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Alaskan Schools: What Matters to Students?

Listening to the Voices of Engaged and Disengaged Alaska Native and Non-Native Students

Summary of Key Findings

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Overview

What makes a school a place where Alaskan students want to be and want to do well? Why do students stay in school or drop out? And what do Alaskan students believe that schools can do to help them succeed? In this report, researchers at American Institutes for Research (AIR) present the answers, provided directly by students, to these questions.

In 2010 and 2011, a series of focus groups was held with students drawn from 26 schools in four Alaskan school districts (Anchorage, Juneau, Lower Kuskokwim, and Yukon-Koyukuk). These focus groups were held with Alaska Native and non-Native students, engaged and disengaged students,¹ and both middle school and high school students from urban and rural communities. The current report summarizes key findings.²

What makes a school a place where Alaskan students want to be and want to do well?

Students were asked to describe what made a school a place where students would want to be and would want to do well, and what would make a school a place where students would *not* want to be and would *not* want to do well. These questions were open-ended so students could easily present their opinions. Students identified five areas of school life that were especially influential:

- Supportive adults
- Physical and emotional safety
- Student-centered teaching approaches
- Opportunities to learn and engage
- Food quality

Supportive Adults. Students identified two ways to gauge adult supportiveness: (1) how teachers behaved in the classroom, and (2) how adults at school did or did not support students who were having difficulties. Students went beyond teachers' surface behavior (nice or not nice) and described how teachers created a positive school climate by establishing good communication with students; reaching out to help students one-on-one, advocating for students, and helping them succeed; being respectful, reliable, and trustworthy; and not overreacting to minor misbehavior (e.g., forgotten homework).

In contrast, students indicated that teachers created a negative school climate by not caring about students as individuals or not providing them with needed support; by being unfair or showing favoritism; or through unpleasant interactions with students, such as nagging or “taking out their bad mood on the students.”

¹ “Engaged” students had at least 90 percent attendance and were passing all their classes—regardless of their level of performance or whether they were in advanced or remedial classes. “Disengaged” students were those students who had poor attendance (less than 90 percent attendance) and one or more failing grades.

² A full report of findings is available at www.aasb.org

Students believed that adults at school should notice and reach out to those students who may be having personal difficulties, should take a supportive rather than a punitive approach to students who are struggling, and should be receptive and available for students who reach out to them. Alaska Native students, in particular, believed that schools could and should provide support for vulnerable students by offering them a safe haven, by supporting students having difficulties at home, and by providing a place where students could spend their time constructively and stay out of trouble.

“A lot of kids have family problems at home, and if they had a teacher or a counselor to talk to, they might feel like someone cares about [them].”

In addition, many disengaged students reported that they had started off with small issues with teachers, felt punished disproportionately, expressed anger or unhappiness toward the teacher, were punished again, and ended up in a downward spiral of misbehavior and punishment that they did not want but did not know how to stop or reverse (and that the teacher also perpetuated).

Physical and Emotional Safety. Students believed that a school provided a good environment when there was equality among students and *no* favoritism from adults, students felt safe to express their own ideas and opinions in an open-minded atmosphere, students had physical and emotional safety, there was structure, and there were opportunities for students to develop personally and to be part of a friendly and encouraging environment. In contrast, students strongly believed that school became a place where students did *not* want to be and did *not* want to do well when there was a judgmental environment in which students experienced racism and sexism, when students were subject to bad or excessive school rules, when students experienced unfair application of the rules, or when there were excessive consequences for minor misbehavior.

Students also uniformly cited the importance of physical and emotional safety among students. Their message was that a school became a place where students wanted to be if they were safe and not bullied or harassed by peers. Alaska Native students, in particular, placed a high value on having peers at school who were helpful, kind, and well behaved. In contrast, for all types of students, school became a place where students did not want to be if there was bullying, intimidation, peer pressure, gangs, cliques, social exclusion, or other forms of peer mistreatment or where there were obvious threats to physical safety such as fighting, violence, or weapons at school. Students felt unsafe when they saw peers at school under the influence of or selling drugs and alcohol. Students also believed that their peers created a negative school climate by being rude, being disrespectful to teachers, sleeping through class, or generally behaving badly.

Student-Centered Teaching Approaches. Students believed that teachers created a positive school climate by showing students that they wanted to do their jobs and making an effort to teach well, by knowing how to have fun or teaching in a way that was fun, and by taking time to make sure all students understood the material. Students also believed that school was a better place when teachers provided assistance with homework when needed, allowed each student to learn at his or her own pace, and kept the classroom environment free from distractions (such as others talking).

Students indicated that teachers create a negative school climate by acting as if they did not want to do their jobs, not teaching well or teaching in a boring way, assigning too much homework, assigning work that was either too difficult or was meaningless “busywork,” being excessively strict about schoolwork, or not ensuring that all students understood the material.

Opportunities to Learn and Engage. Students highly valued academic opportunities, such as good academic classes and enrichment classes, chances to learn challenging material, classes that were meaningful to them as individuals and helped them to develop goals and aspirations, classes that gave them opportunities for hands-on learning and field trips, and classes that helped them learn how to live a healthy life. These academic opportunities were especially important to Alaska Native students in rural areas.

Students also believed that a school was a good place for students to be when there were opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities (e.g., clubs, the arts), sports, gym class, or when there was physical activity. Opportunities to engage in extracurricular and physical activities were especially valuable to Alaska Native students in rural areas.

Food Quality. School food was very important to all types of students, with good-quality food (lunch, snacks) contributing to a positive school climate and bad food contributing to a negative school climate. This issue may be especially important for students whose school meals are subsidized by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) because lower income students also are at higher risk for dropping out of school as a result of factors associated with poverty; in fact, factors contributing to a positive school climate that alleviate issues associated with poverty may be of special benefit to these students.³

What keeps Alaskan students engaged in school, and what makes them drop out?

Students identified the following aspects of school life that affected engagement in education:

- Personal problems
- Family engagement
- Relevance
- Teacher expectations
- School-based problems

“If that teacher [has] high expectations, you’re almost forced to work harder to get those good grades. With teachers that don’t expect much, you won’t have the motivation to do well.”

Personal Problems. Personal problems were the most commonly perceived reason for students to drop out of school (according to their peers). The most common problem was substance abuse (drugs or alcohol). Students also dropped out because they needed to support their families (financially and/or by helping at home), and many had become parents themselves and needed to

³ Nearly half of all students enrolled in Alaska’s public schools in the 2011–12 school year were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch under USDA guidelines. For details on Alaska’s National School Lunch Program, see <http://www.eed.state.ak.us/tls/cnp/NSLP.html>.

care for their own children. Students also stated that peers or boyfriends and girlfriends who had already left school influenced some students.

Although many students believed that their peers dropped out due to “laziness” or “not wanting to get up in the morning,” these responses may be related to another commonly cited reason for dropping out: depression.

Alaska Native students did not differ from non-Native students regarding why they or their peers had dropped out of school. The higher dropout rate among Alaska Native students seems related to the increased prevalence of challenges they face outside of school.

Family Engagement. Students spoke of the importance of parents being involved in their children’s education, being aware of how their children were doing in school, and knowing how to help them. In contrast, many students believed that if parents did not care about school, the students also would care less. Many students cited lack of family interest in education as a common reason for dropping out of school. However, some students (especially high school students) believed that it was primarily the student’s responsibility to do well in school and that family support was not essential.

“If your parents come [to school], they can figure out what you need help with so they can help you at home, too.”

“If your parents don’t get involved, then you’re not going to try at all.”

Relevance. Students had mixed opinions about whether their classes taught them what they really needed to know in life. Students believed that school was teaching them what they needed to know when school prepared them for higher education and later employment and also helped them to develop social skills, to become able to work with authority figures, and to be able to get up in the morning.

Most students believed that school taught *some* things that they needed to know but that some subjects were a waste of time (unless the student would use that subject for a specific career). Students expressed difficulty understanding why subjects such as history and social studies were relevant. Many students who did not believe that their school curriculum was relevant said that they would prefer to have more life-skills education, such as how to care for themselves and run a household (e.g., cooking, home repairs); how to parent, drive, gain employment, and stay healthy; or how to survive in the wilderness.

Disengaged students were somewhat more likely than engaged students to directly state that they were not learning what they needed to know, but most disengaged students still believed that their schoolwork (or at least some of their schoolwork) was relevant.

Teacher Expectations. Students believed that teacher expectations were important and that high or low expectations could influence students. But they indicated that high expectations needed to be accompanied by adequate support so that students could meet those expectations. Some students expressed concern that having expectations that were too high or were emphasized too much could influence adults at those schools to become pushy or intrusive.

Disengaged students emphasized how essential it was for teachers to motivate students and believed that students would not do their work if their teachers did not motivate them. Also, disengaged students were more likely than engaged students to remark that there should be high expectations for student behavior (not just for academics). Further, Alaska Native students were somewhat more likely than non-Native students to mention that teachers who held high expectations for them helped them to achieve their goals.

School-Based Problems. Students mentioned three school-based reasons why their peers dropped out:

- Negative experiences with peers (being bullied or picked on, social isolation)
- Negative experiences with teachers or other authority figures
- Lack of positive connections with or support from teachers

What do Alaskan students believe that adults can do to help them succeed in school?

Students provided the following ways that adults could help students succeed in school:

- Provide a safe haven and support for vulnerable students by ensuring that caring adults at school notice when students are having personal difficulties, reach out to support them, and are available when students wish to reach out for assistance.
- Provide support for students who wish to improve their relationships with teachers.
- Provide a structured environment that promotes equality and physical and emotional safety.
- Remove drugs and alcohol from the school environment.
- Support teachers in providing an engaging and motivating classroom environment.
- Ensure that rules are moderate in number, sensible, and applied fairly, and that consequences for misbehavior are proportionate and restorative.
- Provide students (particularly in rural areas) with opportunities to participate in a broader range of academic courses and extracurricular activities.
- Support disengaged students by being aware that they place *more* importance than do engaged students on their relationships with adults at school, appreciate good school rules and structure, and view poor peer behavior as detrimental.
- Provide appetizing and healthy school food.



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