

JOINT MEETING OF SCHOOL BOARDS 65 AND 202

Held at ETHS on January 16, 2007

OBSERVER: Connie Goddard

MEMBERS ATTENDING:

All members of both boards attended, along with both superintendents – Dr. Eric Witherspoon and Dr. Hardy Murphy -- and several staff members, particularly those involved with counseling and school safety.

PRESS ATTENDING

The Evanston RoundTable (the session was not taped)

PUBLIC AND OTHERS ATTENDING

D 65 middle school principals attended, too; there were very few – if any -- members of the general public.

MEETING TIME

The meeting began on time (7:30 p.m.) and lasted until 10:30 p.m. or so. It moved along very quickly, though – no dallying or irrelevance. All the board and main staff remained until the end.

PURPOSE

The meeting was called to discuss transition of 8th graders to the high school, a process that begins in February. The discussion quickly moved, however, to a review of how well the two districts are coordinating intervention for students whose past difficulties (academic and behavior) suggest they would have a more difficult time than others.

DISCUSSION

This was the first time in three years that both boards met together; there was general agreement that this should happen more often. There was also discussion about (a) joint committee meetings to address particular issues, (b) establishing joint policies regarding discipline, rewards and punishments, etc., and (c) this would involve coordinating the writing of both districts' handbooks. (Witherspoon and Murphy already have a monthly meeting.)

Regarding transition: This was fairly straightforward; apparently staff members at both schools have been putting extra effort into coordination over the past few years. Of note is that 2/3 of D 65 8th graders attend summer school at D 202 before freshman year. There were reports about various programs such as MAP, PBIS (Positive Behavior Intervention and Support), plus Excell and Access; the former has to do with academic work; the latter with negotiating a school with 3100 students – it is offered during summer school; not required but encouraged. (I may have some of these details confused; the point is that the staff puts in lots of effort – and coordinates it between districts.)

Some members of both boards expressed concern that students were not "low-balled" or typecast as special ed students – that they be allowed a fresh start at ETHS. Staff at both schools said that efforts were made to avoid such tracking.

Some good news was reported – statistics on behavior at D 65 mean that behavior really has improved, not just that there are changes in reporting standards; a D 202 person said that behavior was less a concern in classrooms (or where adults were present) than elsewhere; the cameras that have been installed at ETHS have apparently worked to deter poor behavior.

There was a lot of discussion about behavior modification and anger management, including an effort to make the point that “great things can happen when you follow the rules;” and positive reinforcement rather than punishment (rewards for good behavior, etc.)

There was also discussion of parental involvement – both notifying them of infractions as well as bringing them in on improvement process. (There were no complaints about parents not paying attention.)

Both Northwestern and UIC have been involved in various aspects of these issues: NU is devising a program that begins at grade 3 and aims to support students through college entrance; a UIC course did a survey for 202 on how safe people felt there. (See below.)

The safety survey found that roughly 85 percent of both students and adults at ETHS feel that the school environment is safe (I believe results from this study are still being analyzed.)

COMMENTARY

I was tremendously impressed by several things at the meeting, chiefly: (1) the extent to which the social service and safety staff at the two districts coordinate their efforts, particularly for those students who represent challenges to the staff and (2) the extent to which the professional staff at both schools – regardless of ethnic background – understands the challenges and is working together to meet the needs of students most in need of assistance. There was a refreshing amount of honesty and diligence in addressing these matters – these are our children, collectively, and as a community we have to work together to help them move into productive lives.