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ABSTRACT

This article discusses preparing teachers to teach in rural Alaska. An anecdote illustrates how outsiders who come to work in rural Alaska get into trouble because they are unprepared for conditions unique to the North. These conditions end up being viewed as impediments rather than opportunities. The same is true for the field of education. Of 2,368 teachers in rural Alaskan schools, nearly one-third are new to their positions. This compares with about 12 percent of teachers new to their jobs in urban schools. While rural schools employ only one-third of all teachers in the state, they typically hire over two-thirds of the new teachers each year, most of whom originate outside of Alaska. That means that Alaskan preservice programs touch only a small percentage of teachers working in Alaska. In rural Native communities, the proportion of Alaska Native teachers is growing but is still a long way from appropriate local representation. This is all the more critical in that many rural school reform initiatives are dependent on the professional involvement of people knowledgeable about the local culture and environment. In-depth cross-cultural orientation and mentoring programs are needed by all teachers new to rural Alaska. The internship period could include such activities as a cultural orientation program in a week-long camp with local Elders as instructors; pairing each new teacher with an Elder in the community and a respected experienced teacher in the school; and a program of study based on the "Alaska Standards for Culturally Responsive Schools." (CDS)

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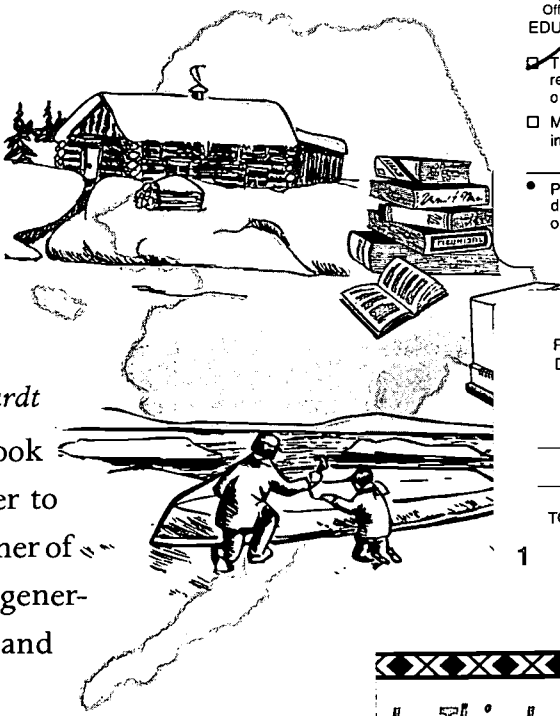
Preparing Teachers for Rural Alaska



by Ray Barnhardt

A few summers ago, a friend and I took a boat trip up the Porcupine River to the Canadian border in the Northeast corner of Alaska. While in the border area, which generally is inhabited only by grizzly bear and caribou, we ran into a crew of loggers from the state of Washington. They had been the successful bidders on a summer contract with the U.S.-Canada Border Commission to clear-cut a 20-foot wide path and reset boundary markers along the entire length of the Alaska-Canadian border. The first and last time this had been done was in 1911, at which time the Rampart House trading post had been operating at the point where the border crosses the river.

Based on a review of topographic maps of the area and some old photographs of the trading post, this small logging company had put their savvy as backcountry loggers in Washington to work in devising a bid that would bring them a reasonable return for their summer's effort. Their successful bid called for them to haul all of their supplies and equipment, including a large landing-craft style boat and two Honda "Big Red" three-wheelers, up the highway from

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Washington to Circle by truck, and then load everything in the boat for the trip down the Yukon and up the Porcupine to the border. Their first hint that conditions in the North may not be the same as they were used to back in Washington came when they ran aground four times before they got around the first bend in the Yukon River below Circle. The cost of a local river guide to get them to Ft. Yukon didn't hurt their budget or pride too much, but the two extra days and the three spare props needed to get up the Porcupine began to worry them.

By the time my friend and I arrived on the scene, their anxiety level had reached the point where their behavior was not unlike that of a first-year bush teacher in mid-January, and here it was mid-June. The circumstance that had driven them to the brink was when they realized their Honda three-wheelers were no match for the hummocks and muskeg on the northern tundra. To get out to their work sites each day from their river base they had to charter a helicopter, which was very quickly consuming their summer profits. To cut costs, the men were sleeping out on the line with a pistol for a pillow, mosquitoes and grizzlies for company, and granola bars and freeze-dried food for sustenance. Their expectations of an exciting summer in Alaska were being realized, but not quite in the manner they had anticipated. By the time we left, things were getting pretty tense and the whole outfit was in general despair.

What had brought this otherwise hearty and savvy group of people to this unfortunate state of affairs? They knew their trade. They had done a good job of planning, based on their perception of the situation. But, they hadn't taken into account that in the North, conditions aren't always what they seem to be from an outside perspective. The same is true for the field of education. We can't always do things here the way they are done elsewhere. When we try, those things that are unique to the North, especially in rural Alaska, end up being viewed as impediments rather than as opportunities.

How do we know that teaching in rural Alaska is different than teaching elsewhere? The first hint should come when we look at the fact that of the 2,368 teachers in rural schools this year, nearly one-third are new to their positions. That compares with about 12% in the urban schools (including 104 brand new positions in Anchorage.) While rural schools employ only one-third of all the teachers in the state, they typically hire over two-thirds of the new teachers each year, most of whom originate from outside the state. That means that at the present time, the potential for improving the quality of education in rural schools has an upper limit that is established by the average three-year cycle of staff turnover.

How do we break out of this cycle? First of all, by identifying the factors that contribute to it. Some of these have already been touched upon—most importantly the stress teachers experience when working in a physically and culturally foreign environment for which they are ill prepared by either training or experience. While an orientation program such as that offered at Old Minto each summer, along with improved living conditions, can help extend teachers' longevity a year or two, in the long run, the problem of teacher stability, curriculum continuity and quality education in rural schools can be addressed only through the preparation of more teachers and administrators who are from rural communities. Only then can those communities begin to assert the degree of local professional control needed to go along with the political control they obtained

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with the decentralization of rural schools in 1976.

The number of degreed and licensed Alaska Natives in the field of education at the present time is just a little over 350, nearly half of whom came up through the field-based Cross-Cultural Education and Development (X-CED) program. While some rural districts have a higher proportion of Native staff than others (a couple are in the 30% range), we clearly have a long way to go before rural Native communities can experience the degree of local representation in their schools that other communities take for granted. This is all the more critical today, in that many of the most promising rural school reform initiatives are dependent on the professional involvement of people knowledgeable about the local culture and environment. Unfortunately, the university programs designed to address these needs have been reduced to less than half of what they were five years ago, and their future remains uncertain.

Responsibility for addressing this issue falls on all of us - school districts through career ladders and staff development plans; Department of Education (DOE) through licensing regulations and teacher education standards; the universities through appropriate teacher preparation programs such as X-CED/Rural Education Preparation Partnership (REPP); and rural communities through their commitment to locally controlled education. But a renewed commitment to preparing homegrown teachers is not in itself going to bring the schools of Alaska to the level of excellence that we are seeking over the next few years—it is a necessary, but not sufficient step. At the present time, we are importing over three-fourths of the teachers in our state. That means that no matter how much we upgrade our own pre-service programs, we are still going to be touching only a small percentage of the teachers working in Alaska.

To get at this issue, we need to address the problem at another more fundamental level—that being at the level of in-depth cross-cultural orientation and mentoring programs for all teachers new to rural Alaska. New teachers, whether from in-state or out-of-state, while on a provisional certificate could be encouraged to participate in a teaching internship program provided jointly by the local school district and the university. In districts where cultural disparities are an issue, the internship period could include training in cross-cultural teaching practices based on activities such as the following:

- New teachers could be encouraged to participate in a district-sponsored cultural orientation program during their first year or two, which could include participation in a week-long camp with local Elders as the instructors sometime during the fall term (similar to the Kodiak camp prior to school last year or the Alakanuk camp that took place throughout the first three weeks of school this year.)
- New teachers could be paired with an Elder in the community and a respected experienced teacher in the school (or an experienced Native teacher) to serve as mentors throughout the first year of teaching.
- A program of study based on the *Alaska Standards for Culturally Responsive Schools* could be made available to guide the teachers in the translation of their new insights into culturally-appropriate curriculum and teaching practice (the Alaska Staff Development Network has already prepared materials for such a program of study.)
- For those teachers who are interested, a two-year field-based course of study could be made available leading to a possible specialty endorsement in "cross-cultural education," and/or a graduate degree in cross-cultural studies. All of the above could also fulfill the current state "multicultural education" and "Alaska studies" requirements.

Such an internship experience would benefit teachers coming out of the university programs in the state as well as those coming with training and experience from outside the state, just as the Washington state loggers would have benefited from a little grounded experience on the Porcupine River before they committed themselves to the border-clearing contract.

Finally, I'd like to say that all of the issues that have been raised here suffer from an inadequate Alaskan data base of information on which to make informed decisions. Recognizing that some problems are unique to Alaska, and that if we don't address them, no one will, I would urge the legislature and the DOE to consider setting aside funds in the amount of one-half of one percent of the annual appropriation for education, to be made available on a grants and contracts basis for the purpose of soliciting and stimulating research and evaluation efforts related to Alaskan education issues. We would then be in a position to build programs with a knowledge base that takes Alaskan conditions into account, instead of adopting programs and practices from elsewhere and finding out after expensive investments that they don't fit. Let's be better prepared than the transplanted brushwackers on the Porcupine River.

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