

Alaska teacher apprenticeship program approval unlocks millions to fuel workforce pipeline

Alaska tribal groups, the University of Alaska Anchorage and the Department of Labor teamed up to increase the number of Alaska-grown teachers

By: [Claire Stremple](#) - July 25, 2024 5:00 am



Apprentice Jana Esmailka works at the school in Anaktuvuk Pass and is pursuing teaching credentials with an additional Tribal Educator certification from Arctic Slope Community Foundation. (Image courtesy of ASCF)

When the only preschool teacher left Harold Kaveolook School in Kaktovik, a village of around 250 people on the northern coast of Alaska, Chelsea Brower was in charge. It was January and she had been the preschool aide for about a year-and-a-half.

"Being with the kids and trying to be their teacher is what really made me realize I want to be their teacher — and it also made me realize I need to become certified to be their teacher," she said.

The only problem was that universities that offered the requisite courses were hundreds of miles away, and she wanted to stay in her hometown with her students.

Fortunately for Brower, the regional Arctic Slope Community Foundation has been working with other tribal groups, the state and federal Departments of Labor and the University of Alaska at Anchorage to develop an apprenticeship program that aims to grow the teacher pipeline in Alaska. The program was approved by the University of Alaska Board of Regents last week and solidified the first apprenticeship programs for teacher licensure in Alaska.

The tribal, state and university partnership unlocks millions of dollars in grant funding to educate and support the apprentices. It is all possible because the DOL made teaching an apprenticeable trade in 2022.

Now Brower can keep her job with the students in her community while she gets her education paid for. She is one of dozens of apprentices that will begin their coursework remotely with UAA this fall.

Brower is Inupiaq and said she hopes to build cultural values in the school.

"The students are seeing more people that look like them inside their school, and I'm hoping that it gets more people to want to become certified to be teachers for the different grade levels," she said. "That would be good, because we have our language and we could incorporate it more into the school. And (the students) will learn more from the teachers from home than teachers from out of state."

The news comes as the state grapples with an unprecedented [teacher shortage](#).

Tonia Dousay, dean of the UAA School of Education, said apprenticeships have been common in other industries for a long time, but it was only in 2022 that the state began accepting registered apprenticeships as a pathway to teacher certification.

"Nationwide, we're watching the registered apprenticeships for educators movement. This fall, we will welcome our first cohort of apprentice teachers from around the state," she said. "This takes our degree and makes it the required training for a registered apprenticeship through the U.S. Department of Labor."

The program targets paraprofessionals, people without teaching credentials who already work in the state's schools, like Brower.

Paradigm shift

Leaders from regional, tribally-affiliated groups worked together to build the apprenticeship program in Alaska with an aim to create a local teacher pipeline in the communities they serve, which are largely remote districts that are the trickiest to staff. Bristol Bay Regional Career and Technical Education Program, Sealaska Heritage Institute and Arctic Slope Community Foundation are sponsor groups for apprentices in their respective regions.

Steve Noonkesser, who works with BBRCTE and is a former superintendent, said the groups worked with the U.S. Department of Labor in Anchorage to become apprenticeship sponsors. That opens up federal funding and grant opportunities to track their apprentices' progress on different skills, called competencies in the apprenticeship world.

"When you do a federal apprenticeship, you learn skills, and you basically check off competencies as you work through it — whether you're an electrician or a plumber or a welder or, in this case, a teacher," Noonkesser said.

The state's Board of Education and Early Development has also [discussed apprenticeship programs](#) and passed a resolution supporting them, but no state regulations about how to become a teacher have changed.

Since state law dictates that one must have a bachelor's degree to become a certified teacher, the groups partnered with UAA and School of Education dean Dousay to create a pathway to a bachelor's degree for the apprentices.

The sponsors, like Noonkesser, work with DOL to keep track of the competencies and on the job learning hours; UAA keeps track of the degree progress and academic hours.

Noonkesser said that there are additional hurdles to getting the degree for people who live in remote parts of Alaska, including financial challenges, difficulty in access and the often low quality of internet that may prevent potential students from taking online courses on their own. For those reasons, he said the apprenticeship coursework is delivered differently and with a different context: culture and place-based connection to community.

"We're really heavily emphasizing that, because that we think has a huge bearing on recruiting teachers and teacher retention. You know, staying in the community and keeping teachers longer, because the turnover rates in Alaska have become just astronomical," he said, pointing to districts hiring ever increasing numbers of teachers from overseas because they "just can't hire enough teachers from Alaska."

"We think that this program will help not only retain teachers more, but it will connect the teachers that are in our schools much better with the kids they're serving," he said.

In his region, he said, 80-95% of the students are Alaska Native compared to only about 8-12% of the educators.

BBCTEP's first cohort, he said, is predominantly Alaska Native paraeducators who are from the region. And he said he expects the learning will run both ways between them and their mentors. "Our apprentices, a lot of them are from the community. Many of them have as many as 10 or 15 or 20 years of experience in the schools — as a parent, professional, as a classroom aide — and are very much connected to community, place and culture. And a lot of our mentors are very good teachers, but they're from somewhere else, and so we kind of are feeling like both have a lot to learn," he said.

Kristy Ford, SHI's education director who oversees the program in Southeast, said it opens up more opportunities because it allows apprentices to work through three tiers of certification, starting with a child care development specialist certificate, then moving to associate's and bachelor's degrees.

"It gives everybody an access point," she said. "It's a paradigm shift in my opinion. We've been doing the same thing with our universities over and over and over, and we're getting the results that we have: It's a rotating door in a lot of our schools. And so by having individuals who live in the community who are aunts, uncles, parents, guardians of the kids in those schools — I think is going to be a game changer."

Ford said the program is the first of its kind in the state.

Community, place and culture

Patuk Glenn, executive director of ASCF, said she they are sponsoring apprentices because they want to see increased engagement and better scores from their students in the North Slope and Arctic regions.

"I think it can all be pointed back to our children, especially in rural Alaska, whose test scores are not making the mark," she said. "If you look at the AK Star Report for 2023 there are 92% of our children in our Arctic Slope region that are not proficient in the state assessment. That is a serious issue, and over the years we've tried to address that in so many different ways."

She said she wants to see scores go up so that kids have better chances later in life.

Ryan Cope, grant director for ASCF, said that is why the program was developed with the understanding that educators have a responsibility to make education speak to students. In the Arctic, he said that means giving teachers a strong pedagogical foundation, so they can incorporate their place-based and Indigenous knowledge.

"Quite frankly, it's about meeting them halfway and having more teachers in the classroom understand who these kids are, where they come from, and what they do in the community. (Teachers) that really can kind of identify with them, and, in a lot of cases, having educators that look like them, speak like them, that know their language. These are very important things that I think that we have all wanted to see."

Cope said the state's teacher certification process has not yielded enough of those educators, which is why the apprenticeship program is necessary. ASCF has also added the Inuit Circumpolar Council standards to its curriculum. In the Bristol Bay and Southeast regions cultural values are also incorporated.

Cheryl Anderson, an administrator with ASCF, added that there's another shift as well: Alaska Native educators were not always encouraged to return to their home communities to teach, she said.

"My parents, they wanted to go and teach back in their village on Kodiak Island, but they were discouraged to do so, saying they were told that they didn't want anybody back from there to go back and teach in their community," she said, adding that her parents ended up teaching in Anchorage instead.

"For the state of Alaska to now be really open and accepting to having people in their own communities ... I'm happy to see that. I'm glad I could see it in my time, in my parents' time."

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