

SIGNS OF PROGRESS AT EAST HIGH

University of Rochester’s leadership appears to be helping with attendance, suspensions

JUSTIN MURPHY @CITIZENMURPHY The question from a student was too direct for East High School Superintendent Shaun Nelms to dodge. And anyway, the whole sitting-in-a-circle-and- talking thing was partly his responsibility in the first place. “Why are you so cheap?” 10th-grader Felipe Burgos asked. “And don’t just say, ‘I’m cheap.’ ” It has been a hot topic all year in Nelms’ Family Group, the small circles of students and adults that meet daily to talk about nearly anything. For Burgos, it came to a head when Nelms admitted to buying Dum Dums — the bargain-basement suckers, a fixture of candy dishes at bank teller windows and grandparents’ living rooms — to fill out the trick-or-treat basket at his house on Halloween.

“Dum Dums,” Burgos muttered. “You can’t get no cheaper than that.”

Nelms waited to receive the talking stick, then explained: like most of the students sitting around him, he grew up without much money. Even now that he makes plenty, he worries about spending too much.

“When you were poor, you never want to be poor again,” he said.

Perhaps because Nelms, the most powerful person in the building, was willing to discuss his feelings honestly, others followed suit. They talked about their grades, their relationships with their families and their difficulties in balancing academic, financial and emotional concerns.

Burgos, who works full time to pay bills at his house and take care of his younger siblings, was the most forthcoming of them all.

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Minellys Iyala reacts to the outcome of a cellular diffusion experiment she and classmate, Brendalee Roman, were working on at East High School.

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Progress

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The Family Groups are the most visible sign of change at East High after its first marking period under the University of Rochester. While it's too early for most academic indicators of how students at the new East are faring, data on student suspensions and attendance shows fitful progress.

Last year, more than 400 suspensions had been issued through mid-October. This year, it was 65, including the added sixth-graders. The rate is rising from where it was in September but still shows a dramatic decrease.

That is partly a reflection of improved behavior but also a changed attitude toward misbehavior. Offenses that previously would have earned students a day of in-school suspension are now addressed in Family Group or by a social worker or allowed to slide all together.

It was perhaps the most fundamental component of the UR's plan for the school, and the area it believed could most contribute to better results: the belief that making students feel valued at school would make them value school in turn.

Ismael Ortiz Jr., a repeat ninth-grader, said there is much less violence this year than there was last year.

"It was crazy — a lot of bad things happened," he said. "You heard about when 10 cop cars came? People were getting Maced and stuff. ... They don't have any of that this year."

Upper School Principal Anibal Soler, who was in charge of the entire school last year, said it has been an uncomfortable process for some veteran teachers more accustomed to the old way of discipline. The Rochester Teachers Association has accused the district of tying teachers' hands on suspensions without adding resources to stem problems in other ways, and East is one of the schools it points to as an example.

In particular, many teachers object to students being allowed to keep their cellphones during the school day rather than dropping them off at the entrance then picking them up later. They say it is a constant struggle to keep students off their phones during lessons.

Nelms said "cellphones as well as other technological devices (have) become increasingly essential" for students, but acknowledged the question requires further consideration.

About half the teachers are new at East this year, and some said they haven't had serious problems with student behavior.

"The kids that come have been motivated, respectful and polite, and they want to learn," science teacher Mike Calzi said. "It's been a breath of fresh air."

His reference to "the kids that come" alludes to the second key point at East — attendance.

At the Upper School, grades 9-12, the average daily attendance in October was 81.1 percent, which is woefully low but nonetheless an improvement over 201415 and previous years.

It was in the Lower School, including the newly added sixth grade, where the UR promised in its official proposal to the state to boost attendance, and the results have been significant. Last year, attendance in seventh and eighth grade was 84 percent; in October 2015 it was at 93.6 percent, one of the highest rates in Rochester.

It is a common trend in districts across the country for attendance to drop in ninth grade, partly because it is often a difficult transition between buildings for students and partly because the ninth-grade number includes many grade repeaters. The hope at East is that the re-committed Lower School students will maintain their attendance when they go to the Upper School.

The school also has concentrated on its efforts with chronic no-shows. Of the 154 students who never showed up for school in the beginning of the year, the school has located all but 21 and either gotten them to class or confirmed they're attending elsewhere and

removed them from the roster.

The UR and its district counterparts have long cautioned against expecting too much too soon. Besides student behavior expectations and discipline, Nelms said work remains to be done in empowering school administrators.

But, he said: "We have all the systems in place. We should get the right results."

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East High School scirocco teacher, Elyse Boress, works with Ismael Ortiz Jr. on an cell diffusion experiment.

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