

A Time for Change

Improving Education Delivery for Alaska's Small Rural High Schools

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Jerry Covey
JSC Consulting, LLC

Overview

This paper addresses three issues critical to the success of small rural high schools and makes recommendations to state policy makers.

ISSUE I: Education Issues in Small Rural High Schools

Alaska's present small rural high-school system shaped by the Molly Hooch decision has remained largely unchanged since it was implemented in 1976; however, the education environment these schools operate in has changed dramatically over the last 35 years.

At the time of their creation, rural education attendance area (REAA) and rural borough school districts operated in a stable environment that lacked competition from other state-funded schools. Since that time, state-funded residential boarding schools, correspondence programs, and charter and home schools have emerged that draw many students who might otherwise attend small rural high schools. In addition to competition from other schools, small rural high schools have been impacted by population shifts from rural to urban communities, significant increases in the cost of education delivery without attendant increases in operational funding, and increasing performance demands from employers, universities and post-secondary training schools, and state and federal governments.

During the 2008-09 school year, Alaska had 126 small rural high schools with 30 or fewer students; 72 of these schools had 10 or fewer students; 110 were off the road system.

Over 84% of the students attending small rural high schools are Alaska Natives. These students are the group with the highest dropout rate and the lowest achievement levels. They also comprise the majority of students that attend the smallest and most remote high schools with the most limited curriculum. The schools these students attend are consistently among the lowest-achieving schools in the state.

Educator turnover in rural school districts is higher than in other parts of the state, and overall a greater percentage of teachers are teaching courses they are not highly qualified to teach. Teachers in small rural high schools are spread thin just to teach the minimal requirements for graduation and have little time and fewer resources at their disposal to deliver much needed advanced academic, enrichment, and career and technical education courses.

Although Alaska's rural high-school system meets legal muster, it is presently stretched beyond its capacity to deliver programs and services that meet the academic and career and technical education needs of its students. Performance data that compares the achievement and graduation and dropout rates of students in small rural high schools with those who attend large rural high schools and residential boarding schools bears this out.

ISSUE 2: Competition Between Residential High Schools and Small Rural High Schools

In addition to the REAA and borough or city schools available to rural students, there are three large residential schools that accept students from anywhere in the state and deliver both educational and residential-living services. All of these schools are funded primarily by the state and are financially impacted by where students choose to attend school.

Alaska's three largest residential high schools, Mt. Edgecumbe High School, Galena Interior Learning Academy, and Nenana City Schools deliver high-school programs to approximately 650 students from mostly rural communities. These schools consistently outperform both large and small rural high schools in terms of attendance, achievement, and graduation rates.

Residential high schools deliver high-quality programs that positively impact the lives of the students who attend them. Unfortunately, they negatively impact the ability of rural school districts to deliver quality programs to students in small high schools. A consequence of the residential school system drawing almost 700 students annually from small rural high schools is that it pits one system against the other. When one part of the system gains in students and resources, the other part must lose. It should not be this way.

The Impact of Residential High Schools on Small High Schools

The impact of residential boarding schools on the 120+ small rural high schools is significant. Specifically, residential high schools annually attract many talented students and remove millions of dollars of school funding from small high schools.

Estimating that the average rural student generates \$15,000 in state aid and taking that number times 650 (the approximate number of students who attend the above residential schools) equates to 9.75 million dollars in funding that goes to residential schools instead of other rural school districts.

Rural districts find themselves in an untenable position. They annually project their enrollment and make employment and other resource commitments only to find that significant numbers of students they budgeted for opted to attend residential boarding schools. Exacerbating the situation even more is the fact that students who drop out of residential schools often return to their local high schools. In those situations, the residential schools keep the funding and districts where the students return must provide educational services without the resources to pay for them.

The financial impact of students attending residential schools on other rural districts equates to:

1. Less revenue to deliver education services.
2. A greater percentage of the budget to operating costs.
3. Fewer teachers.
4. The loss of talented students.

5. Reduced ability to deliver academic and career and technical education courses.
6. Lower student achievement levels.
7. Increased dropout rates.

ISSUE 3: Improving Educational Delivery for Students in Small Rural High Schools

Small rural high schools are an important part of Alaska's education delivery system and are vital to the health and stability of rural communities. It is clearly in the state's best interest to maintain the current system and improve the quality of education they are able to deliver.

A variety of effective distance delivery methods are used to deliver educational services to small high-school students. Advances in technology continue to provide additional opportunities for cost effective delivery of quality programs to students. However, among the most important learning opportunities are those that can only be delivered in person and require resources, infrastructure, and learning opportunities not available in small rural high schools.

Leveling the educational playing field for small rural high school students will require providing them access to learning environments comparable to those provided by large rural comprehensive high schools and residential high schools. Students attending small rural high schools must have the opportunity to participate in advanced academics, career and technical education programs, partnerships with regional training centers, apprenticeship programs, and UA rural campuses.

Create Residential Learning Centers Located in Rural Hub Communities

Regionally-based residential learning centers in rural hub communities would capitalize on existing infrastructure such as large high schools, regional training centers, UA rural campuses, and regionally-based employers to deliver short- and long-term academic, career and technical education programs, apprenticeship, and other programs that offer critical learning opportunities. These centers could operate on a year-around basis.

Benefits of Establishing Regionally-Based Residential Learning Centers

1. Students attending small rural high schools would have nearby access to short- and long-term courses and programs that their local school is unable to deliver.
2. State education funding would remain in a student's home district.
3. Rural school districts could collaborate and partner with other organizations on course delivery and cost-sharing arrangements.
4. Students participating in these programs would have direct access to post-secondary technical centers, rural university campuses, and apprenticeship opportunities that train local students for local jobs.

5. Courses could include practical hands-on learning important to life in rural Alaska and be delivered on a year-round basis.

6. Help students to qualify for the Governor's Scholarship Program.

Fund Programs That Work

In the absence of action by the state to address the needs of students attending small rural high schools, some school districts have developed programs and obtained funding from other sources to meet their students' academic, social, and career and technical education needs that cannot be addressed in small high-school settings.

Outstanding examples of short-term residential programs are the Northwestern Alaska Career and Technical Center (NACTEC) operated by Nome City Schools and Bering Strait School District and Chugach School District's Voyage to Excellence (VTE) program. Each of these districts has procured and operates facilities without state support and has provided students with high-quality residential programs for several years and actively partners with other rural school districts to serve the needs of their students. Northwest Arctic Borough School District currently relies on a grant to operate a magnet school that partners with the Alaska Technical Center and Chukchi College to deliver programs for grades 11-14 that prepare students for careers in rural Alaska. Lower Kuskokwim School District is using grant funds to partner with the Alaska Native Science and Engineering Program (ANSEP) at UAA to deliver coursework that prepares students for entry into the ANSEP program. The program currently relies on a district approved boarding-home program to provide residential services.

These models, and others like them, are outstanding examples of what could be delivered by regional learning centers and made available to all rural high-school students. Programs such as these should be approved by the State Board of Education and funded as residential programs by the state.

Recommendations to State Policy Makers

1. Contract for regional surveys of rural high-school students, parents, educators, school-board members, employers, and community leaders to determine local interest in constructing residential facilities in regional hub communities to improve small high-school delivery options.
2. Approve the construction of residential facilities for rural hub school districts that are currently operating magnet schools and/or residential boarding-home programs (Northwest Arctic Borough School District and Lower Kuskokwim School District).
3. Establish a process to consider, approve, and fund regionally based district-operated residential programs that are currently supported by external sources.
4. Revisit the stipend amount for residential programs and fund all existing and new short- and long-term residential programs at a level that is equitable based on the cost of delivery.
5. Maintain, but do not expand the capacity of current residential high schools.