

Minutes of the East High United Meeting, January 10, 2008

The meeting began with a brief presentation by East math teacher extraordinaire Ms. Chin and junior Andrew Goldsby and sophomore Rayshawn Nash, two student members of the NSBE Jr., a new organization at East for students interested in engineering careers that is a junior affiliate of the National Society of Black Engineers (NSBE). The group's parent organization is the NSBE chapter at the UW-Madison. The organization at East is seeking donations of time as well as money from firms in the Madison area who either employ engineers or have a commitment to supporting academic equity and achievement for students who are members of traditionally underrepresented populations in the science professions. Ms. Chin provided additional written information on the group and its goals to those at the meeting. Anyone interested in helping out with this very worthy cause may contact Ms. Chin at cchin@madison.k12.wi.us.

The main focus of the meeting was a question-and-answer session with Alan Harris, East's principal.

High School Redesign: Mr. Harris was asked about the status of the District's ongoing high school redesign project. He said he does not expect the project to lead to significant changes in East's curriculum. The project, which was announced last year after Mr. Harris proposed changes in the TAG programs at East, seems to have shifted primarily into a vehicle for the District to apply for a Small Learning Communities (SLC) grant from the federal government. The grant application described what the four high schools were doing that could be characterized as fitting into the SLC mold and sought funding to facilitate those efforts. For East, the description focused on the organization of the guidance department and related support staff into purple and gold teams to enable a more unified and consistent delivery of support services to students. The District learned earlier this year that it had not qualified for the federal grant it sought. Apparently there will be a second round of grants, and the district will be trying again. The effort does not seem to be heading in the direction of making the kinds of changes to TAG programming that were first proposed, and Mr. Harris has said that he now recognizes that what he proposed does not have the kind of broad support within the community that it would need to be successful. More information on the status of the high school redesign effort is available here: http://www.mmsd.org/admin/hs/ReDesign_Progress_Report_Nov_2007.pdf

Infinite Campus. Another questioner wondered why more teachers don't use the Infinite Campus system for recording grades and other dimensions of a student's progress that is available to parents over the Internet. The short answer is that, as a bargaining issue, the school cannot unilaterally require all teachers to use the system. The longer answer is that some teachers could benefit from more training on the system before they will feel confident enough to use it. Other teachers have developed their own form of electronic grade book which they do not feel like abandoning. Mr. Harris said that the school is working on trying to convert these systems to Infinite Campus and was

optimistic that an increasing percentage of East's teachers will make use of the program as time goes on.

English Classes at East. There were several questions asked about perceived shortcomings in the writing instruction East students receive, as well as the English classes in general. Mr. Harris noted that improved writing instruction was the only curricular goal identified in the Vision 2012 process of a couple of years that led to what amounts to a long-term plan for the school. The school is attempting to beef up writing instruction by taking a more global approach to the endeavor. One manifestation of this effort is the hiring this year of Ms. Potter, the literacy/TAG coordinator. Another is the establishment of the writing lab staffed by Ms. Torrison.

Mr. Harris acknowledged that the English department does have some work to do. He said that he and others at the school have heard loud and clear that parents are not entirely happy with the English classes offered at East. Mr. Harris said that he felt it was important that measurable goals for the progress students are expected to make in English classes from year to year be identified and established, so that the curricular content of English classes could be assessed to ensure that the necessary instruction is provided to enable the students to make the progress they should over the course of the year. Once measurable goals are in place, then there will be a basis to look at particular types of assignments, for example, and consider the extent to which they will help the students reach the goals they should be striving for. This will require cooperation and teamwork among the teachers. It was noted that there is a difference between teachers having appropriate levels of autonomy in the classroom and the teachers operating in isolation. The goal is that the teachers in the English Department will work together to assemble a more coordinated and unified series of classes that will help provide the students with the literacy tools and skills they will need in their post-high school careers.

Guidance Counselors. A question was asked about the caseload of the Guidance Counselors – do the counselors have so many students assigned to them that it is impossible for them to get to know each of the students individually? Each counselor is assigned about 260 students, which seems like a high number but is in fact the lowest per-counselor total among the 4 large Madison high schools. The counselors are likely to pay particular attention to seniors as they attend to college recommendations and other post-graduation plans, but the school is trying to increase counselors' interactions with students over the course of their first three years, in part through meeting regularly with students in each class during the Purple and Gold time built into the schedule.

Foreign Languages at East. How about foreign languages? Are there any efforts underway to expand the offerings at East beyond French and Spanish? *Ou*í, sí, yes, there are. A group including Mr. Lenz, the language department chairperson, is at work exploring the options for adding another language at East. German, Japanese and Chinese have been mentioned. The goal is to make sure such a language program would be viable at East, and so the study involves working with the feeder middle schools and exploring options for possibly sharing a teacher with another high school. The study group was originally hoping to complete its work such that if they concluded that an

additional language could be offered at East, the program would start next year (the '08-'09 class year). The group has since concluded that it needs more time, and so the goal now is to work toward instituting any new course the following year ('09-'10).

One of the challenges in offering additional languages or any kinds of new courses is that enrollment at East will be going down over the next few years, which will mean fewer teacher allocations. The size variations in each year's class is somewhat random, but it will work out that enrollment next year is projected to be about 110 students less than this year, which means allocations for 4 or 5 fewer teacher positions. The number of students is then expected to stabilize and then start slowly rising over the next several years.

Mr. Harris Takes Stock. Mr. Harris was invited to reflect on his years at East so far. He said that, while it is difficult to quantify, he is pleased with the way the school feels during the day. East is a relatively orderly place that seems to be heading in the right direction. Ms. Paulson, one of the school's math teachers, was at the meeting and mentioned that she can now generally keep her door open during classes without disruptions, which is a positive development. Mr. Harris noted that as progress is made in one area, another area can begin to come into focus that could stand improvement. For example, the floor sweeps at the school have greatly reduced the number of disruptions during the school day, but have highlighted the fact that there is a tardiness issue at the school that needs some work.

Mr. Harris said that he thought the school had a good administrative structure in place that is capable of adjusting to changing needs. He is anxious, however, about how to find the funding to enable the kind of planning time for teachers that is necessary to implement the kinds of changes and improvements that the staff at East would like to pursue.

Mr. Harris also said that he did not feel good about the state of athletics at East. This is an area where he has not yet seen the degree of improvement that he has expected. The slow rate of progress is in large part attributable to the fact that there have been three athletic directors at East in three years, and each has understandably needed to spend some time to get acquainted with the coaches and programs before trying to make changes. He said that he feels Mr. Kapp, the new athletic director this year, is getting a good handle on things and should be able to provide the guidance and leadership necessary to bring about some of the improvements that are possible for several of East's teams.

Athletic Code. A question was also asked about whether the athletic code – with its mandated ineligibility standards for student-athletes involved with drugs or alcohol -- was too strict. Mr. Harris's response, in a word, was no. Student-athletes need to make good choices. Participation in sports is a privilege. The school cannot countenance any student involvement with drugs or alcohol, and so specific consequences for specific violations should be effectively automatic. Mr. Harris noted that if students do run into problems with drugs and alcohol under extenuating circumstances, there can be ways of

working through the consequences with some degree of flexibility while respecting the overall framework of the code.

Math Department. Finally, it was mentioned that MMSD superintendent Art Rainwater has spoken very highly of East's math department. The department has been able to work together to put together a broad and coherent vision of what teachers expect students to learn from year to year and have been able to work together to implement their vision across a range of classes.