

Presentation to Anchorage School Board and Staff

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By

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Thank you for the opportunity to present tonight. It is great to be back in Anchorage.

I apologize if I am a little fuzzy from jet lag tonight.

I must say that I am very honored to be here at Carol Comeau's last school board meeting. And I look forward to a long and productive relationship with Jim Browder. I met him this afternoon. And I pledge the Council's support of him and the Anchorage School District.

Obviously, Carol was pivotal in bringing this school district as far as it has come—and she was a critical actor on the national stage with the Council of the Great City Schools.

She was not only chair of our organization at a critical time in its history, but she was instrumental in making sure that English language learners and Alaska Native students were on the national agenda.

She was also a relentless champion of the social and emotional needs of not only this community's children but all children nationwide.

Her legacy here and throughout the country is secure—and I am personally and professionally grateful for her leadership, her commitment, and her friendship. Thank you, Carol.

With that, I am here tonight to present the results of the Council's work on the organization, staffing, and management of the Anchorage School District.

With me on the phone tonight is Dave Koch who was the principal investigator on this project and is the former Chief Administrative Officer of the Los Angeles Unified School District. And joining him is Bob Carlson, the Project Coordinator and the Council's Director of Management Services.

Before I start, I want to recognize Pat Higgins who originated this effort. I hope the results meet your expectations.

I also want to thank the ASD staff for their incredible work they did in pulling together all the material and data we needed to do our work. They also arranged all the interviews and the logistical arrangements for our team.

As you know, our team was here in Anchorage in mid-February this year to do our field work.

The team was composed of 14 big-city school specialists and experts in the areas of organization, management, administration, human resources, operating systems, instruction, budget and

finance, and management information services. I think it was the single best team we have ever pulled together over the last 12 to 15 years. Their names are listed in the report.

While we were here, we interviewed about 170 individuals—either individually or in groups.

People interviewed included school board members, senior administrative leadership, central office staff, principals, and community members.

We also reviewed over 210 documents and reports

And we analyzed a considerable amount of data on which to ground our findings and recommendations.

Our charge from you was five-fold—

- (1) Review and evaluate the organizational structure of the school district
- (2) Examine the overall staffing levels of the school district and its major departments
- (3) Assess the broad use of the district's financial resources
- (4) Identify major management and operational issues, and
- (5) Make recommendations that would help the district as it moved forward under its new leadership.

I'm going to summarize our findings and proposals as briefly as possible and then take your questions and comments.

I am cognizant that we may not have answered all your questions in our report, so we are happy to address them here.

I must say that you gave us a very difficult task that frankly too few districts request, so the data with which we had to work was not always as good as everyone would have liked.

In general, we can draw some broad conclusions, but—to be honest—some of the answers depend on who we are comparing you to because there is no real objective standard which to measure you on some of the questions.

Still, I hope this exploratory study will be helpful to you as you move forward.

Now, let's take a look at your organizational structure.

I'm not going to review what you already know about who reports to whom in the school district you govern.

But we looked at overall span of control, lines of reporting and accountability, alignment with priorities, cross-functional teaming, job title consistency horizontally and vertically, separation of line and staff responsibilities, and the grouping of like functions.

In general, the organizational structure of the district is straightforward and consistent with standard practice in many major school districts across the country.

We did not find major areas of significant organizational concern.

Still, we found that staff often did not know why things were organized like they were—because the structure of the district has been in place for some time.

It was also clear to us that sometimes the organization of various departments were shaped by personnel changes and availability or by budget cuts rather than structural concerns or strategy.

We also found some bifurcated functions in the areas of risk management, facilities, grants administration and compliance—and some overlapping functions in the areas of Help Desk, instructional purchasing, and support services.

In addition, some of your assistant superintendents have spans of control that are too wide for adequate oversight. This was particularly true in the areas of instruction and support services.

There were also some inconsistencies in position titles and levels of responsibility.

And there was some indication that understaffing in some departments was undercutting the ability of senior staff to focus on strategic work rather than staff details.

Most of the recommendations we had in the area of organization—and I will cover some of those in a minute—were designed to upgrade and streamline some of the structure, to improve oversight, strengthen accountability, and tighten efficiencies.

Second, let's look at staffing levels.

This is an area where it is particularly hard to get precise and comparable numbers.

We relied extensively on data from the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) and district personnel rosters in this and other districts.

But, we discovered that the data your state submitted to NCES was incorrect, which meant that your staff had to reconstruct the results from scratch—and we then had to ensure that the counts were in the proper NCES staffing categories.

And when we looked at staffing rosters, we often found personnel with titles that didn't always make it clear what their real functions were, much less the departments they were housed in.

In addition, a number of structural features of Anchorage are different from many other big city school systems and those differences throw off the degree to which things can be compared with precision.

For example, Anchorage does not have a regional structure like many districts this size has. We think that's a good thing, but it affects your staffing patterns.

Moreover, you actually operate fewer schools than other districts your size, which also has implications for your staffing and your maintenance costs.

Also, the fact that you are financially dependent on your general purpose unit of government for local revenues and the voters for facilities bonding affects your staffing patterns, your ability to project revenues long-term, and your ability to recruit people for your facilities department.

Finally, the fact that other districts we were comparing you to sometimes have consent decrees or court orders that affect the placement, organization, and staffing of their central offices.

So, some of the districts of your size that we compared you to were sometimes financially independent, operate larger numbers of schools, have regional offices, or have various departments that have been seized by the state or the courts.

All of this is to say that the answers to some of your questions are a bit imprecise.

Because of that, we attempted to compare you in a number of different ways—

- (1) We compared you to all school districts nationwide with enrollments of at least 15,000 students using NCES data. There are some 40 such districts.
- (2) We compared you to the 65 urban members of the Council of the Great City Schools using NCES data.
- (3) We compared you to a number of urban school systems of your approximate size and composition using NCES data. These districts included Seattle, Portland, Wichita, Boston, Columbus (OH), St. Paul, and Omaha.

- (4) And we compared you to a smaller number of cities using department staffing rosters. These cities included Portland, Seattle, Boston, St. Paul and San Francisco.

We also primarily looked at total staff numbers, numbers and percentages of teachers, numbers of district-level administrators and support staff, school-based administrators and support staff, and central-office department staff counts.

We found the following—

- (1) Anchorage has about the same numbers of total staff that you would expect of a district with this number of students, compared with the Great City School districts and the selected comparison districts. But you had slightly more total staff than was the norm among districts in the over 15k category. This latter finding is not surprising because many of those districts are not as complex or diverse as Anchorage.
- (2) You have the exact same number of students to teachers as the Great City Schools, but slightly more teachers than the 15k group and most of the selected districts. This is a good thing. However, the percentage of your total staff who are teachers is lower than the Great City School median and the median of the 15k group, but about the same as the selected comparison districts. This means that you have slightly more people on staff who are not teachers than the norm—but not by much.
- (3) Anchorage has fewer district-level administrators and support staff per student than the Great City Schools, the districts in the 15k group, and the selected districts—but you do have a larger percentage of all staff who are district administrators.
- (4) Finally, Anchorage tended to have higher levels of school-based administrators and support staff than the three comparison groups—the Great City Schools, the 15k group, and the selected districts.

If the district is overstaffed, it is in the areas of school-based administrators and support staff, specialized counselors, and related services staff.

If it is understaffed, then it may be in the area of teachers.

In neither case were the numbers off by much.

What was interesting to us, however, was that the staffing patterns reflects the deliberate decisions made by the district over the years that emphasized site-based management and social supports for your unique student body. In doing these reviews elsewhere, we often find that their staffing patterns do not reflect what the districts think they are doing. In some cases, the patterns are simply ad hoc.

Finally, we looked at staffing levels in selected central office departments, compared with those in a selected number of similar school systems.

Overall, we found relatively generous staffing levels in your curriculum and instruction department, your budget staff, and your purchasing staff.

And we found somewhat lower staffing levels in the areas of human resources, IT, payroll, accounting staff, and custodians.

But, again, none of the numbers—either over or under—were off by much. Not enough to raise concerns.

Third, we looked at financial expenditures to see how they compared. We were unable to do a forensic look at your expenditures by function, but we could determine broad patterns of resource deployment.

We found the following—

- (1) The district devoted a larger percentage of its overall spending to instruction than the Great City Schools or the selected districts—and about the same as the 15k group.
- (2) The district devoted a lower share of its total spending to district-level administration than the Great City Schools and the selected districts—and about the same as the 15k group.
- (3) And as expected, the district devoted a larger share of its total spending to school-based administration than any of the three comparison groups. This finding is consistent with the staffing level finding.
- (4) The district also devoted a smaller portion of its total spending on operations and business services than the Great City Schools or the selected districts—and, again, about the same as the 15k group.
- (5) Finally, the team looked at the portion of the district's expenditures devoted to personnel. Here, the data appeared—at first blush—to show that ASD devoted more money to personnel than any of the comparison groups except that we looked at your salary levels and they were uniformly low. The explanation of this seeming contradiction appears to rest in your supplemental retirement fund that your district pays into per state mandate. If we exclude those numbers, then Anchorage actually spends less on personnel than any of the comparison groups.

Finally, we looked at major operations and management systems.

We gave the leadership of the district kudos for its generally thoughtful stewardship over the years.

We also think you have assembled and retained excellent staff.

In addition, we gave commendations to improvements in your IT system over the years.

We gave credit to your HR operations, its tracking systems, and customer satisfaction—something that we don't often see.

We also cited the quality of your CAFR and your track record in getting bonds passed.

This is a generally well-run school system and the public should know that.

Still, we raised issues and concerns that the incoming administration might attend to—

- We would encourage the board and the superintendent to work hard at getting on the same page and staying there.
- We also noted that the district does not use metrics and benchmarking uniformly across the district.
- We saw little use of cross-functional teaming to solve problems—something that can lead to the siloing of staff.
- We also concluded that the budget development process was not as strategic as it ought to be.
- Personnel evaluation and performance appraisal systems are weak at all levels of the organization. In no case are they tied to progress on districtwide goals or priorities.
- Staff development is not driven extensively by performance data and little of it is evaluated for its implementation or results.
- The district also lacks a process by which it evaluates the work of your outside legal counsel.
- The district has antiquated technology in too many instances.
- The district also needs to strengthen its time and attendance system, which is something that we know is in progress.
- The district has little way to determine if its instructional reforms are being put into place as intended. We found the same thing when we did the math review.
- In addition, not much attention is paid to evaluating the effectiveness of instructional programs.
- We found little evidence that the data the district has is being used effectively to modify, expand or terminate programs.
- The federal Title I program is not configured to meet districtwide academic goals.
- Hiring decisions are made late in the year—largely because of local and state budget delays—resulting in the loss of top talent to other locations.
- The budget office and Medicaid staff have not jointly pursued Medicaid reimbursements as aggressively as they could have—something that we know they are working on.
- The accounts-payable process uses a two-way matching process that we think lacks adequate internal controls.
- Your IT system and its vulnerabilities have not been adequately assessed.

- Your Help Desk system is out-of-date and not very efficient.
- Your night-shift custodians are unevenly deployed.
- Your purchasing department does not use standardized procurement solicitation documents.
- And the like.

There are more than enough things to keep the new administration occupied despite the progress of the outgoing one.

Per your request, we also have a number of recommendations and proposals.

However, we did not make many suggestions in the areas of staffing and spending.

These levels, as I indicated previously, are really in line with national and city norms. They also depend to a great degree on strategic changes you make—or don't make—to your theory of action moving forward.

Nonetheless, we do suggest making a number of organizational changes to refresh its structure, make it more consistent, improve accountability, strengthen efficiencies, and reduce some spans of control.

Reporting to the superintendent, we would suggest having—

- (1) Five line reports—CAO, CHRO, CFO, CIO, and COO
- (2) And 4 staff reports—communications, general counsel, project management, and research and assessments. We have done this to improve coordination and strengthen the use of data.

Under the CAO, we would propose having—

- (1) An executive director for elementary schools
- (2) An executive director for middle and secondary schools
- (3) An executive director for SPED
- (4) An executive director of curriculum and instruction
- (5) An executive director for professional development
- (6) An executive director for Alaska Native, Native American and specially funded programs.
- (7) And an executive director for ELL.

These last two positions are elevations from their current positions in recognition of the size of the populations they serve—similar to SPED—and the priority they are for the district and the community.

Under the CHRO, we would place—

- (1) An executive director for certificated staffing and recruiting
- (2) An executive director for equal employment opportunity
- (3) An executive director for contract administration and labor relations
- (4) An executive directors for classification, compensation and evaluation
- (5) And an executive director for classified staff and recruiting

Under the CFO, we would place—

- (1) Budget operations
- (2) Payroll
- (3) A controller
- (4) Treasurer
- (5) And a purchasing director, along with staff positions devoted to compliance and analysis.

Under the CIO, we would place responsibilities for –

- Applications and systems support
- Technical services
- Field services
- IT architecture, design, and enterprise management
- And administrative services

Under the COO, we would place—

- Transportation
- Food services
- Facilities
- And risk management along with staff responsible for emergency response.

Along with these organizational proposals, we have a series of operational recommendations.

Some of the most important of these include—

- Developing an updated strategic plan involving all stakeholders
- Designing and implementing a series of benchmarks and performance measures tied to your strategic plan
- Expanding the use of cross-functional teaming to address emerging district priorities and challenges

- Revamping the district's personnel evaluation procedures and tie them more convincingly to progress on district goals
- Restructuring professional development to align to your strategic plan, your organizational priorities, and your data.
- Accelerating Medicaid claiming
- Attempting long-term budget forecasting—despite your constraints as a financially dependent district
- Streamlining your Help Desk operations
- Returning to a three-way match in your procurement process (i.e., purchase orders, vendor invoices, and receiving documentation)
- And many other detailed proposals

In conclusion, let me reiterate the fine work this district has done over many years.

The foundation has been built that will stand this district in good stead for many years.

That work will also serve as the platform from which the district can become even better than what it is now.

In general, we found a district that was—

- Staffed at about the right levels and reflecting a clear theory of action that the leadership has articulated
- Spending its money on the ways that generally reflect the pre-eminence of instruction, social support, and site-based management.
- Organized in pretty traditional ways but that could use modernizing
- Generally well-run but which could use fine-tuning and improving.

Our recommendations attempted not to tinker with your general theory of action—that is your province, but you should use this report to discuss your approach moving forward and what its implications are for staffing, organization, operations, and spending.

We did attempt in our proposals to breathe more consistency into your organizational structure.

We urge you to bolster mechanisms for monitoring your progress and improving your accountability for results.

And we suggest some streamlining and some efficiencies—all of which are consistent with the previous reports we have issued on your behalf.

Again, I thank you for asking us to do this project

I hope it answers some of your questions.

Thank you and I would be happy to take your questions and comments.