

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

Work Session

MINUTES

April 19, 2011

President Brophy called the work session to order at 5:32 p.m. in the superintendent's conference room of the FNSBSD Administrative Center at 520 Fifth Avenue. The work session was called for a communication focus group discussion.

Present:

Kristina Brophy, President
Sharon McConnell, Vice President
Sue Hull, Treasurer
Silver Chord, Member
Wendy Dominique, Member
Leslie Hajdukovich, Member

Absent:

Sean Rice, Clerk

Staff Present:

Sharon Tuttle, Executive Assistant to the Board of Education

Communication Focus Group Discussion

Karen Kleinz, National School Public Relations Association associate director, facilitated the board's communication focus group discussion. The focus group discussion was part of a districtwide communication audit. Similar to a home energy audit where a technician evaluated a home's ability to generate and retain heat, the district's communication audit would take an in-depth, independent review of the district's overall communication strategies.

The district would use the information collected through the audit to identify strengths, weaknesses, and communication gaps; and to make cost-effective (using existing resources) adjustments to achieve various communication goals. The audit included a review of sample communication materials, core audience surveys, and focus groups. The communication auditors would use the results as an assessment to help determine appropriate communication strategies to enhance and improve the district's efforts. It would provide a basic research snapshot of the district's perception in the community, with staff, parents, and others. It would also provide information on what was working, what was not working, and what could be tweaked to make communication better within the district. The auditors had previously worked in school districts in the Lower 48, so they were well acquainted with education, and specifically public relations in education.

Ms. Kleinz started the discussion by asking board members what they felt was working and what was not working in the district. Board member comments included:

- wanting parents to be comfortable in the schools
- parents having the ability to discuss issues without repercussions
- parents feeling intimidated to bring up problems or issues
- website search and navigation concerns
- more positive exposure and information on the services the district offered
- importance of getting the district's "side" out on issues
- reaching families without Internet/computer access
- important to have a clear strategic public relations plan
- getting families engaged
- utilize electronic media and other tools more
- important to have education advocates

Communication Focus Group Discussion (continued)

Ms. Kleinz questioned board members on their different perceptions regarding the district:

Areas of strength:

- ★ many educational choices and options – magnet schools, charter schools
- ★ excellent teachers and administrators
- ★ go the extra mile without hesitation, did everything possible to make certain kids were educated
- ★ a lot of experience in teachers and administrators
- ★ well developed systems
- ★ stable and consistent response teams
- ★ diversity – a lot of different communities
- ★ diverse school board

Areas for improvement:

- more career tech
- more hands-on options for high and middle school students to keep kids in school
- current technology – kids walking into the building, but walking back in time
- technology in the hands of kids
- better prepared pre-kindergarten

Mrs. Hajdukovich left at 6:00 pm.

Current community image:

- majority of people were supportive of the district
- a small group of detractors – wish they would come see all the good going on in the district
- proactive communication would help diminish the negative about schools

What could be done to improve image:

- ⇒ more mini sound and video bites used to get information out to the community
- ⇒ utilize PowerSchool to get information out to parents
- ⇒ more information mail-outs for families without Internet access
- ⇒ visiting faith communities more – like Superintendent Shortt use to do
- ⇒ continue home community meetings – like Superintendent Lewis had started
- ⇒ reviewing previous public relation campaigns – as they were successful in getting the district good publicity

Ways to improve communications:

- more video pieces at district and school levels – great at clarifying difficult issues

Communication challenges with the upcoming bond issue:

- educating community on the need for a new school and importance of maintaining facilities
- focus on the benefit to kids
- high dollar amount
- important not to stir up controversy
- could Eielson be on the next BRAC list

Communication Focus Group Discussion (continued)

Ms. Kleinz noted people today were so stressed and had so much going on that if the issue didn't touch them specifically, they weren't engaged. In today's world, if people were unhappy, they would be at the board meetings or in contact with board members or the administration. If the board room was empty, people were happy. The old days of parent involvement was a way of the past. Parents today were very specific in what they were doing and wanted to do.

Ms. Kleinz explained the timelines for getting the audit information back to the district, along with short-term and long-term goals, as well as where the district could go with their communication program. A summary should be available in June, with a full report by the end of July or early August. There was a lot of information to process and work through. Ms. Kleinz had been impressed with small-town feeling of Fairbanks.

Other Discussion

None

The meeting adjourned at 6:25 p.m.

Submitted by Sharon Tuttle, executive assistant to the board of education.