

TWO CULTURES, ONE SCHOOL

St. Mary's, Alaska*

A Case Study Prepared By

Ray Barnhardt

***Every Yup'ik Is Responsible To All Other Yup'iks For
Survival Of Our Cultural Spirit, And The Values
And Traditions Through Which It Survives. Through
Our Extended Family, We Retain, Teach, and Live
Our Yup'ik Way.***

Posted in various conspicuous places around the school and community of St. Mary's, Alaska is a poster containing the above statement, followed by a list of values which parents and teachers are encouraged to teach and reinforce in their association with the children of the community. The poster, along with many other initiatives, reflects the commitment of the St. Mary's School Board to create a unified home and school environment in which the children of St. Mary's grow up prepared to live the "Yup'ik Way", as well as the ways of the world beyond St. Mary's. This case study will attempt to document how they have gone about this task, and the role that the school in St. Mary's plays in nurturing the cultural values of the community it serves.

The Community

St. Mary's is a bilingual Yup'ik Eskimo community of approximately 500 residents located on a hillside near the confluence of the Andreafsky and Yukon Rivers in western Alaska. The community was established in 1948 when the St. Mary's Catholic Mission was relocated to higher ground from near the mouth of the Yukon to avoid annual flooding. A nearby site had previously served as the location for the Russian trading post of Andreafsky, which was closed down after hostilities erupted between the Russians and the Yup'ik people in the area.

The economic base of St. Mary's is a mixture of subsistence and cash, with the latter drawn primarily from commercial fishing and from the community's role as a transportation and service hub. The community services about ten villages in the surrounding region, utilizing the adjacent 6,000 foot gravel runway and the daily jet service from Anchorage, 440 air miles away. A twenty-four mile road links St. Mary's with the nearby community of Mountain Village, but otherwise travel to and from the area is by plane, boat or snow machine. The

¹The information for this case study was drawn from several sources, including a school accreditation self-study and visitation committee report completed during the 1988-89 school year; a report on bilingual education in the St. Mary's School District prepared by Ramona Suetopka-Duerre in May, 1989; and a site visit by the author in September, 1989. Sincere appreciation is extended to the members of the St. Mary's school and community who so graciously gave of their time to assist in the preparation of the case study.

community has several local stores for purchasing groceries, hardware and outdoor equipment, which are supplemented with mail orders and purchases shipped in by air or barge service from Anchorage or Fairbanks via the Yukon River. Phone communication and television reception are provided by satellite, though much local communication is still done by CB radio, with the Yup'ik language serving as an important medium of exchange. A small community library, two playgrounds, and a teen center are available to community members for recreation, along with the school facilities.

The School

For the first twenty years of its existence, schooling in St. Mary's was provided by the Catholic Mission, which also offered boarding facilities for students from villages throughout the region. As time went on, the enrollment in the mission school grew to the point where they were no longer able to accommodate the lower grades, so they sought to shift responsibility for the elementary portion of the program to the community. The people of St. Mary's were reluctant, however, to turn the schooling of their children over to the Bureau of Indian Affairs or State-Operated School System, so in 1969, they incorporated as a "city" and formed the St. Mary's City School District, whereby they would be able to operate their own educational system to meet the particular social, cultural and economic needs of their community. St. Mary's was one of the first villages of its size in the state to exercise the option of incorporation as a city to gain control of their school. Many others communities have since followed in their footsteps.

The first five-member school board was elected in 1969, and they began operating a pre-school and kindergarten program in a log cabin constructed by people in the community, with a local resident serving as the first certificated teacher. In 1970 they rented facilities from the mission and took over the elementary program, grades one through six, allowing the mission to focus on the high school level. In 1974 they opened the Elicarvicuar Elementary School, serving grades one through eight in a newly built facility, and in 1982 they added the Andreafsky High School. The Mission School closed with its last graduating class in 1987, leaving the St. Mary's City School District responsible for all elementary and secondary education services in the community. This is accomplished with an annual budget of \$1.8 million, 1% of which comes from a local sales tax, 82% of which is provided by the state, and the balance of which is obtained from federal and other outside sources.

The school currently serves 20 pre-schoolers and 110 students K-12, over 90% of whom are Yup'ik Eskimo and most of whom speak Yup'ik as a first or second language. Classes range in size from six to twelve students for each grade, with a total of 43 students at the seventh through twelfth grade levels. St. Mary's students score slightly below the 50th percentile on nationally standardized tests, though as a whole, they are near the top when compared to similar communities and schools in rural Alaska. The drop-out rate averages less than six percent, with another six percent withdrawing temporarily each year for various reasons, most often due to pregnancy. Over half the parents in the community have completed high school, and, according to the 1989 school accreditation report, most of the current graduates go on to some form of post-secondary institution. Taken all together and weighed against comparable

schools in Alaska and elsewhere, the measures of schooling outcomes outlined above indicate that St. Mary's is achieving exceptional success in its educational endeavors.

The instructional staff of the school consists of thirteen full-time and three part-time certificated teachers, including one full time and one part-time special education teacher, one half-time counselor and one half-time media specialist. Three of the instructional staff are Yup'ik speaking, and six hold a masters degree. In addition, the school contains five non-certificated instructors, along with two secretaries, five custodial and maintenance personnel, a program director, a business manager, a principal, and a superintendent. The annual turnover rate of professional personnel in St. Mary's at the present time is 20%, compared to an average turnover rate of 35% in rural Alaskan school districts as a whole.

The St. Mary's Philosophy and Goals

Throughout its existence, the St. Mary's School Board has had as one of its primary concerns the integration of Yup'ik ways into the educational experiences of the children it serves. The president of the school board, who has held that position for more than twenty years, has a strong commitment to supporting and nurturing the Yup'ik language and culture as an integral part of the school program. This has been consistently supported by other board members and is reflected in the school district philosophy and goals, as indicated by the following statements:

The philosophy of the St. Mary's School District is to provide the most beneficial and profitable education program possible. The district prepares students to cope with the challenges of a continually changing community and world. The school promotes the development of well-rounded students, intellectually, emotionally, physically, spiritually and culturally.

We believe the school will help St. Mary's Yup'ik students to preserve and maintain their own cultural identity and language, [and to] develop the skills and knowledge necessary for successfully dealing with, and living among other cultures and people. With this philosophy in mind, a four-part educational curriculum has been developed: a regular academic program, a bilingual/bicultural program, a special education program, [and] a vocational education program.

The first of nine goals enumerated by the St. Mary's School District as the purpose for its existence is as follows:

*** Help St. Mary's youth to preserve and maintain their own cultural identity and language.**

Of the ten objectives listed under the goal addressing the academic emphases of the district curriculum are the following:

- * Provide the critical components of a social studies education knowledge base, [including] democratic beliefs, values and skills. This knowledge will be integrated with the values and beliefs of the Yup'ik Eskimo to enhance a firm foundation in today's global society.**
- * Teach our students, both Eskimo and/or other cultures, the [Yup'ik] language, traditions, values, and arts and crafts, so that we can express our pride and knowledge of our Yup'ik people. It is vital for the survival of our people and our culture.**

The people of St. Mary's seek to have the school recognize and treat their culture as a living culture, rather than as an artifact of the past. Being Yup'ik is not just a matter of carrying on Yup'ik tradition, but encompasses practices and beliefs that have been borrowed and adapted from other sources to make Yup'ik culture what it is today. They view Yup'ik culture as having the continuing capacity to provide the social, emotional and intellectual foundation from which to participate in and contribute to a "global society". Yup'ik culture is to be given equal footing and recognition in the schooling process, along with the knowledge and traditions that are imbedded in the function of the school as an externally derived vehicle for learning about other cultures. Students are not expected to make a choice of studying Yup'ik to stay in St. Mary's and live the Yup'ik lifestyle, or studying "academic" subjects to be able to move to Anchorage and live the life of a "gussuk" (white man). Instead, students are prepared for life, from a Yup'ik perspective. Once so prepared, they are free to choose to live where they want, and they do.

The Curriculum

Clearly, the St. Mary's School Board is determined to prepare students to survive in both the Yup'ik world and in the world at large. To accomplish this task, they have constructed an educational program that attempts to strike a balance between conventional academic and vocational subject matter and the language, traditions and perspectives of the Yup'ik Eskimo. The regular academic program consists of the usual subjects of mathematics, language arts, social studies, science, health and physical education, with fine arts and computer education distributed across the curriculum. Integrated within these subjects, however, are a variety of components with a Yup'ik emphasis, ranging from Yup'ik oriented lessons in regular subjects to extra required courses in Yup'ik language and cultural skills.

All students are required to participate in the Yup'ik language/skills program throughout their attendance at St. Mary's schools. At the elementary level, the emphasis is on Yup'ik language development, moving from an emphasis on oral skills in the lower grades to literacy skills and vocabulary development in the upper grades. The Yup'ik language skills are linked to other cultural skills and taught through a combination of games, songs, story telling, dance, artwork, and patterned practice drills, with most of the instructional materials developed locally by the Yup'ik language teachers. In addition to language development, elementary students are taught traditional Yup'ik skills associated with a subsistence lifestyle.

At the secondary level, the emphasis shifts from Yup'ik language to subsistence skills, with special courses, taught by local experts, required each year. Ninth and tenth graders focus on making seal skin mukluks, fur caps, parkas, fish traps, and fish nets. Tenth graders learn Yup'ik music composition, including writing their own songs and constructing traditional drums. Eleventh and twelfth graders learn traditional sled and boat building, including the tools and vocabulary associated with each activity. All of these survival and subsistence skills are put to use through student participation in traditional fall, winter and spring camps out on the tundra or rivers with their families.

The purpose for the Yup'ik skills requirement in the St. Mary's school curriculum is stated by the district as follows:

.....to foster and develop the students' knowledge and appreciation of their own cultural heritage by providing opportunities for them to practice the unique skills needed to preserve the Yup'ik lifestyle. Another purpose is to provide motivation for students to increase their average daily attendance in school and to reduce the dropout rate by providing a learning environment that is culturally relevant and intrinsically motivating.

In addition to the Yup'ik language and skills requirement in the St. Mary's curriculum, the district also requires students to complete a course in "Alaska Native Studies" as a part of their social studies requirement. The following description of the course indicates the emphasis it places on contemporary Alaska Native issues, particularly those that derive from the 1971 passage of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act:

This course concentrates on helping students identify who they are, how they relate to others and where they fit into the present time, space and political circumstances. It will contain an historical overview of the relationships of Native Americans, and Alaska Natives in particular, with foreign emigration and the development of present day cultural and political bias and conflict. It examines through student debate, research and role playing, supplemented by instructor lecture and technical guidance, present day Native issues, political involvement, choices and opportunities for personal involvement. Alaskan social relationships, cultural distinctions, geographic and climatic influences and developing political structures and world view will be compared with ideas for political solution to the problems of Alaska Native cultural survival.

Along with the cultural components outlined above, which are integral to the St. Mary's school curriculum, the district also maintains a variety of supplementary programs funded through special federal grants, such as Indian Education, Johnson-O'Malley, and Title VII Bilingual Education, which make up 5% of the school district budget. These programs come under the purview of a Native Education Committee, which the school board has established to help oversee categorical programs and make recommendations on cultural matters. The

categorical funds are used to obtain supplementary staff and resources to enhance regular classroom instruction by providing support for the infusion of Yup'ik elements throughout the curriculum.

The integration of Yup'ik ways into the curriculum remains, however, one of the most difficult issues facing the St. Mary's schools. Numerous problems continue to frustrate the district's efforts to achieve a culturally balanced educational program that can satisfy the diverse needs of the students and the sometimes conflicting perspectives of the parents, school staff, and funding agencies. Of particular concern have been a shortage of Yup'ik staff and curriculum materials, turnover of personnel, and limited resources. In an effort to address these problems in a comprehensive manner, the district contracted with an outside consultant in the spring of 1989 to conduct a "wholistic evaluation" of their Yup'ik programs, including an extensive survey of students, parents, teachers and administrators perceptions of what was being done (Suetopka-Duerre, 1989).

The survey indicated continued strong support for the Yup'ik programs from parents and board members, but it also indicated a lack of support for the programs by some of the teaching staff. Community members viewed the programs as a necessary and integral part of the schools responsibility, with comments such as the following:

The board is 100% behind the programs. No matter what the administrative and teaching staff turnover may be, we feel Yup'ik values are important and that a proper place to learn and to teach Yup'ik language and values is in the school.

Teachers, on the other hand, expressed concern that the time spent on Yup'ik language and culture was detracting from other studies:

Yes, [the Yup'ik program is] beneficial, but the amount of time is really a problem. I don't have as much time for the English curriculum.

The amount of time spent in the Yup'ik program is just about right. On the other hand, test scores are low and kids need more regular instruction time to improve their basic skills. A lot can be done in one hour of English instruction.

The lack of support on the teachers' part was attributed to the lack of "adequate program specification" and inadequate guidance on how to integrate the programs into the regular curriculum. Teachers offered their own observations on what needed to be done to strengthen the programs:

The Yup'ik programs need to be integrated with the regular curriculum so students can work toward a single goal, such as communicating with people at different levels and showing signs of intelligence and respect.

In a set of recommendations aimed at addressing some of the issues raised in the survey and strengthening the role of the Yup'ik programs in the curriculum, the consultant outlined a series of actions for the school district to consider. These included the adoption of more explicit and unambiguous goals for the programs, the development of a more integrated Yup'ik literacy emphasis and sequence throughout the K-12 curriculum, the establishment of a resource center for Yup'ik teaching materials as well as information on multicultural curricula and teaching methods, the provision of on-going bilingual and multicultural training for all Yup'ik and non-Yup'ik teachers, and a systematic analysis of how well current teaching practices match the Yup'ik and English language usage and learning patterns of the students.

As the school board and teachers continue to address these issues, other districts are taking an increased interest in what St. Mary's has been doing with their Yup'ik programs. The Alaska State Writing Consortium, under the aegis of the Alaska State Department of Education, recently prepared a videotape of one of the high school classrooms in which the non-Yup'ik teacher and the Yup'ik aide demonstrate how they have adapted the "writing process" to the teaching of both English and Yup'ik literacy (Calkins, Campbell, *et al*, 1989). The tape is now being distributed to school districts throughout the state. Through its own initiative, the St. Mary's School Board recently obtained the support of the "Coalition of Western Alaska School Boards", representing seven rural school districts, for a resolution calling for the University of Alaska to increase on-site training opportunities for local residents to prepare to move into professional roles in the schools of the region.

After twenty years of effort, the school board is more determined than ever to find ways for the school to be a positive force in the protection and perpetuation of the cultural heritage of the community. To the school board members, the problems outlined above are not new - they are just one more step in a sustained effort to bring the curriculum of the school in line with the aspirations of the community. As one school board member put it:

Today, the school is addressing just one small part of what it means to be Yup'ik. You have to go deeper than Yup'ik language and skills. You have to look at things through Yup'ik eyes. There is also art and music and poetry in everything we do.

Beyond the Curriculum

While the Yup'ik language and cultural skills component of the St. Mary's school curriculum has been an important focus of the districts efforts to respond to the cultural makeup of the community, it has not been the only focus. A concerted effort has also been put into engaging the parents and community more actively in the educational process as well, by bringing coherence and consistency to the kinds of values and attitudes that are promoted between the home and the school. One of the most explicit manifestations of this effort has been the poster outlining the values to be encouraged and reinforced by all members of the community. The list of "Yup'ik values", adapted from a similar list generated by the Inupiat Eskimo people in the Northwest Arctic region, reads as follows:

With Guidance and Support From Elders

We Must Teach Our Children Yup'ik Values:

**Love For Children
Respect For Others
Sharing
Humility
Hard Work
Spirituality
Cooperation
Family Roles
Knowledge Of Family Tree
Knowledge Of Language
Hunter Success
Domestic Skills
Avoid Conflict
Humor
Respect For Tribe
Respect For Land
Respect For Nature**

The St. Mary's school and community have adopted a variety of practices, many of which are now established traditions, in an effort to reinforce these articulated values. At the beginning of the new school year each fall, the parents sponsor a traditional community potlatch in preparation for the new year, during which they present the students with symbolic gifts, such as pens and pencils, and wish them well in their upcoming studies. The students reciprocate by sponsoring their own community potlatch in the spring, at which they present the Yup'ik songs and dances they have composed during the year and express their thanks for the support they have received. A school-community newsletter is put out in both Yupik and English, and at the annual graduation ceremonies in May, the valedictorian and salutorian each present their speech to the graduating class and the community in both languages. At all of these events, elders are given a special place of honor and their guidance is sought and respected.

Parents are encouraged to include their children in traditional subsistence activities whenever possible, and they are invited to the school to demonstrate and share their skills with students. Throughout all of these activities - at home, in the classroom and on the tundra - the values outlined above are modeled and reinforced. By identifying an explicit set of cultural values that all members of the community and school can be encouraged to promote and adhere to, the school district has brought focus to their efforts and has made it possible for parents and teachers to unite in a coordinated education/socialization process for the children of St. Mary's.

In Summary

For the past twenty years, the St. Mary's School District has pursued the goal of bringing the educational experiences provided by the school in line with the social, cultural and economic aspirations of the Yup'ik Eskimo community it serves. With strong and sustained leadership

from the school board and with continuity provided by a stable and dedicated local staff, the district has sought to bring the communities wishes to bear on the school through a culturally articulated curriculum that seeks to balance the learning of Yup'ik ways with the learning needed to survive in the world beyond St. Mary's. This continues to be a delicate balancing act, but the board is committed to pushing ahead, and the higher-than-average presence of St. Mary's graduates in institutions of higher education and in leadership roles in the state, indicates that its perseverance is paying off.

Drawing from the St. Mary's experience, we can extract some valuable lessons to guide other schools and communities in their efforts to establish "culturally relevant" educational programs for their students.

1. The most critical factor in the success of any educational effort such as that described in this case study is its initiation from the cultural community being served and the strong, sustained and unequivocal support provided by representatives of that community. Without such commitment and persistence, the initiatives often fall by the wayside within a few years, victims of the frequent turnover in school personnel and the inevitable redirection and reconstruction of programs that accompany such turnover.
2. The St. Mary's experience indicates that it is possible to approach the infusion of culturally appropriate content and practices into the curriculum through an integrative rather than an additive or supplementary approach. By carefully delineating the knowledge, skills and values students are to learn in culturally appropriate terms, and employing teachers who possess the necessary local and global cultural knowledge and perspective, it is possible for a school district to provide an integrated educational program that builds on the local cultural environment and indigenous knowledge base as a foundation for learning about the larger world beyond. Learning about ones own cultural heritage and community should not be viewed as supplanting opportunities to learn about others, but rather as providing an essential infrastructure through which all other learning is constructed. It is a reality (and should be recognized as an advantage) of today's existence that cultural minority students have a foot in more than one world, so their education should reflect the symbiotic and synergistic potential of that existence. St. Mary's is still seeking ways to fully capitalize on that reality in the schooling experience they provide their children, but they have come farther than most communities in integrating their own culture into the school curriculum.
3. The school cannot do the job alone. The parents and school board members in St. Mary's take an active interest in the education of their children, both in and out of school. The values and skills to be taught in school are the same as those encouraged in the home and the community. Education is viewed as a community responsibility, with the school serving as one player, albeit a key one, in the process. That which is expected of students and the school is reinforced in explicit ways by the parents and the community, e.g., the community potlatch at the beginning of the school year. Parents are active participants and contribute their indigenous knowledge and expertise to the school as teachers. Students are expected to share what they have learned and demonstrate their skills to the

community in appropriate ways. Education is viewed in a wholistic manner, encompassing the totality of the students experiences.

4. A cultural system is more than the surface or visible attributes of the language, arts and crafts, eating habits and subsistence practices. For the people of St. Mary's, being Yup'ik Eskimo also means a way of thinking, a way of seeing, a way of behaving, a way of doing things, and a way of relating to the world around them. The Yup'ik language is a basic element of their cultural identity and its meaning is shaped by the person speaking it and the context in which it is used. Subsistence is a way of life, defined by relationships to the land and all other life supported by it. Education must take all of these aspects of Yup'ik existence into account if it is to be truly culturally appropriate. It is to that end that the St. Mary's School District is now turning its attention.

These and many other lessons can be gleaned from the experience of the community and school of St. Mary's in its efforts to accommodate two cultures in one school. But most of those lessons are of little use to others, unless they also possess the sense of cultural pride, dignity and determination that is reflected in the people of St. Mary's. There is no clearer manifestation of this than the Yup'ik values poster prominently displayed around the school and community, which concludes with the following phrase:

***By The Design Of Our Creator
We Were Created Yup'ik In Space And Time;
Proud, For Generations To Come,
Of The Values Given To Us By Our Creator.***

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St. Mary's Alaska

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December, 1989

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The School

For the first twenty years of its existence, schooling in St. Mary's was provided by the Catholic Mission, which also offered boarding facilities for students from villages throughout the region. As time went on, the enrollment in the mission school grew to the point where they were no longer able to accommodate the lower grades, so they sought to shift responsibility for the elementary portion of the program to the community. The people of St. Mary's were reluctant, however, to turn the schooling of their children over to the Bureau of Indian Affairs or State-Operated School System, so in 1969, they incorporated as a "city" and formed the St. Mary's City School District, whereby they would be able to operate their own educational system to meet the particular social, cultural and economic needs of their community. St. Mary's was one of the first villages of its size in the state to exercise the option of incorporation as a city to gain control of their school. Many others communities have since followed in their footsteps.

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