

## **Anchorage School District**

Anchorage, Alaska

Dates of visits: May 5-9, 2008

Interviewer: Kayla Boettcher

### **Respondents**

With help from the Anchorage School District (ASD), 11 individuals were recommended to provide information about youth development initiatives in the Anchorage School District. These respondents included five Safe and Drug-Free Schools (SDFS) staff, the Assistant Superintendent for Instruction, the Executive Director of Curriculum, the Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Curriculum Coordinator, two high school principals, and one high school Change of Heart coordinator.

### **District Connections to Alaska ICE**

In 2007-2008, Alaska ICE monies were used in ASD to support the following:

- Full funding for one SDFS staff person, who served as the SEL coach in elementary schools and provided professional development for teachers and principals;
- Change of Heart in four high schools;
- Mini-grants with specific requirements to target SEL standards, benchmarks, and indicators. Sixty-seven mini-grants were distributed in the district from a combination of ICE and SDFS funding.
- SDFS staff meeting with an organizational consultant to clarify mission and vision.

### **Social Emotional Learning and Standards-Based Achievement Reporting**

Since the last report in 2006, ASD has continued rapidly on the path toward implementing a district-wide social emotional learning component. Adopting SEL is progressing simultaneously with the district's movement toward standards-based achievement reporting.

ASD has developed 15 SEL standards centered on helping students become knowledgeable (I am), capable (I can), caring (I care), and responsible (I will) individuals. Specific skill areas addressed in these standards are self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, and social management. Report cards traditionally include an assessment of behavior and citizenship skills – the “left-hand side of the report card.” Teacher assessment of these qualities can be fairly subjective and does not include a definition of competency or achievement. One respondent described it like this:

For example, one of them is “has a positive attitude.” The problem with that is it could mean a million different things, depending on who you are. To some people it means, “You come into my classroom and smile all the time.” And that’s not healthy for kids. If you’ve been beat up

on the playground and come back in and sit and smile, and not let anyone know how hurt you are, you shouldn't be getting an A for that. You should be getting help instead.

ASD leaders see their adoption of SEL as a way to better define the terms and goals found on that portion of the report card, to “intentionalize the skills necessary for kids to behave responsibly, have good citizenship, and have a positive attitude,” in the words of one district administrator. To help further define the SEL standards, benchmarks and rubrics are also being developed in cooperation with Dr. Robert Marzano, the nation’s leading expert on standards-based assessment. The district has been working with Dr. Marzano this year to also develop standards-based assessments for language arts and math. The “faceplates” that are being developed include the 15 SEL standards, written in adult language and kid language, so the teachers have ways to communicate to the student specifically what is expected for each standard. Not all 15 are assessed for each quarter – they’re done at different times. Also connected to each of the standards is a rubric, identifying what accomplishment at levels 0-4 would look like.

One respondent indicated that this was Marzano’s first opportunity to create rubrics for SEL, and that other SEL districts in the United States have not moved into assessing it. One individual said, “The reason we decided to go down this path is because if you have to assess it, you have to address it. So if teachers are going to have to say, ‘my kids are at this level,’ they’re going to have to teach it. The idea is that it will force SEL infusion into every place.” Another respondent said, “We are at the forefront of the country in that effort – when we present at conferences, other districts are astounded. Most other efforts are surface-level.” But ASD officials feel it is a necessary step. “Creating the standards and rubrics has helped to break down words like responsibility and attitude – kids need to know if they get an N in responsibility, what they need to do to get better.”

The district will continue to develop rubrics for other content areas, until eventually the entire elementary school report card will be standards based. Next year they plan to add standards-based reporting for science, social studies, and physical education.

As district leaders strive to integrate SEL as a “habit of practice” throughout the district, they consider SEL to entail three elements: climate, tools, and infusion. Climate is described as the environment of the classroom and the school, and having adults at the school model the behaviors they expect of the students. Tools are the direct instructional tools and curriculum, and helping people understand the current research that says SEL can be taught and learned by all students, just like any other skill. Infusion is integrating SEL standards into other content and not thinking of it as an additional thing to teach.

Even as SEL standards are a separate set of learning goals, the SEL curriculum coordinator and SDFS staff are working fervently to infuse the SEL standards with other classroom content. For the last year, the SEL curriculum coordinator has worked closely with the curriculum coordinators for language arts and math to identify places within their curricula where teachers could intentionally promote an SEL standard. Next year, they will expand to include science, social studies, and physical education.

District leaders say the decision to add SEL as a district-wide learning component came from a “grassroots movement” of effective programs adopted by individual schools. When the Developmental Assets were introduced to the district over ten years ago, that framework was also used to create a common language and goals that encompassed the diversity of programs. Because

of this history, the district seems committed to integrating all of these related initiatives and recognizing them all as SEL within the six-year plan.

The pairing of Developmental Assets with SEL is immediately apparent when reading the SEL standards. The assets that correlate with the SEL standards appear at the top of each standard's page. The decision was made to include assets in this manner because of the level of familiarity and buy-in that teachers have with the assets. Trainers tell teachers and administrators that working on SEL standards is another way to build internal assets with students.

The SEL standards have also been intentionally infused with the district's initiative to be culturally responsive and with the five-part continuum they have developed as a tool for evaluating levels of cultural responsiveness on individual, classroom, and school-wide levels. The Alaska Employability Skills have also been aligned with the SEL standards.

One respondent was specifically asked if she sensed any tension between the district's obligation to meet the academic requirements of No Child Left Behind and this vigorous adoption of SEL. Here is her response: "Certainly there's nothing in NCLB that speaks to student social or emotional needs – it's about pure academic achievement. But we know as educators that there's a huge tie between what they're experiencing in their life and how they're going to move forward and envision for their future. It's an unintentional help that NCLB gave us in this effort. Some staff may be feeling conflicted, but it's because they don't get it yet. If you see SEL as an add-on, you miss the point. That's where training helps them understand."

## **Elementary Schools**

Current progress on implementation of SEL and standards-based reporting varies by grade level. The strongest efforts have been initially focused at the elementary level. In 2007-2008, 20 elementary teachers were piloting the standards-based report cards, which included standards-based reporting for language arts, math, and SEL. The teachers used the standards to mold what they were going to teach, conduct the assessments, and report to parents. One individual said, "It's a really big project. We're still in enough of a pilot stage to see if it works or not, and decide if we're going to try a different approach or not. But it looks like this is where we're headed. We've had good success – we've had people saying it's changed the way that they teach, and they're a lot more intentional."

The SEL coach, an SDFS staff member funded by ICE, worked with the 20 teachers who were piloting the new tools and curriculum. The teachers were enrolled in a credit course and met throughout the semester, with an online forum for discussion. Four additional teachers who are "natural practitioners of SEL" were also involved as online forum responders – they would respond to pilot teachers' questions about how to implement certain standards, or to further the discussion about ideas that were generated.

Also in the elementary schools, all teachers received a half-hour of planning time in their contracts. To help provide them with that time, the district added health/SEL classes as a new block operating similar to art, PE, and music. Thirty health/SEL specialists were identified by the district – one for every two elementary schools. The SEL coordinator trains those teachers to provide direct SEL instruction to the students, and to serve as the SEL specialists for their buildings.

Response from the pilot teachers has been largely positive. They are reportedly saying that “they know their students better than they ever expected to know them,” or “they thought they focused on this before, but being intentional like this has made them realize how much more they’re able to build skills in them because of this.” Although there hasn’t been any strong push-back from the teachers, some district leaders are still cautious. “There are so many new things. Standards-based reporting is a huge change from the way we used to do things. So, saying we’re going to do that and we’re going to do SEL, which is a gigantic change – it’s an awful lot to put at people at one time. We’re not getting huge negative responses, but we are getting very tired people, who are saying, ‘I’m not sure how I’m going to be able to do this. When are you going to give me time for this?’” Being aware that teachers already have full plates has furthered the district’s efforts to integrate SEL into other content areas as much as possible. One respondent said, “An elementary school teacher’s day is already so full with what we’ve adopted as a district for our curriculum. Very full. It’s very hard to honor the work they’re already doing and ask them to do one more thing. But most of them already are doing it – it’s getting them to understand that they’re doing it and asking them to do it more intentionally that matters.” Also in response to the time concerns, the SEL coach has been working with the district’s technology department to find ways to make reporting simpler and faster for them.

Respondents offered the following two summations of this stage in the district’s evolution of SEL:

We’ve had incredible support from the superintendent, the assistant superintendent, and our executive directors across the board. That’s very encouraging. It’s almost like this was an idea that was ready to happen. It just keeps happening – one idea after another after another, opening doors. This community was ready for it. I think that the work our Safe and Drug-Free schools folks did with asset-building all along and the buy-in that this district has of strengths-based approaches is what brought us to this point.

The pilot teachers think it’s wonderful work; it’s helped them moved very intentionally into doing this more. And then, the general population of teachers – there are teachers who think SEL is great, they’re glad to have the guidance and know what they should be teaching at every level; and then there are those who say they just don’t have the time, they don’t know when or how they’re going to do this. The important thing is that we don’t get the question “why?” “Why should I be doing this?” We always hear “how” and “when,” which are much different questions. There’s ownership in those questions. And I know it’s because this district has spent 12 years talking about the asset framework. That’s something to celebrate.

## **Middle Schools**

The middle schools have an SEL coach that is paid for through middle school general funds. Her job is to infuse SEL into the middle schools through the Aggressors, Victims, Bystanders (AVB) program. Every middle school is required to teach a certain number of AVB lessons, but they each get to choose their method of delivery. The coach models the lessons for the teachers so they can see what it looks like, and helps to make sure the lessons are delivered at all the schools. She also teaches them how to do student-led conferences, and how to incorporate SEL into the student-led conferences. She provides training to administrators about how to prevent bullying as well as how to build SEL in students. This position has been part of the middle schools for several years, but the district has worked to align this position with the SEL movement and incorporate SEL language into the AVB program. Two middle schools have a special focus on adopting SEL: Romig and Gruening. In these schools, the coach tries to show the staff the ways they are already teaching SEL, and talks with them about how to be more intentional about it.

This summer the district is working on aligning the middle school electives with the SEL standards and doing trainings with all the middle school teachers. The electives provide many open doors for SEL, including topics like leadership and service-learning, so the focus is on being intentional about teaching the standards within those subjects.

At this point, the middle schools may be the most receptive of all the levels, but because of the established AVB program, faculty are not impacted by SEL unless they also happen to be an AVB teacher. All middle schools are required to include SEL in their school improvement plans. They also hold student-led conferences, and help students look at their own social emotional learning in the portfolios they put together to show their parents. The portfolios are used as an avenue for the students to talk about their behaviors, work attitudes, and skills.

## High Schools

Incorporating social emotional learning at the high school level is clearly the most challenging element of this district-wide effort. At least half of the high schools have successful programs in place – respondents identify East, Service, Dimond, Bartlett, and Eagle River as schools that place an emphasis on students' social and emotional environment as well as academics. Change of Heart, advisory classes, smaller learning communities, and programs to welcome and orient new students are listed as the ways these schools help to foster SEL in their schools. Similar to the elementary and middle school levels, the emphasis at the high school level has been on helping faculty to see where they are already teaching SEL and how to be more intentional about it.

Service High School has a pilot program in place for SEL within their Freshman Academy. The Freshman Academy has included academic enhancement classes that are offered bi-weekly, and they have woven SEL into the curriculum for those classes. They also offer occasional intensives in place of their first four hours of classes for service-learning or career-readiness projects. The principal is so invested in SEL for his school that he offered the SEL coordinator her own office in his building. The Freshman Academy teachers are now also supportive, after a period of uncertainty and tension about how they would be able to incorporate it. It appears that they are all on board now, and working together to determine the best method of implementation. There has been discussion about dividing the SEL standards among the different learning disciplines (i.e., language arts teachers are in charge of four of the standards, science teachers in charge of three, etc.), but the final plan was undetermined at the time of these interviews. There is a strong emphasis placed on student ownership there, and seeking student input on learning goals.

East and Bartlett have both invited the SEL coordinator to adapt SEL lessons for their advisory classes, and SDFS staff have led trainings at those schools on how to conduct effective advisories. Advisories are assigned by grade level and meet with some regularity throughout the four years of high school. The stated purpose for advisories is to create smaller groups of students connecting with an adult that helps to personalize education and build connections for students within their school environment. Advisories can provide some tremendous benefits, but they are risky as well. "If teachers aren't supportive of advisories, or annoyed and frustrated by losing classroom time, and especially if they aren't clear on what to do when they are leading an advisory, it will fail," said one respondent. But when they are done well, they provide wonderful connections for students and faculty alike. At East High School, advisories have been in place for three years, and it has "become part of the culture." One respondent reflected, "Even those that didn't like it two years ago – I'm

thinking of one teacher in particular who thought it was a terrible idea – now she is so attached to those kids, she is their biggest advocate. Teachers can't help themselves – they get attached to these kids.”

One administrator said the high schools may be the most challenging level in which to implement SEL, but she believes that they are coming along:

I've seen a pretty dramatic change in the high schools in the last six years. I think it's due to a couple of things – prior to six years ago, it was rare for a teacher to have the philosophy that 'I teach the child, not just the curriculum' – it was more like, "I'm giving it to them and if they're not getting it, that's their problem." But, frankly with NCLB, there was a paradigm shift that this is truly about all kids, and if that kid is not getting what I'm saying, I have to find a different way to get there. I think as we've been talking more about SEL, more about assets, they're seeing how they can fuse it into their curriculum, so that it's not a burden and it doesn't take away from the core content. They're on board and starting to see this more and more and more as the way to get at those kids they've been missing all these years. We still have a ways to go in high school, but it's so much further along than it was six years ago. If we're going to get the kids we've been missing, we have to figure out how, and it's through SEL kinds of things.

Other respondents said the high schools are considering SEL in terms of employability skills. “At the high school level, part of the job is to prepare kids to go into the workforce, and that includes skills in decision-making, goal-setting, and establishing relationships – all of that makes them more successful.”

## **Coaching and Professional Development**

SDFS staff serve an important role in the district as coaches and trainers to help teachers and administrators incorporate SEL into their programs. One respondent described the importance of this approach: “If we're really going to do this work, whether it's assets or SEL, we've got to get the teachers to have a conducive, supportive, respectful approach that's congruent with what they're saying. Kids pick up on the person who's giving the message much faster than the message itself.”

SDFS staff, in particular the SEL coach, conducted four coaching classes for teachers last year (2006-2007) and one this year (2007-2008). A class for principals was also added this year. The goal of the classes is to safely shift faculty thinking to be more congruent with SEL skills, essentially by looking at their own SEL skills and the environment they create for their students. The goal of the professional inquiry classes was described like this:

The teacher is the most powerful element in the classroom because of their skill level, how much students learn, and certainly in the tone of the room – how students treat each other and how they feel when they're there. If teacher is the most powerful element, how do they have a safe way to look at themselves and evaluate what's going well and not so well and what to change? The premise of this class is that every practitioner – regardless of experience or type of teacher – everyone has ways they'd like to grow. The best way to do that is to look personally at our own work. There's a lot of isolation in teaching with little adult interaction, and even when it does happen, it's not deep or exploratory.

The classes have three main elements: coaching, professional inquiry, and an introduction to professional SEL literature. Participants are given the opportunity to objectively examine their daily practice and work with colleagues to explore questions they have about their professional realm. Questions include things like “how do I foster perseverance in my students?” Or “What are the behaviors that really push my buttons and why?” In exploring these questions, participants consider objective versus subjective responses, and they establish a practice of data-keeping by recording their

observations every day. Participants gradually move from working with one partner they have selected, to working with a group of four colleagues, and eventually speaking with the whole class about their journey. All of these strategies are geared to not only help the participants with their own professional development, but also to help them be more intentional about teaching SEL and training them to be objective observers in order to assess their students' progress.

Helping teachers provide objective feedback to their students is critical as the district introduces standards-based reporting on meeting SEL standards. Individuals have different definitions of "respect" and "responsibility," and to provide students with a fair assessment, the teachers need to provide objective feedback and also be intentional about modeling the behaviors they expect of the students. One respondent described it like this:

In Alaska, the quintessential cliché is "this child is not respectful because he won't look at me." And yet, that manifests itself in a hundred ways. Some cultures believe men deserve more respect than women. Boys bring that belief into the classroom with them, and they get into power struggles with women teachers. These are all pieces that effect how we judge whether or not this kid is respectful, and how do we help the child fit into a larger social picture. The tool of standards-based reporting is important, but to me, it's like any other program. It's all dependent on the people. You have this tool or this program – teacher A uses it, it's a smashing success and everybody's happy. Teacher B – same tool, but the kids are failing and the teacher's unhappy. It's not the tool – it's how effective that practitioner is. In terms of SEL, sure we want people to use a good research-based curriculum, but only as a piece of what makes it. For us to be an SEL district, in my eyes, that means, on every level in the learning community, people are living out and modeling and accepting the behaviors that we're expecting kids to do.

In 2007-2008, after 55 teachers had successfully participated in the class, a cadre of principals was invited to participate in a similar class. Principals play a key role in creating and supporting successful SEL environments, especially in how they work with their staff and the level of support they provide for the social and emotional needs of both teachers and students. Eight principals from elementary and middle schools participated in the class. The class was structured so the cadre would meet as a group every other week, and on the off weeks, a coach would meet with each of the participants individually. Respondents indicated that the strength of this approach was that it helped principals keep SEL at the forefront of their thinking for at least one hour every week. They also reported how powerful it was for principals to have a coach that was solely focused on listening to them think through their questions and skills and the environment of their building.

One respondent summarized the importance of the professional development piece with the following: "Ideally, deep professional development is what transforms practice. We just know that to be true. You get a new science kit, and people think they really need some training in how to use that, but you employ SEL standards and not a lot of people think they need help in doing those." The district is also placing emphasis on SEL training by ensuring that when they train teachers in new content curriculum, the training will also include strategies for infusing SEL standards within that content.

## **Change of Heart**

Change of Heart has continued in three high schools – East, Service, and Dimond, with Eagle River also starting the program in the spring of 2008. Each of the schools has customized the program to best accommodate their student and scheduling needs. Most schools have been offering the

workshop to all incoming freshmen, attempting to have them all trained in the first semester. Upperclassmen are trained as trainers, and they are the ones who lead the trainings with the freshmen. Faculty members also attend the trainings with the students.

Dimond High School has been conducting Change of Heart workshops for four years, primarily with all freshmen students. All freshmen are required to take science, and the school has used the science classes as the groups for the training. Student trainers have been selected through a variety of methods; most recently an open invitation was given to the student body and any interested student had to get the signature of one adult in the building who agreed he or she would be an effective student leader. They recruited a mixture of high-achieving students and students who were more “at risk.”

To help allay concerns about students missing class for Change of Heart, Dimond adopted a training schedule that would have the least impact on the trainers’ class attendance. They missed one day of class in September to be trained, and then one day each in October and November when they led a training. The advantage to this approach was that they missed very little class time. The disadvantage was that a lot of time elapsed between sessions for the individual students, and they weren’t as prepared as they might have been if the sessions were closer together, or if they had the opportunity for more practice in leading sessions. School staff also reported that the evaluations were largely positive in October, when the trainers were “fresher” and the student groups were less cohesive, than they were in November, when trainers may have been less energetic, and the student groups more familiar with each other.

Dimond staff are reevaluating how they conduct Change of Heart and may make changes next year. They are considering offering a follow-up program for sophomores instead of putting all freshmen through Change of Heart. The Freshman House at Dimond creates a special and supportive environment for them, and staff feel sophomores may actually be the group more in need of this type of program.

Eagle River High School has just implemented their first round of Change of Heart after a year of planning with SDFS staff. The principal was very excited and confident that the school was ready, but SDFS feels it is critical to the program’s success to have absolute buy-in from staff and students. They met with staff and students at Eagle River to better understand the level of staff support, issues in the school, and the overall school climate. Simultaneously, a group of students involved in student government from Eagle River had attended the state-wide student government convention hosted at East High. East High students offered two sessions on Change of Heart, which the Eagle River students attended. Not knowing their principal had been talking with SDFS staff about incorporating Change of Heart, the students came back from the conference and told their principal they needed to add Change of Heart at Eagle River. The goal was to offer the training to 200 students this spring.

## **Be The Change**

Based on the success of Change of Heart at East High School, Principal Mike Graham approached SDFS staff and requested a follow-up program for sophomores. Be The Change was developed as a result of this request. Based on the Gandhi philosophy of “you must be the change you wish to see in the world,” Be The Change looks at personal courage, personal values, and media literacy. To

develop the class, SDFS staff members met with sophomores to discuss the issues they found to be important and the challenges of sophomore year. They reported that they had experienced increased pressure to drink and had experienced issues with drinking and driving. They also discussed the importance of the media in their lives. Be The Change was developed to be a half-day workshop focused on breaking through stereotypes, making a positive difference, and passing on the message. Be The Change helps students think about their values and beliefs, who influences values and beliefs, and if their choices and actions really reflect their values and beliefs. Students participate in a “sharing circle” where students talk about people in their lives who have been courageous, and times they themselves have been courageous. It ends with a commitment form, where students commit to one or two things they are willing to do to be the change at East.

Other schools have heard positive things about Be The Change and have requested it for their students. Because it is a follow-up to Change of Heart and based on some of the elements in that workshop, SDFS requires that schools conduct Change of Heart workshops before adding Be The Change.

### **Overall Impact**

The Anchorage School District has attracted national and worldwide attention for its dedication to teaching SEL and pioneering standards-based assessment of SEL. The American Educational Research Association holds an annual conference in New York City that draws over 30,000 participants. For the first time in 2007, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) was invited to offer a track of seven sessions on SEL. Representatives from ASD were involved with two of those seven sessions. Victoria Blakeney, the SEL curriculum coordinator, was awarded the Joseph E. Zins Award for Early Career Contributions to SEL Practice from CASEL in 2007. The George Lucas Educational Foundation created an 11-minute film about ASD, entitled *Educating Hearts: A Districtwide Commitment to Teaching How to Care*. The film highlights SEL efforts at all grade levels throughout the district, including the infusion of SEL standards with core content areas and Change of Heart at the high school level. The film was unveiled at a CASEL forum in New York, where the audience included George Lucas, Eileen Rockefeller, David Osher, Mark Greenberg, Roger Weissburg, and several US Senators. Additionally, ASD Superintendent Carol Comeau is now the president of the Council of the Great City Schools, an organization of the 100 largest school districts in the US. Last fall at their conference, she gave a presentation on SEL.

Respondents feel confident that these initiatives are making a difference and improving the educational experience for students in Anchorage. Three years of data from the School Climate and Connectedness Survey are showing improvements, and district leaders find this data invaluable in helping them chart the course. Freshmen success rates at Service High have increased, and respondents credit this success to the Freshman Academy structure. East High School is enjoying a significant decrease in school suspensions, most notably in the category of fighting/assaults. In the 2002 fall semester, the school reported 84 suspensions due to fighting or assault; in 2007, there were only 20. Total first semester suspensions decreased from 340 in 2002 to 217 in 2007. Average daily attendance is well above 90% (according to a 2006 report) – “a higher number than anyone can recall seeing at East.” Scores in reading and writing have also improved dramatically, as has parent involvement in conferences.

While there is no hard evidence to support the coaching efforts, respondents report strong anecdotal evidence that it is a worthwhile endeavor. The elementary pilot teachers, and other teachers and principals who have participated in the inquiry process, have given strong positive feedback to SDFS staff indicating that this deep level of professional development is transformative for their practice and their ability to create supportive learning environments for all students. Results from a pre- and post- survey on how often the pilot teachers were teaching lessons connected to SEL show a distinct change in how often they intentionally refer to SEL standards.

Without hesitation, all of the respondents agreed they have full support from the school board and district administration in the movement toward both SEL and standards-based reporting. The superintendent has also expressed enthusiasm for the deep professional development being led by SDFS. One individual reported on a conversation with the superintendent: “She was fully behind it, saying ‘this is where we want to go; it is so important for principals and teachers to have that opportunity.’” Respondents also agree that board members and district administrators share a strong belief that creating a climate where people are invested in their learning and focus on self- and social management will lead to better learning and better academic outcomes. The emphasis on student empowerment is also viewed as an important aspect of these initiatives. According to one individual, “The more kids are self-aware and self-assessing, the more ownership they have, and they’re the ones that ultimately determine that they’re empowered by these skills.”

School leaders see Change of Heart as a way to infuse SEL into the high schools, because “it really does help groups of students look inside themselves and look at how they treat others and how they feel.” Respondents say that, in general, school staff is initially reluctant about adding Change of Heart, because they see it as another thing that pulls students out of class. However, they are also confident that when staff fully participate in the workshop, they come out of it understanding the benefits, and supportive of the program. Some individuals specifically said that building-wide support for the program is essential for its success, and that it is critical that leaders address any negative attitudes as quickly as possible. If students hear a staff person or an upperclassman speak negatively about Change of Heart, it impacts the student’s level of engagement, and therefore the impact of the program is lost on them.

In addition to the growth and learning offered to the student and adult participants in the workshops, the student trainers are also deeply affected by the opportunity to be a peer leader in this regard. One respondent offered this perspective:

I still feel like the trainers get the biggest impact. We had some students who were not the best academically, or had behavioral or attendance issues, but I watched them really shine in that kind of setting. One trainer was one of our highest-risk girls for violence. Her attendance picked up, her grades picked up; she had maybe 2 credits as a junior, but this year she was passing everything. I feel like this program helped her – it wasn’t the only thing, she was trying to make changes in her life. But this did help her. She was constantly asking me how she could help, if she could do another training. She really started finding her voice through it, in learning to lead peers.

Although parents are not directly involved with Change of Heart or Be The Change, there are anecdotes that suggest parents appreciate the opportunities these programs provide their children, especially for those who are trainers. One parent stood in a long line at a parent-teacher conference to talk with the Change of Heart coordinator (who was not one of her son’s teachers), simply to tell her how much her son appreciated being a trainer, and that it changed his life. Another mother

received a message from a school staff person saying that her daughter did an amazing job as a trainer; the mother called back and said the message made her cry and how grateful she was to hear her daughter is making a difference.

Change of Heart has also been used in crisis situations: “There was a situation at East earlier this year, with some cultural tensions between two different groups of Hmong students – those born in country and those not born in country. It created lots of problems – East had to suspend dozens of students. We brought in Change of Heart to meet specifically with male Hmong students first, and then the female [students], to follow cultural practices. They also met with the cultural communities – the parents and community leaders, too. There hasn’t been one problem since then.”

At this point, there seems to be general agreement that East High School has had the greatest success with integrating Change of Heart, along with the incorporation of advisories. Several respondents indicated that “it’s become part of their culture at East.” Principal Mike Graham has adopted programs like Change of Heart and the advisories as an expectation for all staff and students. Although it is difficult to draw a direct correlation between any one program and a change in outcomes, there is a general belief among respondents that this emphasis on creating a positive, supportive culture and personalized learning environments has led to a number of improvements at East: higher attendance rates, higher participation in testing, lower suspension rates, higher graduation rates, AYP improvements in 18 of 20 categories, a higher rate of parent participation in conferences, and lower teacher turnover. According to one respondent, “We can’t attribute it all to Change of Heart and Be The Change, but that’s part of what they’re trying to do – get kids connected. I believe kids connect with the school if they want to be here. If they know the teacher cares about them, they’re much more likely to put forth some effort and do better academically.”

Respondents reported that the biggest challenges of implementing Change of Heart and Be The Change are finding the necessary time and money to sustain them. An on-site coordinator is critical for scheduling the trainings and working with the trainers. Without dedicated time in the regular school day, it is an additional responsibility. Schools are able to offer their coordinators a little extra pay for their work in that role, but it is still difficult. Time is also limited with the trainers – helping them be prepared to lead a full-day workshop with their peers is a large responsibility, and they currently have very little time to be trained and to practice their new skills as facilitators. Finally, hiring substitute teachers for all the days that staff members are participating in the training is also a large expense. Alaska ICE funds have helped to pay for substitutes; without that funding, district staff were unsure if those resources will be available to them.

### **Next Steps**

The district-wide plan for incorporating SEL will continue to roll out in 2008-2009. At the elementary level, 300 teachers volunteered to help pilot the standards-based report cards. At the time of the interviews, it was unknown how many of those volunteers would be brought into the pilot program, but respondents were very encouraged to have such a high level of interest. Seventy of those 300 specifically indicated they were interested in piloting the SEL standards with the standards-based reporting. The district also plans to lead in-service trainings on SEL and assessment with every elementary school teacher in 2008-2009. The district aims to have all elementary schools on board with standards-based reporting in 2009-2010.

At the middle school level, the curriculum department is working to infuse SEL within the elective classes. The goal at the high school level is to continue supporting programs like Change of Heart, Freshman Academy, and advisories, with the belief that those programs are making a difference, and with the hope that other schools will want to adopt them as well.

There are numerous teachers and principals who have expressed eagerness to participate in the professional development class offered by SDFS staff. SDFS is assessing their capacity to determine how many classes they can offer.

## ***Funding***

Across the board, respondents feel the funding from Alaska ICE has been invaluable in furthering the district's efforts to infuse SEL into their learning environment. The history of ICE support for Developmental Assets and all the programs they have supported over the last 12 years has helped to shape the district's path toward this revolutionary new future. In recent years, the funds that provide additional staff within SDFS have resulted in critical professional development and training with teachers and administrators to help introduce them to the new standards and assessment tools. ICE funds have also helped to ensure the success of Change of Heart at the high school level.

Considering all that ICE funds have supported over the years, it is not surprising to hear respondents express concern about losing that support. Some individuals indicated that the district is rolling out this transformative approach to education at every level with only a handful of staff solely dedicated to that effort. One respondent pointed out that only one person is providing direct coaching and support to elementary teachers as they pilot the SBAR and SEL standards – the position that is funded by Alaska ICE.

There is no question that the district is moving forward with SEL and standards-based reporting. They have already created space within their budget to support the SEL curriculum coordinator, and there is unmistakable support from the board and administration about the direction in which they are heading. But several respondents said it is still a fairly fragile time for this effort, and the additional funding is just as important as ever to help teachers and administrators across the district to really infuse SEL within their buildings in a high-quality, meaningful manner. One individual said, "Coaching the pilot teachers is going to become more crucial as we expand the pilot program and as we go live with the SBAR." Another commented, "to create long-term change and success with these efforts, we need to be able to provide deep professional development, not only for how to teach the standards, but how to create and sustain healthy social and emotional learning environments; a positive school climate." A third individual reflected on the federal government's continued cuts to Safe and Drug-Free Schools, and commented, "This administration doesn't seem to value SDFS programs, and they've been trying to do away with them. As that happens, things like the ICE money are even more important, so districts can prove the efficacy of the efforts, so other school boards are willing to take them on." Finally, one other respondent said, "Michael is so dedicated to making the work happen, we'd find something. But rather than being able to expand our efforts, it would be 'do more with less.'"

At the high school level, funding presents a different kind of issue – specifically, how to pay for the substitute teachers that enable school staff to attend Change of Heart trainings with their students. School leaders experienced with Change of Heart agree that it is an important addition to their

curriculum, and they would strive to continue it in some way. But without the financial support, it may have to be revised, perhaps by no longer including staff. Finding money to pay the coordinator is also a dilemma – the High School Executive Director is supportive of the program and has budgeted to provide addendums to the coordinators, but as one respondent put it, “We know he can say that now, but when they balance the budget, things shift. The bottom line is still about keeping the doors open and teaching content.”