

FAIRBANKS NORTH STAR BOROUGH SCHOOL DISTRICT
BOARD OF EDUCATION
FAIRBANKS, ALASKA

Work Session

MINUTES

September 11, 2008

President Hajdukovich called the work session to order at 5:32 p.m. in the Board Room of the FNSBSD Administrative Center at 520 Fifth Avenue to discuss the Watershed Charter School.

Present:

Leslie Hajdukovich, President
Sharon McConnell, Vice President
Jennifer Schmidt, Treasurer
Wendy Dominique, Clerk
Kristina Brophy, Member
Sue Hull, Member

Absent:

Howard Thies, Member
Michael Fitzgerald, Base Representative
Ronald Johnson, Post Representative
Ken Sample, Student Representative

Staff Present:

Nancy Wagner, Superintendent
Roxa Hawkins, Assistant Superintendent – Elementary
Dave Ferree, Assistant Superintendent – Facilities Management
Mike Fisher, Chief Financial Officer
Kathy Hughes, Executive Director of Alternative Instruction and Accountability
Clarence Bolden, Executive Director of Human Resources
Gayle Pierce, Director of Labor Relations
Peggy Carlson, Interim Executive Director of Curriculum and Instruction
Traci Gatewood, Director of Grants and Special Projects
Bett Schaffhauser, Director of Employment and Educational Opportunity
Sharon Tuttle, Executive Assistant to the School Board

Watershed Charter School

Chief Financial Officer Mike Fisher reviewed the Charter School Application Checklist with Board members. He explained that after the work session, the request for a charter school would probably come before the Board at their October 7 Regular Meeting as an action item. If the Board approved the request, it would be forwarded to the State for their approval.

John Carlson, a teacher at Ladd Elementary School and Watershed Charter School Policy Committee President and Head Teacher, presented the Watershed Charter School's proposal to the School Board. He introduced other Watershed Charter School Academic Policy Committee members in attendance: Abigail Paul – parent; Rae Trainer Wright – community member; Sarah Swift Masterman – district teacher/parent; Jarrod Decker – district teacher/parent; and Dave Merrill – district teacher/parent. Mr. Carlson explained a group of parents and teachers in Fairbanks were proposing to create a school for K-8 students with a locally relevant curriculum focused on central elements for place-based education – cultural studies, Watershed studies, the public process, and local economy.

Mr. Carlson read the mission statement of Watershed Charter School. “The Watershed School will foster the development of students with a strong sense of place who will be prepared to serve as stewards of their community. By gaining an understanding of the history, government, culture, and ecology of Alaska’s interior, students will achieve academic excellence and expand their competency to the rest of the world. At every opportunity, we will provide students with meaningful explorations and activities outside the classroom. We will teach each child with care, encouraging imaginative work and play, analytical and critical thinking skills, and a sense of social and ecological responsibility.”

Work Session

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Mrs. Dominique arrived at 5:45 p.m.

Place-Based Education

The Watershed Charter School would offer a place-based education, which would be a significantly different approach to teaching and learning currently offered in the district. Place-based education was an approach that focused on the goal of developing connections between students and their community. A place-based charter school would help students come to know and care for the place in which they lived. It would be a way to take fuller advantage of the unique characteristics of the Tanana Valley.

Place-based education involved using the local community and natural landscape as a reoccurring theme to teach concepts in language arts, mathematics, social studies, science, and the arts. Place-based education relied heavily upon authentic real-world learning experiences to increase student achievement.

Relying on the philosophy of place-based education, the curriculum would be multidisciplinary and thematic. It would promote teaching among educators, parent volunteers, and community resource people. School and community walls would come down. Learning would be experiential and community-based and would often include projects and service learning components that directly benefited the community. Students would be motivated to learn as they saw the obvious relevance of the curriculum and that motivation would lead to academic excellence.

Place-based education would not promote the elimination of non-local knowledge or the creation of a provincial outlook. When children became intimately connected to and knowledgeable about their own community, they could intelligently apply their understanding to the rest of the world. An understanding of self and community was the bedrock on which an in-depth understanding of the greater world would be built. A curriculum of place would provide children with a deep sense of history of their home-place and an intricate understanding of the landscape and culture surrounding them.

Curriculum

The Watershed School's curriculum would ground itself in learning activities that developed a sense of place through the study of local knowledge and the investigation of the community. The charter school had designed its curriculum in a progression of continually widening circles that would lead children to a deeper understanding and appreciation of world cultures and issues.

Family → Classroom → School → Neighborhood → Community → Tanana
Valley → Alaska → United States → North America → World

The Watershed School would base much of its science content and interdisciplinary thematic units on the natural sciences including biology, geology, anatomy, physics, astronomy, and chemistry. Using the natural sciences as a framework for multidisciplinary studies was solid education pedagogy.

The Watershed School chose its name in part due to the pragmatic implications of the natural science and interdisciplinary thematic units based upon the ecological systems with the Tanana Valley Watershed. The word "watershed" lends itself to the metaphor of an interconnected community of people. Using the watershed as a backdrop, the Watershed School would utilize solid educational strategies that would lead to high levels of student learning in a highly motivating atmosphere.

The Watershed Advisory Committee felt strongly about place-based topics being cognitively and emotionally appropriate for the age of the child. As early as kindergarten the students would be encouraged to take part in problem solving activities. By third grade, children would address

Curriculum

school-wide challenges such as recycling, conserving energy, and other positive issues. By fifth grade, students might be solving schoolyard habitat restoration challenges along Deadman Slough. Sixth graders could address needs of the local food bank. Middle School students might choose to explore opportunities to address an invasive plant species issue in the University of Alaska Arboretum. Although the Watershed School's 7th and 8th grade curriculum would have students studying state, national, and international topics, the focus of engaged hands-on projects appropriate for "community problem solving and decision making" would still primarily be local. Throughout the curriculum, the charter school would present opportunities for students to address real-life problems and issues of the classroom, school, and community.

The Watershed School would engage students in the policy-making processes of the community and governmental institutions. In the field of place-based education, students would explore the process by which groups of people made decisions. Political science would become an integral part of the 5th-8th grade social science curriculum. The study of political behavior would be examined and the acquisition and application of power would be explored through actual local scenarios and played out in classroom role-playing simulations. Although focus would often be applied to the operation of government, with first emphasis on local government, in reality, at the charter school, the democratic political process would be observed in all of the children's group interactions, including classroom structure, community organizations, informal social groups, corporate and education institutions.

The Watershed School intended to help combat loss of young people from the community due to the perceived lack of viable economic opportunities. They would address the perception that youth must leave the area to find fulfilling lifestyles and meaningful adult employment. Charter school educators would regularly reach out to solicit support from community members to further curriculum goals. By doing this, students would become aware of the great professional diversity in the community.

School-wide Philosophy of Management

The Watershed School believes that in order for children to follow school rules and adhere to community expectations they must understand the rules. In working with children, the practice component of teaching self-management was often left out. Behavioral expectations and techniques of self-management would be practiced again and again under the guidance of trained adults.

There were different ways to teach correct school-wide behavior. The charter school would focus on the following key components:

- Teachers must model rules for children. That procedure would be used to show the students what was expected of them and how to be successful in different situations.
- Children must be given opportunities to role play correct behavior. Appropriate behaviors would be reinforced repeatedly in safe and predictable situations.

Inspired by the philosophy of *The Responsive Classroom*, the Watershed School would follow eight guiding practices:

Morning Meeting	Gathering as a whole class each morning to greet one another, share news, and warm up for the day ahead.
Rule Creation	Helping students create classroom rules to ensure an environment that allowed all class members to meet their learning goals.

School-wide Philosophy of Management (continued)

Positive Teacher Language	Using words and tone as a tool to promote children's active learning, sense of community, and self-discipline.
Logical Consequences	Responding to misbehavior in a way that allowed children to fix and learn from their mistakes while preserving their dignity.
Project-Based Learning	Introducing concepts through thematic study using a format that encouraged independence, cooperative problem solving, creativity, and applied knowledge.
Differentiated Instruction	Adapting instruction to accommodate the needs of students with varying learning styles and abilities.
Classroom Organization	Setting up the room in ways that encouraged students' independence, cooperation, productivity, and reinforced the place-based mission of the school.
Working with Families	Creating an open environment that encouraged parental involvement in their child's classroom experience.

All parents who enrolled students in the charter school would be required to contribute volunteer efforts to the school. Parents could choose from a wide array of opportunities to become engaged in the day-to-day operation of the school. As a rule-of-thumb, an average voluntary contribution by a family would be approximately 10 hours per semester.

Physical Education Philosophy and Program

Classrooms teachers would teach physical education to their students. Teachers would be responsible for leading their students in physical activity a minimum of 120 minutes per week (double the district's requirement), excluding recess. In addition, the charter school has taken the innovative stand that 75% of physical education would take place outdoors, weather permitting. Every science and social studies unit would include getting students out of the school building and into the community or the outdoors.

Creative Arts Program

The charter school's educational program placed a great emphasis on the natural sciences and community, but believed that creative arts were crucial to healthy child development and a well-rounded educational program. Classroom teachers would be responsible for incorporating a vibrant creative arts program into their teaching routine. The arts program would include exposure to and appreciation of varied art forms, both within the local community and world-wide, while allowing guided experimentation with different materials and building skills in various media.

The creative arts program would include the following areas: visual arts, music and movement, and dramatic and literary arts. Teachers would incorporate creative arts into daily classroom activities and attempts would be made to tie art projects to school-wide and/or classroom themes. The charter school would draw on community arts resources for project ideas, teacher guidance and mentoring, and at times direct work with students.

While the charter school may not be able to provide individual or group music instruction (i.e. band/orchestra/choir) due to budgetary constraints, they would assist families in coordinating private instruction and offer practice and/or lesson space in the facility outside school hours as they were able. They would also partner with other community performance groups and schools to allow students with more advanced musical and dramatic interests a venue for instruction, practice, and performance.

Language Arts Curriculum

Although not bound by the district's English/Language Arts curriculum adoptions or suggested curriculum materials, the charter school would follow the *Ongoing Learner Goals, Concepts, and Mastery Core Objectives* of the FNSBSD K-8 English/Language Arts Curriculum, adopted May 3, 2005. Setting the charter school apart from most language arts programs would be the direct connection to the science and social studies curricular units. Fifty percent of language arts instruction time would reinforce and relate to concepts covered in the science and social studies curriculum.

Math Curriculum

In regards to the math curriculum, the charter school would follow the FNSBSD *Ongoing Learner Goals, Concepts, and Mastery Core Objectives*, adopted May 2, 2006. The curriculum, reinforced through a solid mathematics series would make up a strong program. The Academic Policy Committee was researching high quality math programs to determine which would best meet the unique requirements of their thematic and project-based curriculum. Mathematics, in much the same way as language arts, would be connected to the natural science and social studies themes. The charter school would strive for 25% of their mathematics content to be reflected in their units on science and social studies.

Middle School

The Watershed Charter School strongly believed that elementary students should have the same teacher all-day-long for two years (looping model). In 7th and 8th grades, students would rotate between two teachers, both with full time aides. This would allow for highly qualified content area teachers who would focus on specific areas of curriculum and would help students prepare for the multiple teachers they would encounter in high school.

The charter school would utilize block scheduling, providing for large blocks of uninterrupted time to conduct large-scale projects and out-of-building investigations. In middle school, rather than having every class each day for a short period of time, the charter school had the flexibility to have only two or three classes in one day, each for a longer time period, resulting in fewer transitions for students. The block scheduling would also allow time for students who needed remedial help or enrichment without affecting the daily schedule.

Specialized Learning Needs

Special education services would comply with district policy and state and federal law. Children with different learning abilities would receive a high quality education at the charter school. It would be an excellent match for students of diverse learning styles - learning disabled students, communication delayed students, or children from diverse language backgrounds.

Program Goals

The Watershed Charter School had nine program goals with specific levels of achievement for each.

1. *Thematic Material:*

- 50% of language arts instruction time would reinforce and relate to concepts covered in the science and social studies curriculum.
- 20% of math instruction time would involve applied mathematics related to the science and social studies curriculum.

2. *Outdoor Education/Recreation:*

- 75% of physical education would take place outdoors.
- Classroom teachers would be responsible for students participating in physical activity a minimum of 120 minutes per week, excluding recess.
- Science and social studies units would be related to the local community. Every science and social studies unit would include getting students out of the school building and into the community or the outdoors.

Program Goals (continued)

3. AYP:

- The Watershed School would meet State benchmarks in math, reading, writing, and science. They would meet all federal and state assessment requirements associated with NCLB and Alaska Quality School Initiative (QSI).

4. Stable Enrollment:

- Excluding those students who moved out of the area, the school would aim for a voluntary re-enrollment rate of 80% after the first year, and 90% in the subsequent years.

5. Community Involvement:

- The school has set a goal of involvement by community members to equal 20% of the total teaching hours budgeted each year. Community members were defined as families and volunteer teachers from throughout the community. Volunteers would include local scientists, historians, and other specialists.

6. Parent Satisfaction:

- The school has set a goal of having 90% of the parents agree that the school met their children's needs per parent surveys.

7. Small School Size with Low Student to Adult Ratio:

- In order to maintain a family-like atmosphere, increase learning, and meet the individual needs of students, the charter school would maintain a small enrollment. The school would be limited to approximately 200 children. The teacher-student ratio would be 1:22 with full-time classroom aides.

8. Family Volunteering:

- 80% of families would volunteer at the school.

9. Teacher Training:

- All teachers would be trained in components of the *The Responsive Classroom*.

Admission Process

Prospective families of the Watershed Charter School would follow a three-step process:

1. During the application process, parents and guardians would be required to attend one orientation meeting to learn about the philosophy, curriculum, and daily operation of the school. In addition, they would be required to observe the school in session. Dates for the orientation meetings and visitation arrangements would be posted on the school's web page. The orientation and in-session observation (if applicable) should occur before completing the application so that students and their families would understand the charter school's unique vision and its requirements.
2. Parents and guardians would read, complete, and sign the Watershed application form.
3. Once completed, the application, along with a completed lottery form, would be reviewed by the Watershed Application Committee. If more students applied than could be accommodated, applicants would be drawn by lottery for admission. Lottery drawings would be held on April 15 of each year.

Admission Criteria

Watershed Charter School would be a parent choice school. There would be no fees for regular tuition and enrollment, although the school could elect to charge fees for special events and/or special programs. A student enrolling would have to be within the age of five and fourteen. As in other district schools, in order to be eligible to apply to attend kindergarten, children must be five years old on or before September 1. Children must be six years old on or before September 1 to attend first grade. At least one parent, or legal guardian, must be a resident of the Fairbanks North Star Borough.

Enrollment at the charter school would be voluntary. As per AS 14.03.265 (b) the school would strive to enroll all eligible students who submitted a timely application. In the event of too many eligible applicants, the school would follow FNSBSD lottery procedures for open enrollment. The lottery would be held on April 15 of every spring, for enrollment for the following fall, and would be conducted in accordance with district policy. The school would keep a waiting list of students that had applied, but were unsuccessful in being chosen through the lottery. When there were openings in the school between the annual lottery, the waiting list would be used to fill vacancies.

In keeping with the charter school's philosophy of long-term connection to family, community, and geographical place, in subsequent years, all students who had previously attended the charter school would automatically be re-enrolled in the program. Siblings would be admitted as a unit so that families could attend the same school. Although all new applicants would be required to meet application requirements, future students who already had siblings enrolled in the school would be given priority to enroll, given that space was available at the appropriate grade level.

Administrative Policies

The charter school would have a head teacher that would share a part time teaching load with administrative responsibilities. There would also be an Academic Policy Committee which would supervise the academic operation of the school and ensure the fulfillment of the mission and specific levels of achievement for the school's educational program.

The charter school would adopt the school district policies, except as waived in the contract between it and the district, and would operate in compliance with the terms of the contract. As employees of the district, all employees of the charter school would be guided by the district personnel policies and contract stipulations, unless waived.

Facility

Although the charter school did not have a specific facility lined up at the time of its presentation to the Board, Mr. Carlson stated the specific requirements for the school's location.

1. Natural area of trees and indigenous vegetation on or adjacent to school grounds.
2. Near borough bus line.
3. Safe walking access to bike paths.
4. Location central to the community with easy highway access from all directions of the valley.
5. Safe walking access to sizeable natural block of public land for recreation and scientific study.
6. Safe walking access to a waterway for scientific investigation.
7. Near the University of Alaska not required, but preferable.

The building or renovation of a facility would attempt to incorporate "green building" techniques and materials to the extent that the budget allowed. "Green building" would utilize environmentally-friendly and recycled materials. Building designs would maximize natural lighting, conserve water and energy, and ensure healthy air circulation.

Staffing & Schedule

Kindergarten – one teacher, one full time aide per grade level

Grades 1-6 – one teacher per grade level, one full time aide per grade level (looping model: 1-2 loop, 3-4 loop, 5-6 loop)

Grades 7-8 – two teachers, two full time aides (one teacher highly qualified math/science, one teacher highly qualified language arts/social sciences). Children move between teachers for content instruction.

The school schedule would be determined by FTE enrollment, budget, and community interest.

Option One

Student Schedule 9:00 – 3:30, Monday-Friday

Staff Schedule 8:30 – 4:00, Monday-Friday

Option Two

Student Schedule 9:00 – 3:30, Monday-Thursday and 9:00 – 12:00, Friday

Staff Schedule 8:30 – 4:00, Monday-Friday

The school would follow the district's calendar, although they would eventually like to utilize more of a year-round schedule.

BOARD QUESTIONS

The Board questioned Mr. Carlson about a facility for the charter school. Mr. Carlson stated the charter school board had kept their search for an appropriate facility low-key until after they had the opportunity to make their presentation to the School Board; they did not want to usurp the Board's process. A few builders and investors had been approached unofficially about leases, as well as a few other options considered. Although the group would be actively looking for a facility now that their presentation had been made to the Board, they could not enter into legal contracts or leases until they had received formal Board and State approval. Mr. Carlson stated if an appropriate facility could not be found, the charter school would not materialize.

The Board questioned and asked Mr. Carlson and charter school board members for clarification on special education services, the school's budget, staffing, student enrollment, facility leases and locations, the charter school's contract and responsibilities to the district and state, student recruiting, curriculum, parent and community involvement, startup issues and funding opportunities, grade level offerings, district policies and exemptions, technology integration, and climate challenges with outdoor instruction.

The Board discussed the issue of a magnet school concept versus a charter school concept and the concerns and issues with both. Concern was voiced about enrollment self-selection and the need to consider where district resources would be best spent.

Mr. Carlson questioned Mr. Fisher on the risks to the district if the Board agreed to the request for the charter school and it failed. Mr. Fisher explained the possible risks the district might encounter with staff, leases, and funding.

The Board expressed their appreciation to the charter school board members who had put so much work into the concept and development of the Watershed Charter School so far. They liked the science, social studies, and math curriculum foundations.

Mr. Fisher reiterated action on the Watershed Charter School would be coming before the Board at their regular meeting on October 7.

The meeting adjourned at 7:33 p.m.

Submitted by Sharon Tuttle, executive assistant to the Board.