

Recommendations from the Superintendent in Response to the Alternative School Review Team's Report

Presented to the Eugene School Board, Jan. 10, 2007

The board on August 17, 2005 adopted a School Choice policy that established a process for the review of alternative schools. In September 2005, I appointed an alternative schools review team (Review Team) composed of Carl Hermanns, former superintendent intern from the Urban Superintendent Program at Harvard Graduate School of Education; Jerry Henderson, retired principal from South Eugene High School; Ray Gross retired high school teacher and former president of the Eugene Education Association; and, Kay Mehas, director of K-8 school services. Last year four alternative schools were chosen for review: Eastside, Family School, Hillside, and Magnet Arts. In February 2006, the board-adopted recommendations related to the first group of elementary alternative schools reviewed under board policy IGBH. The remaining four alternative schools – Buena Vista, Charlemagne at Fox Hollow, Yujin Gakuen, and Corridor – are the subjects of this year's report. On December 13, 2006, the Review Team submitted its comprehensive and thorough report of findings and conclusions. The board received the report of the Review Team at its December 13 meeting.

Once more, I extend my appreciation to the review team for the excellent job. While not everyone will agree with their findings and conclusions, I again am impressed with the quality of their work and their continuing commitment to the fairness and integrity of the process. Second, I want to note that all of the schools reviewed are excellent schools and do an outstanding job of educating the children they serve. The alternative school review was conducted to determine how those schools fared in terms of the adopted criteria in the board policy.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Review Team considered the following four alternative schools: Buena Vista Spanish Immersion at Meadowlark, Charlemagne at Fox Hollow, Yujin Gakuen at Silver Lea, and Corridor Alternative at Silver Lea. By reference, I adopt the findings and conclusions contained in The Alternative School Review Report submitted on December 13, 2006. Following are my general comments and recommendations related to the report. Those are then followed by specific comments and recommendations related to each of the schools reviewed.

General Comments/Recommendations

a. Grade Level Caps

In its initial review of alternative schools in December 2005, the Review Team concluded that there are no strong educational justifications for retaining grade level caps for alternative schools. It was their opinion that

grade level caps are problematic in terms of equitable access; that is, when grade level enrollments are capped, the lottery disadvantages children who attempt to enroll in upper grades. I agreed at that time, and recommended that we move ahead immediately for 2006-07 to eliminate grade-level caps in the four schools reviewed, as well as Corridor, the other non-language immersion school scheduled for review in 2006-07. The board decided not to include Corridor, choosing instead to wait for the results of the 2006-07 review process. I did not include the language immersion schools in that recommendation because I was open to the possibility that there could be a strong educational justification for grade-level caps in those schools, a possibility raised by the Review Team. With respect to the schools reviewed this year, the Review Team determined that there was not a strong enough educational rationale to justify the continuance of grade-level caps in Corridor or the immersion schools, and therefore recommended that grade-level caps be eliminated for all alternative schools. I concur, and now recommend that grade-level caps be eliminated for Corridor and the three language immersion schools as well.

b. Co-location of Alternative and Neighborhood Schools

I concurred with the Review Team's observation in its previous report that there were tensions among all four alternative schools reviewed and their co-located neighborhood schools. I concluded that co-location was not contributing to the schools' optimal educational climate and that the district should proceed to uncouple alternative schools from neighborhood schools. While the board determined that no relocation decisions would be made for 2006-07 as an outcome of the first review, they did direct that co-location and relocation of alternative schools be considered as part of the district's longer-term planning for future school consolidations, reconfigurations and/or planning for school construction and school renovation.

I recommended that the district begin developing a process in spring 2006 for a larger review of enrollment patterns, school boundaries, alternative school relocation, school closure and consolidation, and possible new construction or renovations. I also noted that reassessment of the placement of learning centers, regional learning centers and ESD programs serving special education students should be included in this review. That process has begun and is now underway as part of the strategic planning process, *Shaping 4J's Future*. As part of that process, I anticipate there will be recommendations related to relocation of alternative schools that share a building with neighborhood schools, but also consideration of the optimal locations of alternative schools to reinforce their viability and accessibility.

Additionally, while I think its important that the location of the language immersion schools be considered as part of the *Shaping 4J's Future* process for the reasons identified above and later, I am also intrigued with the question for all language immersion schools of whether students and instruction would be better served in a K-8 standalone setting. So, as the

Shaping 4J's Future process moves forward I would hope that is a consideration that will be looked at.

c. Special Education and Language Immersion

While serving children with special needs is an important concern for all schools, the relationship of special education with our language immersion schools raised specific questions in the reviews of the immersion schools. As previously reported, there have been anecdotal reports that some alternative schools, including some immersion schools, had discouraged special education students from attending their schools, or counseled them out of their programs. The Review Team noted that there were relatively low percentages of special education students attending the immersion schools and questioned whether it was a result of an unwelcoming atmosphere, or of parents' and/or the schools' beliefs that immersion schools would not be educationally helpful or appropriate for special needs students. They identified a compelling need to work with the schools to ensure that they create and maintain a culture that is perceived as encouraging of and welcoming to students and families with special needs. In addressing special education instructional challenges specific to language immersion programs, they suggest reaching out to and creating stronger ties with community and University experts in language immersion and special education advocacy. I support the Review Team's recommendations and will work with staff to assist the schools in developing and initiating strategies to address the identified concerns.

d. Diversity

The Review Team points out that the district's challenge is to ensure that its school choice system facilitates the board's goal of providing an excellent and equitable education for all its students. Alternative schools must be welcoming to *any* family that might desire their specific educational programs for their children, and must be ready to effectively teach those children. The Review Team assessed diversity by looking at the diversity of the school's student population, as exemplified by the school's racial and ethnic makeup, the percentages of students eligible for free or reduced lunch (SES), and the percentages of English language learners (ELL) and special education students; and evidence of school culture and instructional practices that do, or could, support diverse student populations. They determined that while several of the schools had work to do in this area, there was openness on the part of the schools to work with district staff and community to address any concerns in this area. I support the Review Team's conclusions in this area and will work with staff to assist the schools in developing and initiating strategies to address the identified concerns.

School Reviews

I believe that many of the conclusions and recommendations proposed by the Review Team constitute administrative actions that don't necessarily require

board action or directives. For that reason, I only put forth those recommendations that require board action, or for which it is important to have board direction and support. I am not recommending the addition of any new staff or resources and expect that implementation will occur through use of existing resources as available. Following are my responses and recommendations with respect to the findings and conclusions of the Alternative School Review Team for each of the alternative schools reviewed.

Buena Vista Spanish Immersion

The Review Team concluded that Buena Vista's Spanish language immersion program is systematically and effectively implemented throughout the school, grades 1 through 5, and thus represents a distinctive educational strategy for achieving the board's educational goals. It has shown consistently strong enrollment, demonstrates continued strong parent and staff interest and commitment, and is well positioned to contribute to the board's goal of increasing equity and diversity. However, the Review Team also observed that while the tensions of co-location are not directly impairing the overall quality of Buena Vista or Meadowlark, they did find similar stresses, to a greater or lesser degree, as experienced at other neighborhood/alternative school co-locations.

I concur with the findings and conclusions of the Review Team and recommend that in addition to the elimination of grade-level caps for Buena Vista the following actions be approved by the board:

1. No Change in Status. Through this action, the board supports the continuation of Buena Vista as a strong, viable and effective language immersion school.
2. No formal Plan for Improvement, but an expectation that district staff work with Buena Vista to develop strategies to address the key findings of the report related to attracting and addressing the instructional needs of a more diverse student population, specifically low SES, special education, and ELL students.
3. Direct staff to explore the addition of a kindergarten to Buena Vista in 2008-09, including assessment of the instructional, enrollment and facilities implications for both Buena Vista and Meadowlark.
4. Direct staff to consider future relocation of Buena Vista from Meadowlark Elementary to a standalone site or co-location with another alternative school as part of the current strategic planning process, *Shaping 4J's Future*.

Charlemagne French Immersion

The Review Team concluded that Charlemagne's French language immersion program is systematically and effectively implemented throughout the school, grades K through 5, and thus represents a distinctive educational strategy for achieving the board's educational goals. Charlemagne has shown consistently strong enrollment, and it demonstrates continued strong parent and staff interest and commitment. However, the Review Team also concluded that Charlemagne is not contributing substantively to the board's goal of increasing equity and diversity in all schools. They suggest that to effectively serve a diverse student population, Charlemagne will need to

address three areas: effective instructional techniques to support diverse learners; general school culture; and, community perceptions.

I concur with the findings and conclusions of the Review Team and recommend that in addition to the elimination of grade-level caps for Charlemagne the following actions be approved by the board:

1. No Change in Status. Through this action, the board supports the continuation of Charlemagne as a strong, viable and effective language immersion school.
2. Plan for Improvement. Direct district staff to work with Charlemagne to develop a Plan for Improvement to address the key findings of the report related to a) attracting and addressing the instructional needs of a more diverse student population, including low SES, special education, ELL and students of color; b) providing a general school culture that is welcoming to students and families from different backgrounds and cultures; and c) working with staff to ensure that they identify and serve their special needs children appropriately and well.
3. Direct staff to consider as part of the current strategic planning process, *Shaping 4J's Future*, whether the current location of Charlemagne at the Fox Hollow site is the optimal location for ensuring equal access and diversity, and identify what other location options may be available for the future.

Yujin Gakuen Japanese Immersion

The Review Team concluded Yujin Gakuen is very much aligned with its original mission and focus, that its Japanese language immersion program is systematically and effectively implemented throughout the school, grades K through 5, and that it does represent a distinctive strategy for achieving the board's educational goals. The school has shown consistently strong enrollment and high achievement, demonstrates continued strong parent and staff interest and commitment, and, it remains viable as a separate school in its current configuration as a co-located alternative school. They suggest that the Yujin Gakuen/Corridor co-location model (i.e., alternative/alternative) be considered as a possible model for future relocations of other alternative schools. Yujin Gakuen's student population is relatively diverse in terms of SES, race/ethnicity and ELL, but it falls below district averages for special education. However, the Review Team also noted it was not clear, how, and to what extent, Yujin Gakuen welcomes and supports the broader diversity of cultures and families represented in their community.

I concur with the findings and conclusions of the Review Team and recommend that in addition to the elimination of grade-level caps for Yujin Gakuen, the following actions be approved by the board:

1. No Change in Status. Through this action, the board supports the continuation of Yujin Gakuen as a strong, viable and effective language immersion school.
2. No formal Plan for Improvement, but an expressed expectation that district staff work with Yujin Gakuen to develop strategies to address the key findings of the report related to attracting and addressing the instructional needs of special education students.
3. Direct staff to consider as part of the current strategic planning process, *Shaping 4J's Future*, whether the current location of Yujin Gakuen at the Silver Lea site is

the optimal location, and identify what other location options may be available for the future. Also, include consideration of possible relocation of Yujin Gakuen from Silver Lea site to a standalone site, or retaining it at Silver Lea site as a standalone alternative school similar to Charlemagne at Fox Hollow.

Additional Comments:

The Review Team noted that while co-location is not a substantial issue at Yujin Gakuen/Corridor, sharing space still represents an ongoing challenge. And, although they suggest that the Yujin Gakuen/Corridor co-location model be considered as a possible model for future relocations of other alternative schools, they recognize there are some other issues not related to the relationships that I believe warrant additional exploration and consideration for the future. While neither school would be regarded as large on its own (they are both at or above 250 students, which is larger than many of our standalone neighborhood elementary schools), together they do stress building facilities and systems. While cooperative strategies like staggering daily schedules can clearly help, issues like parking, drop-off areas, and accommodating recess will always be challenging. Of more concern to me, however, is the intersection of traffic, safety, neighborhood, and environmental concerns that come together by virtue of having a high school and two alternative schools essentially sharing the same block. This is particularly true when one thinks of the high concentrations of vehicles brought together in one place as a result of high school drivers and alternative school parents all converging on Silver Lane.

Corridor

The Review Team concluded that Corridor is very much aligned with its original mission and focus. Its educational program, consisting of a basic curriculum supplemented and enhanced by a systematically applied schedule of daily electives, represents a distinctive strategy for achieving the board's educational goals, and its decision-making process effectively involves parents and staff in school governance and differs from processes used in other schools. They concluded that full enrollment indicates continued strong interest among parents, with high levels of parent involvement and staff commitment. However, they did not observe any indications that the school would be welcoming to students and families from backgrounds differing from the majority of its current students and families. They recommend Corridor explore these challenges with the assistance of district staff in the following three areas: expanding instruction techniques, examining school culture, and addressing community perceptions. They note there are no significant tensions between Corridor and Yujin Gakuen that present challenges to their co-location, and conclude that Corridor remains viable as a separate school in its current configuration as a co-located alternative school.

I concur with the findings and conclusions of the Review Team and recommend that in addition to the elimination of grade-level caps for Corridor that the following actions be approved by the board:

1. No Change in Status. Through this action, the board supports the continuation of Corridor as a strong, viable and effective language immersion school, and preserves its distinctive strategy as part of the district's program of school choice.
2. No formal Plan for Improvement, but an expressed expectation that district staff work with Corridor to develop strategies to address the key findings of the report related to attracting and addressing the instructional needs of a more diverse student population, including low SES, ELL and students of color.
3. Direct staff to consider as part of the current strategic planning process, *Shaping 4J's Future*, whether the current location of Corridor at the Silver Lea site is the optimal location, and identify what other location options may be available for the future. Include consideration of possible relocation of Corridor from Silver Lea site to a standalone site, or retaining it at Silver Lea site as a standalone alternative school.

Additional Comments:

See comments related to Yujin Gakuen.

- * Note: Plan for Improvement will be completed in the fall of 2007, and follow-up reviews, where required, will be conducted by February 1, 2008. Recommendations do not imply the provision of additional funding or supplemental resources, other than those associated with planning for and supporting any approved change in status, such as relocation, merger, etc.