



## EXPANDED LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES AT THE ACADEMY OF MEDICAL ARTS AT CARSON HIGH SCHOOL IN CALIFORNIA

### Background

The Academy of Medical Arts (AMA) at Carson High School is a small high school located in Carson City-- an area between downtown Los Angeles and Long Beach. The city is home to California State University, Dominguez Hills— a major university in Los Angeles County.

The student population at AMA is ethnically diverse and includes young Filipinos, Samoans, Latinos, African-Americans, Whites, and Native Americans, among others. No single ethnic group dominates the student body, and teachers say that gives the campus a feeling of equality and balance. Many of the students come from families who work blue collar jobs as mechanics, oil refinery workers, longshoreman, drivers, and retail and grocery store staff. Some students' parents also work in the medical field as nursing assistants or diagnostic technicians.

AMA is a community school which has a health sciences-theme. As such, it has developed strong community partnerships with groups that can teach students about public health, community wellness, and careers in the health sciences field. AMA has developed strong relationships with its partners, including Harbor-UCLA Medical-Center, Children's Hospital Los Angeles, and the UCLA School of Public Health.

AMA is given a fair amount of autonomy by the Los Angeles Unified School District. The school has used this autonomy to liberalize the school day in ways that allow students to experience learning that is directly related to careers in the health sciences field. For example, AMA has arranged student schedules so that tenth graders can spend some of their school day at the nearby Harbor-UCLA Medical Center. Students are "embedded" in different departments, such as pediatrics, occupational therapy, medical records, and pathology. They spend several weeks within each department and then rotate to the next department; in this way, they learn about the different roles and responsibilities of different hospital staff—from the nurse to the front desk clerk to the radiologist to the hospital translator. We'll provide other examples of AMA's expanded learning opportunity later on in this case study.

### How the Community School Strategy Strengthens Expanded Learning Opportunities

Terri Ann Sullivan, a teacher at AMA, is the person who's developed the school's expanded learning opportunity program. She says expanded learning is one of AMA's main strategies for getting students engaged in learning and that it excites those students who struggle in school as well as those students who excel:

Nothing is more compelling to a student who is struggling than to see a career up close and personal. They get excited about the possibility of seeing this in their future. Then, all of a sudden, the writing assignments they are doing around that career become much more important to them.

At the same time, for those kids who always want to go above and beyond, these experiences are incredibly empowering for them. They get to rub elbows with professionals in the health field, they get to sit next to important people at health care symposiums, and they get a higher level of information about the professional world that's ahead of them.

Sullivan says AMA could not offer the rich array of expanded learning opportunities that it does without the community school strategy:

The community school strategy is, at heart, about building relationships. As a community school, we know that learning does not take place in isolation in the classroom and we've invited in community groups into

our schools as partners in educating our students. In this way, the community school strategy lays the groundwork for expanded learning opportunities.

The community school strategy also lays the groundwork for relevant teaching and learning at our school. Because we see community groups as partners in education, we can work with these groups to put our students in real-world situations where they can try out their skills as problem solvers, creative thinkers and team players. We can give students a real world venue to test out 21<sup>st</sup> century skills.

### **What Expanded Learning Opportunities Look Like at AMA**

There is a rich variety of expanded learning opportunities for students at AMA. This case study has already mentioned the career shadowing program for tenth graders at the nearby Harbor-UCLA Medical Center. Once students become seniors, AMA also offers a career mentorship program, which gives students an opportunity to learn about a particular job that they're interested in pursuing. Sullivan explains how this mentorship program works:

All mentors are matched with students who show an interest in their job. Mentors come to school every month to talk with students about the career. They share details about all that the job entails and what experiences and education help lead up to the job. All of this is really valuable to our students. Our mentors also take their mentees to their job site twice a year, so that students can shadow them for a day and see what the profession looks like up close.

AMA also matches students with professional researchers and health experts who help guide students through community and school-based health projects. For example, a group of students at the academy noticed that the lack of readily available filtered water on campus made it difficult for students to stay hydrated throughout the school day. Researchers with UCLA's School of Public Health helped students craft a possible solution to the problem and then study the outcome. The student group worked to install filtered water tanks in the school cafeteria and handed out reusable water bottles to all kids. The group also started a health awareness campaign—putting up posters throughout the school with slogans such as “Visit the Hydration Station,” “Water Makes You Smarter,” and “Free Water is Cold and Good.” Finally, the group collected data on student water consumption after the installation of the water filters and, with guidance from the UCLA researchers, found that more students were now drinking water. The partnership with UCLA also helped students fund the entire project, including the purchase of the water filters, the tanks, and the reusable water bottles.

AMA's expanded learning program also gives students the chance to learn by teaching public health issues to others. A group of AMA students prepare and teach a six week course on nutrition and health to middle school students at a nearby school. Under Sullivan's guidance, the students craft workshops such as “How Many Sugar Cubes are in Your Soda?” for their middle school students. Explains Sullivan:

Our students have already taken Health and Nutrition classes with us, and they've taken a full year of Physiology so the knowledge is already there. The afterschool workshop allows our students to show what they've mastered by turning around and teaching it to others. Our students love teaching this course. They love doing the research for the workshops they will teach—they visit websites like “California 5 A Day”—and they find fun things to give their students like pedometers and stress balls and food journals.

### **Students and Teachers Are Thriving**

Students are thriving at AMA—a community school which uses expanded learning opportunities to drive teaching and learning. Attendance is strong: students are coming to school every day for every class period. AMA's students are outperforming the school district average on several standardized tests, and last year 98 percent of the academy's students passed California's high school exit exam. Most importantly, the students themselves report on surveys that they are learning and growing and thriving.

Sullivan also says teachers are thriving in this environment: “Through our partnerships with community groups and our work on expanded learning we are all learning and exploring new areas and new fields together. It creates a very strong family culture in the school. You do start to feel like a family.”