

Alaska Onward to Excellence & Alaska Rural Systemic Initiative

A Summary of:

“Study of Alaska Rural Systemic Reform:

Final Report” (October 1999) Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory and University of Alaska Fairbanks. By James W. Kushman and Ray Barnhardt.

“Closing the Gap: Education and Change”

(October 1999) Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory and University of Alaska Fairbanks. By Jerry Lipka.

Focus

- Early Childhood
- ✓ Primary School
- ✓ Middle School
- ✓ Secondary School
- Postsecondary
- Extended Learning

Overview

These studies evaluated two mutually reinforcing reforms called Alaska Onward to Excellence (AOTE) and the Alaska Rural Systemic Initiative (AKRSI). Funded by the Meyer Memorial Trust and implemented by the University of Alaska Southeast and the Alaska Comprehensive Regional Assistance Center, AOTE was adopted by villages and school districts striving to create educational partnerships between schools and the communities they served. Funded by the National Science Foundation and directed by the University of Alaska at Fairbanks, AKRSI integrated the indigenous knowledge system and the formal education system. In turn, this meant engaging communities deeply in education; fully integrating native culture, language and ways of knowing into the curriculum; and meeting Alaska’s state-driven academic standards and benchmarks. In AOTE, school districts and village schools worked closely with community stakeholders (parents, elders, other community members and students) to establish a mission and student learning outcomes. Village improvement teams then designed action steps to achieve district goals. AKRSI strove to provide a solid foundation for academic growth and learning in ten content

POPULATION

The studies focused on 7 rural Alaska communities — primarily subsistence communities serving Eskimo and Native American students — that had implemented AOTE. The vast majority of families with children in these schools relied on subsistence hunting and fishing for a significant portion of their livelihood. Their average cash income is less than \$20,000 per year, and unemployment runs from 25-37%. The 7 communities covered in the studies — all isolated villages or towns reached by small airplane — range in size from approximately 125 to 750 residents. Most villages were comprised of 90-98% Alaska Native people. The schools served as few as 20 or as many as 200 students in grades K-12. Of the 2,368 teachers in Alaska’s rural schools in 1998-99, nearly one-third were new to their positions.

areas: reading and writing, math, science, world languages, history, geography, government and citizenship, technology, arts and skills for a healthy life. Most schools incorporated learning activities in the native language of the village into English-based curriculum.

Key Findings

Evaluators investigated whether the schools and communities that had implemented AOTE anytime from 1992-1996 had been able to work together for the good of students.

Southwest Region Schools (SWRS) — the district highlighted in Lipka’s case study — was the district able to implement the program most closely to the model and showed the most positive impacts.

- ◆ The percent of students attending college rose dramatically (from 10% in 1988-89 to 50% in 1996-97) among SWRS [see chart].
- ◆ SWRS high school seniors experienced a steady increase in ACT scores between 1991-98. From 1995-96, differences in test scores between students graduating from SWRS and taking the ACT test and state and national average scores narrowed. The differences in test scores between SWRS and the state average declined from 6.9% to 5.96%, narrowing the gap by approximately 14%.
- ◆ The SWRS school superintendent set goals for the district: 80% or more of each class had to meet the required competencies for its grade level and 100% of the competencies for the previous grade level. In 1996-97, 100% of first and second graders mastered 80-100% of required grade-level language arts skills, compared with 67% of first graders and 92% of second graders in 1995-96. Other grades showed less significant impacts.
- ◆ In 1996-97, 100% of first graders and 92% of second graders mastered 80-100% of required grade-level math skills, compared with 68% of

“It is easy to start new reforms but difficult to keep up the momentum in order to bring about deep changes in teaching and learning.”

—James Kushman and Ray Barnhardt, evaluators, Alaska Onward to Excellence

“The case studies tell what happened as rural schools embarked on a change journey through AOTE and other reform activities, paying attention to important educational accomplishments and setbacks, community voices and the experiences and learning of students.”

—James Kushman and Ray Barnhardt, evaluators, Alaska Onward to Excellence

first graders and 66% of second graders in 1995-96. In 1995-96, the number of eighth-grade students scoring in the top quartile on the math achievement test was more than the number of students scoring in the bottom quartile.

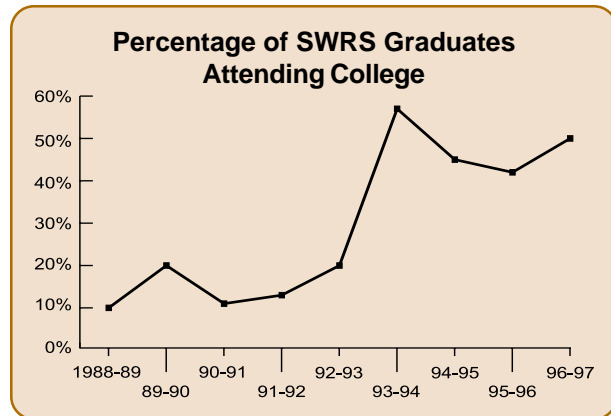
Students from Tatitlek in the Chugach School District performed better on the CAT/5, Woodcock Reading and Six-Trait Writing assessments after the AOTE initiative.

For the Klawock School District, there were improvements in bringing up the bottom quartile in grade 4 reading, grade 4 math, and grade 8 language on state-sponsored achievement tests (Iowa Test of Basic Skills and California Achievement Test). These improvements occurred during five years of school reforms in that district including AOTE, initiatives in strategic planning, outcomes-based education and curriculum alignment with state standards.

The AKRSI evaluation compared dropout rates, college enrollment and choice of major for alumni from rural AKRSI districts and from comparable rural districts without the initiative.

- ◆ Between 1995 and 1998, the dropout rate in AKRSI schools declined .9%, while the decline in comparable non-ARKSI rural schools was .3%. Yet in 1998 AKRSI schools continued to have higher dropout rates over all (3.5% vs. 2.4%).

- ◆ Between 1995 and 1998, the number of students enrolling for the first time as full-time students at the University of Alaska at Fairbanks from the 20 AKRSI districts increased from 114 to 149 at the same time that rural enrollment in 28 comparable rural districts without AKRSI decreased from 145-134.
- ◆ Between 1994 and 1998, the number of Native students at the University of Alaska at Fairbanks majoring in Science and Engineering nearly doubled (from 36 to 70).



Program Components

The vision of AOTE was to bring research-based practices to Alaska schools through a process that deeply involved the whole community in a district and school improvement process.

- ◆ A focus on student learning was at the heart of AOTE. The philosophy behind the reform initiative was that all students can learn and that reform leaders must strive for equity and excellence in student learning. This philosophy was emphasized in workshops by AOTE developers that helped schools launch AOTE implementation.
- ◆ Community-wide commitment was sought as communities and schools shared leadership for the improvement process through multi-stakeholder district and village leadership teams.
- ◆ Adult learning was a strong component within AOTE, which emphasizes information gathering by adults so that decisions are informed by local culture and values, as well as research-based practices.
- ◆ Local heritage, language, culture and native ways of knowing were accepted as legitimate parts of formal education and were viewed as strengths on which to build the AOTE curriculum.

AKRSI used five initiatives “to increase the involvement of Alaska Native people in the application of Native and non-Native scientific

knowledge to the solution of human problems in an Arctic environment.”

- ◆ **Native Ways of Knowing and Teaching:** Documenting, validating and supporting traditional ways of knowing and pedagogical practices in rural schools.
- ◆ **Culturally Aligned Curriculum Adaptations:** Focusing on indigenous areas of content knowledge such as weather forecasting, animal behavior, navigation skills, edible plants/diet/nutrition and medicinal plants/medical knowledge.
- ◆ **Indigenous Science Knowledge Base:** Surveying and documenting indigenous knowledge systems in each cultural region of Alaska and creating a CD-ROM-based Regional Cultural Atlas for use in teaching and research.
- ◆ **Elders and Cultural Camps:** Establishing an Elders in Residence program and Cultural camps at several rural campuses associated with the University of Alaska, and setting up guidelines to protect the intellectual and cultural property rights of native peoples.
- ◆ **Village Science Applications:** Creating Alaska Native science camps, fairs and exploratoria, scientist-in-residence programs in the schools, and partnerships with local businesses to show Native Alaskan youth the real world applications of science and inspire them to enter the field.

Contributing Factors

Sustaining Reform & Leadership

Schools that kept momentum when implementing AOTE saw the most dramatic differences.

Staff/Leadership Retention

The most persistent barrier to sustaining reform efforts was high teacher, principal and superintendent turnover. According to the evaluators, turnover derailed reform efforts and led to a cycle of reinventing schools every two or three years. But in successful schools AOTE could “help alleviate the turnover problem by creating leadership within the community, especially when respected community elders and other leaders are brought into the process.”

Unified Approach

Independent reform activities or goals that were disconnected were of little use in small communities. AOTE helped set a clear direction and vision for student success and provided opportunities for school personnel and community members to think and talk about how everyone should work together to educate children in a changing world.

Shared Leadership

“Leadership needs to be defined as shared decision-making *with* the community rather than seeking advice *from* the community,” noted the evaluators. Shared leadership created community ownership that moved educational changes through frequent staff turnover.

Personal Relationships

Good relationships between school personnel and community members made a marked difference in how well AOTE was implemented. In the small communities studied, personal relationships were more central than formal decision processes as a way to get things done.

New Roles

In schools that successfully implemented AOTE, the attitude that parent and teacher domains are separate, changed. Strong AOTE schools opened avenues for parents, elders and other community members to be involved in school as volunteers, teacher aides, other paid workers and leadership team members.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

The two studies used participatory research methods (action research) that treated school practitioners and community members as co-researchers rather than subjects of the study. For each case study, a senior researcher from the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory or University of Alaska Fairbanks led a small team of 3 to 5 school and community researchers who helped plan each case study, formulate guiding questions, collect data and interpret results. A typical team consisted of a school district practitioner, a village school practitioner, at least one non-school community member, and in some cases a high school student. The AKRSI study also compared 20 districts (serving 133 communities) with AKRSI programs to 28 school districts (serving 120 communities) in rural Alaska that did not have AKRSI programs. The evaluators did not appear to conduct a formal matching of these districts based on race, ethnicity or income. In addition to comparing dropout rates, college enrollment and choice of major for students from these districts, the evaluators examined scores for fourth and eighth graders on the California Achievement Test, 5th Edition (CAT-5). For the sake of brevity, this summary does not include the CAT-5 data.

EVALUATION FUNDING

The evaluations were funded by the National Science Foundation and the National Institute on Education of At-Risk Students, Office of Educational Research & Improvement, U.S. Department of Education. Implementation of AOTE was funded by school districts with assistance from the Alaska Comprehensive Assistance Center. The design of AOTE was funded through a foundation grant from the

Meyer Memorial Trust, the Alaska Staff Development Network and the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory.

GEOGRAPHIC AREAS

The studies centered on villages and school districts spanning western, central and southeast Alaska. Districts included Chugach, Klawock, Kuspuk, Lower Kuskokwim, Southwest, Tuluksak and Yukon-Koyukuk.

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