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Central Park East Secondary School (CPESS) At a Glance

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C P E S S

AT A GLANCE

Central Park East Secondary School
1573 Madison Avenue
New York, NY 10029
Tel: (212) 860-8935
Fax: (212) 876-3494

David Smith, Director

A Small Neighborhood School, Grades 7-12

Opened: September 1985

Students: 460 (45% Hispanic, 45% African American)

Teachers: 38 (40% of color)

Teacher Load: 42 students or fewer per week

Advisor Load: 15 students or fewer

Admissions: No requirements

Web site: <http://mail.csd4.k12.ny.us/cpess/>

NSLC
c/o ETR Associates
4 Carbonero Way
Scotts Valley, CA 95066

Central Park East Secondary School

Habits of Mind in the World of Work

RAMON,* A SENIOR at Central Park East Secondary School (CPESS), pushes his way through the doors of the school into the crisp December morning. Covering the three blocks to Mt. Sinai Hospital in minutes, Ramon greets the hospital security guard, heads through the doors marked “employees only,” and makes his way to a small auditorium where the weekly CPESS/Mt. Sinai Health Careers Internship Seminar takes place.

In the auditorium, Mardi Tumanaro, a science teacher and one of the founding faculty of CPESS, is chatting casually with a cluster of 11 other CPESS students. Clipboard in hand, she calls the group to order and asks for a volunteer to give an update on recent internship work. She reminds students that this is a good time to start practicing for their formal presentations in January.

Ramon steps to the podium and begins. For the past several weeks he has been analyzing data on patient demographics and referrals from two local health centers. After reading a huge stack of reports, Ramon developed “about 19 graphs in 40 minutes,” comparing patient referrals with the actual incidence of doctor visits. He found that only 45 percent of referrals resulted in actual visits. Mardi asks what his research has taught him about the delivery of medical care. Ramon replies that the hospital’s system for tracking returns on referrals is not as efficient as one might think. Some of the data appears to be lost, manipulated, or erroneous. When people do not follow through with referrals, Ramon says, they endanger their own health as well as the health of others — a clear public health risk.

Ramon has designed a new database to simplify the tracking of referral data. He hopes the results will influence strategies for improving the rate of return on referrals. At the same time, Ramon has been developing a more general research paper about ways to improve the response of low-income populations to referrals from health centers. The Mt. Sinai Steering Committee will use Ramon’s report to help evaluate its referral network.

After further questions from Mardi and the students about how he will organize his findings and what interests him in his work (“being able to have an effect on the quality of people’s lives in my community”), Ramon steps down. The students who follow bring up a range of concerns and issues in their work: boredom, problems with supervisors, technical challenges, the possibility of work-related injury. Mardi and the students offer each other support and advice on ways to address these concerns.

The reflection does not end here. Back at school, Ramon and his peers consult with their advisors as they prepare their internship portfolios. They also take

*The names of students have been changed in all case studies.



“My internship is not about working in the hospital and thinking in the school. The work and thinking go on simultaneously all the time.”

— Ramon, CPESS senior

Habits of Mind at CPESS

- **Connections**
How is it connected to other things?
- **Perspective**
What is the viewpoint?
- **Evidence**
How do we know what we know?
- **Speculation**
How else may it be considered?
- **Significance**
What difference does it make?

a related science course that Mardi offers within the CPESS Senior Institute. As Ramon puts it, “My internship is not about working in the hospital and thinking in the school. The work and thinking go on simultaneously all the time.” Nor does this internship in a hospital limit his career options: having started out with an interest in finance, Ramon is now interested in the relation between data collection and public policy.

Intellectual Rigor in and Beyond School

A small school in East Harlem known for intellectual rigor and a sense of community, Central Park East Secondary School rarely receives notice for its work- and community-based learning programs. Yet, every CPESS student spends a half day per week in community service in grades eight through ten and completes an internship of at least 100 hours during the junior or senior year as a graduation requirement. Through its community-service and internship programs, CPESS offers living proof that the adult world of work can serve as a rich learning context for all students, preparing young people for work, citizenship, and further study.

CPESS faculty don't think of their internships as a “school-to-work” program. Instead, they apply a framework that permeates the work and communication of every student and staff member: the five CPESS “habits of mind.” The founding faculty developed habits of mind as a way to make connections across academic disciplines and teach students to use their minds well. Now, 13 years later, the habits of mind remain central to the CPESS experience. To graduate, students must demonstrate competency and progress in all five habits through portfolio exhibitions. In effect, CPESS students learn to use the habits as a set of lenses through which to view the world. As they apply habits of mind to both the school and the workplace, they come to understand and articulate the connections between their experiences at school, at home, and at work.

Community Service and Internships

CPESS initiated community service for a practical purpose: to free up common planning and meeting time for teachers. Sending all eighth through tenth graders out to community-service placements for a half day each week, they reasoned, would open up several hours for teacher planning, while giving students something worthwhile to do. What the staff did not anticipate was just how powerful these experiences would prove for engaging and motivating students. Site supervisors from local non-profit settings such as schools, museums, day care centers, nursing homes, and government offices, began sending in glowing evaluations of previously unengaged students, and many students began earning grades of “distinguished” and showing new confidence in themselves.

One such student was Bruce. Throughout the seventh and eighth grades, Bruce seemed disconnected and missed school frequently. He experienced little success at his community-service placement, and his teachers began to worry that he would not be able to complete his graduation portfolios.

During Bruce's ninth-grade year, Harlem Hospital contacted CPESS about a new “Urban Bike Corps” initiative. Students would learn bike mechanics, make

presentations on bike safety to classes of elementary and middle school students, receive support for their studies, and perhaps travel beyond the metropolitan area. Bruce chose the Corps as his placement.

Over the next two years, Bruce worked with the Corps, growing more and more passionate about bikes and developing strong relationships with the Bike Corps staff. He led workshops and bike trips for younger students and was chosen to participate in a cultural exchange with a group of Ghanaian students. Having earned his travel expenses through various fundraisers, Bruce traveled to Ghana as part of a student team, which donated bicycles to Ghanaian students. Back at school, Bruce's academic work began to improve dramatically. Now a senior, he expects to graduate in June 1998. He continues to communicate with his Ghanaian friends via the Internet.

Bruce's story is not unique. Many students at CPESS have gained confidence and purpose as they achieved success beyond the school walls. Seeing this, the faculty integrated work-based learning more fully into the curriculum in 1987, adding a 100-hour internship requirement for the Senior Institute (grade 11 to graduation). Internship placements include such organizations as Bantam Doubleday, the Office of the Public Advocate, Harlem Textile Works, the NYC Construction Authority, the Children's Museum of Manhattan, Solomon Brothers, The Gap, Marvel Comics, Radio Station WBAI, the 92nd Street "Y," and many others.

As with community service, students in internships have many occasions to reflect on their learning via journal keeping, advisory or seminar group discussions, and portfolio preparation. In fact, students may choose community service and internships as one of seven "major" portfolios for graduation — and many do so.

CPESS has worked the internship and community-service programs into already existing structures. For example, the CPESS flexible block schedule allows time for teachers to visit students at worksites, while advisory groups offer an opportunity for students to reflect on their site experiences and develop their internship portfolios.

CPESS teachers and students see community service and internships as central to the identity, culture, and intellectual mission of the school. Students demonstrate habits of mind as they consider the intricacies of the adult world. Advisors refer to habits of mind in developing reflective activities, and site supervisors use habits of mind to better understand their interns' learning goals and give students helpful feedback.

The Office

It is 8:00 a.m. Program Director Anne Purdy and Internship Coordinator Denise Reagans make last minute changes to sign-in sheets arranged along four rows of tables. This is the calm before the storm. Over the next half hour, 80 tenth graders stream into the office, chatting and joking. The office feels like a cross between an employee lounge, a train station, and a classroom. Students quickly "punch in" and head out to elementary school classrooms, senior service agencies, museums, and other community-service sites throughout the city. Other students approach Anne and Denise with questions and concerns about their work experiences. As the sign-in ritual draws to a close,

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The CPESS Structure

Key Components: Division I (Grades 7–8) and Division II (Grades 9–10)

- Common core curriculum organized around math/science and humanities. Learning centers on themes such as “Peopling of America” for humanities; and “Vision and Light” for math/science
- Communication skills (reading, writing, public speaking, and critical listening) taught in all subject areas by all staff
- All students in grades 8–10 spend a half day per week in community-service placements
- Advisory groups meet 2½ hours per week

Sample Daily Schedule: Divisions I and II

8:00 - 9:00 a.m. Spanish

9:00 - 1:00 p.m. Two-hour blocks of humanities and math/science

1:00 - 2:00 p.m. Thirty minutes of educational options and thirty minutes of lunch

2:00 - 3:00 p.m. One hour of advisory

3:00 - 5:00 p.m. Extended day options

All students in grades 8–10 spend a half day per week in community-service placements.

Key Components: Senior Institute (Grade 11–Graduation)

- Entry into Senior Institute based on:
 - satisfactory completion of Division II academic requirements
 - satisfactory completion of community-service requirements
 - an academic review conducted by the student, family, and Division II advisor
- Curriculum designed by students, families, and advisors around a post-graduation plan, incorporating personal needs and career interests
- Academic courses taken at CPESS and at local colleges
- Internships of at least 100 hours
- Advisory groups meet 3½ hours per week

a handful remain seated on the couches that line the room, awaiting Anne and Denise’s counsel.

Today will be Brianna’s first day at the NYC Public Advocates Office in downtown Manhattan. Stealing glances at the door, she awaits the arrival of her travel partner Tamiaka, a veteran of the Public Advocate’s Office who has agreed to show Brianna the ropes. Denise calls Tamiaka’s home, but no one answers. Brianna will have to go alone. Handing Brianna a subway token, Denise spells out the directions to the Advocate’s Office. Meanwhile, Tamiaka’s name goes on a list of missing students. Later in the day, Anne will follow up to find out why she is absent.

For now, Anne talks with another student, Eva. “I don’t want to go to the hospital,” Eva says. She originally chose a placement at North General Hospital because she wanted to work in a medical office. As it turns out, she is working in the mail room. “Have you spoken to your supervisor yet?” “No,” replies Eva. “I just don’t want to go anymore.” Anne points out that the only way to find out if she can work on more health-related tasks is to ask. Eva remains unconvinced. If that is not possible, continues Anne, then Eva should find out what other work she might do. Only then can she change her placement — that is, if she still wants to. Meanwhile, it is getting late.

Anne suggests that before leaving, Eva should call the hospital to say she's on her way.

Maintaining a comprehensive and structured work-based learning program requires patience, time, and a staff able and willing to offer support. In addition to Anne and Denise's full-time positions — Anne is technically a "teacher" and Denise a "paraprofessional" — the Community Service and Internship Program Office at CPESS employs one full-time administrative assistant, and one grant-funded part-time assistant. Although the program has been a priority at CPESS since the beginning, money is scarce. Anne spends many hours after school writing grant proposals and reports. Her fundraising efforts have met with considerable success, including grants from Learn and Serve America, the Kauffman Foundation, and the Annenberg Foundation. Parents, too, are very supportive of the work-based learning orientation of the school. In fact, many parents send their children there for that reason and assist the staff in arranging placements.

Supporting Students: Advisory

The Community Service and Internship Program Office is not the only way CPESS keeps in touch with student needs. CPESS's commitment to small classes and low student/teacher ratio, for one, allows teachers to get to know their students well. There are never more than 20 students per class, and teachers are never responsible for more than 40–42 students per semester. This is made possible through block scheduling and the efficient allocation of staff. Because there are no guidance counselors, department heads, or deans, the school can hire teachers with the funds that other schools might spend on those positions. Moreover, teachers can team together to offer interdisciplinary classes, group presentations, and small seminars.

The major means of student support is the advisory system. Every student at CPESS takes part in an advisory group of one advisor and no more than 15 students. The group meets three or four times per week for quiet reading, writing, study, and discussions of social and ethical issues. More important, the advisory group helps students make decisions, plan their programs, reflect on their learning, build interpersonal skills, prepare for the SAT, and apply to colleges.

Advisors serve as the school's primary liaisons with families, meeting regularly with students and their families to review work, set goals, and determine how to provide the best possible learning experience for each student. The advisor is in contact with the parent at least once a month, whether things are going well or poorly with the student. Teacher-parent-student conferences take place each semester in the daytime or evening, whenever is best for the parent. There is 100 percent attendance for these conferences. Overall, according to parent liaison Sheila Lambright, CPESS places great emphasis on creating a feeling of "family" at the school. Many of the teachers have, or have had, their own children there, and everybody knows everybody else personally.

Assessing the Learning

CPESS assesses student learning by means of portfolio and exhibition. To earn their diploma, students must present collections of work (portfolios) that

Support for Learning in the Community

CPESS supports community-based learning in several ways:

- Community service and workplace internships are required for graduation.
- Students prepare portfolios about their experiences in community service and internships.
- The block schedule allows time for internships — and teacher visits.
- Advisory provides a place to discuss work experience and prepare portfolios.
- A community-service/internship office, directed by a teacher, provides administrative, academic, and personal support.
- Where possible, a reflective seminar accompanies the internship.
- CPESS provides training and materials for site supervisors and mentors.

Graduation at CPESS

The Graduation Committee must confirm that the student has

- completed an appropriate program of courses, seminars, independent study, and internships that meets the needs of student's post-graduation plan;
- passed the necessary NY State RCT's or their equivalent, and demonstrated basic college entry-level skill in reading, writing, and math;
- satisfactorily presented and defended at least 7 "major" portfolio areas;
- demonstrated mastery of the 5 habits of mind in all 14 portfolio areas (7 majors and 7 minors);
- satisfactorily completed a final Senior Project.

The 14 Portfolio Areas

1. Post-Graduation Plan*
2. Science/Technology*
3. Mathematics*
4. History and Social Studies*
5. Literature*
6. Autobiography
7. School and Community Service and Internship
8. Ethics and Social Issues
9. Fine Arts/Aesthetics
10. Practical skills
11. Media
12. Geography
13. Language Other than English/Dual Language Proficiency
14. Physical Challenge

* Required as major portfolios for all students. Students complete all 14, present 7 as major portfolios.

demonstrate competence in 14 specified areas. Students present their completed portfolios to a Graduation Committee composed of the advisor, a second faculty member, an adult chosen by the student, and a younger student. The committee judges the student's readiness to graduate, holding all work to high standards related to the CPESS habits of mind.

CPESS students emphasize that creating 14 portfolios is hard work. In any given year as many as ten students may not complete their portfolios, thereby returning to CPESS for an additional year of study. There is no stigma attached to that additional year; the clear message is that CPESS holds students to high standards and is determined to make sure that every graduate is prepared for the world beyond high school.

Life After High School

CPESS students enter post-secondary programs at the astoundingly high rate of 90 percent. And of those who enter, over 90 percent graduate with two- or four-year degrees. According to CPESS students and teachers, several key characteristics of the school foster the academic engagement and success of CPESS students. They include: the intellectual focus provided by the five habits of mind; the personalization brought about through small class size, the school's advisory system, and parental involvement; and community connection achieved through service- and work-based learning.

Moreover, the school maintains a "culture of college" in which it is assumed that all students will go on to post-secondary study. There are no programs or students designated as "non-college bound." Starting in Division I, advisory groups take at least one trip each year to visit college campuses. Senior Institute students are encouraged to take one or more college courses at Eugene Lang or the Borough of Manhattan Community College, each of which reserves slots for CPESS students. Finally, throughout their high school careers, CPESS students are required to create a "Post-Graduation Plan," which details both what they would like to do when they graduate and how they plan to make it happen. Students receive extensive feedback and assistance in the development and realization of these plans from their advisors, particularly during the school's Senior Institute.

CPESS advisors help their students begin planning by asking them why they want to earn a high school diploma. Reflecting on broader purposes helps students to think about specifics, such as the kinds of grades and courses they will need; how they plan to finance their educational and/or career goals; how they will investigate colleges or other post-secondary training centers; and where they plan to live after graduating from CPESS.

By providing the time and the advisory structure for such a detailed and realistic exploration of pre- and post-graduate life, CPESS has been able to encourage most students to seek and achieve post-secondary educational success. The Post-Graduation Plan is the first and the last requirement assessed by the student's Graduation Committee.

Post-Secondary Links

Another CPESS strategy for post-secondary success has been to establish articulation agreements and/or ongoing relationships with a number of colleges, including those in the CUNY and SUNY systems (City/State Universities of New York), Syracuse University, Hampshire College, Antioch College, Oberlin College, Moorehouse College, and Brown University. Each of these schools has accepted significant numbers of CPESS students over the years. CPESS teachers have made it a point to familiarize admissions officers with the school and its approach to learning — all in the process of advocating for their students. Now, having had positive experiences with CPESS graduates in the past, these schools readily accept new CPESS applicants.

Senior Institute teacher Shirley Hawkinson believes that CPESS students succeed in college because they have developed independent learning skills. Hawkinson observes that it often takes CPESS graduates about one and a half years to adjust fully to college because they are not accustomed to multiple-choice exams or lectures. But because they are pro-active learners who know how to ask for help and support, they ultimately do well.

Looking Ahead

During the past five years, CPESS has been subject to district-wide policies and budget cuts that challenge the school to “do more with less.” The school has lost five staff positions, including an internship seminar teaching position and an administrative assistant to the director. Such losses make it difficult to expand and develop CPESS’s work-based learning approach. For example, the school cannot afford to fund more teachers to work part-time as internship seminar facilitators. There is a chance, however, that CPESS will regain three of the five lost positions, which would allow the school to re-establish a seminar program for students doing individualized internships.

As is true for all of the NUHS sites, mandatory standardized tests pose a potential threat to CPESS. The State of New York’s latest plan to “guarantee” school success will require all high school graduates to pass high stakes Regents Exams. This system, of course, puts pressure on schools to alter their curricula and programming and teach to the test. The irony is that CPESS’s existing program already works. “After all,” says CPESS director David Smith, “by instituting the system of Regents Exams the state is trying to ensure that more of its students graduate high school and are able to do well in college. At CPESS, we can already document that we are achieving great success along these lines.”

Despite the loss of some staff, and significant changes in leadership — founding director Debbie Meier left in 1994, and co-director Paul Schwartz took a leave of absence in 1997 to become Principal-in-Residence at the U.S. Department of Education — CPESS continues to thrive as a school and an organization. Staff turnover is low. When teachers do leave, it is usually because they want to become full-time parents, or because they plan to start a new school of their own. The school’s resiliency is largely due to its democratic character. Teachers have a tangible sense of ownership and readily embrace steady change and growth. According to David Smith, who has been with CPESS for over ten years, first as a teacher and now as director, “A good school is a hungry school,

Five Keys to Post-Secondary Success

If post-secondary success is a true test of school effectiveness, then CPESS is a truly effective school.

- Over 90% of CPESS students graduate from high school.
- Over 90% of CPESS graduates go on to 2- or 4-year colleges.
- Over 90% of those who enter college graduate with 2- or 4-year degrees.

The Keys

1. **Intellectual training.** CPESS habits of mind prepare students for the rigors of college study.
2. **Personal support.** The CPESS advisory program provides a context where students can
 - reflect on their lives, work, and goals;
 - visit colleges, starting in the seventh grade;
 - get help with the college application process.
3. **Adult world immersion.** Community service and work-place internships make the adult world of work and learning accessible to students.
4. **High standards for all students.** Graduation from CPESS signifies readiness for the world. Students spend an extra year at CPESS if necessary to ensure their preparedness.
5. **Post-secondary links.** Articulation agreements, personal relationships with admissions offices, and past performance build confidence in the quality of CPESS graduates. Many CPESS students demonstrate readiness by taking college courses while in high school.

Staff Development and Planning

- Planning time: 3–4 consecutive hours per week
- Staff meeting: 1 ½ hours per week
- Staff development and committee work: 2 hours per week

balancing dissatisfaction with not being there yet, with real assessment of and appreciation for its successes.”

As part of their work with the NUHS project, CPESS staff have looked critically at their community-service placements and internships. Clearly, these programs are central to the school’s philosophy of community involvement. They provide a context for *all* students to pursue their interests as well as to interact with the adult world of work and learning. Teachers say that for many students, these experiences have proven to be the most meaningful and formative of their high school career. Yet, with the exception of the Mt. Sinai Internship Seminar, CPESS does not now have a system for students to share and reflect on these experiences as a group. And because advisory groups have so many other demands to meet, CPESS is still considering new ways to honor the centrality of the students’ work-based learning.

To uncover more of this rich learning from worksite experiences, CPESS is working with NUHS to develop materials that encourage students, teachers, and site supervisors to connect learning at work with the five habits of mind. These materials include connecting activities for advisors to help students reflect on their community-service experiences; community-service orientation handouts for students and site supervisors; and a packet of guidelines and connecting activities for Senior Institute internships.*

Continuity and Renewal

The staff and students at CPESS have worked hard for their successes. Yet the visitor does not get the impression that teachers are riding on their laurels. As one staff member put it, “We are always looking critically at our work and trying out new things. It takes a lot of energy, but this is a school where you don’t usually see teachers getting burnt out — it’s more like we get exhausted, which is a very different thing.” Implicit in this statement is a key and continuing feature of the CPESS culture: even after all these years, the teachers (and students) work together to create and renew the program. It takes enormous energy to do so, but that energy is repaid in the result: a strong learning community, from which students emerge ready to succeed in the world of work, learning, and citizenship. ■

*See Practitioner Materials: Connecting Activities and Work-Based Learning & Mentoring for adapted versions of these materials.

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