pittsburgh Allderdice High School	Pittsburgh Schenley High School	Pittsburgh Perry High School	Woodland Hills Senior High School	Penn Hills Senior High School
Percent Economically Disadvantaged					
63.5%	41.9%	56.6%	67.5%	58.6%	38.7%
Percentage Advanced or Proficient in Reading					
72%	66%	56	39%	59%	56%
Percentage Advanced or Proficient in Writing					
94%	82%	80%	66%	71%	65%

Source: “Pittsburgh Business Times’ 2010 Guide to Western Pennsylvania Schools”. Pittsburgh Business Times.

⁵At City High, grade level teams of teachers and students loop together from 9th to 12th grade and occupy a dedicated floor of the downtown office building where the school is located.

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While standardized test scores serve as a general indicator of student achievement, City High believes that understanding the full impact of a curriculum such as Cultural Literacy requires more nuanced measures. In the four core CL skill areas of reading, writing, discussion, and action, students are expected to progress towards higher levels of Bloom's taxonomy of intellectual development, moving from acquiring factual knowledge, through comprehension, towards application, synthesis and evaluation.⁶ Therefore CL teachers monitor student progress in skills including:

Increasingly sophisticated writing: Writing portfolios that combine evidence of student growth over four years in relation to a common rubric are one means of demonstrating the type of growth in applied skills City High seeks in the CL program. Students complete regular writing at an increasingly complex level over four years of Cultural Literacy. By 12th grade, students at the proficient level are expected to be able to "Write with analysis, using multiple research sources, and provide counterarguments." Student writings are assessed through rubrics created internally by teachers based on state standards and are meant to prepare students for college level writing.⁷ Samples are collected and saved through 9th, 10th, and 11th grades. In 12th grade students create a writing portfolio that includes samples from previous years combined with reflections on their own development leading to culminating writing pieces that build on their understanding of their own work. In particular CL teachers look for student development by comparing their work over time on two consistent writing tasks: (1) Current Events Reflection assignments that ask students to respond to a prompt using evidence from daily reading of local, national, and international news sources and (2) final exam essays which require students to integrate evidence from history and literature to answer an Essential Question.

Development in ability to engage in text-based discussion: As evidence of students' preparation for college level work and engaged citizenship CL students must demonstrate high levels of ability in discussing readings using textual evidence. This process skill is practiced with content from history, literature, philosophy, politics, and current events and consciously developed over the four year Cultural Literacy curriculum. Student development is measured by their achievement on a rubric specifically designed for text-based discussion.⁸ A recent graduate reflected on his own growth in this domain: *"It was hard at first to express my own ideas. I knew what was in my own mind but found it hard to put that out there for other people to hear and criticize. Through this class, I got a lot less reserved. By the end I was facilitating discussions. By watching other people do that and seeing it is not so bad you realize you learn more by putting your ideas out there and seeing what other people think about them and maybe taking part of the way they see it and bringing that into your view."*

Ability to work independently AND in community: The 12th grade Cultural Literacy curriculum looks very different from the three preceding years, with English and Social Studies functioning more as distinct courses. This split allows the teaching team to reinforce student ability to function at both ends of the continuum from autonomy to community. The English course is completely

individualized, with students choosing their own readings around agreed-upon themes and meeting with the instructor in tutorials much like the British university system. At the same time, the 12th grade Social Studies curriculum challenges students to function as a team. The ability of most students to succeed in both of these modes is the CL team's most tangible evidence of student development through the course.

Tradeoffs and challenges (and how City High addresses them)

To give readers of these briefs the benefit of City High's experience, this section attempts to capture some of the pitfalls the school has encountered in implementing the Cultural Literacy curriculum and the strategies they have used to work through them.

Almost all of the challenges reported by City High administrators and CL teachers are related in some way to the commitment to "double up" on time, space, student numbers and teacher teams. Although these challenges periodically cause individual teachers and the school as a whole to question the model, over the eight years of the school's operation the commitment to a fully integrated Cultural Literacy program has deepened.

Specific challenges of the model and ways City High has found to address them are:

Sustaining attention in longer classes: Many teachers may be wary of such long class periods, particularly with younger students who have less tolerance for sustained attention and come from middle schools with more traditional period lengths of 45-50 minutes. Furthermore, planning for such long blocks may be overwhelming for teachers at first. In fact, both students and teachers need time and specific guidance to adjust to this aspect of the Cultural Literacy model. As discussed above, the strategic mix of consistent routines and diverse activities is key.

Transitions between activities must be managed with particular care and skill. Strategies used by City High teachers include the development of coordinated signals for gaining students' attention, timed transitions with added competitive incentives and graphical representations, as well as clear opening and closing routines.

Managing large numbers of students: Teachers and administrators may also be wary of putting such large numbers of students together in a single class, fearing disciplinary and academic challenges. Distraction and management are issues of concern, especially with ninth graders and students new to the model. At City High, the fact that each student has a laptop in class adds another source of potential distraction.

Many of the same strategies mentioned regarding transitions and a team approach to discipline are effective in addressing the larger number of students as well. Appropriate levels of noise and movement must also be explicitly taught and practiced. Part of the trick is for teams of teachers and their students to come to a shared

⁶Educational psychologist Benjamin Bloom's widely used Taxonomy of Learning Objectives, first published in 1958.

⁷See sample writing rubric in appendix.

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understanding of what is an acceptable and academically productive level of noise. As a CL teacher commented, *“With 56 14-year olds, it is going to get chaotic at times. If you have 4 small group discussions of 14 kids, even if they are totally on task, it is going to get loud.”*

Another important strategy is the effective use of all members of the teaching team. This can mean placement of teachers throughout the room to address discipline or attention concerns during full group directed instruction, or division into smaller reading or discussion groups with each adult taking one group of students.

Strategic assignment of small workgroups, seating charts, and thoughtful room design are also essential in a room with more than 50 students. Room set-up should be done in a way that allows student to transition easily between the variety of activity types that they typically engage in throughout a class period. Most CL teachers have found tables much more effective than individual student desks.

Challenging students on all levels: Another likely concern is how to address the extreme ends of the ability spectrum. In such a large group, how are the needs of both the most precocious and the most challenged expected to be met, particularly in a school model that has no tracking and a full-inclusion model of special education?

On the Special Education end of the spectrum, both regular and special ed teachers believe the model is working very well. One Special Education teacher on the CL team said that he *“lucked out being a special educator in this room. It is so interactive. When you look at a lot of learning disabilities, a common theme in the research is the more hands on the better.”* He also noted that all of the mixing of groups and circulating of multiple adults in the room makes the kids he works with *“less obtrusive, which reduces the stigma and makes it easier for them to accept help. It is terrifying for them freshman year to come from a small resource room of 8 kids to a room of 50-some. But by the time they are in 11th or 12th grade they don’t want separate work, they will refuse modified versions.”* Special Education teachers take the lead, in cooperation with the core subject teachers, in ensuring that IEPs are followed effectively while allowing those students to access the same material as the rest of the class whenever possible. Their engagement is a key part of the model and typically involves individual and small group support within the classroom. Special Education teachers may also help in the design and implementation of lessons and projects and always provide input in the development of modifications and adaptations for quizzes, exams, writing assignments, and projects.

In terms of challenging the most advanced students, most CL teachers *“feel we haven’t fully figured it out yet.”* Currently, City High employs an opt-in Honors program that provides opportunities for students to do advanced work and earn additional QPA credit in each of their four core courses. Any student may choose to join Honors History or English, or both, starting in 10th grade as long as they are willing to do the work and maintain it for the first four weeks of the trimester. These students complete additional work in and out

of class (often taking on a more challenging book related to the main theme of the unit, such as for example, Guns, Germs, and Steel) and typically meet separately for discussion once a week. These meetings occur during class time but in a separate space, typically during the time that other students are engaged in a silent individual activity such as Current Events. Whichever core CL teacher remains manages the rest of the group with the support of the Special Education teacher and para-professional. Honors students are also required to complete final projects and Honors portions of final exams. Some teachers feel that this additional layer is not enough to give these students a true honors experience and are experimenting with on-line discussion and blogging. Others, however, argue that because of the extended period, multiple adults in the room, and opportunity to know each learner deeply over the four-year cycle, differentiation at all levels is built in. One teacher noted that *“Two hours gives you so many more options. You can expect specific things of specific kids. You may give some of the kids more structure on the same tasks. There are always common denominators like providing supporting evidence, but you know which kids you can ask more of.”* The 12th grade English course, the content of which is completely individualized, is the ultimate example of built-in differentiation.

Content coverage: As discussed earlier, the CL curriculum makes a deliberate trade-off of depth over breadth. A recent college graduate who was in City High’s first graduating class evaluated the trade-off this way: *“Simply put, City High did a fantastic job preparing me to do critical reading and then discussion and debate. That said I think the weakness is, someone coming out of a typical high school, the full AP track, their base of knowledge, of facts, and raw historical information is higher. I don’t think the Cultural Literacy curriculum stresses pure knowledge acquisition. I have read a lot of history to try to catch up—I feel I am not as well informed as some of my peers. But I think my other skills make up for it—you can’t really do it all.”* CL faculty acknowledge this challenge in similar terms: *“I believe it if students going on to college say they don’t have the content knowledge some of their peers do. We focus on going deeper into something rather than broader. I look at it more as building skills that will allow them to approach any situation—they should walk out with the ability to engage material, really learn something, make connections, make interpretations. If specific topics become important to them later, they have the skills to pick them up quickly.”*

Veteran teacher buy-in: Getting more experienced teachers to buy-in to the model of collaboration and team teaching has sometimes been a challenge, even at a start-up school. Over the years teachers with experience in their own subject-specific classroom have asked for the wall in the big room to be put back up or have tried simply carving out time for “their subject” within the long period, an approach more accurately characterized as tag-team teaching than team teaching. Over time nearly all of these resistant teachers have come to appreciate the benefits of teaming, not only for their students but for their own professional growth. School administrators foster teacher buy in through the inclusion of Collaboration as one of the criteria on which teachers are evaluated.⁹ Another means of disseminating models of effective

⁹See Appendix for a discussion rubric and sample assignment in the area of ethical reasoning.

⁹See Best Practice Brief on “Competency-Based Promotion” at City High

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team teaching is through peer observations of effective Cultural Literacy teams. While adding a door separating rooms may seem like a practical short-term solution to challenges of noise, management, or interpersonal dynamics, the success of the program depends on removing the “opt-out” solution to teaming and inspires growth and adjustments in both teachers and students.

Lessons learned

City High’s Cultural Literacy course 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:

Effective teams are made, not born: The tight teaming required by the Cultural Literacy model cuts against the longstanding norm in education of teachers doing their work in isolation. To make the model work, school administrators devote significant time to careful selection and nurturing of CL teams. All new teams spend time observing and questioning effective teams already in place. School leaders have also found they must also be attentive to, and address head-on, any negative interpersonal dynamics that may emerge on a team. Rather than seeking individuals who are very similar, however, some of the most successful teams have paired individuals with different but complementary skills and approaches. One powerful approach is to pair teachers at different stages of their careers with one able to mentor the other, even as both take full responsibility for the planning and implementation of curriculum.

Pay careful attention to differentiation and less vocal students: CL teachers have learned to actively work against the tendency for quieter students to “get lost” in such a large group. CL teachers report that with four adults in the room and frequent opportunities for discussion and small group work, students who are struggling or trying to tune out can actually be identified more quickly than they might be in a traditionally structured course. For example, one Learning Support teacher describes providing extra support in preparing for discussion not only to identified special education students but to others who tend to be hesitant to contribute. Pulling small groups out to help them prepare their notes before a discussion makes them more confident that they have something to say. CL teams have also learned to engage para-professionals in a more strategic manner by identifying a small cohort of students on which the para-professionals focus their efforts. This gives struggling students a go-to adult and provides a more consistent barometer on their development.

Respect the disciplines in the interdisciplinary: Despite being committed from the outset to content integration and interdisciplinary thinking in the CL course, City High has maintained English and Social Studies departments for faculty in those disciplines. Rather than being an extra layer of administration, the school has found that the curriculum development of the cross-disciplinary grade-level CL teams is greatly enhanced by the disciplinary perspectives of discussions within departments. The broad structure of the course (the themes, periods or regions, and

Essential Questions laid out in the attached outline) is established by all CL teachers working as a body. Within that framework of common agreements, however, departments maintain a role in choosing texts and fleshing out specific content. Looping back and forth to incorporate a disciplinary perspective ensures that crucial standards, skills and ideas from each discipline receive appropriate emphasis.

Develop institutional memory: Although CL is premised on content that is developed by teachers and constantly adapting to student needs and understanding, leaving behind the textbook need not mean reinventing every single wheel. Over the years CL teams have worked to develop systems for passing down ideas, assignments, and projects that have worked well to develop a specific theme. Initially materials were simply passed on in a binder, which often went untouched. To exploit City High’s technology infrastructure, some faculty began putting resources on the school network’s share drive, but, as a teacher explains, without an overarching structure “it was not consistent or manageable. We are now getting better about what we put up there and how we label it.” Thus without having a scripted curriculum, teachers increasingly have a bank of resources to draw on.

Work the room: Effective teaming requires many of the skills of effective acting. Given the large space, it is essential that teachers are constantly aware of their partners’ positioning and adjust to ensure that the whole room is covered and all students are productively engaged and getting the assistance they need. When students are working independently, we have learned to position one person to take the broad view of the room. The others work the room identifying students who are struggling, have questions, or just may need a bit of extra attention or assistance to get started on the activity. During teacher directed lessons, one teacher leads the room from a position where all students can see and hear, the others position themselves among or behind to aid with management of particularly disruptive students or to clarify issues that may be unclear or missed. They also provide feedback from their areas of academic expertise and can even ask questions or engage the leading teacher in debating an issue as a model for students. Special Education teachers are usually circulating, responding to the particular needs of their students who are dispersed consciously throughout the room, but will occasionally pull them together for a particular lesson or support activity. During project work teachers will either take responsibility for small groups of students or circulate around the room responding to students as they request assistance and seeking out students who need assistance, but are less likely to speak up. Often teams of teachers will make a plan beforehand, identifying the area of the room or particular students who they will work with. In a sense they function like a basketball team determining whether zone or man-to-man defense will be most effective in a particular situation.

Giving students experience with the “disconnections”: Although City High is strongly committed to a holistic and interdisciplinary approach to learning, they and their students are evaluated by standardized tests not designed to honor those principles. In recognition of this reality, co-founder Zinga explains

that “You have to give (students) experience with those disconnections—those isolated skills they will encounter on the test. Normally I don’t care if they don’t know the meaning of two words on the page if they get the overall idea. But it is not fair to them when they come to that kind of format on a test. It doesn’t cause us to re-examine how we teach kids to read and write but you do have to prepare them for the format they will be tested in.”

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 other best practice briefs in this series for information on how the Cultural Literacy course at City High connects to other featured best practices including:

Looping: The fact that teachers and students go through the 4-year CL cycle together greatly increases the potential for differentiation to meet the needs of all learners.

Building faculty ownership: Rather than being handed a textbook to teach, CL teachers largely construct their own curriculum, using curriculum maps and commonly agreed-upon themes and essential questions as guides. The more they bring their own passions and expertise to the course, the more they own the content. Even more importantly, having responsibility for the entire 4-year sweep of their discipline encourages ownership for the learning and growth of their particular group of students.

Building student academic buy-in: In terms of both its content and its process, the Cultural Literacy curriculum plays an important role in City High’s mission to develop student ownership of their own learning. The emphasis on transferable skills, the heavy use of active, project and inquiry-based learning, and the focus on scaffolding students to independence all help students realize that learning is something they do, not something that is done to or for them.

Transfer questions

Issues other educators may want to reflect on in considering adopting or adapting this practice in their schools...

How will a double period course work within your master schedule? Will it work for all grade levels?

What process will individual departments use to come to agreement on the essential questions, themes, and texts of the merged Cultural Literacy course?

What kind of support will teachers need as they are asked to teach a wider swathe of content, and to do so without relying on a textbook? Do you have the right teachers?

How will effective collaboration and team-teaching be taught and supported? When will teachers plan together and how will conflicts be addressed when they arise?

Do you have adequate technology to leave the textbook behind and rely more heavily on on-line resources?



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