



Marlene Blocker named East's second superintendent, replacing Shaun Nelms

The University of Rochester-East EPO partnership continues with new leadership

Marlene Blocker, the current principal of East Upper School, has been named the new superintendent of the East Educational Partnership Organization (EPO) with the University of Rochester. A longtime Rochester City School District (RCSD) teacher and administrator, Blocker will succeed Dr. Shaun Nelms, the current East EPO superintendent, who has been named vice president for community partnerships at the University of Rochester. Both appointments are effective July 1.

When the East EPO launched in 2015, Blocker, then a founding principal of the Rochester Early College International High School, was named principal for East's Lower School (grades 6-9). As part of the EPO leadership team from the beginning, Blocker has been instrumental in making the school's transformative change a reality.

"Marlene has served this community for over 30 years and has a proven track record of success," said Nelms. "She is integral in leading and supporting the school transformation process at East. Under her leadership, East has become a beacon of hope in Rochester, and this work would not have been done without Marlene's focus on obtaining results through systems of collaboration and results-driven accountability. Marlene's appointment creates consistency for East families, scholars, and staff."

Blocker's experience in the RCSD began as a teacher and lead teacher/mentor at General Elwell S. Otis School No. 30 from 1988-2001. She served as assistant principal of John Walton Spencer School No. 16 from 2001-02, and principal of Francis Parker School No. 23 from 2002-10. In 2013, she received the James E. Allen Award from the School Administrators Association of New York State and the 2014 Distinguished Educational Leadership Award from St. John Fisher College, from which she received her master's in educational leadership. Blocker holds an M.S. in elementary education from SUNY Brockport and a B.A. in early childhood education from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

In 2015, Nelms was named the first-ever superintendent of the East EPO. As East EPO superintendent, Nelms has led a distinctive educational partnership model between East High School—an RCSD school—and the University of Rochester. The partnership has

demonstrated great success, serving as a model for academic and cultural transformation in urban K-12 education, and the partnership will continue with new leadership.

Prior to the partnership's founding, East High, one of Rochester's oldest city schools, was in disarray, in desperate need of help, and slated to close for failing to meet state standards for several years. With agreement among the RCSD, New York State, the East High School community, and the University, the EPO was launched. Under Nelms' leadership, the model has shown great success in addressing disparities in urban education to change student outcomes, while surpassing the goal to double the graduation rate of East students. Since 2015, the four-year graduation rate increased from 33% to 85%, the attendance rate grew from 77% to 90%, and the drop-out rate declined from 41% to 15%. As superintendent of East Upper and Lower schools, Nelms also expanded its Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs to include pathways in Culinary Arts, Information Technology, Computer Technology, Biomedical Health Sciences, Business and Computer Essentials, Precision Optics, Teaching and Learning, and Vision Care.

In 2021, the New York State Education Department extended the EPO through 2025.

"It has been a true privilege to work alongside East EPO educators, parents and community members for the past eight years to rebuild the foundation of a great school," said Nelms. "In working with the University of Rochester and its Warner School of Education, we have been able to provide scholars at East real opportunities to succeed, a safe environment to grow, and we've been given the support and resources to innovate in spaces where despair was more often greater than hope. And as the University continues to put their full support behind this model, I am most proud that these public school students have been given what they deserve, which are equitable opportunities that allow them to reach their full potential. It is my goal now in joining the University of Rochester to establish the University as a leader in community partnership and engagement; to cultivate greater and stronger meaningful relationships in the City of Rochester, across Monroe County, and beyond. I'm thrilled to support the University's strategic commitment to furthering the economic, educational, social, and cultural partnerships that build sustained and mutually beneficial engagement and a thriving community for all."

At the University of Rochester, Nelms will help to lead community-based learning opportunities and research, including those at the Center for Urban Education Success (CUES). Based in the University's Warner School and borne out of the East EPO, CUES aims to support the success of K-12 urban schools in Rochester and beyond by sharing findings among researchers and practitioners in urban education and creating models that can be adapted in other school districts across the country. Nelms will continue to serve as the William & Sheila Konar Director of CUES, as well as a clinical professor of educational leadership at the Warner School.

"The University remains firmly committed to the East EPO and CUES and we're thrilled with the continued success of both models," said Warner School Dean Sarah Peyre. "Shaun is one of Rochester's most respected and thoughtful community leaders because of this leadership, and it's natural that in his new role as vice president for community partnerships, he will be able to continue advocating for East while establishing and promoting greater community engagement between the University and Rochester."

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