

UR East Educational Partnership Organization

Presented by

Dr. Joanne Larson, Family and Community Engagement liaison, East parent
Dr. Stephen Uebbing, EPO Superintendent

Dr. Shaun Nelms, Deputy EPO Superintendent
Dr. Sue Meier, East Chief Academic Officer
Craig McManus, East RTA Representative

July 22 – 23, 2015
New York State Education Department

Introduction

As a New York State sanctioned Educational Partnership Organization (EPO), we are embarking on a bold experiment: to transform a comprehensive, public, open enrollment urban high school with dismal student outcomes into a model of urban education and a viable choice of excellence for urban families. After over a year of gathering extensive community input, the University of Rochester was approved to serve as EPO for East beginning July 1, 2015. EPO partnerships are unique reform efforts in that the school becomes a “district within a district” with its own superintendent who reports directly to the school board. Significant differences from other university/school partnerships occurred in our case: 1) intense involvement of students, families, staff, and community in writing the EPO proposal; 2) four renegotiated union contracts to change working conditions and professional learning expectations; 3) unanimous school board support and NYS approval of partnership and budget; 4) targeted a high-poverty, comprehensive high school with no exclusive admissions criteria; 5) control over hiring (all personnel had to reapply for jobs); 6) control over curriculum and instruction, budget, and school policy; 7) distributive leadership model with a unique leadership structure.

We seek to interrupt the cycle of reform/failure/new reform that has plagued urban schools for far too many years (Tyack & Cuban, 1995) in ways that will impact policy and practice. Educational researchers know what essential supports are needed to improve school culture or climate (Roderick, Easton, & Sebring, 2009), but we know less about how specifically to make those changes. Universities are uniquely positioned to use their resources and knowledge base to transform educational inequities through engaged scholarship (Harkavy & Hartley, 2009; Hartley & Harkavy, 2010). With recent calls for research that emphasizes collaboration with schools and communities (Gutiérrez & Penuel, 2014; Nelson, London, & Strobel, 2015), our partnership responds to these demands for community driven research collaborations that are useful to that community and relevant to practice.

Schools in high poverty urban areas have long been recognized as not meeting the needs of the populations they serve (Anyon, 2014; Lipman, 2004). Inequalities in funding, curriculum, and teacher quality between urban and suburban schools constitute a national shame (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Larson, 2014). Schools are labeled as failing in a society that increasingly relies on them to solve major social problems that are beyond their control. Attempts to address these problems are frequently met with failure and frustration. Too often, the problems are seen as intractable, even as efforts at reform ostensibly move ahead. Federal and state laws attempt to improve these schools by legislating “restart” mandates when a school is considered persistently failing. One legal option for a school in New York State is to create an Educational Partnership Organization (EPO) (Education Law 211e, 2014). Our university has begun such a partnership with a local high school through which it will bring its considerable knowledge about authentic education practice to bear on turning around the school. By becoming an EPO, we will significantly transform the educational infrastructure of this school in ways traditional university/school partnerships have not. Our unique legal status suggests this partnership could impact how school reform policy is shaped at the state and national level.

Family and Community Engagement

Based on our extensive outreach with students and families, we have realized that traditional notions of family engagement as attendance at school based meetings, and what we are calling a “notification” culture, are not sufficient to authentically engage East families. Despite advertising on radio, television, and newspaper outlets, family participation has not been optimal. Family engagement at East ranged from the highly active parent who volunteers and leads the PTA, to the single parent who works multiple jobs and thus not able to attend school events, to the parent who is uncomfortable entering the school building because of a language barrier or past negative experience. We have found there is a misperception that parents/families who do not attend school events are therefore not interested, or do not care about their child’s education. And yet, when talking with parents/families during our input gathering phase of plan development, we did not meet a single parent or family member who didn’t care deeply about their child’s education. Thus, we believe we need to change what we mean by family engagement.

We draw upon Harvard’s Family Engagement Project to define family engagement as:

- First, family engagement is a shared responsibility in which schools and other community agencies and organizations are committed to reaching out to engage families in meaningful ways and in which families are committed to actively supporting their children’s learning and development.
- Second, family engagement is continuous across a child’s life and entails enduring commitment but changing parent roles as children mature into young adulthood.
- Third, effective family engagement cuts across and reinforces learning in the multiple settings where children learn— at home, in prekindergarten programs, in school, in after school programs, in faith-based institutions, and in the community (Weiss & Lopez, 2009, n.p.).

Philosophy of Family Engagement

We believe that families are equal partners in a child’s education. Through our work with families, communities, and schools, we reconceptualize our understanding of family engagement by creating meaningful, authentic, and organic opportunities for shared decision making along with the youth and adults in our community. School leaders today have to be more outward facing than ever before, willing to provide extended school services and work co-operatively with social services, health care professionals, and the local community in order to support students and their families educational success. Our goal is to build collaborations among stakeholders that re-center community and families and build capacity for families and youth to transform themselves, their schools, and their communities. We use “family” and “family involvement” purposefully to account for contemporary family structures that include indirect kinship. We count as family anyone the child identifies as part of his/her support network. We believe that when families are strengthened and connected to their communities, they take the lead in improving the quality of their lives. We embrace a philosophy of partnership where information, decision-making, power, and responsibilities are authentically shared.

We use an interdependent model of developmental processes and transformational pathways to frame and reconceptualize family engagement. We begin with building relationships, entering families' homes and listening, uncovering local expertise about schools and communities. We recognize that families and community members are key resources, both in the cultural capital that they possess and the social capital they can access. We must always have the development of skills, social and intellectual capital, and the creation of employment opportunities for both youth and family members as part of our joint agendas. And finally, we must document how families come to challenge narratives of reform and become agents of change within their own schools and communities.

As we build collaborations, we must ensure time to build relationships and trust, to create models that center community knowledge and resources, and work toward co-constructing successful developmental pathways for families and youth. In addition, we must build on the power of collaborative research, creating opportunities for families to participate as co-researchers to learn how to document their own practices and to effectively use their own evidence to drive change.

Implementing this philosophy

We support this process through authentic family engagement practices. For example, we will redefine the "parent/teacher conference" to a student-led family conference at which all parties will share in the positive educational development of the child and in finding the right path for the individual child and her/his family. Family members will be members of our school leadership team and participate in all aspects of school governance and curriculum development. We envision family participation in school-based planning teams that will include review of achievement data and the family engagement data. We established family advocates, one per grade level, who are in the school building during school hours as contact people for families.

Together with families and community partners, we use an asset-based perspective of students and families to develop a collaborative culture of celebration in which all parties feel respected, valued, and loved. We are developing professional learning content for school personnel (teachers and administration) that seeks to change the current culture of low expectations and the deficit perspective of students and their families.

Restaffing

It was important for us to also reconceptualize being a member of the faculty/staff at East. Over the years the work of urban public education has been fragmented by agreements that defined the work in terms of minimal requirements and obligations. We entered this discussion with the notion of an "all in" faculty and staff. We renegotiated each of four existing agreements with the goal of creating a more holistic engaging teaching-learning experience. Excerpts from the MOU with East teachers follow:

1. *Teachers' eight (8) hour workday shall include:*
 - a. *At least a thirty (30) minute duty-free lunch period.*

Professional Expectations

4. *All teachers shall participate in a minimum of ten (10) and a maximum of twenty (20) days of professional development during July and August. For the 2015-2016 school year, teachers shall be given a schedule of required days no later than April 1, 2015. For all subsequent years of this Agreement, a schedule shall be given to teachers no later than the first school day following the December break. Between July 1st and the first day of the new school year, a “day” shall be six (6) hours. East High School teachers may participate in District provided professional development with the permission of the Principal.*
5. *All teachers shall be expected to complete and share lesson and unit plans, assessments, and student data in a manner approved by the appropriate Governance Council. All teachers shall maintain a personal webpage for this and other professional purposes in a manner approved by the Governance Council.*
6. *Each teacher shall support a small student group or “student family”. Teachers shall meet daily with the family group to work on student interests and needs, such as attendance, study skills, academic performance, community service projects, restorative justice practice, and work aligned with specific school support programs. Support for student mentoring families will follow a framework approved by the applicable Governance Council.*
7. *Teachers may be asked to serve as mentors, instructional coaches, or in other teacher-leader roles. Teachers asked to serve in leadership roles may be released from classroom teaching duties. All teachers will teach at least one period per day. Mentors may be released to provide support outside of East High School with approval of Supervising Principal*
8. *The parties understand that East High School’s students will be best served if all certified staff share in the instruction of students. Therefore, supervisory personnel may teach up to one period per day in addition to their administrative duties.*
9. *A joint committee of the Governing Councils shall meet to establish a new teacher mentoring program at East High School that is in compliance with Education Law § 3033 and Part 85 of the Commissioner’s Regulations and provides no less support than offered by the CIT program in the CBA.*
10. *Upon approval of the final EPO plan by the SED, a committee consisting of ESOL and bilingual teachers and other experts and individuals knowledgeable about instruction for English Language Learners, shall convene to conduct a study of appropriate class sizes for bilingual and ESOL classes and shall make recommendations to the EPO regarding the same. Such recommendations shall*

be consistent with Commissioner's Regulations Sup-Part 154-2 and applicable State guidance.

- 11. The parties recognize that the EPO and East High School shall be required to provide evidence of progress and continued improvement and to ensure the effective and efficient use of resources. Therefore, teachers may be required to create and/or maintain professional goals, records, materials and equipment, related to student attendance, performance, support services provided, and educational materials. Governance Councils shall review and make recommendations regarding any new record keeping needs.*
- 12. Teachers shall be expected to report on emergency closing days unless it is determined by the Supervising Principal that either building conditions or weather conditions would create a risk to staff safety or would preclude productive work.*
- 13. RTA members assigned to East High School under the EPO shall be eligible to attend, upon acceptance by the University of Rochester, the Warner School of Education at a discounted tuition rate equal to the tuition rate for similar programs provided by the State University of New York at Brockport.*

We included in the contract reasonable additional compensation for faculty based on an additional 1.5 hours of compensated work per day. Re-staffing involved nearly 500 separate interviews for faculty and staff and for teachers, about 270 separate classroom visits. Hiring committees included union representatives, Warner faculty, parents, and students. We have hired over 250 faculty and staff including 3 school leaders who were previously at East and 85 teachers who were previously at East. In the end, 40% of the new staff are returning East personnel, 40% are coming to East from within the RCSD, and 20% are coming to East from outside the district. This process was completed almost entirely by Warner staff and volunteers without an established human resource function. All faculty and staff have been involved in professional learning since May 1.

For access to all documents (EPO proposal, union contracts, new reports), please see the Warner website at: <https://www.warner.rochester.edu/researchprojects/projects/EastHigh>

East Website: <http://www.rcsdk12.org/Page/12588>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/East-High-School/144846018874074?fref=ts>

Twitter: https://twitter.com/east_high_rcsd

References:

- Anyon, J. (2014). *Radical possibilities: Public policy, urban education, and a new social movement*. Routledge.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2010). *The flat world and education: How America's commitment to equity will determine our future*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Education Law 211e (2014).
<http://www.p12.nysed.gov/accountability/documents/AdditionalFeaturesofEducationalPartnershipOrganization030414.pdf> Accessed June 25, 2015.
- Gutiérrez, K. & Penuel, W. (2014). Relevance to practice as a criterion for rigor. *Educational Researcher*, 43(1), 19-23.
- Harkavy, I., & Hartley, M. (2009). University-school-community partnerships for youth development and democratic renewal. In I. Harkavy & M. Hartley (Eds.), *New directions in youth development* (pp. 7–17). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-
- Hartley, M. & Harkavy, I. (2010). Engaged scholarship and the urban university. In H. Fitzgerald, C. Burack, & S. Seifer (eds.). *Transformation in Higher Education: Handbook of Engaged Scholarship: Contemporary Landscapes, Future Directions, Volume 1: Institutional Change*, pp. 119-129. Michigan: Michigan State University Press.
- Lipman, P. (2004). *High stakes education: Inequality, globalization, and urban school reform*. Psychology Press.
- Nelson, I., London, R., & Strobel, K. (2015). Reinventing the role of the university researcher. *Educational Researcher*, 44(1), 17-26.
- Roderick, M., Easton, J., & Sebring, P. (2009). *The consortium on Chicago school research: A new model for the role of research in supporting urban school reform*. Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago Urban Education Institute.
- Tyack, D. & Cuban, L. (1995). *Tinkering toward utopia: A century of public school reform*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Weiss, H. & Lopez, E. (2009). *Redefining family engagement in education*.
<http://www.hfrp.org/publications-resources/browse-our-publications/redefining-family-engagement-in-education> Accessed 6/30/14.