

East High United Summary of Events

Sent Dec 24, 2006 via email

A number of members of this listserv are likely relatively new to East High United (EHU), the organization for East parents and other interested community members. Now that we've reached the winter break, we thought we'd send you a summary of what has been happening this year. We apologize for the length of this, but it might be just the thing at some point over the holidays if you feel the urge to grab a warm eggnog and curl up with a nice, long email.

EHU meetings typically take place on the second Thursday of the month. The topics for the meetings this year are drawn from the goals identified through the Vision 2012 process that took place last spring. Our first meeting was in October and focused on ways of expanding our reach so that we can work toward building a group whose members better reflect the population of the school.

The second meeting was scheduled to consider high expectations and academic rigor for all students. The topic was preempted by a discussion of school safety issues following the bomb scares at the school. The academic issues were addressed at a meeting on November 16. Rumors that TAG classes might be eliminated helped draw an overflow crowd. At the meeting, Alan Harris, East's principal, discussed some of the pressing academic challenges facing groups of East students and some of his plans for addressing them. The component of the plan that drew the most attention entailed eliminating TAG classes as they are currently constituted and moving toward more of an AP approach to high-level classes for juniors and seniors, and toward heterogeneous English, social studies and science classes for 9th and 10th graders, with differentiated instruction within those classes. This particular proposal excited a great deal of concern. Another meeting was scheduled for two weeks later, November 30, to continue this discussion.

There was a great deal of informal discussion among parents after the November 16th meeting. In addition to the benefits and limitations of TAG classes, the particular challenges East faced, as demonstrated by the school's recent underwhelming performance on standardized tests, were also topics of concern. One statistic that particularly grabbed folks' attention was that 44% of last year's freshman class did not earn enough credits to put them on track to graduate in four years. A general consensus seemed to emerge that East faced daunting challenges and that a concerted community response was called for. At the same time, a number of different views were expressed about preferred forms of changes at the school. Thanks to Sam Hokin's efforts, this listserv grew out of these community discussions.

Prior to the November 30 meeting, School Superintendent Art Rainwater announced that the school district would undertake a major review of the structure and design of the academic offerings in the district's four high schools, and no major curriculum changes should be instituted at any of the high schools until this review is completed. This means that TAG classes will continue at East for the next couple of years at least.

At the November 30 EHU meeting, Mr. Harris apologized for advocating what turned out to be a controversial and potentially divisive proposal regarding TAG. He stated that he continued to believe that what he had proposed promised benefits to all East students, but that no plan could succeed without the support of the community. There is plenty to work on at East, and plenty of opportunity for beneficial changes that the entire community could support, so going forward our focus will be on those.

We most recently met on December 14. The focus of the meeting was the four committees that Mr. Harris and his administrative team have formed to work on particular areas of improvement. Those who attended the meeting broke into groups to discuss the work of each of the committees and the ways in which parents might best be involved. It appears as if the best

roles for parents might well differ from committee to committee.

The committees are:

Academic Support and Intervention Committee.

According to the most recent East parent newsletter, topics for this committee include study hall structure, assessment methods for incoming students, peer tutoring, outside tutors, and improvement honor roll. Assistant Principal David Krause led the group discussion for this committee. The committee will look at structural changes, such as reworking study halls to make them more productive for students; organizational changes, such as setting up a 9th grade advisory group to lay out plans to assist all students to earn the credits they will need to graduate; and changes directed at individual students, such as improved tutoring opportunities. The goal of the committee seems to be to improve the structures and supports for at-risk students so that the school as a whole is more attentive to the needs of the individual students and the students are able to move closer to full engagement in the school's academic enterprise.

Some parents who have particular backgrounds in these areas can help by sharing their expertise. Pete Nelson, for example, has talked about MATC's individualized academic plans for students who need some extra assistance. In addition, any parent who is interested and has the time can help by offering tutoring assistance. Cynthia Chin, one of East's top-notch math teachers, attended the meeting and participated in this group. She said at the meeting that there are several tutoring and other volunteer opportunities available at East, and she sent follow-up information in an email to the listserv. If you would like to volunteer at East, a good place to start is to track down Ms. Chin's email or contact her at 204-1534 or cchin@madison.k12.wi.us. (Volunteers working with students in the Madison Metropolitan School District are required to fill out a form authorizing a basic background check.)

Behavioral Intervention Committee According to the parent newsletter, topics for this committee include whole school behavior intervention model, truancy, strategies for engaging students, positive approaches, intervention plans for 2006-07, and mediation team. Dean of Students Martha Olsen led the discussion for this group. This committee is working on implementing a district-wide effort to move toward consistent and clear rules regulating student behavior, with consistent and clear consequences for violations. Ms. Olson also discussed some of the school's recent efforts to encourage more productive student behavior, such as the recent hall sweeps directed at reducing tardiness. She mentioned the district's movements toward the Infinite Campus data information system that by the end of the school year should enable parents to check on their students' grades and records. The work on this committee addresses the culture of behavior at the school, and Ms. Olson talked of plans to visit the feeder 8th grades and let the students know what will be expected of them when they arrive at East.

The parents who met with this group during the meeting suggested that they might be most useful by helping to work on communications. A suggestion was made that a group of parents might review the code of conduct to see that it is free of jargon and clearly and plainly sets out the school's rules.

Advanced Programming and Curriculum Committee. According to the parent newsletter, this committee will look at the current opportunities offered at the school for accelerated learning, will examine the school's recent performance on ACT/SAT, National Merit, AP tests, etc., and will explore other approaches such as AP course offering, International Baccalaureate programs, and dual credits. Assistant Principal David Watkins led the discussion for this committee. He identified the three current tasks for the committee as (1) expanding opportunities for advanced work for all students and reviewing all courses with this in mind, (2) considering changing the name of the program from TAG to something that is more accurately

descriptive, and (3) improving the process for identifying incoming freshmen who could benefit from TAG programming. Members of the group suggested that this committee might consider soliciting feedback from current students about TAG classes as well as putting together a focus group of recent graduates to share their perspectives.

Members of this group encouraged including a few parents on this committee. It was suggested that any parents on this committee would serve in something of a representational capacity, with the expectation that they would report back via this listserv or other means to other interested parents, solicit parent feedback, and bring that feedback back to the committee.

The school has also formed a **Literacy Commission**. This group is working on ensuring that there is a literacy component to all classes offered at East, which entails an emphasis on reading comprehension, critical analysis, and writing assignments. Sharon McPike, the chair of East's reading department, led the discussion for this group. East was the recipient of a grant that pays for substitute teachers to enable a cadre of East teachers to meet for a half day each month or so and work on this initiative. The immediate plan is to assess the literacy element of classes throughout East, develop goals and sub-goals to improve the literacy component of all classes, and solicit feedback on these ideas from East teachers. The ultimate goal is to develop and establish a national model of a high school with a literacy-rich curriculum implemented school-wide

Ms. McPike said that she would welcome the involvement of a few parents in the work of the Literacy Commission, which would entail attending the monthly half-day meetings. She also distributed a list of recent reports on the state of literacy in the schools for any parents interested in follow-up reading.

There may be some follow-up discussion on parental involvement in these committees at the next EHU meeting on

Thursday, January 11. The principal focus of this meeting, however, will be the fact that 44% of last year's freshmen did not earn enough credits to put them on track to graduate in four years. Mr. Harris will talk about the school's efforts to engage students as they start at East and what the school is doing, and what we can all do, to help make that dismaying 44% statistic an anomaly.

A silver lining to the recent dust-up about the future of TAG classes at East is that it prompted a lot of parents to attend an EHU meeting and gain some more exposure to what's going on at the school and how parents can be involved. What we hope this summary makes clear is that there is a lot going on at East. The coming months and years will see organized efforts on many fronts to address the school's academic and other challenges. Mr. Harris and other East administrators and teachers are inviting parents to participate actively in these efforts to an extent that is unusual in Madison high schools. As the time for New Year's Resolutions draws near, consider the possibility of accepting the school's invitation to join in the work of our east side high school as it builds towards excellence.