



RAINIER SCHOLARS



An Interview with Academic Director Sumiko Huff

## Q&A: The Earlier Start Initiative

The Earlier Start initiative is a key component of Vision 2020, the strategic plan adopted in October 2015 to guide our organization's growth over the next five years. Academic Director Sumiko Huff shares more on the thoughts behind this effort and how it will benefit our scholars and families.

**Q. Can you tell us about the new Earlier Start initiative at Rainier Scholars?**

Rainier Scholars was modeled after Prep for Prep in New York, which places students on college prep pathways in 7th grade and supports them through college graduation. In the beginning, it made sense to replicate their framework, as Prep for Prep had demonstrated a great deal of success with their design. Over the years, we have worked to adapt our program to meet the specific needs of students and families in our area. With local middle schools starting in 6th grade, this shift makes good sense.



The Earlier Start Initiative is an effort to accomplish three things: first, by starting the Academic Enrichment Phase one year earlier, we will place scholars on college prep pathways at the start of their 6th grade year, allowing them to transition into new schools and programs at the same time as their peers, as opposed to making multiple transitions during middle school. Second, this also allows our scholars to compete for financial aid spots in independent schools when the greatest number of dollars is available to new students. Finally, research tells us that providing support for students earlier in their school careers is more effective in ensuring their long-term success.

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**Q. What's the biggest change and what remains the same with the new initiative?**

We have spent 15 years developing curriculum and instruction designed to effectively prepare students to be powerful scholars in college prep settings. This has been really amazing work that has yielded tremendous results! Much of what we have learned will still be highly relevant, however, we now need to adapt it to be developmentally appropriate for 5th graders. How we ramp up and the materials we use will need to shift. Our commitment to excellence, high expectations, comprehensive support and focus on community, all hallmarks of our program, will definitely remain the same.

**Q. What are you most excited about with this Earlier Start model?**

This work is a huge undertaking and a remarkable opportunity. The shift to a one year earlier start allows us to examine all the pieces of the puzzle with fresh eyes. It requires that we ask hard questions, and challenges us to innovate on an entirely new level. I love the creative and collaborative aspects of the work. I think I'm most excited to be able to consider how we can reshape our program to effectively empower students who face the greatest barriers to achieving their goals of college graduation. And of course, I'm excited to welcome our first cohort of rising 5th graders to the Rainier Scholars family next summer!

