

Alaska's Discovery School



A Denali student examines leaf samples collected during a science outing.

Inside many schools is a new school waiting to be "coaxed out." Denali Elementary took on a new identity when a principal united the staff and the community around a common goal.

DAVID HAGSTROM

Denali Elementary School, the oldest school in Fairbanks, Alaska, was once described as "worn out and unwanted." Now it is known as "Alaska's Discovery School." The transformation occurred because the school and the community pulled together to accomplish a common goal: to make their school a better place for the children.

I recently completed three years as Denali's principal. I assumed the temporary principalship in 1988 at the request of the district's central office. I was then a professor at the University of Alaska, where I worked to prepare school principals for challenges like this. With firm support

from an understanding department chair and college dean, I took over the position until "a real principal" could be found. That accidental insult from the central office didn't discourage me; I hadn't been a principal for 13 years, and the university would give me only a 3-month leave of absence.

After years of observing leaders bully children, teachers, and parents into reform, I wanted to try a different approach to leadership — to be an encourager, not a dictator; a facilitator, not a know-it-all. The "servant leadership" approach especially impressed me.¹ I wanted to encourage innovation in the school by nurturing the skills of children, teachers, and parents. I was

convinced that if a leader of an institution helped others understand their own leadership abilities, that institution would become healthier and stronger. Hierarchical rights had to go, so that true power could be realized.

Old Bricks, New Outlook

In its cultural makeup, Denali Elementary is Alaska in microcosm: 20 percent Alaska Native students, 5 percent African Americans, 4 percent Asians, 1 percent children from Central and South America, and 70 percent Caucasians, who were born in 30 different states and 7 nations. In this school community, 10 percent of the parents are upper-middle class or above, 65 percent are middle class, and 25 percent of the parents earn less than what the federal government considers a poverty-level wage. Such a rich mix of socioeconomic levels, ethnic practices, and traditions makes the school interesting and, at the same time, challenges those of us who work here.

Our adventure in shared leadership, now called the Denali Project, had its beginnings in a conversation about curriculum I had with two teachers and two parents just a month after I'd arrived. One parent asked, "How can our curriculum better reflect how our children act *outside* the school?" The other parent chimed in, "Our kids are naturally explorers when they're on their own at home. Why can't the curriculum make more of that fact?" That conversation planted the seed for

a new Alaskan school — new not in brick and mortar, but in spirit.

We decided to invite parents and teachers to discuss a greater alignment between the curriculum and the nature of our children. We chose 6 a.m. on Tuesdays as a meeting time. With each week, our numbers grew — first 5, then 10, then 20, and finally 40.

At the center of our mission was a desire to make Denali Elementary a math-science focus school.

Within a month, the “Tuesday Morning Bunch” had agreed that we wanted Denali to become “Alaska’s Discovery School,” a place where children and adults alike would “have the opportunity to discover . . . (a) the wonders of the world around them and (b) their own potential for greater human growth and development.”²²

At the center of our mission was a desire to make Denali a math-science focus school. Those disciplines, parents and teachers believed, would give children the tools necessary to open new doors of intellectual curiosity, awaken future career possibilities, and inspire a sense of wonder about the universe beyond their school.³ By then, I was so caught up in the excitement of the change that was occurring that I decided to stay on at Denali, rather than return to the university.

In just four months, our group grew to include not only Denali’s parents

and teachers but also high school teachers, university faculty, and many community members. Out of our breakfast meetings came the following goals:

1. Teachers must become learners of mathematics and science.
2. School leadership tasks need to be shared.
3. Continued community involvement is essential.

We felt strongly that these were the best ways to bring about a more lasting change. We also felt good about our chances for success because the effort was valued by the persons who would carry it out, having originated with the Denali parents and teachers.

Teachers as Learners

Like most elementary teachers, ours were well versed in the language arts, but they admitted to having little content knowledge in math and the sciences. The University of Alaska volunteered to help us by sending professors to Denali once a week to give our teachers instruction in these disciplines. During the project’s first year, all teachers were released every Friday for this staff development.

At first, the professors provided background knowledge. Soon, however, the teachers were eager to translate some of this information into practice. They began asking the professors to share projects and ideas that they could use in their classroom. Before long, the university professors and our teachers were teaching side by side in the classroom: A classic example of this team teaching arrangement occurred when a university biology professor and one of our teachers shared fish dissection presentations with the intermediate grade students.

Another benefit of this collaboration for the children has been field trips to the university museum and the science department’s permafrost tunnel, where our kids study soil conditions firsthand.

Sharing Leadership

Just as our teachers have become learners again, so have they — along with parents — begun to share leadership tasks, our second project goal. For instance, teachers have been instrumental in organizing programs. Since everyone knows our vision — to become Alaska’s Discovery School — each teacher has carved out a personal niche that will help get us where we want to go.

For example, our Winter Survival Program grew out of an idea by one of our 4th grade teachers, who believed that in an intense winter environment like Alaska’s, students need to know how to take care of themselves if an emergency ever causes them to be stranded outdoors. Previously an outdoor education director, she taught her students how to build a lean-to, how to choose food, and how to use snow as an insulator. The learning

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takes place in a wooded area close to the school. Her program has since been expanded to other classes.

Another area we pursued was learning from our Pacific Rim neighbors. With assistance from the Alaska Sister Schools Network in our state capital, we linked up with the Hokko Elementary School in Hokkaido, Japan. Every year in June, about 10 students, 10 teachers, and 10 parents participate in exchanges between the two schools. This successful program is directed by a small group of Denali teachers and parents.

During each exchange, we try to concentrate on one science- and one math-related activity. For example, on past visits, our students have toured science museums and a recycling plant in Japan. On one trip, they were excited to discover that the pulp paper used in a Japanese plant had been exported from Sitka, Alaska. We also visit classrooms to learn about instruction. We've learned much about math from our sister school. Whereas in many American schools, kids pore over myriad problems in a given class period, in Japan, students receive an in-depth presentation on a particular process and then concentrate on only one, two, or maybe three problems in a one-hour period. Back home, we've turned our teaching of math around, particularly in the 4th and 5th grades.

I'll never forget the beaming face of one of our teacher-leaders as she got off the plane after the first international visit. With 30 children, teachers, and parents filing off the jetway behind her, she exclaimed, "We had a marvelous time, and I've never been so jazzed about teaching. This is what education should really be about!"

Well, this *is* what teaching is all about at Denali. Every teacher has found an area of interest and taken

complete control so that the effort fits our common school goal.

Broader Community Involvement

The third project goal, to broaden community involvement, has taken many forms. For example:

- Each week our local Kiwanis Club's Terrific Kid Program recognizes a different child in each primary

this wonderful idea. Agreeing that all kids could benefit from an understanding of how things grow, parents and community members pitched in to help.

Every child in the school has a personal plot in the garden. We take advantage of this hands-on science opportunity by coordinating our schoolwide science curriculum appro-



Roland Gangloff from the University of Alaska Museum teaches a science lesson at Denali Elementary. The school's partnership with the university is one example of how the community has pulled together to help the school accomplish its goal of improving the curriculum for local children.

classroom for his or her progress or achievement.

- Students from the middle and high schools participate in a cross-age tutoring program for and with Denali kids.

- In a reciprocal arrangement, our school decorates a local shopping center's Christmas trees for the holiday season, and the center, in turn, advertises school events on its digital sign and gave the school a new public address system.

One of our most popular programs is a community garden, 60 feet from the school. Three years ago, a parent with a 4-H background came up with

privately by grade level with what's occurring in the community garden.

When school isn't in session, the 4-H Club and interested neighbors water and tend the garden. With summer temperatures in Fairbanks reaching the 80s and 90s, and 22-23 hours of sunlight daily in June and July, we've been able to grow some beautiful flowers and lush vegetables: giant cabbages, carrots, beans, peas, potatoes, pumpkins, melons. At state fair competitions, we've won numerous first places. The community garden is a source of pride.

These are just a few examples of school/community involvement.

People have found something they can believe in, and, in the process, they've helped to turn their local school around.

A New School for Alaska

The business of coaxing a new school out of an old one has been gratifying for all of us. Perhaps the greatest satisfaction comes from knowing that we have addressed a task — the creation of a new kind of school — that is “nearly impossible, but extremely important,” to use a favorite expression of Roland Barth's.⁴

Educators simply cannot go about the business of schooling as usual. Too many children are falling by the wayside. If a “worn out and

unwanted” school like Denali can live up to the title “Alaska's Discovery School,” then other schools can also turn themselves around. There is little to lose — and so much to gain. □

¹Robert Greenleaf, through *Servant Leadership* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), encouraged me to *serve* the Denali community.

²*The Seven Year Plan for Change*, (1989), (Fairbanks: Denali Elementary).

³In *Value-Added Leadership* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990), Tom Sergiovanni provided a framework for our project by outlining ways to build consensus about purposes and beliefs.

⁴No one has had more of a direct influence on my notions of leadership in relation to the Denali Project than Roland Barth, senior lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Author's note: Alaska is one of five states the U.S. Department of Education has given a grant of \$500,000 to create academies to prepare school leaders. Our academy's goal is to produce strong leadership for many “new schools for Alaska” over the next 10 years.

I'd like to thank all the teachers, children, parents, community members, and university people who've helped to make Alaska's Discovery School a reality. A special thanks to Rick Cross, Fairbanks School District Superintendent. He helped us stay focused and gave us steady support.

David Hagstrom, formerly Principal of Denali Elementary School, is Director of the Alaska Academy of Educational Leadership, Hutchison Career Center, 3750 Geist Rd., Fairbanks, AK 99709

Becoming Sophisticated about Leadership

Education Politics for the New Century

Edited by Douglas E. Mitchell and Margaret E. Goertz
Bristol, Pennsylvania:
Falmer Press, Taylor & Francis, Inc., 1990

School administrators, teachers, board members, and public policymakers will find this insightful yearbook extremely helpful in preparing for their leadership responsibilities in the new century. Authors of the 10 pieces represent scholars in the social, economic, political, educational, and legal constituencies that influence the shaping of educational policy.

The following timely topics are analyzed: the dysfunction of federal education policy and assessment of educational needs; income, race, and inequality relative to urban high

schools; the politics of school restructuring and technology utilization; and the role of business leaders in school policy reform. The book concludes with a consideration of past issues and future directions germane to policy formation.

The book predicts that the last decade of the century will be characterized by a continuation of the conservatism the Reagan administration fostered; education will not ascend in priority in the competition for scarce financial resources. This will further reduce the government's support of equal educational opportunity and have a direct effect on intensifying the economic and social isolation of urban youth.

Two chapters discuss the policy ramifications of restructuring schools and climate/culture conditions in which teachers work, contending that

changes in both district and state policy are requisite for restructuring at the building level. Another chapter considers the effect of the often proposed technology panacea for education, while two other chapters look at the ways in which the business sector affects educational policy.

Supervision and curriculum specialists are frequently accused of being unsophisticated in the policy making arena. This typically results in our being obliged to conform to policies we had no voice in shaping. *Education Politics for the New Century* will help readers become more formidable partners in shaping policy that reflects what we know is best for education.

Available from Falmer Press, Taylor & Francis, Inc., 1900 Frost Rd., Suite 101, Bristol PA 19007.

Reviewed by Jerrold D. Hopfengardner, University of Dayton, Dayton, Ohio.

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