

Minutes of East High United meeting – December 13, 2007

The topic of the meeting was school safety. Addressing the issue were Dean of Students Martha Olson, Assistant Principal Rick Rogness, and Educational Resource Officer Pat Green. Also present was Officer Green's replacement as ERO as of February, Officer Kat Riley.

The speakers agreed that East seems a more orderly place this year than it did last year, and, as described below, the data seem to bear this out. All were quick to point out that things could change at any moment, but for now the school seems to be relatively calm.

Mr. Rogness described the changes in the school's approach to discipline over the last couple of years. First, administrative responsibilities have shifted. In the past at East, and currently at the other three high schools, assistant principals were assigned to each grade and each would deal with the discipline issue that arose among students in his or her grade. East has switched to a functional model for assistant principals, and Mr. Rogness now handles all discipline matters, along with Ms. Olson. As they describe it, Mr. Rogness and Ms. Olson tag team and deal with behavioral issues throughout the day. They are able to work with Officer Green to form a troika to deal with discipline in a coordinated and focused way. This permits a more consistent and informed approach with better follow-up with students. In general, the three are also able to get to know the students with discipline issues better and so they are better able to exercise their discretion and know when it makes more sense to cut a kid a break than come down hard, and vice-versa.

The district administration has decided that East's structural approach to responsibilities for discipline is the way to go, and the other high schools will start switching over to this model.

Another school initiative to deal with discipline has been the institution of hall sweeps. A couple of years ago, the halls at East could be a bit chaotic. The school administrators decided that they would take the halls back, and so instituted hall sweeps. Students have five minutes to get from one class to another. Once the five minutes are up, the doors to the classrooms are closed. Any students still in the halls are then required to go to the Randall Room and register as tardy. The tardy students are then escorted to their classes. If students are tardy three times in a week, they are suspended. The tardiness slate is wiped clean at the end of the week, and starts fresh on Monday. The number of tardy students is up this year. There were 723 students tardy in the week before the meeting. The sweeps have been effective in keeping the halls clear of students who should be somewhere else and there have been considerably fewer incidents of vandalism and theft at the school.

Another factor contributing to a more orderly atmosphere at East this year was an additional police presence at East (as well as LaFollette) at the beginning of the school year. The police had some concerns about the possibility of gang incidents at the two

schools and used some extra resources to fund an enhanced presence at the schools at the start of the school year. The officers tried to display a friendly demeanor, but attempted, apparently successfully, to set a tone of orderliness by fairly aggressively addressing incidents of smoking, littering, loitering and the like. In fact, there have not been significant gang-related incidents at East this year, though there are certainly students at the school who belong to gangs. As was pointed out, kids can both belong to gangs and also be interested in learning and succeeding in school.

The decline in serious incidents is also attributable in part to a different composition of the student body. As Mr. Rogness observed, the presence or absence of just a handful of students can have a dramatic effect on the number of fights in the school, and the mix is a bit different this year from last year.

And now, let's go to the numbers. First, referrals, which can arise when a teacher has an issue with a student. When a teacher refers a student to Mr. Rogness or Ms. Olson, they try to get to the root of the problem and help the student figure out a better course of behavior. Parents are contacted on all referrals. This notification process helps when a student reaches the fourth referral level and faces a suspension.

Referrals are fairly common. Ms. Olson and Mr. Rogness handle about 20 referrals a day. Most are lower-level offenses. Freshmen and students who are new to the school tend to receive a disproportionate number of the referrals.

The total number of referrals is down so far this year:

	Referrals		
	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.
2006	309	593	501
2007	280	451	461

The next level of discipline is a suspension, which can be in-school or out-of-school, usually for one day. For the first quarter, the total, while still high, is lower than last year:

	Suspensions -- 1 <sup>st</sup> Quarter	
2006	272	
2007	233	

The school administrators had set a goal of fewer than 500 suspensions for the year, but it does not look like this will be attainable. Sixty of the suspensions during the first quarter were accounted for by students who accumulated three or more tardies in a week and thus qualified for a one-day suspension. The most common cause of suspension – the basis for 118 out of the 233 in the first quarter – is insubordination, followed by profanity or verbal abuse.

The school also tracks the number of fights at school. During the first quarter, the number of fights at East declined by two-thirds over 2006. There were three fights in the first quarter. At the time of the meeting, there had been an additional three fights so far during the second quarter. This is a lower total than the other high schools.

The final level of discipline is expulsion. As Mr. Rogness observed, East led the league in expulsions last year, by a healthy margin. Expulsions are also down. There have been about five so far this year – two for pushing past a teacher and two or three for possession of a knife.

Mr. Rogness and Ms. Olson attributed a good share of the responsibility for the generally orderly atmosphere at East to Officer Green. Each high school has an educational resource officer – a uniformed police officer assigned to the specific school. The ERO program started about twelve years ago. Funding for the positions comes 75% from the schools and 25% from the police department. The role of the officer is to be seen around the school and attempt to establish positive relationships with the students, but to enforce order as the need arises and serve as a liaison to the rest of the police department.

Officer Green has done such a fine job that he has worked himself out of the position. He has been promoted to detective. He will be replaced by Officer Kat Riley, who was also at the meeting and who will become East's ERO in February. Officer Riley has been on the force for about three years and has been a patrol officer on the north side. She is also a lawyer who formerly worked in the Dane County district attorney's office and has also worked in the child care field. She is looking forward to her assignment at East.

A discussion of discipline, hall sweeps, suspensions and expulsions can seem pretty strict and by-the-book. Mr. Rogness, Ms. Olson and Officer Green were all quick to point out that they recognize that a number of East students who come before them with discipline issues have a lot of challenges in their lives. The administrators work with students on problem solving when they can, and try to get them engaged in school in a way that can lead to better choices. They also connect students with community resources and programs (e.g. anger management classes) that can help them make positive changes.

Next EHU Meeting: Thursday, January 10, 2008 – an open question-and-answer session with Mr. Harris.