ROCKY MOUNTAIN SCHOOL OF EXPEDITIONARY LEARNING  
MINUTES OF BOCES MEETING  
October 17, 2007  
5:30 p.m.  

In Attendance: Sue Chandler, John Dunn, Mario Giardiello, Emily Hansen and Susan Tabacheck  
Staff: Leann Asgari, Meg Blair, Jim McDermott, Keri Melmed and Julie Stelzer  
Guests: Michael Aitken, Community Council Chair  

Emily Hansen called the meeting to order at 5:45 p.m.  

Open Forum  
Susan Tabacheck thanked the members for the time she was allowed to serve on the RMSEL board. Mike Aitken reported on the Community Council, which met on Tuesday, October 9th, and reviewed the School Improvement Plan, which the council unanimously approved. Jim McDermott will present the plan during his report tonight.  

Approval of Minutes  
Minutes from the September 19, 2007 board meeting were unanimously approved.  

Executive Director Report  
Jim reported that our part-time Spanish teacher resigned. Students had only one day without a teacher. Keri Melmed and Jim held Spanish classes that particular day and discussed how to welcome a new Spanish teacher. The students responded positively. Daniel Stone comes to us with a bilingual background and great teaching experience.  

Our new modular unit has arrived. Leann Asgari deserves credit for all the hard work she has done in getting it placed where we wanted, working closely with our neighbors, the city and DPS. We had great support from the DPS building department and their legal office. A member of the zoning board made a presentation at RMSEL at one time. Another member previously worked with Outward Bound. However, neither member knew about the modular classroom or the requested variance. The board unanimously approved the modular. We have a personal variance meaning that if we were to leave this site and the new occupants wanted to keep the modular, they would have to request a new variance. We hope to move furniture in this weekend, complete the electrical work during fall break, have a certificate of occupancy granted and move in November 5, 2007. John Dunn asked to be refreshed on the use of the modular. Jim explained that our high school humanities classes will be held there.  

The air conditioning units have arrived, now that the weather is changing. They are being installed and will be ready this spring.  

Jim provided the board members with copies of disaggregated CSAP data. Figures are broken out by ethnicity and special education. As the school’s overall numbers are small, and the number of students of color is smaller, it is not possible to break down each ethnic group by grade level without identifying individual students. Therefore, Jim collapsed the information into categories of white and non-white. The Leadership Team was given the data; then it was provided to the Community Council. The staff has not been given this information. However, it was recommended by one of the accountability representatives that during a staff meeting the staff be asked to predict what the data will look like, and then give them the actual data. Jim noted that the second goal in the School Improvement Plan (SIP) is not as specific as would normally be expected. Staff will be asked for input on this goal and then have a specific plan completed by the first of the year. The data raises concerns about the performance of our students of color, as compared with our Anglo population.
Susan asked Jim to review the numbers at the top of the form. He addressed the 3rd grade data as an example. Susan asked if any of the students have bonding issues with other students. Jim stated that teachers will look at each one of those students in detail. However, a cursory view of students socially and culturally would seem to indicate that they are very much a part of the school and appear to be doing well playing and working with other students. However, Jim would want to talk to the crew leaders about that, as they know each of their students well. Jim noted that what’s at work here is the testing and refinement of Expeditionary Learning’s third Core Practice Benchmark, ‘culture and character.’ Jim’s sense is that the students are a good fit and feel they are part of the RMSEL community. Susan related an incident that occurred while she was with some Anglo students (not RMSEL students) on a city bus, and the students reacted to people of color and different income levels. Jim asked Mike Aitken to respond to this concern as he has had the opportunity to travel many times with the students as a chaperone. Mike explained that he traveled to Memphis last year with our middle school students and had the opportunity to visit a school that was 100% African American. The RMSEL students shadowed the students going to each of their classes. The Memphis newspaper wrote an article about the RMSEL students because of their positive attitudes. Students learned that they shared a number of interests with the Memphis students. Mike also noted that if new students come to RMSEL and act inappropriately, their peers will let them know how to treat people. The crew will not allow disrespect of anyone. Emily stated that she believes this has to do with the Core Practice Benchmarks of RMSEL and Expeditionary Learning. Character values and the Design Principles are not separate parts of their education; they are woven in all aspects of student life at RMSEL. In September, the school learned that a former student died in a bicycle accident. The whole school, regardless of grade or time at RMSEL, supported the family at the time and continues to do so.

Emily stated that the 9th and 10th grade reading scores are very impressive regardless of ethnicity. Jim noted that part of that data analysis is tracking students over time to see if we are closing any gaps in achievement by ethnicity. Emily asked if we were familiar with a program called CSNAP. Jim will check with our Douglas County liaison for more information. This is a program that actually compiles this data. One of the purposes of this program is to track each student’s progress.

Keri noted that though the reading results are positive, the math scores are not. Emily agreed, but noted that 9th and 10th grade math throughout the state is a problem. Jim added that one of our goals is improvement in math.

Jim also presented the ethnic achievement data collapsed across all grades. For example, in reading, 87% of Anglo students in grades 3rd through 10th performed at the proficient or advanced levels while 72% of our non-Anglo students were at these levels. The gap is still present but smaller. However, Jim cautioned against over-interpreting the data, as there is a huge difference between 2nd and 10th grade reading and math. Emily asked if in the past reading or writing had been a focus. Jim noted that usually there has been a goal for each of those areas based on feedback from the school improvement committee. The plan this year focuses on one area. There is always an overall goal to make progress in all subject areas. Historically, reading has always been a strong area at RMSEL. A good deal of this success is due to instruction; however, part of it is due to the fact that students often come to us (regardless of ethnicity) with strong reading and literacy background.

Jim noted that there was a request from Community Council to disaggregate the data by students with IEPs. We have 40 students with IEPs, which is about 11.7% of our population. The breakdown is 13 students or 9% in the lower school; 10 students or 10% in the middle school; and 17 students or about 17% in the high school. The most common primary handicapping condition is perceptual communicative disorders (PCD), otherwise known as specific learning disability. There are 3 students at the high school level that have significant identifiable emotional disabilities (SIED). Generally, these students are doing well, though we have questioned whether we are always able to meet their needs. Susan stated that she knows this puts a “little” extra time on the teachers to help these students, but it is very important. Jim answered that the teachers already put in extra time, and that the concern is whether they have the expertise to address these student’s needs. A couple of these students need serious mental health support. Susan asked if we provide that support. Jim explained that we do not have the mental health support that is needed to address the needs of students with
severe emotional needs. The other CSAP data that will be provided next month will address longevity and mobility.

Jim distributed the School Improvement Plan. The first achievement goal focused on math. The math CSAP targets are presented in color to help track the same students over time. A number of efforts are already underway to impact math achievement. This year, math is being taught in straight grade levels, instead of multi-grade levels in a class, which did not serve our students well. Last year, the middle school teachers were teaching math to a class composed of 6th, 7th, and 8th grade students, which was not sustainable. The two high school math teachers each have a section of 8th graders. We are using the 9th grade Interactive Mathematics Program (IMP) with our 8th graders. With these changes, math class size at the middle school level is about 15-16 students. We are already talking about what we should do with incoming 9th graders that did not have the same math instruction, whether it is an elective or a summer math workshop for new incoming 9th graders. We would figure out a way to fund these programs without charge to the students.

One of the issues that emerged since we have begun to teach math in straight grade levels relates to the Core Practice Benchmarks to know students deeply. At both middle and lower school levels, teachers now have some students for only one class, math. In the past in the middle school, the teacher would also have had the student for science. In the lower school, the teacher would have taught all subjects to their students. We will consider whether teachers should loop to the next grade level with their math students for next year. This would cause them to have to learn a new curriculum, but they would know their students better. Emily asked if there is some type of an extensive fieldwork that the math teachers could do with these students. Jim explained that is a possibility, but the issue with that is the problem of time.

We are doing significant staff development in math. At the lower school level, we are working cooperatively with Odyssey, the EL school in Stapleton. The lower school also has purchased the revised edition of the math curriculum they use, Investigations in Data, Numbers and Space.

The second goal in the school improvement plan is to close the achievement gap in math that appears to exist between our students of color and our Anglo students. Susan asked how this was to be accomplished. Jim stated we will look at the data and look at the individual students. Then we will develop a plan to impact the achievement of all students who are not proficient in math. The staff will have significant input because they know the students best. We are going to have that plan by the first of the year. This will be for both non-Anglo and Anglo students. John asked about our English language learners. Jim replied that we do not have a lot of English language learners, because we are not able to provide resources to support them. We are doing a wellness check on a student that we did accept.

Sue Chandler asked how RMSEL’s staff development looks and if the school has the capability for training. Jim responded that this is one area where we have invested a lot for a school our size. We have two half-time instructional coaches, who do work with all our teachers. For a school this size, this is a tremendous investment. We also have our Expeditionary Learning MOU, which provides various approaches for staff development. We integrate staff development with a teacher observing another’s classroom instruction. Every Tuesday, we have a combination staff development and staff meeting for 90 minutes. For the next four weeks, study groups will focus on the specific aspects of what we call assessment for learning. For example, we took student work from high school science and looked at what we can tell about how teachers are assessing student work and giving them feedback to improve that work. Leann also stated that we have 12 professional development days on our school calendar. Jim explained that teachers have a 190 day school year with a heavy load. Basically, they are writing their own curriculum. We are trying to have the learning expeditions cycled every two or three years. For example, the middle school civil rights expedition is every three years, so every middle school student experiences this expedition. Emily asked if the curriculum is in a database, and Jim responded that it was. Our teachers use an EL planning template called LEO. We are able to store and retrieve expeditions from that database.

John stated that even though there are only two goals, they are large and will take a lot of effort. Jim agreed and noted that we are going to benchmark progress along the way. John asked how the staff feels about the
role of CSAPs in the SIP. Jim explained that the Leadership Team reviewed the plan. Members concluded that since CSAPs are required, the improvement goal should be added to the SIP. Furthermore, the improvement goal related to CSAPs only confirmed the teachers’ concerns with math. Emily stated that even if the SIP document is state-mandated and specific to CSAP, there is nothing that states that other tools cannot be used to measure goals. Jim explained that we will be using the MAPS testing, teacher assessments and benchmarks.

At the September meeting, Susan asked us to highlight something that was happening in classrooms. Leann presented each BOCES member with a copy of That Workshop Book, written by one of our instructional coaches, Samantha Bennett, and illustrated by our art teacher, Anna Loring. The book focuses on the workshop model as a teaching strategy. All of the classrooms that are described in the book are RMSEL classrooms. All of the student work that is presented is the product of RMSEL students. The book has received some excellent reviews.

Enrollment
Leann noted that this summer, many families moved among our districts. The enrollment summary by district is as follows:

- Douglas County - 46
- DPS - 173
- Aurora - 26
- Littleton - 23
- Cherry Creek - 75

Budget Report
Julie Stelzer noted that the fieldwork portion of the audit began this week and will probably be completed next week. The auditors will then take this information to complete their report. She does not anticipate any problems. Next meeting, the members may notice that money that was raised in the Capital Campaign for the air conditioning will have been transferred to offset charges in the construction account. Emily asked if the HVAC account will change. Julie explained that the HVAC account will not change, because the construction, modular, air conditioning and surveillance are all in the general construction account. Susan asked if the Community Council reviewed the budget, and Mike stated that they had reviewed it.

Jim presented John Dunn and Susan Tabacheck with a RMSEL vest and water bottles, thanking them for the time they gave to RMSEL. Emily expressed her thanks to John and Susan for their years of service to RMSEL.

Emily also announced that her husband will be deployed to Iraq in January.

The meeting was adjourned at 6:45 p.m.

Emily Hansen, President

John Dunn, Vice President