

**ROCHESTER BOARD OF EDUCATION**  
**Excellence in Student Achievement Committee Meeting**  
**September 8, 2016**

Attending: Malik Evans (Chair); Commissioners Elliott, White, and Hallmark (via speakerphone).

Parent Representative: Toyin Anderson

District Staff: Superintendent Barbara Deane-Williams; Dr. Christiana Otuwa, Deputy Superintendent of Teaching & Learning; Dr. Shaun Nelms, Superintendent of East High School; and Rob Ulliman, Director of Planning.

Additional Attendees: Dr. Barry Stern, Co-Founder of the Fast Break program for at-risk youth

Board Staff: Debra Flanagan

Commissioner Evans called the meeting to order at 5:41PM.

**I. Webinar Presentation regarding the Fast Break program for At-Risk Youth**

Dr. Barry Stern conducted a webinar regarding the Fast Break program, which is intended to accelerate academic achievement for at-risk teens and young adults and provide preparation for college and career.

Dr. Stern described the following essential features of the Fast Break program:

- An experiential program involving project-based learning and team teaching, which promotes career- and college-readiness by:
  - Raising proficiency in math, reading, oral & written communications, use of computer applications, career planning and employability skills. Accelerated skill and learning acquisition is attained by filling in missing subject content for each participant, which increases their grade level within 8-12 weeks.
  - Infusing high-performance work skills/habits into an educational environment, focusing on teamwork, interpersonal relations, customer service, time management and conflict resolution.
- Students are given career guidance and information to help select a career field, along with extended job/college placement and follow-up.
- Requirements for students to participate in the Fast Break program:
  - Skills at least at the 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade level in: reading for information and applied math;
  - Commitment to attend the program for 4-8 hours per day for 8-16 weeks; and
  - Commitment to working, attending school, or entering military service after graduation.

- Criteria for completing/graduating from the Fast Break program:
  - Attaining at least 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> grade level skills in reading for information and applied math, gaining at least one grade level while participating in the program;
  - Satisfactory career speech;
  - Satisfactory progress in basic computer applications;
  - Positive work habits (e.g. teamwork, ability to accept responsibility and criticism);
  - Certified attendance (no more than three unexcused absences/tardy);
  - Remain drug-free

Dr. Stern described the methods used in the Fast Break program to accelerate learning and skill development, specifically by:

- Simulating a high-performance workplace, with a team of 3-5 instructors and aides to assist students in operating their own small business. The instructors and aides are responsible for the academic progress of 25-60 students, and model a collaborative approach to meet/exceed goals and solve problems. Fast Break instructors are given 300 hours of professional development over 8-16 weeks, and remain with the same group of students throughout the program.

Dr. Stern commented that a number of studies have shown that lack of student engagement is a significant factor in lagging academic achievement in the U.S. By focusing on the skills and subject matter content necessary to attain students' goals and presenting it in an integrated "real-life" context, students are immediately aware of the relevance of the course content and become interested in participating in their own education.

- Providing project-based learning experiences for students to integrate and apply academic content to real-world situations, fostering creativity and skill in critical thinking and problem-solving.
- Building on students' strengths, offering support, and promoting social/emotional learning. Dr. Stern discussed the importance of social/emotional skills in motivating students to achieve, take responsibility for their work, and enhance their ability to solve problems and resolve conflicts.
- Offering career-track jobs, apprenticeships, or internships through assistance from the program's Business Council; aiding in students' entry into college without the need for remedial coursework.

Dr. Stern reported the following results for the Fast Break program:

- » On average, students gain 2+ grade levels in Reading and Math in 2-3 months;
- » Students obtain skill in using standard computer applications (i.e. Microsoft Office);
- » 80% of students who have been out of school and who complete the Fast Break program have been placed in career entry jobs or college within 6 months;
- » Employers have been highly satisfied with Fast Break graduates in terms of teamwork and workplace skills;
- » Colleges have been highly satisfied with program graduates because of their readiness to begin college-level coursework.

## **II. Review Minutes of July 21, 2016 Excellence in Student Achievement Committee Meeting**

**Motion** by Commissioner Elliott to approve the minutes of the July 21, 2016 Excellence in Student Achievement Committee Meeting. **Adopted 2-0, with concurrence of the Parent Representative.**

## **III. Update regarding 2015-16 Graduation Rates**

Commissioner Evans noted that the Excellence in Student Achievement Committee periodically checks District graduation rates, which will be monitored more frequently in the upcoming school year. He emphasized that staff throughout the District need to be aware of this critical Board priority, which will be reinforced by continually measuring/analyzing student data (i.e. “What gets measured, gets done”). Commissioner Evans asserted that every school principal should know the status of every student in terms of their progress toward graduation. He stated that he would particularly like to have data for students in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, to encourage monitoring early in high school and allow opportunities for early intervention to raise graduation rates.

Dr. Shaun Nelms stated that he has included a report in response to a request from Commissioner Elliott for an overview of the first year at East High School under the educational partnership (EPO) with the University of Rochester. Dr. Nelms recalled that a report was presented to the Board in January, indicating a projected 19% graduation rate for potential cohort graduates in 2015-16. He reported that a review was conducted to examine the exams taken and passed by each student in each cohort to identify those who are not on track toward graduation. Dr. Nelms stated that this review revealed that 46% of the seniors at East High School had not even taken the Global Studies exam by January of their senior year, despite the fact that this exam is typically taken in 10<sup>th</sup> grade. He reported that the estimated graduation rate rose to 22.7% after the January Regents exams, and current projections indicate a 40% graduation rate for June and August graduates. Dr. Nelms acknowledged that this rate is nowhere near their goal, but represents a substantial improvement from the 19% projected in January.

Dr. Nelms discussed a number of methods that were used at East High School to assist students in graduating on time this year: structured supports, online credit recovery, and systematic monitoring of students’ status throughout the year.

Dr. Nelms also described methods used to track students’ progress in grades 6-8 and to reduce the number of students scoring at a basic level (i.e. Level 1) on NYS ELA and Math assessments. He reported reductions in the percentage of students scoring at this basic level in every grade and subject area, with the exception of 8<sup>th</sup> grade Math. Dr. Nelms reiterated that the test scores are nowhere near the level desired for students, particularly in terms of scoring at the proficient or advanced level (i.e. Level 3 or 4). He reminded Committee members of the large number of East High School students who have been scoring at the very basic level on NYS assessments, and of the substantial supports needed for these students. Dr. Nelms attributed the improvement in NYS assessment scores among East High School students to the double blocks of English and Math that are provided in 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

Dr. Nelms reported that the use of restorative practices in coordination with Hillside, Ibero-American Action League, and other community partners has had a dramatic impact in reducing the number of behavioral incidents and student suspensions over the last year. In 2014-15, there were a total of 1629

incidents and 2541 student suspensions. In 2015-16, the school had 681 incidents and 904 suspensions. Dr. Nelms pointed out that the most disturbing indicator was the out-of-school suspension rate of over 1000 in 2014-15, which was reduced to less than 200 in 2015-16.

In summary, Dr. Nelms stated that the results from the first year of the EPO are encouraging, showing that students are making academic progress and better behavioral decisions. He noted that teachers have also been demonstrating restraint and patience when students do make poor choices.

Commissioner White asked about the graduation rate for East High School in 2014-15. Dr. Nelms replied that the school had a graduation rate of 33% in 2014-15.

Commissioner White expressed concern about the alleged “embargo” of graduation rate data by the NYS Education Department. He stated that he requested the General Counsel to investigate this issue, and no legal basis was found for withholding this data. Commissioner White pointed out that withholding graduation data is essentially a strategic issue because the State’s analysis/interpretation may differ from that of the District. He asserted that this issue can be rectified through internal checks and verification to ensure that the data is accurate. He contended that District leaders should know the number of students that have accepted diplomas in June and August, and have confidence in their data. He also pointed out that monitoring should begin in 9<sup>th</sup> grade to ensure that each student is meeting the requirements necessary to graduate, and that plans are developed for those who are falling behind.

Dr. Nelms commended the staff in the Accountability Department for their assistance in reviewing and clarifying data with East High School leaders. He pointed out that efforts to track students could not be successful without the support of these staff members.

Commissioner Elliott stated that the District has had a poor Accountability Department in the past, and has not kept the data up to date. She reported that under previous administrations, the Accountability Department only provided raw data without any narrative, context or analysis, and this practice compromised Board members’ ability to advocate for the District. She noted that this experience has created doubt about the accuracy of the data that has been provided.

Commissioner Evans asked about strategies used to ensure that students at East High School are meeting benchmarks at each grade level. Dr. Nelms described a number of strategies that have been used:

- » Data “walls” to identify students at a critical point in terms of meeting benchmarks. Dr. Nelms reported that 78% of 9<sup>th</sup> grade students entering 10<sup>th</sup> grade this year have earned 6+ credits, while only 49% of students had reached this benchmark historically.
- » Favorable caseloads for school counselors, which allow them to follow the same students each year and more frequently monitor academic progress;
- » Intensive training for school counselors regarding established benchmarks and use of data;
- » Daily “family groups”, in which staff members meet with the same group of ten students throughout the year to check in;

- » Random sampling of student transcripts throughout the school year for auditing (20 transcripts in each administrative meeting), which ensures that students are taking the proper courses to fulfill graduation requirements and identifies common errors, thereby informing professional development;
- » A checklist on the back of each student's ID card to show the specific requirements needed for graduation, which promotes students' awareness of their own educational needs.

Commissioner Evans commended the idea of putting a graduation checklist on each student ID as a way to empower students, facilitate their ability to advocate for themselves and to monitor and assume responsibility for their own academic progress.

Commissioner White pointed out that an important aspect of the educational partnership is to serve as an incubator for innovation and best practices, and the student ID checklist is a prime example. He stated that he would like to see the targets that have been established at East High School for students in each grade level, and requested data regarding the percentage of students meeting these established targets. Commissioner White stated that he would like a similar checklist for all of the students in the District to facilitate progress monitoring.

**Action Item: Dr. Nelms will provide information to the members of the Excellence in Student Achievement Committee of the percentage of students at East High School meeting each of the established benchmarks for each grade level.**

Dr. Nelms noted that the transition from 9<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> grade is the most critical in high school. He explained that students at East High School are able to earn up to 10 credits per year because five periods are offered each day every other day. Dr. Nelms stated that students have the potential to earn up to 40 credits by the end of high school, which allows some "cushion" in case a student has a bad semester or course.

Commissioner Elliott inquired about strategies for raising students' scores on NYS assessments to proficiency level (i.e. Level 3 or 4). Dr. Nelms explained that the NYS assessments are not aligned with any particular curriculum, which poses a significant challenge to educators. He reported that curriculum writing was conducted over the summer, with over 12,000 hours of professional development for teachers regarding the curriculum and content. Dr. Nelms noted that while the curriculum at East High School is not necessarily aligned with NYS assessments, it is vertically aligned from grade to grade to prepare students to advance to the next level.

Commissioner Elliott referred to the longstanding tendency in the District to have low expectations of students, and asked whether Dr. Nelms is prepared to provide the leadership necessary to ensure that the culture at East High School promotes expectations of every student attaining the highest level on NYS assessments (i.e. Level 4). Dr. Nelms replied that these expectations have been established at East High School. He described efforts to connect with Washington D.C. schools to obtain materials and to provide academic content and activities that are more culturally relevant to enhance student engagement. He gave examples of ways in which literacy has been embedded in activities to involve students and encourage use of these skills outside of the classroom (e.g. a spoken word club and school newspaper). Dr. Nelms pointed out that East High School leaders are interested in pursuing a partnership with School No. 33 to help support students earlier in their education.

Commissioner Elliott asked whether the University of Rochester has conducted an evaluation of the educational partnership at East High School. Dr. Nelms explained that NYS law requires an independent evaluator to be hired to examine the performance of “persistently struggling” schools, such as East High School. He reported that West Ed has been contracted as the independent evaluator for the school, and the Year 2 survey has just been released to parents and staff. Dr. Nelms stated that administrators at East High School meet with West Ed at least once a month to review and discuss performance metrics.

Commissioner Evans requested an update on graduation rates for all other RCSD secondary schools from the Deputy Superintendent for Teaching & Learning. Dr. Otuwa reported that approximately 25% of students in the 2012 cohort have dropped out of school, with the highest dropout rates among Hispanic students, English-Language Learners, and students with disabilities. Despite these figures, Dr. Otuwa stated that she is quite proud of the projected 2015-16 graduation rate of 52.5% for the District, noting that this is the highest rate for the last ten years. She reported that the data clearly indicates an upward trend in graduation rates, but she cautioned that the current rates are projections. She stated that some of the records submitted to the State Education Department may contain errors, which is the reason for hesitation in relying on these figures.

Commissioner Elliott contended that the graduation rate projected for 2015-16 should not be a source of pride because the increase over the last year was slight and the District still has large numbers of students who have dropped out of school. Dr. Otuwa responded that gains are made gradually, and she would prefer to see gradual and consistent progress. Amy Schiavi pointed out that the data that has been presented only includes the 4-Year graduation rate, and historical trends have shown that many more students graduate in 5 to 6 years in the Rochester City School District.

Commissioner Elliott inquired when the 5- and 6-Year graduation rate data will be available. Ms. Schiavi reported that these rates are currently being examined, and can be broken down by cohort.

**Action Item: Dr. Otuwa will provide information to the members of the Excellence in Student Achievement Committee of the 5- and 6-year graduation rates for the District by cohort.**

Dr. Otuwa noted that the greatest gains in the graduation rate in 2015-16 were for African American and Hispanic students, indicating that the District is beginning to close the achievement gap.

Commissioner Elliott inquired about the factors affecting the significant decline in graduation rates (~10%) for White students in 2015-16. Ms. Schiavi replied that this is currently being investigated. Dr. Otuwa speculated that this may be due to characteristics of the population of White students that have remained in the District.

Commissioner Elliott questioned whether the District’s focus on historically under-performing groups has led to a lack of focus on student groups that have been higher performing in the past. She emphasized that she does not want to see academic declines for any student subgroup.

Commissioner White added that the achievement gap should not be closed by lowering the performance of historically high-achieving student groups, but by raising the performance of all groups. Mr. Ulliman clarified that the most significant indicator in the data is the increase in the 4-Year

graduation rate for Hispanic and Black students – the first year in which this has occurred in the District.

Commissioner Elliott asserted that the goal is to increase graduation rates for every student subgroup. She pointed out that further investigation is needed to identify the factors affecting significantly lower on-time graduation rates for formerly high-achieving student subgroups.

Commissioner White contended that further investigation is needed to understand the factors affecting changes in academic achievement for each student subgroup, with a comprehensive analysis to identify specific factors that have been effective in advancing student achievement and the conditions under which efficacy is maximized. He contended that this type of analysis has to begin in 6<sup>th</sup> grade to identify students who are “on track” and “off track” at each grade level. Commissioner White added that the District should be borrowing and implementing best practices from East High School and other schools and districts.

Dr. Otuwa reported an increase in graduation rates for general education students, students with disabilities, English Language Learners, and economically disadvantaged students last year. She announced that this is the first time that the District has seen growth across the board for all of these student subgroups, and expressed the hope that progress will continue.

Commissioner Elliott commented on the almost 5% increase in 4-Year graduation rates for Hispanic students, and requested an explanation of the underlying factors affecting these results in just one year.

**Action Item: Dr. Otuwa will provide an analysis to the members of the Excellence in Student Achievement Committee of the factors affecting the significant increase in 4-Year graduation rates for Hispanic students last year.**

Dr. Otuwa reported that the District added a graduation checklist to student ID badges last year for 9<sup>th</sup> grade students, and this has been expanded to include 10<sup>th</sup> grade students this year. She concurred with Commissioner White’s suggestion to begin tracking students’ academic progress in earlier grades.

Amy Schiavi reviewed the data pertaining to Regents exam results for each subject area and score level, explaining that the data reflect the percentage of students in the 2012 cohort scoring at each level in each subject.

Commissioner Elliott recalled that Dr. Otuwa had previously reported that students have to attain a score of at least 85 on the Regents exams to be considered ready for college. She requested that additional data be incorporated into the chart to show the percentage of students scoring at least 85 in each subject area to indicate their readiness to enter college.

**Action Item: In future reports, Dr. Otuwa will provide information to the Committee members of the percentage of students that scored at least 85 on each of the Regents exams.**

Commissioner Elliott asked how the District plans to assist students to reach college-ready score levels. She emphasized the importance of focusing systematically on strategies shown to be effective in raising the percentage of students scoring at the highest levels on assessments, and in holding District leaders accountable for attaining these goals.

Dr. Otuwa presented data regarding the changes in 4-Year graduation rates from the 2011 to 2012 cohort for each RCSD secondary school. She expressed concern about Vanguard Collegiate High School, and noted that Ms. Schiavi has been working with school staff to ensure that a graduation plan is in place for every student.

Commissioner Evans recommended that the principals of secondary schools attend a meeting in December or January to report to the Board, Superintendent, and the public of their plans to assist students to get on track toward graduation. He pointed out that principals must be held accountable for their school's performance.

The Superintendent described a number of efforts to enhance accountability for students' academic progress:

- Restructuring the job descriptions of the school chiefs to clarify authority in monitoring and supporting schools;
- Conducting "data dialogs" each quarter, which involves the school chiefs meeting with each principal to review data regarding student and teacher performance. Ms. Deane-Williams added that Board members are invited to attend these data dialogs;
- Examining trends over time to determine the underlying factors affecting results, and to identify anomalies.

Commissioner Evans observed that District initiatives have been successful when publicized (e.g. PreK, attendance), and stated that this approach could be adopted to promote the 5-year graduation rate for RCSD students as a success. He noted that District students often need additional time to fulfill graduation requirements, and lobbying should be done at the State level to encourage 5-Year rates to be viewed as a success.

Commissioner Elliott reported that the Community & Intergovernmental Relations Committee plans to conduct a public forum on graduation rates.

Commissioner Hallmark questioned why the reported graduation rates are only projections at this point. Rob Ulliman explained that the District just submitted the data for the August graduates to the NYS Education Department this morning, so the figures have not yet been confirmed.

Commissioner White asserted that internal and external factors must be examined in any analysis of school performance, including the impact of school leadership. He stated that this does not necessarily mean removing school leaders who are under-performing, but offering guidance and support. However, Commissioner White also warned against retaining school leaders who have not been effective.

#### **IV. New Business**

Commissioner Elliott inquired about plans for restoring at least some of the funding for programs in the Office of Adult and Career Education Services (OACES). She stated that the Interim

Superintendent and new Chief Financial Officer had to make difficult decisions to balance the 2016-17 RCSD budget, and these programs are not part of the District's core mission. Commissioner Elliott clarified that she is not necessarily advocating for restoration of these programs, but simply inquiring to know how to respond to the concerns of community members. She stated that she has been explaining to constituents the ongoing legacy costs of programs, particularly in terms of employee benefits (e.g. retirement and health care).

Commissioner White reported that he has discussed concerns about cuts to OACES programs with NYS Senator Joseph Robach. He stated that there seems to be interest in restoring at least the Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) program, particularly in light of the importance of health care careers in our community.

Commissioner Evans expressed concern about prolonging the uncertainty regarding these programs, and in not being able to provide information to the public and to stakeholders.

Meeting adjourned at 7:31PM.