



Boards Making a Difference

From Whole Grade Sharing (Twice) to Reorganization: How Alta and Aurelia Board Leadership Came Together and Became Alta-Aurelia

Published: May 22, 2018

“Alta and Aurelia were bitter rivals in a lot of ways—as recently as 10, 12 years ago. Each district had its own separate problems, and things weren’t looking good for either on its own. We had to come together and make it work for the kids,” said Alta-Aurelia Board President and former Aurelia Board President Brad Rohwer.

In 2011, Alta and Aurelia Schools entered into an academic whole grade sharing agreement—for the second time. Following a tumultuous whole grade sharing agreement lasting from 1989-1996, both districts parted ways and left some community members offended.

Alta-Aurelia Board Member and former Alta Board President Gigi Nelson said, ““We weren’t ready back then. We came to the realization that we had to make an effort to come together or students would have to attend larger districts, because Alta and Aurelia would potentially dissolve. That attitude that the districts needed each other--that was a much better environment for the boards to be able to work together.”

The Alta and Aurelia boards, over the last seven years, have been conducting joint board meetings every month, fostering collaboration and transparency. The two boards run parallel agendas but have separate actions and minutes, and they alternate board meetings between both towns.

This past November, the two communities overwhelmingly passed the reorganization vote for the districts to officially become one—Alta-Aurelia. “A lot of people already thought we had reorganized—I heard, what we have to vote on this? We thought it was a done deal! It was a no brainer for our



communities. The transparency during joint board meetings created trust and we became one,” said Nelson.

THE ROAD TO REORGANIZATION

Both districts have been preparing for reorganization since day one of the whole grade sharing agreement through curriculum alignment, joint professional development, shared positions, common instructional strategies, financial efficiencies and facilities improvements. The boards worked diligently to ensure each community felt like they had an equal role in the reorganized district. Students have access to an elementary school in both Alta and Aurelia, a middle school in Aurelia, and a high school in Alta.

“Both communities have safe, modern and beautiful school buildings now. We’ve improved student and staff safety immensely and prioritized enhanced learning spaces, as well as accessibility. Both boards took advantage of every possible efficiency, which made movement to reorganization a lot easier,” said Shared Superintendent Lynn Evans.

Benefits to students are significant. “Before we came together, our course offerings were bare bones and we weren’t competing in the classroom. Now, course offerings are unbelievable, students have choices and teachers work together on curriculum. Before, Aurelia had a graduating class of 12. It was tough for students to participate in band, arts and sports. With a graduating class size averaging 60, they have more opportunities and we can recruit and retain teachers,” said Rohwer.

Whole grade sharing is a lot like dating—districts can test each other out, students get to know each other, see how the community reacts. Once this test period is over, the next step is nearly always reorganization. In 2017-18, 60 of the 333 school districts were in whole grade sharing agreements. But sometimes, like in the first whole grade sharing agreement between Alta and Aurelia, it just doesn’t work out and districts part ways.

That’s certainly not the case with Alta-Aurelia. “We saw the opportunity for both communities and the benefits to students. We knew we couldn’t be territorial—it’s about more than that. How can we make this great for kids and families and impact the future and vitality of the community? You never know until you try it out!” said Nelson.

The superintendent and board members point to each other as reasons for this success. Frequent communication to the public through a variety of platforms, open meetings in each community, informational handouts, and perhaps most importantly, a dedicated group of board members.

TWO BOARDS BECOME ONE

As part of the reorganization vote, the ballot listed the process to determine the new Alta-Aurelia board. Contrary to what some may think, the board members were not elected in a special election or appointed. Instead, it’s made up of current Alta and Aurelia board members who have essentially volunteered to serve on the reorganized district’s board. Additionally, the board will decrease from seven to five in November 2021 and all members will be at-large.

“This is something the board discussed at length. We don’t want to come off as this community vs. that community. It’s important that all board members are at large when they are voted on in 2021. We are focused on working together and for the best interests of kids in both communities,” said Evans.

The Alta-Aurelia board has reviewed both board policy manuals and developed a new policy manual that is truly comprised of policies from both districts. They have developed a new mission statement, soon to be approved. And they are raising student achievement expectations.

Since entering the whole grade sharing agreement, student achievement is improving in every core area except one. The governance team attributes much of this to teachers who “worked their tails off.”

“We’ve looked at each building and the achievement data. We’ve raised our expectations to 83 percent, we’d like to see that be the goal. But even more than that, we’re focusing on students getting the most out of their day through teachers, materials, etc. Trying to get to the point where students enjoy learning,” said Nelson.

The new board has refocused from whole grade sharing, facilities projects and reorganization, to improving student learning and teaching by setting ambitious goals for test scores, curriculum and proficiency. Additionally, the board plans to set board goals and superintendent goals before the 2018-19 school year.

The board hopes to share the story at the 2018 IASB Annual Convention this November and help inform other districts who are considering whole grade sharing and/or reorganization.

“We’re just all so proud. It’s almost too good to be true. I’ve heard from other districts—how are you doing this, what’s happening there? Neighboring districts have had rocky experiences with whole grade sharing. I tell them, it’s comes down to a great group of people working together for the same goals and keeping the focus on students. That’s my point I try to drive home—it’s been a smooth process because we’re collaborative and doing this for the right reason,” said Rohwer.

[**Meet the Alta-Aurelia School Board**](#)