

EAST HIGH'S

NEW ERA

The University of Rochester and the high school's partnership begins in earnest on 1st day

JUSTIN MURPHY @CITIZENMURPHY From May 6, 2014, when the University of Rochester announced it would consider a partnership with East High School, until this summer, when students and staff went through intensive training and orientation, the question lingered: Would this really be any different? Those students have now taken their seats for their first-period classes on the first day of school, so the question can be answered in part. For one morning, at least, yes. It was different. "I mean, it's (still) East," 10th-grader Tyrique Hasan said. "But we never had this before." Nearly all the school's teachers, staff and administrators lined the entrance to the school Tuesday, the first day of school, to cheer the students on as they got off the bus.

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East High School students are cheered on by staff, area residents and cheerleaders on Tuesday. Samarrian Williams high-fives with school staff.

PHOTOS BY TINA MACINTYRE-YEE @TYEE23/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



Left: O'Neil Burroughs, with Man Up, a group of volunteers who have been going to Rochester schools, encouraging students and cheering them on their first day of school, applauds and high fives students after they get off the bus and head in. Right: Eleventh-grader Jan Luis Rosa gets a big greeting and welcome back from Kelly Wise, a staff worker at the school.

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They were joined by the school's cheerleaders, alumni and other community members who have pledged to work toward change at one of the city's signature schools, long troubled by misbehavior, apathy and poor academic outcomes.

There are substantive changes: a new sixthgrade class, small personal support teams and home rooms for each student, more flexible scheduling and more time spent on English and math.

But there is also an emphasis on creating a student-

See a video of the first day of school at **Democratand** [Chronicle.com](#) .

centered school that the children are happy to go to each day, and Hasan, who plays on the football team, said that was the most apparent difference so far. "It seems like they're trying to make every kid feel welcome," he said.

Leeway likely

The celebratory mood on the first day of school won't be enough to right the school's course. One of the key early indicators will be the attendance rate. Last year it was 78 percent, a number that will need to rise significantly if students are to progress in class. The graduation rate is well below 50 percent and hardly any middle school students scored as proficient on the state math and English exams last year.

Under the terms of the state's receivership law, East and other schools on the priority list will have just one year to show signs of improvement, or else the state could step in with some sort of further intervention.

The high profile of the partnership, though, combined with the \$10 million price tag, means UR will likely have some leeway. It has committed to at least three years of involvement.

By the time today's sixth-graders become 12th-graders, university officials said they believe they can approximately double the graduation rate, to more than 80 percent. Gail Elhilow has worked in the district for 31 years in the clerical department, moving from school to school. She applied and was accepted to move to East High School this year, part of a competitive process that led to significant turnover.

"It's all-in, and I'm an all-in kind of person, so I'm all for it," she said. "The kids are the No.1 priority, so whatever we can do to encourage them, we'll do it."