

The Future of K-12 Education in Alaska – The University of Alaska’s Role and Suggestions for Change

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The University of Alaska plays a significant role in K-12 education in the state. We educate teachers, school counselors, prepare administrators, and providing continuing education. Through partnerships with the Department of Education and Early Development, we help place teachers into their positions through the Alaska Teacher Placement Program, help school districts retain new teachers through the Alaska Statewide Mentoring Program, and recruit young people into the education profession through the Future Educators of Alaska program. In addition, we partner with K-12 schools through high school student dual credit enrollment, the Middle College at Eagle River, the Early College at Fairbanks, and through the new arrangement for UA Southeast to manage the Alaska Learning Network. UA’s engagement with K-12 reflects our Strategic Direction Initiative theme of Productive Partnerships with Alaska’s Schools.

The following observations suggest that change in K-12 is needed:

- Alaska has the lowest college-going rate in the nation. The most recent college going rate information from the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems from 2008 indicates 45.7 percent of Alaska high school graduates go to college (anywhere) compared to the national rate of 63.3 percent. Alaska also has the lowest postsecondary participation rate in the nation for low-income families.
- Among Alaska high school graduates entering UA, 52% require developmental education; the vast majority needs developmental education in mathematics. Twenty two percent of Alaska Performance Scholarship eligible students attending UA require developmental education. Not all college going Alaska high school graduates attend UA, a fair portion attend institutions out of state, so this figure applies to those attending UA only.
- Alaska hires more than 350 teachers from out of state annually and high teacher turnover, particularly in rural Alaska, is expensive and negatively impacts student learning outcomes.

The following five changes should be considered for K-12 (generally what is needed is to scale successful approaches to the state level):

1. Every student in an Alaska Performance Scholarship (APS) curriculum unless parent opts them out. As noted above the developmental education need for students completing an APS curriculum is significantly less than other students. Many other states, e.g., Maryland, have adopted or are considering a college preparation curriculum as standard. The new Alaska Standards will take us a step forward in this regard but the APS curriculum would take us further yet.

2. Improve math outcomes.
 - a. Require 4 years of math classes in high school;
 - b. Increase the required math background of new teachers
 - c. Further innovate in teaching and learning math; embed mathematics in other subjects, such as science or public policy, and use technology effectively.
3. Implement a college ready assessment no later than 11th grade. There are several options here including PSAT, Smarter Balanced, or ACCUPLACER (current UA test). The choice should be mutually agreed on by Education and Early Development and UA.
4. Facilitate K-12 & UA dual enrollment. Dual enrollment has been proven to increase high school graduation rates, college going rates, and reduces time to complete postsecondary degree. UA Southeast's new role in managing the Alaska Learning Network will help but further guidance to get school districts to encourage dual enrollment is needed.
5. Improve teacher retention in rural Alaska. Successful methods used by some school districts need to be scaled to the state level. Providing consistent incentives for teaching in rural Alaska, improve living conditions, and extending mentoring to all new rural teachers should be considered. Incentives such as providing an extra trip or two to Fairbanks, Anchorage or the teacher's home have made a difference in some districts. Growing our own teachers by region also has worked well but has not been scaled to the state level. When a new school is built or an existing school has a major renovation, build a home for a teacher; ship the materials and use the same labor force for efficiency. Perhaps partner with the Cold Region Housing Research Center to create a model home for the community; the home could serve as a living lab where mathematics could be addressed.