

Hawken buys Montessori campus in University Circle for new Mastery School

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By [Patrick O'Donnell, The Plain Dealer](#)

CLEVELAND, Ohio – The [Hawken School](#) is taking over the former Montessori high school in University Circle and turning it into a new private high school with a model that's growing in popularity nationally – teaching classes through student projects, rather than through lectures.

The Mastery School of Hawken will have another major twist fitting its name. It won't be grading students with As and Fs on report cards. It will use an ungraded ["mastery" evaluation method](#), which rates students' skills as Emerging, Developing, or Competent on an ongoing basis.

Students will keep working on skills until they reach "Mastery" over multiple semesters or years, rather than finishing courses at whatever level they reach when a semester ends.

Hawken is spending \$3.7 million to buy three buildings on Magnolia Drive, behind the Western Reserve Historical Society, to house the school. All were part of Montessori High School at University Circle, which [closed in the summer with enrollment and funding troubles](#).

David Kahn, who helped create the Montessori school 10 years ago, said the school's board will use the money to pay off the school's debts and hopefully use anything left over - most likely none - on another Montessori program.

He said he is glad that a school like Hawken is taking over the property.

"I would wish it were another Montessori experiment," he said. "But Hawken's a good school and it is so well-endowed and so well thought through."

Hawken will also use another building it owns on Magnolia, formerly used by the Junior League, for the new school.

The new school will have about 160 students, possibly growing to 220, with some living in the 18-bed dormitory Hawken is buying from the closed Montessori school.

Announcing the Mastery School of Hawken Opening August 2020 in University Circle

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This map shows the buildings along Magnolia Drive in University Circle that the Hawken School will use for its new Hawken School of Mastery. The school is buying three buildings from the just-closed Montessori high school on that street and using another building it acquired from the Urban League. *Courtesy of Hawken School* Scott Looney, Hawken’s head of school, said that teaching problem-solving skills and how to resolve issues in the real world is far more important today than memorizing facts that were important in the past. He and teachers at Hawken have been edging toward this model for several years, he said, and are excited to show it off.

Hawken hopes students will work with non-profit, educational, cultural and medical organizations already in University Circle or in the surrounding Glenville neighborhood on real social or neighborhood issues.

“This kind of education has an enormous utility in the future that these kids are going to live in,” Looney said. “We know this actually works. The rest of the world is still skeptical.”

As a private school, he said, Hawken can throw out lots of the traditional school approaches in ways public schools can’t.

“We kind of want to win over the most skeptical over time,” he said. “We owe it to the education industry to take a shot at it.”

Hawken, a 104-year-old private day-school, has about 1,300 students in preschool through high school. It will keep the traditional grading system at its main campus in Geauga County, near Gates Mills, as well as many standard courses.

But the new high school will use a similar approach to that of an existing Hawken facility in University Circle, the [Gries Center for Experiential and Service Learning](#). Students visit that center from the main campus for a few weeks at a time to try out project-based classes already.

The Gries Center will remain for shorter visits by students of all grades, while the Hawken School of Mastery will use the projects full-time just for high school grades.

Just like at Gries, the Hawken School of Mastery will sets aside standard subjects and classrooms focusing on traditional academic content, replacing them with skills-based project and problem-solving classes that cut across all subjects at once. Skills like communication, critical thinking, creativity and self-directed learning are treated as equals with humanities or science and math skills.

Here’s how it works at Gries, as a preview of the new school:

Students on rotation at Gries take most of their school day to work on projects for businesses or non-profits as a way of learning entrepreneurship. The new school will broaden its topics.

Students meet with the businesses, are assigned a problem to research, gather answers in the field and report back to the company in a few weeks to show what they have found.

Teams of students, for example, have surveyed other high school students and tested an online system to connect college students and alumni to network over work opportunities.

Kate Volzer, co-Founder and CEO of [Wisr, the Ohio City company that developed the system, said the company used some of the ideas students presented.](#)

“This is a really great thing that I wish I was exposed to when I was in high school,” Volzer said.

Students at Gries this week are working with the [Rust Belt Riders](#) soil and composting company in the East Side, located in the facility that hosts IngenuityFest, to explore possible customers and marketing options for products.

Students are doing demographic research, surveying people, and visiting local businesses and stores to see if the products have appeal. That included visits this

week to some new restaurants opening in Beachwood and the [Bremec Garden Center](#) in Cleveland Heights, where manager Arthur Richwine gave them a crash course in the types of products and packaging he sees appealing to different customers.