Place-Based Education

“Place-based education is learning that is rooted in what is local -- the unique history, environment, culture, economy literature, and art of a particular place. The community provides the context for learning, student work focuses on community needs and interests, and community members serve as resources and partners in every aspect of teaching and learning. Together we have discovered that this local focus has the power to engage students academically, pairing real-world relevance with intellectual rigor, while promoting genuine citizenship and preparing people to respect and live well in any community they choose. Place-based learning helps schools and communities get better together.” (Rural School & Community Trust)

Wonderful advantages and traditions define the lives of Alaskans in small communities or villages. Cultural homogeneity, the closeness of a small community, the availability of an extended family, the passing and sharing of cultural traditions and lifestyles, indigenous governance, and the freedom from outside influences all contribute to a high quality of life. Even the challenges of rural life contribute to the pride and independence evidenced by rural Alaskans.

Developing and maintaining quality education programs in Alaska’s remote communities present a challenge to communities, educators, students and parents.

Although many communities share common characteristics, each has a unique personality defined by differences in size, ethnicity, language/dialect, access, culture, economics and governance. Because schools should reflect a community’s values and beliefs, it is critical that educational programs be customized to the unique needs of each community.

The curriculum in Alaska’s schools should be rigorous and reflect the learning styles, values and meaning of Alaska’s indigenous people. The Alaska Rural Systemic Initiative has completed extensive research into the importance of integrating Western and Indigenous learning systems when working with Alaska Native students.

Several critical components must be considered when designing schools that meet the needs of Alaska Native students: Native language and culture must be included in the school curriculum; the curriculum must be culturally responsive and delivered within the context of a child’s learning; shared, bottom up decision-making must be nurtured so that the community and school values reflect one another; teachers should understand and respect a community’s culture; school governance should be shared because school staff come and go. It is up to the people who remain to carry forward the vision for their children.

Some questions that participants in this work group may want to consider:

What programs and support structures are necessary to support the specialized educational and cultural needs of Alaska Native students in urban or rural settings?

How can the state support indigenous languages?
What kinds of technical assistance do small districts require in order to respond to individual students’ needs?

How can extensive rural teacher and principal turnover be minimized?

How can the body of knowledge regarding effective strategies and quality research be expanded, collected and communicated all stakeholders?

What strategies should be implemented to support the needs of students and families who migrate between rural and urban schools?

What programs should be in place to eliminate the high level of suicide, school failure, and drug/alcohol/tobacco abuse among youth?

What steps should be taken to ensure that students in rural communities have access to quality, culturally responsive instructors and administrators?

What role do grant funds play in the development of innovative educational programming? What are the benefits and problems with relying on grants to support education?

How can high-quality, rigorous distance education options be developed and implemented as a viable option for rural students?

What role do boarding schools have as a choice for parents and students?

How can access to quality career and technical programs and experiences be provided to all students?

What steps are necessary to ensure that a community has a powerful voice and ownership in the success of students?

How can Alaska prepare students from rural Alaska to successfully transition into and complete college, technical school or a job of their choosing?