

Summary of Peer Review – Academic Safety Net

March 3, 2008

*The Seattle Public Schools has completed a number of academic and operations **peer reviews**. These reviews, which have been performed by national experts, show us what we are doing well and point out how we can improve.*

The recommendations from each peer review will inform the district's strategic planning process, so changes and improvements to individual programs will advance our overall vision for academic achievement.

The Subject

Academic Safety Net

The Seattle Public Schools offers a number of “safety net” alternative educational programs for students who are at risk either because they have dropped out of school or been expelled, because they are struggling with drug or alcohol abuse or because they are teen parents. The **Academic Safety Net** peer review evaluated four programs:

- Middle College High School
- South Lake High School
- Interagency Academy (which has 12 sites and three learning centers located around the city for different groups of students)
- John Marshall 6–12 Alternative

The Reviewers

The Academic Safety Net study was conducted by a team of researchers from the **National Dropout Prevention Center (NDPC)** at Clemson University in South Carolina. Terry Cash, Ph.D., assistant director of the NDPC and Robert Shumer, Ph.D., from the University of Minnesota, led the study. Both of them have considerable experience with alternative education programs, as they have taught in, developed and evaluated these types of programs in many different states. They were joined by Chet Edwards, the former director of alternative education for the Portland Public Schools.

Summary

After studying the four academic safety net programs, the review team recommended a number of strategies to improve alternative education for students who are at risk:

- **Provide adequate and stable funding** to ensure that each program has the teachers, aides and materials needed to serve students.
- **Evaluate each program each year** to track how students are doing and to respond quickly if any of the programs needs help.
- **Proceed with the plan to close John Marshall** in June 2008, given that school's significant weaknesses.
- **Strengthen drug/alcohol programs** so that students receive personalized support to address their needs.
- **Add community-based learning opportunities** (such as internships and volunteer service programs) so that students can apply what they've learned in the community and workplace.

Study Methods

The review team carried out their study through a combination of methods. They **reviewed** documents and student data from each of the programs; **observed** classes at each of the four programs; and **interviewed** students, teachers, counselors, principals, parents and guardians. They used the National Dropout Prevention Center's *Essential Elements of Effective Alternative Schools Type I* to guide the study.

Findings and Recommendations

The review team made recommendations on each of the four academic safety net programs:

Middle College High School: The Middle College program aims to help students who have not been successful in traditional high schools but who perform at the college level, particularly in writing and mathematics. The program has four sites, which include:

- American Indian Heritage Middle College at North Seattle Community College
- Middle College/ERC at Northgate
- Office of Minority Affairs Middle College at the University of Washington
- Middle College at South Seattle Community College

The review team found the Middle College program to be highly effective overall. They praised the way the program has been able to help students who have not been successful in traditional high schools and noted the “power of the college context” as a particular strength of the Middle College program. They also praised Middle College for a high level of student accountability, a clear administrative structure, strong curriculum and effective teaching.

However, they noted that Middle College is able to provide only limited student support due to budget cutbacks and inadequate funding for the program in recent years. They also noted that three of the Middle College sites are not large enough to accommodate students and teachers.

South Lake High School: South Lake is a continuous enrollment school; new students are enrolled each Monday. After enrolling, each student takes a reading assessment and then is assigned to one of four levels. South Lake aims to help students succeed academically and in other areas of their lives.

The review team concluded that South Lake is effective in a number of areas, but the school could be strengthened by adding research-based educational practices. Team members praised the South Lake curriculum and noted that teaching and learning is strong. They also praised the district’s commitment to a new building for the school.

However, the review team expressed caution that students at South Lake do not have personalized learning plans, and the program does not have strong links to technology, project-based learning, service-learning or career education. The reviewers also noted that student attendance and dropout figures could be improved and expressed concern that inadequate funding had weakened guidance and career counseling.

Interagency Academy: The Interagency Academy includes 12 separate sites and three learning centers located around Seattle. Many of these programs are collaborations with community organizations that serve specific groups of students. The Interagency sites include Alder Back on Track, Columbia City, Detention, Fairview, King County Jail, Opportunity Skyway, Orion, Southwest, University District Youth Center, YOUTH SOURCE and Youth Education Program. Interagency learning centers include Koinonia, YMCA and Peace for the Streets by Kids from the Streets. The review team visited four Interagency sites for this study.

The review team praised the Interagency Academy for using research-based practices and keeping comprehensive data about student progress. In fact, team members concluded that the Interagency sites they visited were stronger than the other alternative programs that are part of the academic safety net. They noted that staff and students have a clear understanding of their mission—to “build a bridge” to a career—and that each student has a personalized learning plan and access to a wide range of support services. The review team was particularly impressed by the strong involvement of parents and guardians.

However, the review team expressed concern about funding for the Interagency Academy. Review team members noted that there are limited textbooks for students, and the district does not pay rent for most of the community spaces the program sites use. In some cases, community organizations may be subsidizing district operations by hosting Interagency programs. The review team recommended that the district revisit program locations and determine ways to improve them.

John Marshall 6-12 Alternative: John Marshall provides educational programs for students from grades six through 12, including an alternative high school, middle school and high school re-entry programs for students who have dropped out of school, and a transition center for behavior disorder special education students.

The review team expressed strong concerns over the situation at John Marshall. Since the initial publication of the peer review study, the district has taken steps to improve conditions at John Marshall by replacing the principal, adding drug/alcohol counselors and family support workers for students, and moving forward with plans to close the school in June 2008.

The review team concluded that John Marshall is not a healthy environment for students and cautioned that concerns about conditions at John Marshall could harm the reputations of the other, much stronger alternative programs that were reviewed as part of this study. Review team members expressed concerns about poor student performance, a high suspension rate, the use of force and punitive measures to maintain a safe learning environment, unstructured student support services, an unacceptable facility and weak leadership.

As noted, the district has made plans to close John Marshall in June 2008 and disperse the school's students. District staff will work to find appropriate and welcoming programs for current John Marshall students, relying on the strength of the other academic safety net programs to support the students who have remained at John Marshall.

Next Steps

The Academic Safety Net peer review was carried out as part of the **Seattle Public Schools' strategic planning process**. The strategic plan is being developed to help the school district strengthen academic achievement for all students by allowing us to assess where we are now, develop a list of priorities for improvement and then take action. The strategic plan will be adopted by the school board in June 2008 and will be carried out over the next several years.