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Aurora Public Schools: Building a Culture of Trust

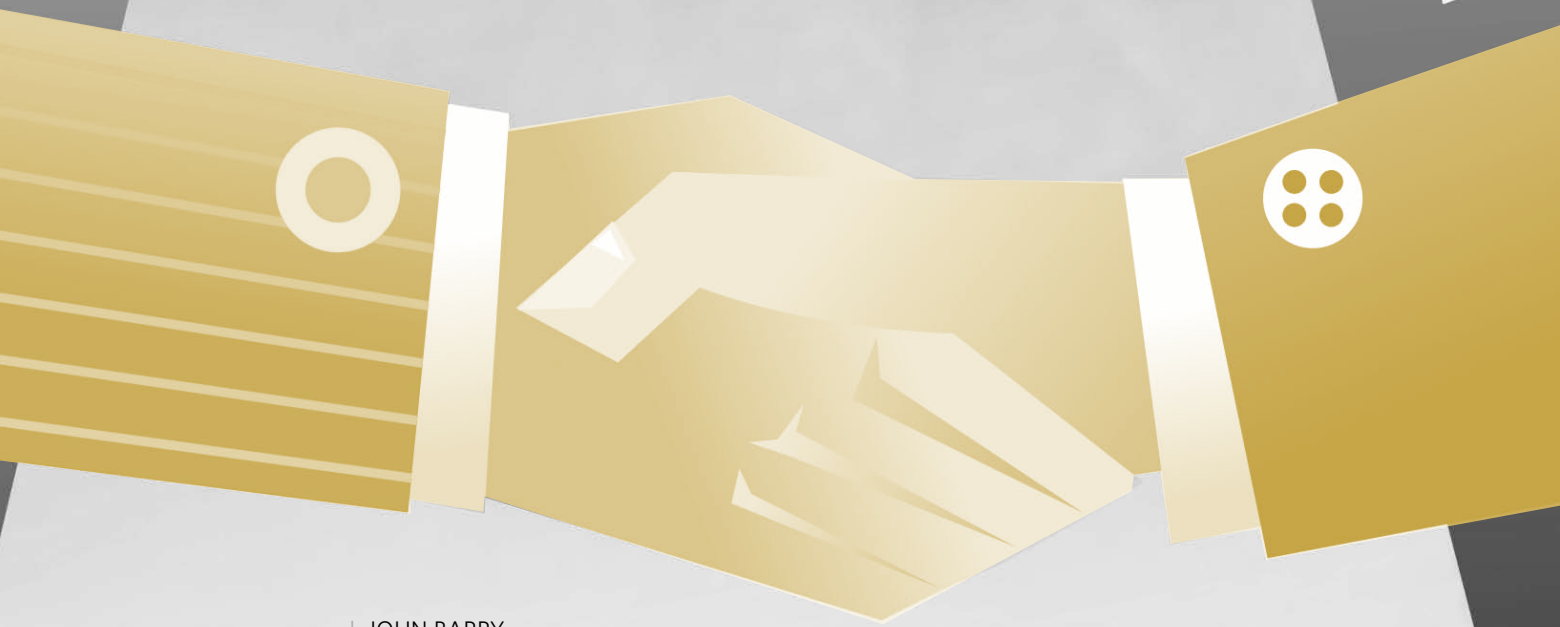
by John Barry

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Aurora Public Schools: **BUILDING A CULTURE OF TRUST**



| JOHN BARRY

Failure is not an option and hope is not a strategy. When discussing our work in Aurora Public Schools (CO) I often use these words first coined by Gene Krantz, the NASA Apollo 13 Mission Director. Every day parents not only entrust us with their children, they assume that we are doing everything possible to ensure their children's success. It is our duty to meet these expectations. To do this in Aurora Public Schools (APS), we had to transform our school district.

When I became superintendent of APS in 2006, I was cognizant of the fact that the first 90 days as superintendent can define an entire tenure, so I began with a strategic entry plan that was inclusive. After collecting feedback from our entire community (parents, students, staff, elected officials, business leaders, and reporters), our leadership team quickly focused on the vision of graduating every student with the choice to attend college without remediation. We pursued this goal by changing the culture of the district and designing a strategic plan relevant to all staff and with initiatives that support the people who can really make change happen: instructional leaders, the teaching corps, and other staff who directly contribute to student performance.

At the time, the district was adjusting to a rapidly changing student demographic that was increasingly poor, mobile, and immigrant. Within the short span of six years, the percentage of English language learners in the district had more than doubled, and the number of poor students had increased from 44 to 64 percent. More than 60 percent of our 35,000 students were receiving free or reduced lunch, and nearly 40 percent were second language learners, mostly from Mexico and other parts of Latin America.

We were faced with poor student achievement, poor attendance, and high dropout rates. Six out of every ten of our schools were rated low or unsatisfactory on the annual state report cards. Our students were well below state levels for proficiency, and we had some of the lowest standardized test scores in the state. Our system was failing too many students, and they were in a downward spiral. Indications were that our own community had lost faith in the district. A major change was needed; continuing along the same route was a path to more failure for our students.

We had a moral imperative to stop failing our children, and we had the professional duty as leaders to create and execute strategies that would build on district realities and focus on actionable initiatives. The *how* of improving student achievement often frustrates school district leaders. To circumvent this, we established a strategic plan that connected ends (vision) with means (goals and objectives). Launching multiple initiatives that were fully aligned and integrated maximized our chances of accelerating student achievement and closing the achievement gaps between ethnic groups.

Coming from a background in the military and the business sectors, I was surprised at the extent to which “silos” persisted in public education and how little

communication there was between staff in classrooms, schools, and district offices. We began by communicating the overarching vision to serve all of our students successfully so they will have the choice to enter the colleges and universities of their choosing. Our mission is to “teach every student the knowledge, skills, and values necessary to enter college or a career and become a contributing member of society who flourishes in a diverse, dynamic world.” The aim was unequivocal – every student – with no excuses and no blame, a hallmark motto that would eventually embody our formal strategic plan. From this, we began to structure a cohesive set of goals and objectives with which to innovate and transform the district. Attaining these goals would mean overcoming significant hurdles related to the dramatic demographic changes experienced in Aurora.

Setting Goals for Performance and Change with VISTA 2010

When I arrived in Aurora, I observed a culture of what I call “normalized deviance,” which means the acceptance of performance outcomes as “normal” that were far from where we really should or could be, often with serious consequences. This phenomenon could be found in diverse areas of district operations: from long standing, problematic truancy rates to the way textbooks were not issued because of concern that students would not return them.

One event early in my tenure served as a catalyst for setting priorities. While most teachers have the best of intentions at heart, I worried that some fell into the trap of not expecting enough from certain students. I observed a teacher in a positive and caring rapport with her student “Johnny.” When I asked how Johnny was doing, she replied, “Wonderfully,” but the data told another story. Johnny was consistently in the “high unsatisfactory” category of proficiency rates, which begged the question: Did the teacher have low expectations for him? Maybe. The larger issue is that she was using a subjective form of assessment that could not be reliably tracked over time. Moreover, there was no system in place for her to judge Johnny’s performance in a broader context, nor was there an established way for her to easily and proactively get new ideas from others about how to improve Johnny’s performance. She clearly cared about Johnny, but we had not provided her the tools for ensuring his success.

Creating a system that would ensure success for Johnny required not only multiple data initiatives and other >

protocols, it demanded a cultural transformation. We began this transformation by crafting a bold strategic plan called VISTA (Visionary Instruction Shaping the Transformation of Aurora Public Schools) 2010. Based on a measurable growth model, the plan identified the moral obligation to develop an organization where all students can learn and succeed. Now that we have reached the year 2010, we are holding more than 100 public forums to help create its successor VISTA 2015.

Five main priorities guided the development of VISTA 2010: 1) increase student achievement, 2) ensure effective district governance through positive board/superintendent relations, 3) improve public trust and confidence through open communication and positive relationships, 4) increase organizational effectiveness and efficiency, and 5) establish a supportive and positive district culture. Each goal in VISTA 2010 includes a set of activities and measurable results that explicitly identify what is needed to meet the objective.

To carry out this plan, we organized our goals around four areas: People, Achievement, Community, and Environment (PACE). PACE (Figure 1) was intended as an easily digestible concept for stakeholders to understand and hopefully support. The graphic in Figure 1 shows a sample of the mosaic of initiatives that form the basis of the approach. We took a federalist approach in planning: set the overall policy with VISTA 2010, and then let the people—the teachers, principals, support staff, and the larger community—fill in the bottom with actions that would lead to positive results for student performance. If

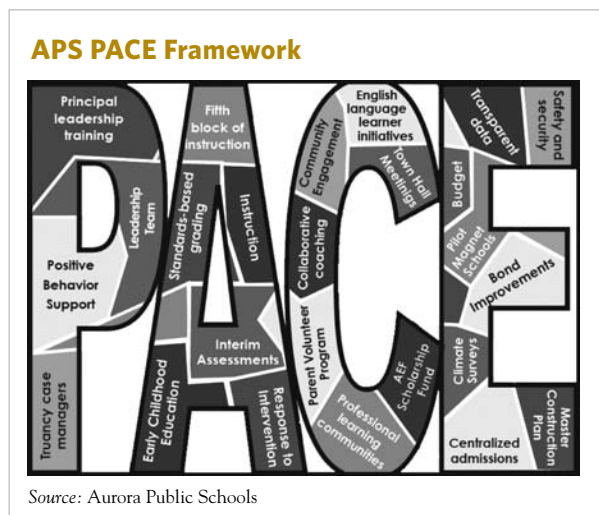
people understand the big picture and own a task that supports it, the strategic plan has a higher likelihood of succeeding.

In addition, each school has an improvement plan that includes a minimum standard of three percent growth on the state proficiency tests. Because Colorado has a growth model where students are compared with all other students at their respective levels, the excuses of – “they came to me underperforming; they are poor and they lack family structure” – are not valid. The VISTA 2010 strategic plan explicitly says, “no excuses, no blame.” As a result of systemic changes created by VISTA 2010, we are now able to determine if a single student has grown since he/she started the year.

To achieve the sort of tangible transformation we were looking for, we introduced several ground-breaking initiatives in VISTA 2010 to maximize our chances for community approval and better serve our students. First, we changed the school calendar, providing a fifth block of instruction that added 23 days of voluntary instruction for approximately 4,000 students who needed more time to reach proficiency in literacy and math. To ensure district-wide cohesiveness and focus, we aligned curriculum, instruction, assessment, and professional development. We provided pacing guides for teachers that break course content into individual segments with specific learning goals to ensure consistent instruction district-wide. The guides have instructional targets aligned with state standards at every grade level to meet the challenge of the high mobility rates of students. These initiatives, driven primarily by the instructional leaders in the community, catalyzed the cultural transformation needed.

Growing up in the Bronx, I learned from Casey Stengel, a New York Yankees manager in the 1950s, that there are three kinds of people: those who make things happen, those who watch things happen, and those who ask what happened. In order to change the status quo of the APS school system, we had to be proactive and connect the ends to the means. We had to make everyone—students, staff, parents, and the community—believe that real change was possible. When creating transformational change, not everyone will be on board with your ideas. You have to understand those who will resist transformation. Backlash about risk-taking should be tempered through counter arguments about the greater risk of inaction. Building and retaining support is a sign that your initiative is working.

FIGURE 1





Superintendent John Barry (center) reviews student achievement data with APS administrators.

Transparent Data Spurs Teacher Awareness and Collaboration

At the center of the transformational process was the way we now use data. While “transparent data” is only a small block in the “E” of the PACE mosaic, it is the foundation for the vast cultural and operational change that continues today. We believe that “transparent data” should serve as an integral resource for both instruction and accountability. The data must be accurate, accessible, and identified by its official source.

We helped administrators and teachers become experts at understanding and using data to carefully monitor student progress, identify potential problem areas, and implement student-targeted intervention strategies. School principals formed “Data Teams,” small groups of teachers who meet regularly to examine student work (addressing individual students beyond those in their classes only), set improvement goals for effective teaching, and monitor the goals. The purpose of the data teams is to improve student achievement by increasing teachers’ knowledge and skills. Teachers proactively share innovative and effective practices with each other to assist in achieving their goals. The data teams can be grade level specific, content area specific, or a vertical team of many grade levels. An individual

school will have many data teams, all of which follow a five-step process:

- **Step 1.** Collect and chart data
- **Step 2.** Analyze strengths and obstacles
- **Step 3.** Establish goals: set, review, revise
- **Step 4.** Select instructional strategies
- **Step 5.** Determine results indicators

Making instruction precise and personalized occurs through a process of using data, based on actual student work, to make decisions about content and instruction. Teachers now use common assessments based on state and district content and performance standards. Analysis of student work focuses on what students can do, what help they need, and the variables teachers control during the seven to eight hours a day, five days a week that students are in classrooms learning. The data teams set achievement goals, select instructional strategies, determine what students will be able to do as a result of the strategies, implement the strategies, monitor students, and finally, administer the next set of common assessments. Then the cycle begins again, ideally resulting in increased teaching and learning success. ▷



Superintendent John Barry discusses VISTA 2010 with district and community stakeholders.

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To share the information effectively, we created “data walls” that display results for every classroom at every school. This fosters an environment of transparent accountability where everyone knows, understands, and accepts mutual responsibility for student achievement results. Displayed data includes quarterly interim assessments

in addition to the annual state exams to determine a student’s progress.

The concept of a “data wall” literally means that rooms exist at the district and school levels with charts and data displayed for use. The data for the entire district is in a room in the administrative offices. Each school has its own data room for use by the staff with data categorized by classroom, by teacher, by subject, and by student. The student data is not open to the public, but available to all the teachers in the building. By creating “data walls” that display results for every classroom and every school, we have created accountable awareness of and responsibility for student achievement.

This powerful culture change received some pushback at first. A few teachers were reluctant to engage in the process, but over time, when they realized the process was not punitive and when they saw where other teachers were, they realized they were all in the same boat. Hanging the data on the walls has engendered a powerful sense of teamwork, something that must be valued in education. Teachers started talking to each other about the data and collaborating and sharing successful strategies to improve their output. The culture change spurred by the data walls has fostered an atmosphere of the three T’s: trust, teamwork, and transparency.

Testing and Data Implementation

To develop this transparent data model, we needed tests to collect data and provide training. One of the first things

we did was to put the head of accountability and research for the school district on the superintendent's leadership team so she could be an integral part of our discussion and planning.

Insight from the district's Chief Accountability and Research Officer Dr. Lisa Escarcega and our Chief Academic Officer William Stuart were essential as we created our plan. One of the early steps was to bring in Dr. Douglas B. Reeves, founder of The Leadership and Learning Center, to train staff in the Data Driven Decision Making Model. The model does not have specific training on data walls, but both support the use of data to drive decision making and instruction. The initial training of district level instructional staff occurred in 2007-08, and then those trained became certified trainers who then trained all principals and coaches.

We also developed interim assessments in 2007-08 with The Princeton Review. As with the training above, the total cost of interims (including testing and three sessions of professional development) will vary by district size and project scale, but our cost was roughly \$730,000. The tests covered grades 3 through 10 in reading, writing, and math and were given at the end of quarters one, two, and four.

During this first year, we began to develop internal tests and the pacing guides for teachers that broke into individual lesson plans with specific learning goals to ensure consistent instruction district-wide. The Princeton Review tests were based on pacing guides. We contracted with Edusoft for software that scores the tests and for a half-time consultant who trained staff members to use the software to run the data that now drives instruction. We also purchased scanners for each building so assessments could be quickly scored and used to enhance student learning.

For the second year (2008-09), we developed our own interim assessments at reduced costs that were of equal or higher quality. Edusoft provided an item bank and a full-time consultant to assist in test formatting and continued professional development. Software and printing costs rose during this time due to increased use. We leveraged teaching staff and district instructional coordinators to develop the assessments. Our district assessment coordinator ran the test development groups and shared editing work with the Edusoft consultant. We also reassigned a secretary to support with test editing.

Test development was overseen by the Division of Accountability & Research and led by Escarcega, who has a Ph.D. in quantitative research and the psychometric background to do test development. This division pulls the data from the Edusoft system at the end of each test window after approximately 80 percent of the tests have

been scanned. They set the proficiency benchmarks, and we report by school, by grade, and by subject. These reports are sent to schools within a week after the close of the test window. School administrators add their school level data to graph templates that we created. For teacher level data, administrators run reports by teacher. These reports are placed on the data walls.

“The culture change spurred by the data walls has fostered an atmosphere of the three T's: trust, teamwork, and transparency.”

Now in our third year of interim assessments (2009-2010), we have a smooth working process with staff across the district owning different aspects. We review each test approximately four months before it is to be administered, editing less than 25% of the items unless there has been a change to the pacing guide. Our district's six instructional coordinators spend approximately 12 days of work each year on the interim revision process. We pay teachers or provide substitutes depending on when the groups meet, making every effort to compensate fairly but to also keep the cost down, which we managed for this year. Printing costs dropped when we shortened the answer key document for teachers. Our Edusoft contract decreased in price and the consultant, probably not needed next year, went back to a part-time position. Success with the interim assessments lies with their formative use. Teachers are allowed to keep the tests for several weeks after the window to work with students on specific items or standards. An answer key provided to teachers gives explanations on why students may have chosen wrong answers, which enables teachers to use the data to drive instruction.

It's All About the Results

All these efforts yielded the largest academic growth in seven years. We fostered a culture of change by creating a strategic plan with our own mosaic of initiatives and actions that have worked for APS for the past four years. In my experience, depending on the initiative, you really need this amount of time or longer to see real change from your innovation. ▷



An example of a data wall at Aurora Public Schools.

“Large scale improvements in student achievement occur when there is large scale improvement of day-to-day classroom instruction. Our data teams now provide the formal structure for teachers to work collaboratively to make instruction more effective.”

Large scale improvements in student achievement occur when there is large scale improvement of day-to-day classroom instruction. Our data teams now provide the formal structure for teachers to work collaboratively to make instruction more effective. In 2009, APS received the largest district gain of 2% on CSAP, the state standardized

tests, since the exams were realigned in 2002 (state gains were 1.1%). We did not decrease on state tests and our increase in proficiency scores over two years of 3.1% was nearly three times the state gain. We have exceeded the state gain of proficient scores over the last five years in all areas except reading. In 2009, 20 out of 27 subject tests had an overall increase. With no implementation dip in sight, APS gains outpaced the state gains in all four academic areas: reading, math, writing and science.

In terms of growth, APS exceeded the overall state median growth percentile (50th percentile) in all three areas assessed for the second year in a row. In 17 out of 21 grade and subject areas, APS met or exceeded the state median growth percentile. The majority of growth came in the area of math, while reading and writing scores were above the state average.

Regarding the Aurora Public Schools culture, our use of data has inspired a new level of collaboration among teachers, which in turn has enhanced a culture of trust. A 2009 climate survey revealed over 70% of teachers felt there was a culture of trust between teachers in schools—this was an increase from 30% two years previously.

Increased communication has teachers collaborating on specific students, building on each other's strengths and knowledge base of their respective students. Teachers are taking collective responsibility for individual students, and sharing and seeking successful strategies from their peers. Meeting styles include both horizontal and vertical strategies for students. Staff members are huddling around freshly posted data walls to decide how to best teach each student.

With 87 percent of the staff responding, this climate survey focused on six areas: clarity of purpose, communication, relationships, work environment, morale, and program support. Overall, the majority of the responses have significantly improved from years past. This positive feedback strongly supports the use of data collection. In particular, our method of data use demonstrates how seriously we take issues like student performance. For example, if someone brings an idea to the administration via a survey, we address the feedback publicly to ensure that stakeholders see our commitment to making change based on input. As school district leaders, we have a duty to listen and to act using the best, most targeted resources to positively impact student achievement.

The APS Culture—Going Forward

For meaningful change to take place, school districts, especially large urban school districts, need to develop comprehensive, demanding, and common-sense plans. Transformational plans must break down the isolation and separation that can exist within school districts. In APS, we focused on building trust, teamwork, and transparency so we would see this transformation to fruition. We operated with a laser focus on student achievement and performance results with a disciplined process. District leaders should own the responsibility and be held accountable for results. One day, I'm going to write a book called *No One Ever Washes a Rented Car*. If you own it, you take care of it. In Aurora, we fostered a culture change that now has teachers owning their own data and growing it. Our staff understands the data like a pilot understands his navigational system. Transformation requires revamping the concept of instruction to ensure a system of expertise and effectiveness, confronting the need for changes in the organizational structure, and adding effective technological supports.

“District leaders should own the responsibility and be held accountable for results. One day, I'm going to write a book called *No One Ever Washes a Rented Car*. If you own it, you take care of it.”

Failure is not an option and hope is not a strategy. We must demand excellence from ourselves and inspire excellence in our students. We must meet parents' expectations by providing learning environments where students succeed regardless of economic class or skin color. Any student who does not graduate may be denied the opportunity to fully realize his or her potential and life dreams. In APS, we leveraged the data to alter the culture and realize our goals. It is our moral and professional obligation as educators and community members to ensure that every student is successful. Our students deserve better, and our country's future demands that we do better. □



JOHN BARRY: PRIOR TO BECOMING SUPERINTENDENT OF AURORA PUBLIC SCHOOLS, JOHN BARRY SERVED FOR MORE THAN 30 YEARS AS AN OFFICER IN THE U.S. AIR FORCE, RETIRING AS A “TWO-STAR” MAJOR GENERAL. AMONG OTHER

ACCOMPLISHMENTS, BARRY LED STRATEGIC PLANNING FOR THE U.S. AIR FORCE AND SERVED AS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR AND BOARD MEMBER OF THE 2003 SPACE SHUTTLE COLUMBIA ACCIDENT INVESTIGATION TEAM. AFTER RETIRING FROM THE MILITARY, BARRY WORKED AS VICE PRESIDENT FOR DEFENSE AND SECURITY FOR SAP IN WASHINGTON, D.C. HE THEN SERVED AS A FELLOW AT THE BROAD ACADEMY FOR SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS WHERE HE STUDIED THE STATE OF URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICTS. BARRY ATTENDED HARVARD UNIVERSITY'S KENNEDY SCHOOL OF GOVERNMENT AS A NATIONAL SECURITY FELLOW AND WAS ALSO A WHITE HOUSE FELLOW. HE EARNED HIS MASTER'S IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION FROM OKLAHOMA UNIVERSITY AND HIS BACHELOR'S DEGREE IN POLITICAL SCIENCE AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS FROM THE UNITED STATES AIR FORCE ACADEMY.