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INTERVIEW

Improving Outcomes Despite Big Budget Cuts: An Interview with John Barry

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Improving Outcomes Despite Big Budget Cuts:

An Interview with John Barry

John Barry, superintendent of Aurora Public Schools (CO) since 2006, brings his unique background and perspective to managing public school districts. Before becoming the superintendent of Aurora Public Schools (APS), he served in the U.S. Air Force for more than 30 years, retiring as a two-star major general, led the 2003 Columbia Accident Investigation Team as executive director and board member, and worked as a vice president for SAP, a leading provider of business software solutions. He has studied political science, international affairs, and public administration and was a 2004 fellow of the Broad Academy for School Superintendents. In 2011 he was named Colorado Superintendent of the Year.

As superintendent, Barry has created and implemented a bold strategic plan that drastically improved the people, achievement, community, and environment (PACE) of Aurora Public Schools across numerous metrics. He has accomplished all of this amid budget cuts on the order of \$70 million. In this edited interview with DMC CEO John J-H Kim, Barry discusses how he has successfully improved student outcomes in the face of daunting budgetary challenges and specifically addresses the change in culture that was required for this achievement.

FAST FACTS: Aurora Public Schools

\$279 million total annual budget | **\$0.72** of every dollar goes directly to support instructional programs

59
schools

36,297
students



38% speak English
as a second language

73% receive free
and reduced lunch

54.6%
graduation rate



John Barry celebrates Aurora's vote for the \$215 million bond to fund the district.

Aurora Public Schools has seen tremendous improvements since you became superintendent. Tell us about what you have done and how you have accomplished it.

We implemented our strategic plan. Staying focused on that has given us a clear roadmap of where to go. We have experienced a transformation on an order of magnitude that rivals any in the country. Our dropout rate has gone from 10% to 4.6%, and we have increased our graduation rates from the low 40s to the mid-60s. Truancy has been cut by at least 28%. Of course, we have plenty of work to do in each of these areas, but we have been able to meet the state CSAP (Colorado Student Assessment Program), now TCAP (Transitional Colorado Assessment Program), for six years in a row on reading, writing, and science. The state's results have gone up, and we've gone up even more. All these are encouraging signs that we are moving in the right direction.

How have you deployed your financial resources to achieve these gains?

When I first arrived here in Aurora Public Schools in 2006, we initiated budget cuts ourselves. It was the first time APS had cut the budget, and we did that in order to generate funds to support initiatives in our strategic plan. We needed some resources to be able to move in the right direction.

The following year, our enrollment decreased for the first time in about ten or fifteen years, which prompted some adjustments; then right after that, we started having to deal with the economic challenges that we have all been experiencing nationwide as well as in our individual states. In short, we have been dealing with deficits of sorts since 2006.

What we've tried to do throughout all this is to stay focused on our strategic plan and keep our priorities at the forefront. Now, we've made mistakes—there are no ifs, ands, or buts about →

Key Improvements at APS (2006–2012)

↓ **50%+**
Decline in dropout rate

↑ **50%+**
Improvement in graduation rate

↓ **28%**
Reduction in truancy

JOHN BARRY

Education

U.S. Air Force Academy
B.A.

University of Oklahoma M.P.A.

White House Fellow 1985–86

Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government
1993–94

Broad Academy for Superintendents—Fellow
2004

Experience

Aurora Public Schools,
Superintendent,
2006–present

SAP, Vice President

2003 Columbia Accident Investigation Team, Executive Director and board member

U.S. Air Force,
retired as a Two-Star Major General; 30 years of service included serving as a combat veteran, fighter pilot, and commander

Awards

Top 10 “Tech Savvy Superintendents”

in the nation by *eSchool News*—2008

Business Person of the Year

by the Aurora Chamber of Commerce—2009

Superintendent of the Year

for Colorado—2011

that—but we are getting into a rhythm of working within a climate of deficits while keeping our focus on student achievement. That’s our litmus test: if a project is not working to raise achievement or close achievement gaps, then we either make adjustments or let it go.

Colorado itself is not a high-spending state relative to the rest of the country and you’ve had these self-imposed and externally imposed cuts on top of that. What did you do? There was the proverbial low-hanging fruit in the beginning, but you’ve been at this a long time. How have you been realigning your resources?

In Colorado, we receive \$1,800 less per pupil than the average per pupil funding in the rest of the states of the nation. We get less as a state—that’s clearly got to be reworked. I’m not a big tax guy, but I am competitive. We need more funding to be competitive locally, domestically, and internationally.

We’ve cut about \$70 million in three years—and it looks like we will reach almost \$100 million by the end of this year. I would say the first \$35 million of cuts were painful, but manageable. We identified cuts to make and we could get it done.

The second \$35 million in cuts really involved cutting to the bone. Those cuts were absolutely painful, without question. We stayed away from the classroom as much as possible because that’s where our focus is. If we could still raise achievement and close achievement gaps, we felt we were making good use of taxpayer money. We needed to do as much as possible, so we cut down transportation, IT, maintenance and operations, and custodians, adjusted classroom sizes, everything. But we didn’t do a RIF (Reduction in Force), and we managed that by not replacing people who retired. Doing a RIF with the poverty we have in our area would have been extremely devastating.

You will remember that the economy declined rapidly in September 2008. That November, we were able to pass a bond for \$215 million and a mill levy for \$14.7 million, and that helped stop the bleeding to some extent. But managing a district by running to the electorate every year to ask for



John Barry on one of his frequent classroom visits.

more taxes with a mill levy override isn't the best way to run a "railroad," so to speak. The benefits of having good, clear evidence to show that our district was moving ahead allowed us to convince the electorate to have enough faith in us to give us a chance with more funding. This November, we are going to have another mill levy, this time for \$15 million, and again, it will help us stop the bleeding. But we have to get back on track as a country, a state, and a school district to manage school district budgets.

I would categorize the first \$35 million of cuts as resulting from technical changes—learning how to do the same things more efficiently. The second \$35 million of cuts sound like they are the result of adaptive changes that involve fundamentally reconsidering what you're trying to accomplish and the set of motivations and values guiding that. Can you talk about how you did this?

I approach it in two ways—internal and external. One way is to look inside and think about the core competency of what our vision is: graduate every student with the choice to attend college without remediation. What I found when I looked

internally gave me some concern about the expectations we were setting. Let me tell a story—it was a rare exception to what I usually see, but it was a cause of concern.

I go into classrooms and see amazing teachers doing amazing things all the time, but one day, I walked into a third-grade class and saw this young African American boy talking to his

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teacher. There was clearly affection between the two; it was really fun to watch. I let them finish and then I went over to the teacher and said, "It's pretty clear that boy adores you. How's he doing?" The teacher said, "Amazing." And, I thought, this →

is great: there's a good relationship, and there are good results. But, as I always do, I asked for the data and found that this student's progress, at best, was highly unsatisfactory. The teacher, who had a true heart for these kids, did not have the expectations for them that we need. We can love these kids to death, but we've got to be able to connect that to high expectations of what a child can do. This student was not doing amazing; he was doing horribly. He had been with us since kindergarten, and he had never risen above unsatisfactory. Setting those expectations involves a culture shift that does not happen overnight, but high expectations are a must for every student.

When I was on the 2003 Columbia Accident Investigation Team, we realized very quickly that if we were going to change NASA, it wouldn't happen quickly. That's why when the board made 29 recommendations, 14 were technical. The technical items needed to be fixed before the next flight; the remaining 15 were culture-management recommendations—adaptive changes, to use your

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term. We did not say that these needed to be fixed before the next flight. We knew that one group of changes needed to come first, not because it was more important, but because the cultural changes might be pencil-whipped if not given enough time.

And what has the process been like in terms of changing values externally?



John Barry celebrates a student's success.

That was a big question for us: how do you engage effectively with the community? My opinion is that in the 21st century we have divorced economic development from academic development. They have gone separate ways, and the only time they intersect is when someone needs to be hired for a job. We can't have it be like that anymore.

In engaging with the community, we knew that the system needed to be built on mutual interest, not just philanthropy. Philanthropy can't last very long—it dries up. So, we have built four Academic and Career Pathways, curricula connected with focused, hands-on relevant learning that prepares students for higher education and the workforce. The pathways are focused on four areas: health sciences; arts and communications; business; science, technology, engineering, and math. Each pathway has a collection of partnerships in the community; in health sciences, for instance, we have a group of hospitals in the area with which we work very closely.

This partnership with the community is certainly an adaptive change. But it is with this kind of partnership that we can align academic and economic development and take on challenges like the Colorado paradox—Colorado is the second-highest educated place in terms of bachelor's, master's, and PhD's, but we import our talent and don't take care of our children's education as much as we need to. One thing we had written into our partnerships in our strategic plan were offerings—internships, externships, job shadowing, mentor-

ing, the capability to get certificates, etc. And most CEOs understand that they have to get involved in their communities if they want to be competitive; it's more than simply writing a check. We need to do more than put kids in a rectangular box for twelve years, same thing for every kid, and then spit them out expecting them to be globally competitive. It's not going to work. Our communities have to be engaged if this is going to work.

We understand you did quite a bit of joint fact-finding in forging your ties with the community. Joint fact-finding is powerful because it steers discussions toward data rather than philosophy.

Our joint fact-finding was compelling to us because we saw how useful it was to bring in people who are looking for the first time at things that you've been looking at for years, or maybe longer. The community workforce planning team had representatives from higher education, the Department of Labor, thirty-two companies we were working with in the community, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Aurora Economic Development Council. We were looking at our process of trying to figure out how we could do our work better. We did a lot of joint fact-finding, and lots of really good questions were asked: Why are we doing this? Why are we not considering this new technology? Why is this still happening in education?

It was a good one-year discussion with probably a half-dozen meetings with some very influential people and companies. This work allowed us to put the plan together that we've been implementing for two years now. All this adaptive change happened because we were able to use community personnel to do joint fact-finding and to determine how we could realign our incentives more effectively.

What is the applicability of your experiences in the Air Force and in the private sector? What are the limits of applying these experiences to running a complex organization such as Aurora Public Schools?

The ability to prioritize, to plan strategically, to manage personnel, and to take a problem and orga-

nize a team around it to find solutions are all skill sets that are easily transferrable to any organization.

The Broad Academy for School Superintendents really helped me to cross the bridge between my previous experiences and the education world. They helped me with that 10–15% of what I didn't know about public education, which really helped me to apply better what I had learned elsewhere. And, of course, I keep learning something new every day in my time here at Aurora Public Schools.

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I find that it's often very helpful to bring people from another school district or state or industry into your organization. The analogy I use is that every organization has a rock in the road that hurts your ability to be effective. When you first arrive in an organization you didn't grow up in, you see it. You have to make sure other people see it, because those who have been there a while don't see it anymore; they just step around it out of habit. It's that fresh set of eyes, that ability to look from a new perspective at something, that can really make a difference.

It's funny—when I was in the military, we studied business and education; in the business world, we looked at the military and education; and in education, we often look at the military and business. The ability to have those fresh eyes and see those rocks in the road is key. Everyone thinks he or she is an expert on education because we all went through it, but sometimes we have to break out of that mindset and take a fresh look. ♦