

V. SUMMARY

A curriculum management audit is an “exception report. Data are gathered by the auditors from three sources: documents, interviews, and on-site visits and compared to audit standards and indicators. A school system is not compared to other systems and rated accordingly. This would be an inappropriate practice since there is no national or state system of education in place. Education is a local matter, and substantial authority and control remain vested in the hands of the locally elected or appointed Boards of Education.

The auditors subjected the Anchorage School District to a comparison of predetermined standards and indicators of quality, and discrepancies were noted. These constitute the *findings* of the audit. The auditors then provided recommendations to help the district ameliorate the discrepancies noted in the report. The recommendations represent the auditors’ “best judgment” about how to meet the discrepancies disclosed in the report. It is expected that the superintendent and her staff and the board may demur with the recommendations. However, they form the *starting point* for a discussion of how to deal with the documented findings.

Normal audit practice is the Board of Education *receives* an audit, they do not *accept* it. After review of the audit report, the Board requests the response of its superintendent of schools. When the superintendent’s response is received, then the Board is in a position to act upon these two sets of recommendations. In this manner, the Superintendent and the Board are always accountable for what occurs in the school system after an audit report.

The Anchorage School District is unique in that it is dependent upon other agencies to approve its budget. With some notable exceptions, many U.S. systems can independently exercise their taxing authority to provide a stable revenue stream upon which to construct organizational constancy via a strategic or long-range plan. This situation is simply not present in Anchorage. The system’s fiscal dependency, and the ever present possibility of fiscal veto or budgetary recision, has created an atmosphere of uncertainty and an anti-planning bias among some of its leadership team. Anything but annual planning appears to many administrators to be a waste of time. This perception, and the operational and psychological gaps caused by inadequate planning, must change in order to meet the pressing challenges which lie ahead.

To remedy this situation there is a need for a visible and functional plan that unifies district operations, one which will connect various organizational units and services into a cohesive whole. At the present time, this condition is lacking. Many departments within the school district are “silos of excellence,” but are isolated from other, related departments. Anchorage educational leaders, as well as members of the Anchorage Board of Education, expressed a desire to bring greater clarity and connectivity to their work. For this reason the auditors have recommended the creation of a six-year plan, commensurate with the city and state planning cycles. At the same time we are not recommending some grandiose experiment with “group think” requiring huge forums soliciting massive public input. The planning recommendation is seen as an extension of ongoing organizational requirements filtered through the elected Board of Education as the representatives of the people. The simple fact that the Anchorage School District is fiscally dependent requires planning, but not an effort etched in stone.

Things are about to change dramatically for the Anchorage School District in terms of educational accountability. New legal and learning challenges lie ahead in the recently enacted federal law *No Child Left Behind* and the establishment of school benchmarks for acceptable progress by the state. These mandates will usher forth incredible new pressures to improve student achievement at all schools for all students. The audit has shown that minority students are still not as well served in the

Anchorage School District as they should be. Test data show at the current rate of progress, minority student success at some school sites will never reach parity to the majority, even as the district becomes a minority-majority school system in its ethnic and racial composition within the next decade. The district is simply not prepared for these challenges at the present time.

The new superintendent, a veteran of many years in the Anchorage School District, has spent her time repairing the human connections, both internally and externally, which are so vital to maintaining morale and good will within and without the school system. This effort has earned her high praise and stabilized the psychological strains which were beginning to unhinge the school system from its constituencies and sub-publics prior to her tenure as superintendent. These aspects now mended the school system requires attention to its structure and operations. It is to this end that many of the recommendations in the audit are aimed. Tighter linkages are required within the crucial functions of the school system involved with curriculum development, assessment, program evaluation, staff development, technology, and budget development. The glue which will integrate, coordinate, and connect these functions together is: 1) a revised and more functional set of board policies with new requirements for a different set of system and individual responses; and, 2) a six-year educational plan which becomes the basis for defining, integrating, measuring, and improving internal focus, cohesion, and productivity.

The most pressing long standing issue in the Anchorage School District is the persistent *achievement gap* in the measured learning between majority and minority students. In this respect Anchorage is not unique nor alone among urban school systems in the United States. The underachievement of minority students is the single gravest problem confronting American public education. What will add new urgency to this dilemma are the new State and federal requirements looming large on the horizon to confront the *achievement gap* issue. At the time of the audit, few Anchorage educators had fully grasped the difficult and complex responses which these new requirements will demand of them. On-the-other-hand, school board members were more fully aware of the general dimensions and scope of the challenges than many operational officers and teachers interviewed by the audit team.

This curriculum management audit comes at a propitious time in the history of the Anchorage School District. The School Board, the Superintendent, administrators, and teachers have a small but viable window of opportunity to prepare themselves and the district to be responsive to a new set of challenges which will test their competence and professionalism. With strong policy leadership by the School Board, a shift in leadership priorities and tasks to creating better central focus and coordination by the Superintendent and her top leadership team, adjustments in staffing and functions, stronger connections between central and site-level responses, the Anchorage School District should be able to successfully respond to the new legal mandates, and most importantly, reduce *the achievement gap* which has been shown to have been a legacy which must be changed for good. This is *not* “mission impossible.” The strategies, functions, tasks, and methods are known. They must be woven together in a unique way to take into account the diverse situation in Anchorage. There is no reason to believe that all involved cannot proceed with *confidence*.