

GOTHAM SCHOOLS

‘Restart’ Parters Say they Plan to Ease into Management Role

by Sarah Darville, at 9:02 am

The radical “restart” plans for 14 struggling schools seem likely to get off to a slow start.

In exchange for millions of dollars in federal School Improvement Grants, the city announced this week that it would turn over the reins of 14 schools to nonprofit Education Partnership Organizations. But with the start of the school year just weeks away, those groups say that much of their first year will be spent assessing needs and adding support, not making drastic changes.

“Whenever you’re in a position of partnering, you’re always balancing the need of that sense of urgency with the idea that there is a certain risk or downside to, say, overhauling the master schedule two weeks before school starts,” said Doug Elmer, the director of Diplomas Now, which will manage Sheepshead Bay High School in Brooklyn and Newtown High School in Queens.

The nonprofits put in their bids to take over schools — where they’ll control everything from curriculum to hiring to budgeting — in May. But after a delay while the city and teachers union hammered out a deal over teacher evaluations in the struggling schools, the groups learned only in the last two weeks that the city wanted them to become EPOs. And they found only just this week which schools they would take over. The city had asked the schools and organizations to rank each other, then paired them off.

“It was a little bit of a flurry,” said Sheepshead Bay Principal Reesa Levy of the matching process. But she said she was excited to work with Diplomas Now. “We’re actually thrilled. I think maybe this will give us that extra push.”

The federal government has promised up to \$2 million a year for three years for the restart schools. Next week, the city’s school board, known as the Panel for Educational Policy, is set to vote on contracts for the EPOs that range from \$690,000 to \$1,885,000 annually.

Five days into the planning process, Elmer said that Diplomas Now is focused on what it knows it could implement quickly and effectively: additional support for teachers and students.

Levy said that she had already spoken with Elmer multiple times and that her school would be getting a full-time “transformation facilitator,” a full-time social worker, and City Year volunteers to serve as role models and tutors in the classroom.

Bob Hughes, president of New Visions, said his organization has no immediate plans to change the leadership teams at the three schools it is taking over, Automotive High School, Bushwick Community High School, and John Adams High School. “We want build on the strengths that they have,” he said, while noting that New Visions might make those changes in the future.

New Visions ran the support network for Automotive and Bushwick last year, and Bushwick’s principal Tira Randall said that her first choice had been to work with New Visions again.

Tim Farrell, New Visions’ communications director, said the partnership organization funding would allow for more extensive partnerships with organizations like Turnaround for Children for mental health support, CUNY’s At Home in College program for college readiness, and ReServe for college advising.

Other “restart” schools also had existing relationships with their newly-matched partner organization.

The Southern Regional Education Board, a group founded to improve schools in southern states but which now has programs in schools nationwide, was matched as an EPO with Grover Cleveland High School and Richmond Hill High School. SREB personnel had worked with Grover Cleveland already to set up and oversee the school’s ninth-grade academy last year.

“The difference in this effort will be that we’ll be focusing on expanding leadership capacity and expanding to the entire school,” said Scott Warren, SREB’s director of state initiatives who is overseeing the partnership.

The EPOs replace the superintendents of the schools that undergo restart, something that the city principals union criticized this week. But who exactly would fill the direct supervisory roles for these schools is not yet clear. Warren said that the SREB is interviewing candidates this week, and Farrell said that New Visions will be announcing a new director for the EPO soon.

Since the restart model hasn’t been tried in New York City before, schools and their EPOs will be working at breakneck speed to make plans before the start of the school year.

“The resources School Improvement Grants bring to table are terrific, but unfortunately, sometimes the timeline doesn’t leave for the traditional half or full year of planning,” Elmer said.