

Alaska's commitment to provide a 'neighborhood school' for every child

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In 1976, the state of Alaska made a legal commitment to provide a high school program in the home community of *all* students in the state, regardless of the size, remoteness, or cultural composition of the community.

As a result, a major effort has been underway for the past three years to construct facilities and develop programs for more than 100 new rural high schools.

This effort has been going on in communities where students were previously required to leave home and attend boarding schools and boarding home programs (in Anchorage and Fairbanks) to obtain a high school education. Today, most students are able to attend high school in their home community and maintain contact with their families and their cultural heritage.

This bold move has brought about some major changes in the educational landscape of Alaska, with the addition of many new buildings, teachers, and programs. But these changes did not occur without confronting some enormous challenges and difficulties.

Today, some basic questions still remain unanswered about the means of delivering quality education in small rural communities. These questions include:

- What are the minimum "ingredients" necessary to establish a basic high school program?

- How can an adequate high school program be offered in a remote rural community with ten or fewer students?

- How can a high school curriculum be adapted to meet the needs of students in an enormously varied and rapidly changing multicultural environment?

In an effort to address questions like these, the state of Alaska—with some help from the U.S. Office of Environmental Education—established the Small High Schools Project in 1977 at the University of Alaska.

For two years now the project staff has been working with emerging small high schools throughout the state to identify which approaches seem to be working and which do

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not—and to offer assistance with regard to teacher training, curriculum materials, and general program development. Out of this effort have come numerous recommendations for alternative approaches in the development of programs in small high schools.

One of the first tasks was to examine the traditional subject matter in a high school curriculum to see how well it was suited to the needs of students in rural Alaskan communities.

Because of the varied and changing cultural patterns and the limited size of the communities in which small high schools operate, the *content-oriented* curriculum taught by numerous specialists appeared inappropriate for rural Alaska. A new curriculum was developed, therefore, emphasizing *the learning of skills through direct involvement in real-life activities*.

Three major areas of study

The new design is built around three broad areas of study. *Communication arts* draws together the language arts and fine arts with a focus on developing various kinds of communication skills. *Environmental studies* brings together the fields of science and math in the development of critical-thinking and problem-solving skills. *Cultural ecology* focuses on decision-making and the development of personal, social, and general-life "survival skills."

Within these three areas, a school can cover nearly all of the basic skills, as well as address numerous locally adapted components of a high school curriculum.

The three teachers needed to offer such a program are also able to utilize many of the resources in the local community. Such resources are readily available and well suited to the three areas of study. (Where there are fewer than three teachers in a school, two or three neighboring schools are able to band together, forming one program and sharing teachers and other resources across communities.)

Since most of the rural communities in Alaska are relatively isolated, *travel* is an important means of expanding the curriculum to include a wider range of learning opportunities for students. Most schools have travel

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programs that expose students to the cultural, geographic, and economic diversity of the state. And, in many cases, these programs take the students outside to the "lower 48" states or to other countries.

Travel is a way of life in Alaska. Single school districts can cover 50,000 square miles, and students must sometimes cross four time zones to play a rival team in varsity competition. It is easy for schools, therefore, to make travel an integral part of the curriculum, encompassing many subjects that would otherwise have to be learned through second-hand experiences.

In one school, the teachers built an entire year's curriculum around a six-week bus tour of the United States.

The students spent the first half of the year planning and raising money for the trip. They assembled—and studied—materials on the areas they wanted to visit. They made all the necessary travel arrangements and prepared an assembly program to present to schools along the way (in exchange for a place to sleep, often-times the gym floor). They corresponded with numerous travel agents, schools, park rangers, congressmen, and private individuals (to set up their itinerary). And they calculated all of their expenses and raised nearly \$15,000 to help pay for the trip.

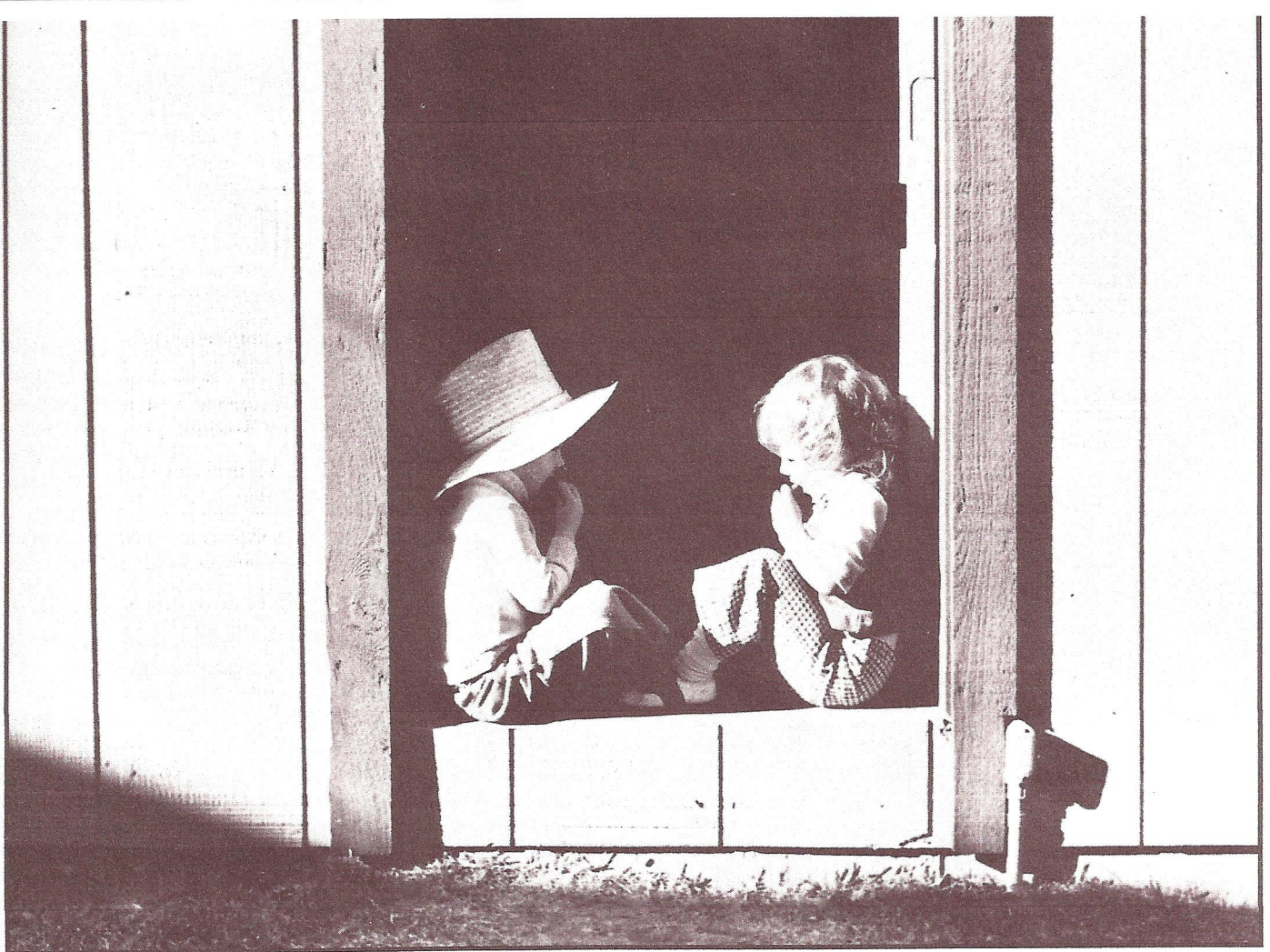
When they came home, they prepared a presentation for their families and friends to show them what they had seen and learned. In the process, they found they had learned a great deal about things like writing, math, history, geography, government, and economics. But most of all, they had learned a lot about themselves.

For example, they had a renewed sense of appreciation of their own community and how it compared with other places in the world. The unhurried pace of rural Alaska looked pretty good after a visit to places like Washington, D.C., and Los Angeles.

The importance of projects

"Projects" provide one of the most popular and versatile approaches to providing students with real-life learning experiences.

Projects can be designed to "fit" nearly any subject for nearly any length of time, to "fit" almost any situation, and to involve any number



of students. In addition to the learning that is derived from projects, the students involved in them also provide useful services to the local community.

In one rural community, for example, high school students operate the local restaurant and bakery and earn enough of a profit to pay for trips for students to Anchorage and Fairbanks. In other communities students operate the store, build cabins and boats, repair snowmachines, publish newspapers, prepare community histories, provide a catalog-ordering service, and, in various other ways, *learn by doing*.

But students involved in projects learn more than the skills necessary to build a boat or conduct an inventory. They also learn how to make a decision; how to communicate; how to solve problems; how to act responsibly—as well as other skills that will “carry over” into anything else they do later on in life.

For students growing up in a rapidly changing cultural environment like Alaska—in which grandparents still live off the land or the sea while parents run large corporations—these

process skills are likely to be more adaptable to the kinds of options they will face as adults than the usual *subject-matter skills* emphasized in traditional high school programs.

Chips off the new block

In order to fit the kinds of projects outlined above into a high school program in a way that’s significant, it’s necessary to make some basic adjustments as to the way such programs are organized.

In particular, it is necessary to restructure the class schedule from the 50-minutes-per-class routine to a new “routine” that educators have labeled *block scheduling*. One of the nice things about the new routine is that students can pursue a learning activity for extended periods of time—from several hours to several weeks.

Small rural schools are especially suited to this approach, because they have fewer students, teachers, and classes to deal with, and have readier access to resources outside the school. And students find this approach more suited to their needs because it

doesn’t tie them down to a complex schedule.

Small rural high schools can provide a strong, personalized program of education built upon resources within the community and responsive to the individual needs of the student.

To accomplish this, however, small rural high schools must look beyond the traditional structure and function of a high school program, and explore alternatives that take advantage of the very feature that makes these schools unique—their smallness.

Small rural high schools in Alaska are just beginning to explore some of these alternatives. Where appropriate, their counterparts in the other states—if not doing so already—might give this approach a try. Both teachers and students should love it. □

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