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Homer Flex

The Flex program and its delivery of content has developed and changed over the years. For some time now, Flex has used a performance-based proficiency model where student voice has been a primary driver of that student's educational experience. This individual ownership has been an integral aspect of a successful school experience, and must remain a core component of our program. A key piece of this model has been the learning management system. Early on, Flex opted to use Educate, which later morphed into Empower. This system, while problematic, has allowed our motivated and goal-driven students to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding and move quickly through content.

But as this learning management system changed, and as students have come and gone from the Flex program, it has become apparent that the Flex program has not been effective for our entire population. Students, parents, and staff have been faced with a steep learning curve in this system. Most of us are familiar with Carnegie Units, so basing a student's progress and movement through grade levels on their proficient completion of standards, and the learning management system's tracking of this progress, has been a point of confusion. At the same time, transferring in and out of Flex mid-quarter has been problematic, as students have been faced with losing credit for unfinished courses. And while motivated students have been able to move through their classes quickly, the pacing of unmotivated students has been a real challenge.

Overall, the performance-based delivery system works for our motivated students, but as an "alternative" school serving "at-risk" students, that leaves a number of students vulnerable to falling behind and/or dropping out. This is unacceptable, and has motivated me to research and explore other alternative models, both inside and outside of our district.

I began by looking at Kenai Alt and SALT (Soldotna Alternative). Both programs use rotations to offer students more opportunity to earn credits throughout the school year (Kenai Alt does five seven-week rotations a year while SALT offers six six-week rotations). Kenai Alt delivers these courses in a traditional classroom setting, with ELA, math, social studies, and science courses driving the schedule. That being said, credit recovery courses through Grad Point are used for various situations. In contrast, SALT engages students through the use of technology. Students work independently to complete courses through the use of Grad Point as well as other digital delivery methods. Students are divided into two separate classrooms, seated at a computer, and work with a coordinating teacher to progress through their course work.

Bruchell School in Wasilla offered an interesting combination of these two models. Bruchell is seen by many as an effective and successful alternative school model, and while I came away with many ideas, it is worth noting that their administration is beginning to question their CORE pathway and entertaining the idea of moving toward a proficiency-based model.

Anyway, Bruchell offers students two distinct and separate pathways: CORE and Advanced. Students must decide to enroll in one or the other. Advanced Pathway is a computer-based program delivered through the APEX learning management system. With the help of a

teacher/advisor, students are placed in one of three levels, set specific academic goals, and track their progress toward graduation. The level in which a student is placed (Literacy Advantage, Prescriptive, or CORE) is dictated by their academic ability and credit situation. Literacy Advantage allows students to test out of whole courses while the Prescriptive level allows students to test out of sections of courses. The CORE level in APEX (not to be confused with the CORE pathway – see below) is for students who are on track academically but who want to move through their coursework faster. Overall, Advanced Path is focused on graduation, provides students with modified scheduling, and does not track seat time. Rather, students drive their education and must meet regularly to set goals. Those who cannot meet those goals are moved to the CORE path.

CORE path offers Burchell students a way to recover credits in a traditional classroom environment. Students are enrolled in four core classes per quarter. Each class meets for 75 minutes a day, from 8 AM to 2 PM (with a half hour lunch in the middle). In this way, students can complete a half credit in each core class every quarter. Enrolled in four courses, this means they can earn two total credits per quarter. Students can also attend elective courses offered in two one-hour afternoon sessions. These sessions are funded by a 21st Century grant. Overall, CORE path provides students with a supportive, teacher-paced environment that some students need to succeed academically. Those that demonstrate a need for independence and the ability to handle more responsibility can move to Advanced Path.

In the end, the visit to Burchell, as well as to Kenai Alt and SALT, helped to clarify a vision for Flex's future. Given the present budget situation as well as initiatives set forth by the school district, we will be taking our time in deciding the direction in which Flex will head. At this point, offering an independent, digitally-delivered pathway where students work in conjunction with staff to monitor and adjust their education seems imperative. We have also come to the understanding that some students need a second option that provides a more supportive environment with teacher-paced content. It is this differentiated approach that we need to clarify and focus in the coming months.

As an afterthought, I am excited about our district's partnership with "Education Elements." It seems that they will be able to offer valuable insight and resources in our quest to personalize the Flex learning experience. Hopefully they will be available soon to assist us in the important decisions and planning stages ahead.