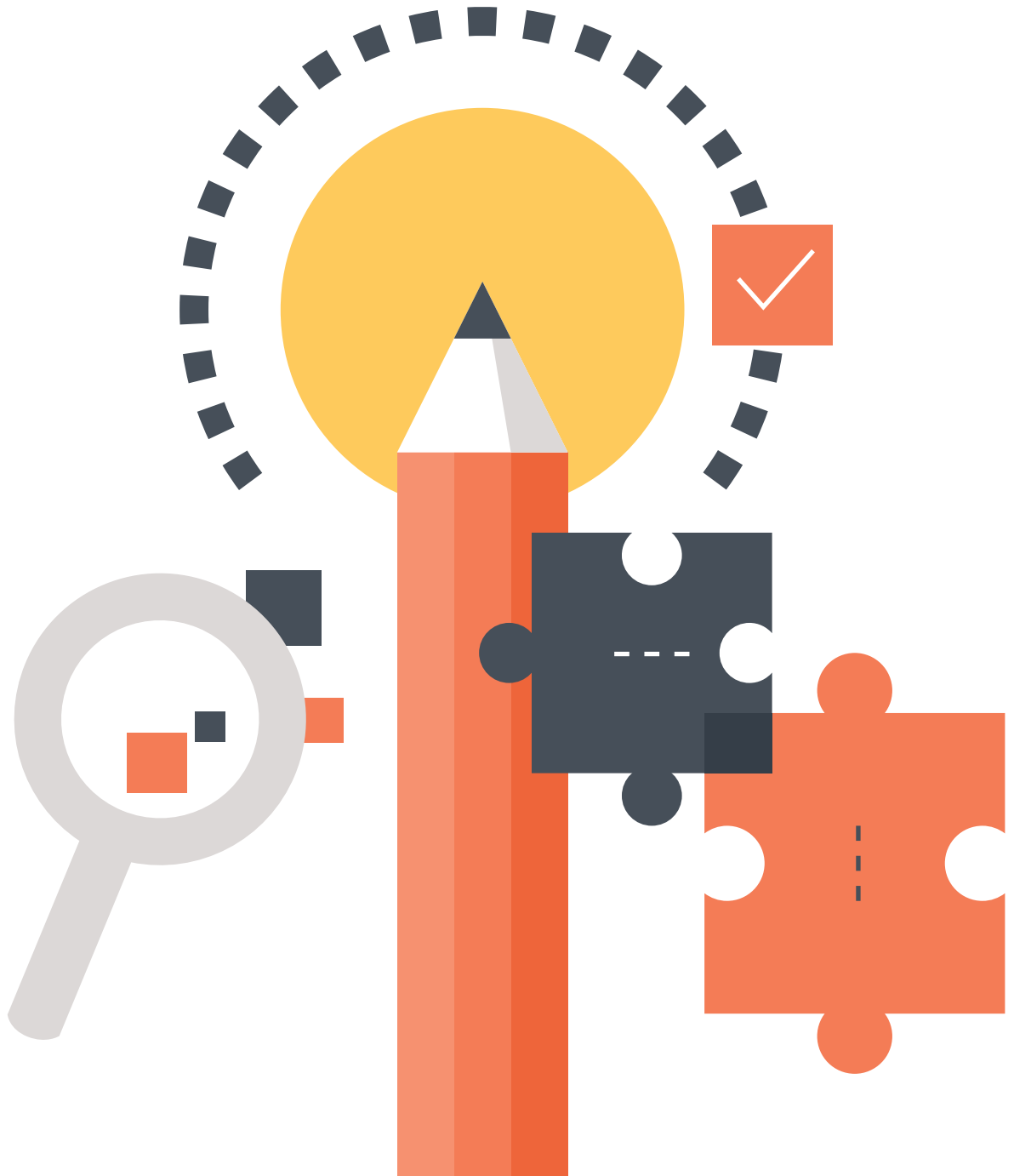


FAIRBANKS NORTH STAR BOROUGH SCHOOL DISTRICT

Comprehensive Review of School Climate and Discipline Project

Prepared by Education Northwest



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Introduction

From September 2017 to December 2018, the Fairbanks North Star Borough School District partnered with Education Northwest to conduct a comprehensive review of its current school climate and discipline policies. The goal of this project is to facilitate a districtwide stakeholder engagement process to review and identify key priorities as the district begins revising its discipline policies and practices. Education Northwest will support the district as it selects and implements an evidenced-based approach to discipline that meets the unique needs of its families, educators, students, and leaders.

This project has six phases. This report describes phase 1 activities and findings. The remaining phases will be described in subsequent reports. All reports will be posted to the district website.

Phase I. Engaging Stakeholders: Understanding Strengths, Challenges, and Possibilities

Education Northwest will facilitate a series of focus groups and meetings that will allow stakeholders to more fully understand the current situation in schools. These activities will provide all interested stakeholders with an overview of the project; a summary of the research on effective school climate and discipline; and an opportunity to discuss the district's current strengths, challenges, and possibilities in this area. The activities will also provide district administrators and school board members with a deeper understanding of the benefits and challenges of creating a fair, consistent, and equitable student disciplinary system. All stakeholders will have the opportunity to provide input.

Phase II. Engaging Stakeholders: Setting Priorities

Based on the feedback gathered in phase 1, Education Northwest will lead a stakeholder engagement process focused on identifying the core values, vision, and priorities that will be incorporated into the district's approach to school climate and discipline. These activities will be carried out in multiple ways, including online surveys, in-person meetings, and virtual meetings. This phase will result in a set of recommendations, which will be submitted to the district leadership team.

Phase III. Affirming a Direction and Promoting Community Awareness and Commitment

Committee members and the district leadership team will meet to establish draft policy and practice recommendations and to agree upon a vision for the district's school climate and discipline approach. In addition, they will establish a plan for promoting community awareness about the project. Through written, face-to-face, and other appropriate communications channels, committee members and district leaders will share information widely within their networks to promote broad stakeholder input and support.

Phase IV. Incorporating Stakeholder Feedback: Proposals, Recommendations, Drafts

Stakeholders will provide additional input into the policy recommendations and revisions, as appropriate, through the stakeholder engagement process developed in Phase II. In addition, it may be necessary for district leaders to reengage and further inform decisionmakers, such as the school board and principals. Finally, during the May face-to-face meeting committee members will review survey data and make further policy and practice recommendations.

Phase V. Drafting and Implementing New Policies and Practices and Planning for Evaluation

Committee members and the district leadership team will review stakeholder feedback and make further revisions to the policy and practice recommendations. This phase will also include the initial development of an implementation and evaluation planning process.

Phase VI. Moving Toward Commitment and School Board Adoption

Committee members and the district leadership team will conduct a final set of in-person and virtual community engagement meetings. These meetings will focus on informing the community about the policies and practices that will be submitted for board approval in December 2018 and building commitment and support for the effort.

Phase I. Engaging Stakeholders: Understanding Strengths, Challenges, and Possibilities

SUMMARY OF FOCUS GROUP ACTIVITY

As part of the phase 1 effort to “allow stakeholders to more fully understand the problem and current situation,” we conducted four focus groups and held three public meetings. These activities took place November 13–15, 2017. The meetings and focus groups were designed and facilitated by Education Northwest in collaboration with Fairbanks North Star Borough School District administrators.

Type of event	Participants
Focus group 1	Students
Focus group 2	Principals and assistant principals
Focus group 3	Alaska Native community members
Focus group 4	Counselors, health and social services representatives, and members of the judicial, legal, and law enforcement communities
Meeting 1	District leadership team
Meeting 2	District advisory committee
Meeting 3	Community kick-off meeting

In each focus group and meeting, stakeholders were asked the same six questions:

1. What are the strengths of the Fairbanks school district in making students feel welcome and respected? As you consider this question think about what positive things (for example, events, programs, initiatives) are happening right now.
2. How would you describe the school climate at schools in Fairbanks?
3. How is discipline handled in the district? How does your organization support this? What types of situations lead to discipline issues? What works in regard to discipline? What needs improvement?
4. Imagine you had a family member involved in the discipline process at one of the schools in the district. What parts of the discipline process would be important? What values should be at the core of discipline policies and practices?
5. What recommendations would you make to improve school climate and the current discipline policies and practices?
6. Imagine it is five years from now and we’ve implemented all your recommendations successfully. What does it look like in schools? What impact is it having on the school climate?

SUMMARY OF FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

This section provides a brief summary of stakeholder feedback. The comments were reviewed and themed collaboratively by the district's advisory committee and the internal leadership team. The summaries were composed by Education Northwest staff members.

Question 1. *What are the strengths of the Fairbanks school district in making students feel welcome and respected? As you consider this question think about what positive things (for example, events, programs, initiatives) are happening right now.*

Stakeholders identified multiple ways in which schools help students feel welcome and respected, from daily interactions to formal counseling and annual events. Several stakeholders said annual events such as Ignition Day help students feel welcome during key transition points ("Ignition Day for incoming ninth-graders ... really empowers students"). In addition to school-led events, stakeholders mentioned the importance of student-driven programs, such as Military Student Ambassadors (a program to support students with family members in the military), Sources of Strength (a program to "recognize signs of suicide amongst their peers"), and various Alaska Native Education events. Stakeholders also identified positive teacher-student relationships, positive parent-teacher relationships, multiple student recognition activities, available counseling support, and good communication across the entire school system.

Question 2. *How would you describe the school climate at schools in Fairbanks?*

While descriptions varied from school to school ("this is very school dependent"), school climate across the district was generally described as safe and welcoming. Many stakeholders pointed to differences between elementary schools and secondary schools, often finding the former more welcoming. The physical appearance of schools was praised repeatedly ("well maintained and free from trash and vandalism"), and student recognition programs were identified as helping to provide both students and parents with positive reasons to interact with the school. Teachers were cited for having positive relationships with students, as well as having high academic expectations, thereby promoting a positive culture. Some focus group members raised concerns about incidents of bullying and racism, but a broad majority of stakeholders described the district as having a positive school climate.

Question 3. *How is discipline handled in the district? How does your organization support this? What types of situations lead to discipline issues? What works in regard to discipline? What needs improvement?*

Stakeholders generally described the district as having a "progressive discipline system," meaning that discipline issues are counted cumulatively against a student and that this record is used to determine disciplinary measures. Many stakeholders cited examples of unfairness ("I hate to see what you do when you're 12 impact you when you're 17") and inconsistency ("it all depends on who is giving the discipline") in this system, and these factors were a source of frustration for many.

Several stakeholders from different groups pointed to a lack of flexibility in the district policy guidelines, which they said leads to unfair punishments, including lengthy (5- to 30-day) suspensions. All stakeholder groups said that disciplinary actions are typically initiated by teachers, who then refer a student to school administrators. Stakeholders said the main problem was inconsistency from teacher to teacher about what constitutes a discipline issue in need of referral. In addition, a broad majority of stakeholders expressed a desire for discipline policies that are more supportive of student learning, less punitive (“be sure to look at the whole child”), and make a greater effort to engage parents. Restorative justice was mentioned repeatedly as an alternative to progressive discipline, and many stakeholders said they would prefer such an approach.

Question 4. *Imagine you had a family member involved in the discipline process at one of the schools in the district. What parts of the discipline process would be important to have? What values should be at the core of discipline policy and practices?*

Many stakeholders expressed a desire for a discipline process that better promotes students’ academic and social well-being. While safety was repeatedly stressed as a top priority, stakeholders said discipline should ideally be viewed as a learning opportunity for students. They also said an ideal disciplinary system would be extremely transparent and clearly defined (“have the person know they did something wrong... and the consequences that relate to it”), while also allowing for flexibility. Stakeholders also cited timely and respectful communication from school staff members to students and parents as essential (“the communication piece is important and needs to be done within 24 hours”). Finally, in regard to out-of-school suspensions, all stakeholders cited the need for a thoughtful and supportive school-reentry strategy that addresses the root cause of the issue so that it is not repeated (“we should focus on aiding the student in recovering from the infraction, not just disciplining them”).

Question 5. *What recommendations would you make to improve school climate and the discipline policy or practices?*

Stakeholders had a broad range of recommendations. Some called for minor revisions in the existing discipline guidelines to allow for more flexibility (for example, the flexibility to deal with violent and nonviolent offenses differently). Others called for major revisions or said the progressive discipline approach needed to be replaced entirely (“progressive discipline does not work as intended”). Given that teachers were cited as the initiators of the discipline process—and that some refer many students while others refer very few—many stakeholders pointed to a need for more teacher professional development on this issue (“workshops should be constant”). Some also cited the need for a more unified vision (“We need a clear vision of what it is we’re trying to do—one that can be clearly communicated to staff, family, parents, and students”). Many stakeholders also pointed to budget cuts, which have resulted in staff reductions, as having a harmful impact on a school’s ability to effectively support the discipline process.

Question 6. *Imagine it is five years from now and we've implemented all your recommendations successfully, what does it look like in schools? What impact is it having on the school climate?*

Many stakeholders described an ideal culture of respect and inclusiveness, in which students “have a voice” and are given the opportunity to understand the reasons for a disciplinary action and to “learn from their mistakes.” Stakeholders also expressed hope that teachers will receive more training and more support from administrators (“empowered to handle behavioral issues”), which will allow them to develop better relationships with all students. For school leaders, stakeholders expressed a desire for more flexibility to determine disciplinary action on a case-by-case basis, so they can better serve each individual student and make decisions that are fair and equitable. As part of this vision, stakeholders often mentioned the need to improve students’ academic achievement and raise graduation rates—reaffirming that school climate and discipline should not be viewed as separate from these efforts. Finally, the vision expressed by a majority of stakeholders can be grouped into three broad priorities: school safety; a focus on academics; and a commitment to student, family, and community engagement.