ROCKY MOUNTAIN SCHOOL OF EXPEDITIONARY LEARNING
MINUTES OF BOCES MEETING

September 19, 2007
5:30 p.m.

In Attendance:  Jennifer Churchfield, Jill Conrad, John Dunn, Mario Giardiello and Susan Tabacheck

Staff:  Leann Asgari, Meg Blair, Jim McDermott, Keri Melmed and Julie Stelzer

Guests:  Scott Siegfried, Cherry Creek Student Services, and Michael Aitken, Community Council Chair

John Dunn called the meeting to order at 5:40 p.m.

Open Forum

Mike Aitken provided an update on Community Council. The Community Council now has the full executive committee, including a parent as the secretary. The Community Council reviewed CSAP and MAP scores and finalized the agenda. The air conditioning has been installed; however, the permanent units are not completely installed, but this should be completed in a couple of weeks. Jim McDermott thanked Mike for his company’s engineering services which were donated. Mike also helped supervise the air conditioning installation to ensure that it was done professionally.

Jim explained that the Community Council serves many functions, one of which is to act as our accountability committee. They established a sub-committee which will review and finalize the school improvement plan and serve as a major advisory role for RMSEL. We have representatives from our lower, middle and high school staff and parents along with community representatives. We have 21 members at this time including one who is a high school student. Susan Tabacheck asked if the Community Council reviewed the revised budget. Jim stated that the entire committee should be reviewing it and believes it should be the whole Community Council. Jim stated that last year RMSEL had one teacher each in humanities, math, science, art/humanities and Spanish/humanities who worked with 96 students. This is still small by most standards, but it is difficult to know students as deeply as we would like. The teachers were also planning and implementing two or three expeditions at the same time. It takes a lot of time to plan and implement each one, and there was a concern about how sustainable this was. As part of the restructure, the RMSEL high school now has one teacher each in math, humanities, science for 9th and 10th grades and one each in math, humanities, and science for 11th and 12th grades. We also have a part-time (.60

Approval of Minutes

Minutes from the June 13, 2007 board meeting were unanimously approved.

Executive Director Report

Jim reported that the school year is off to a positive start. There were few bumps with the new high school schedule and some concerns from the students which are being addressed. We have two itinerant teachers due to the lack of classroom space. We have ordered a modular unit which we hope will be in place soon. Jill Conrad asked for a summary of the high school restructure. Jim reported that last year RMSEL had one teacher each in humanities, math, science, art/humanities and Spanish/humanities who worked with 96 students. This is still small by most standards, but it is difficult to know students as deeply as we would like. The teachers were also planning and implementing two or three expeditions at the same time. It takes a lot of time to plan and implement each one, and there was a concern about how sustainable this was. As part of the restructure, the RMSEL high school now has one teacher each in math, humanities, science for 9th and 10th grades and one each in math, humanities, and science for 11th and 12th grades. We also have a part-time (.60
FTE) staff member who teaches one section of Spanish to the 9th, 10th and 11th grades. Art is addressed as an elective.

Also, between the first and second trimester, there will be a one week program referred to as “Intensive Week.” Students will be able to take one or two courses which will operate for the week. We hope to have at least one art intensive. With the restructure, teachers are now working with 48 to 56 students under one learning expedition. They can work closely in content areas for each class. RMSEL also restructured the senior expedition. The fieldwork has been shortened to four weeks which runs up to our two-week spring break. Students can use this time to extend their fieldwork to six weeks. If students approach the staff and ask for additional time, we will consider their request. We have also added a 10th grade passage process. We felt that four years was too long between passage experiences. In order to accommodate this, we have scheduled senior passages earlier and separately from the 3rd, 5th, 8th and 10th grade passages. Keri Melmed added that because this year is the first time we have two teachers in the same content area at the high school level, they now have opportunities for collaboration. Jim noted that RMSEL is one of the original expeditionary learning schools, and some of our restructuring is in part to align RMSEL with other expeditionary learning schools nationally.

Both of the high school humanities and math teachers and Jim spent a week in Oakland, CA, at an Expeditionary Learning Schools high school institute. The group was pleased to see that the roots of Expeditionary Learning (EL) have not changed. As the EL organization has grown, some strategies and delivery systems have changed. We are trying to work with those delivery systems and strategies that make sense for us, given that we are smaller than most EL high schools.

We had another kick-off barbecue this year. Our Parent Action Crew (PAC) did an outstanding job organizing the event. We believe that there was a better turn-out than last year, and a great way to begin the year.

RMSEL has hired four new high school teachers this year. Due to a late resignation, we also hired a new special education coordinator. Our former special education coordinator was able to pursue his professional goal to become an administrator, being hired as an assistant principal at Adams City High School. We were fortunate to hire Kathryn Blankenberg, our new special education coordinator who comes from Sinclair Middle School in the Englewood School District. Because our special education caseload warranted additional support, we hired another part-time staff member, Catherine Kiewel, who is recently retired from special education work in various public school districts.

This year, we will be taking a look at our special education delivery model. We want to ensure that we are meeting the needs of our students. About 12% of our population has an individualized education plan (IEP). As we have added students, we want to make sure our delivery model is appropriate. Susan inquired about whether the school will expand the delivery model to meet these needs. Jim stated that we need to set clear enrollment limitations, in order make sure that when we accept students, we can meet their needs. And then, if the staffing in the delivery model needs to be expanded to meet those needs, we should do that. Jim noted that we are not required by law to accept students with severe needs, because we cannot meet those student's needs given our resources. Susan expressed a concern that there might be a push to eliminate students with severe needs, and this is a public school. Jim responded that we would only turn a student away if we cannot meet the needs stated in the IEP. Susan stated this could make the school become selective. Jill stated that even member districts distribute the students to different locations according the school that can meet the particular student's needs. Susan inquired about who makes decisions concerning IEP needs. Jim responded that the process is outlined in the intergovernmental agreement. RMSEL reviews the IEP. If we have a concern about meeting the student's needs, the RMSEL executive director and the special education coordinator would meet with the student's home school special education team and the parents. The team would discuss RMSEL’s program, the student’s needs that are described in the IEP and the services that the student currently receives. Based on these discussions, staff members would determine whether or not RMSEL was an appropriate placement. Susan asked about the types of special education needs that exist at RMSEL now. Jim replied that most of our students have mild to moderate needs mainly with learning disabilities, speech/language issues and/or emotional needs (SIED-Significant Identifiable Emotional
Disability). If a student has severe SIED issues, we do not have the services to meet those needs. Jill asked if the school had a sense for the demand of such students to attempt to choose this school. Jim responded that at the elementary level, there would be more children who would fall in the severe autism spectrum. Sometimes, we have given it a try and it has worked and sometimes it has not. At the high school level, RMSEL sees mostly SIED needs. We are working right now with some students who are on the borderline and whether or not we can meet those needs.

Keri noted that if a special education student needs three hours of service from a school psychologist or social worker, we do not have those resources. Jill asked if RMSEL ever contracts with the home district to fulfill the needs. Jim responded that right now, we hire our own special education teachers from our budget. We use the DPS IEP. From DPS, the services we receive are those of school psychologist, social worker, OT, speech/language and nursing services. DPS is involved in the process or the home district is involved when a student comes up whose needs may not be met. Last year, one of our students returned to Cherry Creek whose needs were not being met at RMSEL. Jill pointed out that the board should know if there is an issue of not being able to serve a student’s needs. Jim noted that usually the home district is involved in decisions about meeting a student’s needs. Jill also mentioned that another issue that should be addressed is whether we are exposing the school and BOCES to legal actions. Jim assured the board that the language in the inter-governmental agreement addresses these issues. Leann Asgari noted that in the past three years, there has been only one student whose needs we could not meet. Jim pointed out that we pay $404 for each student for overall enrollment, but we do not get state or federal special education dollars and we hire our own special education teachers and assistants. Susan asked if a student may apply for the lottery. Leann answered yes. On the application, we ask students to include their IEP. However, that is not a factor in whether their lottery number is picked. If their number is picked for the lottery, Leann reviews the IEP with the special education coordinator to determine if we can meet the student’s needs. Mario Giardiello asked about what percentage of the students in high school have an IEP. Jim said he would check, but believes it is higher than the rest of the school.

Regarding the modular unit, Jim stated that we have to ask for a zoning variance to place our modular unit where we want it. We have support from DPS for this variance. Leann walked door to door to get support from the neighbors surrounding the school. Only one neighbor has not responded. Our zoning meeting is September 25, 2007 for final approval.

Jim remarked that we started our year on a sad note. A former RMSEL student was killed in a bicycling accident in Seattle, WA. His brother graduated from our high school in June 2007, and his sister continues in our high school. The community responded by providing the food for a reception at RMSEL after the memorial service last Friday.

Jim distributed CSAP results to board members. He advised that although we are not a CSAP driven school, we pay attention to the results. A review of the analysis shows that we are doing well in reading and vocabulary. If we had a concern, it would be that we do not have as many ‘advanced’ reading scores as we would like. However, our percentages for students who are ‘proficient’ and ‘above proficient’ exceed the state averages. Math scores cause us the most concern. While 3rd grade math results were well above the state average, the percentage of students who are at or above proficient start to decline at 4th grade and continue down until 8th grade, where there was an upswing. Scores in 5th, 6th, & 7th grade were below state averages. We have employed a new math program, and now teach math by straight grade levels K-12. In science, 71% of 8th graders are ‘proficient’, and in high school, 63% are ‘proficient’ which is well above the state average. Jill asked Jim when he anticipates the disaggregated results. Jim responded that he would have them next month. She asked if RMSEL has the ability to study the growth. Jim explained that we analyze the data manually. Teachers will be able to see three to four years’ of data for each student. Each teacher will have that information and will get a sense of where in the ‘proficient’ range the student falls. Jill asked if the school would be interested in exploring having one of the districts compile the growth. Jim expressed that he would be willing to look into it as long as it is not expensive and he is able to get the information we need. Additionally, he met with interested parents to discuss the assessment results and growth. Susan noted that Aurora has had two superintendents. One monitored growth on CSAP. The new superintendent has a
different viewpoint and monitors the scores and where they are. Aurora went from one side of the spectrum where they thought they were doing great to the other side where there were concerns. Her concern is that this could happen to RMSEL. She asked if Jim was stating that the school could never be put on academic watch. Jim noted that the school has to meet AYP (Annual Yearly Progress) and has always done so. There are probably two reasons. First, the school does a pretty good job. Second, the small student population has fewer targets than other schools. Susan believes that one of the districts should disaggregate the data to maintain credibility because people can make data look anyway they want it to, and she thinks it should be transparent. Jim responded that he is willing to look into it, but will work with the state department on our accreditation plan.

Jill mentioned that she would be interested to see how mobility impacts the growth plan. Jim would get that information to her but in general, we do not have a huge mobility.

Keri reported that the juniors took the ACT last year. Five of those students were special education students. Unfortunately, our special education coordinator gave those five students the wrong test. So, when one looks at the scores, they are much worse than reality. Jim added that RMSEL will re-administer the ACT to the five students with accommodations at RMSEL’s expense. The state will only count the 13 scores of the students who did not have accommodations. The other five scores will be averaged in with these as zeros. Mario asked if this will impact students’ chances of applying to college. Keri replied that this will not be the case. They will take the ACT test again and will receive them in time for applications to college. Jim asked if this can be corrected. Jim stated that we are checking into that with CDE. Our experience with CDE has been one of cooperation.

Jim reported that he is working with Community Council to draft the School Improvement Plan (SIP) and will have it for board review next month.

Budget Adoption
Julie asked if there were any questions about the revised budget. Jill commented that it appeared to be very thorough. Julie reported that there was a minor accident that involved damage to one of our mini-buses at a gas station. The damaged mini-bus will be repaired during fall reflection. John asked how Julie would categorize the budget at this point. Julie reported that we are in good shape. In the original budget that BOCES approved last June, financial aid was taken from two places, the general fund and from crew fieldwork budgets. Financial aid should be deducted from the general fund only. The correction to the budget changes the board resolution approved last year to take up to $50,000 out of reserve account for the modular units. In reality, this will be closer to $74,000. John asked if this was the only change to the budget. Julie reported that this was the major change. Since she had to revise the budget, there were some minor changes made as well. However, these changes did not result in a change to the bottom line.

John asked if Julie was looking for approval on the revised budget and also a motion to take out $74,000 from the reserve to cover costs of the modular unit. Jill made a motion to approve the revised budget. The motion was seconded and unanimously approved. Jill made a motion to approve the amount to take from the reserve account to $74,000 from $50,000 for purchase of the modular unit, if required. The motion was seconded and unanimously approved.

Susan requested that we have a teacher highlight some work or an expedition from a classroom, and Jim responded that we would love to do that.

Leann announced that RMSEL will host a reunion for our graduates this year to celebrate the school’s fifteenth year. Board members will be invited.

Enrollment
Leann reported that we are one over in the lower school. One of our new teachers has a son in first grade and an adopted son in kindergarten. We wanted to accommodate her. We are also one over in high school. Again, one of our new teachers has a daughter in high school, and we wanted to accommodate her.
Furthermore, one of our previous high school students wanted to return to RMSEL. We are one under in middle school because we had a student that withdrew at the last minute. Susan wanted to know how many students are enrolled per district. Leann stated that there are 80 from Cherry Creek, 27 from Aurora, 159 from Denver, 17 from Douglas County and 28 from Littleton. These are estimates, and she will have exact numbers at the next meeting.

The meeting adjourned at 7:00 p.m.

Emily Hansen, President

John Dunn, Vice President