

SIUE's East St. Louis Center has positive impact



Jesse Dixon.

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Community enhancement is the focus of this week's episode of Segue, as Southern Illinois University Edwardsville Chancellor Dr. Randy Pembroke welcomes Jesse Dixon, executive director of the SIUE East St. Louis Center, to the show. The administrators discuss a variety of topics, including program offerings through the East St. Louis Center, campus and community collaboration, involvement options for donors and volunteers, future initiatives for the East St. Louis Center and its surrounding communities, and how the East St. Louis Center is addressing critical community needs.

Since earning his master's in education from the Harvard Graduate School of Education, Jesse Dixon has constructed a national reputation as a leader in urban education reform. Prior to joining SIUE, Dixon previously worked as special assistant to the superintendent of the St. Louis Public Schools, as well as chief of staff to the members of the New York City Council, New York State Legislature and Massachusetts State House of Representatives.

Dixon has also served as an education policy consultant to states, districts and schools, consulting with the U.S. Department of Education, Cleveland Metropolitan School District, University of Missouri – St. Louis (UMSL), Saint Louis University, Harvard professional education programs and the Illinois State Board of Education. Dixon also directed the launch and management of the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's Office of District and School Turnaround.

"I was absolutely blown away when I found out about the SIUE East St. Louis Center and the wide range of programs being offered for students and families," Dixon shares. "I had been working in urban education reform for a number of years, and I saw problems with trying to help students meet their education and career goals through education and preparing them with just the K-12 years."

Many kids would leave high school as what we thought were prepared, but experienced several challenges when they went on to college. I am thrilled that the SIUE East St. Louis Center stays with children from six weeks old through adulthood. I truly believe there's nothing like it in the country. There are several universities playing a role in urban education, but I've never seen any role as comprehensive and committed to meeting the educational, social and emotional needs of a community the way SIUE does with the East St. Louis Center."

The SIUE East St. Louis Center serves 2,000 children from St. Clair County each day through a variety of programs. The Center's Head Start program supports 1,400 kids through 14 early childhood centers and more than 200 staff. They work with children and families to establish educational goals and provide early childhood education to better prepare children for elementary education. The Center also partners with community colleges and employers to provide professional development and opportunity for families to meet their professional goals.

Project Success supports more than 70 children with open cases through the Department of Children and Family Services each day through an after school program.

Originally founded by Katherine Dunham, the Center's performing arts program involves more than 100 children through a rigorous program of music, dance and other expressive arts.

As an SIUE music performance alumni, Chancellor Pembroke expresses particular interest in the revitalization of the Center's performing arts programming.

“When asking the people of East St. Louis, when they think of the SIUE East St. Louis Center, they think of performing arts,” Dixon explains. “They’re valued not only in the community, but the alumni have gone on to do incredible things. The original choreographer for the Lion King on Broadway is an SIUE East St. Louis Center alumnus.

“It’s a rich legacy, and we’ve been working to bring that back with arts funding and youth programs. We have launched a six-week summer camp, now going into its second year. This fall, we’ve revitalized the after school program, which allows us to deeply engage with those students who truly want to hone their craft.”

The SIUE East St. Louis Center Upward Bound program serves more than 300 students grades 9-12 to provide resources for college access and preparation. As part of this program, students are housed on SIUE’s campus for five weeks each summer throughout high school to provide additional higher education resources.

The SIUE East St. Louis Center further serves as a community support ambassador for the SIUE East St. Louis Charter High School, the SIUE WeCARE clinic, the SIUE East St. Louis Dental Clinic and the UMSL Center for Eye Care. As a result of these collaborations, students involved at both the East St. Louis Center and the Charter High School have on-site access to registered health practitioners – a feature not typical to most community service centers.

In addition to supporting the East St. Louis community, the SIUE East St. Louis Center and the University’s support clinics also allow SIUE faculty and staff unique opportunities, while providing a setting for student practicum and a cross-collaborative environment for healthcare professionals.

“It’s unusual, and we’re just scratching the surface on how those partnerships can take shape,” says Dixon. “We have SIUE faculty providing emotional therapy and meditation exercises for our children. We are working with the SIUE STEM Center to provide education to our students through the Digital East St. Louis project.

“Next year, the Center will host a six-week summer program for kids not active in Head Start or other high quality childhood programs, so they can learn how to attend school, learn social skills, and learn early math and reading skills. On their first day of kindergarten, they’re ready to learn.”

As a professional coming to the Metro East from St. Louis, Dixon takes pride in connections and outreach initiatives to gain support for the SIUE East St. Louis Center from the metropolitan area.

“When I was working in St. Louis, I didn’t know the SIUE East St. Louis Center even existed,” he admits. “When I tell former colleagues in St. Louis about what I’m doing now, they’re blown away. This program is a well-kept secret, and it shouldn’t be. Because I’m coming from the St. Louis education circle of philanthropies, foundations and practitioners, I feel part of my job is to help create understanding for the enormous potential of what can be accomplished at the SIUE East St. Louis Center to serve kids of all ages.

“We serve adults and older students who will soon be professionals. Whatever shortages organizations have, they can work with our kids to educate them and pique their interest through career exploration activities and work-based learning opportunities. The more we get to know businesses and the more they know us, they realize it’s an unusual partnership that can be forged with the SIUE East St. Louis Center that isn’t just giving money to a good program – it’s more than that.”

Discussion closes with the administrators disclosing future strategic planning initiatives for the SIUE East St. Louis Center, including the establishment of further programming that allows the Center to make a more intimate and prolonged impact on East St. Louis children throughout their education and professional lives.

Visit siue.edu/eslc or call (618) 482-6912 for more information on how to support the SIUE East St. Louis Center through gift giving, mentorship, volunteer assistance and more.

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By Logan Cameron, SIUE Marketing & Communications