Journal of Research in Rural Education, Spring, 2001, Vol. 17, No. 1, 12-26

Reforming Education from the Inside-Out: A Study of Community Engagement and Educational Reform in Rural Alaska

James W. Kushman
Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory

Ray Barnhardt
University of Alaska Fairbanks

This paper presents a study of seven rural Alaska communities engaged in reforms designed to increase community engagement and parent involvement in education, leading ultimately to lasting school-community partnerships that benefit all students. The primary reform effort was called Alaska Onward to Excellence (AOTE), which took place in small rural communities spanning western, central, and southeast Alaska. A cross-case analysis, conducted by research teams including researchers, school practitioners, and community members, resulted in four key findings. First, reform efforts in small communities require an inside-out approach in which educators must first develop trusting relationships with community members, and then work with the community to design educational programs around the local place, language, and culture. Second, parents and teachers need to expand their conceptions of parent roles beyond the notion of parents supporting the school to include roles in which parents are active participants in school life and decisions. Third, school and district leaders must move from top-down to shared leadership so that the ownership for school reform is embedded in the community rather than with school personnel who constantly come and go. Finally, educators and educational reformers must recognize that education in rural Alaska has a larger purpose than teaching academic skills and knowledge.

Bonds among people, and between people and place, run deep in small rural communities. In rural Alaska, these bonds are intensified by dynamic cultural, climatic, and geographic features that can make life both rewarding and challenging at the same time. Especially strong bonds are forged through the cultural heritage of the Native people for whom rural Alaska is home, and who view their world as a unity of the human, spiritual, and natural realms (Kawagley, 1995). People in rural Alaska certainly experience their share of human conflict, but survival is sometimes a matter of coming together to achieve a higher purpose or goal.

In stark contrast to the strong human bonds and sense of place that can hold a small Alaskan community together, formal education in rural Alaska has been more often characterized by conflict than cohesion. The formal education system in rural Alaska is still very young, but its short history is marked by persistent cultural and political differences between indigenous people and the educational institutions serving them (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 1998). This study examines how two related reform mechanisms—community engagement and parent involvement—are being used in rural Alaska to change this historical pattern and achieve a more unified educational system. The dynamics of community engagement and parent involvement are examined, including the factors that help and hinder school-community partnerships and the changes that result when school and community work together. While rural Alaska is in many ways a unique place, there are lessons from this study that can be applied to rural schools anywhere, particularly those serving indigenous people.

The authors wish to thank the members of the research teams for their dedication and hard work in addressing some of the most intractable problems in rural education. Without their contributions and insights, this study would not have been possible. Senior researchers from the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory and University of Alaska Fairbanks contributed to this manuscript, as acknowledged in the case study excerpts throughout the paper.

This research was supported by funds from the National Institute on Education of At-Risk Students, Office of Educational Research & Improvement, U.S. Department of Education. The opinions and points of view expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the position of the funding agency and no official endorsement should be inferred.

Copies of the full case studies and final report are available from the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, and an Executive Summary is posted on the Alaska Native Knowledge Network web site at www.ankn.uaf.edu.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to James W. Kushman, Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 101 SW Main Street, Suite 500, Portland, OR 97204. (kushmanj@nwrel.org)

Engaging the Community in Educational Reforms

Community engagement and parent involvement hold promise as ways to improve and revitalize education at a time when the public's confidence in public schools is dwindling. Community engagement can be characterized as a quiet revolution occurring in large and small communities across the country that works towards inclusiveness, stronger consensus around educational goals, and real change in educational practice and outcomes. Community engagement does not necessarily lead to quick results. Instead, it represents a long-term investment in building ownership, capacity, and "social capital" for deeper changes in educational policy and practice (Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 1998). In rural areas, community engagement is especially important because public schools are often the most visible and accessible institutions for bringing people together around community concerns. In many rural communities there is a strong sense of local place and an essential connection between education, economic vitality, and community health. Community engagement can be a powerful force for social and educational integration in small rural communities.

Parent or family involvement is a related reform theme that speaks directly to partnerships between schools and parents (or other caregivers) for the purpose of strengthening parental expectations, student motivation, learning and study habits, and academic performance. Joyce Epstein (1991,1995; Epstein & Hollifield, 1996) and other researchers (Griffith, 1996; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Thorkildsen & Stein, 1998) provide evidence that parent involvement in the educational process reaps positive results for students, teachers, and parents. School-family partnerships are especially beneficial in leveling the effects of poverty by helping parents, teachers, and students in impoverished communities develop coordinated strategies that lead to high expectations for educational attainment as well as constructive learning habits. Successful partnerships can transcend the effects of poverty and social class by capitalizing on a strong sense of caring for children shared by parents and teachers even in the most impoverished communities. Successful partnerships require a strong and sustained effort on everyone's part (Epstein, 1995). This is particularly true in communities where parents have felt disenfranchised because of race, culture, or poverty. Successful partnerships not only depend on how welcome parents are made to feel by the school, but on parental beliefs about their role in the educational process. Parent role conceptions are influenced by many factors including social and church groups, race, social class, and basic beliefs about child development and child-rearing. Parent expectations about their involvement also depend on their own sense of efficacy. Parents with low educational attainment, for example, often see a very limited role for themselves in helping their own children succeed in school (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997).

Focus of the Study

The communities participating in this study were selected on the basis of their participation in a reform process called Alaska Onward to Excellence (AOTE). Through a foundation grant from the Meyer Memorial Trust, the Alaska Staff Development Network and the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) began designing AOTE in 1991 as a way to bring research-based practices to rural Alaska schools through a process that deeply involved the whole community in school improvement. In AOTE, school districts and village schools develop a partnership with community stakeholders (parents, elders, other community members, and students) in an attempt to implement new educational strategies around the community's educational goals. This school-community partnership was the focal point of our case studies. Our purpose in studying these communities was to better understand how community engagement, parent involvement, and school-community partnerships are developed and sustained. Communities engaged in AOTE provided an excellent opportunity to study how these concepts play out in small rural settings.

While AOTE, with its emphasis on community engagement and parent involvement, was the main reason for selecting these communities, it is important to point out that two other reform efforts were occurring at the same time. The Alaska Quality Schools Initiative (AQSI) was picking up steam as a state-driven reform effort stressing high learning standards, assessment benchmarks, teacher quality, and school-family partnerships. A third reform initiative—the Alaska Rural Systemic Initiative (AKRSI) in concert with the Alaska Rural Challenge—was aimed at integrating the formal education system and the indigenous knowledge systems across rural Alaska. These three simultaneous efforts to improve the educational system (described in more detail later) defined the larger reform context in which the key variables of community engagement and parent involvement were studied. They illustrate the complexity of educational reforms in rural Alaska. Unraveling this complexity was one of the study objectives.

Brief History of Education in Rural Alaska

The three reforms mentioned above are the most recent attempts to improve the formal education system in rural Alaska, a system that is still at the adolescent stage of development. Building upon the early 20th century missionary schools, a dual system of public education eventually emerged in rural Alaska by the early 1960s in the form of

federal Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and state-operated schools. As the 1970s unfolded, a continuing record of inadequate performance by the BIA and state-run schools, coupled with the ascendant economic and political power of Alaska Natives, led to the dissolution of the centralized systems and the establishment of 21 locally-controlled regional school districts serving rural communities. Native communities obtained political control of their elementary schools for the first time, while a new system of secondary schools was also emerging. A class-action lawsuit brought against the State of Alaska on behalf of rural Alaska Native secondary students led, in 1976, to the creation of 126 village high schools to serve rural communities. Previously, high school students had to leave home to attend boarding schools.

A constantly shifting array of legislative and regulatory policies impacting rural schools makes it clear that the education system in Alaska is still evolving and is far from a state of equilibrium. This is especially true in rural Alaska, where the chronic disparities in academic performance, ongoing dissonance between school and community, and yearly turnover of professional personnel place the educational system in a constant state of uncertainty and reconstruction. Rural schools still struggle to form an identity as they try to relate to the needs of their communities. Reform often becomes a never-ending cycle of buzzword solutions to complex problems. Within the last decade alone, rural education in one corner of the state or another has been subjected to variations of mastery learning, Madeline Hunter techniques, outcome-based education, total quality learning, site-based management, strategic planning, and many other imported quick fixes to long-standing endemic problems, right up to the current emphasis on high standards. The short life span of these well-intentioned but ill-fated reforms has only added more confusion to a system that is already teetering on the edge of chaos.

From a systemic perspective, there are some advantages to working with systems that are operating "at the edge of chaos," in that they are, paradoxically, more receptive to change as they seek some form of equilibrium (Waldrop, 1994). Such is the case for many school systems in rural Alaska, and thus gaining an understanding of the complexity and dynamics of educational reform was an important objective of this study.

The Seven Case Study Sites

The seven case study sites were a subset of 42 rural communities in 11 different school districts that had received training in the AOTE process from the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, with funding support from the Meyer Memorial Trust and several federal grants. As stated earlier, communities engaged in AOTE were viewed as places in which there was a serious attempt by the district and local schools to engage the community in the educational process. The seven specific sites were selected to be geographically representative of different rural areas of Alaska and to include villages of different size and ethnic make-up. The seven communities studied were:

- *Quinhagak* in the Lower Kuskokwim School District, on the Kuskokwim Bay
- *New Stuyahok* in the Southwest Region School District, northeast of Bristol Bay and Dillingham
- *Tuluksak* in the Yupiit School District, northeast of Bethel on the Kuskokwim River
- *Aniak* and *Kalskag* (treated as a single case study of neighboring villages) in the Kuspuk School District, northeast of Bethel on the Kuskokwim River
- *Koyukuk* in the Yukon-Koyukuk School District, west of Fairbanks at the confluence of the Koyukuk and Yukon Rivers
- *Tatitlek* in the Chugach School District, on Prince William Sound near Valdez
- *Klawock,* a single-site school district (Klawock City Schools) on Prince of Wales Island, in far southeastern Alaska near Ketchikan

These communities span western, central, and southeast Alaska and range in size from approximately 125 to 750 residents. Most of the communities are nearly 100% Alaska Native (primarily Yup'ik but also other groups including Athabascan and Tlingit Indians) or mixed-communities with significant Alaska Native heritage. These communities are remote villages or towns reached by small airplane. Their schools, which can serve as few as 20 or as many as 200 students in grades K–12, come under the supervision of separate school districts in a system of Regional Educational Attendance Areas. In rural village schools, students are typically educated in relatively modern school buildings (including a library and a gymnasium) and often in multigrade classrooms. Instruction in the early years may be in a Native language (such as Yup'ik) and most schools today try to incorporate at least some Alaska Native cultural components into the curriculum. While most teachers come from outside the state or region, community members often serve as classroom and bilingual aides (Barnhardt, 1994).

Major Reform Efforts in the Seven Communities

While the seven sites were diverse in their make-up and histories of local school reform, what they shared in common was the AOTE reform process. In AOTE, district and village leadership teams are trained to work towards a school-community partnership through several mechanisms: a series of school-community meetings to develop a vision, mission, and set of community-valued learning goals that everyone commits to; involvement of parents, elders, community members, and students on district and village leadership teams that guide a multi-year improvement process; and development of new educational strategies that stress parents, elders, and other community members as partners with the school in education.

As discussed earlier, there were at least two other major reform efforts occurring in these communities at the same time. The Alaska Quality Schools Initiative (AQSI) had its origins as the Alaska version of the national standards movement, driven by the establishment of content standards, coupled with a legislatively-mandated accountability system involving qualifying and benchmark exams for students, performance standards for professional staff, and accreditation standards and report cards for schools. Under these new state mandates, described as "a results-based system of school accountability" (Alaska Department of Education, 1998), there is less room for the diversity of individual, community, and cultural needs in rural Alaska. One similarity between Alaska Onward to Excellence and AQSI is an emphasis on parent, family, business, and community involvement, although AQSI has provided little direct assistance to schools in this area.

While the Alaska Onward to Excellence strategy has been focused on promoting community participation in defining educational priorities at the local level, and the Alaska Quality Schools Initiative has emphasized mandating standards for accountability from the state and national levels, the third systemic reform initiative—the Alaska Rural Systemic Initiative (AKRSI)—has pursued a strategy of engaging all levels in a coordinated effort aimed at systemic integration between the formal education system and the indigenous knowledge system of the community (Kawagley, 1995). The key catalyst for change around which AKRSI has been constructed is the "Alaska Standards for Culturally Responsive Schools," developed by Alaska Native educators working in the formal education system coupled with the Native elders as the culture-bearers for the indigenous knowledge system (Alaska Native Knowledge Network, 1998). From these standards has grown an emphasis on "pedagogy of place," in which traditional ways of knowing and teaching are used to engage students in academic learning by building on the surrounding physical and cultural environment. Educators at the state and local levels have been developing curriculum units, performance standards, and assessment measures that demonstrate the efficacy of integrating local materials and activities into the educational process.

Research Questions

Are community engagement and parent involvement viable routes to more lasting educational reforms or just another "flash in the pan" for rural Alaska? This was a central question for the seven case studies. More specifically, the analysis presented below was guided by two research questions:

1. What does it take for schools and communities to work together successfully to achieve common goals for rural Alaska Native students?

2. What factors help promote school-community partnerships in rural settings like Alaska, and how are these partnerships sustained over time?

Community Voice

In trying to address the research questions and in recognition of the types of reforms happening in rural Alaska at the time of the study, our case studies focused on a key variable we called *community voice.* Community voice captures the essence of what we believe to be the important elements of a productive educational partnership between schools and communities in remote Alaska villages. Our working definition of community voice included four components:

- *Shared decision making*— the extent to which community members (parents, elders, and others) have greater influence and decision-making power in educational matters

- *Integration of culture and language*—the extent to which Native language, culture, ways of knowing, and a community's sense of place are woven into daily curriculum and instruction

- *Parent/elder involvement in educating children*—the extent to which parents, elders, and others have a strong presence and visibility in the school and participate in their children's education at home

- *Partnership activities*—positive examples of the school and community working together to share responsibility for student success

This four-part framework helped provide a common focus for the seven case studies as we collected and analyzed data.

Methods: Participatory Research

Researchers, school personnel, and community members collaborated on this study, mirroring the very partnership process we were trying to understand. We used a participatory action research approach that treated school practitioners and community members as coresearchers rather than "subjects" of study (Argyris & Schon, 1991). Too often, research has been conducted *on* rather than *with* Alaska Native people, based on external frameworks and paradigms that do not recognize the issues, research questions, and worldviews of those under study. For each community, a senior researcher from the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory or University of Alaska Fairbanks led a small team of three to five school and community researchers who helped plan each case study, formulate guiding questions, collect data, and interpret results. In addition to the senior researcher, a typical team consisted of a school district practitioner, a village school practitioner, one or two non-school community members, and in some cases a high school student. The teams included both Alaska Natives and non-Natives who lived in the communities under study. This team composition resulted in a greater awareness of what happens daily in schools and communities, access to others who served as key informants, and a deeper understanding of history, culture, and relationships present in each community

At the beginning of the 3-year research project, concept mapping was used by each team to more fully understand the many simultaneous reforms happening in these communities. Through this structured process that occurred during our first meeting together in Anchorage, each team developed a concept map linking educational reforms, community voice, and important outcomes for the school and community. These maps were used as guides for data collection. The senior researcher on each team designed appropriate data collection techniques, in consultation with school and community team members, that (a) addressed the common research questions and variable definitions (e.g., community voice) under study, (b) were sensitive to the key variables and relationships identified in the concept maps, and (c) were appropriate for the school and community. Each research team used traditional case study methods, including document analysis, participant and researcher observation, and surveys and interviews. A wide array of documents was collected by each senior researcher (e.g., school reports, program descriptions, community newspaper articles, and school board minutes) in order to learn about the general school program and curriculum, reform activities like AOTE, school and community conditions, important school decisions, and of course student achievement, which unfortunately was usually limited to a few standardized test results that did not adequately address the community's educational goals. Observations were also conducted to capture school and classroom life; these tended to be semistructured and designed by individual research teams around key educational issues or reforms in the community. Some common surveys were used across several sites (e.g., a Quality of School Life Survey for students), while other surveys were developed by the senior researcher and research team to address specific issues, including the parent involvement survey from the Klawock community reported in detail later. Finally, many interviews were conducted at each site, both by the senior researcher during site visits and by research team members, using interview guides developed by the team. In many instances, the input from community members about what was most appropriate led us to using less formal and structured interviews in favor of letting people simply tell their stories—sometimes in naturalistic settings like community potlucks. There was no cookie-cutter approach to data collection; the methods were developed as we collaborated together and varied somewhat from site to site (participatory action research model).

The research teams followed a pattern of collecting data, meeting in Anchorage to share and discuss results, and then collecting more data. Each senior researcher spent approximately 10 to 12 days on site during three or four separate visits across 2 school years, conducting interviews and observations and collecting documents. Most of the community teams, with guidance from their senior researcher, also collected data on their own in the form of participant observation, interviews, and occasionally surveys. We met in Anchorage six times (12 days) throughout the study to work in small village teams and as a whole group to design data collection techniques, discuss and interpret the interim results, plan next steps, and conduct a cross-case analysis at the end of the project. Senior researchers met together an additional four times (8 days) to plan the study and further discuss and write up the cross-case findings. In this way, we refined our initial research questions and data collection techniques as we engaged together in constant-comparative analysis.

Results: Community Engagement and Educational Reform

Each community/school case study provided a rich picture of community engagement, parent involvement, and

Table 1
It's All About Teachers
Tatitlek Study/Sarah Landis

When the senior researcher asked the residents to describe any factors that have contributed to school change and improvement, most shared their viewpoints first and foremost on the importance of the two [husband and wife] teachers. Tatitlek residents' inclination was not to talk about programs, but to describe the skills of individual teachers.

A village elder commented on the teacher skills in working with the community: "Those Moores, they have the Native people figured out. They know how to work in the village, when to get involved, how to make things happen."

The village chief also attributed program improvements to changes in specific school staff: "Those new teachers worked hard and put tireless energy into promoting the programs." In retrospect, the chief said he wished that he had worked harder for better staff in the past.

Another community member expressed the viewpoint that, over the course of time: "Community interest in and commitment to schooling fluctuates with the teachers and with the teachers' attitudes towards the Natives." She went on to contrast the current teachers with their predecessors: "The previous teachers kept to themselves. They did not allow their own children to play with the other kids in the village, and they themselves did not associate socially with the rest of the community. They called students stupid and hopeless. But the Moores have changed all of that. They value the Native lifestyle." From her perspective, the current teachers are seen as part of the community because of their own interest and skills, and because their own children intermingle easily with the Native children.

educational reform. The cross-case analysis surfaced four major findings that are the focus of this article:

1. Reform efforts in small rural communities require an inside-out approach in which educators must first develop trusting relationships with the community.

2. Parents and teachers need to expand their conceptions of parent roles beyond the role of parents supporting the school to include roles in which parents are active participants in school life and decisions.

3. School and district leaders must move from top-down to shared leadership so that the ownership for school reform is embedded in the community rather than with school personnel who constantly come and go.

4. Educators and educational reformers must recognize that education in rural Alaska has a larger purpose than teaching academic skills and knowledge; this larger purpose includes teaching to strong cultural standards for indigenous people, and helping students pursue character goals and life skills that prepare them to make a life as well as a living.

5. Each of these findings is discussed below interspersed with case study excerpts to help bring the results to life.

Working From the Inside-Out to Build Relationships and Trust

To varying degrees, the individual case studies showed how reform processes that include concrete ways for the school and community to continuously work together over the long term can be powerful tools for change. However, the larger lesson was that relationships and trust between school and community people provided the foundation for successful partnerships. This was magnified in the very small communities. The community of Tatitlek, for example—located near Valdez with about 100 residents, 23 students, and a husband and wife teaching team—demonstrated how teachers who came from the outside gained the trust of the community by taking the time to understand the community's traditions and heritage, and used this knowledge to create meaningful educational experiences for students. The Tatitlek case study excerpt, *It's All About Teachers*, illustrates this point (see Table 1).

Table 2
Working From the Inside-Out
Aniak-Kalskag Study/Bruce Miller

Alaska Onward to Excellence might be improved if it began with a core group of motivated individuals from each village that spends time identifying key community networks and individuals who can positively influence the community and school. They would engage these individuals in a dialogue about the school and community in terms of their work. In other words, learn what they do, discover their interests and desires, and engage them in their ideas for supporting and helping youth. The focus is aimed at building relationships and the common ground upon which to make improvement decisions.

Classroom-level examples of the kinds of communication necessary for engaging and sustaining such relationships were discovered during interviews with teachers and parents. The common pattern across these examples reflects teachers going out of their routine roles to interact with parents and community members in ways that demonstrate genuine caring for students and an understanding of local context and place. In some cases it was persistent phone and face-to-face contacts in and out of the school. In other cases it was using local resources and people to contextualize learning. Moreover, the examples found in both Aniak and Kalskag of these types of relationship-building behaviors occurred with young teachers, senior teachers, new teachers, Native teachers, and non-Native teachers. These examples have much to teach us about how reform and improvement can occur in village life. Moreover, such a focus builds on local assets and resources as opposed to building on problems and needs.

An important lesson learned in these communities is that too much emphasis can be put on process and procedure from the outside and not enough on building relationships and trust from the inside. The Aniak-Kalskag case study in western Alaska found that to be effective, reform processes that originate from outside the community (e.g., the school district) need to start inside the community with the relationships that already exist and build outward (see Table 2). This inside-out approach can lead to sustained community engagement and ownership for the reform work. In contrast, when personal relationships with key village leaders and residents were not nurtured as part of the reform process, a familiar pattern emerged throughout the case studies—fewer and fewer community people participated in the school-sponsored reform activities as time went on. It makes a big difference whether people perceive that they are being called upon to carry out someone else's reform agenda, or if they come to interpret the message as, "let's work together to raise healthy children for our community."

Finally, two-way communication, particularly between Alaska Natives and non-Native educators, is an important factor in building the strong relationships and trust that can sustain reform in rural Alaska communities. Vignettes in some of the case studies illustrate the extent to which Alaska Natives continue to feel alienated from the school system (see Table 3). Many Alaska Native adults had negative school experiences in boarding schools, where they came to feel that their knowledge and worldview had no place in the formal education system. This is certainly changing in rural Alaska, yet the hurt of past experience lingers. There is still a healing process going on and bringing the community meaningfully into the reform process can accelerate that healing.

Parents and Teachers Must Learn New Roles

The case studies illustrated how educational partnerships require new behaviors, roles, and ways of thinking on the part of both school personnel and community members. Many educators and parents, however, are stuck in traditional roles and are not sure how to change even if they want to. When asked how much voice she had in the school, one parent replied, "I don't know how I am supposed to have a voice." Those words represent a larger finding of the case studies: while it is easy to talk about creating partnerships between school and community, changing the traditional roles, behaviors, and attitudes is a difficult process for both school personnel and parents. Some of the communities were stuck in what Joyce Epstein (1995) calls the "rhetoric rut" in which both school personnel and parents talk about and support the idea of parent/community involvement but do not know how to get there. A parent survey conducted by the case study team from Klawock in southeastern Alaska (an island town with about 750 residents and 200 K–12 students) illustrates how both parents and teachers see limited roles for parent involvement.

The Klawock case study team designed and conducted a survey of the community and the teachers to dig deeper into the issue of how parents and teachers view the parent role in education. A random sample of 40 parents from the

Table 3
When Two-Way Communication Breaks Down
Klawock Study/Jim Kushman

Parents in Alaska Native communities can feel marginalized because of poverty, a sense of cultural isolation, or their own negative experiences with schools, both past and present. The story of Bill (not his real name), an Alaska Native single father with two school-age children, illustrates how deep the barriers to trust can become when parents and schools fail to understand each other and actively communicate. Bill characterized his own education in a boarding school as "a place where 90% of the teachers didn't care if students passed or not," but was generally positive about the present-day teachers in this community's school and their caring for students. Difficulties do persist, however.

Bill pointed out that it is difficult for many Alaska Native parents to work with the schools because they do not understand what the teachers are doing. Bill felt that he certainly could not help his daughter with her middle school math since he only had a ninth-grade education himself. He firmly believed that it is not the parent's role to teach academic subjects: "I run my business, I'm not a teacher, I can't come into the school and teach math!"

Bill was most concerned about his 11-year-old son Sam who was in special education. He characterized Sam's experience in the regular classroom as the teacher "giving him five problems to work on while the other kids get 20 problems." The other kids excel and Sam falls behind. Bill said he has gone to the school and talked to many people about Sam's problems—teacher, principal, superintendent, and finally the school board—but to no avail. "I go down there, I tell them what's on my mind, I get no response; then I get angry and communication shuts down." I asked why he thought it was like this. He answered that cultural differences are part of it. He felt that non-Native parents are more "aggressive" than Native parents as a matter of style, and the school is more likely to listen to the louder voices. He felt that he shouldn't have to be "pushy" to get what his children deserve.

A year later when I interviewed Bill again, he was feeling even more alienated. After an outside child advocate intervened, Sam received one-to-one tutoring and was catching up. But because of changes in special education criteria, Sam stopped receiving the tutoring and was falling behind again. Bill expressed his anger and confusion at this sudden shift in policy, with no real explanation or help coming from the school.

Given his past experiences in school, his low sense of efficacy as a parent educator, and the insensitivity he experienced over his son's problems, it is no surprise that Bill felt deeply alienated. Yet in the abstract, he firmly believed that schools and parents must work together.

Klawock City Schools (representing about one-third of all parents) either completed a mail survey or were interviewed if the survey was not returned. A parallel teacher survey was also completed by 13 teachers (nearly all the teaching staff). Survey items were designed around Epstein's (1995) parent involvement framework and asked parents and teachers to rate the importance of 12 specific parent involvement activities in five categories: parenting (help families establish home environments that support learning), communicating (effective school-to-home and home-to-school information sharing), volunteering (parents helping in classrooms and the school), learning at home (helping parents guide children through homework and projects), and decision making (including parents in school decisions and school improvement efforts).

Figure 1 presents the parent and teacher ratings of "very important" activities; that is, activities busy parents would likely make time for and that teachers would encourage parents to pursue. The results indicated that nearly all parents saw their major role as supporting their children's education at home by monitoring school work and homework, reading to their children or encouraging them to read, and working at home on school projects. Parents also felt that parent/teacher conferences are an important communication activity. Teachers tended to agree here with parents. Next were activities where parents and teachers ascribed less importance to the parent role: understanding and supporting the school's educational program and mission/goals, and attending parent-teacher-school association meetings or parenting classes. Finally, and most important for reforms that encourage full community engagement, both parties indicated that some activities were far less important: parent involvement in school planning and decision making, and volunteering in the classroom or school.

The survey asked parents if they were involved as much as they would like to be; 70% answered "yes." Respon-

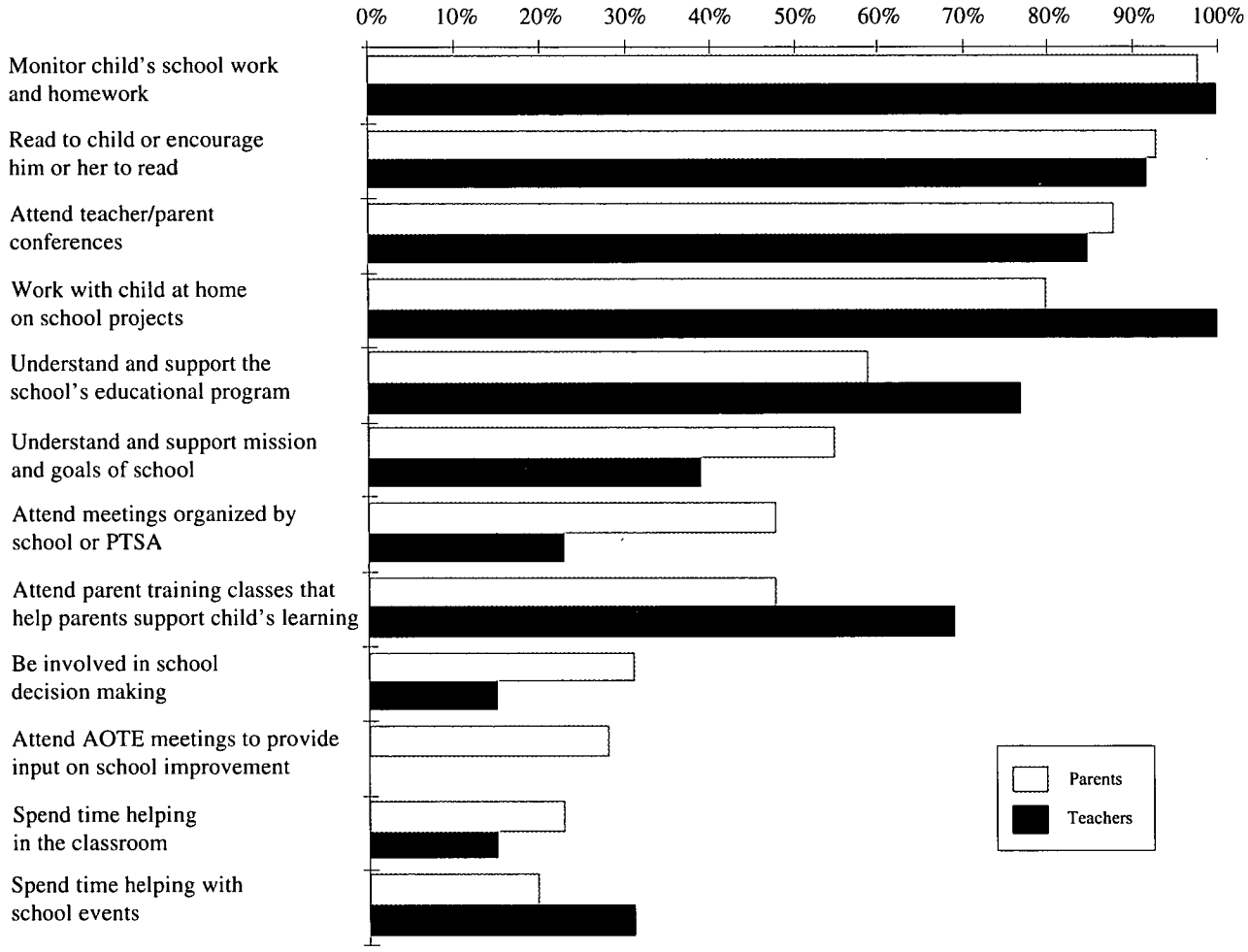

Figure 1. Percent of parents and teachers who rate various parent involvement activities as "very important" (Klawock Survey)

dents were also asked to consider a number of factors that might hinder parent involvement. Not surprisingly, the most inhibiting factor for parents was time and scheduling—this item was checked by nearly two-thirds of the parents, the majority of whom were "working" rather than "at-home" parents. Beyond the time issue, an important inhibiting factor for many parents was that they didn't know what their options were to become more involved in the school. This mirrors the earlier parent concern, "I don't know how I am supposed to have a voice." Interestingly, teachers cited the most inhibiting factor as parents not feeling comfortable coming to the school. What teachers saw as "discomfort" may have been a feeling by parents of not knowing what their involvement options were.

The parent survey results were analyzed by race to see if there were differences between non-Native and Native parents. All of the analyses revealed similar views and opinions across racial groups. Native parents felt just as comfortable coming to the school as non-Native parents, and if anything were less likely to endorse the statement, "I don't think the school is interested in my involvement." Native and non-Native parents also had similar patterns in their role conceptions—they saw themselves as good parents supporting education in the home rather than as classroom volunteers or school decision makers.

These results point to the challenges that small rural communities can face when trying to bring the school and community together. Beneath the rhetoric of greater parent involvement are beliefs about when and how parents should be involved. In this one small community, parents and teachers saw the primary parent role as being good parents and promoting learning at home, which are very important factors for student success. But absent were conceptions of more expanded parent roles that characterize partnerships—

parents as school volunteers, decision makers, and active participants in improvement work. A larger finding of the case studies was that without a compelling goal deeply rooted in community values, such as preserving language and cultural knowledge, many parents and community members are content to leave education to the educators.

In contrast to many of the communities that found it difficult to fully involve parents, the western Alaska community of Quinhagak—consisting of about 550 residents, many of whom are fluent Yup'ik speakers, and 125 K–12 students—exhibited a strong sense that the school belongs to the community, as evidenced by the school's name, Kuinerrarmiut Elitnaurviat, which few non-Yup'ik-speaking people are able to pronounce. Quinhagak illustrated how parents, elders, and other community members work in the school as paid workers and unpaid volunteers, and as educators in the home. Given a strong commitment by everyone to the goal that students will be educated to speak both Yup'ik and English, community members were certainly made to feel they had important knowledge to offer the formal education process. The Quinhagak case study exemplified that with energy, creativity, and a common goal, many new roles can be constructed for parents and community members to become actively involved in the school (see Table 4). Through this strong parent-school partnership that has been nurtured over several decades, Quinhagak and the Lower Kuskokwim School District have built an exemplary bilingual program for Alaska Native students.

Schools Must Understand and Practice Shared Leadership

The case studies provided multiple examples of reforms led by strong superintendents and principals who provided the leadership necessary to keep the improvement process moving forward. However, strong leadership from the top is not enough, and in fact can sometimes hinder rather than help a community-guided reform process. The important distinction here is between leadership as a shared decision-making process and top-down leadership that invites community input rather than full community engagement. Districts and villages with a tradition of top-down management had difficulty making a transition to shared decision making.

District and school leaders need to clearly understand that with a community-driven reform process, they are buying into a different way of making educational decisions. Furthermore, when a district buys into shared decision making, it must follow through on its commitment and not choose to exercise veto power just because a decision didn't adhere to the administrative position. A community will quickly sense when district leaders are not "walking the talk" and this will seriously erode trust.

Strong superintendent and principal leadership helps drive reforms. Yet the case studies also attest to the limitations of top-down leadership and illustrate how *shared* leadership helps districts and communities sustain reforms. Shared leadership creates the high degree of community involvement and ownership that can sustain educational reform despite the frequent superintendent and principal turnover that occurs in rural Alaska schools.

In the community of Tatitlek, where most of the leadership at the time came from the superintendent, there was little evidence of shared responsibility for student success. Once the community provided input to the mission and goals, there was little further interest in being involved because changing educational practice was viewed as *school* work led by a strong superintendent rather than *school-community* work. Many innovative changes in curriculum, instruction, and assessment were in fact implemented by the superintendent, but with little further involvement by the village council and community members—even for things like cultural fairs, which require a high degree of school-community collaboration.

A point of contrast was Quinhagak and the Lower Kuskokwim School District (LKSD), where shared leadership coupled with shared responsibility has been consciously practiced for many years. Shared decision making was part of the organizational culture at the district office and throughout many village schools in LKSD. In the case study site of Quinhagak, the real reform was exercising local control of education. In 1995, LKSD embraced the AOTE process as a way to move from traditional district strategic planning to working with schools and local communities to share decision making and responsibility for student success. This fit nicely with an established district practice of using the local school advisory committees for more than just giving advice. Advisory committees have been involved in core decisions for many years, such as how the school budget would be spent, the kind of educational programs that would be put in place, and selection and retention of the school principal. The district has invested in training local advisory board members in areas like the school budget so that they would have the capacity to make sound decisions. This was true shared decision making rather than the rhetoric of shared decision making. Coupled with strong district support for the Quinhagak bilingual program, which the community truly embraced, a long-term partnership was established involving district leaders, school leaders, and community leaders who worked together and shared the accountability for student results.

The Goal of Educational Partnerships is Healthy Communities

The Alaska case studies focused on understanding how rural districts, schools, and communities can work together

Table 4
There Are Many Ways For Parents to Become Involved
Quinhagak Study/Carol Barnhardt

Many parents in Quinhagak are now directly involved in their school because they are serving as the school's teachers, aides, cooks, custodians—and principal. Several community members serve their school in other positions. Those on the Advisory School Board deal with matters ranging from setting the school calendar to approving changes in the school's bilingual programs to assisting in establishing budget priorities to annual approval of the school's principal. The AOTE process also provides opportunities for community members to serve on leadership teams and encourages broader participation through its community-wide meetings and potlucks. Other venues for direct participation include the Village Wellness Committee Team and the school Discipline Committee.

Some family members participate in less formal ways through volunteer work in their children's classroom or as chaperones on trips. Others contribute through efforts in their own homes (e.g., providing a quiet place for children to study, reading with and to children, reviewing homework assignments with them). A description of 15 initiatives that were designed to promote increased parent, family, and community involvement and participation in the school were identified by the school in 1997. There were 119 volunteers and 1,500 hours of volunteer services during the 1997–1998 school year. The 15 initiatives included:

- Let's Learn Together: Program that rewards parents, siblings, or community members who volunteer at least 10 hours in the school during the academic year with a T-shirt bearing the words "Let's Learn Together—Quinhagak, Alaska" in both Yup'ik and English. These shirts are available *only* to the school volunteers and are worn with pride.

- Home-school journals: Students write weekly letters or notes to parents or other older family member and receive a written reply. Journals are also used for parent and teacher written correspondence. Students know that their teacher(s) will be in contact with their parents on a weekly basis.

- Migrant education program: Federal money is used to hire community workers who visit students and their parents in their homes during nonschool hours to provide assistance with reading for both students and their parents.

- Adult Yup'ik language program: School sponsors an adult Yup'ik language program that provides an opportunity for parents and other interested community members to learn to read and write in the Yup'ik orthography that is used in the school. (Many of the elders learned to use an older system developed by the Moravian Church.). When the class is offered on the same nights as the Computer Night, attendance is better because family members can come to the school together.

- Computer Nights: The school is open 2 or 3 nights a week for parents to learn to use computers. Parents can bring their children to help them.

to achieve greater educational attainment for this generation and future generations of students who must "walk in two worlds with one spirit." The cross-case analysis revealed that education in rural Alaska has a larger purpose than teaching academic skills and knowledge. When community members participated in the reform process, their hopes, dreams, and fears for their children were brought out; it was clear that these communities are trying to preserve their unique identities and ways of life, while still preparing their children to live in a global and technological world. In setting a vision and goals for the future, there were as many community wellness and character education goals as academic goals. People expected the education system to help young people respect their elders, respect themselves, stay sober and drug free, learn self-discipline, and contribute to the well-being of their community.

Some schools and communities tried to achieve a broader definition of "educational reform" than narrow academic goals, and some saw academic goals as a means to community wellness rather than an end in itself. There was a clear sense that education and community health are inextricably linked. Schools and communities in rural

Table 5
Reform as A Means to Bridge Two Worlds
Yupiit-Tuluksak Study/Ray Barnhardt & Oscar Kawagley

> While there continues to be some significant differences of opinion regarding how to proceed in integrating the Yup'ik culture with the standard academic curriculum, the comment of one of the teachers that their task is to help students "walk in two worlds with one spirit" best signifies the direction that has begun to emerge. For the majority of the teachers who originate from outside the communities and culture in which they are working, such a task poses a major challenge, but as a result of the dialogue initiated by the AOTE process they saw the need and were willing to make the effort. Instead of the community having to make all the accommodation to meet the imported expectations of the school, at least one teacher was encouraged that "the school is finding its way to the community." The Yupiit School District (YSD) 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 a variety of "teachers" who possess the necessary local and global cultural knowledge and perspectives, 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.
>
> These and many other lessons can be gleaned from the experiences of the communities that make up the Yupiit School District in their efforts to accommodate two cultures in the schools. 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 Akiachak, Akiak, and Tuluksak. One parent summarized the significance of the mission statement, which was adopted by the YSD board working in collaboration with the community through AOTE, with a paraphrase of an old African adage: "It takes the whole village to educate a child." The villages of the Yupiit School District are making that adage a reality.

Alaska are challenging themselves to simultaneously achieve high cultural standards and high academic standards as a means to improved community health, as illustrated in the case study excerpt in Table 5.

Finally, education is ultimately a means to prepare students for making a life and a living both inside and outside of the village. The communities we studied were working hard to preserve their culture, language, and subsistence ways, while at the same time pursuing student goals such as post-secondary education and successful transition to careers outside of the village (see Table 6). These communities realized that there are many pathways to success, and that schools must prepare, encourage, and support students in whatever path they choose.

Conclusions and Discussion

The Alaska case studies of educational reform point to many hopeful signs that rural schools and small communities can work together for the benefit of all young people. When parents, elders, community members, and school personnel begin to see that they share something in common, they do come together. A shared vision for student success with clear and meaningful student learning goals was created in some of the communities. The AOTE process of scripted community meetings that brings community members into the conversation facilitated, we believe, this vision building. In rural Alaska, this vision was typically to develop young people who "can walk in two worlds with one spirit," to quote a teacher from one of these communities. The goal was to educate students who are literate in their own Native language and subsistence culture, and likewise are prepared to read, write, compute, think, and live successfully in the world outside of rural Alaska. This continues to be a challenging goal in these communities, but one which people adhere to through the many setbacks and personnel changes of multiyear reform efforts.

Establishing a vision that the school and community share is a good start, but it is not enough. The cross-case analysis points to at least four essential characteristics of successful, sustainable partnerships.

First, small rural communities are built on interpersonal relationships more than on formal processes. Reform efforts will be more successful if they take an inside-out approach and build on these relationships. This means seeking out the strengths, assets, and local sense of place and culture that make a small community unique, and then designing a reform effort that fits this context. This is a dif-

Table 6
Helping Rural Students Make the Transition
Tatitlek Study/Sarah Landis

Anchorage House was designed by the Chugach School District [prior to the AOTE process] to provide village students with opportunities to receive skills training, explore after-graduation options, and apply their learning in real-life situations. To accomplish this purpose, the district has purchased two houses in Anchorage at which village students stay while engaged in learning activities in the following areas: life skills, personal development, social development, service learning, urban familiarization, and career development. Activities are organized around exploration in five outcome areas: entrepreneurial, business, postsecondary education, service learning, and skilled trades. Students attend Anchorage House in phases:

Phase 0: Introduction to Anchorage House is intended for younger kids (middle school) to introduce them to Anchorage House and get them started in the program. This phase lasts only a few days.

Phase 1: Search Week lasts for approximately one week. Students and staff live, eat, work and, learn together during this intensive week. During this time, many of the activities focus on self-awareness, problem solving, trust, conflict resolution, resiliency, team building, urban understanding, and exposure to a variety of career and postsecondary choices.

Phase 2: Earn to Return is about 1 month in duration (broken up into two visits) and offers opportunities for successful, dedicated graduates of phase 1 to act as facilitators with other students. Phase 2 is focused on engaging students in job shadowing. At the end of the phase, students are able to look for and secure a job, use resources for counseling and personal finance, live independently, eat, clean, and travel on their own, and have a good understanding of areas they wish to pursue.

Phase 3: Pathways provides an opportunity for "independent" living and emphasis on life after high school by engaging students in various career exploration and internship programs. For approximately 1 month, students are supported to enable them to move toward independent learning while they are also given a more in-depth exposure to what career settings require and employers expect. By the end of phase 3, students are responsible, self directed, and have a good understanding of where they wish to spend their time for phase 4.

Phase 4: Create Your Future is a 6-to-12 month supervised, self-directed, independent living and learning experience. The students who have completed the prior phases and have been successfully matched with an employer, institute or small business start up will gain specific technical skills, and/or college credit, through hands-on learning, closely integrated with school-based activities.

ferent style than working strictly from an external reform model that includes many prescribed steps and often starts from a framework of untested assumptions or perceived community deficits. An important step in this approach is consciously building good relationships among school personnel, parents, elders, and nonparent community members, groups who often start out with a degree of mistrust, ill-feelings, and misconceptions. Relationship-building requires constant two-way communication between the school and community, including communication through the informal people networks in small villages and towns.

Second, parents and school personnel are often locked into a view that the home and school are separate spheres of influence, to use Joyce Epstein's (1995) terminology. It takes more than just talking about the need and importance of parent involvement to unfreeze this mindset. Parents must *learn* new roles and teachers need to change their views about how parents should be involved. It is easy for teachers and parents to become locked into blaming each other for low parent involvement. This blaming is due in part to the frustration that naturally occurs when people are asked to change old attitudes and behaviors. In Alaska Native communities, previous generations of adults were given the clear message that their knowledge, culture, and language had no place in the school. The message has changed but it will take time and effort for people to become comfortable and skillful in exercising new parent roles in which they share decision-making responsibility.

Schools also need to move beyond a few narrow parent involvement options and make accommodations for parents with busy schedules, different backgrounds, and different comfort levels. Too often, parent involvement is

viewed as a one-way street whereby parents are expected to be the passive supporters of the school's agenda. The lesson from these case studies is that parent involvement must be seen as a two-way partnership in which parents and teachers work hand-in-hand to make what students experience in school and the life they lead outside of school complementary. This is especially crucial in Alaska Native communities where the language and culture of the community need to provide the foundation for the school curriculum and teaching practices.

A third essential characteristic of successful partnerships is moving from top-down leadership to shared leadership. Superintendents and principals with strong leadership skills are certainly important in rural Alaska, where sparse conditions and geographic isolation place unusual demands on managing a school. However, when leadership is shared with the community and teachers, reform efforts will more likely become part of the community fabric instead of the latest fad of the current administration. People in rural Alaska have seen numerous school reform initiatives come and go over the years, only to be replaced by a recycled initiative under a new name with each new principal or superintendent (or legislature) seeking to make his or her mark on the educational landscape. If school reform is to become sustainable over time, it is going to have to stress a bottom-up approach so that the ownership and commitment that is needed is embedded in the community. Reform must become something that community members embrace and contribute to, rather than something that someone else does to them. The purpose of the reforms must be clear and widely supported if they are to last beyond the tenure of the current proponents. Reform for reform's sake has no durability and is likely to become an obstacle to meaningful long-term change.

Finally, educational reformers need to realize that in places like rural Alaska, there is a strong link between educational improvement and community health. These are overlapping goals for small rural communities. Schools have an important role in community development, and educators should work to develop educational programs that not only address high academic standards, but that promote high cultural standards for Native groups and help students develop the respect, self-esteem, and other character goals that contribute to academic success. Students in rural Alaska are often caught in a tug of war between their identity as members of the indigenous culture and the pervasive influences of the outside world, particularly as manifested in the school and on television. In the current frenzy over high academic standards, the focus of schools becomes limited to academic development alone, and as a result, risks contributing to disaffection, aimlessness, and alienation among students in rural Alaska. Guidelines for overcoming this limitation of schooling have been spelled out by Native educators in the Alaska Standards for Culturally Responsive Schools. Following are the main points put forward by the Alaska Cultural Standards to address this issue:

- Culturally knowledgeable students are well grounded in the cultural heritage and traditions of their community.
- Culturally knowledgeable students are able to build on the knowledge and skills of the local cultural community as a foundation from which to achieve personal and academic success throughout life.
- Culturally knowledgeable students are able to actively participate in various cultural environments.
- Culturally knowledgeable students are able to engage effectively in learning activities that are based on traditional ways of knowing and learning.
- Culturally knowledgeable students demonstrate an awareness and appreciation of the relationships and processes of interaction of all elements in the world around them.

The Alaska Onward to Excellence process was most effective in communities where the four conditions discussed above were present. AOTE did not create these conditions, although it did provide some tools to willing communities to help them push further on building trust, expanding parent roles, sharing leadership, and defining educational goals that are meaningful to the whole community. Externally-designed reform models like AOTE are never enough to create all of the conditions that lead to sustainable improvements in education. Achieving sustainable and deep changes in small rural communities is a process that works from the inside-out. Externally-designed models are helpful if they can be implemented in ways that are sensitive to local conditions without violating their research-based design features, but they are not silver bullets. This is an important message given current efforts to reform both rural and urban schools via externally-designed reform models, such as through the federally-sponsored Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program.

These are the major lessons that have been gleaned from the case studies of communities involved in systemic school reform initiatives in rural Alaska. While the findings are framed by the Alaska landscape, they are readily generalizable to rural schools and communities anywhere. Inherent in the case study findings is the notion that education is first and foremost a local endeavor. By understanding how such an endeavor is played out in the local contexts

of rural Alaska, we can also understand better how it might be played out in any other local context.

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