

A HISTORY OF EDUCATION IN THE CHUGACH REGION

[We need to get] the kids to learn their cultural ways of living... if we don't teach them now, it's going to die...

Simeon Kvasnikoff, Elder, Port Graham, 2004¹

The Chugach region contains a medley of cultures and traditions. People of Sugpiat, Yupik, Aleut, Athabascan, Yakutat, Tlingit, and Eyak heritage call the region's temperate rainforests and ocean inlets home. For thousands of years, each generation has been educated by the generation before them – preserving and adding to a rich knowledge base on the land, its history, and its people.²

Although too little is known about the history of education in the Chugach region, it is well established that storytelling is central to the communication of knowledge in Alaska Native communities. According to Carol Barnhardt, Professor of Education at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, “the large majority of knowledge about traditional Alaska Native education continues to come from elder’s memories.”³ Sally Ash, a resident of Nanwalek, remarked how she learned from her Elders and women in the village about how to be a mother and raise a child in Sugpiaq ways.⁴ While it is difficult to make generalizations, Barnhardt remarks that many Alaska Native groups share a set of values: prioritizing communal needs, sharing knowledge and materials, and respecting the interconnectedness of the natural world.⁵

Early schools introduced by Russian Orthodox missionaries aimed to “civilize” Alaska Native people, and consequently corroded traditional forms of education that had been effective over millennia.⁶ Both the Russian Orthodox Church and commercial fur trading companies sought to centralize services in larger settlements, and transformed Nanwalek and Port Graham into trading posts where Native peoples were coerced into hunting sea otter populations. This coercive practice led to a loss of political sovereignty among Native communities.⁷ In the late 1800s, the U.S. federal government established day schools in Alaska villages that promoted a strict “English-only” policy.⁸ Whether the school was operated directly by the federal government or

¹Salomon, Anne K., Nick Tanape, Lisa Williams, and Henry P. Huntington. *Imam Cimiucia Our Changing Sea*. Fairbanks, AK: Alaska Sea Grant College Program, 2011. Page 85.

² USDA Forrest Service. Region 10 History and Culture. *McKinley Trail Cabin Details*. USDA Alaska Region Website. <https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/r10/learning/history-culture/?cid=fseprd505674>; Chugach Alaska Corporation. *History Culture. Legends and Stories*. Chugach Alaska Website. <https://www.chugach.com/who-we-are/history-culture/legends-stories>

³ Carol Barhardt, “A History of Schooling for Alaska Native People,” *University of Minnesota Press*, Vol. 40, No1 (2001), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24398586>, Page 10.

⁴ Roy Barnhardt and Angayuqaq Oscan Kawagley, *Sharing Our Pathways: Native Perspectives on Education in Alaska*. Alaska Native Knowledge Network Center for Cross-Cultural Studies at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, 2011. Page 190

⁵ Carol Barhardt, “A History of Schooling for Alaska Native People,” *University of Minnesota Press*, Vol. 40, No1 (2001), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24398586>, Page 6.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Salomon, Anne K., Nick Tanape, Lisa Williams, and Henry P. Huntington. *Imam Cimiucia Our Changing Sea*. Fairbanks, AK: Alaska Sea Grant College Program, 2011. Page 12.

⁸ Carol Barhardt, “A History of Schooling for Alaska Native People,” *University of Minnesota Press*, Vol. 40, No1 (2001), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24398586>, Page 11.

contracted out to missionary groups, western education aimed to assimilate Alaska Native children into a non-Native culture.

The consequences of these policies have been felt over generations. Control over schools serving Alaska Native students transitioned from the Department of the Interior (1884-1888) to the Bureau of Indian Affairs (1888-1986). Following the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act in 1971, state-funded school districts began to assume control of education in the State and in rural Native communities.⁹ Federal and state control has often resulted in a marginalization of Alaska Native voices. Sperry Ash from Nanwalek shared his feeling that “we lack the control to try things our way. Everything about the borough school in our village permeates with the attitude ‘we know what’s best for your kids.’”¹⁰

Any conversation regarding education of Alaska Natives today must recognize this legacy. In a household survey conducted by the McDowell Group, over four in ten Alaska Natives said the Alaska educational system favors non-Native students.¹¹ Among Native households, more than 80 percent said it was important to teach Alaska Native culture and language.¹² Literature consistently points to the fact that the inclusion of Native culture and language in the classroom promotes academic success for Native students.¹³

As We Work Together Program Manager Laura Revels states, whoever tells the story controls the narrative. The following data, observations, and anecdotes enrich the story of the Chugach region, and may teach us how informed partnerships can promote meaningful, holistic learning and student achievement in the years to come.

⁹ Chugach School District: A Personalized Performance-Based System, Pg 5

¹⁰ Salomon, Anne K., Nick Tanape, Lisa Williams, and Henry P. Huntington. *Imam Cimiucia Our Changing Sea*. Fairbanks, AK: Alaska Sea Grant College Program, 2011. Page 193.

¹¹ *Ibid*, Page 4.

¹² *Ibid*, Page 4.

¹³ *Ibid*, Page 4.