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At a recent partnership meeting hosted at BHS are (from left) Harper College President, Dr. Kenneth Ender; District 211 Assistant Superintendent for Instruction, Theresa Busch; Barrington District 220 Superintendent, Dr. Tom Leonard; and District 214 Superintendent, Dr. David Schuler. Not pictured: District 211 Superintendent, Dr. Nancy Robb.

# Thriving, Not Just Surviving

Partnering with Harper College helps students to fulfill their potential.

FOR MANY YEARS, THERE WAS A solid, but limited, relationship between Harper College and area school districts, particularly 211, 214 and Barrington 220. We were able to share some resources in the vocational domain, but as budgets became tighter and fewer students pursued certain trades and vocations, the districts pooled some federal funding to host specialty classes in our own high schools.

Subjects that might generate enough interest to offer in each of our schools became available to students from all three districts at any one high school, complete with a dedicated classroom and a specialized curriculum. Students from the participating school districts could enroll in a course at any of the other high schools, taking classes such as electronics, culinary arts, health occupations, criminal justice, and many more.

Dr. Nancy Robb (211), Dr. Dave Schuler (214) and I valued our collaboration, but we felt a stronger connection with Harper College was needed. This was especially true with the growing interest in dual credit courses, where our students could take a college-level class while still in our high schools.

In 2009, Dr. Ken Ender entered the picture as the president of Harper College. This soft-spoken,

but driven man had just arrived from his leadership of Cumberland County College in New Jersey, and the first thing he did was arrange meetings with Nancy, Dave, and me. He came at the right time, to the right place, and to the right group.

Ken quickly shared his vision of all students becoming productive citizens of society, able to find occupations that allow them to support families and give back to their communities. Ken's focus and energy were instrumental in redefining the partnership between our four organizations. From this collaboration, the Northwest Educational Council for Student Success (NECSS) was born.

Dr. Ken Ender clearly articulates why a quality public education should be available to everyone in our communities. Whether or not one has children in the schools, we all benefit when an educated, productive person contributes through the occupation of his or her choice to society. Young or old, no matter our political leanings, the world is a better place when the next generation is prepared to take on future challenges.

Each of us have our own strengths and limitations. Many students come to us well-prepared due to the support of their families, their internal passions and initiative, and their natural talents. Other students need a little more guidance and

support from our schools to find their niche. Still more have special needs, although I believe we all have special needs, some of which we are aware while others take longer to identify. While not the kindest of terms, the federal and state governments categorize children with special needs, second language learners, and those living in poverty as "at-risk." Statistics tell us students with this designation are less likely to achieve the American Dream.

My mom was one of three sisters born into a home environment many would now describe as at-risk. Her father came to the United States alone with his mother from Italy at just 6-years-old. They did not speak English, and he barely managed to stay in school through the sixth-grade. At 16, he enlisted in the U.S. Army to fight in France and Germany during World War I. Prior to that, at Hull House in Chicago, he learned to play trombone and French horn. As an adult, he turned his musical talent into a career as a professional musician, playing with the Chicago Symphony and local show bands.

Despite his very modest means, he was determined to help his three daughters graduate from college, something he could never accomplish for himself. The three sisters attended public schools, went to public universities and, with the support of their family, were able to obtain degrees. My grandfather was so proud.

Together, Harper, 211, 214, and Barrington 220 are committed to developing better avenues for our more vulnerable, but no less perseverant students, to successfully make their way in our society. For some, success means graduating from college; to others it means finding a passion in a specific trade or vocation. There are many paths to productivity; the more we can point out those routes for students, the greater their chance to thrive and not just survive once they graduate from high school and beyond.

With that in mind, formal "Pathways" frame our partnership with Harper College that allows students to connect the curricula we offer to



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their future careers. These include robust programs that expose students (especially young women) to "STEM" careers in science, technology, engineering, and math.

National studies tell us students who must take non-credit or remedial courses after high school have only a 15 percent chance of obtaining a college degree. Based on this, we enhanced our high school dual credit classes so students can complete some college requirements prior to graduating. As a result, more students than ever are earning college credit from Harper while still in high school and obtaining certifications in some trades.

Barrington 220's partnership with Harper also features the new ADELANTE program, which supports students who may not have considered college as an option. It might be surprising in an affluent area such as ours that exposing students to a college environment, thereby opening doors, eyes, and minds to possibilities, would even be necessary. But it is for many students and their families, and our collaboration with Harper serves that vital need.

When Ken Ender arrived at Harper, he brought clarity and passion to a vision that Nancy Robb, Dave Schuler, and I shared. At the end of this school year, Dr. Robb (211) will start a well-deserved retirement and we will miss her dearly. But as Ken, in his transplanted Southern drawl reminds us, the collective efforts of our organizations must survive beyond the four of us as individuals because – as in any partnership – the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. 🍷

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