



City of Gustavus

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October 20, 2022

Mr. Ralph Watkins
Superintendent
Chatham School District
Angoon, Alaska
Via email: rwatkins@chatham.sd.ak.us

Dear Superintendent Watkins:

Subject: School District Planning—Gustavus School

It was a great pleasure to join you for the Chatham School District Strategic Planning meetings October 5-6 in Juneau. I participated as Mayor, interested in how the Gustavus School performs in our community. I do not have children in the school, so my perspective is less immediate than that of school staff or parents of students. At our meetings, I was impressed with the energy and enthusiasm for strengthening the District schools. I returned home with new hope that our school in Gustavus will benefit from new direction if the District actively applies the strategic plan and drives improvements down to every classroom. As the school improves, our entire community will benefit.

The vision and mission statements we developed should inform a narrative about what the District stands for and where it is headed. I hope you will continue to promote that narrative with the school board, advisory boards, principals, teachers, and staff in all your communications as a means of driving continuous improvement and achieving the plan's goals. I have worked in enough organizations over the years to appreciate that strong leaders capture and hold the focus of the people they lead by keeping such narratives in the forefront.

Upon completion of the strategic plan, the *District will have planned its work*. But for that great effort to pay off, *the District must then work its plan*. Chatham School District managers and staff down to the classroom level should be able to place their activities, planning, and projects in the context of the strategic plan. Goals and objectives must be agreed and then actively worked. Where possible, objectives should be measurable or at least have a means of determining whether and when they have been achieved. Evaluations of staff should reflect their performance and achievement of the established goals and objectives.

It was clear from the survey comments that many Gustavus School stakeholders care deeply about the school and its vital role in preparing students for life both locally and globally in the 21st century. Many parents, current and former staff members, and public commentators have expressed disappointment with school leadership, academic opportunities, quality, and deteriorated connections to the broader Gustavus community. To be sure, not all families are dissatisfied with the school and instead feel their expectations *are* being met. My impression is that parents may be divided into two groups. One with limited academic expectations is happy with things as they are—a small, comfortable, and safe small-town school with an active sports program. The other, intending that their students will go beyond secondary education and excel in college, is largely dissatisfied. The failure of the Gustavus school to meet those higher academic expectations is measured by the high withdrawal rate (roughly 25%) as parents move their children out of Gustavus to attend schools in outside communities that exhibit higher academic standards, or choose home schooling.

Dissatisfied families vote with their feet. Some votes are not evident as withdrawals—they are families who decide not to come to Gustavus in the first place because the school doesn't offer the educational opportunities and quality they demand for their children. (Both the National Park Service and the City of Gustavus have struggled to recruit young professional staff with families to Gustavus for this reason.) The loss to our community when these families leave or never arrive is substantial. Students remaining in the school lose the benefit of interacting with the students who left. We lose, or fail to gain, productive, educated people who would contribute to making Gustavus stronger culturally and economically. Those folks aren't available to work for our employers, staff our NGOs, volunteer in our community, purchase at our businesses, pay local taxes, serve on the City Council, or vote in our elections. Young families are the life and future of a community. The school is vital to their success here. We must build the opportunities and quality that attracts and holds those families in Gustavus.

The Gustavus School has also lost experienced and skilled teachers and paraprofessional staff in recent years. Some tell me that the employment atmosphere was not supportive of doing meaningful work. The school nevertheless does retain some good teachers, and I am not able personally to judge their work environment.

It would be helpful to evaluate the performance of the Gustavus School, and perhaps others in the District, partly by its success in the educational market. A school that builds its student body by retaining and attracting students is probably meeting its customers' expectations and doing the right things. A good school attracts people to a neighborhood or town. Its management and staff should be awarded accordingly. But a school that is losing students to schools in other communities and is declining in enrolment is probably not successfully educating students. Its customers are leaving. Its management and staff will need help and new direction to turn it around.

Sadly, the Gustavus School appears to be in the latter category. A first step would be to ask parents who have withdrawn students why they left the school. What was missing? What would it take to draw them back, or at least to keep others from moving away? A second step would be to interview staff who have left to determine

what caused their departure. How could the school better foster an environment that would make staff excited about what they can accomplish and enthusiastic about their work?

By drawing from the complaints and suggestions of those families and former staff-members the District could devise a turn-around plan for the school. I believe that plan would support realizing the Vision and Mission statements developed in Juneau.

Commenters to the survey and discussions at our meetings highlighted the importance of our District schools being integrated into their communities. Integrated schools draw resources from the community that complement what the school has to offer, thereby enriching student education and social development. At times in the past, the Gustavus School has been a wonderful center of community activity, hosting events that draw even those residents without students in the school. Our community is blessed with many well-educated and skilled individuals who in the past were frequent guest presenters in classrooms, taught short courses, or tutored students in skills from reading to math and science to wood working and engine repair. Many have lead students outdoors to learn in our superb natural environmental laboratory. Lately the school has faded as a center of community activity and learning. Community members with skills to teach and knowledge to share now rarely visit the classrooms. The school seems to have become a silo unto itself.

If the Gustavus School is to meet the Vision our District has set, it will need direction and resources to do so. Its progress must be measured. One measurable goal would be to reduce the percentage of potential Gustavus students who have chosen other schooling opportunities. Management must drive and encourage innovation and academic excellence. Drawing from the remarkable skills and knowledge present in our wider community will broaden educational opportunities for all students, whether college-bound or not. The City of Gustavus, stands ready to contribute to the school's success. It staffs, funds, and operates the next-door Gustavus Public Library, which serves as the School's library. Our two librarians happen both to be former teachers who enthusiastically offer innovative library services from early reading to STEM subjects that extend and complement school educational programs. As Mayor, I encourage developing new services and hope that expanded partnership with the School will lead to exciting new student-learning opportunities.

With you at the helm setting new standards, measuring progress, and building new cooperative relationships with the broader community and the City of Gustavus, the Gustavus School can once again demonstrate excellence and be a beacon in a successful and growing Gustavus. Please let me know how the City of Gustavus can help you achieve in Gustavus the vision you have set for excellence District-wide.

Sincerely,

Mike Taylor

Mike Taylor, MS
Mayor, City of Gustavus