

= Gordon Parks High School =

Gordon Parks High School is a public alternative learning center in Saint Paul , Minnesota . The school , founded in 1991 , was originally the Saint Paul Area Learning Center . It was then called Unidale Alternative Learning Center for several years , after the local strip mall it operated in ; this was often shortened to ALC Unidale . In 2007 , a permanent building was built for the school and it was again renamed . The school serves high @-@ school @-@ age students categorized as " at risk " or far behind in grade level . It is the largest of seven alternative day school programs in the Saint Paul Public Schools district .

= = Campus = =

The Saint Paul Area Learning Center opened on February 1 , 1991 . Its initial student body consisted of 500 full and part @-@ time students . The school first opened in a leased 8 @,@ 000 square feet (740 m2) building in the Unidale Mall . The small space was repeatedly expanded ; the largest expansion was in 1997 , when the building grew by 6 @,@ 000 square feet (560 m2) . Eventually , the building reached 18 @,@ 000 square feet (1 @,@ 700 m2) . The school , with tiny classrooms and no windows , cost the school district \$ 300 @,@ 000 in rent a year . The rented space became too small , and the school district decided to build a new building in part because of pressure from developers of the mall .

Upon the school 's relocation suggestions were solicited for a new name , and social studies teacher Ted Johnson submitted the winning entry . The school was named after photographer , film director and local icon Gordon Parks . Parks grew up in Saint Paul , attending local high schools such as Mechanic Arts High School and Saint Paul Central . Like many of the students the school targets , Parks struggled with events outside of school and eventually dropped out .

= = = New building = = =

In 2003 , Saint Paul Public Schools purchased a parcel of land about a mile and half west of the Unidale Mall on University Avenue from 3M . Construction of the new facility was planned to start in 2005 , costing \$ 7 million . When construction bids were higher than expected , the price tag went up to \$ 8 million and the project was postponed to allow for planning to reduce costs . Construction started in late November 2006 after price concerns had been resolved . The building opened in early December 2007 , with a total cost of \$ 7 @.@ 5 million . It was dedicated one day before the two @-@ year anniversary of Gordon Parks 's death . He died on March 7 , 2006 ; the building was dedicated on March 6 , 2008 .

When the new building was proposed , the initial plan called for a 44 @,@ 000 square feet (4 @,@ 100 m2) facility . The finished product featured a new gym and cafeteria in a 34 @,@ 000 square feet (3 @,@ 200 m2) building . Ownership of the new facility is saving the Saint Paul Public Schools district \$ 300 @,@ 000 annually in rent . The building also has new science labs , computer labs , and bigger art and industrial technology areas .

The building was designed by Wold Architects and built by Jorgenson Construction , Inc . The sloping glass walls in the front entrance were designed to emulate the many car dealerships along University Avenue . The school was built to be environmentally friendly , and the school district intends to apply for a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design Certification .

= = Students = =

The school serves students aged 16 @-@ 21 . Students who enroll must qualify under one or more " at @-@ risk " categories . These include homelessness , pregnancy , children and chemical dependency , as well as being at least one year behind for graduation or any other characteristic that would place a student at a disadvantage . In the 2006 @-@ 07 school year roughly 279 students attended Gordon Parks High School . Sixty @-@ two percent of students qualify for free or

reduced lunch , which is the school district 's measure of poverty . Eight percent of students qualify for special education .

= = Academics = =

Students must finish school before turning 21 years old . In 2007 , the school 's 12 @-@ week trimesters were changed into smaller six @-@ week mini @-@ terms , and then in 2011 , even smaller three @-@ week terms in order to improve attendance . Students who miss more than three days in a three @-@ week mini @-@ term do not earn full high school credit . As a result of this change , attendance increased by 100 % , though daily attendance is still about 50 % . It takes 60 hours of class work to earn one credit .

The school has a closed campus . When students were free to come and go as they pleased , many would not return after leaving for lunch . Now students must arrive by 8 a.m. and remain until noon , or arrive by 1 p.m. and stay until 5 p.m. Exceptions are granted for students in job programs , or who must take care of their family . To meet student needs the school has social workers , counselors , special education teachers , educational assistants , and on @-@ the @-@ job training .

The school has developed a specific program focus that includes film , photography , writing , and art , using Gordon Parks 's life as an inspiration and guide . In partnership with the Minnesota Historical Society , students are documenting stages of transition along University Avenue through the stories of elders , business owners , and residents affected by the METRO Green Line light @-@ rail transit project . The students learn more about the neighborhood 's history , document stories of the LRT project that might not otherwise be told , and share images that might not otherwise be seen .

This multiyear project is titled " Transitions : University Avenue " and is produced entirely by students , who began by documenting the controversial stage of pre @-@ construction along the avenue . As the construction moved forward , the students created documentaries on area residents and businesses and the impact the LRT has on them . The goals are to preserve important history , increase awareness of this community in transition , and highlight the work of Gordon Parks High School students .

GPHS partners with the Human Rights Program at the University of Minnesota in a pilot creative writing curriculum called the Scribes Fellowship . Students develop writing skills and confidence by focusing on personal reflections on human rights that affect their community . Community / school gardens , sustainable agriculture and food justice are the first topics explored .