

Minutes of the November 8 East High United Meeting

Here's what happened at the November East High United meeting:

1. First up was the **principal's report**. Mr. Harris shared the following:

A. **D. C. trip.** Social studies teacher Mr. Borowski and two of his students recently returned for a trip to Washington, D.C. sponsored by a foundation. The students, who were the only ones from Madison, had an opportunity to observe the United States Supreme Court and meet with several of the Justices.

B. **Girls swimming.** Mr. Harris noted prophetically that the girls' swimming team had a realistic chance to win the state championship on Saturday, Nov. 10, which would be East's first team state championship in about twenty years. (Ed. note -- And in fact, the team came through in a mighty big way – they swam to the state title on Saturday, and thus threw down the first big marker in what could be a renaissance in sports at East over the next few years.)

C. **Parent Portal.** As those who attended last month's EHU meeting know, parents can now have access to on-line information on their students' progress through the Parent Portal of the District's Infinite Campus program. But first the parents need to register and, if they wish, participate in training. Parents have been coming to East for this training, and in fact East has a higher percentage of its parents signed up for Parent Portal access than any of the other Madison high schools. If you have not signed up yet, there will be the opportunity to do so during Parent/Teacher conference on November 15 and 16.

D. **Background on the TAG/Literacy Coordinator position.** Mr. Harris provided some background information on the new TAG/Literacy coordinator position at East.

For the past couple of years, a group of teachers at East, under the leadership of Sharon McPike and with funding from an Aristos grant, have been working on developing a literacy initiative at East. While there is a strong emphasis on literacy in the early school years, there has not been as much at the high school level, when students need to learn to be able to draw accurate inferences from complex texts and work with and master technical language.

A part of this initiative is a greater emphasis on writing assignments in all classes, not just English. The initiative in part grows out of a recognition that there is a lot of room to improve the writing instruction that East provides to its students – this is a common observation of East graduates who go on to the college and it is one that the English Department recognized as well. One of the goals identified through the Vision 2012 process was improving the writing component of the English Department. As Mr. Harris noted, East needs to do a better job in getting more kids ready to succeed in high-level classes. East should also be producing more National Merit semifinalists and should have more students passing more A.P. classes. The literacy initiative should help the school move closer to these goals.

The logic behind the initiative is that it makes sense to move on a school-wide basis toward a common set of expectations and evaluation standards for writing assignments among all the teachers in the school – what are referred to as a common set of rubrics for assessment across departments. Mr. Harris realized that the project needed a coordinator to keep the effort in focus.

Another component of the literacy initiative that has been instituted this year is the writing lab under the direction of Ms. Torrison, who attended a five-day program in Oregon over the summer to prepare for her new responsibility. The lab is available to help students at all skill levels with their writing assignments. The lab is open most of the day and provides services for individual students as well as for entire classes.

Similarly, there is an increased focus on TAG and A.P. classes at the East. There are two new A.P. courses at East this year. There is also an increase in the number of students who are taking TAG and A.P. classes, with a particular bump up in the number of freshmen in TAG classes. (One downside of this increased interest is that, on average, class sizes are larger than last year.)

Mr. Harris said that there is a need for a TAG coordinator as well. The coordinator can help ensure that the classes maintain a sufficient standard of rigor, and also guide the process of recruiting and selecting students for the classes, with a particular emphasis on outreach to the populations in the school who traditionally have been under-represented in the TAG and A.P. classes. Unlike some other schools, East does not have a pre-determined limit on the number of slots available for TAG students -- the school will provide as many sections as are necessary to accommodate interested and qualified students.

It made sense to combine the two coordination needs into one position – the TAG/Literacy coordinator. This is the first new in-school TAG position in the District in a while, and currently there are no comparable positions in the other three District comprehensive high schools.

2. Presentation by the new TAG/Literacy Coordinator, Annie Potter.

The background Mr. Harris presented provided a segue to the presentation by East's new TAG/Literacy coordinator. Annie Potter is new to East though not to the District. She has been teaching for 11 years, and has been in the District for seven. For the past six years, she was a reading resource teacher at Cherokee. Her emphasis was on working with high-achieving ESL students. She also helped teachers differentiate the curriculum in their classes to meet the needs of students at different ends of the skill spectrum.

While her background is primarily in literacy, Ms. Potter is excited about working in the TAG field as well. She has met with Mr. Kelly (recently retired English teacher and former head of the TAG program at East), Mr. du Vair and other TAG teachers to learn how the process works. She will be working both on ensuring that TAG classes maintain an appropriate level of rigor as well as on widening the base of the program so that the enrollment in TAG classes is more representative of the population of the school. Ms. Potter has been talking to East's feeder middle schools – Sherman, Blackhawk and O'Keeffe – about the TAG application process. The schools were offered the opportunity either to test all students for possible admission to TAG classes, or only the students who self-elect the testing process. Two of the schools (Ms. Potter did not identify which ones) have chosen to test all students, and one is going the self-elect route. Ms. Potter said that the literacy component of her job is already pretty well developed, thanks to the work that Ms. McPike and the other teachers have done over the past two years. Ms. Potter now has to work on implementing the plan, which, among other things, calls for more professional development on literacy for teachers. Those who have heard or read the school's daily announcements probably have noticed the words of the week. These are an

outgrowth of the literacy initiative. Ms. Potter said she will soon institute a reading of the week, which will be a selection from the professional literature for teachers.

Ms. Potter handed out a brief overview of the TAG application process at East for all 8th through 11th grade students who are not currently enrolled in TAG classes. The application process is different for 8th graders than for current high schoolers, but students in each group need to complete an enrollment application (available after December 14) for each TAG subject area for which the student wishes to be considered. The student is also required to complete in school, during the specified testing date, a hand-written writing sample pertaining to each applied-for subject. The in-school writing exercises will take place between December 14 and January 11. While this writing sample is required, it is only one of five criteria on which applicants are judged. Anyone with questions may call Ms. Potter at 204-1723.

3. Questions and Answers

After hearing Mr. Harris explain how East is expanding and devoting more resources to the TAG programs, a parent asked him what had changed since last year. About this time last year, Mr. Harris had proposed significant changes to the curriculum at East that included embedding TAG-like elements into most classes and doing away with separate TAG classes.

Mr. Harris answered that he clearly heard that the approach he had described was not what the East community wanted. He mentioned that he had talked about his proposed changes last year to a group of East students who were enrolled in TAG classes, and they told him that his approach sounded good in theory, but it also sounded close to what they had in middle school, and they thought that particular experience sucked. (“Sucked” is a technical term employed by some young people to express a critical judgment with distinctly negative connotations.)

Mr. Harris said he still believed that the approach he proposed has merit, but he knows that it cannot succeed without the support of the community. He said he felt like he was a Buick salesman trying to make sale to a customer who had to replace a Buick that had broken down. That’s a sale you’re just not going to make. An approach that the community can support, and so one that East is following, entails strengthening TAG and A.P. classes and making sure they’re available to all qualified students.

Mr. Harris also made another interesting point. He said that, as compared to high achieving high school students he had observed in California and elsewhere, high achieving students at East seemed to have a particularly strong esprit de corps. They are more willing to work cooperatively with each other and celebrate each other’s accomplishments, and are less affected by cutthroat competition. Mr. Harris said that it is important to keep in mind the benefits of preserving this school attribute as efforts continue to make classes more rigorous.

Mr. Harris also answered a question about the progress of the ongoing District-wide High School Redesign project. A presentation on the on the current status of the project will be given at the School Board meeting on November 19. Mr. Harris said that no secret master plan will be revealed. Instead, he characterized the direction of the group as more toward tweaking elements of the existing system. A primary focus is on possible strategies for spreading opportunities and seeking broader levels of achievement in order to counter the situation that currently exists where the academic success of students can too readily be predicted on the basis of their socio-economic status and the color of their skin. Mr. Harris said that everything the group is likely to recommend can be accommodated within the current structure at East.

4. **The District's Math Task Force**

Jill Jokela gave a brief summary of the work of the District's Math Task Force. Jill was appointed to be the sole parent representative on this District-wide group, which, in addition to Jill, is comprised of a teacher from LaFollette and a lot of math professors from the UW and elsewhere. More information on the group is available here: <http://www.mmsd.org/boe/math> Anyone with a particular interest in the topic may contact Jill directly. She will also be giving updates at future EHU meetings.

5. **Upcoming events**

Parent Teacher Conferences – Thursday, Nov. 15, 1 to 4 p.m. and Friday, Nov. 16, 8 am to 12 noon and 1 p.m. to 4 p.m.

Early release at 12:30 on Thurs, Nov. 15

No school on Friday, Nov. 16

Fall Play – Arthur Miller's The Crucible – 7:30 p.m., Thursday, Friday and Saturday, Nov. 15 – 17, plus a 2 p.m. matinee on Saturday

Booster Club meeting – Mon., Nov. 19, at 7:00 p.m. in LMC

No school – Thanksgiving – Thurs. and Fri., Nov. 22 and 23

Band Concert – Mon, Dec. 3, 7:30 p.m.

Choir Concert – Tues, Dec. 11, 7:00 p.m.

6. **Next meeting**

The next East High United meeting will be on Thursday, December 13, 2007, at 7 p.m. in the LMC. The topic is school safety at East. Guests will be East's Educational Resource Officer Pat Green, Safety and Student Discipline Principal Rick Rogness, and Dean of Students Martha Olsen.