



TOP STORY EDITOR'S PICK

# Buffalo's Research Labs High School to evolve through UB partnership

Ben Tsujimoto 54 mins ago 0

A committee formed to plan the future of a Buffalo school was given a simple charge: “Don’t think small. Think big.”

Thanks to their efforts, one of the city’s smallest high schools will soon have one of the biggest opportunities.

Research Laboratory High School, which enrolls about 200 students in the first floor of the **Tri-Main Center**, will this fall become Buffalo Schools’ first University-Assisted Community School through a reimagined collaboration with the University at Buffalo. The high school’s focus – previously geared toward medical sciences in conjunction with UB’s Jacobs School of Medicine – will broaden significantly, and students and teachers will engage more frequently and at deeper levels with their higher-education partner.





Research Labs High School principal Angela Cullen, left, and Buffalo Schools Associate Superintendent of School Leadership Karen Murray at Research Labs High School in Buffalo. The high school this fall will become Buffalo Schools' first University-Assisted Community School through a reimagined collaboration with the University at Buffalo.

Libby March, Buffalo News

“Hopefully now we can meet students where their interests are,” said Karen Murray, Buffalo Schools’ associate superintendent for school leadership who has been integral to the project. She said that in the past, students who attended Research Labs, a Buffalo school that does not require certain criteria for admission, would feel “stuck” if they did not enjoy medical sciences.

The committee, balanced between UB’s Graduate School of Education and Buffalo Public Schools, has crafted an unusual package. Advanced computer literacy will be woven into all subjects at the school, enhanced by the hiring of a computer science teacher. A movement toward inquiry- and project-based learning will position Research Labs to be prepared for the future of New York State Assessments. Chances to learn and work alongside UB professors and students – as well as dual enrollment opportunities – might be the biggest perks.

“For too long there have been silos between universities and K-12 institutions,” Buffalo Superintendent Tonja M. Williams Knight said Jan. 8. “You can live or go to school a stone’s throw away and never engage with a college. So many of our children will be first-generation college students, and it’s just really important as early as possible to begin exposing them to the opportunities at post-secondary institutions.”

Freshmen this fall will be the first class to learn under the University-Assisted Community School model, with Research Labs adding another grade each year until the concept is immersed in 2028. The school will drop the “bioinformatics and life sciences” from its official name.

## How it came to be

When former Buffalo Schools Superintendent Kriner Cash established Research Labs as an innovative school in 2016, he intended to create a pipeline for students interested in medical careers to access UB’s Jacobs School of Medicine and benefit from partnerships with other businesses on the rapidly growing Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus.

The endeavor connected Will Keresztes, Buffalo Schools’ chief of administration, with University at Buffalo



Graduate School of Education Dean **Suzanne Rosenblith**, while the **UB Teacher Residency Program** furthered a bond between UB and BPS. The leaders engaged in big-picture discussions, laying the foundation for what could be a new high school, especially when Covid-19 disrupted the momentum of Research Labs' original purpose.

But some elements of the model were working – shown in the school's 90% graduation rate the last two years – which led to tweaking the existing mission rather than starting from scratch.

“We quickly realized there’s so much going on at Research Labs High School today that was exciting and inspiring,” said Chris Proctor, an assistant professor at UB and a member of the committee, “that it really made sense to transform the existing school and build on the work they’ve done the last nine years.”



**Smaller classes, innovations to greet students in ‘reformed’ Buffalo schools**

Longer hours for school buildings, 13 community schools, smaller class sizes for lower grades and new technology will greet Buffalo students as the new school year kicks



**'Intense' UB teacher residency program tackles diversity, retention in Buffalo schools**

Thirteen graduate students are forging a different path into the teaching profession as the inaugural class in a new teacher residency program at the University at Buffalo's Graduate School of

That’s not to say there won’t be significant change. Rosenblith connected the committee with the **Netter Center at the University of Pennsylvania**, which founded the University-Assisted Community School model in 1985 and now implements it in six public high schools in West Philadelphia. Part of its educational mission is to encourage students to identify a relevant problem that interests them – then tackle it head on by learning how to research and embracing university resources.

“We want our students to be part of the decision-making,” said Angela Cullen, the principal at Research Labs who’s been integral to the process. “We want to provide them the opportunity to explore issues in their community and try to be problem-solvers of those issues.” If they can explore their interests, they’re more likely to attend school, graduate and take a next step academically or in the workforce, the committee believes.”

Could the Research Labs effort lead to a slew of internships and a more robust BPS-to-UB pipeline? The committee is working on ways to facilitate a transition for future Research Labs students to dual enroll or make a smooth jump to the university.

## Research, computer science align

Research is already a fulcrum at the small school, with students required to take two

classes of scientific research, and many participate in a symposium at the end of the year. But the new emphasis on computer science will complement that research-focused approach – preparing high schoolers to work as lab interns at the university level, the committee believes.



Chris Proctor, an assistant professor at the University at Buffalo, is a key part of the committee on reimagining Research Labs High School.

Ben Tsujimoto

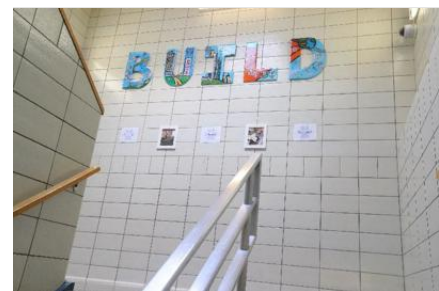
“I’m not necessarily talking about coding,” Cullen said, “but they’ll develop a skill set to be supportive in a lab environment with professors and college students.”

This pivot will test the mettle of administrators, teachers and students. How will the existing staff integrate computer literacy into their subjects? Will this be an expensive program to run due to its technological emphasis? The committee said a computer science curriculum never used before – but generally aligned with the **state’s new standards in 2020** – will be implemented.

The work **excites Proctor**, who directs UB’s computer science teacher preparation program, studies the subject’s role within learning sciences and new literacies, and participates in the advocacy-focused **CSForNY Coalition**. He referred to computer science as an “interdisciplinary nexus” that can “catalyze university-school relationships.”

Rosenblith, the university dean, said UB will be hands-on with professional development and trainings for Research Labs’ teachers. “I think that’s a big way we’re going to be involved in the school, in helping support the teachers with this big change,” she said. The committee also envisions some co-taught classes at Research Labs with one university and one high school professor, plus opportunities for graduate students to help in the classroom to form valuable “near-peer relationships,” Cullen added.

Equipped with advanced computer literacy and basic research skills, students at Research Labs will be able to approach community issues



#### **UB, Buffalo district look to BUILD relationship at troubled school**

The district has decided to “close” the school at the end of the school year and reopen it in the fall under a new model, with new school leadership and the aid of UB’s Graduate School of

with tools that translate to a breadth of careers, the committee hopes.

“What can research do to help us understand ways we can address these issues?” Rosenblith asked rhetorically. “That’s a pretty impactful opportunity for students. I have to believe the math, social studies, reading and all those really important things come along with that kind of excitement and engagement.”

## Why it matters to UB

The University-Assisted Community School will be valuable to UB, too, Rosenblith said. The collaboration will give the graduate school research partners; provide a population with which to conduct research; help the university secure grants; and facilitate valuable learning experiences for graduate students. She said the university holds a responsibility to impact the broader Western New York community.

“Public research universities really should be seen as anchor institutions in communities,” she said. “Businesses come and go, elected officials come and go, deans come and go, but universities – they’re here.”

Rosenblith’s passion for the project has piqued the interest of fellow deans at UB, some of whom have shown interest in the Research Labs model or future partnerships. It’s reasonable to think UB’s graduate school programs such as architecture, law and geology could collaborate with a high school in the future.

“Our campus has been taken by this idea, so I also envision other partnerships with schools not just in Buffalo but across the region who want to partner with us and have that kind of a designation,” Rosenblith said. “Then you can take the full scale of the university and bring it to K-12 without overwhelming any one building with all of UB, which would be too much.”

What’s next?

Much of the hard work to create the foundation of Research Labs’ new identity is complete. But a crucial – and just as difficult – task will be alerting the Buffalo Schools community that the small school is a legitimate option for incoming freshmen. Families scramble to get their students to test into City Honors, Olmsted, Da Vinci and Performing Arts, or maybe eye Career & Technical Education pathways at Hutch-Tech, McKinley or South Park.

“Research Labs High School is not on a lot of families’ radars,” said Jennifer Mecozzi, West District representative for the Buffalo School Board, after hearing the



### **UB's Brainy Bulls creates virtual bonds between college tutors, grade school students**

"I see so much potential in young people," Wil Green said, "and that's not just for the students that are receiving the supports and being tutored, but it's also for our tutors." Brainy Bulls, UB's blossoming tutor-mentoring program, is rewarding for all.

committee’s presentation at City Hall. Mecozzi, with the support of other board members, urged an aggressive publicity campaign for the school’s pivot.

There’s the possibility of a challenging transition, but the committee believes the long-term product will be “endlessly successful by anyone’s measure, Rosenblith said.

“In Year One, everyone will have to go in with a flexible spirit,” Rosenblith said.

“School will continue with its standards-based curriculum – there are state goals to meet and nothing about that changes. How we approach that is where we are really excited.”

Ben Tsujimoto can be reached at [btsujimoto@buffnews.com](mailto:btsujimoto@buffnews.com), at (716) 849-6927 or on Twitter at @Tsuji10.



By Ben Tsujimoto

Reporter



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