



432 Monroe Street, Brooklyn, New York 11221 | www.unityprep.org

Frequently Asked Questions

The “Ins and Outs” of a Teaching Career at Unity

The purpose of this document

At Unity, our mission is to empower students as scholars and citizens so that they may lead fulfilling academic, personal, and professional lives. This document aims to provide prospective teachers with a clear understanding of what we envision for our faculty as they lead the way in realizing this goal.

We aim to cultivate one of the most highly esteemed cadres of teachers in New York City, as well as to develop professional systems and structures that other schools may adopt or adapt as they work to realize their own missions.

How is teaching at Unity different from teaching at other schools?

As experienced educators, we have taken a sensible approach to designing Unity’s professional framework in an effort to address the common issues that often stunt teacher success. Our framework includes the following features:

- Manageable workload, including smaller class sizes, one core-course to prepare for each day, ample curricular resources, and a school-wide system for developing lesson plans and attaining regular feedback
- Generous compensation and formal recognition for positive contributions to the school over time
- Formal and transparent career ladder for teachers to advance in their craft and assume new titles with commensurate responsibilities while remaining in the classroom as practitioners
- A multi-faceted, comprehensive professional development system that equips faculty with the skills and knowledge needed to ensure that students achieve academic and personal excellence

What is a normal day like for a Unity teacher?

A teacher typically teaches four sections of the same course each day and has two periods for collaborative planning and course management. In addition, she/he serves as co-advisor to 18-25 students and meets with these students twice daily. Teachers also play an active role in our afternoon enrichment opportunities, by helping facilitate or support clubs or sport teams.

In what ways do Unity teachers work to master their craft?

Supporting teachers by providing them with ample opportunities to develop their skills and realize their potential as master educators through active, teacher-centered initiatives is a hallmark of Unity’s design. Such opportunities include the following:

1. Instructional Coaching/Feedback through Observations: All Unity teachers have a designated instructional coach and receive personal coaching on a bi-weekly basis. Following each observation, a teacher and her/his instructional coach debrief on the observation using video footage and collaboratively devise concrete action steps designed to enhance specific areas of the teacher's practice
2. Content-based Video Study Groups: Video Study Groups provide an opportunity for teachers to collaborate with colleagues of the same content area to further develop their skills through the analysis of real day-to-day video footage. On a tri-weekly basis, teachers identify specific areas that they want to develop. They then record and select video clips of their teaching and, in content-specific small groups, analyze footage according to a set protocol to support a deeper understanding and improvement in each teacher's selected focus area.
3. Individual Enrichment Opportunities: Individual enrichment opportunities allow teachers to voluntarily self-select learning opportunities beyond the walls of the school and take ownership over their own development. Examples include visits to other schools to see other talented teachers in action, graduate-level courses in a given content area, trainings and conferences offered by institutions, and fellowships. When possible, the school sponsors, subsidizes, and encourages teachers in these opportunities. Following the teacher's participation in the opportunity, the teacher formally shares his/her learning with fellow staff members.
4. Targeted skills development and training: These trainings, which occur roughly every other Wednesday for one hour and are commonly facilitated by Unity staff, focus on individuals, teams, or the full faculty. The schedule and topics selected for trainings are informed by classroom observational data and perceived teacher needs and focus on developing the skills necessary to best address students' academic and non-academic needs. Steps are taken to assess each training's value to teachers in enhancing their instruction, thereby improving student learning.
5. Lesson Planning Cycle: Each week, teams of faculty, under the guidance of the Director of Curriculum, Instruction & Assessment, take part in a lesson planning process, which entails the creation, review, and revision of lessons plans before they are taught. By participating in this process, colleagues learn from one another as they collaborate in creating, reviewing, and editing lesson plans.
6. Summer and Winter Staff Development Institutes: Each summer the faculty convenes for a two-week summer institute with the goal of preparing for the upcoming school year. This professional development is designed to address the needs of individuals, teams, and the entire school faculty. Similar trainings are offered in the winter institute, which takes place over two days in January. For both institutes, trainings are often based on the support needs of students and informed by aggregated and disaggregated student performance and classroom observation data. We tap into the expertise of individual faculty members to help facilitate these sessions whenever possible and solicit outside expertise when necessary.

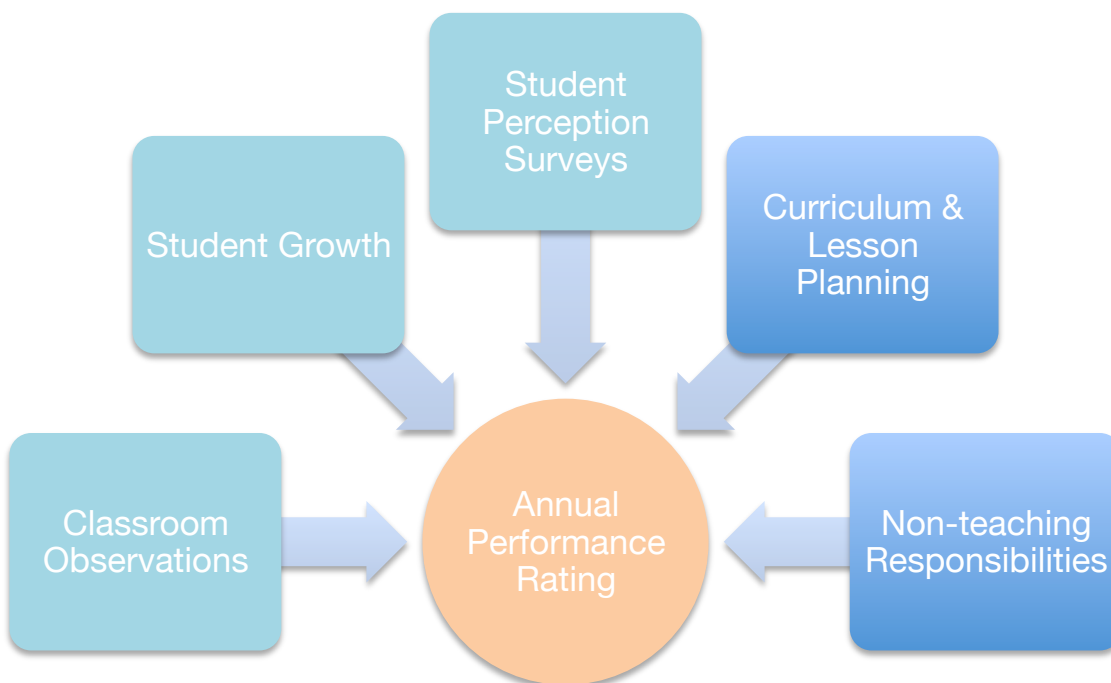
How are teachers evaluated annually?

The school's annual teacher performance review process provides direction and clarity on what it means to develop the requisite skills and competencies of a Unity Distinguished Teacher, equips teachers with ongoing feedback on their performance, and informs staffing decisions, including promotional decisions, through the school's Teacher Career Advancement System (T-CAS) (more information on T-CAS is provided below). On an annual basis, teachers are evaluated across two major domains:

- Domain 1 - Effectiveness in Promoting Student Learning: A teacher's level of effectiveness is assessed through three measures: (i) a series of approximately fifteen formal classroom observations conducted by the school's instructional coaching team using the school's classroom observation instrument on which teachers have trained (see below for more information); (ii) annual student academic growth measures and (iii) students' evaluations of teachers using tools such as the Tripod student perception surveys, developed by Dr. Ronald Ferguson at Harvard University, with which students communicate about their classroom experiences with teachers. Student surveys are administered twice annually.
- Domain 2 - Fulfillment of Professional Responsibilities and Expectations: A teacher's fulfillment of her/his professional responsibilities and expectations is based on two measures: (i) the quality of the teacher's curriculum and lesson planning and contributions to the school's planning processes and (ii) satisfactory completion of her/his administrative responsibilities and the quality with which they are fulfilled.

A teacher's formal annual evaluation is based on a roughly equal weighting (approximately 20%) across each of the five sub-items of the two domains as illustrated in the figure below.

Components of Unity's Annual Teacher Evaluation Process



1. Classroom Observations: As a part of the annual evaluation/performance review process, each teacher is observed formally by her/his instructional coach on approximately fifteen occasions annually (roughly every two weeks). Observations are based on agreed-upon benchmarks and standards established in advance by the teacher and her/his instructional coach.² Following each observation, the instructional coach provides the teacher with written descriptive (“what I saw”) and normative (“what I thought”) comments on the standards focused on during the observation. The teacher and the instructional coach then meet within three days of the observation to debrief the observation and establish action steps, which are entered and archived in a database and can be accessed by the instructional coach and teacher.
2. Student Growth: Annual growth of student achievement is a second factor used to evaluate teachers’ expertise (for content areas in which measuring student growth is possible). Measurements used for this aspect of teacher evaluation include a teacher’s annual value-added score or a teacher’s student-growth percentile score if value-added scores are not available. In courses in which this information is not available, student mastery of standards is used in determining a teacher’s level of effectiveness in a given year.
3. Student Perception Surveys: Students complete perception surveys twice annually. These surveys, among other things, offer feedback to teachers. The teacher and her/his instructional coach review a summary of the feedback provided to each teacher by students. Areas of strength and opportunities for growth are identified and appropriate action steps are then developed.
4. Curriculum and Lesson Planning: A teacher’s competency in curriculum and lesson planning is evaluated on established standards presented to staff during the Summer Staff Development Institute each year and reviewed on multiple occasions over the course of the school year. At the beginning of each trimester, the Director of Curriculum, Instruction & Assessment evaluates each teacher’s trimester-long curriculum and unit plans for alignment with relevant state and national standards as well as Unity’s departmental scope and sequencing, when applicable. The remaining standards are assessed as part of the school’s weekly lesson plan review process. The Director of Support Services evaluates lesson plans and other documents to ensure they reflect appropriate accommodations and modifications for students with IEPs and 504 plans. Results of these evaluations are entered into a teacher evaluation database and discussed with teachers. Each teacher is assessed as meeting or not meeting standards under this category.
5. Non-teaching Responsibilities: Non-teaching responsibilities, such as fulfillment of professional responsibilities and advisory duties, are assessed twice a year using a set rubric. The first review is conducted in early November, based on internal records and the teacher’s immediate supervisor throughout the year to date. Teachers receive written feedback via Unity’s evaluation database and discuss the review with her/his direct supervisor. The second review is conducted in late February; it is not to be debriefed separately; rather, it is incorporated into the teacher’s yearly evaluation. As with classroom observations and curriculum and lesson planning, each teacher is

evaluated based on whether she/he has met the standards under this category.

Each teacher completes a self-assessment in late August. The self-assessment process is designed to inform and focus the areas in need of growth, ensure that the teacher and the teacher's designated instructional coach are in agreement regarding the teacher's areas in need of growth, and allow for the monitoring of progress in these areas. The school's self-assessment forms include the teacher's annual goals and corresponding benchmarks, as well as her/his long-term goals, which are aligned with the T-CAS designation to which she/he aspires (see below for description of T-CAS designations). The self-assessment form is formally reviewed by the teacher and instructional coach in August and then revisited in December, March, and June to reflect on the past year's performance and plan for the next school year.

What equipment and materials do teachers have access to in fulfilling their responsibilities?

In addition to the host of resources described above, providing teachers with the necessary equipment and materials to do their job well is a priority at Unity. Curricular materials made available to teachers include reference materials and textbooks, CCLS-aligned scope and sequences, pacing guides, an exemplary unit plan, and a cross-disciplinary lesson plan template for each core-content area. Teachers also have the following work-related resources and equipment: a classroom/private workspace, Mac Air laptop, Ipad, access to copier/printer, overhead projector, document arm camera, and access to class sets of shared Chromebooks and Ipads.

What employment benefits does Unity provide to teachers?

Teachers are provided with a wide range of benefits. Some of these benefits — such as Workers' Compensation, Social Security and Unemployment Insurance — are provided to all employees, as required by law. Additionally, Unity provides a broad range of benefits to certain employees according to their employee classification. While some benefit programs require contributions from employees, most are fully paid by the school.

Discretionary Benefits include:

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| • No-Fault Days | • Dental Insurance |
| • Paid Holidays | • Parental Leave |
| • Medical Insurance | • Leave Without Pay |
| • 403(b) | • Bereavement Leave |
| • Long Term and Short Term Disability | • Life Insurance |

How does the school's career ladder work?

The school's Teacher Career Advancement System (T-CAS), summarized in the figure below, provides a formal pathway for teachers to advance in their craft, assume new titles with commensurate responsibilities while remaining in the classroom as practitioners, and be generously compensated and formally recognized for their positive contributions to the school.

Depending on their qualifications and level of experience, new teachers join Unity's faculty either as Junior Associate, Associate, or Senior Associate teachers. While the system begins as of the school's first year, teachers are not eligible for promotion until the summer after the school's second year and longer depending on their designation within T-CAS. Junior

Associate and Associate teachers are eligible for promotion after their second year of teaching in their respective designation; Senior Associate teachers are eligible for promotion to Master Teacher following their third year at Unity with that designation; finally, Master Teachers are eligible for promotion to Distinguished Teacher following four years as Master Teacher. Teachers who are not promoted when eligible remain at the same designation. In this situation, teachers are next eligible for promotion after an additional two years. Teachers cannot be demoted.

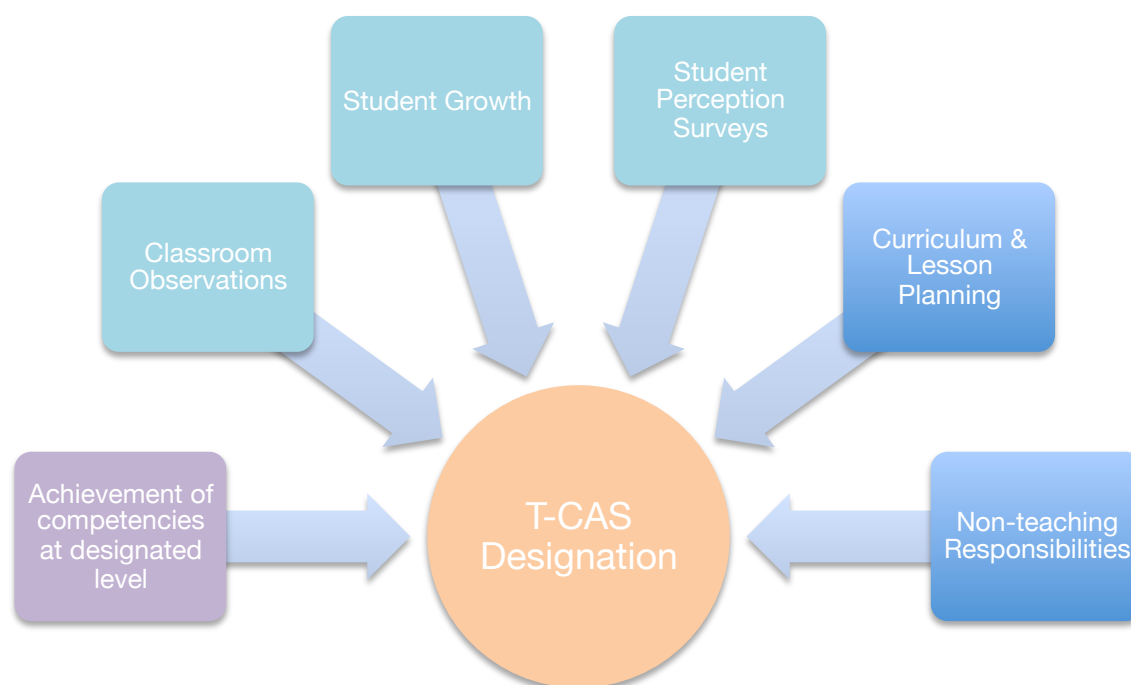
Promotional decisions are based on a teacher's cumulative, annual reviews as well as her/his demonstration of competencies expected of teachers at each designation. In general, new designations earned through promotion require greater intellectual demands and expertise (not just more time and responsibilities), which, depending on the designation, may include teaching demo-lessons, mentoring and coaching teachers, working with larger class sizes, writing/reviewing/editing curricula and assessments, leading professional development efforts, teaching courses that are challenging to less senior staff, representing the school on professional panels, and/or presenting at conferences.

On average, a Unity Associate Teacher with 2-3 years of experience may earn as much as \$75,000 annually. This is approximately 37% percent higher than the salary currently earned by a third year teacher with an advanced degree under the NYCDOE's traditional salary ladder. It is also significantly higher than more than 75% of teachers working in other NYC charter schools according to the most recent compensation survey conducted by the New York City Charter School Center (2011). Depending on a teacher's long-term success at Unity, teachers have an opportunity to earn as much as \$125,000 annually if they are promoted to Distinguished Teacher.

Unity's process of making promotional decisions is similar to the approach used by colleges and universities to decide promotion and tenure. Decisions concerning promotions to Associate-level positions are made by school leadership. Decisions concerning promotions to Master and Distinguished Teachers are also be made by school leadership and informed by a recommendation from a Standing Committee. Each teacher's Standing Committee comprises of teachers within the school and members of the school's Advisory Board. In making its recommendation, the Standing Committee reviews three areas:

- the teacher's prior annual evaluation records, which reflect the teacher's accomplishments and growth
- the teacher's success in meeting the responsibilities associated with her/his present designation
- a formal self-review in which the teacher makes the case for her/his promotion

Guidance and feedback regarding a teacher's prospects for promotion are provided in her/his ongoing debrief meetings with school leadership.



What opportunities for co-planning exist for teachers? What are the expectations around lesson planning?

In developing lesson plans, teachers work within a formal weekly system in which: (i) teachers draft lesson plans for the upcoming week in collaboration with grade-level teams, including learning specialists, during shared preparation periods and weekly content-area team meetings; (ii) teachers submit the plans to the content-area leaders, the Director of Curriculum, Instruction & Assessment, and the Director of Support Services on Friday mornings; (iii) these directors then review plans, provide written feedback, and return the drafts to teachers; (iv) teachers then make final revisions. Through this system, teachers are well equipped with a detailed roadmap of how to best facilitate student learning on a daily basis. The system assists in the creation of a school-based archive of lesson plans that may be used, revised, and enhanced by teachers each year. Each summer, the staff reviews curriculum resources and, as the school grows, develops scope and sequences, curriculum maps, and units for the next grade.

How does Unity foster a positive staff culture?

Beyond the structural features of the role of teacher at Unity, including the challenging yet manageable workload, generous compensation and formal recognition, and career ladder and development offerings, Unity also offers a host of initiatives that promote a positive staff culture and deep sense of collaboration among staff. Such initiatives include: opportunities for collective decision-making including participation in our Quality Improvement Teams, an emphasis on collaboration amongst grade-level and content area teams, regular social gatherings, “shout-outs” during faculty meetings, weekly breakfasts (donuts!), a jam-packed Teacher Appreciation Week of events, and other informal forms of gratitude. The summer and winter staff institutes also incorporate team-building activities and discussions. These initiatives and policies help to make Unity an environment in which people enjoy working and feel supported as they strive to enhance their craft.