



40<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION of  
UNIVERSITY CITY HIGH SCHOOL  
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## Salvaging a Dream

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When ground was broken four years ago for the University City High School at 36<sup>th</sup> and Filbert sts., there were hopes that this would be a model facility offering an alternative to the traditional curriculum and rigid scheduling in most urban high schools.

The school was one of 17 designated by the U.S. Office of Education to operate on an unstructured basis, with students learning at their own pace from individual “packets” of materials instead of from textbooks. There were to be no bells, no grades and no time limitations. Twenty-five percent of the study body was to be drawn from across the city to participate in the school’s special science and mathematics program; the remaining 75 percent would come from West Philadelphia to take the regular comprehensive high school curriculum.

The school was built to reflect the freedom and openness of the curriculum. Nine entrances allow easy access and exit. Classes branch off an octagonal core with various interconnecting hallways. The physical location of the facility was planned to attract faculty and faculty children from neighboring Drexel University and the University of Pennsylvania.

The hope that this would be a new and successful departure in high school education has been dealt a blow. Since the school’s opening a year ago there have been student stabbings, assaults on faculty and repeated gang violence at a rate exceeding that in other city high schools. Two weeks ago a group of students sought to “take over” the institution and were prevented from so doing by the civil disobedience squad.

What’s more the “magnet” science and mathematics program has had to be severely curtailed because of opposition among parents who wanted the school to serve students in the West Philadelphia area and not the “elite” of the city. What was planned as an integrated facility is currently 97 percent black, with most students coming from overcrowded West Philadelphia and John Bartram High Schools and several other junior highs in the area.

The most novel feature, the unstructured learning with individual packets, has collapsed for all but about 10 percent of the student body capable of handling the freedom inherent in the plan. One

reason for the failure here was lack of time available to brief incoming teachers and faculty when the school opened. After several weeks most indicated they wanted to go back to the old system.

The short range solution for University City High School's difficulties appears to be the adding of security guard to help patrol the corridors and keep out unauthorized visitors. Beyond that is the need for firming up administration and discipline generally. An urban high school must have strong leadership if fear and chaos are not going to gain the upper hand. Too much [is] invested in University City High School to permit it to go down the drain.

# Salvaging a dream

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