

Notes from "Building a School Community" class
Begich Middle School
December 7, 2006, 4:00-6:00 p.m. at Susitna Elementary School

1. Introductions and welcome

There were approximately 50 class members including students, parents, community members and 25 Begich Middle School staff members.

2. Susitna Elementary School (SES) overview from Susitna teachers Julie Green-Graham and Dave Gillam

School report card data was distributed to show school demographics and assessment data. SES is comprised of neighborhood and optional programs. The optional program is characterized by multiage grouping, project based assignments, portfolio grading, community service, and self-directed learning. The school has a long and successful history. The optional program attracts zone exemption students who must participate in a lottery to be accepted. The neighborhood school population has recently become more diverse with Alaskan Native students the most predominant minority group. The schools' population has also changed with a higher percentage (49%) of families eligible for free and reduced lunch services. More students ride buses to the school. There is also a breakfast program. Parent involvement is high, especially in the optional program, as an expectation is that parents contribute 36 hours per year. Connections between the neighborhood and optional families are good as a major goal of the school is to be welcoming and open.

3. Individual and shared vision work

Question: What do we want to create at Begich MS?

The class divided into six groups composed of six to seven members. Each class member wrote ten "big picture" qualities for our school, prioritized the top three to five qualities, and shared one with the group. Each group shared three priorities with the entire class.

A summary of these qualities are categorized and listed below:

SAFETY

- Provide a safe school environment. All students feel safe.
- Organized.
- Student, staff and community buy-in.
- Emotional and physical safety.
- Stability and dependability.

POSITIVE SCHOOL CLIMATE

- School wide approach: “Our school, our programs, our kids.” A common language; unified student body, staff and community.
- Student centered environment.
- Welcoming, polite, comforting, and friendly; evidenced from first steps in building at every door.
- Relaxed and fun.
- Lots of Smiles!
- Joining of all into one.
- School has reputation for excellence and is known for something. -An opportunity for our school to be a shining star in Anchorage
- Thank you notes to all visitors.
- Lots of pictures around school. Inviting visuals, signs, mailings and displays.
- Respect for education, property and age.
- Positive rewards for students and staff.
- Inclusive; embrace and treasure diversity; cultural unity. Promote idea that everyone is different and that is okay.
- Don't bite off more than you can chew. Follow through.
- Wild at heart; passion for life, high energy.
- Pride and enthusiasm.
- Good health stressed.
- Professional.
- Human-centered.
- Unique. interdependent and memorable.
- Blossoming self-confidence.
- Pride in facility; upkeep of building.
- Open-minded; accepting and non-judgmental.
- Consistency throughout building; school-wide discipline..
- All students are heard, empowered and should feel validated.
- Kids have a voice.
- Respectful students and staff.
- ESL and Special Education students given respect.
- Humor.
- Attitude is one of solution not blame.
- Not boring; an exciting place to be; spirit as one walks in; stimulating.
- “Me” time; base groups.
- Supportive, caring, nurturing, positive, stable environment for all.
- A school with these descriptors: energetic, creative, problem solving, encouraging, active, cooperative, flexible, innovative, unified.
- Commitment to school.
- Strong, healthy climate.
- Not cluttered.
- Open dialog between administration, staff and students.
- Social expectations: “Ladies and Gentlemen.”
- Pep assemblies with student recognition.
- Social Emotional Learning intentionally taught and practiced and taught in all activities.

- Snack stands.
- Firm rules; students accountable for choices.
- “Bully free.”
- Low tolerance for misbehavior.
- Music during passing times.
- Students featured in newspaper/TV; student produced “infomercials.”

PARENT INVOLVEMENT

- Active and involved parents at all levels.
- “Room Mom’s” or team parents.
- Organized plan for parent effort.

INNOVATIVE TEACHING AND LEARNING

- “Real world” learning opportunities; support for learning off-campus.
- Atmosphere that stimulates curiosity and encourages personal expression
- Student choice.
- After school “third session” with all kinds of activities and skills taught. School hours are “blurred” with classrooms beyond the school walls.
- A pace where ideas are possibilities.
- On the cutting edge of technology and best practices; trendsetting.
- School wide activities, e.g., “problem of the week.”
- Shared planning ideas.
- Access for ipods.
- Open exchange of ideas with defensive action.
- School wide portfolio with three year history of learning experience.
- True teaming; interdisciplinary units.

CURRICULUM

- Finding and using best practices so that all students can learn.
- All students learn and success for all students.
- Balanced and differentiated curriculum and academics.
- Variety of curriculum; some project-based learning
- School Within A School with community based projects
- Advanced placement courses.
- Technologically adept.
- School-wide projects or “weeks,” (e.g., Bridges)
- School-wide literacy and word walls.
- School-wide cooperative learning “base groups.”
- Transition time for sixth grade (e.g., for the first two weeks have delayed passing time).
- Opportunities for growth academically, physically, emotionally and socially.
- Sixth graders in pottery, home economics and on the top floor.
- Forward vision with possibilities; not just a band-aid approach.
- Shared decision-making.

- More gym time.
- Performing dance and music group.
- Elective and core classes valued equally.
- Integration of learning; weave learning through all disciplines.
- Classroom as community.
- Sixth grade separated from seventh and eighth for core classes.
- Outreach to community in a variety of ways.
- Lots of music opportunities.
- Daily PE.

HIGH ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AND BEHAVIOR EXPECTATIONS

- Clear, consistent and high behavior and academic expectations for students.
- High and challenging academic standards of achievement. -Rigorous, relevant, productive and supported.
- Focused, single goals, cross curriculum.
- Support for kids falling behind.
- Students know rules and follow them.
- Academic risk takers, thinkers and problem solvers.

CONNECTIONS

- Strong connection with community.
- Connect creative projects to students personal ideas and concerns.
- Community building activities.
- Encourage support of school activities among families, staff and students.
- Advisory groups.
- Lots of involvement and connections, especially for the “invisible middle.”
- Adult advocate for every child.
- Working together, exploratory and involvement.

STUDENTS

- Learn responsibility
- Dynamic choices for student involvement
- Kids support other kids in clubs, sports and activities.
- Student involvement with school culture.
- Peer and multiage group support.

ACTIVITIES

- Balanced variety of extracurricular activities in sports, music, drama, art, intramurals and academic competitions.
- Assemblies by team or grade to recognize students.
- Optional activities and sports.
- Everyone in a sport and a sport for everyone.

- Public presentations and performances.
- Help students feel they belong in and to school.
- Something for everybody.
- More after school activities.

STAFF

- Staff cohesiveness and involvement.
- Open communications.
- Professional development opportunities.
- Cohesive teams.
- Happy staff.
- Cool teachers.

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

- Student work posted in hallways.
- Spacious lockers.
- Purified water in water fountains.
- Chairs connected to the tables that spin.
- Decorations for the holidays.
- Better school!
- Big desks!
- Animals in classroom.
- Comfortable furniture in hallway.
- Ergonomically designed furniture.

Throughout this year, we will add to the above list of qualities. In May, 2007, these will be used as a foundation for writing our vision, mission statement and guiding principles. Feel free to contribute to these qualities at any time.

Next class on December 14, 4:00-6:00 p.m., Service High School, Room D008, east side of building, lower D hall. This will be a presentation on Smart Boards with a technology.