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## What Works

### Head of the Class

**Eastside Prep balances support and structure  
in a school for low-income minority students**

By Pehr Luedtke

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## ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

### Head of the Class

Eastside Prep balances support and structure in a school for low-income minority students

by Pehr Luedtke

The only sound in this particular classroom at East Palo Alto's Eastside College Preparatory School is the scratching of pencils on paper and the occasional shuffling of textbooks. This is a high school study hall at 4 p.m., and approximately 20 students are seated at their desks reading. This may not seem like such a big deal – except that these students hail from one of the poorest minority communities in Northern California. And, despite their background, these particular students will graduate and likely go on to four-year colleges.

In fact, since its founding in 1996, all of Eastside Prep's students have graduated and gone to a four-year college, including nearby Stanford University and the University of Pennsylvania in the Ivy League.

This is a remarkable achievement considering that the private nonprofit school serves students from a community where 65 percent of the children typically drop out of high school. With 170 students enrolled in grades six through 12, Eastside is 45 percent African American and 45 percent Latino, with the remainder Pacific Islanders. The median household income of the area is \$29,206.

The majority of the students have parents who never

made it beyond high school, so the focus on college acceptance, the core tenet of the school's mission, is daunting to many of Eastside's entering students. "A lot of these students have an abstract concept of college because most will be the first generation from their families to be college-bound," said Chris Bischof, the school's director, principal, and co-founder. It is the school's ability to provide an environment of support and structure for both teachers and students that enables it to achieve its success.

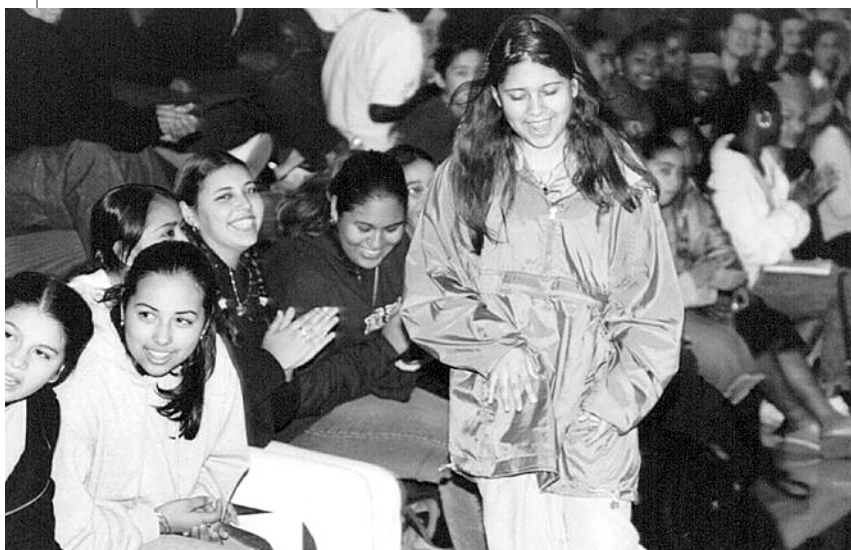
#### Individual Support and Discipline

"We wanted to develop strong work habits and encourage students to consistently do their work. At the same time, we wanted to provide a strong system of support for the students," said Bischof, a former public school teacher. He designed a tightly structured school with a two-pronged approach. Classes are limited to 18 students, so they receive a large amount of individualized attention. Students, however, are also given more work and have longer days than traditional schools.

Eastside has a mandatory extended school day with faculty-supervised tutorial periods. Teachers supervise students on their homework assignments, and sometimes stay long after the school officially closes at 5 p.m. In addition, students are not allowed to go home on Friday until all of their weekly homework assignments have been completed. The rigorous schedule is initially a shock to students who are not accustomed to school days that often last 15 hours.

"These students were expected to do a lot more than they had done prior to Eastside," Bischof explained. "We set high expectations and kids rose to the challenge because they wanted to be here." Said freshman Anthony Grady, "I thought from eight to five, that's a long time – but this is a whole new environment. There's always something to do. You are not sitting around wasting your time."

Combining incentives with discipline proves to be an effective means of teaching: Names of stu-



Every six weeks, the entire school meets in the gymnasium to recognize individual academic achievement.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF ROBERTO MENDEZ



dents who have missed homework are posted outside the classrooms. “You have to develop a consistent learning environment. This means daily schedules and deadlines,” said Bischof. Grady added that it’s the heavy academic load and how the school pushes the students to achieve that attracted him to Eastside. “The focus on sending all of the students to college is the main thing that got me.”

The school engages the students’ families as well, requiring each parent to sign a “student/parent contract” that outlines the high expectations of the family and commits the family to support their child at Eastside. Financial support, however, is covered; every student’s \$15,000 tuition is subsidized by outside donations.

## Reinforcing Culture of Achievement

One of the most difficult challenges for schools in low-income minority communities is to overcome a student culture that equates doing well academically with being uncool. “This is not like any study hall I’ve taught in before,” whispers Marlene Mullin, formerly a public school teacher in Pennsylvania. “The students who don’t have their homework done will stay on Friday nights to do it.”

Eastside has created this new culture of achievement by using several strategies that positively engage peer pressure. “We post homework charts on the walls and a lot of students will check the charts and stay on top of each other. They’ll say, ‘You missed your homework, what’s wrong with you?’” says Jennifer Foster, who has taught at Eastside for three years. Every six weeks, the entire school meets in the gym to publicly recognize individual achievements, such as students of the month or honor roll. Last year, Foster says, one shy boy making the honor roll for the first time ran a victory lap at the assembly while his classmates cheered.

Older students tutor younger students and participate in extracurricular activities such as the student council, the National Society of Black Engineers, the Eastside Entrepreneurs Group, and choir. Eastside also has boys soccer, girls volleyball, and varsity basketball teams for both. The boys basketball team has become a force in Northern California.

## Attracting Teachers

Eastside seeks highly qualified and dedicated faculty members and attracts teachers who are frustrated with the public school system. “This is the perfect job – it’s exactly what I thought teaching was going to be,” said Mullin, who used to teach six classes of 30 students at her former school.

Teachers are attracted to many aspects of Eastside. Its 2001 base salary of \$45,000 is competitive with other Bay

Area schools. The smaller class size significantly reduces the grading responsibilities loathed by most teachers. Eastside instructors work in an environment where students are motivated and dedicated.

In addition, teachers can watch students develop over their entire high school career. “In public school, when the kids leave your class, you don’t see them, and when the year’s over, they’re not your students anymore,” said Helen Kim, the school’s vice principal and co-founder. “Eastside is small enough so that you see each student grow over the four years.” The size also increases the accountability Eastside teachers feel for their students. “Everyone knows which student is in which class, so you feel responsible if things don’t go well,” Kim said. “One failure weighs on your heart.”

At the same time, Eastside teachers take on responsibilities that their public school counterparts do not have. The most time-consuming task is afterschool tutoring. As Kim notes, “Kids are certainly confident about asking for help. They’re willing to do more, so we need to be willing to do more as well.”

## Community among Teachers

The small size creates a tight community among the teachers, and Bischof and Kim have developed mechanisms to reinforce collaboration among the staff, something teachers feel is unique to Eastside. “We collaborate,” said Foster. “We do,” history teacher Erin Hays chimed in, “not just within subject areas, but across the board. With all of us having the common goal of preparing everyone for college, it develops a stronger camaraderie.”

Eastside’s curriculum requires teachers to work together to coordinate lessons. For example, when students learn about life in 19th-century America in history class, they also read “The Scarlet Letter” in their English class. This way, the syllabus in one class supports and enhances the learning in another. Teachers have free time from 11:20 a.m. to 12:50 p.m. every day, but they often spend it with their peers, developing lesson plans or helping students. In most public schools, this time would be spent grading papers.

In Eastside’s supportive and structured environment, both teachers and students perform their best and expect the best of each other. “When you come here, you get ideas about what you want to do in the future,” said junior Jeremiah Williams. “It’s like a dream. It’s there, and there are people helping you. You just have to want it.” □