

# Native Alaskan Dropouts in Western Alaska: Systemic Failure in Native Alaskan Schools

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The number of Native Alaska secondary students choosing not to complete high school is of great concern to educators and Native communities. In this study, schools in small communities throughout western Alaska were observed while teachers and dropouts were interviewed concerning their perceptions of the education process. It became very clear that there was something fundamentally wrong with the systems of education in western Alaska. Teachers and administrators frequently leave after a very short time. Students leave the school systems in large numbers and communities are not happy with the education their young people receive. In some cases, the school systems do not need an incremental change approach to education—they need to examine an entirely new paradigm of schooling.

## Introduction

Staying in school until completion is an option large numbers of Native Alaskan children are not exercising. Some villages in the Lower Kuskokwim River Delta in southwestern Alaska experience 100% dropout rates (Alaska Department of Education, 2001). In advocating for increased funding for programs to encourage students to stay in school, the University of Alaska-Fairbanks branch campus administrator at Bethel claimed, “The trend in the target area [Lower Kuskokwim River Delta] is for fewer and fewer students to graduate from high school at all; and fewer and fewer of the high school graduates are enrolling in PSE [postsecondary education enrollment]” (Medinger, 2001, p. 1).

This research examined some of the issues young people are facing as they make the decision to stay in school until completion or leave the system for something they perceive as more attractive. We wanted to understand why the students left school and what the circumstances were that led to their decisions. If it is true that “local school officials often understand little about why the students really left school” (Gallagher, 2002, p. 36), then this research should provide some insight into that decision process.

## Issues Review

Leaving school before completion has been a problem nationally for some time where American Indian/Alaska Natives are concerned. In 1966, one author declared, "We do not know what to do about a youth who wants to leave school before graduation" (Greene, 1966, p. 9). Many of the historical assimilation efforts aimed at increasing American Indian/Alaska Natives' presence within mainstream American systems were double failures. Not only did these efforts weaken the pride and solidarity found among American Indians/Alaska Natives, but also assimilation rarely took effect on mainstream American thought; that is, the general populous and the institutions representing them did not and have not embraced American Indians/Alaska Natives despite attempts toward inclusion.

### The Non-Completion Numbers

Today, annual dropout rates range from 7% to 16% of the total high school student population (Kaufman, McMillien, & Sweet, 1996; National Center for Education Statistics, 1992). The National Center for Education Statistics does not compute separate numbers for Native Alaskan students. Table 1 gives evidence that noncompletion in the western Alaska region has historically been high for adults over age 21. As shown, levels of educational attainment in southwest Alaska are much below the state average. Degrees in higher education are very rare.

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Table 1  
Educational Attainment Levels in the Adult Population  
in Selected Counties in Western Alaska

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Counties	No high school diploma		No baccalaureate	
	#	%	#	%
Bethel	2,584	37.7	5,958	86.9
Wade Hampton	1,053	42.0	2,239	89.8
State of Alaska	42,244	13.4	248,932	77.0

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From *Talent Search, 2002-2007*, by Target Area Administrators, 2001, p. 7.

The annual school dropout rates in western Alaska are shown in Table 2. The trend as evidenced in Table 2 shows no indication of improvement in annual dropout rates over the past several years. These percentages represent numbers of students in high school that leave school and do not return.

The longitudinal dropout rates for recent classes in the area indicate large percentages of the children are choosing to leave school before completion. Table 3 illustrates some of the percentages of children leaving school before completion in western Alaska. Each four-year period represents a specific class of students and their dropout numbers while in high school.

Table 2  
**Annual School Dropout Rates in Selected School Districts,  
 Western Alaska School District**

School District	1999		2000		2001	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Lower Kuskokwim	63	5.7	78	6.1	90	9.2
Lower Yukon	19	2.9	22	3.4	49	7.1
Yupik	3	2.3	4	2.6	3	1.8
St. Mary's	2	2.7	1	2.4	3	7.1
Kashunamiut	0	0.0	2	2.2	2	2.0
Kuspuk	4	2.1	5	2.5	12	6.0

From *Talent Search, 202-2007*, by Target Area Administrators, 2001, p. 8.

Table 3  
**Annual School Dropout Rates in Selected School Districts,  
 Western Alaska School District**

School District	1995-1999			1996-2000			1997-2001		
	#	#	%	#	#	%	#	#	%
Kuskunamiut	10	8	80%	6	3	50%	6	3	50%
Kuspuk	25	22	88%	30	21	70%	28	21	75%
Lower Kuskokwim	252	131	52%	260	137	53%	243	116	48%
Lower Yukon	151	73	48%	146	74	51%	140	69	49%
St. Mary's	10	4	40%	11	5	45%	10	5	50%
Yupik	31	21	88%	36	24	67%	37	22	60%
Area Totals	479	259	54%	489	264	54%	464	236	51%

From *Alaska Department of Education and Early Development School Report Cards*, by Alaska Department of Education, 2001, p. 9.

From the above data it is clear that Alaska Native students suffer from disproportional rates of withdrawal compared to state or national numbers. In some school districts in western Alaska, the majority of students are choosing to withdraw from formal education before completing high school.

### Colonial Education for Native Alaskans

In trying to describe the historical frustration Indigenous populations have experienced in American education, Gibson and Ogbu (1991) differentiated between a minority that was *involuntary*—taken over by conquest—and a minority that had *voluntarily* placed him/herself in the mainstream of American society. Invariably, the involuntary minority was less successful in utilizing an education system imposed on him/her. Since the U.S. annexation of the Alaskan Territory, Native Alaskan educational systems have been modeled after a White, middle-class education system. Special emphasis was placed on eradicating Native languages. In a newspaper article from 1888 in Sitka, the philosophy of education was stated by two of the leading educational leaders in Alaska, Sheldon Jackson and William Kelly:

The Board of Home Missions has informed us that government contracts for educating Indian pupils provide for the ordinary branches of an English education to be taught, and that no books in any Indian language shall be used, or instruction given in that language to Indian pupils. The letter states that this rule will be strictly enforced in all government Indian schools. The Commissioner of Indian Affairs urges, and very forcibly too, that instruction in their vernacular is not only of no use to them but is detrimental to their speedy education and civilization. It is now two years and more since the use of the Indian dialects were first prohibited in the training school here. All instruction is given in English. Pupils are required to speak and write English exclusively; and the results are tenfold more satisfactory than when they were permitted to converse in unknown tongues. (Jackson & Kelly article as cited in Dauenhauer, 1997, p. 14)

Sheldon Jackson's "English Only" policy became a hallmark of Alaskan education well into the 20th century for Native students. Jackson even required parents to sign papers "giving their children over to the school for a period of five years" (Dauenhauer, 1997, p. 13). Perhaps not surprisingly, there was a distinct lack of enthusiasm for school. One teacher noted, "Native children are stupidly dull . . . [The parents] would not send a child to school if not compelled by the treasury agent to do so" (Jordan report as cited in Dauenhauer, 1997, p. 18).

One educator indicates that the language policies of the 1800s impact Alaskan education today:

The legacy has been one of linguistic insecurity. Generations of teachers have convinced parents that Native languages will result in stupidity and difficulty in learning English. Unfortunately, the battle still rages; we are fighting the same issues we fought one hundred years ago. We have the results of English-only education in Alaska, and frankly, I don't think the results are much to write home about. Irreparable damage has been done to the mental health of the Native community and individual. As a teacher, I have to deal with the impact of this every day, and it makes me angry. (Dauenhauer, 1997, p. 19)

## Teachers

If the education practices of the past are still having a negative impact on teaching Native Alaskans, it is only one factor contributing to the difficult conditions many rural Alaskan districts must face. "About a third of Alaska's school districts—almost entirely remote rural districts—face chronic teacher shortages. These remote districts have historically been hard to staff, and some scramble to fill as many as half their teaching jobs each year" (McDiarmid, Larson, & Hill, 2002, p. 1). One Native Alaskan now living in Bethel described her experience as a child with a new teacher.

I was so excited to be getting a new teacher that I asked my mother if I could dress up and go with the other children to meet her plane. The plane landed on the lake and a white lady in a dress and high heels stepped out, looked around and left with the plane. I felt so bad because I thought it was something I did. She didn't stay any longer than the plane did. (personal communication, November 13, 2002)

In the United States, the supply of teachers has steadily increased since the 1960s (Arends, Winitzky, & Tannenbaum, 1998). Nationally, the vast majority (89%) of teachers are White and most teachers are female (Arends et al., 1998). Nearly 50% of all teachers leave the profession within the first five years throughout the United States (McDiarmid et al., 2002). This means more resource dollars must be devoted to the recruiting and training of new teachers.

In some Alaska rural districts, the percentages of turnover are much higher than the national average and “the shortages that some Alaska districts face are unlikely to disappear in either the short- or long-term” (McDiarmid et al., 2002, p. 61). The role models Native Alaskan teachers, especially male, could provide has been in critical short supply in Native Alaskan education.

The history of educating Alaska’s Native children and the present statistics on non-completion of high school indicate serious issues remain. It is within this current context that this research was conducted.

### **Methodology**

Through observations, interviews, and document analysis, the researchers were able to “watch, listen, ask questions, and collect things” (Bogden & Biklen, 1992, p. 196). The data were collected in the fall and winter of 2002–2003. The time devoted to the research allowed for “in-depth understanding . . . [and] . . . extensive and intensive participant observation” (LeCompte, Preissle, & Tesch, 1993, pp. 94-95). Persons interviewed for this research included administrators, GED instructors, counselors, teachers, and recent dropouts. The researchers also observed elementary and secondary classes in six western Alaska communities. Through the use of multiple observers and sites, the study was able to build a “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) that supports the findings described in the conclusion of the study. A standardized interview protocol was used for all the interviews. The responses to the interviews were “phrased as concretely and precisely as possible from field notes or recordings of observations” (LeCompte, Preissle, & Tesch, 1993, p. 338).

The core of the research presented here came from the words of recent dropouts and some of their former teachers.

There are significant reasons for attending to what dropouts have to say about their school experiences and to their suggestions for school improvement. Their unique perspectives provide researchers with a glimpse into how they viewed school and what they valued. (Gallagher, 2002, p. 37)

This research examined the personal interpretations of the young people who did not respond positively to what the schools were offering. These “exceptional pathways of individuals” were projected “into the foreground” (Cairns, Cairns, Rodkin, & Xie, 1998, p. 34).

LeCompte and Dworkin (1991) developed the theoretical framework used for guiding this study. They identified the framework as the “process model” (p. 12). Four elements were identified as contributing to the alienation a student feels before making the decision to leave school:

1. Pupil-related factors: family, peer pressure, poor academic performance, and economic conditions;
2. School-related factors: inadequate teacher preparation, unresponsive school structure; and the “systematic stratification of knowledge”;
3. Constructed factors: attitudes about school and how students and teachers interact;
4. Macrosystem factors: labor market, demography of the community, and changes in the large family structure.

The interview protocol was developed around the four elements, and each individual was questioned in the four areas. Student-related factors included gender, age, ethnicity, approximate academic performance (GPA), family background, the reason for leaving school, and the intent of returning to school.

School-related factors included questions on what the school organization did to encourage the student to stay in school, the types of teachers the student had, the degree of technology available in school, and what teaching strategies were normally employed in school. Constructed factors that were explored included what a student liked best/least in school. Then dropouts were also asked about their attitudes toward education in general and how their friends felt about their decisions to leave school. Macrosystem factors that were explored included the size and kind of village, the economic conditions of the area, the availability of GED programs, and the training for work most people received in the area. Students and other school personnel who were interviewed were encouraged to expand on their answers.

### **Presentation of the Data**

Approximately 30 days of observations were made in 10 schools in 6 communities throughout western Alaska. Both elementary and secondary classrooms were observed. The student population of the schools was nearly entirely Native Alaskan. The size of the villages where the schools were located ranged from a few hundred to over 5,000.

In addition to the observations, interviews, and document analysis allowed the researchers to examine the schooling process. Students, school personnel, and parents were interviewed and observed at each site in the fall of 2002 and the winter of 2003. Twelve school personnel were interviewed in the 10 schools and 6 dropouts were interviewed about their schooling experiences and their decisions to leave school. The presentation of data is organized around the theoretical framework used for this study.

### **Student Dropout-Related Factors**

One female and five male dropouts were interviewed. All the young people had some Native Alaskan ethnicity in their backgrounds. There was a wide range in academic achievement levels. All the young people interviewed were currently living in the Bethel area, but some had gone to school in nearby villages. Nearly

all the interviewees indicated their family structure was very sound. With only one exception, they all lived in two-parent households. Four of the six had used alcohol or drugs.

Their decisions to leave school came very late in their educational journey—either in their junior or senior year of high school. One left school with only one uncompleted course.

## **School-Related Factors**

### Teaching Strategies and Resources

Class sizes ranged from 25 to less than 5 students. In the small villages, the class sizes were small, and sometimes the classes resembled a one-room schoolhouse with a number of classes and grades going on at the same time.

Lecture, textbooks, and paper/pencil activities dominated the teaching strategies observed in the classrooms. In some cases, the entire period was taken up by students filling in answers on worksheets by reviewing a chapter in a textbook to find the answers.

Hands-on activities, project-based learning, or service-learning activities were not familiar teaching strategies to any of the teachers observed with the exception of two student teachers. Even science classes were very predominately paper/pencil in nature with no attempt made to include experiments or hands-on activities. One school district had moved to the block system of scheduling, but had not trained its teachers to do any student-centered learning. The teacher doing examples on the board took up most of the period and the last half hour was left to the students to do homework.

Some of the most innovative teaching strategies were observed with two student teachers at the elementary level. One student teacher was teaching reading by having students act out plays. The class was divided into two groups and all students were expected to memorize their lines over a two-week period. The plays were performed for other classes and parents. Another student teacher did a unit on Arctic animals by allowing students to independently research their chosen animal and then present his/her findings to the class with parents being invited.

One intern complained that he would like to try to include more community members in his classroom, but the administration was not in favor of elders participating in the classroom. He continued to battle the administration throughout the semester as he tried to make his curriculum more sensitive to the students' cultural heritage and include community members in the classes.

The resources teachers had to draw upon varied greatly. In one case, there were no materials for science labs and high school science was completely done by textbook and worksheet. In another case, a teacher was teaching math entirely by the text and doing examples on the board. The students did not have calculators.

All communities in which classrooms were observed had access to the Internet. During some class periods, the students used computers. The use of

computers was normally done with a worksheet as a guide. In one classroom, seventh graders who were on the computers were working on entirely different assignments than the eighth graders in the same classroom. The consensus of the dropouts interviewed was that access to computer technology was adequate, but frequently students were not able to use a computer by themselves.

Physical education classes were held in tiny gymnasiums, about half the size of a regulation gymnasium. In two school districts, new schools were being planned with expanded gym facilities. No students ever dressed out for physical education classes and the normal teaching strategy was to allow for a game or shooting baskets for the period. In one instance, the gym teacher was openly hostile toward athletics and claimed that despite the inadequate facilities available for physical education and sports, the district placed too much emphasis upon student participation in athletics. He claimed that not enough attention was paid to the academic aspect of schooling. Three of the six dropouts interviewed indicated that physical education was their favorite school activity. After-school athletics also rated high among favorite school activities.

Most teachers observed were asked to teach outside of their certification areas. This is extremely common in rural Alaska. One teacher in the alternative certification program had a bachelor's degree in English. His teaching duties included teaching science, video production, physical education, and writing. One teacher had no homeroom and "floated" throughout the day from room to room and even from building to building. He taught junior high social studies and language arts classes.

### Phasing

Those schools we observed were under a district directive to form ability groups that the district referred to as "phases." One grade level might have as many as three levels. Theoretically, a child could move to the next phase at any time, but the usual procedure was to advance the entire group at one time once standards were deemed met. Movement between ability levels was not frequent. The lowest ability group included students identified for special education services as well as students not performing to the ability level of the phase above.

At one high school, the students were grouped with junior high students since their ability level was identified as junior high. Some parents objected to this arrangement and the district was working to resolve the issue. Theoretically, a high school student could be assigned to an elementary phase group if he/she did not meet the standards in any of the phase groups in high school. In January 2003, a teacher from a district in extreme western Alaska indicated that his district was also moving in the direction of placing students, regardless of age, at the grade level or phase group where they could perform adequately.

### School System Efforts at Dropout Prevention

Former students were asked what the school system officials did to encourage them to stay in school. "Nothing was done," was the reply of one student. "They



didn't say anything [when I dropped out]," replied one 18-year-old female. One former student simply said, "Nothing."

A General Education Studies (GED) instructor indicated an unhappiness with the lack of coordination between tribal authorities wanting to assist students considering leaving high school and the local high school authorities. She had been part of a conversation at the beginning of the year in which tribal and school officials agreed to work together to coordinate their efforts to prevent students from leaving school prematurely. At the time of the interview (December 2002), no school official had contacted the tribal official responsible for dropout prevention. The GED instructor said, "I know kids have dropped out of school because they have come here wanting to enroll in our GED program since school began this fall."

In an interior village, a high school counselor was interviewed concerning his experience with students choosing not to complete high school. The counselor mentioned that dropout numbers were "high." Some students had dropped out of school to get their GEDs so they could enter the military or go to a vocational school away from the village. He also indicated the school system had no formal intervention program for students identified as being at-risk for dropping out.

### **Constructed-Factors**

When former students were asked how they viewed teachers, nearly all the comments were negative. One 17-year-old male described his teachers as "educated idiots." Another 18-year-old male responded, "[My former teachers were] average. They helped out when I asked for help. When I got bad grades they [told me] to do something about them." Another student replied, "[The teacher] didn't offer me anything. She wouldn't relate to me."

Some of the teachers were not impressed with their students or communities. One teacher stated, "We [Americans] didn't conquer these people. We rescued them." There was a general frustration on the part of the teachers for the apathy students showed toward their schoolwork. In speaking about keeping students at a particular grade level until they met the objectives, the same teacher said, "And if they need to be [at that grade level] for 13 years, then they will be there." Then he added, "Or until they drop out." One school administrator in a Native village said, "If these kids don't want to be [in school], we need to stop forcing them to be here." He expressed extreme frustration at dealing with discipline issues and unhappy parents.

One attitude that a number of students mentioned was impatience with the time it would take to get a high school diploma. "I'm going to do something with my life, not waste it for a half credit," was the reply of one student when asked about his decision to leave just before his schooling was over. Another student responded, "I was ready to step forward into my future." Staying in school until completion was not a step into the future for this student.

### Macrosystem-Factors

All the dropouts interviewed had lived their entire lives in villages in western Alaska. The economy of their villages is mainly subsistence hunting and fishing. Some seasonal work can be found in the tourist service industry or working the summer months in a fish canning factory. Unemployment is high and employable skills low throughout western Alaska.

An extensive interview was held with a college instructor that works with one of Alaska's largest General Education Degree (GED) programs. Recently, classes graduating with their GEDs from her program have been the largest in the state. The instructor also serves on the local school board and has worked in the community for over ten years. She indicated that many of her students were facing difficult family and economic issues, but she was always amazed at their resiliency in pursuing their GEDs.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

The research presented here is not an attempt to advance a comprehensive view of all the questions about Native education in Alaska or to assign blame for the challenges confronting Native education in Alaska. However, this research does suggest that the complex questions that remain demand that educators continue to explore innovative solutions to ongoing education issues.

### The School/Student Relationship

There is one overriding theme that emerges from the collected data and the background literature on Alaska Native education. Despite high numbers of students leaving the school systems before completion, the school systems have shown little evidence of changing to meet the human and academic needs of the Indigenous student clientele. There is a serious systems flaw that results in Native students being "bored out of school" (Reyhner, 1992, p. 39). The process of inflicting an educational system conceived and implemented completely by outside forces appears to be a foundational cause of alienation by Native students toward school.

Feeling white [in school] happens not because of its educators' plans or practices, and not because of its educators' failings or shortcomings. It happens by the simple act of attending a school whose origin, rationale, form and content are extracted from the non-Indian, outside world. (Peshkin, 1997, p. 118)

### The School/Community Relationship

Not only does there appear to be a dysfunctional relationship between the school organization and the students, there are also serious barriers that separate the school and the community. In a study of Alaskan educators leaving rural schools, 45% agreed with the statement, "The school received little support from the community" (McDiarmid et al., 2002, p. 32). There is clearly a disconnection between the school systems these teachers work in and the communities where the school systems are located.

One of the researchers for this article discovered a similar pattern of school/community disconnect on a New Mexico reservation school. "The school system is tolerated, but at the same time, community members appear to have slowly erected a barrier against the alien organization" (Freed & Peña, 2002, p. 30). Academic achievement levels were well below state averages and schooling was described as "very, very difficult to get the kids to exercise their brains at all" (Freed & Peña, 2002, p. 30).

Most of the teachers we observed in Alaska came from outside the villages and could not envision change in the educational system in which they worked. After all, it was the type of educational system that had served them well. Despite being surrounded by a system that loses most, if not all, of its clientele, these teachers were often unable to strategize beyond citing blame for poor academic performance or attendance on Native students or their families. Schlechty (1997) reported that "few high school dropouts report that they had great teachers who influenced them, though most teacher education majors report that they were influenced greatly by one or more great teachers in high school" (p. 152). Teachers with a vision of empowering Native Alaskan students through a relevant education system rather than blaming them or their families for lack of academic achievement should be a prerequisite to an assignment of teaching in Alaska.

Teachers in Native Alaskan villages must come to realize that "the children's school experiences are real, daily life experiences; they [should not be] a withdrawal from life, which is only resumed outside the school" (Katz & Chard, 1997, p. 6). However, for many western Native Alaskan students, school experiences do not have meaning outside of the classroom or the school environment. If, as one teacher we interviewed observed, there is no apparent difference between staying until completion in the irrelevancy of the local school or working in the real life of the community. The large percentage of students leaving are a clear indication which of the two alternatives students are choosing.

### **The Importance of Education**

Almost without exception, our interviewees indicated an awareness of the importance of a good education. One student stated, "Education is important. Education and success are #1!" And yet each of these young people turned their back on the only educational institution in their villages. Despite the critical importance education carried in the minds of these Native Alaskan youth, the process of schooling was not something they chose to endure.

In a desperate cry for an empowering educational experience, a Black South African character in the book, *The Power of One*, stated,

If the white man would give me his rights and the same voice, I would not be able to use them, I would still be in bondage. . . . I am naked without knowledge. I am nothing without learning. . . . Please, sir, give me this knowledge, give me this learning, so that I too can be a man. (Courtenay, 1989, p. 447)

Large percentages of Native Alaskan children scattered across the enormity of western Alaska have recognized the futility of their schooling experiences and they remain naked in a cold and unforgiving land.

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