

IMPROVEMENTS AT EAST HIGH

East

Progress made in first year under direction of UR, but lots of work remains to be done

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After East High School Superintendent Shaun Nelms finished his last monthly report to the Rochester school board for the 2015-16 school year, board President Van White answered with a sentiment shared by many.

“If this doesn’t work, we’re in trouble.”

It has been two years since the University of Rochester said it would partner with the Rochester City School District to turn around East, which had been marked for immediate action by the New York state Education Department.

The school got millions of dollars in additional funding, and the University of Rochester put its full arsenal of resources at the school’s disposal. There was renewed outreach to parents, alumni and community groups.

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Students arrive for the first day of classes at East High School.

TINA MACINTYRE-YEE

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Never in Rochester has so much concentrated support converged on one school building.

So, now that Year One is in the books: Did it work? Or are we in trouble?

Melissa Caso, who just finished 11th grade, reported that “it did feel a little different.” “Everything with the U of R and the partnership has been better,” she said. “There used to be a lot of suspensions because of fights, and this year there weren’t as many. ... The teachers are way more connected this year. I see them trying to get students to do the best they can.” Kenneth Jackson, also a rising 12th-grader, also praised the greater teacher involvement and more controlled environment.

“The students that acted out, they didn’t really put up with it,” he said. “They really took control. ... The changes were way better for students.”

A survey of several students, teachers and administrators who spent time in the school in 2015-16 all reported positive changes, and there is data to support them. Most significantly, suspensions are down by two-thirds, from 2,541 in 2014-15 to 895 in 2015-16. Out-of-school suspensions in particular are down from 1,002 to 181, a difference of about 10,000 school days, Nelms said. Average daily attendance has risen at every grade level and now exceeds the district average for every grade except ninth grade. In particular, this year’s seventh- graders, in their first year at East, attended school at a 93 percent rate, up from 84 percent in 2014-15. Another important shift among younger students: About 85 percent of ninth-graders are expected to advance to 10th grade next school year. In the past, only about 50 percent have finished ninth grade in one year, and those who do not have only about a 5 percent graduation rate. “When you have that many kids fail ninth grade every year, that’s an indication that the system has normalized failure,” Nelms said. “We’re trying to break that.” Most interesting, East High spent only \$28.6 million of its \$30.2 million budget. The savings came mostly from hiring six fewer teachers than planned. Not everything has gone to plan, though. In January, Upper School Principal Anibal Soler Jr., a holdover from the pre-UR days, resigned; Marlene Blocker, who previously had been responsible only for the

lower grades, took over the entire school. It meant a departure from the university's two-leader plan, though Nelms said it had the effect of bringing greater consistency to the building. School 29 Principal Tanya Wilson will take over grades 6-8 next year. Even though UR conducted a rigorous hiring process before the school year, it became clear in the first semester that not all staff was on board with the new line of thinking. Things improved by the spring, Nelms said, though he acknowledged it's a work in progress.

Chris Fields, a veteran district teacher in his first year at East, said some staff members have yet to adopt the right mindset.

"Maybe some people thought it would fix itself just because the U of R stepped in," he said. "We have great ideas, but it's a work in progress."

And the number that draws the most attention — the graduation rate — is not likely to rise significantly when it is released later this summer.

In its proposal to the state, UR aimed for a 10 percent increase in last year's August rate of 33 percent. A data review in January, however, showed that the district had provided inaccurate projections to UR.

The district reported that 46 percent of students who first enrolled in 2012 were roughly on track to graduate this spring or summer. In fact, Nelms said, the number was 19 percent; the district had mistakenly filtered out students who had dropped out.

As a result, Nelms said he expects the graduation rate to be in the 30s again.

Much of the attention in the new regime has been on "stopping the bleeding for kids who have not been successful," Nelms said. That includes several specialized programs for students not on track to graduate.

Nelms is a former top-level RCSD administrator who got a doctorate from UR's Warner School of Education and came back to East from the Greece Central School District. He was diplomatic yet critical in assessing the condition in which he found the school this year.

For instance, some 12th-graders had not sat for all the exams required for graduation.

"That's a systems failure — it's a lack of training and a lack of paying attention to detail," he said. "What I think happened here in the past was, when kids were failing, there wasn't really anyone asking those thought-provoking questions. Or if they had questions, there was no space to actually ask them. Whereas we're telling every adult: 'If there's an issue you see and you know it and you don't identify it, you're the cause.' You have to call things out."

Next year, there will be additional focus on reaching out to alumni and better measuring and appreciating parent involvement.

Students also continue to complain about the cafeteria food, and Nelms agreed with them. School leaders have met with state officials to request some increased local control over food and hope to "radically change the way food is served here at East" by 2017-18. Back to that first question: are we in trouble? Is this, as former Superintendent Bolgen Vargas said in a similar context, the "last chance to improve this district?"

Steve Uebbing, the UR point person for East High, dismissed the question.

"The last I looked, kids are still going to be there and still will need to be provided with a high-quality public education," he said. "It's not a 'last chance.' ... Is it going to work? Of course it's going to work. This year we've seen slow, incremental progress, and next year we'll see more slow, incremental progress. I refuse to even contemplate that it won't work."

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Alexa Basile works with other teachers at East High School during a summer professional development session on curriculum writing.

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Reporters Tracy Schuhmacher and Justin Murphy eat lunch at East High School with student LaJoya Green.

CARLOS ORTIZ/@CFORTIZ_DANDC/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



East High School Superintendent Shaun Nelms

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