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AK: Reinventing education Alaska-style



Students from Chugach and Bering School Districts bundle up against the -30° weather for a dog sledding trip along the Iditarod Trail as part of Chugach's Voyage to Excellence Outdoor Leadership Program.

Summary: What can be done for a district suffering from low test scores, high drop-out rates, annual staff turnover exceeding fifty percent, and business' complaints about students lack of skills? Go straight to the school board and community for help. Although pioneering a grass-roots educational reform took time, patience, and hard work, this district now sees success—the dropout rates have decreased, students consistently test above state level averages in reading, writing, and math, and more graduates see college as an option. Read this story to learn how the Chugach Quality Schools Model helped turn this district around and how it is helping other districts do the same thing.

Covering 22,000 square miles of Alaskan wilderness accessible only by small plane and boat, the Chugach School District (CSD) with 249 students and twenty teachers would seem to be an unlikely place for a revolution in education to occur. In 1994, however, that's exactly what happened.

Dismal test scores, high drop-out rates, annual staff turnover exceeding fifty percent, and business' complaints about students' lack of skills signaled the district's wake-up call. "We were standing on a burning platform with the flames licking at our feet," says district superintendent Bob Crumley. "We had to do something radically different to help all of our children. Our community chose to reinvent our educational system."

The resulting Chugach Quality Schools Model (CQSM), grounded in leadership, shared vision, standards-based design, and continuous improvement, is now a symbol of community pride and a national model of educational reform. In 2001, the district won the prestigious Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award. The district is one of the first recipients in education and is the smallest organization ever to win this award.

Building a shared vision with stakeholders

Pioneering a grass-roots educational reform takes time and hard work. Armed with performance data, research on educational models, and leadership skills training, CSD launched its "Onward to Excellence" process. According to Crumley, "We went straight to the school board and community for help. We knew this process wouldn't work if it were imposed from the top. We engaged everyone as our stakeholders—students, elders, parents, school board members, teachers, school staff, community leaders

and members, and businesses—by listening carefully and acting on their concerns."

From initial stakeholder meetings paired with potluck suppers, bingo nights, prize-drawings, auctions, student performances—anything to engage a skeptical community—the model began to materialize. "We built the plane as we flew it. We looked for tools to facilitate meetings, models of benchmarking and standards, best practices, and research to support our ideas about what education should be. If we couldn't find them, we created them," relates Wendy Battino, a former CSD teacher who is now the Executive Director of the Re-Inventing Schools Coalition (RISC), a non-profit entity developed to help other systems replicate the model.

Creating leadership and credibility

Leadership training for all stakeholders generated a sense of shared responsibility, ownership, and commitment. "Stakeholders from all backgrounds—not just district leaders and teachers—ran meetings, led

District characteristics
Name: Chugach SD
State: AK
Type: Rural
Grades: Pre-k-12
Enrollment: 249
Students per teacher: 17

Enrollment characteristics
Economically disadvantaged: 62%
English language learners: 2%
Students with disabilities: 8%
White: 62%
Black: 1%
Hispanic: 1%
Asian/Pacific Islander: 1%
American Indian/Alaska Native: 27%

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discussions, and made presentations. School staff members from maintenance staff to teachers, and community members, parents, and students, felt empowered for the first time. Parents actually cried and told me they had no idea that they could be so involved in their children's education," notes Battino.

American Indian/Alaska Native: 21%
Other: n.a.
Source: Chugach School District

Through structured meetings, the district leadership solicited stakeholders' input at every stage of the process and provided regular updates about results and progress. "Together, we built a shared vision based on our beliefs, values, and goals. Over time, stakeholders identified new organizational performance goals and a continuum of standards; they built accountability into all levels of the system. Everyone had to deliver what they promised," explains Crumley.

A waiver from the Alaska Education Department allowed the district to make a critical break with the traditional education system: replacing credit-bearing units and grades with new performance-based standards as graduation requirements. Former CSD superintendent and founder of RISC, Richard DeLorenzo observes, "Allaying people's fears about abandoning the traditional education system took time and effort. Seeing their kids take an active interest in school and succeed changed skeptics into advocates for the new system."

Fostering success—one student at a time

"We now have a flexible system that adapts to the individual student instead of an inflexible one focused on age, time-in-seat, and grades," says Doug Penn, area-wide school principal. Every student has an Individualized Learning Plan, a Student Learning Profile, a Student Assessment Binder, and a Student Lifeskills Portfolio to document progress. Students know exactly what is required to master each developmental level. They learn and advance at their own pace. Some students may be fourteen years old when they master all levels; others may be twenty-one. The model also works well for students with special educational needs; these students and their families like the fact that they are not labeled "Special Ed Students."

To advance in each level, students demonstrate proficiency in district standards in five traditional areas—reading, writing, mathematics, science, and social science, and in five non-traditional areas—Service Learning, career development, technology, cultural awareness and expression, and personal/social/health development. Penn explains, "Stakeholders designed these performance-based standards to address the whole student. Students need to know how to succeed in their personal lives, as well as in many environments, not just in school, to become productive community members."

A balanced instructional model requires students to apply and demonstrate knowledge in real-life situations. This can range from a one-week survival course where students must plan how to survive after a small plane crash to participating in the Anchorage House, a short-term residential program, designed to ensure students' self-sufficiency after graduation. "We designed this four-phase transition program with our community and business stakeholders to help students master personal, social, and career skills. Through increasing levels of responsibility and independence, students learn how to navigate an urban environment, manage their daily lives, and how to be dependable employees through job shadowing, internships, and other work placements. Students are also exposed to educational opportunities beyond high school," says Ty Mase, the District's director of school-to-work programs.

Moving forward—no resting on their laurels

A process of continuous improvement is also one of the model's hallmarks. "We're proud that our model has been validated through the Baldrige Award process and by leading education experts including Dr. Robert Marzano. We've learned, however, that nothing is perfect. There are always gaps to fill. At the individual and organizational level, stakeholders regularly go through the PIER process—planning, implementation, evaluation, and refinement—to assess how well everyone is meeting goals and to investigate ways to improve. We're in the sixth cycle of standards revision right now," observes Crumley.

CSD regularly captures formative and summative data through instruments such as on-going stakeholder surveys, teacher evaluations, student performance levels, student assessment binders, the Alaska State Report Card, graduation rates, college entrance rates, and Alaska Benchmark and High School Qualifying Examination results.

The best proof that the model works is, of course, students' success. The dropout rate has decreased from nine percent to 4.9 percent since the model's implementation. CSD students now consistently test above state level achievement averages in reading, writing, and mathematics. Over a four-year period from 2000–2004, an analysis of aggregated data from the Alaska Benchmark and High School Qualifying Examination achievement tests showed consistent improvement in CSD students' proficiency percentages in reading, writing, and mathematics.

	Reading	Writing	Math	Total Growth (4 yrs.)	Average Growth (4 yrs.)
Chugach SD	5.73%	15.38%	21.66%	42.77%	14.26%

(Source: RISC, *Re-Inventing Schools Implementation Monitoring Survey, 2005*; see www.reinventingeducation.org for the complete survey results which compare five Alaskan districts using the QSM with five districts with traditional education systems.)

More CSD graduates see college as an option. Of the thirty-three students who have graduated since 1999 when the Quality Schools Model was fully implemented, sixty-six percent have enrolled in colleges such as the University of Alaska, Humboldt State University, and Dartmouth. Major businesses and industries are eager to hire graduates. Annual staff turnover is now only ten percent.

The Chugach Quality School Model has had an impact far beyond the tiny Chugach School District. With funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Re-Inventing Schools Coalition has already assisted fifteen school districts in Alaska (now part of the Alaska Quality School Model Coalition) and over two hundred schools to replicate the model. Coalition staff have consulted with school systems as far away as India and Mexico. With this record, RISC is well on its way of reaching its goal: spreading the reform to one thousand schools and one million

students.

Lessons learned

- Reinventing an education system requires commitment to a formal systemic process. It cannot be accomplished by tinkering with one piece of the system or on a project-by-project basis.
- All potential stakeholders must be included in developing a shared vision and in the subsequent development and implementation of the model. Stakeholders must see the results of their input in plans and in action in order to take ownership. Accountability at all levels is critical to success.
- Constant communication with and reporting to stakeholders about process, plans, and outcomes is essential to success. CSD invites stakeholders to quarterly meetings, in-service learning and planning programs with CSD staff, and community-wide celebrations of success. It keeps them up-to-date and engaged through surveys, their web site, local community-based meetings, newsletters, e-mail, teleconferencing, and videoconferencing.
- Strong leadership at both the district and school level is important, but all stakeholders must be trained and empowered to lead. The transformation process needs to be a collaborative one among equal partners.
- A long-term commitment to the process by all stakeholders is required. CSD's initial commitment was five years, which is now the standard length of time to implement the CSQM process.
- The process of a reinventing school system is evolutionary. Continuous assessment and continuous improvement—based on formative and summative evaluations of processes and data—are critical to keeping momentum going, meeting the changing needs of students, and preparing them for a changing world.
- Staff development, especially for training new staff in the model, requires significant time and resources. CSD now offers 30 days of staff training each year compared to the state allowance of 10 days per year. Much of this training occurs outside of the regular teacher contracted days. CSD also motivates staff with a pay for performance system.
- Succession planning at the district level is important to continuity of effort over time.

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