

Is Outside Help Coming to Eastern?

School Officials Looking for Curriculum and Teacher Development

ARTICLE AND PHOTO BY KYLE JOHNSON

In planning for an academic re-vamping of Eastern Senior High School, much emphasis has been placed on creating an academy structure to break up the student body into smaller groups. Recent discussions between District school system officials and a Los Angeles-based organization suggest that other changes could also be in store in the near future.

DC officials have met several times with Steve Barr, founder and chairman of Green Dot Public Schools, and Barr has toured Eastern. Barr returned to DC in mid-August to continue those discussions to see if Green Dot would be a good fit for Eastern or other schools.

If Green Dot is brought in by the school system, Green Dot would likely handle curriculum planning and teacher techniques and training, according to John Davis, instructional superintendent for DC public schools. School staff would remain employees of the school system.

“For example, I’ll still evaluate the principal. I’m still their manager,” he said.

Talking hypothetically, Davis said Green Dot or any other outside organization would be brought in to help low-performing schools get better. These organizations wouldn’t replace the school staff or the school system’s involvement, however.

“Really, what it comes down to is we want to bring in people who have had some success with students, especially students in urban sites, and we think that they can bring something to the table,” Davis said. “Comprehensive high schools are just tough. So if we’re bringing in people that have had some success, then it’s a win-win situation. It’s got to be managed well, but



Signs welcoming students back to school were put on the fence around the student learning complex, the home of Eastern for the next year during the renovations at the school. The complex is situated just east of the school.

it’s a win-win situation.”

Not a Done Deal

It isn’t unprecedented for outside organizations to work within public school systems in an attempt to improve education quality, especially within DC. Friends of Bedford, which runs a Brooklyn public high school, was put in charge of Coolidge and Dunbar this summer, and the DC-based Friendship Public Charter Schools is now working at Anacostia Senior High School.

Green Dot has become well known in education circles for its success in improving education in some of Los Angeles’s worst schools. Earlier this year, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan met with Barr to discuss plans

to improve the nation’s worst schools. At that meeting, Barr said Duncan urged him to take his work to a national level, including in DC.

“It seems like at least I have to go out and see if we can help,” Barr said of his meetings with DC school officials.

Barr said he has traveled to other cities to find a good fit for his organization, but DC is high on the priority list because of the symbolic importance of quality education in the federal government’s home turf.

“It’d be great to show that hopeful example ... in our nation’s capital,” he said.

Barr and Justin Cohen of the school system’s Office of Portfolio Management both said that it’s too

early to tell if Green Dot will be working with Eastern or any other school.

“Our process for partners is to engage the community in a discussion of whether or not partnership would be a good strategy for the school in question; identify partners who are willing and able to operate their program within DCPS; match partners with schools; and give partners between six months and one year of planning on the ground,” Cohen said in an e-mail.

Cohen said a final decision would be made “in the next few months.”

Green Dot’s standard operating procedure when starting at a new school is to work at the community level to stir up support for their work. Barr’s background helps in this pursuit: he has worked as a political fundraiser,

co-founded Rock the Vote and worked on President Bill Clinton's 1992 campaign.

If Green Dot is brought in to help at Eastern, Barr said he and his staff members would relocate to DC and the school's neighborhood. They would then work with all the stakeholders in the school to ensure they have support to instill changes at the school.

"Every one of our schools has been built that way," Barr said.

Suzanne Wells of the Capitol Hill Public School Parent Organization was not familiar with Green Dot's work, but she was opposed to bringing in outside organizations to help run the schools, especially a group like Green Dot with a charter school background.

"Charter schools are private enterprises, and they can come and go in a day. Green Dot could close up tomorrow and not even be there," she said. "If these people are so interested in improving the schools, then they should work within the system already in place to do that."

Leading the Way

Eastern is heading in the right direction whether or not Green Dot is brought in, Principal William Chiselom said. Chiselom, who just started his second year on the job and taught at the school from 1988 to 1999, said strong leadership is the key to success at Eastern.

"Going into last year, I was [principal] number 11 in 13 years, so there was of course a lot of turnover. A lot of times, when you bring folks in from the outside, they may not know the culture of the school, and that person may not get an opportunity to bring some staff in with them to help them establish what he or she is trying to do," he said. "Sometimes, you know, it's overwhelming."

Last year, Chiselom started some programs that he said have helped to position the school for future success. For example, staff spent 30 minutes each morning on "collaborative planning time" to focus on improving teaching.

"We were able to be up close in the face of the teachers on a daily basis, emphasizing some of the same things," Chiselom said.

That program will continue this year, and school administrators will keep an emphasis on advocating best teaching practices at the school.

In addition to working with the teachers, Chiselom said it's important to get the involvement of the "first teachers of kids," their parents.

"One of the things that really determine the outcome of kids is effective parenting. I think that's one of the things that have changed over the years," he said.

A parent center was created at Eastern last year to help educate the parents and instill in them the importance of providing a quality education for their children.

"Once we can get them to buy into what we're doing, I think we have a better chance of educating more effectively the child," Chiselom said.

Nature vs. Nurture

Many people weighing in on school reform say that a school's building is an important contributor to the success or failure of a school. If a school's building is out of shape, the school is more likely to be dysfunctional, in other words.

Count Davis and Chiselom out of that group. Both said that the remodeled building will be nice, but it will not make or break the academic program.

"Yes, you would like to think the environment does have some impact, but ultimately, I was comfortable with Eastern as it was," Chiselom said.

Davis added, "If the teaching isn't where it should be, then it's a nice building that's kind of hollow."

And if the school is headed in the right direction, when can students and parents expect to see changes in the school's overall quality?

Davis said that the first step is to instill a "sense of culture" within the incoming freshmen next year. If that happens, barring major problems with the senior class finishing up high school next year, Davis said there could be improvements as soon as the next year.

The proposed academy structure for the school is a large part of instilling the school's culture in the students. Fesler said a freshman academy is essentially a lock for the school, and a health academy is likely as well. Two other academies – one on the "liberal arts track" that would aim to prepare students for college, and a law and public safety academy for future lawyers and law enforcement officers – are also in the preliminary planning stages.

The liberal arts and law academies aren't sure things yet, and the finalized academic structure won't be known until early next year.

All students will be in one of the academies, with the freshman having their own academy and the higher grades split between the other options. Regardless of the specifics of the academies, Fesler said that one of the core values guiding the school is to prepare all students for either higher education or a career after high school.

"We've been really careful to say even if you're in the health track, you don't have to be a doctor," she said. ★

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