On Friday, Sept. 10, we officially opened the newest of the university’s schools, the University High School of Science and Engineering. It was a day of great promise.

A partnership between the University of Hartford, the Hartford Public Schools, and the Capitol Region Education Council, University High is a public magnet school for students from ninth to 12th grade. We planned the school with the help of a grant from the Woodrow Wilson Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. University High is part of our three-pronged effort—with the construction of the Integrated Science, Engineering, and Technology Complex and the creation of the College of Engineering, Technology, and Architecture—to establish the university as an important center for the study of science, engineering, and technology.

We began this year with a ninth grade, and the school is now temporarily located in the Auerbach Science Center on the university’s Asylum Avenue campus. The Connecticut legislature has appropriated $34 million in bonding to construct a permanent school on Mark Twain Drive, on the university’s Bloomfield Avenue campus, and we hope to have construction completed in two years.

When the new school is finished, the university’s Bloomfield Avenue campus will have a second major entrance, this one from the Blue Hills neighborhood of Hartford.

University High School opened this September with 103 students, approximately two-thirds of whom come from Hartford. The other third come from Hartford’s suburbs. Approximately 35 percent of the students are girls, which is a significant achievement. Nationally, only 10 percent of high school students who express an interest in science are girls.

We have three major goals in founding this school. First, we have designed the school to be an early-college high school, so that by the time students graduate from the school, they will have had a chance to earn up to two years of college credit. Second, we hope to provide a superb educational experience in an urban environment, integrating students from Hartford and its suburbs. Third, we hope to encourage more women and students of color to pursue careers in science and engineering.

By the looks of opening day, I would say we have taken giant steps toward achieving all three goals. When the students, their teachers and staff, many of the parents, and a number of faculty,
staff, and administrators met in the school’s auditorium, the positive spirit and sense of accomplishment were palpable. Provost Donna Randall, sitting in the last row, told me she saw parents in the row in front of her weeping for joy.

As I looked out at the students, I saw the face of America’s future: eager, hopeful, ready to learn. Ninth-graders, as you know, come in all different shapes and sizes, and our class comes in a wide variety of colors and from an even wider variety of backgrounds as well. What they have in common is an eagerness to study science and engineering, a hope for a better future, and a youthful enthusiasm that makes all of us proud.

The ceremony to open the school, at which Eddie Perez, mayor of Hartford, and Robert Henry, Hartford’s superintendent of schools, joined me, was short and sweet. At its conclusion, the University High students, whom Principal Betty Colli and the school’s teachers have named its “legacy class,” came forward to sign the class banner, modeled after the class banners that all University of Hartford students now sign when they matriculate, and then to shake our hands.

As they filed by me and shook my hand, I was struck by two things. First, I asked each of them what his or her career goal was, and virtually each of them had one. “Architect,” said some. “Engineer,” said others. “Pediatrician,” said some more. Second, and even more striking and moving to me: at least one third of them specifically thanked me for starting the school. That simple expression of thanks moved me to tears.

Starting a school like this, the university’s second magnet school (joining the highly successful University of Hartford Magnet School, our prekindergarten to fifth-grade school now starting its fourth year of operation) requires enormous effort from many, many university faculty, administrators, and staff. Led by College of Engineering, Technology, and Architecture Dean Alan Hadad, a dedicated team of faculty and administrators spent the better part of two years “inventing” the school, its course of study, and its curriculum. Our facilities staff created a semimiracle, converting the Auerbach Science Center into a working high school. And our government relations staff, led by John Carson ’65, worked tirelessly to persuade the legislature to fund the construction of the school.

University High is a school that will change the face of education in the Greater Hartford region. As a cooperative venture between a public school system and a private university, it may well change the face of education nationally. We are now the only private university in the country with not just one, but two, public schools located on its campus.

We have broken new ground this fall. I am confident that not only have we changed the face of our university and our region, but we have also blazed a path for public education throughout our country. This is truly a legacy of which we can all be proud.