

East High United – January 11, 2007 meeting

The meeting focused on the disquieting fact that 44% of the students who were enrolled as freshmen last year did not earn the 5.5 credits necessary to stay on pace to graduate in four years. (22 credits are required for graduation.) Mr. Harris provided information on the 484 freshmen who were enrolled at East for at least 120 of the 180 school days. Of this group, 171, or 35%, failed to earn at least 5.5 credits. (The 44% figure includes students who were enrolled for less than 120 days.) The information provided also included demographic data (gender/ethnicity/low income/special ed/ELL/retained students) and the percentages of students in each of the categories who had failed to earn the 5.5 credits. Those at the meeting then broke into smaller groups to discuss the data.

The best predictors of a failure to earn 5.5 credits are low income status and special ed status. About 53% of low income students and 66% of special ed students did not earn the 5.5 credits. (This does not necessarily include special ed students with significant disabilities who progress through school on a non-credit basis). A high percentage of African-American students also fell short on earning credits (81 of 129, or 63%), but Mr. Watkins said that economic and special ed status are actually better predictors of students who are likely to fall behind.

For a student to fail to earn 5.5 credits, he or she must fail or drop more than one class. There was some discussion of what it takes to flunk a class at East. It seems that, for most classes, a student who is engaged in the class, attends regularly, and makes a sincere effort to do the homework is likely to pass the class, even with a relatively poor academic performance.

There are some classes for which this generality does not hold true – algebra is the most prominent. Students can flunk algebra even if they are in class every day, complete their assignments and do their best. Mr. Harris suggested the possibility of offering a two-year algebra sequence for those students for whom the regular class simply moves too fast. The idea would be that all students would start out in the regular class at the start of the year, and at the end of the first quarter those students who are struggling with the pace of the class would be identified and shifted to the two-year sequence. Since all students need to complete algebra and geometry to graduate, a two-year geometry sequence is also a possibility.

Students who have not earned 5.5 credits can make up some of the work in summer school. East and LaFollette students both attend summer school at East. Last summer there were about 900 students enrolled.

Truancy among last year's freshmen seemed to be a significant contributing factor to the academic difficulties many of them experienced. The shift to a closed campus for freshmen and a freshmen-only lunch are intended to help combat freshmen truancy. There was also some shifting of responsibilities among East's administrative team to focus more on the needs of freshmen. There are some encouraging signs suggesting that

the changes have helped, but an assessment of the effects of the changes will have to wait at least until first semester grades come out. In the longer term, there are plans to improve the quality of information that East gathers on all incoming freshmen, including obtaining a writing sample from everyone, so that class assignments can be made in a more informed way that should improve freshmen's chances for academic success.

Toward the end of the meeting there was also some discussion of the application process for TAG for next year. In terms of the substance of the applications, the only change from past years is that students will write answers to questions about their interest in the classes they are applying for in a middle school class on a designated school day, rather than outside the classroom. The teachers noted that they are not looking for polished prose in these answers, but critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. They felt they could get a more accurate sense of the students' capabilities in these areas if the answers are written in the classroom, with no outside help. In terms of schedule, on February 12 East representatives will meet with middle school principals and guidance counselors to explain the application process and the student information East will rely on. Applications will be available sometime after that. This year, registration for classes will take place in March, and will be carried out on line through the district's Infinite Campus internet-based school information and data system that is in the process of being implemented.

NEXT MEETING: Thursday, February 8, in the LMC. Meeting topic: Issues related to alcohol and other drug abuse (AODA) at East.