

# A World Class Education

**Erin Stuart:** *Principal, later Superintendent/Principal of U-Prep 2004-2012*

In the spring of 2003, five educators, with more than 100 years in combined professional experience, began to plan the school that would become University Preparatory School. While I believe that all the founders\* came to the U-Prep project with similar goals, for the purposes of this article, I am speaking from my own recollections of our process. I taught high school English for 27 years as well as drama for 17 of those years. I was fortunate to have varied assignments, teaching students in grades 9-12 at every level including Advanced Placement, teaching at College Connection for nine years, teaching at three SUHSD schools, and developing a specialized program with a collaborative team. These experiences shaped me as a teacher and ultimately as an administrator. At College Connection I watched marginal students become scholars. And the reason was simple: these students had tremendous support from their high school teachers/advisors. If a student needed tutoring in a specific subject, we helped him find a tutor and encouraged him to meet with the professor. If a student needed technology support, help with research, personal counseling, or time management training—we provided it. At that time about 30-40% of Shasta County students were being prepared for and admitted to four year colleges. The realization that many more students could be prepared was the founding principle of U-Prep.

The leadership of SUHSD had reasons for wanting their own charter. Suffice it to say that the completion of a new classroom building at Shasta High School meant there would be empty rooms at the Shasta Learning Center. I agreed to consider a small junior high/high school (7-12) model, which would include elements of many private schools: high expectations for student achievement and behavior, built in support for college admission process, and participation in small school athletics. As the other founders joined the conversation and we considered the advantages and limitations of a 7-12 school, we decided to include 6<sup>th</sup> grade due to the many K-5 schools in our area. We agreed there was a need for a small, public high school for those students and parents

who were seeking that experience. We also knew that a small school provides enhanced opportunities for family involvement and student participation. Throughout the spring of 2003 we met and planned and in November 2003 our charter was approved by SUHSD and subsequently by the California Department of Education.

From its inception U-Prep had a five member board, which governs the school—setting policy, approving the budget, adopting curriculum, hiring personnel, and generally making the kinds of decisions that further the school’s mission. The SUHSD would be the LEA (Local Educational Agency) for our Special Education needs and receive U-Prep’s Special Education funding. The use of the facilities, maintenance, and utilities would be paid for with a percentage of the school’s state and local funding. As the charter’s authorizers, the SUHSD board had the responsibility to annually review U-Prep’s finances, educational testing results, and adherence to the requirements of a California charter.

When considering how to organize, advertise, and staff our new school, the founders made several student-centered decisions. Each of us had the experience of positively and profoundly affecting the lives of students, so we knew that our teachers, in addition to being dedicated professionals, would also be people who genuinely cared about children. Most important: we wanted our school to be inclusive. By creating the tuition-free equivalent of an expensive, private school, we leveled the playing field for families who couldn’t afford this advantage. Initially all who applied were enrolled; within a few years applications exceeded available places and we began using the state mandated lottery system. While some people in our community persist in thinking we select our students based on academics--that is not true. Our students come from all over Shasta County along with some students from Tehama, Siskiyou, and Trinity counties. In order to advertise the opening of the school, we held public meetings, purchased ads and circulars, and spoke to community service clubs. Our message to the parents was simple: give us a hard-working student and we will provide a world class education.

My background as a G.A.T.E. chairperson and my experience at College Connection convinced me that students should not be tracked by ability. Since adolescents develop at different rates

it didn't make sense to decide in 6<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> grade what level would best suit a student. Therefore, we chose an honors and advanced placement course of study for all of our high school students. In social studies and English all of our high school students would be honors/AP; in science and mathematics, our students would have several paths but all would include advanced study. To prepare our students for a rigorous high school course of study, we added some specific skills to the 6-8 curricula. Our middle school students would learn to take Cornell notes, write research essays, acquire academic vocabulary, and practice formal discourse. Additionally, all of the middle school students would take at least one year of Latin. The decision to include Latin was mostly research-based and partly personal. A prep school education often includes the study of a classical language, and including Latin in the middle school curriculum would provide an early experience with a difficult subject. Research has consistently shown a correlation between the study of Latin and vocabulary development. At the time we started U-Prep current research was also showing a positive relationship between Latin and achievement in mathematics. Along with not tracking students, we wanted to allow advancement based on ability, talent, and interest. Therefore students could advance in mathematics, pursue a challenging science path, be placed in performing arts classes (music, dance, drama) based on talent, or study more than one world language. By eliminating the restrictions of traditional curriculum paths, we were able to increase student and parent options. We also wanted our students to connect to U-Prep through participation in meaningful extra-curricular and co-curricular activities. Our ultimate goal was to foster the leadership skills our students would need to be future stewards and innovators in our community.

Besides my background in education, my experiences as a parent with a child attending the excellent local public schools also informed my goals for U-Prep. When he was in sixth grade, my son tried out for the basketball team at a large middle school. More than 70 boys tried out; eleven made the team. And it seemed to me that many talented athletes as well as those who could've developed skills were being cut from the team for the next 6 years. The following year 45 tried out; by 8<sup>th</sup> grade the number was smaller. And by the time these boys were high school seniors, 6 of them had been on the 6<sup>th</sup> grade team. A smaller school like U-Prep has the

same if not more teams as the big schools and therefore offers more opportunities for participation. We wanted a school that left room for students to develop athletic skills as they matured physically and emotionally. We were also committed to having vibrant fine and performing arts programs. From the beginning our students had quality instructors for instrumental and vocal music, art, dance, and drama and many opportunities to showcase their talents outside of their classrooms. Our teachers were hired knowing they would coach a team, direct a fine or performing arts group, manage a club, organize community service, or prepare students for academic competitions. We wanted our faculty to be role models and form positive relationships with students in a different setting.

Within the advantages and restrictions of charter law was the freedom from much of the bureaucracy of traditional, non-charter systems. For instance we had seen how students scheduled into a 6 period, college prep track in most local high schools had virtually no room in their schedules for electives. By instituting a 7 period day for our high school students, we left room for them to continue with an instrument, pursue an additional foreign language, double up on math and science, or take up a new fine art. Because we were building our school from the ground up and because we were not limited by a negotiated contract, we were able to include advisory and tutorial periods and offer unique classes such as Latin, dance, and Chinese. From Day 1 (August 23, 2004), our teachers taught more classes, tutored students before and after school, led significant extra-curricular activities, and developed advisory curriculum. Creative and committed, our new staff loved their students and their school. All of these teachers came to U-Prep and worked without the safety net of tenure. I have so much respect for the risk they took, giving up the security of their jobs to embrace our dream. We had some great advantages and we also had some very good luck. We were able to hire fantastic teachers including a talented dance instructor with an amazing resume and a music teacher with both vocal and instrumental expertise. We also recruited world language teachers from China and Great Britain who added an international perspective. The beautiful and historic Shasta Learning Center gave our school automatic gravitas as did the inclusion of the Latin program. Experienced teachers with great local reputations became mentors for our younger faculty and allowed us to hit the ground running. We were blessed with a staff that supported

each other, collaborated with the leadership team (aka the founders), and pitched in wherever they were needed. We were also fortunate in our parent community who showed patience and grace as we figured out communication strategies, developed and changed policies, started and abandoned various bell schedules, and finally enlisted their help to set up parent groups. It is no exaggeration to state that the leadership team learned as we went, developing wisdom and insight along the way, and relying on feedback from students, staff, faculty, and parents. For example, our first high school class of ninth graders (we started with grades 6-9 and added a grade for the next three years) convinced us to move tutorial from morning to afternoon, a strategic change that made it possible for students to ask questions about homework. The assistance we received from our school community involved everything from the prosaic (schedules and calendars) to the profound (developing a school brand and an outreach strategy).

Early on the leadership team set significant academic goals: U-Prep would score high on state tests, become accredited before our first class graduated, and receive high national rankings for college preparedness. We wanted a school atmosphere that valued achievement, a place where it was cool to be a good student and to care about grades. Mainly we accomplished this by hiring an energetic, professional teaching staff that brought knowledge, commitment and compassion to their classrooms. For our teachers, we wanted to create a climate that encouraged professional growth and innovation. Many of our teachers had advanced degrees and/or additional credentials; all were avid learners, committed to high quality instruction. We decided to align our graduation requirements with UC admission and that meant adding a two year world language requirement, 3 years of advanced mathematics, and laboratory classes in both physical and life sciences. These changes also lined up with our mission. Simply put, our mission was our name and our vision was our belief that every U-Prep student would learn the skills to be successful in college. Along the way, we had a lot of fun. All of our teachers worked hard to make our new student body comfortable and connected. This involved helping students make friends and showing them we could laugh at ourselves. I remember a particular rally where some of the staff played volleyball against the high school team. We made two points. Student/faculty basketball games were more competitive but equally hilarious. At staff

meetings the leadership team usually included some team building that was designed to get staff to know and appreciate each other. There was always food and laughter and a camaraderie that sustained us through long days and many nighttime activities. I wouldn't trade a single minute of that first year for something easier or less exhausting. It was a privilege to be a founder, a joy to be its leader for 8 years, and a source of pride to be part of the history of University Preparatory School.

\*More information on the founders can be found on the [U-Prep website](#)

\*\*The requirements that must be met by CA charter schools can be found in the "[Panther Pride](#)" [Newsletter \(April, 2016\)](#) in the "Charter News" section.