Have You Ever Thought of Yourself as a Hero?

by Alan Fields, ACSA President and Principal, Kenai Central High School

According to Webster, a hero is an illustrious warrior; a man admired for his achievements and noble qualities; one who shows great courage; the central figure in an event, period, or movement; or an object of extreme admiration and devotion.

In my opinion and in the opinion of many students, staff, and parents, you are all heroes and leaders of heroes. As a school leader you are the warrior who fights daily for the success of your schools, staff, and ultimately each of the students you serve.

You are an integral part of a heroic profession and probably have not thought of yourself as a hero. The acts of heroism that you perform each and every day have become second nature to you. To you it is just what you do.

As a school leader you are a warrior fighting for Assessment for Learning, Bullying Prevention, Co-curricular Activities, Collaborative Leadership, College Access, Community Partnerships, Curriculum and Instruction, Data-Informed Decision Making, Diversity and Social Equity, Facilities, Federal Legislation, Finance/Funding, Instructional Technology, Literacy, Parent/Family Involvement, Personalizing the School Environment, Scheduling/Organizational Structures, School Climate/Safety, School Improvement, School Law, Special Education, Staff Development, Students at Risk, Teacher Evaluation, Team Building, and Transitions.

This school year will offer historical opportunities to shape education on a national, state, and local level. It is imperative that you be a hero who serves with passion and persistence.

Passion

Each day, reflect upon why you got into education. We wanted to make a positive impact on the lives of students. Each day is an opportunity to make a difference in the life of a young person. There are

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Communities Turn to Schools for Safety and Stability in Crises

by Mike Hanley, Alaska Commissioner of Education & Early Development

When disaster strikes a community, residents often turn to the schools as a bulwark. Schools may have to serve as emergency centers—housing and feeding residents, stockpiling materials, disseminating information, holding community meetings, and providing space for medical treatment. Schools are places of stability during a tumultuous event.

At the department and in the districts, we periodically need to remind ourselves of our responsibilities to prepare for and respond to emergencies. The response continues even after the physical damage is cleared away, such as counseling for children who are recovering from a traumatic event.

Fortunately, as educators we are already geared toward serving our communities. We do it every day. It is our mindset. Every day, the community entrusts its most precious resource to us. The tools that help us fulfill our daily responsibilities will serve us well in times of crisis.

We know how to organize people and materials, accommodate diverse needs in large populations, and deal with new challenges. We know how to communicate with children and adults when they are anxious or concerned. We regularly interact with other authorities such as the police or state agencies. We maintain a clean, safe and orderly environment—attributes that are of practical and emotional value during a crisis.

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The Past Informs the Future
by Tamara Nunley, Principal, Lake Hood Elementary, Anchorage

Just like our excited students with their new pencils and notebooks, principals anticipate all that we will accomplish this school year. The freshness of new beginnings is as crisp and invigorating as the chill in the air.

At this time of year many of us are writing school action plans, setting personal goals, helping teachers craft professional goals, and having conversations about school goals. It is inevitable that we find renewal in giving shape to new challenges because we are in the business of continuous improvement and lifelong learning. It is the job that we love to do and it brings meaning to our days.

When I look back to the previous year in order to set goals for the upcoming year, I can’t help but notice all that has been accomplished in my building, in my district and in our state. This fall I’ve been thinking of the changes I’ve seen in my school over the past three years. I see teachers regularly using data in their practice. Looking deeper into the data, I find trends that will help improve instruction for my school and the individual classes. We consciously integrate the arts and social and emotional learning within the school curriculum.

Throughout the state, districts are implementing Response to Instruction and finding creative ways to ensure that every child is receiving effective instruction. Nationally, the conversation about education is ongoing as we move closer to reauthorizing ESEA. We know that education is the key to freedom and prosperity, and we strive to ensure that all children have access to the opportunities provided by a free public education. It is noble and fulfilling work.

When we look to see what still needs to be done in our continual steps toward providing a better education for all children, let’s keep in mind all that we have accomplished. It is an amazing feat!

Celebrating Public Education
by Barbara Nagengast, Principal, Homestead Elementary, Anchorage

When I was asked to write a short article celebrating public education, I quickly said yes because it’s what I do every day. I am convinced that I have the best job in the world—I am an elementary school principal! I open sandwich wrappers and milk cartons for kindergartners, I tell knock-knock jokes with second graders, I play 4-square with third graders, I play a band instrument along with sixth graders, and I read books to kids of all ages. Most importantly, I work closely with the adults in my school and my district to lift children up academically, emotionally and socially until they are able to stand on their own as young citizens ready to take on the world.

If you Google “celebrating public education,” you’ll get over 17 million results. I don’t pretend to have looked at more than a handful of them, but those I viewed all celebrate specific events at specific schools. Celebrating what is right with our schools needs to be done on a day-to-day basis. It is incumbent on us as principals to garner support for public education by making sure that our own schools are the best that they can be, and by making sure that our parents and neighbors know just how lucky they are that their children attend their local public school. The more clearly we communicate all the good things that are happening at our schools, the more support we will find within our parent community. Well-written school newsletters and pictures and stories in the local news can get the word out, and never underestimate the value of the “good news” phone call home to parents and the positive effect that can have.

Some readers may recall that I authored a number of articles for ACSA’s Education Bulletin several years back. In an article about advocacy I quoted a theme used by Mary Johnstone, principal at Rabbit Creek Elementary in Anchorage: “The closer you get, the better we look.” It’s true! When parents know first-hand about the good things that are happening in our

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Celebrating Public Education

schools, they become our greatest champions. Public education needs those individual champions and each unique celebration of success.

But we can’t be all about talk and promoting a Pollyanna vision of the world. We need to listen, too! When a parent voices a legitimate concern, it’s an opportunity to evaluate past practice. In doing so, we demonstrate responsiveness, garner support, and further our opportunities to celebrate what is right about public education.

We come together in our public schools to educate a diverse American society and to ensure that an educated public protects and safeguards our American democracy. Along with setting high standards for academic achievement, we teach problem solving and peaceful conflict resolution—skills needed for success in life.

I am proud to be a principal, and every day I proudly celebrate public education and all that it encompasses!

Celebration of School Life

by Tim Doran, Principal, Denali Elementary, Fairbanks

What a great profession we have! I love this time of year as we get to celebrate who has come to our school. Each fall we take off on a journey of discovery as we listen to the stories of our students, hear their questions and answers, watch as they carry themselves in the hallway, and see how much they have grown and matured. It indeed represents a celebration of life—the life of a school.

There are times when we need to drill down to the AYP data and the results of the universal screenings, the probes, the progress monitoring and the curricular assessments. A wealth of information can be found in this data to guide instruction. However, at the same time, we need to focus on the whole child, to be mindful of what is going on and developing in the child’s own life. It is a time to be alert to their insights and to explore interests and broaden horizons through conversation both in and outside the classroom.

It is a pleasure to spend time in classrooms and see masters of learning at work as teachers build connections with their students. They are carrying out a curriculum, but more importantly, the teachers are building a world of competence, confidence, and caring within their kids. It is so neat to watch these relationships blossom, even within a few short weeks, knowing that this sets the stage for the learning and growth that will take place throughout the year.

We have opened a book and through each chapter we are captured by the nuances of each character—student, teacher, parent—as we get to know them and they us. We will grow thankful for the mutual interactions and contributions each brings to the table in our schools. We all become enriched, and that is truly something to celebrate.

Resources for Emergency Planning

- The Alaska Department of Education and Early Development provides a 60-slide PowerPoint presentation to introduce the topic. For guidance, we also link to the Kodiak Island Borough School District’s crisis and emergency procedures handbooks. See www.eed.state.ak.us/MandatedTraining/home.html.
- The federal website www.ready.gov includes a one-hour introductory webcast for parents and educators. Additionally, the website includes four one-hour training webcasts for school personnel. See www.connectlive.com/events/depteduphilly0207.
- A 132-page compilation of practical information on crisis planning can be found. See www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/emergencyplan/crisisplanning.pdf.
Listen To Your Students

by Adam Mokelke, AASSP President-elect and Principal, Burchell High School, Mat-Su

It is no secret that good principals are good listeners. We listen to our constituents daily, taking in feedback and suggestions, dealing with concerns and complaints, and processing input from a vast range of sources. We learn to be responsive but not reactive, to respect and validate all viewpoints. We hear daily from parents, community members, the business community, and our staff. We know good input and feedback, we are in constant communication, and a positive, proactive mindset makes us good leaders. When in our busy days do we make time to listen to our students?

Despite the many responsibilities and demands of the job, I have always chosen to do “lunch duty” or monitor the lunchroom. The reason is simple: it is one time and place where you are sure to connect with and hear from students. Students will give us some of the most blunt, honest and unfiltered feedback we will ever hear about our schools. If they trust us and get to know us, they will tell us the truth, tell us how they see things and let us know how they feel. If we listen, there are many important things the students will tell us.

Students will tell us about the real culture of our schools. If we have a bullying problem, we will surely hear about it, and I was pleased and surprised to hear from students at my new school that bullying is nearly nonexistent. As an alternative school, students explained to me, many kids come from places where they were bullied or where they dealt with cliques and other social problems. They choose an alternative school partly because they can fit in and be themselves, and they have developed a culture that doesn’t tolerate bullying. This is an amazing insight into our school that I got straight from students.

Students will tell us quite a bit about teachers. Of course, no principal would act on this information alone: we make observations, do walk-through visits, conduct surveys, assess data, get feedback from parents, and rely on a variety of other sources that help us to assess teacher effectiveness. However, students will give honest, unfiltered insights that can help us to identify effective teaching and provide support. They will tell us who the “good” teachers are, in their opinion, and this may be insightful. Just this week I heard “He explains math so that I get it,” and “She makes learning fun.” They may also share that they like a teacher for the wrong reasons. I also heard “We don’t have to do anything in that class!” and “She always lets us go early.”

Along the same lines, they will tell us about the job we are doing. One young man made my day after a conversation about changes at our school when he said, “But I think you are doing a great job.” We are all human, and it is good to hear positive affirmations of the hard work we do.

On the other hand, some of it is hard to hear. When I assigned another young lady in-school suspension for her tardies, she told me I was ruining her school. Although I can’t do it every time, in this instance I took the opportunity to sit and listen to her frustrations, then explain why it was so important to protect learning time and to minimize interruptions. Students have been honest, positive and negative, and all of their input is critical because they are the people we are really here to serve.

With all we do as principals, with the constant demands on our time, it is hard to find the time to listen to students. We can’t explain every decision we make or debate every school policy. Students can share formally with us through student government. However, I believe we can schedule time in our day that puts us in a place to listen to students. Our adult constituents are good at making themselves heard; students may not always know how to share their thoughts with us. Each chance we get can provide valuable insights and teachable moments. Each conversation is an opportunity to model positive, appropriate interactions. Each student interaction allows us to share our vision.

Students need to know their voices are heard and respected. When we hear student voices, we are reminded of why we do this work, and whom we serve. My message to you as we kick off a new year is to make time to listen to your students. You will be rewarded.
Sharing Successes Amid So Many Challenges

by André Layral, Executive Director, AASSP

As AASSP member principals and assistant principals, you are now well into another school year and have been working with staff to ensure success for this year’s students. I vividly remember how much I looked forward to the opportunity each year to create a culture where learning was our school’s central focus. Revisiting the school’s vision, assessing progress of new programs, reviewing assessment data, providing meaningful and targeted professional development for staff, and inviting family involvement were always part of my school start-up efforts.

This year I invite AASSP members to share with me the practical approaches your school is taking to raise student achievement and, if you have high school students, improve the graduation rate. Our governor and the legislature are concerned (and rightfully should be) about the graduation rate in Alaska. We will remind both, however, that principals have the same interests for improving schools as they do, and we’ll provide examples of how our schools are tackling this issue. Principals know what works and are meeting challenges every day, yet their important voice is often absent when important policy decisions are being made.

There is no shortage of successes to be shared with parents, school communities, school boards and our legislators. Recently Unalaska City Junior/Senior High School was named a 2011 National Blue Ribbon School, based on improvements in two areas: performance of their students on statewide assessments and the percentage of students from disadvantaged backgrounds who improved performance over time.

It is welcome news when a school receives the Blue Ribbon designation, yet there are many other Alaskan schools doing similarly outstanding things on behalf of students. For example, recent successes in the Yukon-Koyukuk School District have resulted in the district having the “intervention status” label removed. This is particularly noteworthy when one considers the lack of progress on ESEA re-authorization and that the fact that the percentage rise in annual measurable objectives is so dramatic that data is largely irrelevant.

This past week I asked several AASSP members about the challenges they face as principals while striving to ensure success for all students. I wasn’t surprised that many of the challenges identified are things over which schools have little control or are things that eat away the time needed for principals to be instructional leaders. School attendance, homelessness, student transiency, ensuring school safety, student discipline matters and staff turnover were just a few of the challenges cited by principals.

The negative image of public education portrayed in the media today appears to manifest itself in an increase of families that do not value education. When education is not valued in the home, there are often student discipline problems related to negative perceptions their parents harbor towards school personnel, policies and practices.

Educating children is a shared responsibility between families and community. When family and community support are absent, schools must often do “whatever it takes,” and sometimes that is not enough to guarantee success. Many principals believe that community leaders could talk more about the importance of supporting schools and the value of a good education. Schools cannot lead this conversation alone.

Communities Turn to Schools for Safety and Stability in Crises

Governor Parnell has proclaimed September to be Emergency Preparedness Month in Alaska. Planning for emergencies can be very complex because they range from human violence to earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, fires and pandemics.

Every school district already has its emergency plan, as required by Alaska Statute 14.33.100. But it is a good idea to periodically review the plan and your trainings with educators, local emergency responders, and parents.

The state and the federal government provide resources to help schools plan for emergencies. Together, we can be prepared to serve our communities in a time of crisis.
Embracing the K-12 Paradigm
by Denise Greene-Wilkinson, NASSP President-Elect and Principal, Polaris K-12, Anchorage

For the 2011-2012 school year, I have the privilege to serve not only as principal of Polaris K-12 School in Anchorage, but also as president-elect of the National Association of Secondary School Principals. Next year I will step full-time into the presidency of NASSP.

As a principal, like so many of you, I began this school year with students and teachers eager to be back in school and ready to embrace all we do in public education.

As president-elect of NASSP, I also started the school year standing at a podium with other Alaska educators and Alaska Senator Lisa Murkowski as she unveiled legislation to fight nationwide dropout rates. The bill Early Intervention for Graduation Success is designed to institute preventative measures that would identify the first signs of students sliding off-course as early as pre-school and on through high school.

"No child wakes up one day and decides to drop out of school," said Murkowski. "It starts as a bad day, turns into frustration over time and ends up as a trajectory in the wrong direction."

The bill is being called “an educational guardrail” to get at-risk kids on track early and keep them moving forward. If passed, the bill would direct competitive grants to states and school districts with the lowest graduation rates to fund effective, sustainable and coordinated school dropout prevention activities.

Whether the bill passes or not, it’s encouraging to see that our government leaders are recognizing that public education can’t be divided into separate little boxes. Everything we do from pre-school through graduation is intricately linked.

It’s heartening to know that our government leaders are willing to join us in celebrating the importance of public education.

Another important educational tool that I had the honor of contributing to is the new NASSP publication Breaking Ranks: The Comprehensive Framework for School Improvement for K-12 School Leaders.

Breaking Ranks builds upon the belief that regardless of grade level, all school leaders must address the three core areas of collaborative leadership; personalizing your school environment; and curriculum, instruction, and assessment in order to improve student performance.

Breaking Ranks is not a specific model that a school must follow, but rather a single framework for K-12 school improvement. Each school builds upon that framework to connect the many programs and strategies that schools have in place to create a whole school improvement plan.

Like Senator Murkowski’s bill, the Breaking Ranks program recognizes that student improvement will only be successful and lasting if it is continues through all grade levels. For each student to succeed there must be an ongoing and rigorous analysis not only of that student’s performance, but of the schools as well.

Have You Ever Thought of Yourself as a Hero?

no off days, no days where just getting by is enough. Just going through the motions is never enough in our profession. Every day counts, not just for one student but for all students.

This passion should be considered with regard to all decisions and requirements of your position. It is the reason you do what you do. It is the filter for the decisions you make. It is the reason you work long hours and spend restless nights thinking of solutions.

Persistence
Pursue your passion relentlessly. Continue to fight over and over for what is right in education and for what is needed for improvement.

Do not allow barriers and frustrations to discourage you or those you lead. Your passion must carry you through the continual quest for perfection.

There is a great deal that is right about public education. The heroes who do their work with passion and persistence are at the top of that list. Take time this year to recognize the heroes at your school or in your district, including yourself.

Thank you for the opportunity to serve as your president for the Alaska Council of School Administrators this past year.
American Education Week is scheduled for November 13-19 this year. I hope you are ready to celebrate with us. At a time when beating up on public schools appears to have become a national sport, there has never been a more important time to celebrate our successes.

With the announcement of NCLB AYP in Alaska schools nearly paralleling Secretary Duncan’s announcement of waivers (largely due to the unfairness of the testing our students experience annually), it is too ironic not to mention the success of all of our schools.

Today, students are expected to know more than ever before and at a younger age, yet the great majority of our teachers and students are succeeding in each of our schools. It should come as no surprise that public education has nearly eliminated illiteracy in our country.

Despite the media’s hype and willingness to jump at the chance to publish articles regarding schools in crisis, public education has shown significant success these past several years. Although NCLB has undermined the public’s confidence in America’s schools, how many other professions are held to the standard that public education has been held to? Do we dare demand that police officers eliminate 100% of all crime, or that doctors cure 100% of all patients? Of course not. The fact is, the United States leads the world in global competitiveness. In back-to-back years the United States has outperformed 131 ranked countries, as listed in the Annual Global Competitiveness Report, and consistently remains in the top five.

What is different, however, is the fact that our economy has fundamentally changed and our reality now requires that most families have two incomes to survive. Both parents are working and have less time at home.

At the same time, the percentage of children raised in single-parent homes continues to increase. Subsequently, family dynamics and economic barriers are far different today. The reality is that public schools are successfully educating our young people in spite of the changes.

It is evident that public schools in Alaska are not at the crisis level that the media professes, although there are targeted areas where improvement is needed. Many reforms are happening in public education to deal with these problematic areas.

Public education is the bedrock of American democracy. Believing in equality of opportunity is a fundamental value of American society, and it is public education that bolsters and secures this concept.

During the upcoming American Education Week, please make an extra effort to thank all those teachers and support staff who are committed and dedicated to our children. We need them to know that despite the political agendas working against them, they are appreciated for their hard work. Here’s the bottom line: we don’t have to wait for Superman; he/she is already here, waiting for our children each morning in our classrooms.
Learning on the Rise
by Bruce Johnson, Executive Director, ACSA/AASA

During the question and answer portion of a recent address to the Rotary Club in North Pole, Governor Parnell was asked about a potential increase in school funding in the form of a base student allocation (BSA). He responded by saying, “No tangible benefits were gleaned from that [Palin’s increase in BSA funding for three consecutive years].” “And,” he added, “we’re not happy with 64 percent of our kids entering ninth grade finishing twelfth grade.”

Yet at the September 2011 State Board of Education and Early Development meeting, the State’s Director of Assessment and Evaluation pointed out that Alaska’s public schools are achieving at higher levels as measured by the required standards-based assessment (SBA). This report outlined that in 2011 nearly 77% of Alaska’s students achieved proficiency or above in language arts, and nearly 70% in mathematics. This contrasts with 2003, when proficiency was at 73% in language arts and 66% in math. What is even more enlightening is that these increases occurred despite the required AYP proficiency targets (annual measurable objectives, or AMOs) being raised dramatically between 2003 and 2011 (from 64 to 83 in language arts and from 55 to 75 in math). In other words, it is significantly more difficult for schools to demonstrate proficiency today than in 2003.

On the graduation side of the equation, it is clear that Alaska’s public school graduation rate is more encouraging than the 64% referenced by Governor Parnell. When carefully examining the Class of 2010 graduation rates, 67.4% graduated with their four-year cohort, while 10.6% (or nearly 1,300 students) remained in school for additional time in order to achieve a diploma and 22% left without securing a diploma.

There is no need to apologize for students who take longer to graduate. Each child is unique and the time necessary to meet the requirements is a variable. Alaska public schools and everyone associated with public education should celebrate the fact that 8,245 students received diplomas in 2010. That’s a 19.4% increase over 2005! At the same time, we are also accountable for the students who left public education in 2010 without a diploma and must vow to do better in the future.

Those of us engaged in public schooling recognize the challenge of educating each child to his or her highest potential, a goal that we must and do embrace. A recent article in Smithsonian magazine ("Why Are Finland’s Schools Successful?") sheds light on what is working for them.

For starters, Finland has adopted a “do whatever it takes” approach to helping a child succeed, particularly during a child’s first nine years of school when every effort is made to catch the “weak” students and offer specialized assistance. Finland does not rank, provide comparisons or invite competition among its schools. Instead it focuses on broad national goals that all schools must follow, yet it is not prescriptive. Teachers are given the freedom to experiment, use the outdoors and provide relevant, meaningful educational experiences.

It is also important to note that Finland has some supports in place that obviously enhance student success: three years of maternity leave and subsidized day care, for example, and every teacher is required to earn a fifth-year master’s degree in theory and practice, paid for by the government. Children and public education are highly valued, as evidenced by the 6,600 applicants for 660 primary school positions in 2010. Finland’s journey began in 1963 when the Finnish Parliament chose public education as its best hope for economic recovery, and it took decades to realize the full benefit of this investment.

When seeking the best results for dollars invested, improvements invariably take longer than anyone would like. The world in which our children are growing up is not equitable. We need to be mindful that school personnel cannot control obstacles to learning such as poverty, homelessness and language barriers. But with assistance from a variety of agencies, we can welcome each child every day through our front doors, knowing that we have the resources and staff necessary to help move them forward toward graduation and a promising future. Alaska’s children deserve no less, so like our fellow educators in Finland, we will do “whatever it takes.”
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Edunomic Crisis
by Luke Fulp, ALASBO President and Chief Finance Officer, Kodiak Island Borough School District

In September, I had the opportunity to attend the Association of School Business Officials Annual Meeting & Expo in Seattle, Washington. Many sectional and discussion groups dealt with the economy, and were centered on doing more with less.

One of the presentations I attended, titled Edunomics, provided a dynamic perspective on education and its role in the economy. Panelists participating in this forum consisted of school business officials from New Jersey, Georgia, Wisconsin and California.

After sitting through two hours of Edunomics, I was thoroughly briefed on cost cutting measures such as the elimination of collective bargaining, state mandated salary caps, and state imposed budget reductions.

Even though Alaska has not cut education funding in recent years, purse strings are still tight. One reason for this is that Alaskans understand what may be coming their way, in terms of reduced federal spending. This reality, coupled with a volatile oil industry, is creating a conservative climate in Juneau.

Given this environment, our advocacy for public education needs to remain relevant. Not only do we need to discuss our efforts in the classroom, but also our role in economic development. Consider this a quick lesson in Edunomics.

First, there needs to be a recognition that our school systems are usually the largest employer in a given city or borough. And, if not the largest, the number of employees working for a school district will typically place a school system among the top five employers.

Along those lines, our jobs represent important economic drivers. Teachers, classified staff, and administrators are able to purchase homes, vehicles, groceries, utilities, health care and other services. Each position within our budgets provides the financial resources necessary to procure market basket items, such as the ones listed above, that then help stimulate private enterprise.

Second, and beyond this basic notion of providing jobs that pay well within Alaska's communities, schools also stimulate their local economies through day-to-day operations. For example, there are major utility costs associated with occupying school facilities. The Anchorage School District (ASD) is a great example, paying $14 million every year to heat and power its schools.

Schools also have transportation budgets that support student participation in extra-curricular activities. Alaskan companies like Era Aviation, Frontier Flying Service, and Hageland Aviation Services benefit from having school districts as stalwart customers during the winter months. Combined, these carriers operate a fleet of 70 aircrafts in the State of Alaska.

Another great example of Edunomics is with a school's communications budget. Our districts qualify for E-rate funding through the Universal Service Fund, managed by the Federal Communications Commission. According to the State of Alaska Department of Education & Early Development, this revenue source represents $28.7 million per year in outside funding. These funds help support internet and telephone communications. Again, through reliable business, schools help support investments in critical infrastructure such as microwave towers and fiber-optic cables in Alaska's rural communities. Once in place, this infrastructure serves as a resource for other companies and businesses within the area.

While there are plenty of other examples, the premise is quite simple. When dollars are spent on education, they help support Alaska's business community. It is important that our elected officials understand the byproduct of delivering a quality education. Being prepared to give specific examples of Edunomics will help drive home this point.
Asking the Next Question
by David Arp, Business Manager, Sitka School District

Early in my career I learned a strategy that I have carried with me throughout my personal and professional life. I had been trading bonds for a small investment company. For a couple of weeks I had been working closely with an assistant from a firm with which we traded. I came in early on a Friday morning, dialed his number and was informed by his supervisor that the assistant was let go the previous night. The news surprised me because I thought the guy was doing a solid job. When I pressed the supervisor about it, he explained, “We all liked him and he was a good worker, but he just couldn’t grasp the concept of asking the next question.”

In trading, information is everything. Pieces of information are often called “color” because each trade is perceived as a picture. As you gather more information, more of the picture gets filled, or colored in. The goal is then to gather enough of the color to complete the picture to the point where you can make an informed and profitable trade. The art of asking the right questions to extract the relevant information is an integral part of the process.

When asking the next question, the process is to inquire of both yourself and the individual, “What is everyone’s ultimate goal behind this question or concern?” Start by isolating the true underlying issue, then take a step back, look at the picture in its entirety, and try to visualize everyone’s ideal outcome. This is the hard part. Visualizing what you want is typically pretty easy, but visualizing what others want can be much more difficult. Finally, prepare a roadmap to lead you to that ideal outcome.

It may sound complicated, but once you’ve gotten used to the strategy the problems and outcomes begin to identify themselves with greater ease. This concept seems obvious in environments like the markets, where things can change on a dime. However, it took me a couple of months to realize its value when I started my career as a school business official.

I find that very few people in the school district see the organizational details to the extent that we in the business office are required to. This revelation occurred to me about four months after I took the job as Business Manager. An upset employee contacted me, claiming that the business office was withholding leave credit on the end-of-year paycheck for a significant number of employees. (Note: this description of the event is significantly filtered.) The employee referred to the last round of negotiations, stating that changes had been made to correct this specific issue because it had occurred in the past. They were adamant that we were not living up to our end of the arrangement. Being new to the position, I panicked and spent about a week researching the issue. I tore apart payroll records and past negotiated agreements, reviewed meeting notes, and stirred up a number of my coworkers. Eventually, I concluded that everything was correct from the district’s perspective and the employee(s) had earned all of the leave to which they were entitled.

I scheduled another meeting with the individual and provided evidence showing receipt of the entitled leave. The employee produced a final pay stub and asked, “Well then how come nothing showed up on my final pay stub under pay period accrued?” A quick look revealed that we had a faulty setting in the payroll system that had caused the remaining balance of the leave to be accrued in the previous check! The employee never looked at the annual total, just the monthly accrual. I could have saved everyone a lot of trouble if I had asked the employee from the start, “What makes you believe you’re not receiving your leave?” In retrospect, it was a valuable experience because I learned a lot, but the lesson would have been so much better without all the drama.

A final cautionary piece of advice: while this method has proven effective for me, people should be prepared when using it. There will be times when you ask the next question and the answer is something you would rather not have known! I think this is what people mean when they refer to the value of experience.
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2011-2012 Educational Association Events

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