

Evaluation of the East EPO—Year 2 Executive Summary

Introduction

The University of Rochester (UR) was approved by the New York State Education Department (NYSED) to serve as the Educational Partnership Organization (EPO) for East High School starting in the 2015-16 school year. An EPO is the equivalent of superintendent; and is a partner in helping to improve a school that is on the verge of being closed by the NYSED. In the spring of 2016, WestEd was contracted by UR to conduct an external evaluation of the East EPO. This Executive Summary is drawn from the comprehensive Year Two Evaluation Report.

The EPO Plan

The underlying criteria of the original EPO plan – negotiated changes with the teachers’ union, approval from the NYSED, and oversight of the school by the EPO, are all still intact in Year 2. The initial plan included several key characteristics, initiatives, and changes that were also still intact as Year 2 began:

- Adding 6th grade
- Separating the former East High into two schools, East Upper School for grades 9-12 and East Lower School for grades 6-8
- Implementing a longer school day consisting of 7.5 hours with staggered starting and ending times at each school
- Focusing a major emphasis on curriculum and instruction
- Strengthening supports for students academically and behaviorally
- Implementing block scheduling and alternative programs to address student needs
- Implementing Freshman Academy to support new 9th graders
- Adopting a restorative approach to student discipline
- Fostering student/staff connection through family groups.

The status of implementation of these various initiatives is described in full in the Year 2 Evaluation Report and is briefly addressed in this Executive Summary.

The Evaluation

The Year 2 evaluation focused on the progress made in the implementation of key initiatives, programs, and practices begun in Year 1, as well as on identifying which initiatives made the greatest impact on student progress and the continuing strengths and challenges of these as reported by stakeholders in

the school, and as observed by the evaluators. The methodology used was a mixed-methods design that enabled WestEd to gain a variety of perspectives from multiple sources of data. Stakeholder involvement was a critical component of the evaluation plan and helped to develop an attitude of data-based inquiry and reflection with an eye to continuous improvement. The data-gathering methods were implemented via multi-day site visits, the administration of school-wide surveys for scholars, teachers, and administrative staff; ongoing interviews with key leaders of the EPO at both the Warner School/University of Rochester and at East Upper and Lower Schools; classroom observations; focus groups or interviews with teachers, assistant principals/directors, students, counselors and social workers, East staff, UR staff and partners; and observations of support rooms, collaborative planning time, and family group time. The data gathering also included informal conversations with parents during school events, continued conversations with community partners, and the analysis of extant data and document review. Interim evaluation findings have been shared with East leaders via informal discussions, written summaries and presentations to the Oversight Committee and Leadership Team.

Key Findings

EPO Leadership, University and School Support

The University of Rochester is the educational partnership organization for East with an Oversight Committee that oversees and directs the EPO in general, and a superintendent who functions at the school level overseeing the school leadership team and implementation of the EPO plan. The model includes a unique school-level role of the Chief Academic Officer (CAO). The CAO position is considered indispensable as it allows a laser-like focus on curriculum and instruction. In Year 2 the EPO Oversight Committee began to decrease its direct oversight and became less involved in the day-to-day operation of the school. This was an intentional move planned from the start by EPO Leadership, and its accomplishment showed a vote of confidence in the School Leadership Team's management and organization of the school overall.

Year 2 brought continued adjustment in the leadership structure, and the distributed leadership model implemented in Year 1 expanded somewhat as more teachers and teacher leaders moved into informal leadership roles. Inadequate communication in Year 1 that had led to confusion for many regarding the leadership structure was cleared up in Year 2. Efforts were made to clarify the levels of leadership roles and responsibilities resulting in teachers and administrators having higher confidence in the EPO organization and structure. School leaders saw improved impact in terms of distributed leadership in Year 2 and in building a culture of coaching in the school and capacity building, despite some teachers still preferring an approach to leadership with clearer roles and responsibilities set forth.

University Role

Although the EPO Oversight Committee's day-to-day involvement decreased in Year 2, the support provided by university faculty and staff, especially from the Warner School and the Center for Professional Development and Education Reform continued, focusing on leadership and teacher development and curriculum development. University faculty and staff, including curriculum and teaching experts, continued to be involved at East providing consulting or advising to support curriculum

implementation and professional development. Results of teacher, staff, and leader surveys, focus groups, and interviews regarding the university role and its importance, consistently revealed the value of the roles of the superintendent and chief academic officer, and the extensive professional development for curriculum and instruction provided by the faculty associated with the university. Some teachers expressed differing opinions in focus groups regarding the involvement of the university, but teacher survey results were strongly positive; with teachers noting that the University of Rochester (UR) brings resources for students and research-based practices for teachers, and has improved the reputation of East in the community. Further details on the university's role are provided in the full Year 2 Evaluation Report.

Progress of Implementation of Key Initiatives

Year 1 evaluation of the EPO implementation identified successes and revealed challenges of the key initiatives. Again, in Year 2, those fully implemented initiatives with clear evidence of success stand out. The Year 2 comprehensive evaluation report describes these successes and evidence of progress in great detail, as well as the continuing challenges encountered, and the adjustments implemented as of Fall 2016. Here we present highlights of the findings for each initiative and we also provide a summary of the extant data analysis on student progress and outcomes.

School Structure

The initial changes made under the EPO in school structure remained constant in Year 2. The implementation of Freshman Academy for new freshmen entering 9th grade, the two distinct schools – Upper and Lower, the addition of sixth grade, block scheduling and the longer school day with staggered start and end times all were deemed successful and necessary for the ambitious enactment of various student supports and more collaborative teacher time. Though each of these structural changes had met with some resistance during Year 1, such as teachers and students who considered the longer day and block scheduling to be burdensome, the benefits these changes allowed, such as a support period for students, time for teacher collaboration, and a robust set of career and technical education and elective offerings to address student interests are now seen as necessary and the school community appears to have adjusted well to these changes. The enrollment of a full sixth grade class continued to be a work in progress as Year 2 concluded.

Curriculum & Instruction

In Year 2, the overarching framework used for the extensive curriculum redesign work continued to be Understanding by Design (UBD). The focus for Year 2 included the development and implementation of common formative assessments, performance task assessments, the continued development of UbD units for all courses as well as the enhancement of teachers' use of learning targets. Another major goal of the EPO involved enhancing the rigor and level of cultural relevance of the curriculum. Given the intense focus on strengthening the curriculum, along with higher expectations for students and efforts to help teachers change their classroom practice, it was not surprising that many teachers felt overwhelmed with the extent of the changes expected of them during Year 1. In addition, teachers believed that students were not hearing a strong message about taking responsibility for learning and

that the focus had been mostly on “sharpening” teachers. During focus groups and from the teacher survey the evaluators heard these complaints less often for Year 2. However, there are still some teachers who feel they are not receiving the appropriate support or level of autonomy needed to implement their particular curriculum, and that the level of rigor and cultural relevance of the curriculum could still be strengthened.

EPO and school leaders were interested in the extent of curriculum implementation with fidelity. While 81% of Lower School teachers and 72% of Upper School teachers indicated that they are implementing the curriculum as designed, administrators hoped to see higher percentages here, and will want to explore the reasons more teachers are not implementing the curriculum with greater fidelity.

EPO and school leaders were also interested in the extent teachers believe the curriculum to be rigorous and culturally relevant. Although the teacher survey results indicate a high number of Lower and Upper School teachers believe the curriculum is rigorous, some teachers during focus groups indicated that some specific areas of the curriculum are less rigorous than that of some surrounding suburban districts. Teacher survey data indicate that more Lower School teachers indicated the curriculum is culturally relevant to students than Upper School teachers did (67% vs 47%).

In terms of instructional practices, an increase was observed in Year 2 in the number and quality of Learning Targets being displayed or used in classrooms as compared to Year 1. This indicates that teachers are better understanding the potential power and impact of Learning Targets to enhance their teaching; and suggests the extensive professional learning focused on Learning Targets in Year 2 has been effective in shifting teacher practice.

EPO leadership would do well to investigate the issues those dissatisfied teachers continue to bring up and focus on resolving them.

Professional Learning & Staff Support

The EPO continued to provide extensive training and professional learning opportunities for teachers and staff in Year 2, as outlined in the school’s five-year professional learning plan. Most of these opportunities were viewed positively by East teachers and staff. Faculty and staff at the University, especially the Warner School and the Center for Professional Development and Education Reform, continued to provide support for leadership and teacher development, curriculum development and implementation, professional development and more throughout Year 2. According to teacher/staff survey results, there is strong agreement that the University of Rochester’s role in supporting effective teaching at East is invaluable, despite a few teachers who expressed the sense that the UR’s way is inflexible and devalues their professional experience.

Teacher Collaborative Planning Time (CPT) was considered an extremely important professional learning opportunity that occurs almost daily and focuses on the key goals of strengthening teachers’ instructional practices and ability to implement rigorous curricula. In Year 2 teachers also used CPT to engage in professional conversations and to look at student data. Teachers indicated that the quality of CPT varies; and most teachers considered Content CPT to be more relevant, while IDCPT was seen as less valuable. Evaluators observed more CPTs being led by coaches in Year 2, with better organization,

higher focus on instruction, and an increased use of common language. One of the tensions around CPT, however, is that some teachers would prefer a less coach-driven approach to more actual teacher-teacher collaboration in CPT.

School leaders reportedly implemented a more comprehensive and systematic plan to observe teachers in Year 2, to continuously monitor for quality and to see if practices taught in professional learning were being implemented. Most teachers viewed this change as positive; however some still revealed a lag in the timing of receiving feedback after an observation.

Student Supports

The additional social workers and counselors hired in Year 1 to better support students was a first step taken by the EPO and proved to be a very positive one. Two other important onsite supports for students at East, viewed as critical to the success of turnaround efforts, continued to be monitored to ensure timely resolution to challenges that arose. These were the “support room model” and “family group” both of which endured challenges in Year 1 that were addressed even before the end of the school year. Significant changes in these two student support strategies were instrumental to the positive impacts made during Year 2.

Support Room Model

The Upper and Lower School Support Room models varied greatly; with the Upper School model being viewed as more successful. Several changes employed in the Upper School model will be implemented in the Lower School model next year. These included a newly organized leadership structure and clarified roles and responsibilities for support room staff, and greater coordination between classroom teachers and support room staff to ensure streamlined support for student academic progress. Small, specific groupings of students with appropriate staff were developed supporting better student engagement and preparation for Regents exams.

Family Group

Family Group was also enhanced with very beneficial improvements in Year 2. Each family group was assigned two or more co-parents; other changes included a more flexible curriculum, more school-wide activities during family group, the creation of specific groups to meet the needs of certain school populations, and a less rigid protocol for allowing students to switch family groups all led to higher ratings for student and staff satisfaction in Year 2. Challenges still hinder the success of some family groups, such as student engagement and heavy use of cell phones, and lesson plans that are not age-appropriate. Staff might explore ways to increase the degree to which family group is student-led, and also on assisting parents to modify lesson plans as needed.

Restorative Practices

Another central endeavor at East is the implementation of Restorative Practices. Teachers, leaders, and staff generally believe restorative practices are important, but many reported very varied experiences with the restorative strategies. This was apparent as well from the student survey. Although restorative

practices are credited with being an overall benefit to the school in enhancing a more positive culture and climate, more training in these strategies was requested by teachers and staff. Restorative practices are becoming more ingrained in some aspects of the school community; teachers and staff would like to see the restorative approach used with/by all levels in the school, not just with students.

Community Partners & Parent/Family Engagement

The extensive community partner roster of the EPO continues to grow and change. Community partners are considered to be a huge asset to the school and its student and family populations, providing services such as counseling and mental health support, wellness education, advocates for students and guidance to families for obtaining appropriate services, tutoring, mentoring, and providing internships for students as well. In Year 2, the Families and Community Engagement (FACE) committee and the original Community Engagement Team of community partners were blended together to help strengthen the family engagement component which has stymied East's leadership historically. Parent attendance at some school events improved due to changes such as student-led conferences, combined parent events, and school-based partner/local agency fairs. Even though parent attendance at school events is still low, teachers and administrators report that parents promptly respond to calls about their scholars and are generally supportive and cooperative. Partners readily revealed that families are open to assistance and support, and often instigate communication with partner organizations in support of scholars. Thus a relationship-based approach to strengthening family engagement and community partnerships through FACE was begun in Year 2, and has proceeded to implement regularly-scheduled meetings, better communication to partners and families, and other systems to further support improvement in this area. Despite challenges, improving parent/family engagement with East will continue to be a strong focus going forward.

Alternative Programs

The EPO implemented three alternative programs to better meet the needs of students who were disengaged, out-of-school, over-aged, and/or under credit. These were Quest, Big Picture, and Freedom School. Many teachers and some administrators at East had limited knowledge of each alternative program's purpose and student eligibility criteria, leaving some staff with incorrect perceptions of the students in these programs. In addition, not all teachers and staff believe the alternative programs present rigorous enough curricula to prepare students for the Regents exams. After some success in Year 1, the Quest program, which is the alternative program most integrated into East, reconfigured its purpose and began working more intently on improving its low attendance rates in Year 2; and a Quest2 program was implemented to expand the potential for more students to catch up on credits and experience success. Freedom School operates independently from East and Freedom School enjoyed enough success in Year 2 to make a difference for a small number of students. Big Picture's Year 2, however, was fraught with challenges and whether it will continue was undetermined at the end of the school year. The EPO might consider additional focus groups and interviews with alternative program scholars and their parents to identify ways to improve the overall successes at these alternative programs.

Student Progress and Outcomes

[To be updated in September 2017 after data are released]

Reflections, Recommendations, and Replication

The East EPO turnaround effort is ambitious and complex. The first year of implementation was described by many as a sometimes difficult “learning year.” Year 2 has focused on adjustments made to address the challenges of Year 1, and solidifying improvements in curriculum, teaching practices, and culture and climate. Year 2 saw a very visible shift in school climate with more orderly hallways, increased student engagement in Family Group, and a pervasive sense of “all-in” by teachers, staff, and administrators. Teachers and school administrators are committed to improving classroom instruction.

It can be easy to lose sight of the progress and accomplishments when living the day-to-day challenges of implementation. The evidence suggests that, while still facing challenges, East is making progress toward its goals of school improvement. Table 1, below, presents an assessment of East’s progress toward turnaround in four key domains of turnaround and recommendations to further strengthen or solidify progress.

The East EPO may want to consider ongoing evaluation to continuously monitor progress toward its goals. It would also provide a way for stakeholders, from students to teachers, staff, family, and the community, to provide input and feedback. The EPO might consider establishing a small evaluation committee with diverse stakeholders to inform the evaluation.

Replication of the East EPO model

The EPO leadership at the University of Rochester is interested in understanding the essential elements of the East model that need to be in place if this model were to be replicated. While it is still too early to measure impact on student outcomes, certain elements of the EPO are emerging as key and should be considered in any replication of the model:

- A leadership structure with a position focuses exclusively on curriculum and instruction.
- The ability to recruit and hire teachers and staff who are committed to the mission, vision, and hard work of implementing school turnaround.
- The implementation of a research-based curriculum.
- Time for guided teacher collaboration.
- Time for students to get extra support in order to meet higher expectations.
- A focus on transforming the school culture and climate,
- Strategic engagement of community partners to meet the non-academic needs of students and their families.
- Creative ways to engage and inform parents of the expectations for students.
- Outreach to the community to forge connections and take advantage of opportunities that may further support students and the school.

Table 1. East and the four domains of rapid improvement

Domains	Assessment of East’s progress	Recommendations to address challenges
<p>Turnaround leadership</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The EPO has prioritized improvement and communicated urgency. • The EPO is monitoring progress. • Support is more school-wide than customized. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to strengthen distributive leadership. • Plan for leadership transitions. • Much responsibility and knowledge about curriculum and instruction resides with CAO.
<p>Talent development</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The EPO recruited all new staff and engages in extensive staff development. Some fear burn-out that may threaten the sustainment of talented teachers/staff. • The EPO provides extensive professional learning opportunities, many of which are required. Professional learning is targeted on EPO’s priorities but may not be targeted toward individual teacher needs. • The EPO has set clear expectations for teacher performance and has been enforcing them. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider how IDCPT can be made more effective, for example through clearer expectations or the use of protocols. • Consider how teacher leaders can spend more time coaching individual and groups of teachers to more fully realize potential.
<p>Instructional transformation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The EPO is making progress in diagnosing and responding to student learning needs. The extent of student needs was surprising to EPO leaders in Year 1. Challenges are especially evident in staffing for supporting the needs of English learner students. • The EPO is continuing its multi-year process of developing rigorous curriculum with all subjects and grades involved in curriculum writing or refinement to ensure a strong alignment to standards. • The EPO is assessing literacy levels in students and providing supplemental literacy interventions when needed. It is unclear whether barriers to learning and opportunities for enhanced learning are present in the school. • The EPO is engaging in strategic partnerships to help meet student needs that may otherwise be barriers to student learning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support increased fidelity of curriculum implementation. • Strengthen the Lower School Support model. • Strengthen the academic rigor of alternative programs. • Consider ways to increase student engagement in the classroom and with academic content. • Continue to support teachers in implementing research-based practices, such as higher order thinking skills, and the transfer of new information.

Domains	Assessment of East’s progress	Recommendations to address challenges
<p>Culture shift</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Year 2 has seen more effort on explicitly building a culture focused on learning through adherence to the mission and vision, through tracking progress and grades in Family Group, and through other data tracking efforts. Students appear to be taking more ownership of their learning, but it is not evident across the board in terms of effort. • School leaders solicit input from stakeholders via various surveys throughout the year and through the “Let’s Talk” anonymous question submission system on the school’s website. • School leaders continue to struggle with engaging parents. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Address chronic absenteeism and tardiness. • Support teachers and staff who may be reluctant to embrace the parent role. • Consider ways that Restorative Practices can be modeled at all levels of the school.