

**U.S. Department of Education**  
**2021 National Blue Ribbon Schools Program**

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[X] Public or [ ] Non-public

For Public Schools only: (Check all that apply) [X] Title I [ ] Charter [ ] Magnet[X] Choice

Name of Principal Mrs. Vickie Landis  
(Specify: Ms., Miss, Mrs., Dr., Mr., etc.) (As it should appear in the official records)

Official School Name University High School  
(As it should appear in the official records)

School Mailing Address 9419 West Van Buren Street  
(If address is P.O. Box, also include street address.)

City Tolleson State AZ Zip Code+4 (9 digits total) 85353-2804

County Maricopa County

Telephone (623) 478-4380 Fax (623) 478-4252

Web site/URL https://university.tuhsd.org E-mail vickie.landis@tuhsd.org

I have reviewed the information in this application, including the eligibility requirements on page 2 (Part I-Eligibility Certification), and certify, to the best of my knowledge, that it is accurate.

Date \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
(Principal's Signature)

Name of Superintendent\* Mrs. Nora Gutierrez E-mail nora.gutierrez@tuhsd.org  
(Specify: Ms., Miss, Mrs., Dr., Mr., Other)

District Name Tolleson Union High School District Tel. (623) 478-4000

I have reviewed the information in this application, including the eligibility requirements on page 2 (Part I-Eligibility Certification), and certify, to the best of my knowledge, that it is accurate.

Date \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
(Superintendent's Signature)

Name of School Board President/Chairperson Mr. Devin Del Palacio  
(Specify: Ms., Miss, Mrs., Dr., Mr., Other)

I have reviewed the information in this application, including the eligibility requirements on page 2 (Part I-Eligibility Certification), and certify, to the best of my knowledge, that it is accurate.

Date \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
(School Board President's/Chairperson's Signature)

The original signed cover sheet only should be converted to a PDF file and uploaded via the online portal.

*\*Non-public Schools: If the information requested is not applicable, leave blank.*

## **PART I – ELIGIBILITY CERTIFICATION**

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The electronic signature on the first page of this application (cover page) certify that each of the statements below, concerning the school’s eligibility and compliance with U.S. Department of Education and National Blue Ribbon Schools requirements, are true and correct.

1. All nominated public schools must meet the state’s performance targets in reading (or English language arts) and mathematics and other academic indicators (i.e., attendance rate and graduation rate), for the all students group, including having participation rates of at least 95 percent using the most recent accountability results available for nomination.
2. To meet final eligibility, all nominated public schools must be certified by states prior to September 2021 in order to meet all eligibility requirements. Any status appeals must be resolved at least two weeks before the awards ceremony for the school to receive the award.
3. The school configuration must include one or more of grades K-12. Schools located on the same campus (physical location and mailing address) must apply as an entire school (i.e. K-8; 6-12; K-12 school). Two (or more) schools located on separate campuses, must apply individually even if they have the same principal. A single school located on multiple campuses with one principal must apply as an entire school.
4. The school has been in existence for five full years, that is, from at least September 2015 and grades participating in statewide assessments must have been part of the school for at least the three years prior to September 2019.
5. The nominated school has not received the National Blue Ribbon Schools award in the past five years: 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019 or 2020.
6. The nominated school has no history of testing irregularities, nor have charges of irregularities been brought against the school at the time of nomination. If irregularities are later discovered and proven by the state, the U.S. Department of Education reserves the right to disqualify a school’s application and/or rescind a school’s award.
7. The nominated school has not been identified by the state as “persistently dangerous” within the last two years.
8. The nominated school or district is not refusing Office of Civil Rights (OCR) access to information necessary to investigate a civil rights complaint or to conduct a district-wide compliance review.
9. The OCR has not issued a violation letter of findings to the school district concluding that the nominated school or the district as a whole has violated one or more of the civil rights statutes. A violation letter of findings will not be considered outstanding if OCR has accepted a corrective action plan from the district to remedy the violation.
10. The U.S. Department of Justice does not have a pending suit alleging that the nominated school or the school district, as a whole, has violated one or more of the civil rights statutes or the Constitution’s equal protection clause.
11. There are no findings of violations of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in a U.S. Department of Education monitoring report that apply to the school or school district in question; or if there are such findings, the state or district has corrected, or agreed to correct, the findings.

## PART II - DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

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Data should be provided for the current school year (2020-2021) unless otherwise stated.

**DISTRICT** (Question 1 is not applicable to non-public schools.)

1. Number of schools in the district (per district designation):
- 0 Elementary schools (includes K-8)
  - 0 Middle/Junior high schools
  - 8 High schools
  - 0 K-12 schools
- 8 TOTAL

**SCHOOL** (To be completed by all schools. Only include demographic data for the nominated school, not the district.)

2. Category that best describes the area where the school is located. If unsure, refer to NCES database for correct category: <https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/schoolsearch/> (Find your school and check “Locale”)

- Urban (city or town)
- Suburban
- Rural

3. Number of students as of October 1, 2020 enrolled at each grade level or its equivalent at the school. Include all students enrolled, in-person, participating in a hybrid model, or online only. If online schooling or other COVID-19 school issues make this difficult to obtain, provide the most accurate and up-to-date information available:

Grade	# of Males	# of Females	Grade Total
PreK	0	0	0
K	0	0	0
1	0	0	0
2	0	0	0
3	0	0	0
4	0	0	0
5	0	0	0
6	0	0	0
7	0	0	0
8	0	0	0
9	55	69	124
10	42	81	123
11	47	72	119
12 or higher	27	46	73
<b>Total Students</b>	171	268	439

\*Schools that house PreK programs should count preschool students **only** if the school administration is responsible for the program.

4. Racial/ethnic composition of the school (if unknown, estimate):
- 0.5 % American Indian or Alaska Native
  - 15 % Asian
  - 9 % Black or African American
  - 62 % Hispanic or Latino
  - 0.2 % Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
  - 11 % White
  - 2.3 % Two or more races
  - 100 % Total**

(Only these seven standard categories should be used to report the racial/ethnic composition of your school. The Final Guidance on Maintaining, Collecting, and Reporting Racial and Ethnic Data to the U.S. Department of Education published in the October 19, 2007 *Federal Register* provides definitions for each of the seven categories.)

5. Student turnover, or mobility rate, during the 2019 - 2020 school year: 10%

If the mobility rate is above 15%, please explain:

This rate should be calculated using the grid below. The answer to (6) is the mobility rate.

<b>Steps For Determining Mobility Rate</b>	<b>Answer</b>
(1) Number of students who transferred <i>to</i> the school after October 1, 2019 until the end of the 2019-2020 school year	5
(2) Number of students who transferred <i>from</i> the school after October 1, 2019 until the end of the 2019-2020 school year	42
(3) Total of all transferred students [sum of rows (1) and (2)]	47
(4) Total number of students in the school as of October 1, 2019	484
(5) Total transferred students in row (3) divided by total students in row (4)	0.10
(6) Amount in row (5) multiplied by 100	10

6. Specify each non-English language represented in the school (separate languages by commas):

Amharic, Spanish, Bengali, Arabic, Romanian, Filipino, Tagalog, Indian, Mandarin, Urdu, Vietnamese, Swahili, Punjabi, Hindi, Cantonese, other

English Language Learners (ELL) in the school: 0 %  
1 Total number ELL

7. Students eligible for free/reduced-priced meals: 39 %

Total number students who qualify: 171

8. Students receiving special education services: 0 %  
2 Total number of students served

Indicate below the number of students with disabilities according to conditions designated in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Do not add additional conditions. All students receiving special education services should be reflected in the table below. It is possible that students may be classified in more than one condition.

- |                                  |  |
|----------------------------------|--|
| <u>0</u> Autism                  | <u>2</u> Multiple Disabilities                 |
| <u>0</u> Deafness                | <u>1</u> Orthopedic Impairment                 |
| <u>0</u> Deaf-Blindness          | <u>4</u> Other Health Impaired                 |
| <u>0</u> Developmental Delay     | <u>0</u> Specific Learning Disability          |
| <u>2</u> Emotional Disturbance   | <u>0</u> Speech or Language Impairment         |
| <u>0</u> Hearing Impairment      | <u>0</u> Traumatic Brain Injury                |
| <u>0</u> Intellectual Disability | <u>0</u> Visual Impairment Including Blindness |

9. Number of years the principal has been in her/his position at this school: 1
10. Use Full-Time Equivalents (FTEs), rounded to the nearest whole numeral, to indicate the number of school staff in each of the categories below. If your current staffing structure has shifted due to COVID-19 impacts and you are uncertain or unable to determine FTEs, provide an estimate.

	<b>Number of Staff</b>
Administrators	1
Classroom teachers, including those teaching high school specialty subjects, e.g., third grade teacher, history teacher, algebra teacher.	18
Resource teachers/specialists/coaches e.g., reading specialist, science coach, special education teacher, technology specialist, art teacher etc.	0
Paraprofessionals under the supervision of a professional supporting single, group, or classroom students.	0
Student support personnel e.g., school counselors, behavior interventionists, mental/physical health service providers, psychologists, family engagement liaisons, career/college attainment coaches, etc.	3

11. Average student-classroom teacher ratio, that is, the number of students in the school divided by the FTE of classroom teachers, e.g., 22:1 22:1

12. Show daily student attendance rates. Only high schools need to supply yearly graduation rates.

<b>Required Information</b>	2019-2020	2018-2019	2017-2018	2016-2017	2015-2016
Daily student attendance	96%	96%	96%	96%	97%
High school graduation rate	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

13. **For high schools only, that is, schools ending in grade 12 or higher.**

Show percentages to indicate the post-secondary status of students who graduated in Spring 2020.

<b>Post-Secondary Status</b>	
Graduating class size	84
Enrolled in a 4-year college or university	90%
Enrolled in a community college	10%
Enrolled in career/technical training program	0%
Found employment	0%
Joined the military or other public service	0%
Other	0%

14. Indicate whether your school has previously received a National Blue Ribbon Schools award.  
 Yes  No

If yes, select the year in which your school received the award.

15. In a couple of sentences, provide the school’s mission or vision statement.

A place where students grow socially, emotionally, and intellectually in order to become their best self and achieve their maximum potential.

16. Briefly describe how your school has been operating during the current 2020-2021 school year (e.g., open as usual, online only, a hybrid model, etc.)? If different grade levels in your building operate in different ways, include this. If the school began with one model and switched to another partially through the year, include this as well.

For the first three quarters we were on-line. For the fourth quarter we transitioned to hybrid, allowing students and families to choose between hybrid and in-person.

17. **For public schools only**, if the school is a magnet, charter, or choice school, explain how students are chosen to attend.

The application process requires documentation of previous academic performance. To determine eligibility, we require applicants to submit 7th grade end-of-year report cards, teacher recommendation forms, and 6th grade AzMerit scores (state assessment).

We accept students who are "proficient" by state assessment scores. However, we do accept students who are "partially proficient" if they are dedicated to the work ethic and have a strong desire to learn.

Due to COVID, we have dropped assessment requirements.

## **PART III - SUMMARY**

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The Tolleson community, dating back to 1927, is tightly-knit and very proud of its origin and heritage. Generations of students have attended schools within district boundaries, and they maintain staunch ties to their alma maters and their community. While the Tolleson Union High School District (TUHSD) is well-established, University High School, which is nestled within the Tolleson High School campus, began first as a program in 2006 and eventually became its own school. University High School (UHS) provides its students the core curriculum, and its students are co-enrolled in Tolleson High School for their extra-curricular classes.

Our families desire the best opportunities for their children, and that is what drives them to UHS. Many of our students did very well in elementary school, excelling in their courses, and their parents have expressed confidence that their students are ready for the next step that will prepare them to enter college. Our incoming students aspire to attend a college or university, and for many, they become first-generation collegiate students in their families.

We serve a diverse student population, many coming from low-income families. It is because of this diversity and appreciation of others that our bullying rate is low. As a matter of fact, our students are generally confident in reaching out to us to express concerns for their fellow students. Over the years, our students have advocated for and began diverse co-curricular clubs with teacher and administration support. Examples of a few of our student-founded clubs are the Gay Straight Alliance (GSA), Gardening Club, Robotics, Anime, and Native American Club. Additionally, we have formed an organization on our campus called the Grit Gurus, which is a tutoring and mentoring program that matches underclassmen with upperclassmen who will support them through the difficulties of managing a college-prep curriculum and the rigor, executive function, grit, growth mindset, and social emotional supports that come along with it.

Another aspect that makes UHS unique is the spiraling of Sean Covey's *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Teens* (2014) within the English Language Arts curriculum and with all things UHS. For example, as our students struggle to make sense of the world and to be strong digital citizens, they sometimes misstep. Recognizing their humanity and constant growth, we conference with students about appropriate behaviors involving the use of social media or digital presence. We often site lessons and habits from the book, such as beginning with the end in mind. We examine the purpose of student actions and dissect it to align with one of the habits from the book. With these habits and lessons, we help students see the impact of their decisions throughout their high school careers.

UH also utilizes Positive Behavior Interventions Supports (PBIS) as we encourage our students to make RITE decisions with Respect, Integrity, Teamwork, and Excellence. Students are rewarded with RITE cards and praised for their decisions, helping us complement the work from the *Seven Habits of Highly Effective Teens*. The cards are redeemable in the bookstore which works to reward their behaviors. This is also reciprocated toward teachers. When a student is rewarded, that student has an opportunity to award a teacher for exemplified positive behavior. The teachers are always happy to receive positive acknowledgement and kind words from our students.

When our students commit to attend UHS, they are also committing to enrolling in the strong and rigorous curriculum of Advanced Placement (AP) programming. However, they are not left to fend for themselves. UHS provides guaranteed hours of tutoring, requiring students to attend at least two hours of tutoring a week after school. Our teachers are committed to providing those opportunities and ensuring that the depth of understanding for their learning, whether it be refusing to take less than their best on English Performance Assessments or providing multiple attempts at mastery on a science project. Because of our continued student support and their ultimate success, UHS has been consistently named as one of the Best High Schools by US News and World Report over the years.

Not only is University High School a rigorous school that supports students in their academics, diversity, and social and emotional learning, we provide opportunities to celebrate and to be a part of a larger community because we are hosted on Tolleson High School's comprehensive campus. Our students

participate in spirit competitions and athletics, while still maintaining the feel of a small school with field days, advisory competitions, and brain breaks.

Everything that is University High School embodies our vision for our students' success. We are dedicated to our legacy and are confident that our students will be better citizens, lifelong learners, and achievers throughout their lives. They learn that with grit and a growth mindset, they will be successful in whatever they choose to pursue. Because of the overall climate and culture at UHS in Tolleson, Arizona, students' unique experiences, teachers, clubs, and supports, help us provide them a vision and opportunity to seize a future beyond their dreams.



## **PART IV – CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION**

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### **1. Core Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment.**

The college-level curriculum at University High School is rigorous. For our advanced and extra-curricular courses, we use the district curriculum and traditionally administer its mid-year and end-of-year assessments. We prioritize content standards and design lessons around the skills necessary for course mastery. Our students also enroll in Advanced Placement (AP) courses, so all syllabi and resources are approved through the College Board.

This year, our bell schedule has had three different iterations, and our teachers pivoted to meet the demands of changing schedules. In January, we sought to increase engagement by requiring students to turn on their cameras while meeting virtually for class. Teachers were excited that they were able to see their students for the first time in some cases, especially for the freshmen. This transition did not come without challenges, but we were flexible with students who had limited bandwidth or who struggled with other issues such as broken equipment. This year we also implemented a daily Power Hour of intervention for all students.

The English and language arts (ELA) curriculum provides a strong foundation of learning with the use of literature and informational text. We promote student ownership of learning and of mastering content skills. Our rigorous and differentiated re-writing process utilizes writing, speaking, and listening skills and provides students with longer projects and student choice. Many learn that we will not accept anything less than their best, and we require students to work continuously on their semester performance assessment until it meets mastery of 80% or higher. However, this year our teachers addressed the struggles that came with virtual learning during the pandemic by reducing the mastery level to 70% and by providing students more time and opportunities. Strong and consistent communication with students and parents help us emphasize high expectations and foster college-readiness with literacy skills that cannot be rivaled. Visiting alumni attest to their application of these skills, and they voice their confidence and proficiency with such. Students enroll in advanced courses as underclassmen and transition to dual enrollment and AP courses, including AP research and AP Seminar, in their junior and senior years.

The math department continued to refine their practice in competency-based grading while providing multiple attempts for mastery. The department prioritized the standards that overlapped between AP and the Arizona Department of Education's standards. To ensure that the instructional time was prioritized, students had to take their math assessments during learning Power Hour. Cameras had to be on during testing, and the math teachers supervised their students. Unlike the ELA department's focus on performance assessments, the math department focuses on proving tasks which are formative assessments that the students may take multiple times to show their growth of knowledge on the standards. This allows the student to see progress and assess their own learning as they master the content and standards. Students are assessed multiple times during a unit to demonstrate growth and mastery of the standards and are given two attempts at the unit summative assessment. After the first attempt, students have choice to determine which area of focus they need to improve on for their re-test. Like ELA, pandemic adjustments for math allowed students more than two attempts on their assessments and other assignments. The need to be flexible with due dates was imperative, and our teachers worked with students to ensure they had the time to achieve mastery for the desired mastery level.

Social studies AP courses are provided at every grade level. Teachers in this department utilized more on-line instructional tools than ever before and were excited that the online platform ensured that students had access to the curriculum at home and at all times of the day and week. Course assessments were also reviewed and trimmed to ensure exact alignment between the standard and the assessment. Teachers continued to adapt their instruction so that instructional practices such as Socratic seminars and mock trials were successfully adapted to increase engagement and to gather evidence of learning.

Like the math department, our science teachers also utilize competency-based grading. During the pandemic, teachers developed skills-based activities that provided clear expectations for students and were aligned to the Arizona (AZ) Science Standards and the Next Generation Science Standards. This new grading system allowed teachers to balance content with skills. Before the school year began, teachers

worked to transition the science department into a foundational field, building upon the skills learned from year to year as the students progressed through science courses during their time at UHS. This vertical alignment allows teachers across grade levels to produce appropriately rigorous expectations and lines of communication about student achievement and growth across the sciences. Teachers use data throughout the semester to provide targeted and tiered interventions to students based on their diverse needs. In the students' senior year, they may select AP Physics, AP Biology, AP Chemistry, or AP Environmental Science – which is most favored among students.

Through the intentional planning with curriculum, instruction, assessment, and support of students, teachers and staff continue to ensure that upon graduation from University High School, students will have mastered the advanced and college-level course work required of them. Despite the various transitions, limitations, and adjustments during this pandemic year, teachers not only promoted grit among their students, they also modeled it. University High School students will truly be ready to collegiately compete with their peers at the colleges and universities they will attend.

### **1a. For secondary schools (middle and/or high school grades):**

University High School has an array of opportunities that support college and career readiness. Currently we offer dual enrollment through our AP English Literature and AP World History classes. We look forward to expanding our dual enrollment offerings next year through AP Calculus, AP US History, and AP Government and Economics. Opportunities for specific career and education tracks are found in Business Operations, Coding, Culinary Arts, Digital Communication, Digital Photography, Marketing, Medical Assisting, and Sports Medicine. Most of these courses include three earned college credits. However, medical assisting may offer up to eight college credits, and sports medicine and rehabilitation may offer up to 15 college credits.

Our Career and Technical Education program offers apprenticeship or pre-apprenticeship/internship opportunities. Once a student successfully completes the minimum required course work within a CTE program and passes the state assessment for that program, he or she can be a student intern in the areas that correspond with their completed coursework. Over the past five years, students from UHS have been offered placements upon graduation from high school because of their internship experiences.

Industry-recognized credential opportunities are integrated within the curricula of our CTE programs. Through these, students become prepared for and gain opportunities to learn about automotive, business operations, coding, culinary arts, digital communications digital photography, marketing, medical assisting, and sports medicine.

Student leadership, civic responsibility, entrepreneurship skills, and work-based learning opportunities occur in all CTE programs. These are not only embedded within the course curricula via Arizona Professional Skills but are also put into practice as part of the program and its alignment to Career and Technical Student Organizations (CTSOs). Within the past five years, two UHS students have served as state CTSO Officers for Arizona Future Business Leaders of America (FBLA). Worked-based learning is also integrated within the CTE program. Students at UHS have the opportunities to engage with co-curricular CTSOs such as Distributive Education Clubs of America, Future Business Leaders of America, Family Career and Community Leaders of America, Health Occupational Students of America (HOSA), and SkillsUSA. While competing in state competitions, UHSS students from FBLA, Family, Career and Community Leaders of America, and HOSA regularly earn state recognition and move on to National and International competitions where they fare well in leadership and civic-minded competitions as well as in entrepreneurship and career pathway opportunities.

### **1b. For schools that offer preschool for three- and/or four-year old students:**

## **2. Other Curriculum Areas:**

While University High School students take rigorous core classes, they also experience the arts, which further provides opportunities to think critically, collaborate with others, and creatively solve problems. UHS students participate in various events, performances, and competitions that involve marching band, choir, theater, dance, music, and art. A student enrolled in Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC), band, or dance is awarded physical education (PE)/Health credit, allowing them to take another extracurricular or a Career and Technical Education (CTE) course.

With the help of the arts, our students have opportunities to enjoy the creativity that comes with performing and visual arts. Our programs engage students in the artistic process to create, perform, respond, and connect. Upon completion of four years of coursework and engagement in community events, our students have the opportunities to earn an art seal on their diploma endorsed by the Arizona Department of Education.

Fine arts exposure begins at the freshman level with opportunities to take art, ceramics, guitar, band, theater, dance, Folklorico, Mariachi, choir, guitar, and piano. Their additional enrollment in a speech course compliments the English Language Arts class and infuses Covey's Seven Habits of Highly Effective Teens (2014), which helps students learn professionalism and character building.

As sophomores, students may remain in the arts or join a CTE program, beginning with Career and Technical Education Student Organizations (CTSOs). Students can eventually transition to internships and work experience opportunities. Sophomore year is also the year students join the world language program, where, for many, they choose to take three to four years of Spanish and find themselves very successful in the AP track.

Health is taught in the 10th grade through an on-line platform to ensure that students can remain focused on their rigorous AP coursework. We look to complement the course with Social and Emotional Learning resources so students can gain a stronger understanding of and utilize the resources that are available on campus and can learn how to better support their peers.

Juniors and seniors continue with the fine arts or CTE programs and are able to enroll in AP Computer Science Principles and AP Computer Science. They may also enroll in AP Art History, AP Art Music Theory, and Art Studio for art and ceramics.

In addition to the myriad of extracurricular activities, UHS has a robotics club that meets regularly, has a strong partnership with local businesses and leaders, and competes in robotics competitions within the state.

Though the pandemic posed a number of challenges to our various programs, our district continued to prioritize the arts by purchasing and organizing the delivery of guitars, keyboards, and art supplies to students' homes where on-line instruction could take place. By doing so, our students were able to participate in hands-on learning, creativity, and expression that the arts promote. We were so fortunate that our students could continue with the arts!

### **3. Academic Supports:**

We support our diverse student population by giving them a vision of success and hope. Students enter our school with strong transcripts and confidence that they will succeed. Though they may not know how, they do know that UHS is one of the best schools in our state and nation and that we have a program that will foster their academic achievement.

ELA is vertically aligned and recursive to build mastery of foundational reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills. We begin the freshmen level with an advanced class and a speech course complement, and we build upward to pre-AP at the sophomore level. Junior and senior levels consist of designated Advanced Placement courses, which provide strong resources with spiraled, high expectations throughout the course of their high school years. The performance assessment cycle for ELA students helps our teachers to gather feedback on the discreet skills that students are

struggling with. Mini lessons evolve into instruction which support students who are struggling with the grade-level and above expectations.

The mathematics sequence requires students to take two content courses during their sophomore year or to take a summer school course to fulfill this requirement. Because mathematics uses competency-based grading, the assessments are closely aligned with instruction, leading students to mastery of both content and skills. During instruction, our math department sets up stations based on immediate feedback from proving tasks which provides opportunities for remediation. We also provide challenging stations for students who excel. Not only do our students engage in assessments that inform instruction and demonstrate mastery at the local level, but they also prepare for assessments on the national and global level. We have opportunities for practice AP tests, as well as SAT and ACT tests.

AP Human Geography kicks off the social studies content at the freshman level. This college-level course complements the expectations of reading and writing in our ELA courses and reinforces strong foundational skills. As sophomores, students may take Advanced World History or AP World History; and, as juniors and seniors, students enroll in AP History and AP Government.

In science, students grow in three dimensions as evidenced by the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS), which utilize Science and Engineering practices and Crosscutting Concepts. Uniquely challenging and making relevant for our students, science instruction is vertically aligned among Biology, Chemistry, and Physics to assess the same skills across different grade levels. Each year, the core skills become more rigorous and are transferable across content disciplines.

Despite the challenges in having multiple preps, teachers continue to work in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) to compare assessment scores and instructional practices for common courses, but they also work closely in grade-level teams to continue vertical and horizontal conversations. Our less than 500 student enrollment allows our teachers to work together regularly and to know our students well. This allows us to identify students who are not achieving at grade-level or at high expectation and provide them with the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), including social and emotional learning supports.

Upon entering UHS, students are given a diagnostic assessment that includes writing samples and reading comprehension. This addresses students who may already experienced gaps in opportunities. Mandatory tutoring begins within the first two weeks, and these students attend every day. The supports that are provided are scaffolded with their current assignments and focus on the discreet skills that are needed to build a successful foundation to be successful in the rigorous environment.

Near the end of the freshmen year another diagnostic is implemented, and teachers utilize the student writing portfolio to address discrepancies in skill attainment. Some students attend summer school, and some students attend very rigorous summer programs at other universities or seek out other opportunities to hone their skills.

This year during the pandemic we implemented learning support time for all the core areas every day, as well as additional tutoring after school hours. For competency-based grading (math and science), students were encouraged to work on and resubmit work in areas they were struggling, but ELA and Social Studies also provided opportunities for students to commit to more learning while working on skills. Sometimes this looked like tutoring on the difference between evidence and commentary and practicing with the texts that students were studying.



## **PART V – SCHOOL CLIMATE AND CULTURE**

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### **1. Engaging Students:**

The school climate is palpable at University High School. When students enter the campus, they know that they are becoming a part of something so much larger than they can imagine. They hear the stories from the alumni, they hear of scholarship opportunities, and they know the future they dream is attainable. Their teachers push them to their limits, and then support them as the students continue with productive struggle.

The learning at University High School includes student reflection and goal setting during supplemental instruction time. During office hours and or power hour, students reflect on their progress, set goals, and work to achieve them. Sometimes those goals are tied to increasing a grade, but many times the goal complements the mastery of a concept or skill.

Another original invention from UHS is its Grit Gurus. Junior and senior-year students, who have achieved academic success at University High School, mentor freshmen who struggle to manage the expectations of their teachers. These Gurus support their younger peers emotionally, socially, and academically by providing advice, tips, and a community of support. The primary drive of the Gurus is to help freshmen improve their executive function skills, which many lack upon as they enter high school.

With the grit gurus and our recognition for being gritty, teachers identify students who exemplify grittiness in their academics. These students are not necessarily “high-achievers,” but are instead students who display passion and perseverance in their academic pursuits. They maintain an exceptional work ethic and practice the tenants of a growth mindset. These students have overcome adversity and challenges to achieve their academic goals. We award these students every month with Grit Guru t-shirts—awards that are highly sought and are proudly worn by students.

Another organization unique to UHS is the Sophomore Grit with Hope and Healthy Education Environment Committee. Grit with Hope is a space for the students to vocalize their concerns and current situations. By their sophomore year, students have the foundational understanding of what it means to be a UHS student; and, it is at this time that students find their passions and identities. In Grit with Hope, students are supported by other students and a school sponsor, and they have an opportunity to advocate for a strong and healthy school environment, while looking for ways to provide supports for student mental health.

In the beginning of the pandemic it was increasingly difficult to provide support for students in the on-line structure, but we persisted by adjusting the school schedule. We adapted to our traditional practices of holding meetings, assemblies, and celebrations, though virtual. We even had our school bus drivers deliver certificates and t-shirts to our students, and we made celebratory phone calls to families to rejoice in good grades and to applaud students who were doing well.

### **2. Engaging Families and Community:**

Our families are an important part of University High School I. We establish a strong relationship with our parents upon acceptance by inviting them to Parent University, a series of sessions where parents learn about what it is like to attend University High School, how to support students who experience high levels of stress, and how to provide students support with content by understanding executive function.

Our parents also are invited to participate in the Parent EnGagement (PEG) group that meets at least once a month. The principal informs the group about progress in school improvement and includes Title updates, and parents have opportunities to ask questions. The meeting then pivots to a parent-led discussion about supporting one another.

We host Academic Consultation night where parents discuss with teachers their student’s needs. This year we adjusted the process by holding virtual conferences through our Learning Management System (LMS). At the beginning of each semester, we hold open houses to provide updates and prepare parents for what is

to come. We also send parent communications every Sunday evening.

University High School partners with Arizona State University (ASU) on several programs. We are especially proud of the American Dream Academy and its support for parents as they help their students navigate the college application and preparation process. We can provide resources to students through ASU's TRIO, a federally funded opportunity designed to support and motivate first generation and low-income families with college aspirations. ASU supports our students in engineering as we work closely with Dr. Ganesh to promote careers and opportunities in the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) field. And it is through the American Modeling Association and its strong relationship with ASU that our science teachers receive valuable professional development.

We have built partnerships with other educational institutions, providing dual enrollment through Maricopa Community Colleges and programs associated with West-MEC (Maricopa County Education Center), our Career and Technical Education partner. We also partner with Grand Canyon University in STEM outreach.

At the local level, our students can be seen at every community event: serving at the annual Thanksgiving dinner, celebrating Fall Fest and December Fest, or handing out candy at our partner district's Trunk-or-Treat. We have strong partnerships with our Tolleson and Avondale community as we support Kids at Hope through the local Boys and Girls Clubs.

We could brag about more of our partnerships with community members, cities, and our Wolverine-Knight Foundation that supports and celebrates. We can also proudly boast about our Garden Club, which raises plants and vegetables that are sold at the local farmers' market.

While this year has been difficult with the shutdown of in-person learning for the first three quarters, we continued to meet with parents, adapted our open houses and parent consultations to utilize our learning management System (LMS), updated parents more frequently, adding attendance updates for interventions as well as for instructional time, and maintained our community partnerships in support of our students.

### **3. Creating Professional Culture:**

High expectations are what drives student learning at UHS, but it also drives the professional culture. Teachers consistently enroll in college level classes, seek new or different certifications, participate in AP workshops, lead AP workshops, and demonstrate professional expertise.

UHS has engaged in Professional Learning Communities since the school's inception. Because of the small environment that is UHS, teachers had to work closely together to support our unique and diverse students. The structure of that has improved and evolved over the years, and this year was no different. PLCs were required to utilize data-driven, focused decisions to inform interventions in the afternoons for learning support and for tutoring. Because our schedule was modified so that instructional time was decreased and intervention time was increased, the teachers had to be intentional with instruction and supports.

Our science department participates in the Knowles Teacher Initiative, a five-year program focused on science (and math) instruction, that is comprised of thorough professional development focusing on data collection and tools for teachers to gain a better understanding of their classroom and pedagogy. We are proud to say that two of our teachers are Knowles fellows in years three and four of the fellowship. Additionally, our science teachers complete professional development in the American Modeling Teachers Association which transforms traditional classroom instruction into discovery learning.

Our teachers are masters in their content and dedicated to a lifetime of learning. This is a foundation of UHS as students learn about growth mindset and are taught The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Teens. These habits are carried into their adulthood, and our teachers believe in it so much that their professional lives reflect the same productive struggle as our students. Every year, they are invited to participate in AP training, and many apply for and are awarded scholarships to attend. Our English department typically participates in the College Board's AP reading and scoring training, while others work to attain masters' degrees to teach dual enrollment courses in conjunction with their AP courses.

Every summer, we have a day-long retreat where teachers review the school's vision and mission, learn the theme for the year, and work on the framework for professional development and school improvement. This truly is a collective effort to continuously improve our practices.

Throughout the pandemic, the district provided professional resources and training on social emotional learning and new digital resources so our teachers could engage students and support them with content that we may not have had access to previously. For example, our teachers learned to use Nearpod for instruction, formative assessment, and student engagement. They were provided digital resources aligned to core content and have had the opportunity to utilize the College Board's AP Classroom complete with instructional resources.

#### **4. School Leadership:**

As we look at school leadership, it is important to look at our school's mission statement: A place where students grow socially, emotionally, intellectually to become their best self and achieve their maximum potential. We believe that when we support students to reach their potential in these avenues, success will occur. We will be supporting the proverbial whole child. Our students are pushed every day academically, and we provide the support academically, socially, and emotionally as they work on becoming the best version of themselves.

This year posed a different challenge that UHS had not experience before, not even relating to the pandemic. They also experienced a leadership change at the end of the first quarter. Because UHS has a strong work ethic with vision and mission statements evident and rooted in their culture, with strong systems in place, they continued to prevail.

There is one principal at University High School, and that principal works with five department chairs: one from each content area, plus the Gifted and Talented program lead. They meet weekly as the leadership team and serve as a pseudo-assistant administrative team to build and enact school regulations and policies in conjunction with the principal. There are twelve early releases scheduled on Wednesdays with a full day release in the first semester. Much of the work during the release time was rooted in PLC, data driven conversations, and digital tools.

The PLCs work in content as well as grade-level to ensure alignment is both horizontal and vertical. In content we discussed the progress and celebrations of the students. Curriculum was evaluated as we monitored success rates, and then modified student schedules to adapt rigor levels during virtual learning. In content areas, teachers were working to ensure that the content maintained rigor, and if something was deemed as non-essential, it could be removed or spiraled through a different unit. Teachers also worked together to re-evaluate mastery level and adjust to support students who were struggling.

Tolleson Union High School District has a strong social and emotional support structure. Each school is supported by a social worker, interventionist, psychologist, and district prevention specialist. University High School incorporates Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) into their culture by aligning behaviors to the RITE way as referenced in a previous section. These resources were especially relevant this year as we looked to support our students and teachers with SEL.

University High School works collaboratively with the Tolleson leadership to ensure our students and staff have the best opportunities. We are so thankful of our district who prioritized student and staff safety during the pandemic.

#### **5. Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning:**

Our student body is very diverse, and we tend to tenants of culturally responsive teaching. UHS teachers create spaces for students to have a sense of self-acceptance which includes their cultural backgrounds and lived experiences. Through social and cultural, academic, and socio-emotional



supports, students gain a well-rounded educational experience.

Social and cultural events are paramount in celebrating and recognizing the diversity in our families, staff, and students. Our teachers have organized opportunities to celebrate Black History Month, Latinx Heritage Month, and Women's History Month. For Black History Month, a montage was created and shared across the campus and with our district that honored less celebrated contributors to science, technology, and innovation. This activity is one example of how UHS celebrates and appreciates our diverse student body reflected in industry and innovation.

Students engage in a variety of organizations, catering to their unique interests, e.g., Native American Club, Coexist, Social Justice Club, and Robotics Club. They hear from alumni every year about the positive experiences at UHS and the opportunities that await them in adulthood. Participation in organizations and hearing from alumni contribute to their self-growth in addition to balancing between their social and academic lives.

Our AP Human Geography course sets a foundation of diverse appreciation and provides our students opportunities to engage in activities that celebrate their cultures. Students get to study their cultures and the impacts of their heritage on our history, culture, and world.

Most recently the Social Justice Club met virtually to discuss the recent crimes against the Asian population in the United States. They shared perspectives and discussed resolutions to heal the nation. Next week the club, which has representatives for most continents, will learn more about Ramadan.

UHS has structures in place that support students socially and emotionally by fostering growth mindset among students and parents. Drawing from Covey's *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Teens* (2014), students know they will be equipped with the tools necessary to navigate the challenges that come with UHS's rigorous curricula. Through consistent communication with parents, we can guide them and educate them about the academic challenges their students face, and we provide them with the necessary resources to support their student's academic journey.

It is common practice amongst teachers to emphasize Miyake and Friedman's (2000) notion of executive function and its relation to brain development. Students recognize that this notion is embedded in the school's culture. Each teacher reinforces the importance of organizational skills and prioritizing responsibilities.

UHS provides students with necessary academic and social and emotional supports. The school's learning support program and Power Hour address their diverse academic needs. Teachers provide targeted support to ensure mastery of essential skills. We also included brief videos produced by our social worker about supporting students by utilizing our anonymous hotline. Our district dedicated a whole day of professional development to SEL as we focused our learning on suicide prevention and will learn more about cultural biases in an upcoming professional development. And, with the RITE committee and our Student Government, we displayed a large iron heart decorated with red lights during COVID-19 to demonstrate love for community and dedication to our students.

The staff at University High School strives in cultivating a safe learning environment. They provide opportunities for students to celebrate diversity and to be part of a community of life-long learners. It takes the efforts of parents, teachers, students, and the community to support and ensure that all students leave UHS with a well-rounded education.



## **PART VI - STRATEGY FOR ACADEMIC SUCCESS**

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Our district, administrators, staff, and students have been resilient throughout the pandemic, and it is difficult to identify one practice. But if we must, it will be modifying the school day to include Professional Learning Communities to meet, as well as time to include student intervention during the school day.

When we started the 2020-2021 school year, we were following the traditional bell schedule of our district with 55-minute classes and 30-minute lunches. This was modified later in first quarter to address some issues. Students and teachers were concerned with the amount of screen time, and our students were struggling evidenced with declining assessment scores, therefore, impacting their grades as well.

The schedule was modified to include 35-minute courses, an hour lunch, and an afternoon designated as learning support. Teachers worked in PLCs to design the learning support schedule so that they could manage PLC meetings, provide support for struggling students, allow for math assessments during learning support, and still provide tutoring at the end of the school day.

A weekly message would go out on Friday afternoons when students did not attend learning support. At the end of the first semester, UHS was experiencing higher rates of failures than in the past, and students were not attending learning support in the afternoon despite the weekly email and text message about attendance. As a result, we restructured our learning support time again.

This time, we set the expectation that all students would login to Teams with their grade level advisory teacher after lunch. At the beginning of learning support on the first Monday in January, the grade level teams would meet with small groups of students to discuss their schedule for the week and sign up for learning support. We set the expectation that students would complete the login process every day and plan their afternoons. Mondays would be longer as we were building relationships with students, for example discussing their weekend activities and/or answering questions that they had, that did not necessarily have to do with a specific content. Teachers would take attendance every day at the beginning of the learning support, and then we would send students to what we call “Power Hour” where attendance would be taken again. The parents would be notified daily this time. What we saw was an increase in attendance as well as an increase in engagement.

The practice of including common meeting time for teachers and providing interventions during the school day is one way the district met the needs of our students. Moreover, during the pandemic we were able to modify the school schedule to include this best practice. We identify such practice as a successful strategy and work to ensure we can maintain the flow of normalcy the following school year once we are all back in-person.