



AHSCC Response to GUHSD Alpine High School Proposal

The following is the response of the Alpine (AHSCC) representatives on the Grossmont Design/Education Committee to the proposal for the Alpine High School presented at the Nov. 30 meeting by Cindy Douglas. The proposal is an excellent starting point and the comments and responses below follow its basic outline. Overall, our comments are very positive and include the valuable information and ideas obtained from our local and Seattle area school tours.

1. Autonomous Schools Within a School

A. Start With Three Schools

Research and anecdotal evidence suggest that teacher collaboration and articulation yield the best results for student learning; therefore, we strongly support the formation of small, autonomous schools within the larger high school. In conjunction with other important components, this small school organization allows teachers and students to form stronger bonds and therefore better meet students' needs. The GUHSD suggested breakdown appears that it will appeal to most incoming students, but instead of just an English/Entrepreneurship/Communication school, we propose that one more school be added. The breakdown would be as follows:

School A – Language Arts/Media/Communication

School B – STEM school

School C – Business/Finance/Entrepreneurship.

We can tweak what we call and how we define these schools but this division into three academies would more logically cover virtually every conceivable curriculum need for our community. In today's competitive global environment we believe there is a strong need to prepare students for the business world and therefore it is best to create a separate, stand alone academy to meet this need. This would allow School A to better focus its emphasis on language arts, media, and communication. We also believe the student population of the greater Alpine area justifies and necessitates the three academies/buildings.

(This will be elaborated on in a separate document.)

Some community members are concerned that small autonomous schools will prevent the high school from offering a wide AP curriculum. In the event that some classes cannot be offered due to the small schools design, we believe that teachers, administrators, counselors, students, and parents will creatively seek out AP classes either on-line or through distance learning. We also believe that to maximize students' access to necessary AP courses that are not offered within their academy, the structure should allow students to cross over to other academies.

B. How autonomous?

Our belief is that each school within the larger high school be as autonomous as possible, just as GUHSD outlined in its proposal. We asked ourselves the difficult question, “Do we want a school that meets everyone’s needs and lacks focus?” Our decision was that focus should trump variety in most instances, with the only exception being AP. Keep in mind that most if not all classes a student desires to take will be available either on-line, through distance learning with other schools in the Grossmont district, or at local universities or community colleges. Our group believes all students should have access to the performing arts, physical education, and extracurricular activities, which likely will take place outside of each academy. Thus, autonomy should only be compromised when it comes to AP courses. We must maximize students’ access to necessary AP courses by allowing the students to cross over to other academies. This allowance for AP course cross over would also enhance the efficiency of the overall operating budgets and save money for each individual school or academy.

C. Project-Based Learning

When members of the AHSCC visited various high schools in San Diego and Seattle, we looked for a sparkle in the students’ eyes, an indication that students were excited about what they were learning. After having broken down major instructional and curricular components of these schools’ designs, we consider project-based learning as one of the key contributors to that “sparkle.” We are in agreement with the GUHSD proposal that project-based learning be held off until the 10th grade and increase in importance and frequency in the 11th and 12th grades. There needs to be a close relationship among project-based learning, AP coursework, and internship opportunities. Essentially, project-based learning needs to be closely integrated into the curriculum.

2. Internships (Based on “Big Picture Learning” model)

Our concern is that the senior year, at most high schools, does not properly prepare seniors for accomplishing their future goals much less help them decide what to do once they graduate from high school. Therefore, we heartily support the internship program outlined by the GUHSD proposal. Again, this program does not appear plausible unless it is implemented with the small schools design. The projects that students will complete during their internships also support the high school’s focus on project-based learning. Not only do these projects provide relevance to students’ education, but they also allow students to serve their community. As we noted above, another way to interconnect project-based learning and an internship opportunity is to allow students to coordinate their “down the hill” internship time with taking a class on a college campus that is also internship or project related.

3. College Coursework Option

The one thing that AHSCC has been consistent on and which is at the core of our “Curriculum and Design Foundational Principles” document (linked at www.ahscc.com) is student centric learning. The logical outcome of this thinking is that we should do everything we can so that students can customize their education to fit their needs, abilities, and career goals. If a student has completed basic course work in, for example, Math, that student should be able to take an AP calculus course. After having visited many schools that offer project-based learning, another important component of curriculum design at the high school, we support a model that includes AP and college coursework options. Two models to investigate are those in place at Aviation High School in Seattle, WA and the Denver School of Science and Technology, the STEM liberal arts HS located in Denver, CO.

4. Looping

We believe that looping provides continuity and establishes a close student/teacher relationship – something at the heart of the small school concept. Looping can be most successful if it is coupled with strong teacher collaboration, strong support/supervision by administrators, and relevant staff development. These components raise the likelihood that all teachers can maximize student performance; therefore, the fear that a student will be “stuck” with a bad teacher will not be an issue. Looping makes it essential to correlate student performance with teacher performance, which requires the teachers and administrators to use data to continuously improve curriculum design and instruction. With a focus on results, students and parents can be assured that looping will not compromise their high school experience.

5. Technology – Based Learning

We are very happy GUHSD Superintendent Collins is dedicated to the concept of disruptive innovation in education IT, as introduced in the book, Disrupting Class, authored primarily by Clayton Christiansen, of the Harvard Business School. Christiansen’s admonition is that, *“The only innovating worth doing is the disrupting kind, the kind that completely redefines the problem and its context, before thinking about creative solutions to it!”*

Based upon our observations, we believe that technology allows us to emphasize student-centric learning and prevent our school from succumbing to the inevitable fall-back to the old system. However, we are concerned that our committee has not investigated the best practice for when technology is fully integrated into the school and curriculum, not just added on as hardware and software. The generality of the Item 5 Solution is good, but not Christiansen’s, *“The kind that completely redefines the problem and its context.”*

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Therefore we recommend the following:

- ✓ 1) Consult with several experts before thinking about, or recommending the learning lab concept, or Wi-Fi, or any creative solutions to information technology.
- ✓ 2) Hire a lead expert consultant in education IT, who will emulate the role provided by consultant Victoria Bergsagel, who led the GUHSD Design/Education Team in assessing the appropriateness of Small Learning Communities, and Schools within a School.
- ✓ 3) Use the Denver School of Science and Technology (DSST) as our model for IT. This is a new and high performing liberal arts high school with small learning communities, emphasizing science & technology. A visit to the school will be beneficial in verifying its practices and learning more about its approach.

Check the following references:

<http://www.archfoundation.org/aaf/documents/report.designforlearning.pdf>

<http://www.bigpicture.org/2009/10/thoughts-on-innovation/>

- ✓ 4) Contact the IT education expert in Sunnyvale, CA named Aruba Networks. This noted consulting firm has published numerous white papers on this subject.

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6. Professional Learning Communities

We agree with GUHSD's proposal that the school be built around professional learning communities. In fact, all components of design rely on teachers and staff working closely together. In Seattle at the Gates Foundation facility, our host shared his opinion that the most effective use of information technology in a high school education setting was the one found at the Denver School of Science and Technology (DSST), referenced above.

At DSST each academic area ("Pod" as they call them) contained a series of classrooms and a lounge. The Pods are designed to be shared by a variety of teachers over the course of a day. This mobile approach to classroom use is intended to mitigate territoriality that is found in traditional high schools. There are flexible work areas for break-out sessions, lounges for class presentations, science labs, and faculty offices with designated meeting space. Teachers share

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office space, but have personal assigned areas within that space. This is designed to be grouped so as to lead to better collaboration and information sharing among faculty members.

The GUHSD Design Team also toured Seattle, WA area's Marysville-Getchell High School which is designed very similarly to the DSST layout. The model for the DSST floor plan and collaborative area and classroom layout was based on our own San Diego based Hi-Tech High (HTH).

- ✓ We recommend studying the DSST and Marysville-Getchell designs, and consider emulating these already proven floor plan layouts for effective professional learning communities.

7. Administrative Structure:

We very much like and support the proposed administrative structure and have but two comments, one minor and one major. The minor comment is that there should be another title selected for "Director of Rigor and Relevance". This is the top position in the school and is the person who will enforce the multi academy structure. Ideas that were thrown in were 'School Director', 'CEO', etc. We recommend talking about a better title.

We also recommend adding a Director of Technology. We consider this an extremely important professional/executive level position and not merely someone who provides tech support to teachers. As discussed above, technology will be a critical and vital component of the new school in terms of student learning and teacher productivity. How technology is ultimately defined for the new school will shape the role of the Director of Technology. We also foresee technology evolving rapidly after the school opens and this Director needs to have the vision and expertise to see around the curve and anticipate how the school should respond to meet future changes. The actual maintenance of the IT equipment could be done by students of the various academies as part of curriculum and be project based. This would also save school district money, and be value added learning, enhancing the IT education of our students.

8. Joint Uses

This topic was omitted from the proposal and for good reason. The burden rests with Alpine and AHSCC to put some meat on the bones of Joint Uses for the new school. This subject is also very immediate as it impacts the critical path issues of architectural design and funding. A few ideas have developed and will be mentioned below but much more work needs to be done and the AHSCC will embark in taking the lead on this subject within our community in the first quarter of 2010.

One joint use issue that has evolved somewhat is the library. The Grossmont proposal suggests a learning lab library in each school but the question of a centralized library remains up in the

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air. One of the things we are currently doing is working with the Alpine Friends of the Library, the group that has taken the lead in getting a new library built for Alpine. We are exploring whether the site for the new library can be moved from its current planned location adjoining the Community Center to the new school site and therefore serve a broader joint use. Our plan is to look at recently opened high tech libraries in SD County. There is a new one in Ramona, incorporating green technology, and a brand new joint use library in Logan Heights that was built on a school campus. There is also the beautiful example of Muckleshoot that had the bonus of incorporating Indian Culture. The Alpine Friends of Library might be organizing some tours of the new local libraries and we should join them in this process. Once some firmer ideas are developed we would like to meet with Superintendent Collins, County Supervisor Jacob, and Indian Tribal Leaders to gain support for further developing a plan as well as ideas on multi-party funding.

Similar joint use concepts will also be explored for athletic fields and facilities, the school's auditorium/performing arts center and, of course, the Tribal Museum and Cultural Center. This will be a significant undertaking that will bring in many stakeholders and community leaders. However, the potential return is very high in terms of leveraging available funding and developing much better facilities than would occur if they were for "school only" rather than joint use purposes.