



University High School

Where College Readiness Becomes Reality

School Profile

Name: University High School

Location: Memphis, Tennessee

Founding Year: 2022

Grades Served: 9-12

Enrollment: 362

Student Demographics: 50% Black/African-American, 45% White, 5% Multi-Race/Other, 27% low-income

Results at a Glance



Tennessee's #1 Success:

University High achieved the highest success rate on high school end-of-course exams in Tennessee.



Early College Wins:

100% of students enrolled in dual enrollment courses earn college credit and over 75% of students enrolled in AP courses earn college credit.



English II Excellence:

Black students scored in the 96th percentile; low-income students in the 98% percentile.



University High School shows students that they already belong in college and can succeed there. Located in the Orgel Education Center on the University of Memphis campus, the school was founded around a provocative question: Why wait until after high school to give students college access when they can experience it every day?

Unlike traditional high schools that view college readiness as a future goal, University High offers college immersion starting in ninth grade. All students have the opportunity to earn college credit between their sophomore and senior years, learning alongside university students, faculty, and resources.

University High now operates as part of Tennessee's first Innovative School District, an independent local education agency in partnership with the University of Memphis. This structure combines the stability of district support with the innovation of university collaboration.



[See University High School in action](#)



NewSchools

The Model

Every decision at University High School flows from its identity as a laboratory school embedded on a college campus. Students engage with university life daily through dual enrollment courses, access to campus resources, and opportunities for character and career development.

In their sophomore year, students select one of eight career-connected pathways, such as engineering, public health, or fine arts, and follow a program of study that blends high school coursework with authentic college experiences. The school strategically combines Advanced Placement courses with dual enrollment options so they complement rather than compete with one another. Students regularly use university libraries, labs, and facilities, making college-level learning immediate, not abstract.

Key Innovations

Teaching & Learning

- **Integrated College and Career Pathways:** At the end of sophomore year, students choose one of eight career-connected pathways: entrepreneurship, public health, engineering, sport and human performance, humanities, fine arts, cybersecurity, or pre-law. Each pathway includes Dual Enrollment, AP, Honors courses, along with relevant college classes and experiential learning aligned to students' interests. All students successfully earn college credit before graduation, completing high school with 15-36 transferable college credits, all free of charge.
- **Structured Inquiry Arcs:** Sophomores complete 20 hours of structured service through partnerships with Memphis organizations, aligning projects with their pathways while giving back to the community. Students can also engage in civic and social responsibility projects through the University of Memphis Center for Service Learning and Volunteerism.

- **Senior Capstone:** Each senior completes a yearlong capstone (most Fridays are dedicated to this course) for internships, research, community service, or creative pursuits such as composing music or launching a business. The experience culminates in a public presentation or exhibition for the community.

Essential Mindsets, Habits, and Skills

- **Nine Core Competencies:** Students develop nine competencies essential for success in college, work, and civic life. University High embeds the competencies in daily experiences, and students are then asked to demonstrate mastery through hands-on work and reflection. Through experiences like entrepreneurship coursework and collaborations with Junior Achievement, Epicenter, and the Crews Center for Entrepreneurship, students learn to ideate, test, and iterate, building creative and self-directed habits.
- **PREP Course and Advisory:** Ninth graders take a counselor-led course introducing them to the nine competencies. In later grades, daily advisory sessions reinforce them through quarterly reflections and goal-setting, helping students connect learning to their personal growth.



Continuous Improvement

- **Three-Goal Strategic Framework:** Each year, the school leadership team sets three focus areas – for example, joy, accountability, and strong team – to drive continuous improvement. Joy is measured through surveys and feedback sessions; accountability through instructional walkthroughs and timelines for improvement timelines; and strong team through teacher retention and positive interactions. Data from each informs short-cycle improvement loops that guide schoolwide adjustments.
- **Sustained Excellence through Adult Development:** By its third year, University High achieved 100% teacher retention after implementing a robust professional development system. Instructional leadership teams, data-informed coaching, and opportunities for teachers to engage in university-based research have all created a strong culture of adult growth and collaboration. Teachers also benefit from their university employee status, which provides additional access to professional development resources and collaborative learning opportunities.

Lessons Learned

Lesson 1: Academic Excellence and Student Well-Being Require Intentional Balance

High achievement and student well-being are not competing priorities; they must be designed together. University High earned Tennessee's #1 high school success rate and scored 20% above national averages on the PSAT 9. But as academic rigor increased, student surveys revealed rising stress and a decline in joy. Leaders recognized that high expectations alone weren't enough. They needed systems to monitor and strengthen the student experience with the same discipline applied to academic data.

In response, the team made "Joy" one of three annual organizational goals one year – alongside accountability and a strong team. They began monitoring well-being through student surveys and introduced new rituals of celebration and connection into the school day. Within three years, student satisfaction rose from 54% to 67%, and measures of social awareness and growth mindset climbed more than 20 percentage points. University High's experience underscores that sustainable excellence requires intentional attention to both learning and belonging.

Lesson 2: Systems Scale More Successfully than Good Intentions

Strong relationships and founding energy can carry a school in its early years, but scaling requires systems that keep communication and accountability clear. As University High grew from 97 to nearly 300 students, inconsistent communication and feedback loops began to challenge teachers and families alike. Leaders realized that maintaining the culture of trust and responsiveness that defined their start-up phase would require explicit structures, not just goodwill.

The team introduced a guiding principle – SEE: Strong, Early, Effective – to shape communication and follow-through. They established problem-solving protocols, walkthroughs, and clear response timelines to ensure consistency across the team. These practices brought clarity, strengthened trust, and reduced burnout. By year three, teacher retention reached 100%, and 90% of staff reported positive perceptions of school culture. For new schools, University High's story illustrates that strong systems sustain performance and culture as organizations grow.



Lesson 3: Innovation and Stability Must Coexist

Innovation thrives when experimentation is paired with reliable systems that protect students' learning experiences. As a lab school, University High was designed to test forward-looking practices such as dual enrollment aligned to career pathways and experiential learning. But leaders soon realized that trying too many new ideas at once risked overwhelming teachers and families. They developed clear criteria to determine which innovations to pursue such as alignment with mission, evidence of student benefit, and sustainability and paired each pilot with strong mentorship and evaluation.

At the same time, the school established reliable anchors that families could count on, such as the guarantee that all students graduate with 15–36 hours of free dual enrollment credit. This balance allowed the school to innovate responsibly, expanding successful pilots like service learning and public health projects, and setting aside others when data showed limited impact. By combining curiosity with discipline, University High created a model that continues to evolve while preserving the stability students and teachers need to thrive.



Preparing Students for College on Day One

University High shows that the path to college can start the moment students walk through the doors of high school. Every graduate earns transferable college credits, saving families time and money while giving students a head start toward a degree. The school's success proves that real college experiences, not simulations, can transform what students believe about themselves and their futures.