

East High School

By Joel Seligman

The University, led by its Warner School of Education, has embarked on a noble initiative to help save East High School, the largest and one of the most historic high schools in Rochester. Because of its past failure to meet academic benchmarks, East was on the verge of being closed by the state. We began this work because of our commitment to our city and its K-12 students and because we believe there are few challenges more important to our country than revitalizing K-12 education in urban environments. This is a core mission for a school of education.

On June 30, I announced, together with Van White, chair of the Rochester City School Board, and the leaders of the four labor unions associated with East High, that an essential step had been taken to allow the school to remain open. Working with key stakeholders, the University submitted a plan to the State Education Department to administer East High School under a special statute that allows us to assume the role of an Educational Partnership Organization (EPO). This is the equivalent of becoming the superintendent for East High School. On July 9, the education department approved our plan.

I characterized this, quoting Churchill, as “the end of the beginning.” There are many key steps remaining.

The next key milestone will be the development of a full operational plan by December 2014. The intervening months will be dedicated to meeting with local partners, teachers, parents, and community members to refine the EPO plan for final submission to the state. The University will hold focus groups and a town hall meeting this fall to solicit input from the community as to how best to galvanize our collective efforts. These efforts will be led by Professor Steve Uebbing of the Warner School, who has over two decades of superintendent experience under his belt in the Canandaigua (N.Y.) City Schools and Fort Plain (N.Y.) Central School. Steve has been the key leader of this project and deserves special thanks for his hard work and patience.



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The University's EPO plan anticipates doubling East High School's graduation rate from the current 42 percent to 84 percent over a seven-year period. This will be accomplished by incorporating best practices in school and district leadership, curriculum design and implementation, teaching, social and emotional support, and school-and-community partnerships. The approach will revitalize the school, doing so with unionized employees, fully protecting their economic security. The plan contemplates an upper (grades 10 through 12) school, a lower school (grades six or seven through eight), with a separate ninth grade

academy and staggered arrival and departure times for the three programs. Students will be arranged into “families” of five to nine students who will meet with the same adult mentor every day.

We agreed to this undertaking under the principle of budget neutrality, meaning that we would proceed if our investment were not financial but based upon the expertise of our faculty. If the next milestone is also approved, we will become the EPO for five years, beginning July 1, 2015. At that time, Steve Uebbing will begin the role of superintendent of East High School.

I am encouraged by the support and contributions from all involved in this process to date, including State Education Commissioner John King; Rochester City School Superintendent Bolgen Vargas; Van White; Assembly Majority Leader Joseph Morelle, Rochester Mayor Lovely Warren; Rochester Teachers Association President Adam Urbanski '69, '75 (PhD) and union leaders Deb Ryder (Association of Supervisors and Administrators of Rochester), Dan DiClimente (Board of Education Non-Teaching Employees), and Marge Brumfield (Rochester Association of Paraprofessionals); East High School Principal Anibal Soler; and Wade Norwood '85, a member of the New York State Board of Regents. Without key compromises by all involved, progress on our proposal would not be possible.

Our Warner School Dean Raffaella Borasi has been instrumental in harnessing the collective efforts of faculty members and educators on this important proposal. The University's General Counsel Gail Norris also played a consequential role in reaching accord on the labor agreements.

Going forward this process will only be achievable with the support of East High School teachers, students, parents, and community members, including members of the University community. This proposal has the potential to become a new model by which public schools can transform, evolve, and succeed. I am deeply grateful to those in the Rochester community who have supported the University's unprecedented endeavor to turn around East. But to quote a familiar line, if this experiment is to succeed, “Our work is but begun.”