

East High United -- March 13, 2008

Here's a report on the East High United meeting held on March 13, 2008. As usual, the meeting began with the principal's report from Mr. Harris before moving to the main event – a discussion of sports at East with Mr. Harris and athletic director David Kapp.

Principal's report --

Mr. Harris started out with the news that East's enrollment is projected to go down by about 120 students next year, primarily as a result of vicissitudes of class sizes. Since the number of teacher allocations is based on the number of students at a school, this has the unfortunate effect of reducing East's teacher allocation by about 12. Mr. Harris has to figure out where to make the cuts.

One possibility is that there will be cuts in East's Agriculture program. Long-time East agriculture teacher Mary Klecker will be retiring at the end of the current school year, and projected enrollment in agriculture classes next year is down to about 36 students. It is possible that agriculture classes next year will be reduced significantly, and perhaps eliminated. This is still in the discussion stage.

Mr. Harris also noted that the administration has heard a lot of suggestions about trying to improve study halls so that they function more as a learning opportunity that offers academic support and interventions. Moving to this kind of model would require increased allocations devoted to staffing study halls, another change that is under consideration.

East used part of its teacher allocation this year to reduce the student load for guidance counselors, part of the implementation of the Purple and Gold Team coordinated approach to student services. These lower student loads may not be possible next year, and guidance counselors may go back to about the same student load for guidance counselors as is in place at Madison's other high schools, which is something less than 300 students per counselor.

Mr. Harris had a couple of pieces of good news to relay. First, the school district has recently analyzed the English writing exam administered to ninth graders in the district. The school district's new English coordinator let Mr. Harris know that the work produced by East's freshmen was impressive – the individual voice of the writers and their love of writing came through. In addition, one of the assignments involved writing about the students' school and a number of students wrote about how they liked East.

Second, the school recently received word that East, Emerson and the Goodman Atwood Community Center Grant have been awarded a \$200,000 grant for an after-school academic intervention program involving elementary and high school students. East is exploring other opportunities to partner with the Goodman Atwood Center once its new facility is completed next fall. At a minimum, East will be involved in a culinary arts program at the new center.

Mr. Harris also mentioned that he has recently had occasion to reflect on how things have been going at East over the three years he has been principal, and he has come to appreciate how valuable the East High United meetings have been for him. Attendance at meetings has varied considerably depending upon the topic, but the meetings have been where the East community has come together to try to problem-solve and to identify areas where there was room for improvement at the school.

This provided a natural segue to the main topic of the evening – athletics at East.

Athletics at East

Mr. Harris introduced Mr. Kapp, who has been the athletic director for East and LaFollette since last September. Mr. Harris commented that athletics is an area where he feels a bit disappointed about the level of progress made over his three years at the school, but he believes that things are on the right track now with Mr. Kapp. Mr. Harris noted that Mr. Kapp has previous experience as an athletic director and that he has been impressed with Mr. Kapp's ability to begin to lay structures to lead East forward. Mr. Harris said that Mr. Kapp shared his view that athletes at East can compete with those from any other high school, though we may have to go about some things differently.

Mr. Harris also said that any constructive changes to the athletic department have to involve the parent community. While the point of the evening's meeting was not to talk about individual coaches, it was an opportunity to hear first hand what is going on with our teams and what East can do better.

Mr. Kapp echoed Mr. Harris's point that East teams can get to the point where they can compete with anyone. Mr. Kapp also extolled the benefits to students of being involved in sports – studies consistently show that students perform better academically when they are on school teams. Mr. Kapp said he would like to see growth in East's sports programs, with the teams structured better and with a greater emphasis on teaching fundamentals and sportsmanship.

Mr. Kapp noted that when he was hired before the start of the current school year, school superintendent Art Rainwater made it quite clear that there were plenty of coaches at Madison high schools who had outlived their usefulness and that it was time to get serious about assessing performance. Before this year, ADs were not able to evaluate coaches because they were part of the same collective bargaining unit as the coaches. That has changed with Mr. Kapp, who is considered part of school administration. For the first time, the ADs can now be in charge of hiring and evaluating coaches and Mr. Kapp has started the process.

Mr. Kapp said he has worked with the downtown administration, and particularly with assistant superintendent Pam Nash, to come up with a plan for assessing and evaluating coaches. Mr. Kapp has developed a 50-point evaluation tool that he will apply for the first time next year with the coaches of fall sports. He reported that he has met separately this year with coaches of winter and spring sports and has provided them with a booklet that sets forth his expectations. He and Mr. Harris met recently with all

coaches and explained what their approaches and expectations would be in assessing coaches' performances.

Mr. Kapp noted that it was pretty clear what the school's expectations for coaches are, but he did not know if any of East's coaches had previously had those expectations laid out for them with the same degree of emphasis as he has delivered. He told the coaches that they must engage with parents and maintain open lines of communication with them. He told them that for any team to be successful, parents have to buy into the program and have to support and be behind what the coaches do. Mr. Kapp has asked all head coaches to have parent meetings to explain the coach's philosophy and expectations and establish clear protocols for handling complaints.

On the other hand, while Mr. Kapp said that he welcomes feedback from parents, he has heard from various parents that the school should fire 7 of its 14 coaches. This is perhaps a more heightened level of criticism than is ideal. Mr. Kapp said he was looking for something somewhere in between silence from parents and demands to fire everyone and start all over.

Mr. Harris and Mr. Kapp briefly outlined the hiring process for coaches. Coaching vacancies must be posted. The school has some discretion in describing the requirements for the job, but not a great deal. If any current district employees apply for a coaching vacancy, they must be interviewed first. If the position is offered to someone from outside the district, the school must be able to show that no district employees who applied met the qualifications for the position. This makes the initial description of qualifications particularly important.

It is not as easy to find quality coach candidates as some might think. A head coaching position entails a lot of work for not a lot of money. The head boys soccer coach position at East, currently vacant, has been posted. Despite focused recruiting efforts, only one person has applied for the position.

Coaches cannot be fired during the yearly term of their contract without just cause. Just cause is not necessary for non-renewal of a contract from one year to the next, though a reason for the non-renewal is required.

There were a number of parents at the meeting and many expressed a great deal of pent-up frustration about a few of the sports programs.

Among the complaints were coaches belittling and discouraging their athletes, playing favorites, retaliating against athletes whose parents had raised issues, failing to communicate with parents, not following through on commitments, lacking organization, failing to keep up their skills, and generally providing a poor experience for their athletes.

There was a general sense that there did not seem to be any overriding athletic philosophy at the school, almost no coordination among the coaches of the various teams, and even some teams appeared to have no organizing principles, with, for example, two freshmen teams in the same sport following widely divergent coaching approaches at the same time. There seemed to be agreement that the coaches of the different teams should be coordinating with and supporting each other more. For example, athletes from many

teams could work together on strength and conditioning in the weight room and should be encouraged to do so.

There was a general sense among some of the attendees that some coaches were falling well short of their obligations to their athletes and to the school, and had essentially been coasting for years, but the school hadn't seemed to be very interested in holding the coaches accountable for their performance. Mention was made a couple of times to the fact that there were students who were planning to transfer from East because their sports experience had been so frustrating.

Mr. Harris responded more than once that he was not happy with the general state of athletics at the school and that he shared the blame for that. One of the complications has been that East is now on its third athletic director in four years. Each AD needs to get familiar with the school, the teams and the coaches before he feels he is in a position to make significant changes. If the AD leaves before that process is complete, it starts all over again with the new AD. Mr. Harris expressed hope that the program can reach the necessary level of stability with Mr. Kapp so that the changes that are appropriate can be identified and acted upon.

Several parents vigorously shared their disappointment that this seemed to mean that all coaches would get a pass until at least next year, since the upgraded evaluation process would not start until then. To some, this suggested that their kids would be guaranteed at least one more lousy year. In response to several comments in this vein, Mr. Harris said that the school could act sooner if it became clear that there were coaches whose job performance has simply been unacceptable. On the other hand, unless there are egregious circumstances, going immediately from the implementation of an evaluation system to non-renewing a coach seems to entail skipping the actual evaluation part, which did not seem fair to the coaches.

Both Mr. Harris and Mr. Kapp explained that if parents are unhappy with a coach or a team, they should try to work together as a group and document with as much detail as possible their specific concerns. It would probably make sense to delegate to the team's Booster Club representative a responsibility to serve as something of an intermediary for communications between a team's parents and coaches. When there are issues, it is important for as broad a cross-section of parents as possible to meet with the coach and express their concerns directly to him or her. Both Mr. Harris and Mr. Kapp emphasized that it would be completely unacceptable for a coach to retaliate against an athlete because his or her parents raised concerns with a coach.

Despite the vigorous exchange of views, the meeting wasn't all doom and gloom. Several speakers observed that there are some very good coaches and teams at East. It's a little tough to be critical of the girls swimming team, for example, which just a few months ago brought home the first team state champion trophy to grace East's trophy cases in decades.

One suggestion was that kids should try other sports and not simply concentrate on one sport year round. This seems like a particularly good idea if a student has been disappointed with his or her experience on the one East team on which he or she has

played. For example, there has been close to unanimous praise for the track team over the last year or so. It may not be too late for students who had unsatisfying experiences in Fall or Winter sports to join the track team for the spring season and see what a challenging but positive and supportive team experience feels like.

Next EHU Meeting – Thursday, April 10, 7 pm in the LMC. Topic to be determined, but sure to be interesting and worthwhile.