MS Curriculum Committee Meeting Notes

10/27/2026, 5:30–6:47 PM · Academic Policy Committee MS Curriculum Committee

Attendance

- **APC members:** Lindsay, Jon, Kali.
- **Parents:** Rachel Nash, Kim McMilin, Donica Nash, Delissa Owen.

Action Items

- **Kim McMilin:** Book a room at the Soldotna Library for the Nov. 17 meeting — Conference Room B preferred (seats ~7 comfortably); or the Community Room (has a projector/whiteboard, larger) is the fallback. Plan is to publicize just “Soldotna Library” and direct people to the room once there.
- **Whole Group:** finish going through the remaining research questions (see blanks below) before the next meeting. If a means to share our research is established, upload your documents.
- **Jon/Mr. DeVolld:** Send the finished/updated questions to Mr. DeVolld, so he can post them.
- **Jon/Mr. DeVolld:** Figure out an effective way to share our research notes offline (google drive?) so the group doesn't have to read through them together verbally in our meeting and we can focus on discussing what the findings mean to us.
- **Kali:** Start drafting an initial bank of survey questions, aiming to field the survey around February.

Process Notes

- Mr DeVolld will likely serve as the official communication channel coordinating our work by doing things like, posting these meeting notes publicly as APC documentation, determining if and how we can share our written research, fielding questions about our upcoming meetings, etc.

Research Findings by Topic

Staffing

- **Aurora Borealis:** one principal covers K–8, with a second, part-time admin added to help with the high school (grades 9 and 10). The group discussed a “teacher-principal” structure as a possible model for SMCS — a specific pay scale where one person is half-time admin / half-time teaching rather than a dedicated full administrator, paid a bit more for the added responsibility, so nobody has to fully give up teaching to take on admin duties.

  Caution raised: Aurora Borealis's principal “allowed” the high-school expansion but wasn't personally excited about or fully on board with it, which is possibly part of why there is a part-time admin for 9-10. The lesson drawn: get genuine admin buy-in before expanding, not just permission.
- **Chinook Montessori (Fairbanks):** no dedicated principal; 2 teachers; ~22:1 ratio.
- **Montessori Borealis AMP (Juneau):** 2 state-certified teachers for 45 students across two classes (~22:1); has already mapped its curriculum to Alaska state standards.
- **Lupine (Oregon):** 4 teachers, Montessori-certified but not state-certified — flagged by the group as a real problem for SMCS, since Alaska requires state certification and this model likely can't be replicated directly. Ratio currently 18:1, designed for 20:1, currently a few students short of full enrollment. Shared principal, plus a 5th teacher who takes on day-to-day administrative-type duties in a hybrid role since the principal isn't on site full-time.
- **Houston Montessori:** not covered this meeting.

- **General notes:** math/science and history/English are natural certification pairings. Aim for teachers who hold 6–12 (not just K–8) certification if they might ever teach upper-level content. Teacher aides were discussed as a way to lower the effective adult-to-student ratio without requiring every staff member to be state-certified.

Support Staff

- **Aurora Borealis:** several parent educators, an interventionist, and a special ed teacher (unclear if MS-specific); dedicated specialists for art and music daily, plus a separate person for drama. Believed to be required to provide special-ed services under the charter/district.
- **Chinook:**
- **Montessori Borealis AMP:** special ed, a reading interventionist, and a counselor.
- **Lupine:** no additional support staff; relies on a Montessori-trained aide model instead of certified specialists; shares art/music specialists with the rest of the school.
- **Houston Montessori:** dedicated staff for special ed, drama, art, and music.

Curriculum

The curriculum questions were not directly covered as separate topics this meeting — carry both into the next session. Below are notes related to curriculum that came up during discussion.

- **Aurora Borealis:** no curriculum was developed as part of their charter amendment — encouraging news for SMCS, since it suggests a full 7–8 curriculum may not need to be in place just to amend the charter (it would still need to be built before actually teaching).
- **Houston Montessori:** runs on 5-week work cycles.
- **Chinook / Montessori Borealis AMP / Lupine:** not covered this meeting.

Facilities

- **Aurora Borealis:** all one building; the middle school is intentionally in a separate wing from elementary — a deliberate choice not an afterthought. When the high school was added, HS moved into portables (physically a bit separated though still on the same campus) and MS moved into the main building, overlapping heavily with elementary there; the building is roughly U-shaped, with dedicated bathrooms set up for certain grade groupings. Getting the high school into the building/portables was “a big fight” that took real convincing on the elementary side. The argument that worked: kids moving from 6th to 7th grade don't suddenly become different people and need a separate building — a useful parallel for SMCS's own 7–8 case.
- **Chinook:** K–8 all in one building, 8 classrooms total.
- **Montessori Borealis AMP:** has its own dedicated wing in a larger building shared with two other schools — a separate charter school (the transcript renders this as “Juno/Juneau Community Charter School”) and an alternative high school — while staying connected to its own elementary program through shared specialists (music/art) and mentoring opportunities with younger kids. Business model is food-related, built around a commercial-grade kitchen rather than outdoor farming.
- **Lupine:** a physically separate building — originally a retrofitted house/office space, not purpose-built. Handles the outdoor/Erdkinder component through a 2-week residential camp away from home rather than on-site land, and still shares specialists and full-community events with the rest of the pre-K–8 school despite the separate building. The school appears to be having some financial troubles after buying its own buildings. They bought because they had been shuffled around a lot when leasing from the district. A cautionary note about the risks of buying a space or leasing one outside of the district.
- **Houston Montessori:** has its own dedicated middle-school space, a deliberate choice made during a period of rapid growth; runs grades 7–12 together with no shared space with elementary.
- **General notes:** just grades 7–8 together makes for a pretty small world for the kids — probably want to integrate more broadly with the rest of the school, in line with SMCS's own instinct to keep the middle school close to its existing community.

- **SMCS-specific facility notes:** a possible future space in the current Soldotna Elementary could becomes available. If so it could let SMCS also grow its elementary program, increasing the MS feeder pool, but would require hiring more teachers. The district's own facility plans were described as changing week to week, month to month (e.g., talk of 6th grade officially shifting into middle school, or wing renovations) — the group sees this as its single biggest source of uncertainty.

Governance / Approval Process

- **Aurora Borealis:** having only two grades (9th and 10th) together at first was seen, in hindsight, as a disservice — it made the kids' social world too small. Space was the single biggest obstacle to the high-school expansion specifically. Charter renewal has also been a struggle in some years, but over two specific operational issues — securing a bus route and providing high-school lunch service — which triggered school-board pushback; the group believes neither issue applies to SMCS's own 7–8 addition, since both already exist for the current K–6 program.
- **Question about SMCS's own process:** does the APC/school need to formally get on a specific school-board and/or state docket to begin a charter amendment, and what that timeline looks like. Mr Devolld would likely be the one to know this. Maybe not advantageous to move too quickly or raise awareness fully to the school board until we are ready.

Family Demand

- **Aurora Borealis:** ran a family-interest survey; response wasn't especially strong, but the expansion was ultimately pushed forward by a small group of very committed parents. Current 9th/10th enrollment is 17 students total (9 in 9th grade, 8 in 10th) — a roughly even split the group found notable. The middle school itself isn't much bigger than its feeder population — some students leave for bigger schools, typically landing around 15–18 students by 8th grade. Aurora Borealis runs its MS lottery open to anyone who wants to apply, in addition to continuing students from its own elementary
- **Chinook:** targets 90% yearly retention, has generally landed in the low 90s; looking to expand its own grades 4–6 specifically to feed the middle school.
- **Montessori Borealis AMP:** fills its MS partly with students moving up from its own elementary program and partly through a lottery for remaining open seats.
- **Lupine:** started with just 12 students, grew to two full classes of 24, then expanded again to its current three classes (~80 students across 7th and 8th). The first year came in under target before building up — the group sees this “start small, let it grow” approach as the likely realistic model for SMCS. Maintains a significant waitlist and a 96% year-over-year retention rate, which the group found comparable to SMCS's own current waitlist.
- **Houston Montessori:** not covered this meeting.
- **Plan for SMCS's own survey:** target current families and the waitlist directly and specifically — ask plainly whether they'd choose an SMCS middle school over other options — and also survey the wider community, not just the existing feeder base. The group sees its already-large waitlist, as a meaningfully positive demand signal on its own, separate from the planned survey.

Transition

Not directly covered for any comparison school this meeting — carry into the next session.

Hindsight

Not directly covered as a standalone topic this meeting — carry into the next session.

Open Questions for Next Meeting

- Finish all the blank cells above for every school, especially Curriculum, Transition, and Hindsight, which got little or no coverage this time.
- Clarify the charter-amendment docket process — does SMCS need to formally queue up with the school board and/or the state, and on what timeline?
- Reach out to Aurora Borealis insiders for more detail on their pitfalls.