At the Missouri State School Board meeting, where charter schools receive their final approval, the coordinator of educational support services for the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education remarked about the excellent application of EAGLE College Prep. This made me curious about the school and I wondered what would make this school so exemplary.

So, I recently sat down with Dr. Suzanne Johnson, the school leader of EAGLE College Prep, and Matt Hoehner, the Saint Louis regional executive director of Educational Enterprises, the school’s management company. Below are some quick facts and the transcript from our conversation.

**School Quick Facts**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School name:</th>
<th>EAGLE College Prep</th>
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<tr>
<td>Type of school:</td>
<td>Free Public Charter School</td>
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<tr>
<td>School sponsor:</td>
<td>University of Missouri, Columbia</td>
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<td>School Leader:</td>
<td>Dr. Suzanne Johnson</td>
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<td>Executive Director:</td>
<td>Matt Hoehner</td>
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<td>Website:</td>
<td>Eagleprepstl.org</td>
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<td>Opening:</td>
<td>Fall 2013</td>
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<td>Location:</td>
<td>4923 Chippewa, in the South Tower Grove neighborhood</td>
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<td>Grades:</td>
<td>K-3 (with plans to expand to K-8)</td>
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<td>Approximate enrollment:</td>
<td>130</td>
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James V. Shuls (JVS): Thanks for taking the time to sit down with me. Tell me a little about EAGLE College Prep. What makes the school unique or different? Why should people be interested in this school?

Suzanne Johnson (SJ): Well, we know that students in South City and students in Saint Louis in general need a great education if they are to break out of the cycle of poverty that we see in too many places. And we know a great school system is critical for the revitalization of Saint Louis. The mayor talked about this recently during a press conference where he said people are choosing to not move into the city or choosing to move out of the city because they don't have a good public school choice. We saw that need and want to bring a better choice to a neighborhood that is currently underserved. I can speak to this from experience. I lived in the city for five years, we rehabbed a house in Soulard and loved it, but we moved to Illinois because I was having my first child and I couldn't afford private school and I was not sending my child to a Saint Louis Public School.

So, we're looking at bringing a neighborhood school, a free public charter school that is going to provide a world-class education. We expect that our students will be able to compete with students in the county, because they will receive a high-quality education, the kind we would all want for our own kids. Not to put anyone else down, because there are many great schools, but we believe the South Tower Grove neighborhood is currently underserved. There just aren't that many quality options for the kids in that neighborhood and we want to serve them.

The other option that we are bringing in is a blended learning model. We will be using direct instruction, or traditional education, but we also know kids need differentiation. This neighborhood is very diverse; socially diverse, economically diverse, culturally diverse. So the one-size-fits-all model is not going to work. We want all of our students to achieve, so in addition to the direct instruction where we use the best researched-based methods, we're also going to differentiate using a blended learning model with the Compass Education program. Our kids will be meeting in small groups for reading and math so we can really target in on those skills that our kids need remediation with or have an opportunity to excel. We know we will have some gifted kids, and we will be thinking “how can we get them higher?” We know we will have kids who will come in to kindergarten not recognizing their alphabet, so we have to start where they are and bring them up, and we have to be able to do that.

JVS: Talk a little more about the blended learning model. There is a lot of talk that blended learning can not only improve education by tailoring education to a student's specific level, but could possibly bring some financial benefits as well. Was that part of the consideration when thinking about a blended learning model?

SJ: Right now we are seeing great success with our schools in Milwaukee and in Phoenix and they're using models very similar to ours, with the differentiation piece. As a former classroom teacher, and a former principal, I know this is critical. When I was a high school English teacher, I had a class of 30 kids; some were reading at a third-grade level and some were post-high school. How do I go into that class and teach a lesson? You need help. You can break into small groups, but classroom management becomes an issue. So we believe a blended learning model will help us engage students and keep them on task, so we can have that one-on-one time. And yes,
there are economic advantages because this is economically feasible. This is a great tool, plus we know technology has transformed so many jobs in the work place, so kids need to be able to use a computer to learn and perform in the work force.

**JVS:** I’m a former first grade teacher myself. I taught reading and I had that struggle of working with my small group, while other students are supposed to be working at literacy centers. So I had to find tasks for the students to do, which often resulted in a lot more work for me. Plus, the students were often off task, which distracted my small group. For many teachers like me, literacy centers are a headache. The idea is great, but it is hard to manage. So is blended learning kind of a different take on learning centers?

**SJ:** Absolutely, and we will utilize paraprofessionals to help in that time, because while the teacher is engaging that small group, you may not be able to pay attention elsewhere. And that is where kids are off task. We will have paraprofessionals to guide students, to keep them on task, and to help the teacher.

**JVS:** Some people are critical of computer-based instruction. They think this is the dehumanization of the classroom. How would you respond to that?

**SJ:** If we were going to 100 percent computer-based instruction, I would be on that bandwagon. There are things that are appropriate for every age level. For us, along with the computer-aided instruction, students will be engaging with their teachers. Another way we will humanize the classroom, to use your term, is by teaching character education. That will be a huge component of our schools.

Parents aren’t just concerned about the quality of education they are receiving; one of the major concerns is safety. Somewhere we lost that character component. I found it to be my job as a teacher and a principal to teach kids how to be good people, to form a classroom community. So that humanization is going to come by blending character education in with our daily instruction. [We are] teaching kids, not just expecting them to enter the school knowing how to be good students, knowing how to be good people. We will teach them values, like how to be respectful, how to be helpful, how to be responsible, how to be safe, how to be a servant leader to their community. Because we know we have to give back in order to revitalize our neighborhoods.

**JVS:** You talk about character education and the name of the school has college prep in it, but it is one thing to say these things and another to actually do them. If you go to any low-performing school and change the name, it’s still a low-performing school. So how will you actually teach character and how do you actually put the emphasis on college prep?

**SJ:** It is part of the culture of the school. You teach character education, just like you would teach a lesson about adverbs. And you don’t just say these things, you have teachers who model the traits that they are teaching. You use direct instruction, saying this is what being responsible looks like, and you reinforce it. Then you go back and you re-teach, because kids don’t learn these things when they are told them once. I have a 6-year-old, and I know you have to reinforce those traits that you want to see in children.
I took over a school that had more than 5,000 office referrals the year before. Within three years, we had less than 1,000. So, I know it can be done. We didn't weaken the rules, there were still consequences for bad behavior, but by the time our students left the school and went to the high school, there was a difference. High school teachers commented that they could tell which students came from our school because they treated their teachers with respect.

You focus on college prep with the same mindset. You reinforce to kids that it's not “if I go to college,” it's “when I go to college, which college am I going to?” You create this mindset by having teachers talk about their college experiences. A little thing that makes a huge difference is college Fridays. Every Friday our staff will wear clothes from their alma mater. They will talk about what it was like to be a college student. We will talk with kids, especially as they go into high school, about how to apply for college. We will work with families and help them with the paperwork. As a first-generation college student, thankfully I had people to do that for me and we will do that for our kids and give them those opportunities. My goal is not only 100 percent of our students will graduate and go to college, but we want 100 percent of our students to graduate from college. It is not good enough for students to enroll in college and then drop out; we will continue to support our students because that is how we do business.

**Matt Hoehner (MH)**: The community is really a focal point of our school. A lot of community leaders that I know are coming together for this school. I live in the neighborhood and it is not only about teaching the kids, but teaching the parents as well. When we use love and logic to teach the kids, we will also have parent meetings where we share that information. We will share what we are doing in the classroom, so families can reinforce those skills throughout the day. We will really build a community and once you build those relationships, it carries on through college because it is more than just a school. It is a community, it's a family, you have these relationships and you care about these people beyond the class walls.

**JVS**: You keep talking about college, but isn't this school initially only going to have youngsters? What grades are you opening with and how do you plan to expand to that point where you are serving high school students?

**SJ**: We will start with a K-3 school and will add a grade every year. Our initial charter is through eighth grade, but we have an expansion plan in place, so when our sponsor says we are ready, we will be able to open a high school. My vision is that those third graders will go from eighth grade into our high school.

**JVS**: Suzanne, you brought up your experience and I'm sure you could have stayed where you were. So what is it about this school that made you want to take this step and say, let's do this?

**SJ**: The idea of being able to teach kids to be a servant leader. I want to be able to give back to the community. Nobody goes into education to become rich. And if you don't go into education because you love kids, you're going to burn out quickly. Saint Louis is such an amazing place, but we have a need for high-quality schools. This opportunity is the perfect meld, because I want to be able to move back to the city, I want my kids to have a great place to go to school, and I want to be a great school leader. This is the opportunity to do that and really make a difference for our area, to really help Saint Louis grow to what it once was and what it can be.
JVS: Matt, you live in South Tower Grove, but the management company, Educational Enterprises, operates schools in Milwaukee andPhoenix. How did you and Educational Enterprises become interested in Saint Louis?

MH: I have been in the Saint Louis area for 14 years. I have a 7-year-old and a 5-year-old and obviously education is important to me, for my kids and the kids in my community. Before this role with Educational Enterprises, I served as a pastor. So I have been serving and caring for many other kids who also need a great school.

The South Tower Grove area has many refugees, Nepalese, East and West Africans, and they don't have enough money to send their kids to a private school. So, they come from a refugee camp into Saint Louis and their children are often placed in failing schools. We know that system is simply not working out for many of them. So we started wondering, how do we meet that need?

In my former congregation, we leased out our building to a charter school and then ran an after-school program to support the kids afterwards. It was through that interaction, as I was directing the after-school program, that I came into contact with Educational Enterprises. Having been on school boards with private schools, I was able to see their track record, meet with the CEO, and understand their vision and mission. I could see how well their schools were performing in Milwaukee and Phoenix. I visited their schools to see what it was they were doing and when I saw it I said, “We need this in Saint Louis.”

So we worked to bring Educational Enterprises here and EAGLE College Prep is our first school here in the city. This organization is all about the kids. Every decision we make is kids first. Our blended learning model is not just about being financially feasible; we believe it is what's best for kids. It makes the school sustainable, it's long lasting, and it helps us reach all of our students individually.

Our model has been proven to be very successful in both Milwaukee and Phoenix and we are really excited to bring this school to the kids in our neighborhood.

JVS: You mention an after-school program. Will EAGLE College Prep have an after-school program?

MH: Educational Enterprises will create a separate after-school program to wrap around the public charter school because we believe that additional support is important. We also recognize that many families want a faith-based option. Through our free public charter school and a separate, optional faith-based after-school program, we believe we can meet the need for a high-quality school and faith-based instruction. The after-school program will run from the end of school at 3:45 p.m. to 6 p.m. The kids will be able to be at a place where they will be safe, they can play sports, get a healthy snack, and also have some Christian faith-based instruction. We will also be offering a pre-school to families with young children. And, it is our goal to make all of these additional options as affordable as possible, so they are accessible to everyone.

JVS: The school is to open next year, for the 2013-2014 school year. If someone is interested in EAGLE College Prep, what should they do now?
SJ: We will be accepting any student who is a resident of the city and will be going into grades K-3 next year. The enrollment packet should be online at the beginning of November. Like other schools, you will have to be able to prove residency and you will need shot records, all the state required pieces. Enrollment will officially begin in January and will run through sometime in March. If we have more names than seats, we will do a lottery.

JVS: What else should people know about this school?

MH: The three words that best sum up EAGLE College Prep are college, character, and community.

About the Author

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https://showmeinstitute.org/publication/school-choice/college-character-and-community

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