

**Hearing Before the U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs
“Transformative and Innovative Strategies for Better Educational Outcomes for Alaska Native
Students.”**

By

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**Honorable Chairman Brian Schatz
Honorable Vice Chairwoman Lisa Murkowski
And Members of the U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs**

Good Afternoon. Thank you for the invitation to testify. My Name is Nuyaq William Naneng, General Manager of Sea Lion Corporation, an Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971 village corporation of Hooper Bay Alaska. Sea Lion Corporation has 643 shareholders of Yupik descent and seven directors who control investments and policy of our ANCSA corporation.

As an advocate for those in my community and of rural Alaskan education systems, my message to you is that rural western education system has long recognized, for many reasons, that it has not successfully worked for our Alaska Native Students and its product has adversely affected most of the predominated Native populated communities. There is a process of attending to Alaska Native student’s needs, experiences, and feelings, and intervening so that they learn particular things and go beyond the given. Statistics of the State of Alaska indicate Alaska Natives have the highest dropout, and lowest college graduate rates in the country. We have chronically high turnover among our teachers, resulting in lack of educators to benefit the Alaska Natives in the present educational system. The system, called Regional Educational Attendance Areas (REAAs), divided rural Alaska into 21 autonomous school districts (now 23 because of 2 recent additions) along the lines of regional ethnic and geographic identity, each with its own locally elected school board of directors charged with making local policy. REAAs became operational in 1974. REAAs lack up- to- date internet connectivity in stark contrast to our urban communities.

We are honored to contribute little ways to address the causes of high rates of absenteeism among our Yupik students, which may come across as a lack of enthusiasm about learning and achieving to outsiders. This perception that Natives are lacking, may be farther from the reality. Yupik parents and our students want to succeed in reading, mathematics, and sciences. We have a continual problem in retention, and high rates of suspension and expulsion among the students in our community. Native cultures have a lot to offer to the society, which can be used as a fulcrum to flip this around. I live with these individuals and have seen them successfully engage in our difficult and complex subsistence way of life.

In our community, indigenous families embodied change as we formed the Hooper Bay Charter School (HBCS) and received approval by the regional school board in the spring of and the Alaska State Board of Education in the autumn of 2019. Now, the Hooper Bay Charter School is improving the lives of up to 60 students, grades 4 through 8, every year. But our school must

overcome challenges. Most notably, rural schools like Hooper Bay Charter School require funding for innovative pathways to train and employ local indigenous educators. Also, the charter school has been forced to lease inadequate space resulting in low enrollment. Our Alaska Native students are truly deserving of their own facility. It is imperative that communities like Hooper Bay have an assurance of equitable resources to pursue adequate education systems

The mission of the Hooper Bay Native Charter School is to embrace the reality of our unique rural environment with its rich Alaska Native traditions, tribal governments, native villages, native corporations, ANCSA Corporations, cultural-based learning organizations, and create a partnership to develop well-prepared Alaska Native students who are, in -turn, able to contribute to their community. The school partnership will include elders, Alaska Native leaders, youth, parents, and teachers together to develop and implement curriculum reflective of cultural values, traditions, practices, and languages.

An educational system that utilizes traditional ways of knowing and methods of instruction will further help to transition rural Alaska Native students into overcome the barriers that Western educational models have long conceded to, while fostering pride and a strong sense of cultural identity. The HBNCS will engage in educational research and serve as a demonstration for other schools and educators who wish to develop effective methodologies and approaches for working with Alaska Native students, their families, and their communities.

Core Beliefs

1. We expect the curriculum to encompass Yup'ik core values, history, and culture, and encourage student efforts to become proficient Yuntun speakers.
2. We expect our students at Hooper Bay Charter School to develop intellectually, emotionally, morally, and socially, while merging contemporary and traditional knowledge.
3. We expect students to display a deeply engrained sense of respect for elders and understand they are an important resource in learning their history and culture.
4. We want our students to be held to high standards of achievement and commit to helping them reach or exceed proficiency in all subjects.
5. We want HBCS students to participate in the development of their curriculum.

A Constructivist Approach

The five core beliefs identified by the Academic Policy Committee are examples of a Constructivist philosophy of education. Therefore, the education methods of the school will embrace constructivist teaching methods:

- Constructivism suggests that humans understand things and make meaning from their experiences
- All new knowledge is built on a basis of prior knowledge
- Constructivist teaching is based on a belief that learning occurs when students are actively

involved in making meaning out of experiences (rather than listening to lectures)

- Constructivism relies heavily on collaboration among students
- Constructivist teachers help students learn to take responsibility and initiative for learning.
- **Students learn best when they are allowed to construct a personal understanding based on experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences.**

Instructional Design for Hooper Bay Charter School

Hooper Bay Charter School's curriculum and instruction design is based on the premise that all children can be academically successful in an environment that is culturally responsive, engaging, and addresses individual learning needs. This will be accomplished through an interdisciplinary, multi-grade teaching model with an emphasis on STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). HBCS will build a community of learners with a growth mindset, teaching students how to be responsible and excited for their own learning. Members of the community, elders, parents, and students themselves will provide input and guidance on all aspects of the instructional model so that there is a strong emphasis on local traditions, strengthening the use of their indigenous language, and incorporating Yup'ik values and learning styles.

Multi-Age and Multi-Disciplinary

Hooper Bay Charter School will use an interdisciplinary and multi-age approach for students in grades 4 through 8. An interdisciplinary model has many advantages. It allows the student to learn by making connections between ideas and concepts across different disciplinary boundaries. Students learning in this way are able to apply the knowledge gained in one discipline to another different discipline as a way to deepen the learning experience. In this model, students will become highly motivated as they have a vested interest in pursuing local science and engineering topics that are relevant to them. As a result, the content is often rooted in life experiences, giving an authentic purpose for the learning and connecting it to a real-world context. Consequently, the learning becomes meaningful, purposeful and deeper resulting in learning experiences that stay with the student for a lifetime.

An interdisciplinary model also allows students to cover topics in more depth because they are considering the many and varied perspectives from which a topic can be explored. Critical thinking skills are used and developed as students look across disciplinary boundaries to consider other viewpoints and begin to compare and contrast concepts across subject areas, synthesizing ideas.

There are also many advantages to a multi-grade model, namely the opportunities to experience leadership (for older students), cooperative learning, and a culturally appropriate family- and community-inclusive atmosphere.

Summary

As children growing up in rural Alaska and as first-time students, our parents or elders, as they prepared us for school, they'd project to us that the school was a safe environment by saying: "be loving to others". Similarly, our charter school principal's motto, as the students assemble

for class would say out loud: “be kind to others” and have the students repeat the same words. The principal leads by instructions to the staff and to the students. The school encourages the parents or extended family members to be involved; this community involvement extends to the classified staff by allowing them to lead in TREKs. On the onset of the COVID pandemic and the uncertainty it created, the school put together lesson packets for each student and we had a 65% pick up of those instruction material by parents, and the staff delivered the remainder of the packets to their homes.

Our observation through the grade student academic assessments in the first year of charter school; the 4th- 8th grade students were not ready to be taught in the the grade level they enter and will not very well achieve proficiency, unless the instructors provide remedial lessons to get them near where they should be. The general schools and educational system have been moving the Alaska Native students along, so they end up graduating with 9th or so grade level education. The strength and the success of University of Alaska Anchorage, Alaska Native Science and Engineering Program is their adamant and insistent the student enrollment is based on their level of knowledge in subjects like reading and mathematics, otherwise when many rural school graduates start off with college credit courses, they are set up for failure.

This was the impetus change in Hooper Bay, our community took control of our students’ academic future. When the charter school idea was proposed to the Alaska Native village corporation board of directors, the immediate acceptance did not happen overnight. Rather, it was built through many years of their educational support of providing scholarships and donations to student activities. When I went before the Alaska State Board of Education, the first two questions I was asked: how would we get the parents involved and improve student attendance? My answer was many students do not live in traditional family setting, many of them live in dwellings with extended families and multiply single parents.

Establishing the school with the approval of the Alaska State Board of Education, Lower Yukon School District Regional School Board and Native Village of Hooper Bay, it offered our Tribe, a means to access federal funds created to benefit Alaska Native students. By developing new school activities based upon Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics and offer remedial lessons, we were able to create curriculum which facilitate literacy, mathematics and science in a manner that is culturally familiar to the students.

More importantly, Academic Policy Committee, the governing body has learned how fragile this is in its infancy, due mainly to lack of infrastructures in facilities and utilities and many rural village political elected representatives lacks the savvy, and resources to firmly establish the foundation it and the Sea Lion Corporation Board of Directors have built. Another being our disproportionate reliance on federal funds.

Recommendations

1. School district should have their own broadband connectivity, not connected to any central. We all understand tribal funds have been earmarked to connect the villages. Living without broadband during a pandemic is especially challenging in rural Alaska. Unlike areas with affordable broadband where people can comfortably work from home or attend classes online, this is not the case in many rural communities.

Alaska's internet infrastructure is inadequate to deliver reliable, fast, and affordable service to underserved homes. Broadband is generally only available to anchor institutions that receive highly subsidized service. When students cannot physically attend school, and they can't afford high priced service at home, they cannot receive an education. Physical isolation translates to total social isolation.

Telemedicine is also a tremendous challenge and generally not available. Many rural communities do not have local doctors or specialists, so no internet means households also lack critical healthcare access. Working from home is almost impossible. Healthcare to students should be a priority.

2. Pedagogy is a universal concept. Our Yupik cultural ways of knowing should be central focus by Academics of Elders participation. Yupik Elders guide practice by doing/experiential learning, detailed observation, intuitive analysis, cooperative learning and listening. Native Elders understand about early childhood development, children's needs, and that we can succeed. The Charter School has begun to develop curriculum that reflects our environment.

This should become part of the federal Indian Education curriculum.

3. Village science and village math used by Yupik Elders should be used to make our youth understand basic science and math concepts.
4. Honoring our children's cultural lifestyles should be part of teaching to focus traditional learning of our Yupik Way of Life. Focusing on weather prediction, flora and fauna management, managing fisheries, learning subsistence fishing and hunting practices, etc. It's all about self-esteem.
5. Just like Hooper Bay structured its own charter system within the school district, this should expand. Expand more Indian Education funding into this program. This is about local policy control

What I am recommending is not new. It's the federal government that can enact such policies to make innovation happen to make our Native students proud of who we are.

The pedagogy of Native cultures taught in the school curriculum can only succeed if state and federal bureaucracies adopt local sciences, mathematics, and Native lifestyles are accepted into the norm. Indian Education funds should be about local policy control and responsibility.