

A NEW HOPE

A NEW HIGH SCHOOL FOR STUDENTS

WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

This statement outlines the case for permanent establishment of a high school in the San Francisco Bay Area's East Bay region to address the needs of students with learning disabilities and to help them fulfill their potential.

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A Void to be Filled — A Vision to be Realized

Roughly fifteen percent of the total population has some form of learning disability. Students with learning disabilities may be highly talented and intelligent, yet unable to succeed in traditional schools due to conditions such as dyslexia, ADHD, auditory processing disorder, non-verbal learning disorders, Asperger's Syndrome, or a host of other, major challenges. Schools devoted to address their special needs are far too rare. The scarcity of such schools in the San Francisco Bay Area -- especially in the East Bay region -- is a particularly dire problem. And while several mainstream private high schools occasionally enroll learning disabled students, they welcome only those whose deficits are at the mildest end of the spectrum. A still smaller number of students from families of means are able to attend special education boarding schools on the East Coast. Regrettably, however, most students with learning disabilities struggle, and many times fail, in school settings that are neither equipped nor designed to address their neurobiological differences.

The creation of a new high school for learning disabled teenagers is born out of a vision that more must be done to educate this population of deserving, special needs students and thus assure them the opportunity to thrive as productive and contributing members of society.

Building on What Has Come Before

The course being charted for this new high school draws directly on the decades-long success of Raskob Institute and Day School, a program of Holy Names University in Oakland, California.

Established in 1973, Raskob Day School is licensed as a nonpublic, non-sectarian school that offers fulltime instruction to learning disabled children in 3rd through 8th grades. The Raskob Institute, founded in 1953, is one of the oldest tutoring centers in the U. S.

Following the unanimous endorsement of its board of trustees in October 2004, Holy Names University expanded Raskob's offerings by opening a high school in September 2005. Their decision was based, in major part, on well-identified demand for these specialized educational services. While small relative to conventional schools, Raskob High School was designed to accommodate and instruct more students than any comparable special education high school in Northern California. In Fall 2005, teachers welcomed a fully enrolled 9th grade class of 20 students – implementing the first phase of a plan to add a grade each successive year until the high school reached a full enrollment of 80 students in all four grades.

Just five months later, in January 2006, the university announced with regret that, although the high school program has an outstanding curriculum and teachers, addresses a pressing community need, and covers expenses through its own revenues, campus space will no longer be available to house it. Increasing enrollment in the university's undergraduate program -- its top priority -- necessitated the reversal of the university's decision to expand Raskob. Raskob High School can occupy campus space and

continue with 9th and 10th grade classes through the 2006-07 school year, after which time the high school's operations will be suspended and its classrooms converted to college use. Raskob's elementary and middle schools and the tutoring institute will continue unaffected in a building already fully dedicated to those purposes.

Ensuring Educational Continuity and Opportunity

For parents at Raskob, leaving their own children -- and others confronting similar challenges -- to face an educational void was not an option. The day after the announcement that Raskob High School will close in June 2007, a group of parents began to organize to establish an independent high school whose doors will open in September 2007.

The new high school will provide an uninterrupted education for current Raskob students and assure that still other learning disabled students who desperately need these services will have a place to attend school. Upon hearing that parents are creating an independent high school, Holy Names University administrators have reached out to offer their moral support.

With the model of Raskob as its foundation, the new high school will be able to build directly on many critical planning steps that have already been successfully implemented: demand for such a school has been tested and is extremely high; a specialized curriculum has already been painstakingly developed by some of the best experts in the field; and outstanding and experienced high school teachers have already been recruited. The special education community has rallied passionately behind the school's creation, and a campaign to gather seed funding and find a facility is well underway.

What It Will Take

While much time and expertise have already been devoted to this effort, making this new school a reality by September 2007 will require help from many individuals and organizations in the Bay Area – those who understand and care about the education of youth, the particular struggles of children with learning disabilities, and the dearth of options to address their needs.

- ***Governance*** : In January 2006, over 35 volunteers formed committees to address essential planning functions for a new high school, including governance, finance, programs, facilities, fundraising, community relations, and operations. All committees meet regularly, with committee chairs meeting weekly. In February 2006, the steering committee's pro bono legal counsel filed Articles of Incorporation establishing the Bay Area Educational Institute, a California nonprofit corporation, which will operate the yet to be named high school. In March 2006, bylaws were adopted, volunteer officers and board members elected, and applications prepared for submission to state and federal agencies for nonprofit, tax-exempt status. Additionally, the donated services of a strategic planning consultant who specializes in organizational start-ups proved invaluable.
- ***Executive and Academic Leadership***: An extraordinarily talented and experienced high school director and team of special education teachers and administrators are already in place at Raskob High School. The goal is to offer them employment contracts with the new school when Raskob High School closes, thus providing a seamless educational experience for students and continuous employment for a highly skilled staff.

- ***Students:*** The high school expects a highly diverse student body, based on the current enrollment of Raskob High School. All of its students possess average to above-average cognitive abilities, but have diagnoses that range from dyslexia and ADHD to nonverbal learning disorders and Asperger's Syndrome. Students mirror the cultural richness of the San Francisco Bay Area, with roughly half representing racial and ethnic minorities. Because schools for students with learning disabilities are so rare, children commute from across the Bay Area, as well as from throughout the East Bay.
- ***Accessibility:*** While the high school must stay small to address the individual learning profile of each student, it will nevertheless offer the largest program of its kind in Northern California and the third largest in the state of California (the two larger programs are in suburban Los Angeles). Reaching those children in greatest need — regardless of their families' socio-economic status — is a philosophical mandate. Even with the school's 1:6 teacher-to-student ratio, tuition will be set at a level comparable to private, independent schools. By contrast, other schools for the learning-disabled may charge twice the tuition. Additionally, the new high school expects to be able to accept students who are funded through their public school districts. A high priority goal is also to raise funds for scholarship support.
- ***Enrollment:*** The school will open with 9th, 10th, and 11th grades, enrolling up to 20 students per grade. In its second year of operation, enrollment is projected at 80 students in all four high school grades.

- ***Funding:*** Pro forma start-up and operating budgets have been prepared by a financial services executive in consultation with two veteran school administrators, all on a donated basis. By September 2007, \$350,000 is projected to be needed to cover start-up costs, including securing and upgrading a new site. In-kind donations, such as furniture, equipment, and curricular materials, will be aggressively sought to offset the projected amount of start-up expense. Additionally, as of May 2006, \$170,000 in pledges of cash have already been received from current and former Raskob families toward the start-up goal. The school's 2007-08 projected operating budget of \$1 million will be self-funded through tuition and through modest fees for an after school program. Fundraising for scholarships and an array of school enhancements will also be sought during the start-up phase and afterward.
- ***Location & Facilities:*** The need for a high school for students with learning disabilities is especially urgent in the East Bay region. A commercial real estate broker is providing services at no cost to the Bay Area Educational Institute to find a facility. The search spans from Richmond to Hayward, with the preferred location being near a public transportation hub. Several possible sites have already emerged, some involving alliances with community-based organizations that have space to rent to other non-profit causes. Outfitting classrooms to meet the needs of students with learning disabilities is no small undertaking. Minimizing visual and auditory distractions to maximize learning must inform the design of classroom spaces. An architect with expertise in this area is donating services to assure students and teachers the best possible educational environment.

- ***Curriculum:*** Already in place, the high school curriculum is based on the latest knowledge of underlying neurobiological processes that promote or hinder learning. The research-based, multi-sensory curriculum will ensure students' academic success, while also meeting state standards. Students will be able to choose and benefit from two fully developed options: a college-preparatory curriculum designed to meet University of California and California State University requirements, and a more supported academic program that will ensure that more delayed students will achieve their academic and vocational goals.
- ***Therapeutic Services:*** On-site specialists, including speech and language pathologists, occupational therapists, and psychologists, will be available to provide direct services to students, as well as to consult with classroom teachers.
- ***Assistive Technology:*** For those who learn differently, technology is an essential, high-yield tool that enables and deepens learning. Assistive technology will be integral to the high school program.
- ***Licensing, Accreditation, and Admissions:*** A seasoned, special education consultant has been identified and will be retained starting July 2006 to oversee three essential areas: 1) prepare the documents to seek State of California licensing as a nonpublic, non-sectarian school -- a status that will allow the high school to accept students funded through public school districts; 2) guide the new school through the accreditation process of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC); and 3) manage the confidential admissions process.

What is at Stake -- Our Children's Future

In education, one size does not fit all. By the time students with learning disabilities find an appropriate school setting, they are often emotionally worn down and functioning below their academic grade levels. Having failed at or been failed by their prior schools is the unfortunate norm. Children with learning disabilities are often described as "at risk" and "vulnerable." Indeed, the correlation between unaddressed learning disabilities and drug addiction, teen suicide, and incarceration has been abundantly documented.

The new high school's purpose is to defy negative outcomes; its pursuit, to remediate and accelerate students' academic learning and to help them acquire resilience and life skills. The school's promise – both to the community at large and its young people -- is to prove that those with learning disabilities can still learn, can reach high levels of achievement, and can thrive as highly contributing and fully engaged members of society.