

Report for the last EHU meeting of the 2006-2007 school year

Here is a report on the East High United meeting held last Thursday, May 10. Since it was the last regularly-scheduled meeting of the school year, the topic was an update on issues addressed at earlier meetings and a general question and answer session with Mr. Harris.

In no particular order, here is a summary of some of the matters discussed:

As is true for every school the size of East, there will be staff turnover between this year and next. Doug Green (Guidance), Ken Bremer (Applied Technology), and Jan Deadman (Consumer and Family Education) are retiring. Thanks are due to all three for their years of commitment to the school. Unfortunately, the financial challenges facing the school district and a decrease in East's enrollment next year (projected to be down from 1803 to 1730) compel other staff departures as well. Many have heard that the funding squeeze has claimed as victims Mike Brandl and the German program he taught. But there are a total of 26 staff members who are being surplusd or having their responsibilities significantly changed as a result of East's reduced allocations. Thanks are due to all of them as well for their service to the school under challenging conditions.

Mr. Harris shared his thinking behind the difficult decision to drop German. Mr. Brandl has been a very valued teacher at East. However, with no middle school feeder program, the declining number of students enrolled in German made it difficult to continue the classes. The trade-off was that maintaining German, with its smaller class sizes, would result in unacceptably higher class sizes in French and Spanish. Also, Mr. Harris explained that for incoming students, there would be other foreign language choices available, i.e., French and Spanish. Colleges may require a certain number of classes in a foreign language, but they do not specify what the language should be. Mr. Harris also held open the possibility that another language may be added down the road, if it should appear in the future that that would be the best way for East to fulfill its academic mission.

There are some positive staffing developments. Mr. Harris has cobbled together enough funds for a new position, the responsibilities of which will be split 50-50 between serving as Literacy Coordinator and as TAG Coordinator. In addition, a .6 English allocation will be devoted to staffing a new writing lab, which will be run by Beth Torrison. This is tangible evidence of the school's commitment to enhancing the literacy skills of East's students as well as to TAG programming. (District-wide, this may be the first commitment to new TAG resources in quite a while.) Nothing comes without cost these days, and these new positions will be funded in part by a decrease in librarians from two to one.

The literacy coordinator will work on implementing the school's commitment to providing East students with the reading, writing, and critical thinking tools they will need to be successful life-long learners. East's staff recently endorsed three goals developed by the literacy group: developing a school-wide structure that addresses the literacy needs of all students; developing integrated literacy strategies to support student learning in every course offered at the school; and providing literacy supports to increase student achievement by those at all skill levels, from struggling readers to the college-bound. Subsidiary strategies include such practical steps as word-of-the-day vocabulary instruction. Now if they'd just start teaching how to diagram sentences, we crotchety old-timers might not have anything to complain about. (Correction: about which to complain.)

Other changes on tap for next year include a scheduling adjustment. The current schedule includes a late start on Tuesday, 15 minutes of silent reading three days a week, and home room on Friday. Next year, there will be a later start on every other Wednesday, and the silent reading time is making way for half-hour blocks on Tuesdays and Thursdays. One of the blocks of time will be devoted to club meetings and the other will enable guidance counselors and others to make presentations to and meet with students.

On a related note, the guidance department, school psychologists, social workers and nurses will be re-organized along the lines discussed in the report on the March EHU meeting. These staff will work in a coordinated way in two teams in order to provide better integrated services to students. There will no longer be a guidance counselor assigned exclusively to freshmen, but instead students will be assigned to the same counselor for all four years.

NO EHU meeting would be complete without some discussion of freshmen TAG classes. Mr. Harris reported that the number of eighth graders applying for TAG classes for next year was up significantly. This year, there are 50 freshmen enrolled in TAG English, 49 in TAG social sciences, and 63 in TAG biology. Next year, there will be 56 freshmen enrolled in TAG English (out of 111 applicants), 72 freshmen in TAG social sciences (out of 123 applicants), and 86 freshmen in TAG biology (out of 156 applicants).

And what about the revamped lunch schedules that prompted such a ruckus at the beginning of the year? Did the upperclassmen go hungry? Well, it seems that things kind of worked themselves out. The change to an all-freshmen lunch has appeared to have a positive impact in reducing truancy, which was one of the intended benefits of the change. Last year, 121 freshmen were habitually truant during the first semester, and 135 were habitually truant during the second semester. This year, the corresponding numbers are 73 and 77. The change in lunch schedules has also helped in identifying students who are not where they should be over the lunch hour and has reduced the impact of students' presence on nearby residents. Another effect, the relative merits of which can be debated, is a reduction in the extent to which the freshmen have been socialized into respecting the school's customs and hierarchy. To the upperclassmen, this means the freshmen do not show the proper respect and deference to defined boundaries, like the junior wall and the senior wall. To the freshmen, this means they feel freer to go where they want in the school.