

7-15-2006

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### Recommended Citation

Reagle, C. (2006). Creating Effective Schools Where All Students Can Learn. *The Rural Educator*, 27(3), 24-33. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v27i3.491>

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# Creating Effective Schools Where All Students Can Learn

Christina Reagle

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*Helping schools create environments where all students can learn is a worthwhile mission for schools big and small. Both multi and single site districts agree that providing equitable and meaningful learning opportunities for every student is essential, but find this challenging and difficult. What are the systemic factors that limit educators in considering new educational paradigms that might structure schools differently, increase learning outcomes for a wider spectrum of students, and prepare students to meet the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? All communities need graduates ready to face the world after high school, prepared to work, and ready to offer hope toward world and civic affairs.*

Real change begins with the simple act of people talking about what they care about.  
--M.J. Wheatley (2002) *Turning to One Another, Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future*, (p. 22)

Most people care about schools because their children attend, they employ the graduates, and they believe the country's future depends upon children attending public schools. However, "nationally almost *one-third* of all high school students don't graduate on time, with significantly worse rates for students of color" (Hall, 2005, p. 1, italics in original). States are now required to report statewide graduation data in a format that matches the number of students who started high school with the number who complete. The good news is information such as this can help guide the school improvement process, nevertheless, the bad news is many schools do not want to share this critical information.

Part of the problem is schools do not have sound tracking systems to follow students as they move through the system. Other concerns may include high schools need transforming (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 2004); citizens have less confidence in public schools today (Phi Delta Kappa, 2004); culturally, ethnically, linguistically diverse student groups are growing (Nieto, 2004); and "the American system of education has become *obsolete*" (Wagner, 2002, p. 9 italics in original). Most parents and educators would agree with the effective schools mission declared by Lezotte (1997) "Learning for All: Whatever It Takes" (p. 2) but have not seen the reality of this in the business of daily school activities.

With the present educational focus on No Child Left Behind (NCLB) it certainly seems like there should be a system in place for all children to have equal learning experiences; however, when we match test scores and student outcomes to family income levels the results do not support that statement. Nieto (2004) explained that,

A number of reviews of testing legislation and practice have concluded that, instead of improving learning outcomes, such legislation is actually having a detrimental

impact because gross inequities in instructional quality, resources, and other support services are being ignored. (p. 99)

NCLB's accountability plan emphasizes standardized tests, which are culturally biased (Neil, Guisbond, & Schaeffer 2004) and do not test the full spectrum of necessary skills to be successful in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Wagner (2002) theorized "A much more rational approach would be for specialists from the different but related disciplines to agree on skills or knowledge that are common across several academic subjects" (p. 39), including high order thinking, problem solving, and critical thinking skills.

## *Contemporary Educational Paradigms*

How has the world changed and how do the changes affect education? In the past, "the functional mission of public education... was compulsory attendance" (Lezotte & Pepperl, 1999, 12). Now "the new mission of public education must be compulsory learning" (p. 13), which raises the question are educational systems in place to meet the new mission? Wagner (2002) posed

The challenge is in dealing with the future...the tug of war over school "reform" in this country today may, in reality, be a struggle between those who believe that the best way to deal with change is to cling to remnants of the past and those who eagerly embrace the future. (p. 11)

Darling-Hammond (1997) explained "the challenge of the twenty-first century is creating schools that—ensure for all students in all communities—a genuine right to learn" (p. 5). Every day different groups discuss the purpose and expectations of schools with varying dialogues, arguments, and decisions often with continued dismay and general contentment (Tyack & Cuban, 1995) depending on their perspective.

In order for schools to change many pieces need to be in place—a concentrated focal point, high expectations for and

by the groups involved (teachers, students, parents, administrators, support staff), similar understandings, and lots of hard work by everyone. Schools that decide to examine change and improvement tactics must utilize the data their school has, work with the communities the students represent, and evaluate the staff for professional development needs, as well as address the needs of the diverse students who flow through the doors each day. Schlechty (1997) stated “the fact is that the primary business of schools is the transmission, preservation, and processing of knowledge and information and the development in others of the skills needed to carry out such tasks” (p. 30-31). Implementing effective education for all groups of students is challenging at best.

Fullan (1993), a leader in educational change, reminded us “that education has a moral purpose...to make a difference in the lives of students regardless of background” (p. 4). He has written many books about how difficult and necessary change is in education and why it is the next step in creating successful school systems. Schools today have a different purpose than when they were structured to teach order and conformity to the elite group who attended (Tyack, 1974) them in the twentieth century. Today schools are asked to “help produce citizens who can live and work productively in increasingly dynamically complex societies” (Fullan, 1993, p. 4). The challenges facing schools are overwhelming on a good day and devastating on a bad day.

Togneri and Anderson (2003) reported that to increase student achievement both instructional practice and support systems need to change. In order for overall learning to improve teachers, administrators, school board and support systems need to work together in developing effective strategies for every child to be successful. This collective effort requires a comprehensive change in the school climate and encourages new systems to be developed that focus on students and best practices in teaching, learning, assessment and reporting.

The state of North Carolina decided to investigate Total Quality Management (TQM) as a management philosophy and approach to improve schools for their students (Siegel, 1999) when they decided to address the question “*What does it mean to be a good leader and manager in today’s schools and districts?*” (p. 5). As the North Carolina educators, business leaders and policy makers were influenced by TQM because of its focus on quality. This work led them to utilize the criteria used by the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award program. The Baldrige Quality Award is noted for its demanding assessment process that employs seven categories to examine the core values and management approaches reflective of high-performing business organizations.

In 1998 the Baldrige National Quality Award program added Education as an area for performance awards given to organizations that demonstrate excellence. The process Baldrige uses to examine the systems of the organization under review is thorough, valid, reflect high standards, and

incorporate leading practices to confirm that outstanding services are provided to the customers they serve. Since adding the Education category five years ago there have been 66 education applications and only four winners, three (two K – 12 programs and one University level program) in 2001 and one K – 12 in 2003. Each educational institution that applies receives a comprehensive feedback report increasing the opportunity and probability they will improve services and overall management of the district and individual schools whether they are a winner or not.

The Baldrige Criteria is built on a set of interrelated Core Values and Concepts, which are typically found in businesses that are doing well. Educators have been apprehensive to become involved with values since they are something dealt with at home or by the student’s support community. Fullan (2001a), Glasser (1990), Lezotte and McKee (2002), and Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, Smith, Dutton, and Kleiner (2000), and many others believe it is important to review core values, guiding ideas, beliefs, and hopes of the school community in order to address issues that may be blocking student learning. Evaluating and examining school communities means including school, community and business members, and families in the processes and procedures, which assists in making learning experiences more relevant for student groups and improvement to occur across the continuum of students.

Wagner (2002) stated “schools probably have changed less than any other institution in our society” (p. 15). The world has moved from the industrial age to the information age and “is asking our graduates for skills and fast-paced communication, and schools are still giving them facts and one-way lectures” (Littky, 2004, p. 31). Moving schools into the 21<sup>st</sup> century is not a simple task and preparing students in urban and rural communities looks much different today. Hargreaves and Fullan (1998) explained “schools cannot shut their gates and leave the outside world on the doorstep” (p. 7). The student population is more diverse than ever before and growing each day, plus technology provides students access to more information than even some of their teachers.

Schools that are not doing well are asked to create school improvement plans, which focus on raising test scores in math and reading, but do not give the time and attention to the underlying issues that genuinely help a school to improve teaching and learning. Wheatley (2002) shared “Change doesn’t happen from a leader announcing the plan. Change begins from deep inside a system” (p. 25). Taking the time to ask the hard questions of parents, students, business and community members and educators is an important action step in any school improvement process. The significant data collected in this interchange assists in decision making and is a critical factor in addressing the issues for all students.

Developing questions to begin conversations with the groups that have been left out of educational decision making in the past are key. Wheatley (2004) stated, “There

is no power equal to a community discovering what it cares about” (p. 22). Asking questions about what students are learning and how relevant the information is to them when they leave school demonstrates to students a sincere attitude about how important they are to the community.

Wagner (2002) explained, “The problem is not the ‘failure’ of our public schools. They are incrementally better than they were fifty years ago. They haven’t *really* changed – for the better or the worse. The world has. That’s the real problem” (p. 4). In order for schools to be effective in educating the students entering school each day “it must first be understood that it is not enough to change the behavior of individuals—what must be changed as well are the systems that encourage, support, and maintain present behavior patterns and discourage new patterns from emerging” (Schlechty, 1997, p.16).

### *Equitable and Meaningful Opportunities*

How do we know when schools have improved and are meeting the needs of all students? What data tells us that schools are providing meaningful opportunities for all students? What strategies need to be in place to assure that this focus is genuinely met? How can we as educators help students to become engaged in their education? These questions and more are necessary and essential to examining the crisis and opportunity schools have before them.

Over the last decade reformers have created and redesigned thousands of schools that are now educating rich and poor, black, brown, and white students alike to levels of success traditionally thought impossible to achieve. Yet these schools, too remain at the margins, rarely embraced or supported by the systems in which they struggle to exist and generally unexamined for what they can teach the education enterprise. (Darling-Hammond, 1997, p. 2)

Changing schools requires a different type of commitment from everyone involved with education. Community members, as well as parents and educators need to be connected to schools and be aware of what is happening in classrooms.

Making everyone a school leader is discussed by Sergiovanni (1992) as a new way of thinking “about attitudes and values informing our leadership practice” (p. 1). Leadership of this nature focuses on doing what is right for all students as the basis for decisions and actions by involving the “heart (what I value and believe), the head (my mindscape of how the world works), and the hand (my decision, actions, and behaviors)” (p.8). Both Fullan (1993) and Sergiovanni (1992) stressed that a major role for school leaders should be to remind everyone, especially educators

of their responsibility and role in helping shape the students and leaders of the future.

The study, *Beyond Islands of Excellence: What Districts Can Do to Improve Instruction and Achievement in All Schools* (Togneri & Anderson, 2003), stated that for school systems to become excellent, “Our nation has a moral imperative to close the achievement gap between low-income students and their more advantaged peers... [which] will demand system wide approaches that touch every child in every school in every district across the nation” (p. 1). The report outlined the roles and responsibilities of state leaders and policymakers, business and community members, the various district and school- site educators, as well as parents and students.

In order to educate all children effectively Darling-Hammond (1997) supports “the idea of opportunity-to-learn standards...first introduced by the National Council on Education Standards and Testing (NCEST)” (p. 279). She proposed two standards that would guide schools in promoting equitable education in *delivery and practice*:

1. All students should have equitable access to the school funding necessary to enact the state’s learning standards.
2. All students should have access to well-prepared teachers and other professional staff who understand how to teach challenging content to diverse learners. (p.281)

Worthwhile, genuine education that is effective for all students may require different approaches and strategies in order to be successful. Nieto (2004) acknowledged “it must be recognized that our public schools are not providing many students—particularly poor students of Latino, African American, and Native American backgrounds—with the schools they deserve” (p. 161).

Paulo Freire, a Brazilian intellectual and educator, believed educators should help students learn to think critically—“to take risks, to be curious, and to question...to seek their own answers” (Nieto, 2004, p. 359). His commitment to encouraging equity between the learner and teacher has created challenges in the traditional and hierarchical learning environments. Freire wanted students to take control of their education to move beyond being “empty receptacles” (p. 113) that teachers poured information into. Freire’s leveling the field in classrooms and schools required that individuals have “a fundamental shift of mind” (Senge, 1990, p. 13) to think of all students as individuals capable of being involved with their own learning. Helping students understand their role in becoming a life-long learner can be the catalyst that drives meaningful school reform and builds strong learning and teaching opportunities.

Litky (2004) uses the phrase “treating everyone alike differently” (p. 73) to explain how staff at The Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center (The Met) work with students daily and approach new students who are

disconnected. Improving schools is a daily challenge that includes tiny steps and quantum leaps, a willingness to take risks, devoted staff, eager and unengaged students, supportive and reluctant parents, business and community partnerships established and lead by a philosophy that all students can learn and want to learn when given appropriate and equitable opportunities. The genuine belief that all kids can learn needs to be the cornerstone of all teaching and learning efforts in order to explore new educational paradigms and guide the changes necessary to develop productive school improvement plans.

When discussing the standards necessary to ensure quality and equity Lezotte and McKee (2002) stated

The second standard will be equity, which will be evaluated by looking at the distribution of measured student achievement across various categories of students (boys compared to girls, minority students to non-minority, middle-class students to disadvantages students). (p. 6)

School reform, school improvement, and future school planning will all require that people think differently about education and make paradigm shifts that promote new strategies and approaches to connect EVERY student to learning opportunities. In this information age teachers have many tools and resources at their finger tips; however connecting students and schools will necessitate leadership at different levels to meet the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century learner.

### *Preparing Students for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

Barton (2004) reminded us that out of 100 freshmen students entering high school, four years later only 67 will exit graduating from high school. These high school statistics, “pressures exerted by the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act, high-stakes testing, and the critical voices of business and higher education leaders—have combined to create a sort of ‘perfect storm’ churning the waters of America’s high schools” (p. 6). Wagner (2002) explained

We have moved from an industrial, assembly-line economy to one that is increasingly dominated by technology, information, and service....Today one has to have both intellectual and social skills in order to get a decent job. (p. 16)

And, yet many schools are struggling with the reality that something needs to change and challenged by how to make that happen. Despite the 1983 *A Nation At Risk* report that stated “more than half the students are not at grade level” (Bowsher, 2001, p. 6) and with similar results existing in schools today many educators “want to give up on education reform” (p. 1).

Littky (2004) reminded educators that in 1993 a well-known educator, Ernest Boyer, gave a speech about his educational hopes for schools in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. His desire was that students “will be judged not by their performance on a single test, but by the quality of their lives” (p. 4). Almost a decade has past since his death and schools are more focused on tests than ever before. Meier (Levine, Lowe, Peterson, & Tenorio, 1995) stated “fueled by public concern that schools are less rigorous than they used to be, standardized tests are increasingly prescribed as the ‘get tough’ medicine needed to return excellence to our classrooms” (p. 175).

What needs to be put into place to *reinvent* educational systems so all students have opportunities to master the skills they need to be prepared for the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Bowsher (2001) acknowledged,

Schools may be better in some respects today than they were earlier in the prior century, but they’re simply not good enough for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Our country now requires an education system where all students receive a real high school education. (p. 37)

Since 1998 the Public Agenda Foundation has conducted an annual survey to discover what the public thinks regarding education issues and to understand the various perspectives and views people hold. Findings of *Reality Check 2002* indicated that despite the fact many students may have excellent computer skills they are ill prepared for the world of work because of basic skills, low performing work habits, motivation and lack of appropriate respect for supervisors and others (Johnson & Duffett, 2002).

Dewey talked about the need and responsibility of educators to assist students in seeing the immediate value in their education thus helping them contribute to society. Schools can be the conduit for linking world and community changes through daily educational practices. In the June 2004 Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) newsletter Carl Glickman spoke about the need for students to experience relevance and application in their learning to relate it to their future planning or they are not motivated to learn. Planning and implementing real-life experiences for students requires more preparation and coordination time by teachers and support staff than teaching to the test.

When students do not feel what they learn in school is relevant or helpful to them they often begin to disengage and finally drop out of school (Lezotte, 1997 & Wagner, 2002). Motivating and creating authentically engaged learners and developing educational learning environments where there is a balance of rigor, relevancy and respect are the core elements needed for schools, students, and communities to be successful in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Wagner, 2002). Connecting students to what they are learning and to the world around them develops creative thinkers, critical

thinking skills, and improves schools and communities for everyone.

Levine (Levine et al., 1995) discussed “Schools are highly political institutions. How could they not be, given that one of their main charges is to reproduce within the next generation values and social relations deemed appropriate for the continuation of civilization?” (p. 56). Wagner (2002) has discovered through interviewing and talking with parents, educators, students, and community members and looking at a wide range of data that “It’s easy to talk about ‘failing schools’” (p. 34). It is much more difficult to genuinely assess these four areas: “work, learning, citizenship, and motivation for learning” (p. 15) in understanding the role of education for the twenty-first century. Involving students in the learning and accountability process, as well as families and communities plants seeds and establishes academic and real-life connections between school and work.

### Big Risks by a Small District

One small rural district that covers 22,000 square miles in south central Alaska, the Chugach School District (CSD), took a considerable risk to open dialogue and create opportunities for change in their schools. In 1994 CSD took a big step and ventured out to the small communities and homes of the parents they served to talk about the status of the schools in the district and to inquire about the hopes and dreams of the parents for their children. This unconventional method to discuss the fact that only 10 percent of the students could read at grade level and the district was in the bottom quartile in reading, language arts, and math on state tests at that time was significant (Leavitt, 2002). Parents were tired of teachers coming and going, a common occurrence in rural Alaska schools, which affects the education students receive and the sustained sense of school community that is common in small rural communities (McDowell Group, 2001).

Some type of change needed to happen in order for the schools and students to improve. The second important step taken by the local school board was to hire a new administration to work closely with the parents, business and community members, as well as the students themselves to create a new school system. Wheatley (2002) discussed the importance of talking to one another in order to “restore hope for the future” (p. 22). When there is a crisis within a community, especially small rural areas people need to understand the issues and consider the different options to move toward corrective action.

The Chugach School District pulled together parents, students, school board members, business and community members (including future employers) to meet with educators to talk about the different obstacles and challenges blocking quality and effective education in their schools. Three essential questions led the interactive discussion:

1. How are our students performing on tests?
2. What happens to our students once they leave school?
3. What will students need to know in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

By including everyone in the discussions the rules were broken and a new system could be established. Relationships change when individuals become part of the process and new solutions are considered. Littky (2004) spoke about the importance of engaging families in their children’s education in his “commitment to keep finding ways to involve parents in the real decisions we make every day” (p. 140) in schools.

### Shared Vision

The discussions and contributions from the various stakeholders in the CSD helped to determine a *shared vision*, defined by the Chugach School District as “a collective purpose that is derived from stakeholder input” (Schreiber & Batino, 2002, p. 335). The five common strands, (a) basic academic skills, (b) individual needs of students, (c) character development, (d) transitional skills, and (e) technology, grew from the shared vision discussions that answered the three guiding questions which became the framework for Chugach’s Organizational Performance Goals. The administrative senior leaders then developed immediate and long-term goals, and when shared with the community led to the establishment of a strong accountability system specific for every goal. This collaborative *shared vision* became the foundation of what they wanted students to know and be able to do.

The shared vision work sessions with the CSD administrative team, educators and other stakeholders also developed and established district beliefs noted in Table 1. CSD’s mission statement, organizational performance goals and beliefs established through this system do not collect dust on the superintendent’s bookshelf or reside in the school board manual. Fullan (2001a) shared “the crux of change is how individuals come to grips with this reality” (p. 29). The new structural framework that CSD created have all become the heart and soul of a systems and school change process; are incorporated into the daily interactions of all who helped to create the new system; and are revisited on a regular basis.

Table 1.

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*Chugach School District educators and stakeholders’ beliefs*

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Reading, writing, and math are the foundation skills necessary for all other learning and will enable students to reach their full potential.
All students should have respect for self and others, including elders, teachers, parents, students, and community members.
Students will act in a manner that reflects honesty, integrity, and persistent attitude.
A low pupil-to-teacher ratio is important.
It is essential that students, parents, and the community accept joint responsibility to educate Chugach's students.
Instruction must be meaningful and motivating.
All cultures, languages, and religions should be recognized and respected.
Transitional skills are necessary to prepare students to meet the challenge of an ever-changing society.

The commitment to sustained and ongoing reflection was demonstrated when Chugach applied for the Malcolm Baldrige Quality Award in 2001 and won. This small school district composed of three small schools and a correspondence program with a total of 214 students district-wide is unique, innovative and continues to push the envelope of educational change and a willingness to be creative and look at new paradigms for improving services to the students served by the district (Broder, 2002).

Wagner (2002) would not label the CSD systemic change model as a school reform effort, which he stated are "for the most part...test driven and punitive minded" (p. 12). He would classify the CSD model in a "reinvent" (p. 12) education category. Several elements contribute to the distinctive characteristics of this reinvented school model: each student has an individual learning plan (ILP), a standards-based system is in place, multiple performance assessments are used, career-development and personal/social/health standards are part of the required curriculum, technology is the norm with each student having a computer, students participate in their own evaluation sessions, and teachers attend 30 days of professional development as well as staff receive pay incentives (Schrieber & Batino, 2002).

### **Leadership**

When CSD learned about the principles and procedures used in the Baldrige application they began to adjust and modify their educational systemic processes, which were the methods used when they began the changes to improve the educational delivery in the district. Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) discussed features essential in planning for effective school leadership which included "agreed-upon

processes....[that] enhance communication among members of the community" (p. 103) as well as address instruction, parent/community involvement, professional development, and student reporting.

The reinvented system developed by the Chugach School District, now identified as the Quality Schools Model (QSM) has been structurally designed to include four major components: Shared Vision, Leadership, Standards-Based Design, and Continuous Improvement. Refinements at every level are incorporated into the CSD school processes and procedures which then become fine eye reflections used as part of the continuous improvement process to evaluate student achievement, the major focus of the district. Schwahn and Spady (2001) determined two major components critical to the strategic design process: "One is a systematic, future-focused plan; the other is its implementation. Strategic direction is identifying what you want to get, and strategic alignment is structuring to get what you want" (p. 122).

Chugach researched and continues to investigate best practices in looking at how people learn, professional development strategies and standards-based education for teaching and working with students, what students need to know to work and live in the twenty first century, leadership qualities, and how Fortune 500 businesses are managed to effectively include teamwork and problem-solving skills. Sergiovanni (1992) and Lezotte and Pepperl (1999) stated that when educational concerns and issues arise, most people committed to educational equity examine what is the right thing to do in order to reach the goal toward education for all students. CSD administrators discuss servant leadership, community involvement, and believing all individuals can learn in philosophical discussions during the

interviewee process and as part of the employment contract (R. DeLorenzo, personal communication Sept. 23, 2003).

CSD leaders utilized Maxwell's (1993) five levels of leadership both with individuals and within the organization to provide staff, parents, and students a rubric on how to be an effective leader and how to build capacity within the organization. Maxwell (1993) reminded people to keep two things in mind at all times: "know what level you are on at this moment and know and apply the qualities needed to be successful at each level" (p. 14).

All staff make a difference in the life of a child and are an indispensable part of the school district, which is demonstrated through the responsibilities given to staff each year and the many district leadership opportunities. The philosophy behind this approach is to help empower all the different people who impact students whether in the building as classified and support staff, classroom teachers and paraprofessionals, or district level personnel. The motto is everyone is a leader, which is displayed as *My role as a Chugach leader includes*, is a quote on the back of the business cards each person has in the CSD.

## Standards-Based Design

Diane Ravitch helped to establish the standards movement in education when she served as Assistant Secretary of Education (Marzano & Kendall, 1996). The attention she brought to educational standards being compared to construction design, food processing, air quality, and other regulations helped to spark many debates and dialogue amongst policy makers on how to improve learning for all students. The result of her work and many others as well (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Lezotte & McKee, 2002; Marzano, 2003; National Research Council, 2004) is that students perform better when they understand what is expected of them.

CSD wanted students to understand what they were expected to know and be able to do at all times. Before 1994 they had a typical institution-centered approach in their classroom design: seat time, a graded system, a textbook curriculum, disconnected assessments and reporting, and limited counseling about post high school plans. Their new educational framework, named the Quality Schools Model, was different. Table 2 illustrates the original school format as compared to the new format.

Table 2.

### *School design comparison*

Original School District Format	Quality Schools Model Format
Individual needs not met	Individual Learning Plan
Credit or "Seat Time" System	Standards-Based System
Graded System	Non-graded System
Disconnected Reporting	K-12 Standards Report Card
Traditional Assessments	Skills-Based, Self, Analytical & Contextual Assessments
Text Book Curriculum	Standards-Based Curriculum
Poor Transition System	Electronic Student Profile K – 12
No School to Life Plan	Comprehensive School to Life
Institutionally Centered	Student Centered

The Quality Schools Model (QSM) is a comprehensive standards-based design system based on Marzano and Kendall's (1997) "Approach IV: Reporting on Individual Standards...where individual teachers report students' performance on specific standards" (p. 223). This approach is a major paradigm shift for many because it is a systems change strategy, not just a new program the school is undertaking. Marzano reviewed the Quality Schools Model and the implementation process in four school districts and included this statement in his report, "As far as I can tell, the Quality Schools Model, as implemented by Chugach and

other districts in Alaska involved with RISC<sup>1</sup> is the most comprehensive and well articulated approach to standards-based reform in the country" (Coladarci, Smith, & Whiteley, 2005, p. 1).

Research and best practices have been utilized in the preliminary design process and continue to be supported as a major component and commitment of the QSM leadership. Marzano's (2003) research on what works with standards

<sup>1</sup> RISC is the Re-Inventing Schools Coalition, a non-profit foundation established to assist school districts interested in learning more about the Quality Schools Model, maintain fidelity, and provide quality QSM training and support.



and instruction suggested that the QSM has the potential of meeting the individual needs of every student if implementation processes are followed and supported by multiple teaching methods. And, Marzano, Waters, and McNulty's (2005) plan for effective school leadership confirmed much of what CSD already had in place, especially regarding managing first-order and second-order change, distributing leadership responsibilities, and crafting a purposeful community.

The Balanced Instructional Model (BIM) (Schreiber, & Batino, 2002, p. 71) is the phrase developed by the CSD Leadership Team to describe their Standards-Based Design strategy which includes relevant standards, effective instruction, multiple assessments, and meaningful reporting used to deliver the academic content. Teachers become learning facilitators, no longer the final word when a student is learning a topic. This approach connects process and content knowledge with assessment utilizing a foundation of direct instruction, individual practical application within a specific content area, using group interactive applications in predictable situations across multiple content areas and finally having real life application in unpredictable situations.

During the shared vision work session all the stakeholders (parents, business and community members, educators, and students) worked together to develop the final ten content areas for the CSD based on input from the guiding questions. The ten standard areas are: "math, technology, social science, reading, writing, cultural awareness and expression, personal/social/health, service learning, career development, and science" (Schreiber, & Batino, 2002, p. 10). Each content area is performance-based and has clear criteria for students to understand what is expected of them and is delivered in a way that allows students to move at their own pace.

### **Continuous Improvement**

Winning the prestigious Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award brought attention to the Chugach School District and assisted in obtaining \$10 million from the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation which helped to establish the Re-Inventing Schools Coalition (RISC). There are presently sixteen school districts in Alaska that RISC is helping to implement the Quality Schools Model in their schools. RISC has also been partnering with the Alaska Staff Development Network (ASDN) to provide Quality Schools Symposiums and Institutes where professional development sessions are held for educators, parents, community members, and students. These training and information gatherings include participants from Alaska school districts, as well as teams from other states and countries who attend to investigate the QSM and determine if the systematic changes would work for their schools.

From the beginning conversations held by the district to the quarterly symposiums and institutes critical connections

are being made with parents, schools, business and community members and students. Fullan (2005) reminded us that "systems consist of individuals...the key to changing systems is to produce greater numbers of 'system thinkers'" (p. 40). Building system thinkers helps to make everyone accountable and connected to learning for individual students, as well as the bigger picture of the community where citizens can all feel pride in their schools. Darling-Hammond (1997) pointed out that in developing "structures for caring...relationships matter for learning. Students' trust in their teachers helps them develop the commitment and motivation needed to tackle challenging learning tasks" (p. 134).

Several systematic changes have occurred in CSD and are continually being explored in order to continue the refinement process and assist other school districts interested in implementing the QSM. Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) confirmed "A school is not an island...it functions in a complex context that must be addressed if the school is to be highly effective" (p. 58) which involves complying with district and state mandates and advocating with parents, community, students, and staff. The opportunity to help schools, districts, and students make connections that improve learning is a practice that requires the contribution of many different individuals. All of this work is part of the commitment to continuous improvement of the Quality Schools Model—to be the Best of the Best in order to "Give all kids hope, whatever it takes" (Rich DeLorenzo, personal conversation, September 23, 2003).

### **Discussion**

Finding the best approach and strategy to reach every child in classrooms large and small is no easy task. Since changing their school system and developing the Quality Schools Model the Chugach School District has had several successes; however they still have daily challenges and understand the need for continuously examining their leading and lagging indicators. Hard working staff members have assisted students in improving reading, math and high school qualifying exam scores. Special summer camps have provided students with leadership skills and an extra boost to improve their academic skills in the new school year.

This investigation of the Quality Schools Model development as part of the Chugach School District's systemic change process has focused on interpreting the information gathered. Stake (1995) explained that "qualitative researchers nourish the belief that knowledge is constructed rather than discovered" (p. 99). The mini case study format for this essay was selected to examine this rural systemic reform model utilizing the critical features of the QSM framework: Shared Vision, Leadership, Standards-Based Design, and Continuous Improvement. It also attempted to assess whether the QSM includes equitable and meaningful opportunities for all students in meeting the

current needs of 21<sup>st</sup> century schools. Duffy (2003) affirmed that,

We all know that change, especially whole-district change, is very difficult....the best precondition for stimulating change is where there is either a great opportunity or an agreed-upon crisis. If both of these conditions exist, the stars are aligned for change to occur. (p. 119)

### Conclusion

Evans (1996) acknowledged “Organizational change—not just in schools, but in institutions of all kinds—is riddled with paradox” (p. 4). In order for educational institutions to craft effective change strategies educators must be willing to implement second-order change processes. “Second-order changes are systemic in nature and aim to modify the very way an organization is put together” (p. 5) which entails structural changes and paradigm shifts. Darling-Hammond (1997) discussed the “increasingly prescriptive policies created through the political process in the name of public accountability are reducing even further the schools’ responsiveness to the needs of students and the desires of parents” (p. 65).

Productive change calls for all “five pillars or essential conditions....purpose, vision, ownership, capacity, and support” (Schwahn & Spady, 2001, p. 22) to be in place and will not succeed if one element is missing from the critical balance. Fullan (2005) concluded that “moral purpose of educators may seem universal, but it has too often emerged as an individual phenomenon” (p. 68). Sergiovanni (1992) stated that “we need to move the moral dimension in leadership away from the periphery and right to the center of inquiry, discussion, and practice” (p. 3). This educational focus toward moral purpose needs to consist of,

(a) a commitment to raising the bar and closing the gap of student achievement for all individuals and schools; (b) a commitment to treat people ethically—adults and students alike (which does not mean being soft; see Lesson 8, on demanding cultures); and (c) a commitment of improving the whole district, not just one’s own school. (Fullan, 2005, p. 68)

Commitment to moral purpose in education to encourage and create genuine learning opportunities for all students seems simple enough; however the key to making this happen requires multiple changes. Wagner (2002) stated “We need to reconsider what it means to be an educated adult in the twenty-first century and make tough decisions about competing priorities” (p. 37). Communicating to the community and specifically the groups impacted daily by

school information is essential to building student success and positive school climate where teaching and learning is respected. Regular recognition and celebration of student, classroom, school site, and district successes are important ingredients to involving everyone in the continuous process of successful education.

Schools must be creative in developing strong relationships and working interactions with communities to include them in learning and understanding about education to reach all students. Fullan (2005) theorized that “systems thinking in practice....is the key to sustainability” (p. 43) of educational changes and necessary for all groups to understand and be comfortable with the changes. Making authentic connections with parents, members of the community and local businesses, as well as students and staff to look at the strengths and weaknesses of schools may help the educational systems to discuss and create meaningful plans of improvement.

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