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## **East Durham revitalization begins at the kitchen table**

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By Jeannine Sato

### Durham Connects

Things are changing in East Central Durham. You can tell by the newly renovated and constructed Holton Junior High School on Driver Street, which is now home to Holton Career and Resource Center, which celebrated its grand opening in August. Holton plans to be a hub of community activity including high school vocational training, a Duke Medical Center health clinic, community recreation center, family support classes and an abundance of community events.

East Central Durham is widely regarded as one of the roughest neighborhoods in the city. However, a group of city and county officials, neighborhood representatives and local service agencies are determined to revitalize the area, improve schools and turn around graduation rates and outcomes for local children. The group, called the East Durham Children's Initiative (EDCI) began meeting earlier in the year. The goal is to centralize and focus existing resources in East Central Durham, loosely defined as the Y.E. Smith school zone.

Now the group is reaching out to the East Durham community to learn of its needs, requests and suggestions for revitalizing their own community. What better way to create an open dialogue about community perspectives than a kitchen table conversation?

EDCI is hosting a free kitchen table conversation and dinner on Oct.15 from 5:30 to 8:30 p.m. The event is free and open to any citizen interested in improving their East Durham neighborhood. EDCI co-chair Minnie Forte-Brown says the kitchen table concept has worked well for Durham Public Schools and is a chance to hear many voices, not just those in the forefront. "Come and let your voice be Heard!! Be a part of the conversation about what needs to happen in East Durham for families and youth to ensure that our children graduate from high school ready to go to college and/ or enter the workforce on a career path. Too many of our children do not graduate high school and therefore are unemployed or underemployed. We want our children to be in line for meaningful careers that will provide them sustainable income, not dead in jobs."

Kitchen table conversation organizer and EDCI member Wanda Boone lives near the East Central Durham Zone and has been working to revitalize the area for years. She is executive director of Durham Together for Resilient Youth (TRY). Boone says she has been living and breathing services for youth and now is the time to help kids from "cradle to career". "I try to contain my excitement! I am so thrilled about this because for the last five years this is exactly what I've been working for through other systems. I've been a part of a lot of collaborative efforts and haven't seen the real coming together until now. We have the momentum we need." Boone emphasizes that the dinner is about empowering the community. "What are the strengths? What are the things you're most proud of? And what hopes do you have for this community?" said Boone.

Holding the dinner at Holton is no accident, said Boone. "It's an important symbol of community. The school has been revitalized and now we're revitalizing the community."

The East Durham Children's Initiative is an ambitious "whatever it takes" model borrowed from the successful Harlem Children's Zone model originated by Geoffrey Canada 30 years ago. Canada emphasizes that early support of children in all aspects of their life, from home to school, and everything in-between must be addressed to break the cycle of poverty, crime and school dropouts.

The EDCI leadership including Forte-Brown, Boone, Ellen Reckhow and Barker French, working with neighborhood leaders, plan to form a community advisory board to help guide the East Durham Children's Initiative's work. The first order of business is to create a "baby college" program for expectant parents in the community similar to the Harlem model. To achieve this, Welcome Baby, a well-regarded parent resource center has teamed up with Antioch Baptist Church to hold "Incredible Years Baby" classes for local parents which begins Oct. 1. Many of the referrals will come from another EDCI partner, Durham Connects, which visits parents of newborns in the area.

When asked how the EDCI is different from other attempts to revitalize the community, Forte-Brown said, "It is community based. It has been successfully done in other communities. The stakes are much too high for us to fail. These are our children and we MUST do better, if they are to thrive in the 21st century. We CANNOT Fail."

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