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Unconditional Education®: Transforming lives, transforming the field

Seneca Family of Agencies (formerly Seneca Center) was founded in 1985 by advocates who were determined to more effectively meet the needs of children in group homes and foster family care.

The ways in which our educational systems fail children are all too familiar: children often must fail before they receive real support; struggling students are excluded from the mainstream learning environment; and uncoordinated services tend to address symptoms rather than causes.

Throughout California and nationally, the achievement and opportunity gap grows every day.

But what happens when you implement a model that turns all that on its head? What can an educational setting look like when support is provided early, so as to prevent failure? When interventions offer the most inclusive and least restrictive options for each child? When services are coordinated and delivered holistically?

Tamarah Tilos works for Seneca Family of Agencies as a UE Coach. She is stewarding the implementation of an innovative model, Unconditional Education® (UE), in East Oakland’s Lighthouse Community Charter School.

An innovative, trauma-informed, whole school intervention, UE seeks to address the ever-expanding achievement gap in education and beyond. For Tamarah, piloting the UE model has demonstrated that transformational change is possible for individual students and entire school systems when the core commitment is to do whatever it takes to help a child succeed.

“I have witnessed nothing short of miracles,” Tamarah exclaims.

The majority of students who attend Lighthouse Community Charter School live in disadvantaged neighborhoods, where they are repeatedly exposed to gangs, crime, and community and interpersonal violence. Youth who are exposed to this type of trauma are often less able to process information, distinguish between threatening and nonthreatening situations, form trusting relationships, and effectively regulate their emotions, all of which impacts their ability to achieve academic success. In Oakland, this has resulted in student referrals to Special Education at a rate that is 1.5 times greater than the state average. Through her work at Lighthouse, Tamarah has witnessed profound changes in the academic success and social emotional well-being of individual students, as well as an entire school population.

Launched in 2011, UE reflects Seneca’s efforts to prevent students from falling so far behind academically and socially that the only available options are highly restrictive, intensive, and expensive interventions.

The UE approach addresses two primary academic needs:

• Improving the academic performance and social-emotional well-being of the students experiencing the greatest challenges, including student with disabilities.

• Increasing the capacity of schools in under-served and at-risk communities to deliver effective, data-driven interventions for all their students.

In traditional school settings, services may address just one aspect of a struggling student’s needs and challenges, and the child must fail before additional support can be offered. With the UE model, teachers, mental health counselors, and behavioral specialists work together to identify and intervene immediately and often with struggling students. When a student is struggling, the team connects, coordinates services, and responds promptly to meet the child’s holistic need.

Indeed, the UE model shifts interventions from reactive to proactive, from down-stream to upstream, and from reactionary to foundational.

Pilot implementation of the UE model has already revealed some promising results in regard to academic achievement in English and Math, decreased number of suspensions, and increased attendance. UE has been the focus of a national study, assessing the outcomes for over 8,000 students in Oakland and San Francisco. While the study is still underway, initial outcomes have already exceeded the anticipated results and show promise for students who are particularly impacted by the achievement gap, children of color, English language learners, children in foster care, and students enrolled in Special Education services.

For Tamarah, UE is an approach that “just makes sense.” We are in dire need of real change in the education and mental health fields,” and “UE just emerges so beautifully.” As a UE coach and soon-to-be doctoral graduate, Tamarah values her work at Seneca because she is committed not only to working in the field, but to transforming it.

Eight years ago, Tamarah began working at Seneca as a mental health counselor at a nonpublic school for special education students with emotional challenges. With the encouragement of her supervisor and financial help from Seneca, she decided to pursue her teaching credential and master’s in Special Education while remaining a full-time employee. She worked in various school-based positions and eventually returned as an Assistant Director at the same school where she began her work at Seneca.

New Tamarah works as an Unconditional Education® Coach and...
Seneca Family of Agencies

Seneca Family of Agencies (formerly Seneca Center) was founded in 1985 by advocates who were determined to more effectively meet the needs of children in group homes and foster family care. Seneca established itself as an innovative leader in the provision of unconditional care through a comprehensive continuum of school, community-based and family-focused treatment services for children and families who have experienced high levels of trauma and are at risk for family disruption or institutional placement of the children. In 2011, a strategic merger with Krupen Center formed Seneca Family of Agencies.

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is gaining an entire school through a three-year evolution, as they adopt the UE model and its school-wide restorative and inclusive practices. She hopes to graduate from her education doctoral program in Organizational Leadership during the next year. Reflecting on her career path, she laughs and notes that “The work is not easy,” but “I am proud to be in a leadership role that allows me to further advance our agency’s mission,” and that “I feel fortunate to be part of an organization that has invested in my professional development all along the ways.”

Seneca is dedicated to developing creative and responsive strategies to improve services and outcomes for all children. This commitment transforms not only the clients the agency serves, but the staff who do the work. Tamarah describes herself as “empowered to be a change maker” and views her role as a UE Coach as a “torchbearer” for the values that guide the UE model and the commitment to never give up on children and their families. Through her work in the Unconditional Education model, Tamarah believes she is helping to develop the future best practices in mental health and education. For over three decades, Seneca Family of Agencies has committed to a singular goal: to stop at nothing to ensure the success and well-being of every child. Achieving this goal is only possible through the support and collaboration of committed individuals, and public-agency partners whose shared vision and values have enabled Seneca to help children and families in ways that are dramatically more supportive and culturally relevant than in the past. The outcomes that Seneca achieves with struggling and vulnerable families are only possible because of a superb staff like Tamarah, who believe deeply in the potential of each child and family to thrive and succeed.

Seneca’s commitment to providing unconditional care means that we do whatever it takes to help children and families thrive, no matter how challenging their circumstances.

We are seeking passionate individuals to join our team! We offer a generous benefits package, high-quality training programs, and scholarships for ongoing education.

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