

**A visit to Aveson School of Leaders (K-5) and Aveson Global Leadership Academy (6-12), two schools run by Aveson Educational Cooperative in Altadena, California**

Friday, November 21, 2008

E|E Attendees: Curt Johnson and Kim Farris-Berg

Visited with AEC Coop's "Executive Director of Instructional Program Management", Kate Bean, as well as with a number of students.

Legal structure: Aveson Corporation is a 501(c)3 organization with a three member board that operates two chartered schools: Aveson School of Leaders (K-5) and Aveson Global Leadership Academy (6-12). The Corporation contracts with Aveson Educational Cooperative (AEC), which is organized as a "consumer cooperative" under California statute (Corporations Code Section 12200, et. seq.) and operates like a workers' cooperative. Via the contract, Aveson Corporation formally delegates the authority to design and manage the schools to AEC. Kate Bean, the Executive Director for Instructional Program Management says, "As far as I know, Aveson is the only school in California where, legally speaking, teachers have total collective responsibility for the success of the school."

AEC members deemed it an "educational" cooperative rather than a "teacher" cooperative because more than teachers are members of the cooperative. The cooperative has two divisions: instructional program management and educational consulting. On the consulting side, consultants (who sometimes are also teachers at the school and sometimes just consultants; sometimes coop members and sometimes not) provide professional development and technical assistance to other schools. As of November 2008, they've provided services on more than 30 contracts. AEC members delegate decision-making authority to two Executive Directors: one (Kate Bean) leads instructional program management and the other (Steve Regur) leads educational consulting.

Governing board: Aveson Corporation has a three-member board made up of people who "get" the cooperative idea. One is a parent with a doctoral degree in education who wrote a dissertation on charter school start-up; one is a community member with legal expertise; one is a community member with financial expertise. The responsibilities of the Corporation board are to keep AEC members accountable to the terms of the contract. They're providing arms-distance oversight to ensure AEC members produce desired results and are fiscally responsible. Aveson Corporation's board does not make any stipulations for AEC. AEC makes decisions autonomously.

AEC had four members when it formed in 2007, and all four original members plus one additional member who joined later in 2007 are on the board. The board votes to admit new members and makes AEC-related policy decisions, but otherwise delegates decision-making responsibility for specific tasks to specific members. As mentioned earlier, two members of the board are Executive Directors for the two revenue-earning sides of AEC.

Membership structure: In late 2007, one new member joined the cooperative, adding to the original four members. In 2008, two new members joined the cooperative. One new member has an instructional program management perspective and the other has an educational consulting perspective. There are seven members total. Members' responsibilities include setting benefits and related personnel policies (e.g., vacations and leaves), election of directors and conferring "membership" on applying candidate members.

Members have a \$3000 buy-in, as AEC values include that its members make decisions based on a real "ownership stake". Surplus income from the educational consulting budget is distributed to the "collective account" as necessary to bring a year's collective account distribution up to 25 percent of the year's combined surplus. All other educational consulting surplus is distributed as patronage to member accounts in direct proportion to paid days worked by the individual members during the fiscal year. Any loss is distributed 75 percent to member accounts and 25 percent to the collective account, with the exception of losses occurring and/or carried over from AEC's first two fiscal years. The AEC board can change distribution percentages for a coming fiscal year.

There is not surplus income from the instructional program management side, as AEC puts all income for the schools back into the schools. If there is money above what is needed to carry out services, AEC Coop determined the income would be spent on employee incentives (raises and bonuses).

## **Aveson Educational Cooperative**

### **Site Profiles: Aveson School of Leaders (K-5) and Aveson Global Leadership Academy (6-12, currently serving 6-10)**

#### **COOPERATIVE AND SITE CONTACT:**

Kate Bean  
Email: [aveson@aveson.org](mailto:aveson@aveson.org)  
1919 Pinecrest Drive  
Altadena, CA 91001  
Phone: 1-626-797-1440  
Fax: 1-626-797-1918

Coop Web site: [www.aveson.net](http://www.aveson.net)  
Schools' Web site: [www.aveson.org](http://www.aveson.org)

**AUTHORIZER:** Pasadena Unified School District  
**EPP ESTABLISHED/SCHOOL OPENED:** 2007  
**GRADE LEVELS SERVED:** K-12  
**ENROLLMENT:** 410  
**CLASS SIZE:** 20-23  
**NUMBER OF SCHOOL DAYS:** 177  
**YEAR OF LAST FINANCIAL AUDIT:** 2007-2008

**Coop Board:** 5 members

**# OF COOPERATIVE MEMBERS:** 7  
**# OF CREDENTIALLED SPECIALISTS:** 37  
**# OF NON-LICENSED STAFF:** 5

#### **STUDENTS:**

Male: 53% Female: 47%

American Indian: 0%  
Asian: 1%  
Hispanic: 19%  
African American: 30%  
Caucasian: 44%  
Other: 1%

Limited English Proficiency: 1%  
Free and Reduced-Price Lunch: 18%  
Special Education: 12%  
Mobility: 1%

**ATTENDANCE RATE:** 96%

**TESTS:** California Standards Test, CAT/6

**OTHER EVALUATION METHODS/TOOLS:** DIBELS, Core phonic, AIMSweb, DRA, Spelling Inventory

**TECHNOLOGY:** 130 laptop computers, 40 desktop computers, UBUNTU operating system, Open source software

AEC mission, vision, values: The Aveson cooperative mission is: every student by name; every lesson with purpose. From AEC's Web site: "Aveson Educational Cooperative, Inc. develops exceptional teaching by supporting teachers and administrators with research-based strategies and collaborative coaching focused on results. We believe in the right instruction at the right time. We match the expertise of our staff to meet the needs of our customers. Our staff has a diverse K-12 background with expertise in comprehensive school reform, administrative coaching, literacy coaching, technology integration, and data-driven decision-making.

We set out to create an educational professional practice, an innovative approach to providing education to the public...Based on our shared experience and lessons learned, we developed the principles that guide our work:

- Vision means seeing what could be and what will be and living the difference.
- There is no such thing as too much truth.
- How you say it is as important as what you say.
- When identifying problems, offer strategies and solutions.
- Everyone's time is valuable.
- Your commitment is to make others around you successful.
- Our growth together requires us to grow individually.
- Integrity is everything."

Sites served: The two schools (K-5; 6-12) are on the same campus, and both opened in 2006. Aveson currently serves up to grade 10, and will add grade 11 next year, and grade 12 the following year. As Aveson is located on a foothill of Altadena, California, with buildings on multiple levels ascending up a hill, multi-aged "learning cohorts" comprised of students who would otherwise be in traditional grade-levels (K-2, 3-5, 6-8, 9-12) are separated by physical height. The Aveson Schools (known to its authorizer, Pasadena Unified School District as a single school because they are managed by one corporation and have one MOU) have 410 students, and are "full". Two fall 2008 tours for families who want to enter kindergarten in 2009 had 400 people despite the registration already being at capacity. The Aveson Schools are one of four chartered schools authorized by Pasadena Unified School District (PUSD). Others are NIA (6-12), Rosebud (K-5), and Learning Works (9-12, independent study). There is one other chartered school in Pasadena, authorized by the county (Odyssey, K-8).

Aveson Corporation leases the Aveson schools' space from PUSD. The schools are co-located in one of four existing school buildings that PUSD had previously opted to close due to declining enrollment. Per California Proposition 39, the School District is required to provide facilities (their own, or help find new ones) and resources (help pay for space) to chartered schools if they request space. Per California Proposition 39, the School District is required to provide facilities and resources to charter schools if they request space and there are surplus spaces within the District. For students who live within the PUSD boundaries (80 percent of the students), Aveson Corporation a small monthly rate per square foot per student. For the remaining 20 percent of students, Aveson pays about 22 times that rate per square foot per student. For shared common areas, PUSD determined that Aveson will pay the smaller rate. PUSD is responsible for deferred maintenance (e.g. roof and electric) and, according to Bean, has been

very reasonable and supportive. Aveson is responsible for costs associated with utilities and day-to-day custodial services. Neither Aveson nor PUSD provides transportation to students. For more detail about Prop 39 and PUSD, see the May 31, 2006 notes of the 7-11 commission: [www.pusd.us/7-11/docs/mtg4/7-11\\_04\\_summary.doc](http://www.pusd.us/7-11/docs/mtg4/7-11_04_summary.doc)



The school building is located in a very high income area of Pasadena, which may help explain why it was no longer being used. According to a September 2007 article by Peter Dreier in Pasadena Weekly, “Pasadena's poverty rate declined from 14.1 percent of residents in 2005 to 13.3 percent in 2006. It would be nice to think that this is because a significant number of the city's poor were able to lift themselves out of poverty. But this isn't the case. The reality is that the poor are being pushed out of the city by rising housing costs. This is a major reason for the decline in enrollment in Pasadena Unified School District (PUSD) schools. A recent report by Davis Demographics, a consultant used by PUSD to examine population changes, found that most of the students who have left the district are those who live in areas with many low-income families and mostly rental housing. PUSD's declining enrollment and budget woes are due in large part to the displacement of the poor, not the flight of the middle class.” [http://www.pasadenaweekly.com/cms/story/detail/separate\\_and\\_unequal/5087/](http://www.pasadenaweekly.com/cms/story/detail/separate_and_unequal/5087/) Bean reported that 1 out of every 3 students in Pasadena attends private school.

*Hiring and terminating; determining compensation:* AEC is responsible for hiring and firing all teachers and staff. Bean says that having the ability to hire and fire “is what the success of the school and coop depends on.” The cooperative members delegate the authority to Bean to determine salaries, while all coop members determine benefits, including insurance. Hired teachers are employees. They receive contracted, at-will positions with salaries and benefits packages. They are not all members of the cooperative, and are not necessarily aware of the cooperative structure, although Bean says they are aware of their increased level of control over curriculum design. Some coop members do not teach at the school, and are strictly educational consultants. Most are not full-time, and are contracted to work on specific projects for set fees. They are responsible for paying their own taxes, and do not receive benefits.

AEC designed what Bean calls a “rigorous” hiring process. Candidates show up on a Saturday for “performance day” (there were three such days last year). They work in small groups to collectively address school-related dilemmas and the AEC members, as well as teachers already employed by AEC, observe. Candidates who “pass” performance day are then observed by AEC members as they teach students. Those who “pass” the observing stage are interviewed by cooperative members and selected.

Once, a teacher made it all the way through the process, but when she began teaching it was clear she was “mean to kids” and “did not have a good curriculum”. Parents had informed the school of their concerns and, after observing the teaching themselves, AEC made the decision to terminate her. This sent chills through the spines of teachers at the school. Teachers worried, “At this school, parents can get a teacher fired!” Bean recalls, “It wasn’t unhealthy, though. It was productive. Teachers came to understand, better, what it means to have a contracted position and that Aveson leadership is serious about accountability. Teachers also come to understand that this is a climate where change happens regularly. To remain innovative, which is actually what chartered schools are responsible for doing under California law, Aveson is supposed to—must—change. We’ve changed the daily schedule four times to meet the needs of the students and teachers here. That’s what we do. But that sort of climate certainly isn’t for everyone.”

In determining compensation, AEC makes market-based and resources-based decisions. Essentially, AEC members find the teachers they want via their process and then do what they can to get those teachers. Bean has a certain salary budget and she stays within that, making salary and benefits offers to each. Generally, Bean rewards years of experience with higher pay (a notion collectively determined by candidate teachers while interacting at a performance day). Bean is conscious that when a teacher comes to Aveson from a district school, that teacher may be giving up his/her earned pension and sometimes a higher salary. Recently, Aveson offered a master teacher (veteran) a salary within the range Aveson pays for someone with her experience: \$58,000-\$62,000 per year. Turned out that the teacher had been making substantially more. Bean discussed the matter with other AEC members, and they collectively decided that to recruit this teacher, they would offer a salary above the typical range, but still far below what she had been earning. The teacher accepted the position. Bean explained, “For one, her child attends here. But she also LOVED the Aveson model. She was tired of carrying out core programs and being under administrators’ thumbs. She says she’s never worked harder in her life, but she’s proud of what she’s able to achieve here.”

AEC members see themselves as developing their cooperative membership structure. It was their original intention that every teacher at an Aveson school would also be a coop member, but they decided to delay that goal to focus intensively on school start-up. Initially, members were very concerned that every teacher, as a member of the coop, adopt the mentality of a business owner and participate in the \$3000 buy-in. Upon starting the school, they elevated cultivation of teachers’ ability to live the AEC/Aveson Schools’ vision to first priority. While AEC is getting the “Aveson Learning Program and School Management Model” right, members decided to make coop-related professional development a lesser priority. They are quite open to change in the future, however, including more teachers having an ownership stake in AEC.

Performance review and improvement: Once a year, Teacher/Advisors score themselves on an Advisor Self Efficacy rubric. They are encouraged to ask for input from their peers and students. The rubric is comprised of indicators specific to the three focus areas at Aveson Schools: Personalized Learning, Social Leadership and Healthy Living. Teacher/Advisors have the option of customize some indicators on the rubric to meet their personal goals. The rubric is then scored by Bean, the Executive Director for Instructional Program Management. Bean meets with each individual to discuss any discrepancies between her scores and the individual teacher/advisors' scores. The Aveson philosophy is to build-on strengths, not to turn-around weak areas (Bean cited the Marcus Buckingham premise: the most effective method for motivating people is to build on their strengths rather than correcting their weaknesses).

At a teacher retreat this year, AEC leaders described that they want a large percentage of AEC educators, ultimately, to not just "do a great job" but be committed to building an organization which is changing education and helping to ensure the "Aveson model" is a leader in the change movement. Every Aveson teacher is encouraged to evaluate whether this entrepreneurial journey is right for him/her, but ultimately AEC is seeking those for whom it is right. These folks are known as "lifers" in AEC. "Lifers" will dedicate their time at Aveson to strengthening the model and propagating the vision.

"Lifers" have a lot of career growth options at Aveson. They might stay in the classroom, or perhaps move into administration. Maybe they want to be a consultant at some point so they can share their skills with others and move out of the classroom. Or, perhaps, they want to be a part-time consultant and part-time classroom teacher. Bean explained, "There are a lot of opportunities...name what you want to do."

After the leaders described this notion at the retreat, they asked the teachers how many considered themselves to be "lifers". Only two of eight secondary teachers raised his/her hand. The reasons for not wanting to be a "lifer" were diverse. Two advisors wanted to go back to school for advanced degrees; another wanted to start his own chartered school. "All great goals," Bean said. This exercise proved to be very instructive for the AEC members, who had noticed that the secondary school wasn't taking off in the same way that the elementary school was. "Don't get me wrong," said Bean, "They are doing a good job. Better than most. But they're not owning the model as much as the elementary and middle-school teachers. Since most have been clear they are not "lifers", we know we've still got to find more of those who are. With a clear picture of the commitment of our current staff, we could fly all their positions next year. We have a wonderful opportunity for potential teacher/advisors to interact with the reality of our school.; to spend some time in the actual advisories they would be taking over. Due to the integrity and honesty of our staff there will be no need for the traditional secretive methods or uncomfortable situations during the hiring process.

Perhaps our current staff members will in time decide they want to be more of an 'owner' of the Aveson model as it is, or perhaps Aveson will need to demonstrate further why the teachers might *want* to be 'lifers.' For example, as an Aveson 'lifer', there's greater earning potential, autonomy (two levels: control in the classroom and decision-making authority at the organizational level), varied experiences as they further their careers, and the opportunity to do something that is highly inspired/bigger than one's self."

Bean says that people have questioned if the Aveson model would be appealing if consulting were not an option for educators to pick up additional work and increase potential income. Bean describes that teachers in particular are concerned about where they'll go after they leave the classroom, or whether they'll have to leave the classroom at all. Since AEC leaves all options on the table, teachers are attracted to the schools. "In a more traditional setting, teachers must go into administration in order to advance their career...there is no other way to 'move up the ladder.' But what if administration is not your strength? Consulting allows many members and employees to share strengths; to help others improve their craft. Plus the earning potential, autonomy, and so on [outlined in the previous paragraph]. But is consulting the ONLY way to offer teachers a 'better job'? We're not sure yet..."

Sources of revenue: California and PUSD allocate per-pupil funding to Aveson Corp. Aveson Corp then passes funding for salaries, benefits, professional development, and insurance to AEC. Other funds stay with Aveson Corp, which has delegated authority for allocating and managing the budget to AEC, which in turn has delegated the authority to Bean, the AEC Executive Director of Instructional Program Management. Bean seeks input from teachers and AEC members. All considered, AEC is managing a \$2.3 million "contract".

The educational consulting side of AEC is also a source of revenue. AEC members and Aveson teachers who are not AEC members have carried out more than 30 contracts since AEC and Aveson formed in 2007. Typically, the client hires AEC and AEC subcontracts with a particular AEC member or employee (teacher) to do the work. Contract fees are determined based on the market value for the services. Aveson charges an average of \$1200 to \$1500 per day. The educational consulting side allows teachers to earn summer income, and also puts them in a position to act as missionaries for the Aveson Learning Program and School Model, thereby earning more consulting work and spreading the innovative new model. When coop-members do the work, any net revenue is considered surplus; when non-coop members do the work net revenue is considered profit and is taxable.

In the future, when its learning program and management model is more developed, Bean says AEC might approach PUSD to see if it would contract AEC to manage a poor-performing school, or even a single small learning community within a larger school. "Critical to our success would be that we would have to be able to start new and hire our own staff (most important) who would live the Aveson vision."

Start-up funding: In 2005, Aveson Corporation received three grants—one from EdVisions, Inc. (\$150,000 for the secondary school only) and two from the state of California—to start two chartered schools (\$450,000 per school). Aveson approached EdVisions, Inc. for funding because EdVisions promotes teacher-governance models, even requires that schools receiving start-up funding have some sort of teacher governance at the school.

Liability and business insurance: Aveson Corporation pays for all the insurance: property, student and accident, general liability, and board of directors' insurance. The Aveson Corporation board (which is the board of the schools) has delegated the authority to Bean to select and managed the insurance policies, but Bean states that she senses that the board might be better off making these decisions on their own to avoid conflict of interest.

Learning program: Aveson's learning program is student-centered, outcome-driven and personalized. The curriculum focus is deep, not wide. As the Executive Director for Instructional Program Management, Bean is responsible for informing hired teachers of the Aveson vision, and for working with teachers and AEC members to set the desired program outcomes. Generally, teachers are responsible for designing the curriculum to work for the students they're serving so long as they meet the desired outcomes. In practice, this has been easy for some teachers and difficult for others. Bean reports, "We've been perhaps too focused on the vision and outcomes, and may need to fill in the gaps better to help some understand how to get from here to there. The AEC members carved out the Aveson vision for six years...it's reasonable that it will take time for others to 'get it', especially considering that our culture is so different."

Bean explains that the educational-cooperative model for school leadership allows AEC to be highly adaptive. She asked rhetorically, "If there weren't a cooperative, why even attempt to adapt? AEC can adapt day-to-day, and need not live by a policy set by board members who are not working at the school or by administrators not working with the students."

How have they adapted? And why? Bean clarifies, "Students learn in multi-age cohorts: K-2, 3-5, 6-8, 9-12 (the school has just 9th and 10th graders now). But a lot of schools do that. What's unique about us is that even the elementary level students move around to their courses. Elementary school students don't stay in one room with all the subjects being taught by the same teacher. Every day students get math class with a math teacher, literacy class with a literacy teacher, and social studies, science and the arts with a project teacher. The remainder of the day is spent in advisory. Secondary students spend the morning in content seminars, similar to classes, and the rest of the day in advisory-based learning (ABL).

The purpose of ABL is to provide the space, time and resources for students to integrate what they've learned in content seminars with their individual skills, passions and interests, under the guidance of an advisor. In ABL, students are to develop a sense of self, a sense of the global community, and a commitment to action. Students and their advisors incorporate history and science into ABL.

The advisor's role during ABL time is to develop trusting relationships with each student in order to nurture, focus and cultivate each student's personalized learning plan and monitor projects and assignments from content seminars. Below is a picture of students working in an advisory. Review advisors' individual blogs and Web sites here: [http://aveson.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=38&Itemid=48](http://aveson.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=38&Itemid=48)



“For ABL time, we’ve tried incorporating distance learning. We’ve had different experiences with it. We encouraged our gifted high school students to take an online Spanish course during their project time, and they bombed. They came back to us saying, ‘We want a class.’ Same for Algebra II, ‘We need instruction.’ So, even though it wasn’t in our plan to provide direct instruction through content seminars for all students, we’ve needed to adjust to our market. We’re hypothesizing, however, that students who come up through the school—from a younger age—will likely be able to more readily engage in self-directed learning. Most of our high school students, today, transferred in as high school students. We’re needing to teach them time management within the ABL time. Truly we’ve found that only some kids at this higher level would have survived with that model. So, in January we’re changing the schedule to increase the time for content seminars thereby decreasing the time for ABL. The longer content seminar time will allow the students to get more academic support from their content specialist.

Some parents are initially rattled when we change the daily schedule. We’ve changed it four times, and like I said we’ll be changing it again in January. We explain, ‘To remain innovative, we will change. This is for your students. Other schools don’t change, but that may not be what’s best for the students.’ Most of the families come around, and are very supportive of what we’re doing.

The schedule change is an adjustment for the teachers, right in the middle of the year. But they appreciate that their input has an immediate effect. Multi-age cohorts only work well if we retain our teachers to work with students over the three years, so we must listen to the teachers who know their students. We ask: what do you need to achieve the vision? If they say a new schedule would work well, then we have the flexibility to change things. This can’t happen where there is more bureaucracy.”

Aveson does do test prep, mainly to help students understand the context: Why do they take the test? What questions are involved? What will the test-taking setting be like? But we don’t make a practice of teaching to the test—we drilled for just a couple of weeks. As a back-up, throughout the year students regularly log on to Study Island, a software Aveson subscribes to. Study Island exposes students to more

traditional test tasking (e.g. multiple choice). This gives students practice, and we feel better about the development of their test-taking capacity given our deep vs. wide strategy. Our strategy seems to work: students were ready. Elementary students scored an 871 API – that’s way above average. Secondary students’ API was 788.”

A note for context: According to GreatSchools.net, “In 2007-2008 California used the Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) program to measure student learning in grades 2 through 11. The STAR program includes the California Standards Tests (CSTs), a series of standards-based assessments, and the California Achievement Test, Sixth Edition Survey (CAT/6), a national, norm-referenced test. California also administers the California High School Exit Examination (CAHSEE), which high school students must pass to graduate.

Using tests in the STAR program and the CAHSEE, California assigns each school and district an Academic Performance Index (API) rating ranging from 200 to 1000, with a statewide API goal of 800 for all schools.” <http://www.greatschools.net/cgi-bin/showarticle/achievement>

Cultural notes:

- Aveson’s course offerings include culinary arts. They converted part of the food-preparation area into a culinary demonstration area. Older students also participate in serving food to younger students. This is to promote a positive school community. AEC has a goal of students one day operating their own coop; developing and selling their own food products and contributing the revenues to the school.



- An Aveson parent voluntarily offered to work with students during their project time to develop and learn how to play instruments, in addition to learning the history of the instruments. In the second picture below, you can see a black rectangular structure with PVC pipes emerging. That’s an organ.



Students are also developing a solar oven with this parent, pictured below.



- Students share responsibility for site custodial services. Below, a student is sweeping while others spend the end of the Friday in the school yard. Students clean at the end of every day and then spend “circle time” reflecting on today and preparing for tomorrow.



- iPods are not allowed during the beginning of lunch hour to promote interaction among the students. At other times, teachers are more open about iPod use. Especially during project time, this helps some students to concentrate.
- In conversations with middle school students, some reported there was too little discipline and others said that there was too much.
- In conversations with middle school students, some said they would continue on to high school at Aveson. Some said they weren't sure. Two said they wanted to go to a "real" high school because they sensed it would better prepare them for the "real world". They would get to go to prom and use iPods during the full lunch period and have a bigger and more diverse social experience. Bean said this is a common discussion among ninth graders last year. During the last week of school, however, they were far more certain that they would return to Aveson for the following year. E|E observers discussed later that the students' sense of the real world can be constructed by pop culture.
- At times, students are involved in mentoring students from younger learning cohorts.