

ANCHORAGE SCHOOL DISTRICT

ANCHORAGE, ALASKA

ASD MEMORANDUM #18 (1999-2000)

September 27, 1999

TO: SCHOOL BOARD

FROM: OFFICE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT

SUBJECT: SUMMARY OF SECOND-YEAR EXPERIENCE: NEW EVALUATION SYSTEM FOR CERTIFICATED STAFF, 1998-99

PERTINENT FACTS :

In June, 1997 the School Board adopted a new evaluation system for District employees whose positions require the possession of a teacher or administrator certificate. The system was created in response to passage of a new law, House Bill 465, now referenced as Chapter 31. At the time the new system was introduced, we committed to offer a report to the School Board describing our first year of experience with its use, in order to share what were believed to be strengths and weaknesses of what was created. This summary reports on the second year's experience.

The system was constructed with input from a variety of District and community stakeholders. Their input was again sought in preparing this report. In addition to discussion with various groups and individuals, we invited written input to this report from the Anchorage Council of PTAs, the Anchorage Principals' Association, and the Anchorage Education Association. Written input from the Anchorage Council of PTAs is included as Attachment A.

The process for collection of input from students and parents was revised. All input forms were revised to take into account the input of parents and school staff members. The National Computer System contract increased to \$73,000 to cover the additional costs of redesigned surveys and the addition of a separate simplified student survey for grades three through six. The data collection period was moved from the last two weeks of the first semester to early December for mailing of parent surveys and the week of December 4th for the distribution of student input forms. Overall costs including the duplication, distribution, sorting, and return of materials to supervisors are close to \$100,000.

The District has completed its second year with the system. The following summarizes our experience this year and includes recommendations for change.

PERCEIVED STRENGTHS :

After completing a second evaluation cycle, some strengths remain clear.

1. The adoption of performance standards has been a major plus for the District. In capitalizing on the general value of a standards-based evaluation system, we have adjusted particular performance indicators to address the very real differences among groups of employees who share a common title of "teacher", for example, but whose job responsibilities are very dissimilar. Modified standards have been developed for several types of Related Services staff and for nurses. Modified standards have been proposed for counselors, assistant principals, teacher experts, and other specialized service providers who are not assigned to direct teaching responsibilities. There is no intent to alter the performance standards, which were adopted both by the State Board of Education and by the Anchorage School Board. Our interest is to clarify the translation of the performance standards into performance indicators, which match the actual responsibilities assigned to various classes of employees.

The emphasis this year has been on development of useful matrices which help supervisors to identify behaviors indicative of compliance with the adopted standards. As those matrices are refined by our experience, they will be incorporated into standard training programs for all supervisors.

2. The Short Form has been very useful insofar as it focuses directly on the adopted standards. One of the clear deficiencies in the prior evaluation system was a complete lack of direct attention to defining basic performance expectations within a given job and lack of a report format which certified that those expectations were addressed and met. Although some continue to resent the "check list" approach to evaluation, most supervisors who have offered feedback have found the basic form useful. Moreover, the use of the Short Form reinforces to supervisors that what is reported on the form is their personal certification that the performance of the observed employee meets standards. That responsibility has created some anxiety among supervisors. In the past, supervisors were required to do little more than comment on the extent to which an employee addresses personal educational goals. Most comments were either so general as to reveal little, or so procedural as to amount to nothing more than a description of process.

3. The Professional Support Form has also been widely used. It has provided a vehicle for expression of concern that is relatively less threatening and less serious than a Plan of Improvement. It has at times been difficult to persuade those receiving a prescription for professional support that it is not tantamount to a declaration of incompetence but we have worked closely with union representatives to help promote a wider acceptance of this tool as helpful rather than threatening. By far, this was the preferred vehicle for expressing minor to moderate concerns about employee performance during the year just ending. We are trying to incorporate a similar process into procedures used for non-certificated employees.
4. Plans of Improvement are being used by supervisors who cannot in good conscience certify compliance with performance standards, regardless of tenure. A few senior employees, faced with formal notice that their performance did not satisfy adopted standards, elected to exit the system. We expect others to follow as the recognition of the District's commitment to support supervisor efforts to improve performance grows.
5. By and large, people appreciate being asked for input into the performance of employees whose conduct affects them. Independent of whether the questions asked were appropriate in number or type, most favor continued asking.
6. Principals appreciated and used input that was sufficient in strength and frequency to justify comment. Most of that input came from students. The quality and utility of student input varied by grade level. In 1998-99, two student forms were used, one for primary age students and another for those above the third grade. As a result, there were far fewer problems in form completion and the input received was far more reliable.
7. This year the second phase of the evaluation procedures were put into place. The alternative appraisal models were designed for the professional growth of tenured certificated staff that had demonstrated competence with the short form or teacher standards. Overall, the feedback has been extremely positive. Many certificated staff formed study groups and other project based initiatives that combined professional growth directly with school and District initiatives. Staff appreciated the congruence of the evaluation models with other expectations in the area of professional development. The expectation of collaboration with peers was extremely beneficial and well received.

IDENTIFIED WEAKNESSES :

A variety of weaknesses in the new system were described in the previous report. We addressed each this year. What follows is a summary of what has been and how well the changes corrected the original problem.

1. The District presented guidelines (rubrics) this year that offered more detailed explanations of what constitutes compliance with adopted performance standards. Those guidelines were widely circulated. We appreciate that no rubric, no written system that relies on observation and judgment, is ever to be free from subjectivity. We employ and train professionals to supervise; we rely on their judgment and experience in certifying that an employee's performance meets adopted standards. Two supervisors may view differently parts of the general performance of any given employee but it is our extensive experience that the differences are operationally minor. The conduct of employees at either end of the performance spectrum — from best to worst — is seldom lost on any competent administrator, or any competent teacher. Most employees, most of the time, in most schools have little trouble identifying the excellent teachers. They also have little trouble identifying the incompetent. Conflicts of interest or loyalties between teachers sometimes discourage candid sharing of opinions but knowledge of deficiency is seldom absent. Differences of opinion regarding the performance of those who fall between the extremes are common but cause few problems.

A second draft of rubrics is in preparation and will be distributed in the fall. This draft will incorporate reference to the adopted standards for students.

2. We tightened the distribution, monitoring, and collection procedures for student surveys. Directions to principals varied by grade level and were more explicit. The survey activity was elevated in importance and presentation to more resemble procedures employed in distributing, monitoring, and collecting standardized tests. We remain committed to minimizing the impact on school operations of our survey efforts. We will again attempt to balance the importance of securing input with the need to avoid disruptions to the instructional program. Furthermore, we will act to ensure that the cost of the survey process is borne centrally and not by the schools.
3. We adopted new forms for use with each different stakeholder group. The forms asked fewer, simpler questions, and were sensitive to the probable expertise represented within the target group. We revised timelines for collection of information to minimize the impact of

student surveys at the end of the semester and to give parents additional time to respond. However, the number of parents responding to mailed surveys remains disappointingly low.

We estimate that more than 5,000 parents provided written comments on the forms returned after parent-teacher and report card pick-up in November. More than 14,000 forms were completed by students in grades 3-6 representing 91 percent of the students enrolled. Close to 18,000 forms were completed by students in grades 7-12 representing 87 percent of the secondary students.

Input forms were mailed from National Computer Systems to parents for each of the more than 48,000 students enrolled in late November. Parents were mailed one form for each child that included the names of the teachers and principals identified as working with the child. Forms were returned for close to 4,400 elementary and 2,000 secondary students. This is a return rate of only about 16 percent at elementary and 10 percent at secondary.

The Administration will be discussing alternative methods of collecting input from parents. Various methods are possible including doing a mailing prior to the actual survey to alert parents; mail and/or telephone surveys of a sample of parents; revision of current survey forms; and abandoning the mail out the bubble sheet survey in favor of some other method of collecting parent input. A follow-up survey was conducted with 1,000 parents to ascertain why the response rate was so low for the mailed parent input forms. A summary of that survey is included in an Attachment B.

4. To the extent we are able to do so, we will again build the calendar to protect the basic agreement to undertake mid-year survey work, focusing on the first semester, while distributing the actual forms prior to the Winter Vacation. Although we may continue to stagger the surveys for students, parents, teachers, etc., it is hoped that we can have all the survey work completed by March 15, with the teacher surveys completed in January. Our efforts this past year were frustrated by strike activity and the survey work was completed on a later schedule that we had originally planned.
5. Based on our experience during this school year, a revision to the number of alternative appraisal models will be made. The revision will reduce the number of choices from seven to four models. By incorporating models that have very similar requirements, slight changes in the names of the models will occur. The revised models will be Portfolio, Study Group Process, Project Based and Action

Research/Self-Study.

6. The initial implementation of the Alternative Appraisal Process created some anxiety on the part of staff. The process required more initial thought and work on the part of the staff member. The form provided was more comprehensive, requiring the evaluatee to complete a greater percentage of the form than in the previous system. Based on input from teachers and principals, minor revisions to the form will be made. Overall, once the adjustment to the change in the process occurred, staff was able to complete the forms satisfactorily.
7. The Training and Professional Development Department produced a compact disc which explains the complete evaluation system. It was given limited distribution and has been judged useful by those who take the time to use it. One of the difficulties in full application was the compatibility of software available in schools. Since the CD was created, a player application has been developed that will be added to the CD that allows the program to be opened and used as a stand-alone. The CD is also available through the Training and Professional Development shared folder. The CD was also placed on the ASD web site during the summer of 1999. The use of these forms of technology will be more beneficial as the Technology plan is implemented.
8. The Training and Professional Development Department produced a training video on the four alternative models. The video featured teachers and administrators who participated in the process this past school year. Hopefully, this will help clarify any confusion staff may have on the intent of the professional development process using the alternative models.

SUPERINTENDENT'S NOTE:

Many people have spent a great deal of time and effort including a group of teachers to work on the parent input process. While the task has been significant, I believe we need to look at some changes that will allow us to not only improve or streamline the process but to also allow us to better recognize the excellence in our teaching, administrative, and support staff.

I am offering the following comments separate from the full body of the report because I want the School Board and others to recognize the work done by others, not me, and to be clear that my recommendations have not yet proceeded to others. The ideas I am suggesting are not entirely mine. I have received feedback from Board members, teachers, administrators, and parents and believe these can be helpful to improving our evaluation input process.

I believe we have to accept the criticism that we may not have adequately communicated or publicly provided the performance standards across the community. We have done better than most but we can do better. With a wider public information campaign about what is expected of our staff, we will increase the opportunity for positive feedback for those who are doing a good job.

It is evident that many people need to be provided the information about the standards more than once in order to know and recognize the performance that meets the standards. As we communicate more widely the expected standards, more parents will realize the high quality of our staff and the excellence provided to our children.

As a District we need to initiate a broader recognition for the excellent staff members in our community. Currently, the recognition most often comes from outside the District. We need to change that. While money is an issue, it is worth considering that we reduce the cost of collecting the parent input forms and re-direct the savings to begin to recognize our most outstanding educators. I will be suggesting to the School Board that we re-direct at least 2/3 of the current funds budgeted for the parent input process to a recognition program for outstanding employees. The remaining 1/3 would be used to continue to obtain parental input but in a different manner. For example, we can simplify the input process by telling the community, especially parents, that for teachers, administrators, and others who are meeting the standards, we do not need or expect an input form. However, forms would be requested on those who are exceeding the standards or those not performing to standard. In any system, the vast majority of people meet the standards.

If we narrow the focus as to the number of responses to be submitted, then we can re-design the input process to eliminate the need for machine scoring and systemwide mail outs with specific names pre-identified on forms. We will give each parent a single sheet with the list of names of teachers, principals and others who are involved with the students. Along with this, we provide some copies of the input form and ask the parent to submit a form for the ones they wish to comment on. While the emphasis will be on identifying excellence or those needing improvement, the opportunity will exist to comment regarding any of the employees listed. The form will be returned directly to the school and the principal would review the form with the employee. There would be no need to go through a machine scoring process. The costs would reduce substantially because of the reduction in the amounts of paper provided and in eliminating the machine scoring and the mail back costs.

This approach has not been fully discussed with affected parties—teachers, principals nor parents. However, I do believe with sufficient discussion and review then we can shift our focus and improve the process of gathering community and staff input.

We can shift some of our current expenditures to reward and recognize our outstanding staff and still meet the letter and the spirit of the law on community and parent input. We need to reduce our focus on process and increase our focus on recognition and reward for excellence.

BC/CC/LCW/TJ/RF

Attachments

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