

The Future of K-12 Education in Anchorage

Report on the Mayor's Education Summit Capstone Summit

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INTRODUCTION

In Fall 2011, Anchorage Mayor Dan Sullivan convened the Mayor's Education Summit, an initiative to improve education performance for all students in Anchorage public schools. Conducted with the support of the Superintendent and the school board, the project aims to raise the achievement bar so that Anchorage high school graduates are competitive in the international workplace. The Mayor's Education Summit consisted of three parts, each building on the one that came before:

- **Phase 1: November Summit (November 2011).** More than 100 leaders from education, business, health care, the faith community, civic organizations, early childhood and government participated in in-depth dialogue about how to improve outcomes for every student in Anchorage schools. After hearing from and engaging with recognized national leaders in education reform, the leaders worked together to identify the specific challenges facing Anchorage schools and a range of approaches for improving outcomes to be tested with the public in phase 2.
- **Phase 2: Community Conversations (February 2012).** In a series of 6 Community Conversations nearly 400 Anchorage residents engaged in dialogue about the range of approaches, developing a common ground vision of their priorities for improving education in Anchorage and the steps they hoped would move towards that goal.¹
- **Phase 3: Capstone Summit (June 2012).** This session brought back together the leaders who had participated in the November Summit, along with representatives from each of the Community Conversations. Over two days, they worked together to take the ideas generated in both the earlier phases of the project and use that input to identify and flesh out a small number of high-priority and high-impact reforms and the steps necessary to achieve those reforms.

1. Detailed information about the November Summit and the Community Conversations can be found at: <http://www.muni.org/Departments/Mayor/Pages/Mayor'sEducationSummit.aspx>

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THE CAPSTONE SUMMIT

The goal of the June Capstone Summit was to build on the ideas generated in the November meeting and the Community Conversations to develop a concrete, achievable set of reforms that would improve outcomes for all Anchorage students. On the first day, participants were asked to begin by describing their vision for education in Anchorage: If the Education Summit is successful, what will Anchorage look like in three to five years?

Several key themes surfaced repeatedly:



- ***A more rigorous and relevant curriculum.*** Many participants hoped that Anchorage adopts a curriculum that raises the bar for all students so that the district's students would meet and exceed international standards. Participants described a curriculum that is strong on the fundamentals, allows each student to identify and develop his or her potential, and focuses attention on both academic and life skills. (Several participants noted that the Anchorage School District had adopted the Common Core standards following the November Summit, which they felt was an important step towards bringing Anchorage students' performance up to international benchmarks.)
- ***Choice and opportunity for all students.*** Participants came in with a vision of a school system that is not one-size-fits-all, but one where each child has the chance to maximize his or her potential. They described a much richer mix of schooling options, including online learning, hands-on internships/apprenticeships, home school, private school, charters, public schools, computer learning and vocational schools. They stressed the importance of vocational and technical education to provide real opportunities for kids who are not college bound. And they emphasized that these options would be available to all students in the ASD, not just those who are lucky or privileged enough to gain access.
- ***Inspired teaching.*** Participants recognized that Anchorage schools would be only as good as their teachers: they envisioned highly qualified expert teachers, a culture of excellence throughout the district and strong instructional leadership.
- ***Strong community involvement and high expectations.*** Nearly every comment envisioned a much higher level of involvement on the part of the entire Anchorage community—from parents, students, teachers, and administrators, to business leaders, the faith community, neighborhood associations, and ordinary citizens without school-age children. As one participant put it, we want to see “family, community and schools united around each child, cradle to career.” With broader engagement, they hoped that Anchorage would become a community where education was a top priority for everyone.

Identifying High Impact Reforms

The participants then saw a brief presentation and video describing the findings of the Community Conversations.² They used these findings, as well as those from the November summit, as a starting point for the rest of the day's discussion. Working in small groups, participants identified a range of high-impact reforms coming out of the findings that they felt would do most to improve outcomes for all students in Anchorage.

More than twenty-five potential reforms emerged from these discussions. Some (like improving teacher training and professional development) were clearly aligned with the primary conclusions of the November summit and the Community Conversations; others (like focusing on early childhood development) were identified by some participants in the Community Conversations but came to the fore for Capstone participants as they discussed what sorts of measures would be most effective at bringing about the outcomes that participants in earlier phases and they themselves wanted to see.

Participants then worked to cluster these reforms into broad areas, each of which became the focus for a Strategic Initiative working group on Day 2 of the summit. Four Strategic Initiative working groups emerged:

- *Professional development*
- *Early education and literacy*
- *Student-centered learning*
- *Community engagement*

Participants spent the entire second day of the summit working on the initiative of their choice in working groups and in plenary discussion. For each initiative the participants defined a goal and an initial action plan to realize that goal.

Professional Development

Goal: Improve the quality of teaching so that every classroom has a teacher with the skills to create world-class outcomes for their students

Getting a great teacher into every classroom has been front and center at every phase of the Mayor's Summit. Like those in the November Summit and the Community Conversations, Capstone participants agreed that the key to improving student performance is to get the best and the brightest into teaching, prepare them well, and provide them with meaningful ongoing support. They believed more rigorous training and expanded degree requirements would elevate teaching's status as a profession and enhance community support. This working group focused on creating a unified district-wide model for professional development, finding the time and money required, and measuring success.

They also had an intense discussion about recruitment and retention. What sort of incentives for new teachers would be practical and effective? What are the best and fairest methods of evaluating teachers, supporting those who need help and dismissing those who fail to improve. Throughout they also considered the legislative and contractual issues involved in improving teacher quality, training and support.



2. The presentation on the Community Conversation findings and video can be found at: <http://www.muni.org/Departments/Mayor/Pages/CapstoneSummit.aspx>

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Specific initiatives:

- Develop district-wide standards for and emphasis on rigorous and continuing professional development. Ensure all teachers in the district receive ongoing training and mentoring, and implement evaluation programs across the district.
- Create central funded department to support Professional Development within ASD.
- Identify financial support for professional development programs in ASD.
- Identify financial support for high school and college students interested in becoming teachers (includes scholarships and loan forgiveness).
- University of Alaska, Anchorage and Alaska Pacific University, in collaboration with ASD, develop more rigorous and relevant teacher training program.
- UAA and APU offer more incentives and opportunities for students to become certified teachers.
- Develop relationships with top teaching colleges to offer employment incentives to top graduates.
- Expand high school curriculum to include more teaching-related classes.
- Revise contractual agreements around seniority and terms for dismissal, with the end result that the most skilled teachers are retained regardless of seniority and less skilled teachers either receive support and show improvement or can be more easily dismissed.



Who, what, when: In discussing who would do what and when, this group envisioned two parallel tracks, one for recruitment and retention, the other for professional development.

They envisioned the Mayor and the Superintendent together taking the lead on recruitment and retention: exploring a more rigorous teacher training program with Administrators from UAA and APU; engaging with unions and the school board to address seniority and “last hired/first fired.”

The group anticipated that the Superintendent and staff would work with principals, policy makers, and unions to develop a district wide professional development model. At the same

time, leadership, bargaining units and post-secondary education would work together to develop an evaluation tool. And finally participants described a major public outreach effort to solicit community input and build community support for some of the needed changes. This would include community councils, PTAs, legislators, workforce development chair of the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), the Chamber of Commerce and the Anchorage Assembly.

Several of these steps have already been put in place since June, including work by the Superintendent and school board to put a district-wide professional development plan in place.

“Teacher preparation is key. The first part is rigorous university programs that teach best practices. Then professional development within the school system that supports teachers and principals—and gives them time to implement and demonstrate competency.”

—Capstone Summit Participant

Early education and literacy

Goal: Every child in Anchorage reading at grade level by grade 3.

At the Community Conversations in February, participants in each session identified the importance of early childhood development, though it was not initially included as a distinct choice in the materials. But as Capstone Summit participants considered high impact steps—especially in light of the evidence that early reading skills are a strong predictor for future success—they came to feel that this was an especially effective (and cost-effective) way of boosting student performance throughout their school years and preparing kids for successful adulthood.



Specific initiatives:

- Institute a broad-based coordinating commission or organization—an “Early Childhood Working Group”—including business leaders, elected officials, ASD officials, other community stakeholders. The EC Working Group would be devoted to:
 - Making quality early childhood programs that enhance literacy skills available to all children in Anchorage;
 - Establishing close connections between early childhood providers, ASD and the broader Anchorage community so that all parties can work together more effectively to improve reading proficiency.
- The Early Childhood Working Group would undertake several specific tasks:
 - Map all existing early childhood programs in Anchorage, identify gaps in population served and in programmatic goals and identify approaches to adopt in Anchorage, drawing on the latest research and best-practices from across the country;
 - Work with early childhood providers in Anchorage to create a shared set of ambitious goals and principles aimed at developing literacy skills for all young children and achieving literacy standards by grade 3;
 - Where there are shortfalls, increase the number and quality of literacy-focused early childhood programs so that all children in Anchorage have access;
 - Address any shortages of highly qualified Early Childhood teachers and providers by incentivizing top high school and college students to enter Early Childhood professions;
 - Coordinate efforts of ASD and early childhood providers to ensure a seamless transition from Early Childhood programs to elementary school;
 - Identify funding options for literacy-based early childhood programs.

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Who, what, when: Participants described the Early Childhood Working Group as being convened by the Mayor and including a broad cross section of stakeholders. Suggested members included: the “Best Beginnings” Initiative, local early childhood providers, ASD teachers and administrators, non-profits (especially those focusing on cultural issues and underrepresented communities), the National Association of Early Childhood Education, law enforcement, social service agencies, parent groups, libraries and the literacy council, and other organizations specializing in community outreach. This information would provide a basis for developing a specific set of programs most appropriate for Anchorage and the working group would then identify funding options to implement those programs.

“There was a presenter [at the November Summit] who really lit the fire under me to stay involved in all this. One tidbit he dropped was that they are building prisons based on 2nd graders’ reading levels. And that terrified me. So when we look at the importance, the need for us to do this, it isn’t just teaching kids to read. We’re saving their lives!”

—Capstone Summit Participant

Student-centered learning (Alternative programs and school choice)

Initial goal: *Create a system where every child is able to maximize his or her potential.*

At the outset, this working group focused on student-centered learning.³ They agreed with participants in earlier phases of the project that education was not a “one-size fits all” endeavor, and they called for a richer and more diverse curriculum that would allow students with different aptitudes and abilities to develop to the greatest extent. They had an intense discussion about what it means for each student to achieve his or her potential, what sort of models are currently available, and what realistically would be needed to create greater opportunity for all students in this very diverse district.

In particular, participants emphasized the need for more and better vocational and technical education options that would prepare students for jobs in skilled trades, professional certificate programs, and other career paths that do not require a college degree.

The group noted that while there are many different options currently available, they are not enough to meet demand. Programs that are producing the highest student performance (like Chugach Optional and the ABC schools) have long waiting lists, and placement in these programs is determined by lottery, excluding many interested families. A first step should be to expand these already successful schools. Participants also noted that many students, especially low-income and minority, face transportation barriers that prevent them from accessing alternative programs. As the group wrestled with the issue, they concluded that the biggest bang for the buck would be to increase access to choices across the district, both by expanding existing programs and by creating new ones. As a result the working group shifted their stated goal to reflect this focus.

Revised goal: *Greatly expand students’ access to high-quality alternative programs and school choices at schools within ASD.*



3. “Student centered learning” is usually defined in contrast to more traditional content-driven models. It emphasizes active rather than passive learning, critical thinking and understanding, greater emphasis on independent learning, student responsibility and accountability, and the teacher’s role as a facilitator of learning rather than a presenter of information. It is usually designed to accommodate a wide range of learning styles.

Specific initiatives:

- Initiate a broad-based discussion among the community, key stakeholders, district leaders and other education experts to build greater understanding about alternative choices in education. Anchorage has limited experience with school choice so this would be especially helpful in determining which alternatives (including charters, magnets, and other models in use elsewhere) are most appropriate here.⁴
- Based on these discussions, develop a set of detailed approaches and transportation plans that would allow for the creation of a wide range of alternative programs and school choices (“Centers of Excellence”) available to all students.
 - Possibilities include expanding existing programs at schools that now have waiting lists, offering several programs at every school, magnets, different schedules, online alternatives, revised school day and school year.
 - Prioritize plans that will not require additional funds; parents and other stakeholders will provide input to the ASD as it reviews existing programs to see what programs might be sunsetted and what funds might be redistributed towards alternative programs. (Some participants noted that if good programs are put in place and demonstrate a positive ROI, it may be possible to consider increasing revenue to expand those programs.)
- Once this detailed list of potential alternatives has been created, return to the public and key stakeholders to determine support for increased choice and identify which alternative programs and school choices to focus on. This would include both expanding existing programs and establishing new alternatives and (where appropriate) sunsetting programs that do not meet student needs.
- Engage local communities, community councils, parent groups, school leaders and other organizations to understand different communities’ key concerns.
- Using input from the public and key stakeholders, develop a range of alternative programs and schools that support student centered learning. Create choices that reflect different learning styles, incorporate a wide range of subjects and interests (e.g. arts, technical skills) and provide high quality options for career and technical education for students that are not college-bound.
- Create and implement staged plan for increasing alternative programs and schools, including professional development for teachers at these programs, transportation issues, selection process.



Who, what, when: Participants agreed that it would be essential for the district to engage extensively with communities (starting with neighborhood based groups, parents and others) to understand different communities’ needs and priorities. They also recognized that it would be vital for principals to have more control and accountability in order to implement the programs most appropriate to their schools. Participants struggled with how best to balance the site-based management that would allow innovation and flexibility with district-wide coordination and oversight. While they did not resolve this issue they came up with several suggestions (e.g. splitting up the district into several “zones” that would each offer a range of options).

4. As was noted at the November Summit, Alaska has extremely restrictive rules for charter schools, and prohibits them from operating independent of the school district. In addition, Anchorage students attend private schools at about half the rate of students in other urban districts.

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This group also noted that expanding the range of choice available in the district would require attention to a broader array of methods for student evaluation, both to be able to measure student performance across a wide range of programs and to allow teachers to see how their students are learning and where they need improvements. (They felt that “formative assessment” approaches would be especially helpful in this regard.)⁵ They also called for more robust teacher training to allow for a greater diversity of learning options in the classroom. They felt this was an important synergy between their group’s focus and that of the professional development group.

“In my mind, we ought to take a look at all the options [for alternative programs], look at all the good things out of each of the options, and boil it down to three or four alternatives that communities can choose from. [That has to include] a no action alternative. A community may not be ready, and if they’re not ready, we don’t want to force it on them. That needs to be a community decision.”

—Capstone Summit Participant

Community engagement

Goal: Create ways of effectively engaging the community in advancing the strategic initiatives coming out of this summit.



As the groups worked, participants quickly realized that community engagement would be critical to the success of all of the goals put forth by the Summit. While participants in the Community Engagement working group discussed some community engagement in terms of efforts that should be pursued for their own sake (e.g. improving attendance and graduation rates), it became clear that their initiative would do well to focus on creating an infrastructure that could be used to engage the wider community around the other strategic initiatives coming out of the Summit. For instance, they noted, the student-centered learning/school choice initiative would require active participation

on the part of the community as a whole as well as among school clusters and local neighborhoods because of the size of the shift involved. Similarly, the early literacy initiative would need to reach families whose children are years away from formal schooling—and that would involve engaging with everyone from parents and extended families to neighbors, employers, business owners and more.

Their goal was both simple and sweeping: to bring about a cultural shift so that Anchorage becomes a community where all residents—not just those directly involved with education—make education a top priority.

5. “Formative Assessment” is an approach in which students are regularly tested to see whether they are learning critical skills, and teachers then use that information to help shape instruction for each individual student. Unlike traditional standardized tests that measure how well a student has mastered a subject after the fact, formative assessment is ongoing. It provides teachers real-time feedback while students are learning—what they understand, where they need help, and how to help them improve.

Specific initiatives:

- Map out and (where possible) build on existing engagement efforts, for example:
 - Alternative models like MyHigh, Kahn and vocational/technical programs that provide options for at-risk youth;
 - Job-readiness and skill-building work like that being done by Anchorage United for Youth;
 - The United Way's initiative to bring ASD's graduation rate to 90% by 2020.
- Establish six mini-councils in the ASD where the community can gather, learn, educate and connect. Most felt it made sense for the area served by each mini-council to align with attendance boundaries for the six traditional district high schools.
 - School board and site council would have a role;
 - Foster links with local PTA, school board members, as well as local/neighborhood-based organizations like homeowners' associations, community councils.
- Expand school-business partnerships, with a goal of having up to five active business partnerships per school within the next year.



Who, what, when: As participants discussed recent and ongoing engagement efforts they noted a challenge: how to make sure that top-down engagement efforts from the district and educators will mesh with the bottom-up efforts that come from parents, families and communities. Too often, they said, leaders and the rest of the community fail to connect or communicate effectively and their good-faith efforts at bridging the disconnect end in frustration. A possible solution was to create a Community Engagement Council that would serve as a bridge and point of connection between top-down and bottom-up efforts. By bringing together community leaders, city leaders, the district and the public, this council could help coordinate the engagement efforts needed for all the initiatives coming out of the summit.



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Closing Comments

Participants in the Summit recognized that they were not taking on an incremental reform: creating a world-class educational system for Anchorage will require transformational change. They ended the Capstone Summit very positive about the work that had been accomplished, mindful of the magnitude of the task ahead, and excited to be a part of the work required. While recognizing that this will take time, persistence and sustained effort, they emphasized their commitment to the effort in coming months and years.

One theme that came up repeatedly was that this is more than an education initiative—it is really a community initiative. The work of reform will require input not only from education insiders and experts, but from also the broader community, including businesses, civic organizations, the faith community, neighborhood and cultural groups and ordinary citizens. For many people, one of the singular strengths of the Mayor's Education Summit was the breadth of the conversation and the diversity of people at the table. Participants recognized the importance of this broader conversation and they thanked the Mayor for bringing that about.



Steps taken since the Summit

The work from the Mayor's Summit already has had significant impact on Anchorage's schools. In spring 2012, the Anchorage School Board adopted the Common Core standards for grades K–12 independent of the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development. Anchorage School Board members noted that adopting these standards raises the proficiency bar to international standards. Using these standards also will be cost-effective as the district will be able to draw on professional development resources (i.e. text books, curriculum) being used in other states rather than having to develop resources from scratch to meet Alaska's stand-alone standards.

And in the weeks since the Capstone Summit in June 2012, ASD has taken significant steps toward developing a comprehensive cutting edge professional development program.



Next Steps

The Education Summit is a promising beginning. It lays the groundwork not only for the implementation of a set of specific goals, but also for expanded and ongoing efforts in many different areas of education reform. The wide range of participants, their sustained effort, commitment and growing sense of ownership, and the Mayor's convening power, together create a new capacity to unite all sectors of the Anchorage community behind the goal of improving education. Almost all of the diverse Summit participants have expressed a desire to continue working towards the shared objectives they identified.

This continued commitment, along with the credibility established by the collaborative and inclusive Summit, will lead to a wider range of projects, a broader profile for the group's efforts and additional resources from throughout the community and beyond. This group of Summit participants is well positioned to continue to support thoughtful, structured community and public engagement, something they have identified as a critical component to achieving success in any aspect of education reform.

The Mayor and Superintendent now are working on the implementation phase for many of the recommendations that were developed during the process by creating a not-for-profit organization to focus solely on this effort. The Mayor will again be working with Anchorage's business leaders to underwrite implementation efforts, just as they generously did with the entire Summit process.

Throughout each phase of the Summit, Anchorage residents came together and agreed that not only is there a right to education, there is a responsibility to education. That responsibility lies in a student and a parent, a teacher and a community. The Mayor and Superintendent are committed to ensuring that all students will have the educational opportunities by which they can realize their potential.

"I don't think anybody in this room has a sense of urgency as much as I do right now based on what you all have provided as a framework for me to work on with our school board and the community as we go downstream. There are so many wonderful ideas and opportunities in what you've done.... As I listened, I was really proud of this group and how they took everybody's diverse input and made it into something that could be utilized by this district as we go forward.... We've got a huge amount of work to do, but it is doable, and it's right there in front of us.... I'm honored to have been here, and I look forward to doing my part to get this to the next step."

—Superintendent Jim Browder

"It doesn't stop with today. You have my commitment that this really is just a step in the process. We're going to continue to collaborate with everyone—our elected officials, our school board, our superintendent, business leaders, the folks that deliver education both in private sector and publicly—so that we can achieve our goal.... We've got the facilities. We've got the resources. But most importantly of all, we've got the human resource. As I look around this room, I think that is our number one resource. We have got outstanding people that live in this community, in all sectors, at all strata, and if we can continue to galvanize that effort, that energy, we will become the number one school district in America.... This is just the beginning, and I look forward to working with all of you in the future to make the goal come true."

—Mayor Dan Sullivan

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Thank you to all the Education Summit underwriters!



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