

August 11th, 2025

Written Comments of Patuk Glenn, Executive Director, Arctic Slope Community Association

Roundtable: “The Alyce Spotted Bear and Walter Soboleff Commission on Native Children: Examining Draft Legislation Related to The Way Forward Report”

Chairwoman Murkowski, Members of the Committee, Quyanapqak for the opportunity to provide written comments on behalf of the Arctic Slope Community Association, our region’s Tribes, and our many partners across rural Alaska.

The Need for Further Federal Support of Education Programs Across Rural Alaska

Alaska Native and American Indian children continue to face some of the lowest educational outcomes in the United States. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, only 30% of Alaska Native students are proficient in reading by 4th grade, compared to 41% of all Alaskan students, and just 13% are proficient in math by 8th grade, compared to 28% statewide.

In many rural districts, graduation rates for Alaska Native students remain below 70%, with some districts seeing rates as low as 53%. These statistics reflect not a lack of ability, but systemic challenges, including chronic underfunding, lack of culturally relevant curricula, and high teacher turnover.

The Need to Include Tribes and Community Organizations

To address these persistent gaps, it is essential that any federal legislation or program include a strong role for Tribes and community organizations. Tribes possess deep cultural knowledge, community trust, and the ability to mobilize resources for children and families. Community organizations, especially those based in rural Alaska, provide critical wraparound services that support school attendance, mental health, and family stability. Federal support should prioritize direct funding and technical assistance to Tribes and trusted local partners.

Primary Concern: Positively Affecting Student Performance Improving student performance must be at the heart of federal policy. Decades of research show that students’ academic success is most threatened by frequent teacher turnover and by schools that do not reflect students’ languages, cultures, or values. In rural Alaska, teacher

turnover rates are alarmingly high, often exceeding 30% per year, and in some villages, more than half of teachers leave annually. This instability disrupts learning, damages student-teacher relationships, and contributes to lower academic achievement and graduation rates.

The Link Between Student Turnover and Teacher Turnover

High teacher turnover is often mirrored by high student mobility. When teachers leave, students lose trusted adults, experience disruptions in learning, and are more likely to disengage from school. Research from the Regional Educational Laboratory Northwest found that in Alaska, schools with high teacher turnover see declines in student academic growth and increased absenteeism. The social and emotional impact is especially severe for Indigenous children, who may already face trauma and marginalization.

Certified Indigenous Educators: A Path to Improved Student Outcomes

Research consistently demonstrates that Indigenous students perform better academically and socially when they are taught by educators who share their background, language, and culture. Alaska districts with higher percentages of Native teachers report improved student attendance, graduation rates, and academic achievement. Yet, currently, less than 5% of Alaska's teachers are Alaska Native, while over 25% of students are.

Innovative Concepts: Registered Apprenticeships for Educator Training

To address this gap, we advocate for innovative educator preparation models such as U.S. Department of Labor registered apprenticeships. Apprenticeships enable Indigenous paraprofessionals and community members to “earn while they learn,” pursuing teacher certification without leaving their home communities. This model reduces barriers, supports local capacity, and ensures teachers are grounded in place-based knowledge. Federal funding should prioritize apprenticeship pathways and multi-employer training consortia, allowing rural districts and Tribes to collaborate and share resources.

The Need for Culturally Relevant, Place-Based Training

Place-based, culturally relevant educator training is essential to retain Indigenous educators. Training that reflects local languages, values, and ecological knowledge not only prepares effective teachers but also affirms the identity and dignity of Indigenous children. On-the-job training, embedded in local schools, ensures that educators gain practical skills and community trust, while being supported by Elders and cultural mentors.

Aullaagvik Tribal Educator Apprenticeship: A Model for the Nation

The Arctic Slope Community Foundation's Aullaagvik Tribal Educator Apprenticeship is a pioneering example. Since launching in 2023, Aullaagvik has enrolled 24 apprentices from across rural Alaska, each working toward full teacher certification while remaining in their home villages. Apprentices earn wages, receive mentorship from master teachers and Elders, and complete coursework focused on Iñupiaq language, culture, and land stewardship. Demand for the program far exceeds available funding; in 2024, we were forced to turn away qualified applicants due to a lack of federal and philanthropic support.

In a dearth of alternative Indigenous educator training programs, it is critical that the federal government ensure pathways for apprenticeships and multi-employer statewide training programs to access funding. Without sustained investment, we risk losing the momentum and hope that these apprentices represent, along with the opportunity to fundamentally transform rural education.

Why This Matters: The Research Is Clear

Students learn best when they have teachers who stay in their community, who look like them, speak their language, and know their culture. Studies show that Indigenous teachers are more effective at engaging Native students, reducing disciplinary disparities, and raising academic achievement. Teacher stability boosts trust, school climate, and student well-being.

Recommendations

- 1. Increase direct federal funding for rural Alaska education programs, with set-asides for Tribes and community organizations.**
- 2. Prioritize support for Department of Labor registered apprenticeship models and multi-employer educator training consortia.**
- 3. Require culturally relevant, place-based curricula and training for all federally funded teacher preparation programs.**
- 4. Ensure all federal education legislation is developed in partnership with Tribes and includes mechanisms for Indigenous voice and leadership.**

With your support, we can create an educational system that lifts up Alaska Native children, families, and communities, ensuring every child has access to teachers who reflect, respect, and honor their culture.

Quyanaqpak for your consideration.

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