



February 2, 2026

**REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS
TO ESTABLISH A
REGIONAL TRAINING CENTER
FOR UNIVERSITY-ASSISTED COMMUNITY SCHOOLS**

PROJECT GOALS

To develop a University-Assisted Community Schools (UACS) regional training center that draws on the expertise of its own UACS initiative and works in a specific state or multi-state area to:

1. Work with higher education institutions and their partners to help develop and/or increase their engagement with UACS;
2. Develop a professional learning community comprised of universities and colleges and their UACS partners; and
3. Provide training and technical assistance on the UACS model to interested universities and colleges and their school and community partners.

A UACS regional training center can be based at a university, college, or a consortium of higher education institutions.

NETTER CENTER BACKGROUND

The [Netter Center for Community Partnerships](#) has forty years of experience developing and adapting the [University-Assisted Community Schools](#) model that was created with its school and community partners in West Philadelphia.

A major component of the Netter Center's work is mobilizing the vast resources of the University of Pennsylvania to help traditional public schools become innovative University-Assisted Community Schools (UACS) that educate, engage, empower, and serve public school students,

families, and community members. UACS focus on schools as core institutions for community engagement and democratic development, as well as link school day and after school curricula to solve locally identified, real-world, community problems. At the same time, working with community members to create and sustain UACS provides a powerful means for universities to advance teaching, research, learning, and service, as well as the civic development of their students.

From 1993-2008 the Netter Center was supported to adapt its UACS model at specific sites across the country as well as to provide training and technical assistance. With funding from the Wallace Foundation and the Corporation for National Service, 23 university-community-school partnerships adapted the university-assisted community school framework. Additionally, with support from the Mott Foundation, over 75 teams attended the Netter Center's training workshops on the UACS model. Many hundreds of other visitors have come to Penn to learn more about this work. Since 2008, the Netter Center has focused on creating regional centers based at higher education institutions across the country that can build on their substantive local UACS programs and have the capacity to train and support others in their region to develop and expand UACS

With the increasing number of colleges and universities mobilizing their resources to develop UACS and innovative university-community partnerships, the Netter Center, in collaboration with the Coalition for Community Schools, created a [University-Assisted Community Schools National Network](#) in 2015.

Beginning with participation from over 20 universities, the network now has over 1,200 members representing over 300 higher education institutions. Comprised of higher education leaders, faculty and staff, and community school partners, including school and district leaders, teachers unions, community organizations, government agencies, and foundations, the network functions as a professional learning community. The network provides technical assistance to universities, schools, and community partners and fosters the exchange of resources and practices to advance UACS partnerships through virtual meetings and in-person conferences.

DEFINITIONS, CORE PRINCIPLES, AND KEY ELEMENTS

The Netter Center's UACS work is rooted in a definition of a community school developed initially in John Dewey's 1902 essay, *The School as Social Center*. The UACS approach builds upon and extends Dewey's idea by highlighting the central role of universities and connecting the work to the academic core of the school and the university.

Definition of a community school

A Community School

- *is a comprehensive neighborhood center* that educates, engages, and serves, not only children, but all members of the community in which the school is located
- *educates students for democratic citizenship and serves as a catalyst for community change*
- *is based on democratic partnerships* at and through the school
- *contributes to improved student learning and development* through real-world community problem solving
- *contributes to improved community wellbeing*, including physical, behavioral, and social health, as well as environmental conditions.

Core principles of a community school

- Public schools can function as environment-changing institutions. They can become the strategic centers of broadly based local partnerships that engage a wide variety of community organizations and institutions, as well as become hubs of services, recreation, and education that genuinely engage students, families, and neighbors.
- When schools play this innovative role, they function as community institutions par excellence. They provide a decentralized, democratic, community-based response to rapidly changing community circumstances. In this process, they help young people learn better through democratic action-oriented, collaborative, real-world problem solving.
- Democratically solving complex, community-identified problems advances knowledge and learning at all levels, K-16+.
- Moreover, for the neighborhood school to function as a community school, it needs additional human resources and support. The Netter Center emphasizes university-assisted because universities constitute strategic sources of broadly based, comprehensive, sustained support for community schools.

Definition of a University-Assisted Community School (UACS)

A University-Assisted Community School (UACS) is a community school in which universities serve as a lead partner in providing broadly based, sustained support. Academic partnerships connect the university's and school's curricula through a focus on helping to solve local community-identified problems. This approach is designed to improve both the quality of life in the community and the quality of learning at all levels of schooling.

UACS, as well as community schools in general, are comprehensive neighborhood centers built on partnerships that educate, engage, activate and serve students, their families, and other members of the community. For neighborhood schools to function as community schools, they need additional human resources and support. Universities are particularly well-suited to be a lead partner in the creation, growth, and ongoing development of community schools, including providing academic, human, and material resources.

Key elements of UACS¹

In supporting universities and colleges around the country in developing UACS, the Netter Center recognizes that local circumstances need to be taken into consideration as programs are developed. These include, but are not limited to, the type of university and its resources, stage of development of university engagement with local schools and communities, readiness at the school site, demographic variations, and the local context of support for community schools. However, we have found that there are key elements of the model that need to be in place, regardless of the specific program activities. These include:

1. A central office on campus that coordinates university resources and promotes community engaged scholarship. For this work to grow and be sustained, it must become part of the core operation of the higher education institution(s) rather than remain the effort of a few faculty members. This includes the sustained engagement of diverse stakeholders from across the institution, including faculty, staff, and students at all levels (undergraduate and graduate).
2. Academic partnerships that engage multiple university programs and departments and make connections between the university and school curricula through a common focus on helping to solve local community-identified problems.
3. A principal who welcomes the partnership and conveys the UACS philosophy of collaborative learning and practice to the school faculty and staff, including through professional development activities.
4. UACS staff who are integrated into the school's operation, including its educational activities, so that planning for and provision of supports for students, teachers, families, and the community are as seamless as possible. This often includes a coordinator at the UACS who serves as the liaison between the school, community, and higher education institution(s).

¹ Adapted from Harkavy, I., Balfanz, A., & Sun, F. (2025). Realizing higher education's democratic promise through university-assisted community schools. In Dresden, J., Ferrara J., Neapolitan, J., and Yendol-Hoppey, D. (eds.) *Cambridge handbook of school-university partnerships* (pp. 467-482). Cambridge University Press & Assessment.

5. Family and community involvement through advisory boards or other mechanisms to help determine what supports are needed and how they should be provided.
6. Operation of the school before and after traditional school hours, including weekends and summers, for student, family, and community uses, such as adult education, recreation, and cultural events.

The selected regional center should reflect the above elements in practice in its UACS and be prepared to help other higher education institutions develop them.

SCOPE OF WORK

This project is for a university, college, or consortium of higher education institutions that are part of a UACS initiative that can serve as a training/technical assistance site for a state or multi-state region (two or more states including the applicant's state) of the United States as defined by the applicant.

The Netter Center will contract with the selected university for a period of three years, renewable annually. The annual contract will be for \$50,000. No indirect costs are allowable.

The selected site will have a project director who will work closely with the Netter Center's associate director and director of the UACS National Network for adaptation activities.

In addition, we expect that the selected site will:

- Have an office dedicated to community engagement that has worked with UACS programs as a major part of its portfolio;
- Secure local funding that will also support the proposed work;
- Have an established University-Assisted Community Schools (UACS) site that can host site visits requested by other universities and colleges, or as referred by the Netter Center, and be a hub of learning and engagement for the regional center;
- Host a conference or series of workshops on the UACS model;
- Contribute articles on its local and replication activities for the Netter Center's *Universities and Community Schools* journal;

- Participate in the regular virtual meetings of the University-Assisted Community Schools National Network; and

We also expect the selected site to have a plan for ongoing implementation of UACS after the funding period, including:

- Continue to advance the engagement of higher education institutions in the specified region in UACS,
- Continue to develop partnerships and programs aligned with the core principles of UACS, and
- Continue and expand the selected site's own UACS programs.

APPLICATION

Program Narrative

The applicant is requested to send a 7–10 page (double-spaced) program narrative that outlines the following.

- Experience with University-Assisted Community Schools.
- Higher education institutional context of the proposed regional center, including the school, office, or center in which the program would be housed and the institutional reporting lines for key personnel.
- Commitment of the university, college or consortium of higher education institutions both to advance local UACS and to become a regional center.
- Identification of the state or states that will be the target areas for the regional center and the rationale for the selection of these states.
- Capacity to carry out the scope of work, including staffing and overall ability to develop the regional network.
- Discussion of how training and technical assistance would be organized, including engagement of local partners in any trainings.

Budget And Reporting Requirements

The proposed funding is \$50,000 per year for three years. A budget for only year one is required with the application. A 1:1 match, cash or in-kind, is required. No indirect costs are allowable. The grantee will submit reports to the Netter Center twice a year on its progress. The start for the award is September 1, 2026.

Submission

Please submit your proposal electronically by April 15, 2026 at 5 PM Eastern Time to

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For questions, contact Cory Bowman at bowman@upenn.edu.