

The following is a summary of the EHS meeting with Superintendent Rainwater on January 18, 2005 at Warner Park.

Interim Principal Rathert was also present. Carol Carstensen was the only board member I saw. Candidate Laurie Kobza was there as well. I don't know what Larry Winkler looks like. Sorry if I missed him or any other board member.

The Superintendent was in good form. He began the meeting by laying out the process for everyone. Then he took questions and suggestions. He seemed open and cordial to comments, but did not really agree to change the process in any way. He said that the interview process is grueling and he thinks it does a good job of identifying good candidates for the job. Mr. Rathert also agreed, though he admitted that the system selected him so he has a bias.

Here are things people said:

(1) Could we have a forum at EHS after the top three candidates are identified so that parents could meet the finalists and ask questions?

Superintendent Rainwater (for brevity I'll use SR in this text) said he needed to think about it but would get back to us.

(2) One parent thanked SR for agreeing to allow students to be included in the surveys sent home to rank priorities for East. Initially only parents were being asked to do this. I'm not sure about staff. I believe these priorities will be used by the selection committee for formulating questions.

(3) It was also questioned why Valencia Douglas was not open to allowing seniors to serve on the hiring committee. They know so much more and are more outspoken than sophomores or juniors. Also, they have experienced East under Milt McPike and his successor (funny, she was never mentioned by name the entire night).

SR said it was the first he heard of this and would look into it. He seemed willing to change this restriction.

(4) One parent asked if SR could meet with the selection committee after they ranked their top three candidates so that they could elaborate on their selections.

SR said he would be happy to do it, but did not know how it could be done. He also said he felt the number rankings were enough information. He wants each step of the process to be a fresh look at the candidates.

(5) One parent expressed everyone's frustration that the last hire at East was so terrible. SR made some comment to the effect that when you hire a lot of administrators like he does there will be some mistakes. Then he pointed out his great hires at Sherman and Black Hawk.

The parent came right back at him and said flatly that those two schools went through several years of duds before they got a principal who was good. The parent also

suggested that the board look at changing the hiring process because there is not a lot of trust right now.

(6) There was talk about East's reputation as "the ghetto school."

SR said it is a great school and no one in the administration talks that way. Given the student body one can't compare it to West or Memorial, but if you compare it to the suburban high schools it turns out more merit scholars than they do.

One parent did express frustration that funding doesn't seem to match the needs of students. East has some of the neediest students.

Another parent, who works to relocate families to Madison, said that many Madison employers and realtors promote the Westside over the Eastside, which keeps the money flowing west.

SR said that Madison has greater poverty in all its schools and tight budgets are hurting our ability to meet those kids' needs.

(7) Principal Rathert was asked to make some comments about EHS. He said he really enjoys working there. He said that the student body is kind and supportive and the staff is very dedicated. He also said that he thinks East is in a great place right now and is just waiting for a leader to come in and take it forward.

(8) When asked what the field of candidates will look like, SR said that there are a couple strong internal candidates that may apply. He knows nothing of the external field, but the search officially closes on January 26 and then the HR office will know more. To date there are 8 applicants. Most applications come in closer to the deadline.

(9) SR also said that the only thing he can PROMISE is that he will never hire someone if he feels they can't do the job. He will only hire someone he believes can do a great job, but one cannot always predict a person's success from an interview. The last hire for East did not work out, but she seemed like a very good choice. If he knew then what he knows now, he would have reopened the search process.

Someone pointed out that if you look at her administrative background, she did not come from a diverse school. SR responded that she had 17 years at Milwaukee King before that. The person replied that she was not a proven administrator from Milwaukee King,

SR said if the top candidates were weak, he would appoint an interim principal again and restart the process to find someone better. He said Madison is competitive for Wisconsin, but has not kept pace with the rest of the country in salaries and benefits. Ten years ago, Madison would receive 70 applications for this job. Today it will receive 15-25.

The Human Resources Department will fact-check the applicants and then send them to 3 people to be rated. There are 6-8 questions on the application, which are rated blindly (no names and any identifying information is removed). The top 8 will go to the selection committee to be interviewed. Interviews should start at the end of March or early April.

(10) SR said he was looking for someone who is a leader; someone who will gather people together; someone who can connect the stakeholders in the community and move East forward; and someone who will unite the staff and be there for students. He said he wants “Someone who will bleed purple & gold.” — meaning someone who will be dedicated to the job 24/7, do outreach, and be visible at school events. SR said that downtown can help with budgets and curriculum, that leadership was the most important quality for the next principal at East.

A parent said, “No suckers, please.” For those of you who don’t know, Principal Tillman preferred to spend her time handing out suckers to kids on their birthday, rather than dealing with more pressing, difficult problems. Not only was it a horrible waste of her time, but the kids felt insulted. SR and Mr. Rathert agreed that was really bad and high school students need to be treated like young adults.

Conclusion.

If you believe that our superintendent cares about East and wants to get it right this time (like he finally did at Sherman and Black Hawk), then you left the meeting feeling good. If you question the process and his decision-making ability given some of his poor choices in the past, you probably left the meeting feeling disappointed, which is mostly what I heard. Nothing has changed.

It was not said, but we pay for the mistakes for a very long time. A great principal can turn a school around in weeks, but a bad principal or several principals for several years can really hurt the students going through those schools. It is not just failing to master academics, but their feeling of connection gets hurt as well. It could be argued that some of the problems East is having today stem not only from the void at the top at East, but also from the fact that two of its feeder middle schools and some of its feeder elementary schools have been struggling due to poor leadership.