

UNUSUAL APPROACH, IMPRESSIVE RESULTS

School

Vertus, East face pivotal days for school innovation

Justin Murphy Rochester Democrat and Chronicle | USA TODAY NETWORK

TCharter institution with 1,200 students and roots dating back a century here is plenty to distinguish East High School and Vertus Charter School: The former is a Rochester century; the latter, one of the newest high schools in the city, with under 300 students.

Nonetheless, each school in its own way is at the forefront of educational innovation in the Rochester area. And for each, this weekend's graduating class represents an important juncture in determining success.

One day last week, Vertus Dean of Students Joseph Carter addressed a sparse morning meeting. Half the usual attendees were preparing to sit for Regents exams; the rest were tucking in their official school polo shirts, depositing their cell phones in plastic bins and stuffing the last of their breakfast into their mouths.

Carter exhorted them to stay concentrated on their remaining tests. He congratulated a few students by name, including one young man who'd recently changed his truant ways. He announced the class that had posted the greatest year-over-year growth on reading, earning ice cream and a trip to the Rochester Sports Garden.

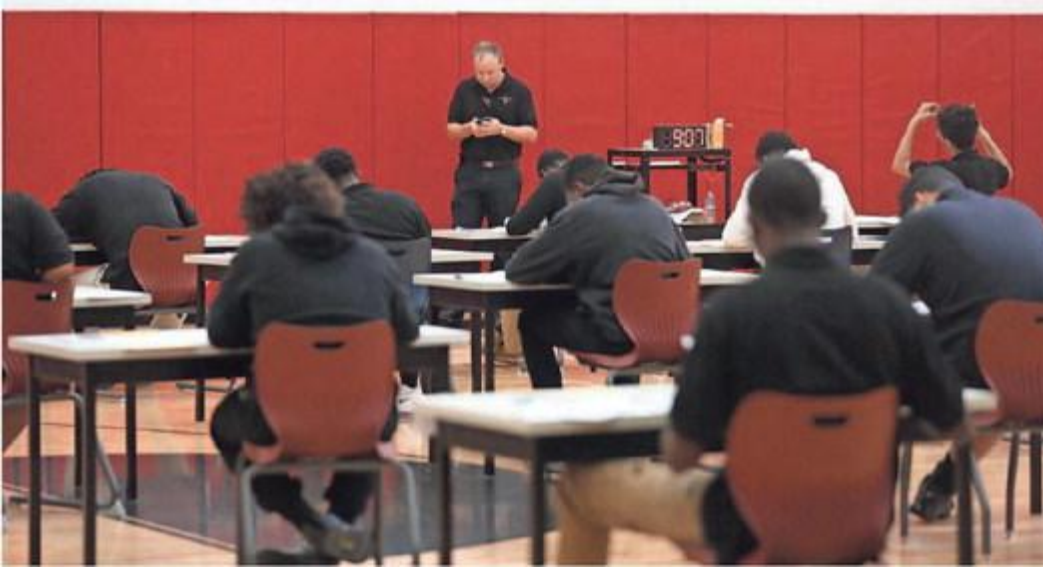
The young men joined him, as always in the school creed, which ends: "We are our brothers' keepers. We are leaders of character. We are Vertus men."

"Everyone in here is a leader," Carter said. "I need you to be leaders in the community when you go home, too."

If the purpose of charter schools is to pilot innovative new ways to educate children, Vertus is the local school doing it the most faithfully. It is unique in Rochester, or nearly so, in several respects including:

- All-male student body.
- Blended learning, with students spending half their time in class and half on a computer program that allows them to progress at their

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Vertus seniors take their Regents exams in the gym. TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/@TYEE23/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



Vertus High Head Dean Joseph Carter addresses the students in the cafeteria before the start of class. TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/@TYEE23/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

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own pace.

■ Students are accountable not just to teachers but also to their “preceptor,” a position that combines the roles of tutor, mentor and coach for small groups of students.

■ Taking Regents exams is delayed until the school believes students are ready to pass them, even if it means waiting a year or two beyond the normal credit sequence.

As co-founder Leigh McGuigan put it last year: “We can do things the same way everybody else does and get the same results. We don’t want to do that.”

The unusual approach has generated some impressive results. Student growth in math and reading is more than double the national average, according to NWEA MAP tests. Students can get an array of real-world work experience, from making prosthetic hands on a 3D printer to working at a nonprofit bike shop down the street.

Eric Cornwall is only in 11th grade but will be graduating this June after taking advantage of the self-paced computer program to accelerate his studies. He has already taken five classes at Monroe Community College and nearly earned a certificate in advanced manufacturing.

He was sitting back relaxing while classmates were cramming for Regents tests or finishing off their final class projects.

“The more work you get done early, the less you have to do later,” he pointed out.

Financial strain on Vertus

After administering just 22 Regents exams in 2016 — and none in 2015, its first year — Vertus administered 88 in 2017 and maintained an unusually high passage rate.

There have been struggles as well. Enrollment is well below capacity, putting a financial strain on the school. Attendance is in the low 80s, principal Julie Nocey said, too low to sustain steady success, and the suspension rate remains high.

Like most Rochester-area charter schools there are nearly no English language learners, and while the 21 percent special education classification rate matches that of the Rochester City School District, Vertus does not accommodate students with significant disabilities.

“We don’t kid ourselves that we’re the great example for all mankind,” board Chairman Bryan Hickman said. “We’re just a group of people trying to educate young boys, and some of the things we’re doing seem to be working pretty well.”

The class of 2018 is Vertus’ first group of graduating seniors, and the number of young men walking across the stage this weekend will go a long way in the state Board of Regents’ determination of whether its charter should be renewed in 2019. The graduation rate target in the charter document is 80 percent. Nocey said she’s confident it will be better than 70 percent this year.

“Of course there’s pressure there,” she said. “But the bigger pressure is doing the right thing for these young men and letting them be something bigger than what they would have been.”

East remains on course

If Vertus had a golf team — it doesn’t — and one of the golfers struck a solid four-iron facing north, the ball would sail over Atlantic Avenue and land on the football field at East High School, home to a very different experiment in urban education.

On the same day Joseph Carter is addressing the morning meeting at Vertus, East Upper School Principal Marlene Blocker is holed up in her office.

The weather is perfect, the sunshine brilliant, but she doesn’t look up to the window once.

Instead, she asks: “You got an English on him?”

Counselor Christine Burnell puts aside the thick binder she’s been leafing through and bends over for another thick binder.

“Yes — 87 in June of last year,” she answers. Blocker nods, almost imperceptibly, and moves on. “Next, Matthew. Good to go?” It’s two weeks before graduation and Blocker isn’t sleeping well. The thought that keeps her awake is missing a sign that one of her charges is missing a credit he needs to graduate.

She, Burnell and counselor Anne Rosdahl triple-check the progress of every 12th-grader with one another to determine who will be graduating, who will be attending summer school and who has more work to do. They

track their work with two software programs, a thicket of sticky notes and a rainbow of highlighter pens.

“It’s so critical that you don’t miss one little thing that will be the difference from them being a graduate forever ... or giving up and being a dropout forever,” she said. “The problem is, there are about 40 combinations to graduate and they change all the time. If your counselors and administrators aren’t up to speed, a student could very, very, very easily fall through the cracks.”

Another student needs four credits in summer school, they all agree. Blocker winces.

The University of Rochester partnership with East High School is by far the most visible and most closely watched education innovation in the city. As school board President Van White said at the outset: “If this doesn’t work, we’re in trouble.”

The key points of the model include:

- An emphasis on relationship-building with students and families.
- More restorative justice, including through peace circles and family groups.
- More time on math and reading.
- A greater array of extracurricular and enrichment activities.
- Closer attention by administrators of how students are accumulating credits.
- More opportunities for students not on track for graduation to catch up.

The August graduation rate was 33 percent in 2015 and is projected in the low 50s this year, a gain of 20 points in three years and near the stated goal of 55 percent in year three. Suspensions have plummeted and climate surveys have backed up the perception that the school feels different now.

As at Vertus, attendance has proved the most difficult problem to address. At the same time the percentages of students with disabilities and English language learners have decreased since UR arrived, as has the overall student body, which now stands at about 1,000 even including an additional grade level.

Most significantly, East had a budget of \$23.4 million in 2017-18, of which it anticipates returning about \$1.2 million to the district. By comparison, Edison Career and Technology High School has over 600 more students than East but a budget of just \$16.9 million.

In stark terms, East spends twice as much per student as Edison.

Part of the additional East funding goes toward its separate administration costs, including the salary of Superintendent Shaun Nelms, the district’s third-highest paid employee at \$210,000. Much also goes to additional support staff, such as social workers, that UR insisted upon for East students.

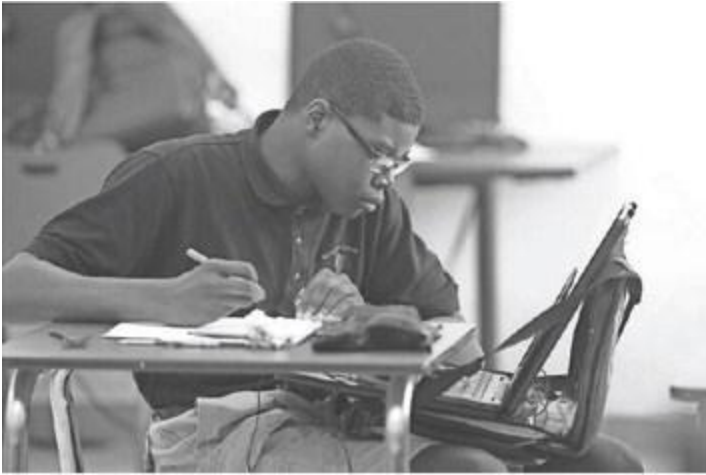
Nonetheless, it is remarkable to hear Nelms and Blocker say that East, long the most lamented school in the district, is oversubscribed for ninth grade in 2018-19. In fact, they said it is the third most popular high school in the district in the placement process.

UR projected that its first class of sixth-graders would eventually graduate at 84 percent. That won’t be known until 2022.

In the meantime, Blocker checks and rechecks the names in her color-coded binder.

“We were never going to turn things around in one year,” she said. “Anyone who thought that is foolish. The important thing is to make steady progress so it becomes ingrained.”

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Dylon Gardner, a sophomore, works on English language arts coursework. TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/@TYEE23/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



Eric Cornwall, a graduating senior, hangs out in a senior work area at Vertus High School. TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/@TYEE23/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER