



DISCUSSION GUIDE

Continue the conversation about Crosstown High to rethink any high school in your community.

THE STORY OF CROSSTOWN HIGH

WELCOME!

This guide will help you facilitate a rich discussion after your screening of “The First Class.”

WE ENCOURAGE YOU TO:

1. Familiarize yourself with the guide.
2. Watch or re-watch the film.
3. Prepare for your post-screening discussion.

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XQ INSTITUTE

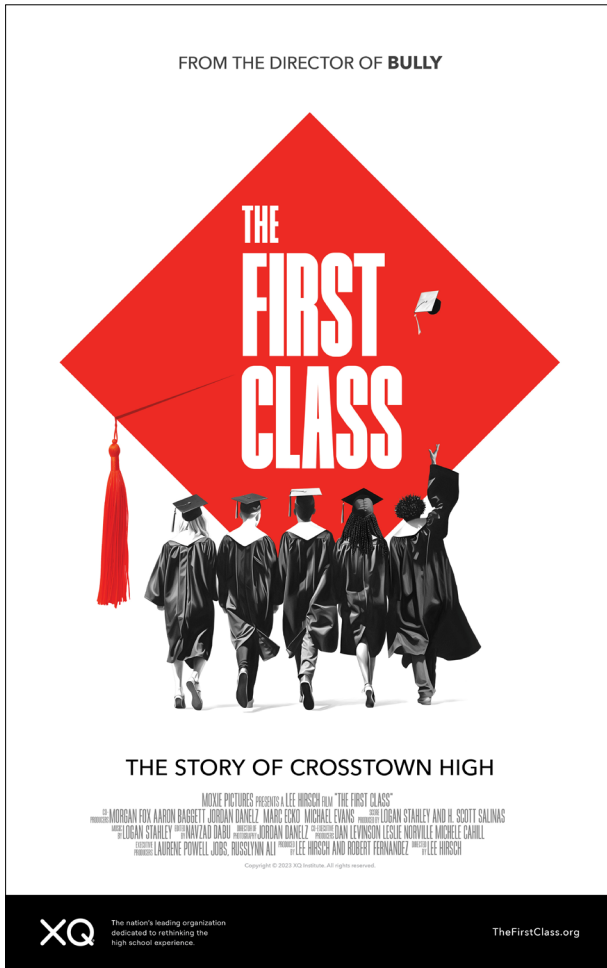
XQ is the nation's leading organization dedicated to rethinking the high school experience so that every student graduates ready to succeed in college, career, and life.

XQ collaborates with educators, within individual classrooms, with institutions, and across entire communities to revolutionize high schools. We recognize that the future of education hinges on our collective duty to recognize educators as indispensable nation builders who hold the key to transforming the system and ensuring it better equips all learners for what the future holds.

"The First Class" is more than a documentary: it's a powerful tool to build belief, inspire action, transform practice, and ultimately reimagine high school education.



ABOUT THE FILM



“The First Class” follows the founding class of Crosstown High in Memphis, one of the XQ schools across the country that is redefining the future of learning. Join Crosstown students on their journeys from 9th grade through the triumph of graduation as they imagine life on Mars, step into the lives of refugees, learn to think critically, and ultimately find themselves. This documentary highlights the vital role of educators in harnessing their expertise and working with communities to prepare the next generation for a future filled with possibilities.

ABOUT CROSTOWN HIGH



Each new school year, **more than 3.6 million students** enter high school in America.¹



Less than half of those who graduate will be ready for college or career.²



In Memphis, that number is **only 20%**.³

Determined to overcome these challenges, community members across Memphis came together to design Crosstown High—a bold new high school that opened in 2018. During its first year, Crosstown’s students had the highest attendance rate in Memphis,⁴ and ranked 1st among their peers in Geometry and English statewide.⁵

When Crosstown High’s first class graduated in the spring of 2022:

- 95% of students graduated on time, compared to 80% of students in the Memphis-Shelby County Schools.⁶
- 84% planned to attend college,⁷ compared to 66% of seniors nationally.⁸
- Collectively, students earned over \$10 million from various scholarships.⁹

Crosstown’s class of 2022 also:

- Exceeded their district peers on most state benchmarks.¹⁰
- Outpaced state and national ACT college readiness rates.¹¹
- Exceeded national AP course exam participation rates.¹²

The class of 2023 continued these trends.

- 94% of students graduated on time, compared to 81.5% in the Memphis-Shelby County Schools.¹³

HOW “THE FIRST CLASS” CAME TOGETHER

In 2015, XQ launched the Super School Challenge—an invitation to the nation to improve the high school experience by dreaming big. Applicants were encouraged to make learning more relevant and engaging for all students through community partnerships, interdisciplinary teaching, and by disrupting the traditional school day.

The challenge inspired teams of applicants that included more than 8,500 people from nearly all 50 U.S. states and several territories, representing district schools and charter schools. One of those people was Memphis parent Ginger Spickler.

Ginger was intrigued after she drove past an XQ billboard. At the time, she had a child in 5th grade and wanted something more inspiring than what she saw in her local public schools. She was excited about XQ’s call to design the high school of the future, and started by inviting everyone she thought might be interested—from teachers, parents, and students to local architects, writers, and business owners. The founding team of Crosstown High ended up being one of the largest and most diverse in the XQ Super School Challenge, with a total of 69 people from across the city of Memphis. As part of their process, the team gathered input from more than 200 students and also hosted community conversations.

In 2018, with the help of XQ’s design tools and resources, Crosstown High opened its doors to its first class of students. In 2022, that first class finished with a significantly higher graduation rate than the surrounding district and state (95 percent versus 80 and 90 percent, respectively),¹⁴ as well as better results on standardized tests such as the ACT. At the start of the Super School Challenge, XQ invited acclaimed film director Lee Hirsch to document the work of different school design teams around the country. Crosstown’s journey—its ups and downs, its struggles and triumphs—stood out. Crosstown’s leaders, Lee, and XQ then decided to create “The First Class,” to inform and inspire others seeking to make high school all it can be, and all that young people deserve.

Creating a high school like Crosstown High that’s more responsive to students, teachers, and the community doesn’t happen by chance. It requires approaches driven by research and practice. Like others in the original Super School Challenge, Crosstown’s design team was guided by the five XQ Learner Outcomes (p. 9) and the six XQ Design Principles (p. 10). These foundational materials continue to steer rigorous, engaging high school transformation at Crosstown High and in other schools and districts across the country.

ABOUT THE CAST: MEET THE EDUCATORS



Nikki Wallace (Science Teacher) is a passionate and dedicated mentor to her students. She leads the project about life on Mars, inspiring her students to think critically and creatively about scientific research. Nikki's personal journey of facing discrimination and navigating her own health challenges makes her committed to empowering her students to advocate for themselves and overcome barriers. She hosts conflict resolution sessions, guides students on how to advocate for themselves, and constantly investigates ways to support her students.



Ryan Pryor (Social Studies Teacher) is known for challenging his students and encouraging them to think critically. He co-teaches a combined English and humanities class with Deion Jordan that results in the refugee project and exhibition night we see in the film. He guides students by pointing them in the right direction and encourages them to find answers for themselves, fostering independent thinking and problem-solving skills. Ryan also co-hosts a Friday poetry slam, creating a space for students to express themselves creatively.



Deion Jordan (Former Crosstown English Teacher) is known for his high expectations and patient demeanor. He co-teaches the class we see with Ryan Pryor. Deion maintains high academic and behavioral standards and holds students accountable for their actions. Despite his firm stance, he also supports and mentors his students, helping them develop strong communication skills and critical thinking abilities.



Bertram Williams, Jr. (Former Crosstown Educator and Current Restorative Justice Practitioner) serves as a mentor and advocate for students, particularly Le'Cedric. He relates to Le'Cedric and goes out of his way to forge a personal relationship with him. Bertram's encouraging and supportive demeanor fosters positive relationships with students and helps create a more inclusive and equitable school environment at Crosstown High.



Chris Terrill (Executive Director) is an enthusiastic and inspiring leader who sets the tone for the school's mission. He is committed to giving all students an equal opportunity to reach their full potential in high school and beyond. Chris's reflective nature demonstrates his dedication to the school community, its values, and impact—and what it means to be a lifelong learner at a new type of high school. He goes above and beyond to connect with students, dressing up in the school's Yeti mascot costume during the COVID lockdown to show how the students are missed.



Ginger Spickler (Co-founder of Crosstown High, Parent) is a visionary educator and mom who is passionate about creating a better school for all children in Memphis that truly prepares them for the future. She has long been involved with education through local nonprofits, and she knows her community well. Inspired by an XQ billboard, Ginger reaches out to dozens of people in the Memphis community about designing an innovative educational model, leading to the creation of Crosstown High.

ABOUT THE CAST: MEET THE STUDENTS



Hayley (Student) is a highly expressive young woman who brings a unique and vibrant energy to the school. She uses her sense of humor to navigate through challenges and find joy in the process. Hayley is particularly passionate about poetry and writing, and she expresses her creativity through her words and performances. The film's ending finds her headed to the University of Memphis to study Marketing Management.



Paul (Student) has a positivity that shines through despite his nerves as he struggles to find his voice. Paul surprises everyone by excelling at a poetry slam, receiving a standing ovation. He further showcases his talents by creating an animated movie during the COVID lockdown period. Paul's journey is one of growth and self-discovery. The film's end finds him headed to Sewanee College to pursue his undergraduate degree.



Rachel (Student) is a natural leader and often refers to herself as "Rambunctious Rachel." Rachel is known for her hustle and drive, and she's willing to do whatever it takes to achieve her goals—and claims she's more interested in school than friends. Despite this initial claim, Rachel comes to bond with her peers through Crosstown's collaborative project-based learning style. Her talents and hard work pay off as she gets accepted to Rhodes College on a scholarship.



Le'Cedric (now known as Santana; Student) is a high-energy and creative student with a passion for music and art. He's musically inclined and often uses the school's studio to create his own music. Like other students, Le'Cedric struggles with Crosstown's fast-paced curriculum and sometimes feels overwhelmed. At one point, he is punished with a ten-day suspension for violating school rules. By his senior year, Le'Cedric shows growth and maturity. We see him ready to face new challenges at graduation and to continue his journey toward personal and academic success.



Terrell (now known as Everett; Student) is, like his peers, a nervous yet excited 9th grader, glad to be part of a brand new experience as a student in the first class at Crosstown High School. Terrell is intelligent, resilient, and loves nature. He's a science enthusiast with a sharp mind and a keen sense of observation. But in a school where collaboration is so important, Terrell has some difficulties working with another student and also struggles to figure out the right approach to an ambitious project. By the film's end, Terrell bolsters his collaboration skills and earns a full-ride scholarship to Rhodes College.

THE XQ LEARNER OUTCOMES

The five XQ Learner Outcomes provide a North Star for students, propelling them to engage deeply in their own learning and to master the knowledge and skills to meet the challenges—and opportunities—their futures hold.



Learn more about the XQ Learner Outcomes and related resources

THE XQ DESIGN PRINCIPLES

The six XQ Design Principles can help any school community that's interested in rethinking high school so all students achieve the XQ Learner Outcomes. They can be used as a self-assessment or to guide a school design process. These research-backed principles have been used by teams across the country, including Crosstown, to rethink their existing high schools or create new ones.

Strong mission and culture

A clear set of school values that unify stakeholders around a common purpose.

Meaningful, engaged learning

Strategies that are interdisciplinary and engaging that help students develop content knowledge and complex skills.

Caring, trusting relationships

Personal connections between students with adults and students with their peers to help them develop holistically.

+

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Youth voice and choice

Authentic, ample opportunities for students to build autonomy, develop agency, and develop their identities.

Smart use of time, space, and tech

Nontraditional approaches to when, where, and how students learn.

Community partnerships

Connections that open up real-world learning opportunities for students to gain valuable experiences that help them envision life beyond high school.



Learn more about the XQ Design Principles and related resources

CHOOSE AN APPROACH

Designing and facilitating a great discussion starts with being intentional about what you hope to achieve. By hosting a screening, you've already made an important decision to take on this effort.

Reconnecting with the purpose behind your decision will help create the best environment for engaging your audience after the film.

Follow these simple steps:

1. **Reflect on your audience** and what might be top-of-mind for them.
2. **Curate the questions** you'd like to ask to spark discussion.
3. **Plan how you'll close** the discussion, inspire action, and distribute takeaways.
4. **Gather everything you need** to facilitate a great discussion.

To support you, we have included two different approaches:

GENERAL DISCUSSION: INTRODUCING HIGH SCHOOL TRANSFORMATION THROUGH "THE FIRST CLASS" | PG. 13

This approach is for an audience that has a general interest in the film. It will help you to lead a discussion about Crosstown High's efforts to rethink the high school experience. It's a great place to start.

EXTENDED DISCUSSION: UNDERSTANDING THE DESIGN PRINCIPLES THAT SHAPE CROSTOWN HIGH | PG. 14

This approach is more extensive, building off the general approach while featuring explicit examples of how Crosstown High's community achieves the six XQ Design Principles.

Questions under each design principle are broken down by role—educator, student, and others—asking them to first reflect, then think more deeply about what they can do within their own communities. It's a great way to galvanize your community for the journey of high school transformation.

DISCUSSION TIPS

HOW TO LEAD A GREAT DISCUSSION

- Once you've selected an approach, choose a few questions from the list that you think will resonate with your group.
- Get the conversation flowing with an overarching question or two before moving to some specific questions.
- Listen for areas of interest or debate and ask thoughtful follow-up questions.
- Encourage attendees to "pass the mic" to someone else after speaking.
- Make sure to leave time to discuss and suggest next steps.

SUGGESTIONS FOR HOW TO CLOSE THE DISCUSSION

Planning for how you want to close your screening is crucial to cementing what your audience takes away and what they do next.

- **Summarize key themes.** Make sure you have a way to take notes during the discussion. You'll want to return to the themes with the most energy. What was discussed? Why was it exciting?
- **Acknowledge emotions.** Discussions about education can raise deep feelings. Be prepared to acknowledge and hold all emotions that are shared. The outcomes of young people are incredibly important, and talking about them reminds people of their own lives, what they want for their children, and how we solve the pressing problems we all face.
- **Name takeaways and next steps.** Urge attendees to be specific about their insights—and what might help ignite high school transformation in their community. Point them toward TheFirstClass.org to:
 - **Download the social media toolkit** and share their screening experience.
 - **Host additional screenings** by filling out the request [form](#).
 - Explore [XQ's resources](#) to **take action** to rethink high school in your community.



Scan to visit
TheFirstClass.org

GENERAL DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



START THE CONVERSATION

- Which aspects of learning at Crosstown resonated most with you? Why did they surprise you?
- How does Crosstown's use of space, time, and technology compare with that of other high schools you're familiar with?
- What might be challenging about being a student, teacher, or family member at Crosstown High?

DRIVE A DEEPER DISCUSSION







- What stood out about how educators collaborate at Crosstown?
- What were your impressions about how Crosstown students like Rachel and Terrell responded to their projects on Mars and refugees?
- Based on the film, how effectively do you think Crosstown achieves its goal of being an inclusive, supportive community, and why?
- Student agency is a core value at Crosstown. What do Crosstown students like Hayley do to ensure they're heard and taken seriously? How do students like Paul grow as learners throughout the film?
- How have partnerships, like the one with the Refugee Empowerment Project, influenced the learning experiences for students at Crosstown?

EXTENDED DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Reflect on what your audience cares most about and curate scenes that align with their concerns.

Crosstown High is shaped by the six XQ Design Principles, which are fundamental to effective high schools. You'll see evidence of the different design principles in action throughout "The First Class."

For each Design Principle, we've created a section that highlights specific scenes and themes from the film to illustrate their importance. Additionally, we've developed discussion questions tailored for different roles in high schools, such as educators and students. You'll find prompts focusing on both reflection and application, which you can adapt to facilitate your discussion.

<p>Strong mission and culture</p> <p>A clear set of school values that unify stakeholders around a common purpose.</p>	<p>Meaningful, engaged learning</p> <p>Strategies that are interdisciplinary and engaging that help students develop content knowledge and complex skills.</p>	<p>Caring, trusting relationships</p> <p>Personal connections between adults and students with their peers to help them develop holistically.</p>	<p>Youth voice and choice</p> <p>Authentic, ample opportunities for students to build autonomy, develop agency, and develop their identities.</p>	<p>Smart use of time, space, and tech</p> <p>Nontraditional approaches to when, where, and how students learn.</p>	<p>Community partnerships</p> <p>Connections that open up real-world learning opportunities for students to gain valuable experiences that help them envision life beyond high school.</p>
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→ p. 15	→ p. 17	→ p. 19	→ p. 21	→ p. 23	→ p. 25

STRONG MISSION AND CULTURE

An effective high school has a strong mission and culture, grounded in a shared set of goals, values, and expectations that guide every aspect of the school, from its overall approach to teaching and learning to the smallest daily routines. A strong mission and culture start from the beginning and require ongoing effort. They are particularly important for sustaining a school community in times of stress, challenge, or transition.

In “The First Class,” we see the school’s executive director, Chris Terrill, working to establish a culture that unifies the entire school community around Crosstown High’s bold vision. He greets students and families personally on the first day of school.^A In an early faculty meeting, he speaks passionately to teachers about Memphis’s deeply troubling low measures of student achievement and how Crosstown High can break that pattern.^B We hear from Ginger Spickler, the parent who first brought community members together around the idea of designing a new, intentionally diverse high school that would offer more interesting learning experiences to every student.^C We also learn a little about why the theme of diversity is especially important in Memphis, a city where de facto racial segregation has been a bitter fact of life for many generations.^D



STRONG MISSION AND CULTURE

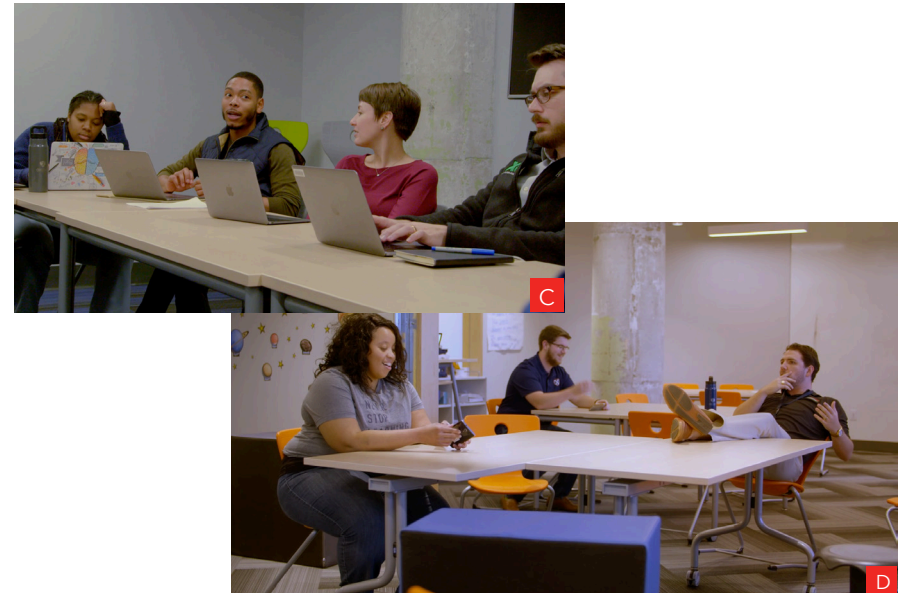
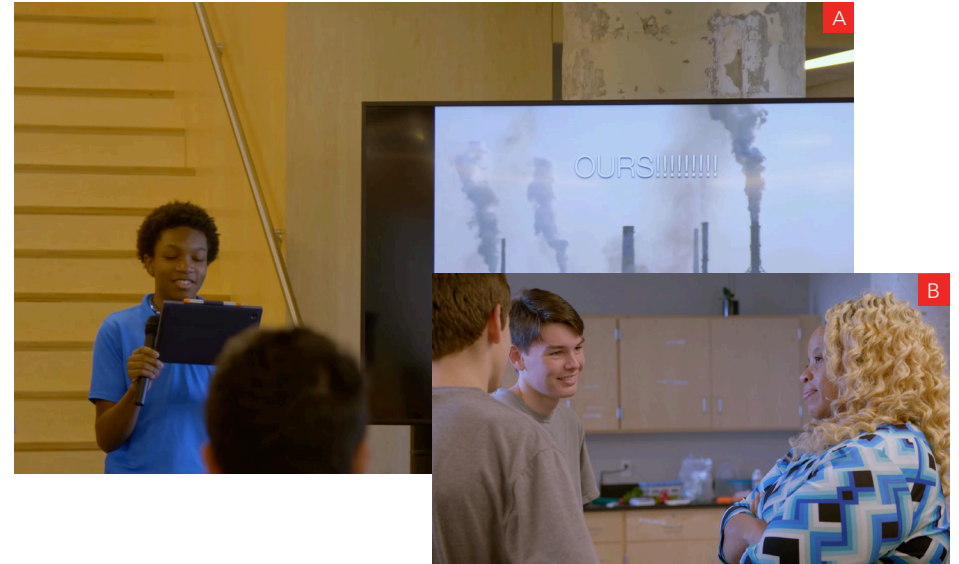
Discussion prompts

	FOR EDUCATORS	FOR STUDENTS	FOR GENERAL AUDIENCES
	Does everyone at Crosstown High—students, staff, and families—seem to share a common mission and set of goals?		
REFLECT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What specific evidence did you see of the Crosstown High community's commitment to diversity and high expectations for every student? • Which of Crosstown High's policies or practices seem especially important for instilling a common sense of mission? • Where do tensions emerge, and how does the community cope with them? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where does Crosstown High's commitment to diversity and high expectations for every student show up in students' day-to-day experience? • Are these values important to Crosstown High students? • Where do tensions emerge, and how does the community cope with them? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What specific evidence did you see of the Crosstown High community's commitment to diversity and high expectations for every student? • Which of Crosstown High's policies or practices seem especially important for instilling a common sense of mission? • Where do tensions emerge, and how does the community cope with them?
	Do high schools in your community hold a strong sense of mission, a supportive culture, and high expectations for every student?		
APPLY/PERSONALIZE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is your school's mission? Can you state it in words? How does your mission show up in policies and day-to-day practices? • Do you hold high expectations for every student? • Are there things you can do to strengthen your mission and culture as a unifying force in your high school? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is your school's mission? Can you state it in words? How does your mission show up in policies and day-to-day practices? • Does your school hold high expectations for every student? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are high schools in your community meeting the needs of all young people? • How would you like to be involved in high schools in your community? • How can you strengthen your community's commitment to your high schools?

MEANINGFUL, ENGAGED LEARNING

High school students need learning that ignites their interests, enables them to build rigorous knowledge, and supports them in developing the skills and competencies for college, work, and life. They need learning experiences that are relevant to their lives, with opportunities to apply what they know and solve real-world problems. That kind of learning means challenging the status quo approach to high school, where students often sit at their desks and absorb facts about neatly divided subjects from lectures and textbooks.

In “The First Class,” we see educators implement an approach to learning that’s different from what most teachers and students have experienced in more conventional classrooms. The school’s science teacher, Nikki Wallace, leads students through a learning experience about sustaining life on Mars,^A which she believes will be really exciting for them, only to encounter pushback from students who aren’t sure they’re learning.^B Ryan Pryor and Deion Jordan co-teach a unit on immigration and refugees, a multidisciplinary learning experience that culminates in a public exhibition of students’ own original products—but then the teachers struggle to ensure every student develops a final product that is rigorous and authentic.^C We hear teachers candidly discuss their worries over lunch one day, and we hear Nikki reflect on her experience at Crosstown High and her past work in other Memphis schools.^D We also hear students talking about how learning is different, and sometimes uncomfortable, at Crosstown High.



MEANINGFUL, ENGAGED LEARNING

Discussion prompts

	FOR EDUCATORS	FOR STUDENTS	FOR GENERAL AUDIENCES
	What are the upsides and downsides of learning at a school such as Crosstown High?		
REFLECT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What did you like, or dislike, about the pedagogy you saw in the film? • How did you see Crosstown High educators accommodate differences in students' interests, skills, and learning preferences? • What questions did students ask, and how did teachers respond? How else might you have responded? • How well-prepared do you think Crosstown High educators were for this approach to learning? Has your own training and experience prepared you for this style of teaching? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did Crosstown High students respond to the units on Mars and refugees? Where did students struggle, and how did teachers manage that? • Did other scenes about student learning stand out for you as good, bad, or interesting? • What roles do teachers play at Crosstown High? Did anything in the film surprise you? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do Crosstown High students respond to the units on Mars and refugees? Where did students struggle, and how did teachers manage that? • What stood out to you as good, bad, or interesting about those projects? • Did other scenes about learning at Crosstown High stand out for you as good, bad, or interesting? What, if any, questions did these scenes raise in your mind? • What roles do teachers play at Crosstown High? Did anything that teachers did or said in the film surprise you?
	Is learning at your school truly interesting and relevant to students? Is it project-based, high-interest, authentic, and rigorous?		
APPLY/PERSONALIZE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Could you implement a learning experience like the units on Mars or refugees, or a learning experience you design yourselves? • How would you organize for that? What support and resources would you need? What scheduling or other flexibilities would be useful? • What professional learning opportunities might help you implement an approach like what you saw at Crosstown High? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Would you like to see projects such as the units on Mars and refugee storytelling implemented at your school? Or maybe similar learning experiences relevant to your community, designed by teachers and students? Why or why not? • If so, how could you push to get that started? What support and resources would you need? • What scheduling or other flexibilities would be important? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are students in your community currently experiencing learning that is project-based, high-interest, authentic, and rigorous? • How can you discover more about how students are learning in your local high schools? • Are you interested in getting involved?

CARING, TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS

Neuroscience tells us that caring and trusting relationships with adults are foundational for adolescent learning. When students feel understood and cared for, they're less focused on the doubts and insecurities that go along with adolescence and more able to blossom as learners. Caring, trusting relationships are especially important for students who have experienced adversity and trauma.

In "The First Class," we witness one especially difficult episode in Crosstown High's first year. A student who is clearly struggling, Le'Cedric, is suspended for 10 days. An educator, Bertram Williams, Jr., is especially close to this young man, and we see Bertram talking with several students about the severity of Le'Cedric's punishment and the appropriateness of out-of-school suspensions.^A Executive Director Chris Terrill ultimately opts to reduce the punishment—which involves contradicting a fellow staff member's decision—and reaches out to Le'Cedric's family.^B In the final scenes of the film, we see Bertram sitting down with Le'Cedric, now a young man ready to graduate from high school, discussing how he's grown in the past four years and his plans for the future.^C



CARING, TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS

Discussion prompts

	FOR EDUCATORS	FOR STUDENTS	FOR GENERAL AUDIENCES
	Crosstown High aims to be an inclusive, supportive school community. Does it succeed, based on what you saw in the film? Why or why not?		
REFLECT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What struck you about the way the school handled Le’Cedric’s suspension? Do you think the educators handled it properly? Why or why not? • Where in the film do you see evidence of Crosstown High’s commitment to fostering caring, trusting relationships between young people and adults? • How does the school foster positive, supportive relationships among students themselves? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What struck you about how the school handled Le’Cedric’s suspension? Do you think the educators handled it properly? • Where did you see evidence in the film of educators fostering caring, trusting relationships with students? • How does the school foster positive, supportive relationships among students themselves? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What struck you about how the school handled Le’Cedric’s suspension? Do you think the educators handled it properly? • Where in the film do you see evidence of Crosstown High’s commitment to fostering caring, trusting relationships between young people and adults? • How does the school foster positive, supportive relationships among students themselves?
	How does your school ensure that every student feels well-known and cared about by teachers, school leaders, and other adults?		
APPLY/PERSONALIZE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does your school typically deal with serious infractions, like fighting? • How can you foster a culture of inclusion and support among all members of your school community? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can your school do more to foster the kind of culture where everyone feels safe and supported? How? • How does your school typically deal with serious infractions, like fighting? What do you think schools should do in cases like this? Or to prevent them from happening? What would you like to see? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can a school cope constructively with serious infractions like fighting? • What policies and practices can help foster a culture of inclusion and support among all members of a school community?

YOUTH VOICE AND CHOICE

Effective schools value student voice and give young people many opportunities to exercise choice. When students play an active role in guiding their own learning, they gain agency and a sense of responsibility for their future. Students also grow in many ways when they have opportunities to be deeply engaged in designing and continuously improving their school.

The teachers and school leaders at Crosstown High are committed to elevating student voice and choice at every step—but that’s not always easy. We listen in as three girls joke nervously about being “thrown in at the deep end” at a school that continuously challenges them to think for themselves.^A We see teachers pushing students to reach higher, dig deeper, and take on more than they think they can do, even when that causes discomfort.^B There’s a moment of triumph when Paul, a quiet student, brings down the house with his poem about maps.^C Later, toward the end of the film, several 12th graders make their final Presentations of Learning. In this special event, Crosstown High students look back on their learning and growth over the past four years.^D



YOUTH VOICE AND CHOICE

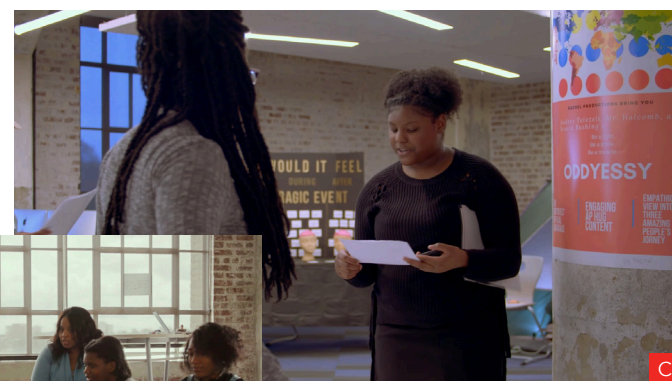
Discussion prompts

	FOR EDUCATORS	FOR STUDENTS	FOR GENERAL AUDIENCES
	How does Crosstown High support students to take an active role in their own learning?		
REFLECT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How is Crosstown High structured to enable youth voice and choice? Where do we see students making choices about their learning? About their school? How did teachers at Crosstown High adapt their teaching methods based on students' feedback and preferences? How do adults address students' concerns about safety, socialization, and their overall experience of school? What stood out to you about the way Crosstown High is structured to promote student agency? How do you think that ties in with what the 12th graders say about their growth at Crosstown High? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What do Crosstown High students do to ensure their voices are heard, and that their choices are taken seriously by their school? Are there similarities with your own school? Could you identify with students as they tried to reshape their learning experiences or when they confronted fellow classmates about their behavior? Why or why not? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What stood out to you about the way Crosstown High is structured to promote student agency? How do you think that ties in with students' success at the school? Did anything surprise you about the relationship between students and teachers at Crosstown High? Do you agree that students should play a more active role in their learning and in shaping the culture of their school?
	How does your school empower students in their learning and beyond?		
APPLY/PERSONALIZE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What practices and systems do you use to build students' ability to exercise choice in their own learning, and to develop agency and autonomy as learners? Do students have opportunities to shape your school's culture, policies, and priorities? When they raise questions or concerns, how are those addressed? Does your school have systems, such as an active student government, that enable students to participate meaningfully in major school decisions? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In what areas of school life do you have the most input? Where do you have the least amount of input? How could students at your school work to gain more voice and choice in their education? What could the teachers and school administrators do to help advocate on students' behalf? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are students in your local schools empowered with a strong sense of voice and choice regarding their education? How might community members support schools in fostering a strong system of youth voice and choice?

SMART USE OF TIME, SPACE, AND TECH

Most American high schools still run on outdated assumptions about when, where, and how learning happens. By challenging these old assumptions about facilities, schedules, modes of instruction, and staffing, groundbreaking schools like Crosstown High are opening up exciting new possibilities for student-centered learning.

Throughout “The First Class,” we see a school located inside a much larger facility—Crosstown Concourse, a massive, multi-use community redevelopment—that’s accessible to the entire school community.^A Clearly, the school benefits from being located in a beautiful and inspiring new building. But Crosstown’s fresh approach offers examples any other school can learn from, regardless of location. For instance, classrooms are not static. We see Crosstown High teachers Ryan Pryor and Deion Jordan co-teaching a blended English and social studies class, we see community partners from the Refugee Empowerment Program coming into the school to deepen students’ learning,^B and we see the school transformed into a vibrant public exhibition space where students present the results of their work.^C We also see how the flexible environment enables Crosstown High’s educators to support each other professionally, as well as meet students’ needs in more personalized ways.^D



SMART USE OF TIME, SPACE, AND TECH

Discussion prompts

	FOR EDUCATORS	FOR STUDENTS	FOR GENERAL AUDIENCES
	Time, space, and technology are precious resources. How does Crosstown High use them differently?		
REFLECT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What stood out to you about the way Crosstown High utilizes physical space? How about its use of time and/or technology? • How does the school staff collaborate in traditional and non-traditional ways? How does collaboration help teachers support students and each other? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are your thoughts on flexible use of time and classroom space and the impact on student learning? Do Crosstown High students seem more engaged or more confused? If so, why? • Do Crosstown High teachers seem accessible to students? Why or why not? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What elements of Crosstown High’s use of time, space, and technology stood out as particularly innovative or effective as depicted in the film? • How does Crosstown High’s model compare to your own experiences in school or to schools in your community?
	Is your school using time, space, and technology effectively?		
APPLY/PERSONALIZE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are you already using time, space, and tech flexibly to benefit student learning? • Do you have ideas about how you’d like to change your school schedule to optimize learning? • Are there spaces in the community outside the school building or campus where students could be learning? • How might professional development help prepare your staff to use these resources more effectively? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How would you redesign your school day if you had the chance? What is most important when considering how you spend your time at school? • How do you think your classrooms should be shaped and used? What makes a classroom look and feel engaging? Would you want to learn outside a classroom? • How do your teachers engage with you in your classrooms? Are they accessible? • How do you think technology could be put to better use in your school? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Every school is different, with different facilities. Are your local schools making the most of their existing facilities? Are they utilizing local resources outside the school to enhance student learning? • How might you learn more? Are you interested in supporting or advocating for more innovative use of time, space, and technology in high schools in your community?

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

By identifying and building strong relationships with the right partners, schools can open up new opportunities for student learning. Community partnerships with nonprofits, businesses, and colleges, for example, offer students invaluable opportunities to apply their learning in various contexts, explore potential career paths, and develop a strong sense of civic engagement. These relationships should be symbiotic, with schools and partners benefiting and learning from one another.

As we see in “The First Class,” Crosstown High started with the community when parent Ginger Spickler reached out to groups and individuals across Memphis with the ambitious idea of creating a new high school.^A They found a space within Crosstown Concourse, a new redevelopment project that includes dozens of local businesses and institutions.^B Students and teachers have immediate access to those and many more local organizations, expanding the possibilities for student projects, internships, and learning experiences beyond the classroom. We also see how students connect with local organizations such as the Refugee Empowerment Program to deepen students’ academic learning and strengthen their understanding of their Memphis neighbors.^C



COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Discussion prompts

	FOR EDUCATORS	FOR STUDENTS	FOR GENERAL AUDIENCES
REFLECT	How are community partnerships integrated into the curriculum and culture at Crosstown High?		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do partners such as the Refugee Empowerment Program benefit student learning? • How do partnerships deepen the school’s overall commitment to being “diverse by design?” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did partnerships help students understand and feel connected to their local community? • How did partnerships help students grow as learners and envision their own future? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do partners such as the Refugee Empowerment Program seem to affect students? • How do connections with Crosstown High benefit the partner organizations and the greater community?
APPLY/PERSONALIZE	How might your school develop or strengthen partnerships with community organizations?		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What community organizations—such as museums, cultural institutions, employers, colleges, or other entities—operate in your community? Do they already have relationships with your school? If not, how could you initiate them? • Do your students already have access to internships, community service projects, work experiences, and/or college courses through your school? If not, how could you initiate them? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Could partners—such as museums, cultural institutions, employers, colleges, or other entities—enrich student learning experiences and projects at your school? • Do you have access to internships, community service projects, work experiences, and/or college courses through your school? If not, would you value those opportunities? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What community organizations—such as museums, cultural institutions, employers, colleges, or other entities—operate in your community? Do they already have relationships with local high schools? If not, how could you help initiate them? • Do local students already have access to internships, community service projects, work experiences, and/or college courses through your school? If not, how could you help initiate them?

ABOUT XQ

Who We Are

XQ Institute is the nation’s leading organization dedicated to rethinking high school. Our young people are growing up at a time when the economy, the workforce, and the environment are changing rapidly. And high schools must respond. We help high schools become centers of innovative and rigorous learning, where every student is prepared to succeed in college, career, and life.

Our free tools and products empower educators, communities, and policymakers to disrupt outdated systems by redesigning schools and transforming student learning to be more relevant and engaging.

Our approach is guided by deep research, and powered by data and storytelling that inspire action. In partnership with a growing network of schools, districts, and states, we are advancing a movement that radically transforms the high school experience for young people everywhere.



xqsuperschool.org

Join the conversation with us @XQAmerica across social channels using #TheFirstClassDoc and #RethinkHighSchool.



1. Table 203.10. Enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools, by level and grade: Selected years, fall 1980 through fall 2031. National Center for Education Statistics. October 2022.
2. 2018 SAT Suite of Assessments Annual Report. College Board. October 25, 2018.
3. 2018-19 TN Ready Graduate Data Download. Tennessee Department of Education. 2019.
4. 2018-19 Attendance and Graduation Files Data Download. Tennessee Department of Education. 2019.
5. 2018-19 Assessment Files Data Download. Tennessee Department of Education. 2019.
6. 2021-22 Graduation Cohort Data Download. Tennessee Department of Education. 2022.
7. XQ Senior Survey for the class of 2022.
8. "Class of 2022: Planning for the Future in Uncertain Times." YouthTruth. April 2022.

9. Number reported to XQ by Crosstown administrators.
10. 2018-19 Assessment Files Data Download. Tennessee Department of Education. 2019. 2020-21 Assessment Files Data Download. Tennessee Department of Education. 2021.
11. Crosstown ACT data reported to XQ by Crosstown administrators. State and national ACT data from ACT, "U.S. High School Graduating Class Trends." October 2022.
12. Crosstown AP data reported to XQ by Crosstown administrators. National AP data from College Board, "AP Program Results: Class of 2022." April 2022.
13. 2022-23 Graduation Cohort Data Download. Tennessee Department of Education. 2023.
14. Ibid, 6.