

Alaska Natives Take the Lead

In August, 2005 the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) released a report on “Status and Trends in the Education of American Indians and Alaska Natives” (<http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2005108>). While there continue to be significant gaps between the educational performance of Native American students and that of non-Native students, the report indicates that substantial gains have been made in recent years in the number of Native students who have completed high school and gone on to college. Given these positive trend lines, several national studies are now underway to try to identify just what it is that is contributing to this improvement in educational attainment by Native American students.

Here in Alaska, as well as in other parts of the country, one of the factors that appears to be contributing to the increased success of Native students is greater attention by schools and communities to utilizing the local language and culture as a way to make education more meaningful for the students. While NCES and other federal agencies are researching the impact of language and culture-based educational strategies on learning, Native educators from throughout Alaska have taken their own initiative to implement programs that bring their knowledge systems and ways of knowing into the educational systems. Following is a brief description of a few of those initiatives and how they are seeking to improve educational opportunities for all students in Alaska.

One such program has been the Alaska Rural Systemic Initiative, which was implemented throughout the state over the past ten years by the Alaska Federation of Natives with funding from the National Science Foundation. The AKRSI sought to help teachers and schools to tap into the knowledge base in the local communities through initiatives such as Academies of Elders, cultural atlases, Native educator associations, culturally relevant curriculum, cultural camps and culturally responsive teaching practices. All of this has been drawn together into a coordinated set of proven educational strategies as outlined in the “Alaska Standards for Culturally Responsive Schools” and made available through the Alaska Native Knowledge Network web site (www.ankn.uaf.edu).

As Native educators have become more involved in local initiatives through their regional Native educator associations, they have extended their influence into several educational arenas, including curriculum development, teacher education, Native literature and educational policy. As a result, several new statewide Native education advocacy initiatives have been implemented to support and represent a Native voice in education throughout the state. These include the First Alaskans Institute (<http://www.firstalaskans.org/>), which has sponsored several statewide Education Summits and reports on the status of Alaska Native education; the Alaska Native Education Association (<http://www.ankn.uaf.edu/NPE/ANEA/>), which has recently been formed to represent the statewide interests of the regional Native educator associations; and the Honoring Alaska’s Indigenous Literature working group (<http://www.ankn.uaf.edu/IKS/HAIL/index.html>), which has taken an active role in

critiquing literature by and about Alaska Natives and establishing an award program for Native authors.

All of these initiatives have placed a strong emphasis on improving the ability of teachers to utilize more culturally responsive approaches in their teaching. This has included local and regional cultural orientation programs, as well as preparing more Alaska Natives as teachers. Most prominent in the latter efforts has been the Preparing Indigenous Teachers for Alaska's Schools (PITAS) program offered through the University of Alaska Southeast Professional Education Center, with comparable efforts underway at UAF and UAA as well. PITAS draws on a network of Mentor Teachers from partner districts to recruit and work with potential future Native teachers in the high schools and then offers a Summer Institute and financial support to assist the students through their entry into college.

One such PITAS-sponsored Future Teachers of Alaska club is located at Mt. Edgecumbe High School, where students participate in a variety of teaching activities to obtain skills needed for working with adults and children in an educational setting. FTA students also assist with the "Babes and Books" program at the community library, help with community children's fairs and carnivals, and perform volunteer services at the White Elephant thrift store on Saturdays.

Another "grow-your-own" Future Teachers of Alaska program has been implemented through the University of Alaska in partnership with the Alaska Federation of Natives, Alaska Teacher Placement, Lower Kuskokwim School District, Bering Strait School District and Nome Public Schools, with funding from the U.S. Department of Education. Each partner school district creates local future teacher clubs that address their unique educational needs and utilize the resources available within the school, community and district. In Nome the students studied the Alaska Standards for Teachers, developed their own philosophy of education, and helped the district identify the following qualities of a competent teacher:

- Teachers have high expectations of the students.
- Teachers care about the community and the students.
- Teachers incorporate the cultures of all students.
- Teachers are honest and fair.
- Teachers are friendly and make learning fun.
- Teachers understand human behavior and classroom management.
- Teachers are strict but flexible.
- Teachers know how to teach using different methods.

One of the newest initiatives on the Alaska Native education scene is the Effie Kokrine Charter School, which opened its doors August 18th on the Howard Luke Campus in Fairbanks. The school was created by a group of parents, community members and teachers over a period of several years to address the persistent high drop-out rate for Native students in the Fairbanks North Star Borough Schools. The school is open to all students grades 7-12 and the student enrollment on opening day of EKCS exceeded the

minimum target of 150 students to be eligible for full state funding as a Charter School. The curriculum of the school is intended to provide students with a strong foundation in Native cultural traditions as well as prepare them for academic success in the larger society.

The Effie Kokrine Charter School is governed by an Academic Policy Committee made up of parents, teachers and others associated with the development of the EKCS program. The Fairbanks Native Association is serving as the initial sponsoring organization for the school, though EKCS operates as a public school with a governing board of its own, established under a charter approved by the Fairbanks North Star Borough School District and the Alaska State Board of Education.

In an effort to provide students with a well grounded educational experience rooted in the social, political, economic and cultural contexts of Interior Alaska, the EKCS curriculum immerses them in numerous real-world projects and activities, all of which are organized around a series of 12 themes, including a focus on family, cultural expression, health and wellness, outdoor survival, applied technology and exploring horizons. Within each of these themes, students learn the academic knowledge and skills associated with the Alaska State Content and Performance Standards, as well as the knowledge, skills and values associated with the Alaska Standards for Culturally Responsive Schools, as adopted by the State Board of Education.

To provide flexibility for the kind of in-depth experiences in real-world settings that such a curriculum calls for, EKCS has been organized around a block schedule in which students enroll in one course/module at a time for three weeks, rather than the 50-minute period, six-classes-a-day structure that is typical of most high schools. This allows students to participate in extended field trips, internships and community research and service projects in which they apply the knowledge and skills they acquire in the classroom setting to real-life conditions in the community. EKCS also sponsors an intramural sports program, including participation in the Native Youth Olympics and the World Eskimo and Indian Olympics.

To take further advantage of the learning opportunities that such a curriculum structure provides, the EKCS calendar is organized on a year-round seasonal basis with several month-long breaks distributed throughout the year, rather than one three-month break in the summer. That way students can participate in and learn from the many educational opportunities that take place during every season of the year, while meeting the same graduation requirements of other students in the Fairbanks North Star Borough School District.

While the data reported by the National Center for Education Statistics indicates that much work needs to be done to achieve parity in educational opportunity for Alaska Native students, it is clear from the initiatives outlined above that progress is being made. Native people are taking the lead in implementing innovative new programs that begin to address some of the most critical issues facing schools throughout the state. It is

important for students, teachers, parents and communities to join these efforts to achieve from the bottom up what hasn't been achieved from the top down.

Following is contact information for the initiatives described in this article:

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