Spirit rising, Roosevelt students strive to be comeback kids

By Carole Carlson ccarlson@post-trib.com/302-0949 November 8, 2013 11:49PM
Updated: December 10, 2013 6:02AM

GARY — The floors glisten, new lockers line the halls and awards from a golden era are back in a new student-installed trophy case.

Those are the signs of change on the surface at Roosevelt College and Career Academy, once the revered crown jewel of Gary Community School Corp. and holder of 25 state titles in basketball, cross country, and boys and girls track.

Below the shiny new veneer, there's a renewed sense of hope in the classroom.

An unsettling initial year found the state-anointed takeover operator, EdisonLearning Inc., grappling with a lack of student records, a failing heating and air conditioning system and a principal jumping ship midyear.

It took a lawsuit to gain the records and a maintenance agreement with the recalcitrant Gary Community School Corp., still smarting over the takeover and the loss of state money to the for-profit EdisonLearning.

Under a four-year contract, EdisonLearning receives basic tuition support for the school based upon enrollment as well as various state and federal grants. Total budget for 2013-14 is $9.23 million, said Todd McIntyre, an EdisonLearning official.

The company must offer performance updates before the State Board of Education. In September, officials reported seventh- and eighth-grade ISTEP Plus scores improved 9.5 points in English and 3.5 points in math.

Down and out

Failing had become a way of life for Roosevelt students, who posted six straight years of dismal test scores.

The Indiana Department of Education, under former state school chief Tony Bennett, yanked Roosevelt away from Gary Community School Corp., invoking a never-used 1999 state accountability law that allowed for the takeover. The state picked EdisonLearning, a private for-profit education management company, to lead the comeback.

The Roosevelt challenges were as obvious as the graffiti and tattered lockers that filled the halls — outer symptoms that underscored more serious classroom issues.

Principal Donna Henry said EdisonLearning found just 23 of 146 seniors on track to graduate in 2012. One senior had just four credits.

"It did surprise me," said Henry, who became principal in February after Terrence Little bolted, taking a job with the Gary schools. "I came from a high school in an urban area, but the severity of deficiencies were shocking."

Early last year, EdisonLearning officials started teaching student accustomed to disorder about their roles in the classroom.

"We had to help students understand what occurred during the school day. You go to class. You take notes, you ask questions. This is what learning looks like," said Henry.

Some students balked.

"I heard comments that school was too strict," Henry said. "Some didn't respond, but by the end of the year, 90 percent bought in."
Henry said students began asking questions about their own progress reports.

“They perceived a level of disservice in their education. Now, we’re seeing the level of rigor of questions increase.”

Students see a difference.

“My grades are better. The principal has more control of the students,” said freshman Ronisha Gassaway, 15.

Senior Darrin Payne said school is different now. “The rules, the teaching has gotten better,” said Payne, whose grade-point average improved to 2.5.

Junior Joshua Falls is new to Roosevelt, moving from Battle Creek, Mich.

“I love it, just the history of the school. My mom was in the Class of ’86. Roosevelt is on the up-and-up about grades. They keep a close eye on the students.”

**Staying in school**

Roosevelt’s graduation ranks plummeted because kids would come to school and quickly leave, even though campus was closed.

EdisonLearning hired a truancy officer this year to shag students back when they strayed. Student recruitment officer Terry Martin rode school buses to make sure students went into school.

Henry said the truancy officer found students got off the school bus and often headed to nearby convenience stores. “That’s just our reality,” she said.

Roosevelt turned over the highest number of names to the Gary City Court’s Project Rebuild truancy court program that holds parents accountable for making sure their kids go to school.

When school began last year, September attendance was barely 70 percent. This year it was 81 percent.

“We’re going to hit 92 percent,” Henry said with conviction.

Roosevelt Superintendent Vanessa Ronketto, an EdisonLearning vice president, said previous attendance numbers for Roosevelt weren’t accurate. “They weren’t 98 percent,” she said.

An in-school credit recovery program, started last year, resulted in 41 students getting high school diplomas, raising the graduate count to 64 out of 123. Four more earned diplomas by attending summer school.

That still left more than 50 floundering without a diploma. So the school launched an in-school credit recovery program with morning and afternoon sessions.

“They have to do additional work at home,” Ronketto said. The program does allow for students to have jobs while they complete their requirements.

Misbehaving students attend an alternative education setting within the school.

Last month, about 13 students were in the program, which is set apart from the rest of the student body. Students can return to the mainstream as they earn points for good behavior. So far, Henry said, one student has been expelled.

**Computer assist**

Seventh- through 10th-graders are taught under a “blended learning” philosophy in which core learning is done via a computer program that quickly corrects their mistakes. They move independently through the curriculum with a teacher guiding them. If they’ve mastered the content, students test out and move ahead.

“One of the benefits is, they’re able to work at their own rate and it keeps them engaged,” said freshman math teacher Jarrett Ward, who taught at West Side Leadership Academy last year. “There’s way more technology here and it’s more hands-on. It creates a diversity for learning.”

Ward noticed other benefits, too. “I like the culture. It’s given you that ‘I want to be successful’ attitude.” Ward said his co-workers are younger and their strategies are more up-to-date.
The parent puzzle

EdisonLearning reached out to the Indiana Parenting Institute in Gary to start a program to get families involved. "I think there’s a lot of potential under EdisonLearning in that they’re interested enough to get something started. All of us have a goal to bring Roosevelt back to its former glory," said Jena Bellez of the Indiana Parenting Institute.

Parent Lisa Johnson has three sons at Roosevelt.

"I’m really pleased with the turnaround EdisonLearning has provided," she said at the Oct. 16 homecoming celebration.

"I see a great difference in my oldest son. They’re getting a handle on the behavior of students as well as academics. They embraced the rich tradition. And the school is much cleaner. It gives them a sense of pride."

Offers and articles from around the Web

From around the web

4 rescued after suspicious fire in S. Side building: officials
Loyola U. hires ex-Vatican ambassador with questionable past
Mom of girl charged in murder says uncle should ‘rot in jail’
4 dead, 18 wounded in Chicago shootings since Friday night
Retired Chicago homicide cop nabs car thief, as owner who gave chase is badly hurt

Suggested for you

4 rescued after suspicious fire in S. Side building: officials
Loyola U. hires ex-Vatican ambassador with questionable past
Mom of girl charged in murder says uncle should ‘rot in jail’
4 dead, 18 wounded in Chicago shootings since Friday night
Retired Chicago homicide cop nabs car thief, as owner who gave chase is badly hurt

© 2014 Sun-Times Media, LLC. All rights reserved. This material may not be copied or distributed without permission. For more information about reprints and permissions, visit www.suntimesreprints.com. To order a reprint of this article, click here.