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Testimony to the House Education Subcommittee  
By Don Shackelford  
Vice President Avant-Garde Learning Foundation  
March 9, 2009

Mr. Chairman and members of the sub-committee, my name is Don Shackelford and I am vice president of the Avant-Garde Learning Foundation. I'm a former high school English teacher, principal, assistant professor at UAA and director of the Alaska Partnership for Teacher Enhancement at UAA. I graduated from West Anchorage High School and Alaska Methodist University and received my master's degree at UAA. I have lived in Alaska for 47 years.

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you today about the Foundation and the work we are doing in our state. We are first and foremost an educational foundation, devoted to improving teaching and learning in Alaska. Avant-Garde, since its inception as a nonprofit organization in January of 2006, is committed to improving public education through the use of innovative, scientifically based practices and processes and by forming strong partnerships with school districts, colleges and universities and corporations.

Recently, our Board of Directors voted to make Kameron Holloway Perez-Verdia our Chief Executive Officer. Kameron was raised in Barrow and has extensive experience working with and running several nonprofit organizations, both in Alaska and Outside. We are pleased to have him return to Alaska to take the leadership at Avant-Garde.

Our founder and President, Dr. Shirley Holloway, is someone many of you know from her years of public service to Alaska's children as a teacher, principal, superintendent, college president, commissioner of education and member of the state school board. Her vision for the Avant-Garde Learning Foundation was to create a nonprofit organization that would help fill in the gaps in our educational system and find innovative ways to leverage our

strengths, to work together collectively, and to experiment with pilot programs that could conceivably become permanent aspects of our educational system if they were proven to be effective. Our efforts, then, have been devoted to creating educational programs and initiatives, several examples of which members of the subcommittee have before you in the packet that was provided for this testimony. Please allow me to speak to some of our efforts.

Our largest project is the Alaska Native Teacher Initiative. Shell Oil contacted Avant-Garde two years ago and asked us what sort of community support they could provide in several geographic areas of interest to Shell in our state. Dr. Holloway visited communities in rural Alaska and asked Elders, mayors, school district superintendents, community leaders and others about their needs and what most needed to be done to improve the lives of those who reside in rural Alaskan communities such as theirs. Without exception, communities reported that there was an urgent need for more Alaska Native teachers in their schools. Community members mentioned the need for appropriate role models for their children and superintendents talked about the high turnover of teachers in their schools.

From that, Dr. Holloway put together a group of thirty educators, several of whom were Alaska Native, and community members as a Design Team that held its meetings from January to May 2008. The Design Team became the vehicle for creation of the Alaska Native Teacher Initiative. Five school districts - Aleutians East, Bristol Bay, Lake and Peninsula, North Slope and Northwest Arctic and five institutions of higher learning - Alaska Pacific University, Bristol Bay Community College, Chukchi Community College, Ilisagvik College, and the University of Alaska Southeast - became our original partners in the Initiative. After months of meeting and working together, the design team crafted an initiative that supports rural Alaskans in their efforts to become teachers. As a result of the Design Team's work, and through generous financial support from Shell, Avant-Garde now

supports a cohort of 33 students who are currently taking their first course together this spring. We are also indirectly supporting some 97 students in our partner higher education schools through funds devoted to giving teacher candidates the supports the Design Team designated as essential to recruiting and retaining Native and other rural Alaskans.

Our Design Team found several previous teacher education programs that were designed for rural Alaskans, and two current programs, RANA at APU and PITAAS at UAS. These programs produced many Alaskan teachers, including many who are still on the job, and several who were on our Design Team. We found that a highly focused and clearly intentional process whereby teacher candidates receive a great deal of support – financial, personal, cultural and educational – maximizes the candidates' chances of becoming certificated Alaska teachers. If you are at all familiar with the UAA ANSEP program, with its focus on strong and consistent supports for its engineering candidates, you have some idea of what we mean. However, Avant-Garde's Alaska Native Teacher Initiative is de-centralized and divided between our five partner school districts and institutions of higher learning, and thus literally spread across the state.

We have contracted with the Institute of Social and Economic Research (ISER) at UAA as our evaluator for this and all our projects. ISER will help us monitor the progress of the Initiative by following our students all the way through the first years of their teaching. Our intent is to create a data-driven profile of our Initiative and to analyze the impact our students make on their students in the public schools. If we are correct in our assumption that people from a culture who are well trained and prepared as teachers will have a positive impact on student performance, and that these teachers will remain on the job in village schools for the duration of their careers, or certainly far beyond the tenure of most teachers from outside the village, then we will be back before this subcommittee and the legislature talking about how we can expand this Initiative.

This fall, we hope to add the University of Alaska Anchorage to our Alaska Native Teacher Initiative. We are currently seeking Federal funding for our second cohort of teacher candidates. Many of our candidates are paraprofessionals who are currently working in their village schools. Avant-Garde also wants to reach down into the middle and high schools of rural Alaska to encourage and support young people who want to become teachers. We also plan to include two new school districts this fall, Southwest and Dillingham City Schools, as partners. The Alaska Native Teacher Initiative is an exciting effort and we are dedicated to making it a success. Our students and our communities deserve the very best in the field of education.

Another effort with which Avant-Garde is involved is the Alignment Study that was conducted for us by ISER. Part One of the Study, which was paid for by Shell Oil, was published in time for the Commissioner of Education's Summit last November. The question we asked ISER to explore was: What are the gaps in Alaska's public education system that are holding students back from academic success? The Alignment Study found two major areas of concern. The first was the fact that many young people enter school already behind their peers in terms of academic readiness. The need for quality early childhood education would seem to be the answer to this issue although there are obvious fiscal implications. The second problematic area identified by ISER was in high school and the apparent disconnect between high school graduation and college entry. The Study found that after passing the High School Graduation Qualifying Exam, many students consider their high school career over. The fact is, the HSQE is essentially an eighth grade test taken by tenth graders, who upon passage of the test are not adequately prepared for post-secondary education. High school students need to be challenged to take more demanding courses, tackle difficult subjects like another language and be counseled to become better prepared to enter college or the workforce. Moreover, the University of

Alaska's academic expectations for entering freshmen are often murky and difficult to fathom. A stronger connection needs to be made between high schools and our institutions of higher learning. Too many of our high school graduates are required to take non-credit "developmental" courses as freshmen in order to meet the minimal requirements for college-level English and mathematics courses.

Avant-Garde is interested in data-driven discussions that move us beyond educational decisions that may not be based in fact. We also want to help create a dialogue between educators, citizens and policymakers that will help us creatively and decisively address issues of common concern. This is why we commissioned the Alignment Study and why we are seeking funding from this legislature for the second part of the study so that we can look more closely at the identified problem areas and help clarify where we need to go as a state.

Another of Avant-Garde's projects is an online essential skills program for students in primary through high school called Skills Alaska. It employs two pieces of technology, Skills Assessment and Skills Tutor. Skills Assessment is an instrument used by students, parents and teachers to accurately assess students' math and language arts skills. Skills Tutor is a program that provides skill-building lessons for students in math and language arts. Over forty percent of Alaska's public school students in seven school districts have access to Skills Alaska, and over the years we have gathered data that show significant improvement in students' skills when they faithfully utilize the programs. Teachers who utilize Skills Alaska report favorably on the diagnostic tools and the flexibility that allows them to create class, small group and individual lessons for students in need of building their skills. Funding for Skills Alaska is currently being provided through United States Department of Education sources. The school districts involved with Skills Alaska are Aleutians East,

Anchorage, Bristol Bay, Galena, Kenai, Kodiak, Lower Kuskokwim and Nome.

These are examples of Avant-Garde's current work. We are excited by the positive reception we have gotten from other Alaskans and the amount of cooperation we continue to receive from our partners in education. We are optimistic about helping improve teaching and learning in our state. By forging partnerships between institutions and entities with common aims and concerns, we are creating a new way of looking at and solving our educational problems. Avant-Garde's clients are the students of Alaska. Our pledge is to help them receive a first-rate education, no matter where they live, rural or urban. Our commitment is to continue finding ways to leverage our state's strengths in order to address our educational weaknesses. This is why Avant-Garde was created, and this is why we hope to continue to play a pivotal role in public education in Alaska.

Thank you, once again, for this opportunity to brief you on our work at the Avant-Garde learning Foundation.

### *The Alaska Native Teacher Initiative*

Recognizing that Alaska faces unique challenges in recruiting and retaining quality teachers, and given that nearly twenty-five percent of our students are Alaska Native, yet only five percent of our educators are, the Avant-Garde Learning Foundation, through funding from Shell Oil, has designed an initiative that addresses these critical issues. In January of 2008, thirty-five Alaskan educators from around the state, including several distinguished Native educators, began work as a design team that would eventually create the Alaska Native Teacher Initiative. The group's charge was to build a path for rural Alaskans to become teachers in their communities with as much support and as few obstacles as possible. The Initiative's first pool of candidates would be drawn mostly from paraprofessionals already working in rural schools. The design team focused on ways to recruit and support teacher candidates effectively, in full recognition of the candidates' unique situation as Native community members living in rural Alaska and often as mature heads of households.

Working in conjunction with five rural school districts and five of Alaska's institutions of higher education, the design team created an approach that supports teacher candidates and that recognizes and honors their Native knowledge and their prior learning. The Initiative takes advantage of lessons learned from previous Native teacher efforts and has incorporated valuable information from teacher recruitment and retention data in its design. In addition, Avant-Garde commissioned a parallel Alignment Study, which provided timely information on gaps in Alaska's overall public education approach, with particular emphasis on the need for strong universal pre-school programs and the urgent need for a better transition from high school to college. Particularly disturbing were data indicating a student dropout rate of epidemic proportions. Rural schools face unique challenges, not the least of which is the need for qualified teachers from the villages who understand students in ways only those who live there can, and who are, naturally, committed themselves to living in the villages.

In January of 2009, the first group under the Alaska Native Teacher Initiative, a cohort of thirty-seven candidates, met in Anchorage for a week to begin or continue their journey toward becoming teachers. Thirty-two of those candidates were Alaska Native and all of them live in rural Alaska. This cohort will continue their initial course through the spring, utilizing both face-to-face and distance learning. The candidates will receive continuing support through their districts, from their local colleges and universities, and from Avant-Garde, as they progress toward the day when they will join the ranks of Alaska's teachers. More cohorts are planned for the future with an eye toward recruiting young people who are currently in school through Future Teacher clubs and other endeavors that will begin to attract Alaska's youth to the teaching profession.

This Initiative is possible only as a result of a strong collaboration between school districts, institutions of higher learning and the communities in which it is working. This collaborative effort is itself a model of how to achieve change in Alaska's educational system. The mutual needs that are shared leads to a high level of cooperation and only through this dynamic could the Alaska Native Teacher Initiative have become a reality.

# Performance-Based Teacher Preparation Program

*Capitalizing on Opportunities of Rural Alaska Education*



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Elitnauristekegcaraurcaraq  
*The process of becoming the very best educator*

## Program Points of Difference

The teacher preparation program is unique in several aspects. First, it acknowledges many students will already have amassed work, life or school experience, and provides student candidates with credit for prior learning.

The program also recognizes the challenge many rural students face in having to travel to obtain an education, which is why an emphasis is placed on delivering the program in the candidate's home community.

The program also strives to be culturally respectful and responsive to the needs of Alaska Native teacher candidates.

Finally, mentorship and advising is a key component of the program. The chart below visually demonstrates the continuum of support offered to students throughout their journey from teacher candidate to professional teacher.

## The Learning Circle

Support Throughout

Teacher Candidate —————> Professional Teacher

EQUITY





## Capitalizing on Opportunities of Rural Alaska Education

Rural Alaska is facing serious challenges when it comes to education. Teacher turn-over is high. The number of Alaska Native teachers is low. And teacher recruitment is increasingly difficult.

Avant-Garde Learning Foundation believes the solution to this challenge involves increasing the number of teachers from rural Alaska, which is why Avant-Garde is leading an effort to create a student-centered, performance-based, Alaska teacher preparation program.

By increasing the number of Alaska Natives and rural residents who become teachers, the program is expected to help reduce teacher turn-over, improve student academic performance, be more culturally respectful, and decrease the student drop-out rate.

This collaborative effort involves five Alaska school districts, including North Slope Borough, Northwest Arctic Borough, Aleutians East Borough, Lake and Peninsula Borough, and Bristol Bay Borough, as well as higher education institutions and other agencies. Funding support is generously provided by Shell Oil.

## About the Program

**OBJECTIVE:** To create a student-centered, performance-based, Alaska teacher preparation program based on a strong partnership between school districts and higher education.

**VISION:** A culturally embedded teacher preparation process built upon access, equity, excellence and success.

**MISSION:** Grow, nurture and sustain Alaska Native educators to serve Alaskan communities.

### VALUES:

- Cooperation
- Collaboration
- Communication
- Personal growth and development
- Respect
- Honor cultural values
- Innovation
- Acceptance

## Developing the Program

As a first step in the development of the performance-based teacher preparation program, Avant-Garde has established a program design team, which is comprised of a diverse group of individuals, including teachers, school administrators, university faculty and rural Alaska community leaders.

With input from the leadership team and steering committee, the program design team is in the process of developing phase one of the teacher preparation program, which will be implemented for the 2008 – 2009 school year.

To track the progress of the design team, please visit [www.avantgardealaska.org/teacher.html](http://www.avantgardealaska.org/teacher.html).

## Get Involved

If you are interested in supporting or participating in the performance-based teacher preparation program, please contact Don Shackelford at (907) 301-1927 or [agfoundation@gci.net](mailto:agfoundation@gci.net), or Shirley Holloway at (907) 250-5618 or [shirleyjean58@gci.net](mailto:shirleyjean58@gci.net).

## Purposes of Program / Stated Goals

Prepare More Native Teachers for Native Students

Prepare Culturally Respectful Educators

Preserve Native Languages & Cultures

Support  
Community  
Based  
Education

SOURCE: Modified from the "Power of Native Teachers: Language and Culture in the Classroom," a publication of the Center for Indian Education, Arizona State University



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AVANT-GARDE  
Learning Foundation

The enclosed Alignment Study was commissioned by Avant-Garde Learning Foundation and performed by the Institute of Social and Economic Research (ISER) in order to begin the investigation of student preparedness in Alaska. The goal was to create a foundation document for educators, policy makers and the general public that would ask questions about student performance and the gaps that exist in our education system, pre-K through 16.

As a foundational document, it will continue to grow as we learn more about the nature of the problem and possible solutions. The Research Summary was presented in its original form to the Education Summit held in Anchorage, November 13 and 14, 2008.

November 13, 2008

Dear Colleague:

The following Alignment Study was commissioned by the Avant-Garde Learning Foundation in order to investigate troubling questions regarding young Alaskans' readiness for entry into school and preparedness for high school graduates' postsecondary work and college. Conducted by the Institute of Social and Economic Research (ISER) at UAA, and paid for by a generous grant from Shell Oil, this is a first look at critical educational alignment problems in our state. Couched in the necessarily cautious language of prudent social science, the report nevertheless discovers crucial alignment problems in our public school system K through 16 that need to be addressed.

Too many of our pre-school aged children are arriving in kindergarten or first grade unprepared. These early years are the most crucial in a child's learning development. Educators and policy-makers in our state need to take a close look at the data concerning early readiness, recent early childhood research, and successful efforts made in other states to institute quality early childhood education.

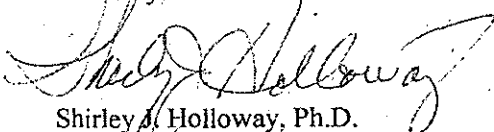
Too many of our high school graduates are unprepared for work and careers or for postsecondary education. The data clearly indicate a failure on the part of public education in Alaska to adequately prepare students for life beyond high school. Conversely, the expectations of colleges and universities as to what qualifies as prepared for our graduates varies. The data raise questions such as: What are the academic expectations of high school students in 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade beyond passing the High School Qualifying Exam, accruing credits or reaching district standards? How well are schools assisting students academically to meet the expectations of the world beyond high school? What are the academic expectations of employers, colleges and universities? How do we align these expectations so that students receive the full benefit of a public school education?

Only by answering an educational call to arms can we do the work that is required to answer these and many other questions regarding student readiness and preparedness. The various institutions must begin to work more cooperatively and closely if we are ever going to satisfactorily address the alignment issue. Only through concerted effort, and through a selfless commitment to our students, can this work be done. And there is much that needs to be done. Work groups with specific tasks and missions need to be established. Substantive meetings between P-12, postsecondary education and employers need to be held with the expectation that a tangible plan and product will be the result. Action plans need to be formulated and carried out. Assessment of our progress should be formative in order to guide us with data and analysis regarding the effectiveness of our efforts. Alignment must be an educational priority in Alaska.

This effort will only be possible if the state's leaders and educational policymakers make it a priority. Other states have understood the urgent need to commit to educational alignment and to support the necessary changes with appropriate funding and political capital. This is Alaska's chance to do the right thing for our young people and for the future of our state.

Above all, we need to be results oriented. Our students, be they four years old or eighteen, deserve a seamless quality education second to none. It is our job to provide that to them. Let us begin that work now.

Sincerely,



Shirley J. Holloway, Ph.D.  
President/CEO



# RESEARCH SUMMARY

## CONNECTING A DISJOINTED SYSTEM: A FIRST LOOK AT ALIGNING EDUCATION IN ALASKA

By G. Williamson McDiarmid and Alexandra Hill

We've heard it before, but it's still true: too many Alaska students don't have the skills they need to move on to the next stage of education or to get good jobs. Too many drop out of high school, and too few of those who graduate go on to college or other post-secondary education—and among those who do go on to post-secondary education, many don't graduate within four or even six years.

Employers report that young people entering the work world directly after they graduate from high school (or right after they drop out) don't have the reading, writing, and math skills necessary for many of today's jobs, even entry-level ones.

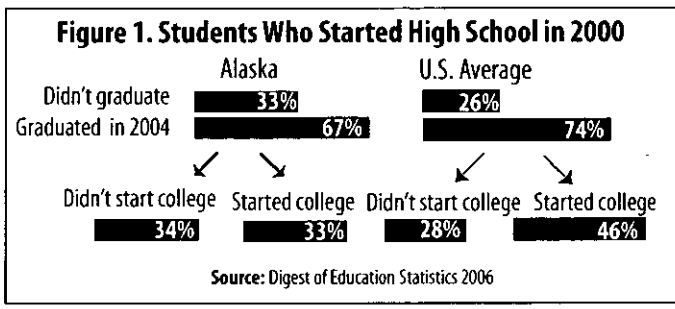
Alaska is not alone in these problems, but the high-school dropout rate is higher than the U.S. average and fewer graduates go to college. A third of Alaska's high-school students don't even graduate, and only about a third graduate and start college right away (Figure 1).

Many states have begun to address these problems by looking at education *alignment*—that is, coordinating the policies, programs, and mechanisms needed to support students as they move through the system from pre-school to elementary and high school and on to higher education or work.

Ideally, education levels would be coordinated so all students were prepared for the next step. In practice, many students—from kindergarten through college, vocational training, or work—enter without the knowledge and skills their teachers, professors, or employers expect. The students and their families are often frustrated that—despite indications to the contrary—they haven't been prepared for the next level. This frustration contributes significantly to the high dropout rates in both high school and college.

This publication summarizes a longer paper on the scope of alignment problems in Alaska and identifies areas where more research is needed or there are no data at all. It concludes with suggestions about steps the state should consider for improving alignment.

To move toward alignment, educators would synchronize their learning goals, curricula, and expectations. K-12 and early-childhood educators would agree on the skills children need entering kindergarten and first grade and how best to assess those skills. Likewise, businesses, higher education institutions, and schools would jointly determine the skills required for high-school graduates entering the workforce or college. To ensure that policies and resources supported such alignment, policymakers would need to collaborate in the process, working with educators from various education levels.



### TRANSITIONING TO SCHOOL: EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

We'll talk first about early childhood education—that is, education children receive before entering kindergarten. This is important, because several longitudinal studies have shown that children who receive high-quality early education are less likely to need special education or drop out, and as adults earn more and are less likely to commit crimes and receive welfare.

Alaska is one of only 12 states with no state-funded early education. It has federally mandated special education pre-school and federally funded Head Start programs in many communities. These programs together enroll about 16% of Alaska's 3-year-olds and 22% of 4-year-olds. Many more students in urban areas are enrolled in private pre-schools.

Overall, about two-thirds of Alaska children attend some sort of pre-school, according to the 2007 State Preschool Yearbook. But there is little information on how well these various programs prepare students to enter school.

### How Many Alaska Children Aren't Ready for School?

The main source of data on Alaska children's readiness for school is the Developmental Profile. Teachers administer this assessment when children enroll for the first time in public school, usually kindergarten but sometimes first grade. The profile includes information on many aspects of development—physical and social, language and literacy, and cognitive.

Teachers rate children as "routinely," "inconsistently," or "never" exhibiting 11 measures of school readiness.

Data from recent profiles show that fewer than 5% of children rate "no" in physical well-being and social development. But about 10% fail to demonstrate the requisite skills in each of the areas of language and literacy development and cognitive development. Between 20% and 50% demonstrate these behaviors "inconsistently."

ISER and Avant-Garde Learning Foundation jointly carried out this research, funded by a grant from Shell Exploration and Production Alaska.

These statewide results mask wide variations among districts. In many, more than one-third of entering students don't meet some of the readiness measures, and in a few 60% or more don't. Those districts lose valuable time trying to catch children up, and some children never catch up.

### What are the Limits of the Data?

We don't know how effective Head Start programs are. Some school districts with communities served by Head Start have Developmental Profile results similar to the state average, while in others the majority of children are rated as deficient on one or more measures. Little research has been done on what approaches are most effective for preparing Alaska Native children for school. Also, we lack data on the extent to which Head Start grantees coordinate with local school districts or with each other.

Districts report Developmental Profile results to the state without identifying individual children. Although the profile is a useful tool for teachers and parents, the lack of identifying information means the data cannot be disaggregated by student characteristics such as ethnicity, gender, or socio-economic status. Therefore, the profiles are not useful for tracking efforts to improve Alaska children's school readiness or for exploring the effectiveness of different programs.

### TRANSITION FROM HIGH SCHOOL TO COLLEGE OR WORK

#### What is the Issue?

Many Alaska high-school students graduate unprepared for post-secondary education or work. Alaska's colleges and universities find that many of their entering students—even those with good grades in high school—aren't ready for college-level work.

A 2006 national survey of 431 employers, published by Partnership for 21st Century Skills, reported that 42.4% of the respondents rated new entrants with high-school diplomas as "deficient" in their overall preparation for the entry-level jobs they typically fill, and 45.6% rated their preparation as "adequate." Almost no one (0.2%) rated their preparation as "excellent." Anecdotal information from Alaska employers suggests that Alaska's high-school graduates are no different from their counterparts Outside.

Available data also indicate that many of Alaska's high-school graduates are not prepared for college—but even within Alaska, what constitutes "prepared" can differ among institutions.

#### How Prepared Are Students for College?

The majority of Alaska students who enroll in college in the state go to one of the three University of Alaska campuses—Fairbanks (UAF), Anchorage (UAA), or Southeast (UAS). All three require students to demonstrate they're prepared for introductory level courses in English and math, through previous test scores (such as the SAT) or university placement tests.

Some requirements are similar across all campuses, but others are quite different. Table 1 shows (in abbreviated form) requirements to place into

CAMPUS	ACT	SAT	ACCUPLACER*	OTHER
UAF	17	430	Not mentioned	COMPASS (52) ASSET (45) HS GPA 3.0 or higher and permission
UAA	22	530	180 combined reading and sentence skills, including at >=85 reading, >=95 sentence skills	
UAS	n/a	n/a	454 combined essay, reading, sentence skills, including >=92 in both reading and sentence skills	Not mentioned

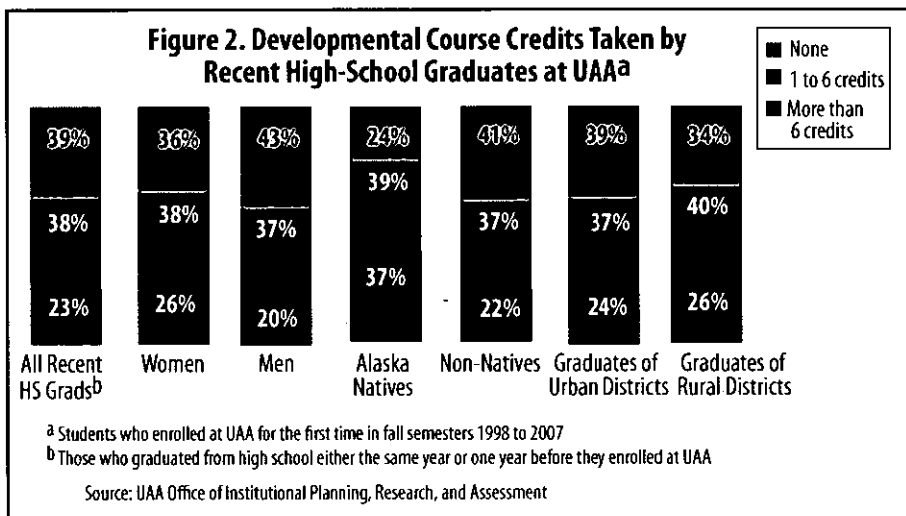
\*Accuplacer scoring is not a simple cut-off score, but rather a set of minimum total score and subtest scores, simplified here for comparison.

"freshman level" English. The information in the table raises two issues. First, it's neither easy to find nor to interpret. While academic advisors at the universities certainly know and can explain the requirements, prospective students, their parents, and teachers may be unable to get any clear sense of the actual skills and knowledge students need, or how they will demonstrate their proficiency. The other notable point is the difference in SAT/ACT scores required for entry into English 111 at UAA and UAF: SAT of 530 versus 430, ACT of 22 versus 17. That means students must score a bit above the mean (about 59th percentile) at UAA, but in the 20th to 30th percentile range at UAF.

Students assessed as unprepared are directed into "developmental" courses—which often don't count towards their degrees.

Data available at UAA allow us to see how many entering students had to take developmental courses. Among recent high school graduates enrolling at UAA for the first time, 60% take at least one developmental course. Almost one-quarter take more than 6 credits of developmental courses (Figure 2).

This analysis includes all students who enrolled at UAA for the first time in the fall semesters from 1998 through 2007. Further, we focused on "recent high-school graduates," defined as those who had graduated from high school either the same year as they enrolled at UAA or one year earlier. Thus, for example, students entering in fall semester 2007 were considered recent graduates if they had graduated in 2007 or 2006. Over the 10 fall semesters we examined, 15,713 recent high-school graduates enrolled.



We disaggregated the data on recent high-school graduates to look at the numbers of Alaska Natives and non-Natives, men and women, and graduates of urban or rural Alaska high schools. Ethnicity was self-reported. Urban graduates are those who graduated from high schools in the Anchorage, Fairbanks, Juneau, Mat-Su or Kenai school districts; rural graduates are those from all the other districts. (About 15% of recent graduates were from other states or countries, or the location of their high school was unknown.)

It's worth emphasizing that all but one of these sub-groups averaged high-school grade point averages (GPAs) of 3.0 or better. Men's average GPA was 2.98. We looked at the number of developmental credits these students took, categorizing these as none, 1 to 6 credits, or more than 6 credits.

Figure 2 shows that men are somewhat less likely to take developmental courses than women and to take fewer credits if they do. This may mean that men score better on placement tests (despite their slightly lower GPAs), or that they disproportionately enroll in programs that don't require college-level English or math (e.g., certificate programs in vocational fields). It's also possible that they are more likely to find ways around enrolling in recommended developmental course work—such as getting the professor's permission to enter a college-level course.

Alaska Natives are about 30% more likely than non-Natives to take at least one developmental course, and about 70% more likely to take more than 6 developmental credits. Graduates of rural high schools are somewhat more likely (about 8%) than graduates of urban high schools to take developmental courses.

How do the thousands of UAA students who take developmental courses do? Unfortunately, they're not highly successful. Overall, recent high school graduates pass just over half the developmental courses they attempt (Figure 3). Women are more successful than men and non-Natives more successful than Alaska Natives. There is little difference between students from urban and rural high schools.

### How Prepared are High-School Graduates for Work?

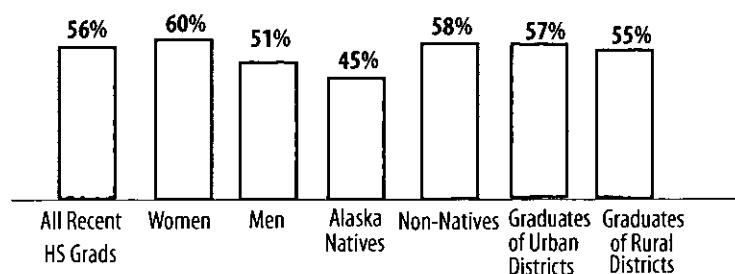
Alaska's students may graduate from high school unprepared for today's careers as well as for college. Although we lack comprehensive data for the state, we do know that employers often report they can't find qualified applicants for their openings. They also report that many of today's technical careers require as much mathematics or writing as entry-level college work.

A 2003 report on vocational education in Alaska noted that as accountability mandates and high-stakes testing were instituted between 1997 and 2003, the resources available for and participation in career and technical education in secondary schools declined. But no systematic data are available on how well prepared Alaska high-school graduates are to enter the workforce.

### Do Current Requirements Prepare Students?

We've reported evidence that many of Alaska's students leave school unprepared for either college or work. But since many of these students did graduate from high school, does that imply that meeting the current graduation standards isn't enough to prepare students for college or work?

**Figure 3. Percent of Recent Alaska High-School graduates Who Passed Developmental Courses They Took (By Course Type and Credit)**



See Notes, Figure 2. Source: UAA Office of Institutional Research, Planning, and Assessment

Alaska's state standards in English and math stop at the 10th grade level; science standards include 11th grade. The High School Graduation Qualifying Examination (HSGQE) is also the 10th grade level Standards-Based Assessment. Most districts require, in addition to the HSGQE, specific courses for graduation, without specifying the expectations of those courses. Others require students to demonstrate a particular level of proficiency in several areas.

The published high-school graduation requirements of the districts we reviewed (Anchorage, Bristol Bay, Aleutians East, Lake and Peninsula, Northwest Arctic, North Slope and Chugach) didn't make it clear whether those requirements went beyond the state's 10th grade standards. Although it was beyond the scope of this study to review all 53 districts in the state, we interviewed superintendents of four districts (Chugach, Aleutians East, Lake and Peninsula and Bristol Bay) and four principals in two of those districts. We asked them about their academic expectations for 11th and 12th graders, and whether they believed their graduation requirements ensured that graduates would be to be prepared for post-secondary education, job training, or work.

The superintendents and principals expect 11th and 12th graders to have passed the HSGQE and to be on track to graduate. They also expect those students to begin focusing on preparing themselves either for college or for work. They emphasized that students need to go beyond the graduation requirements to be fully prepared for college or work.

Some districts reported that teachers tell their students the minimum graduation level of work is equivalent to about 10th grade and will not prepare them for college-level coursework. And all the respondents said students have opportunities to learn far more than the minimum—and that too few students take advantage of those opportunities.

### SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Reviewing national research and available data on Alaska, we see that:

- Up to one-third of Alaska children enter the public schools with no pre-school experience.
- In some school districts, more than half the entering children don't demonstrate all dimensions of school readiness educators expect to see.

- Research predicts that these students are more likely to need special education services and to drop out of high school.
- In the small sample of districts we canvassed, just meeting the high-school graduation requirements does not guarantee graduates that they are prepared for college or for technical training.
- Many high-school graduates who do enroll in Alaska universities find they are not prepared for college-level work.
- Employers report that they find many recent high-school graduates unprepared to embark on careers.

To address these problems—especially lack of alignment—effectively will require coordinated efforts among parents, educators, policymakers, and researchers. One approach that many states (30 as of 2006) are using is formal councils established to address problems from pre-school through college. A review by the Education Commission of the States found that while the specific membership, funding structures, and goals differ, such organizations typically aim to:

- Expand access to early learning for children ages 3 to 5, and improve their readiness for kindergarten
- Smooth student transitions from one level of learning to the next
- Close the achievement gap between white and minority students
- Upgrade teacher education and professional development
- Strengthen relationships between families and schools
- Create a wider range of learning experiences and opportunities for students in the final two years of high school
- Improve college readiness and college success

The commission also reported several states' successes, including reducing achievement gaps, increasing success on advanced placement testing, and raising higher education enrollment.

To be effective, councils need to work within a shared vision of the total system and commit to long-term efforts and real change. Andrea Venezia, a noted education researcher, cautions that, "convening a commission and holding cross-system discussions may be helpful, but these steps alone will not create meaningful K-16 reform. To be lasting and effective, the deliberations must be anchored in policy and finance reform and must reflect each state's culture and history." Any effort that hopes to be successful will have to convene key stakeholders, determine what additional data and analyses are necessary, undertake those research efforts, identify potential solutions, and make recommendations for change.

In our discussion we've identified both problems in the education system and gaps in the Alaska data. What don't we know?

- We need better data on children who enter school unprepared: numbers, areas of unpreparedness, pre-school experience, and progress in elementary school. The new Developmental Profile assessment, aligned with the state's early learning standards, has the potential to provide some of this information, if the Department of Education and Early Development is authorized and funded to link profile information with later student data and analyze it.

- We need better information on dropouts: numbers, demographics, and subsequent educational experiences and GED completion.
- We need to understand what districts expect of their 11th and 12th graders, and how they convey those expectations to students and parents. Do students and parents realize that the minimum graduation requirements will leave graduates unprepared for most post-secondary education and training and for many jobs? Do teachers understand what students need to succeed in college level work?
- We need to consider how to collect data about the success of high school and college graduates. If we want to hold high schools and universities accountable for preparing their students, we must be able to measure how well they do so. The state is creating a data system for tracking students in the public schools, from entry through high school graduation. What's missing is the capability to link P-12 data with university data with workforce data. Legal safeguards on data use present a challenge, but it's not insurmountable.

Finally, we hazard a few recommendations.

1. Alaska should create publicly funded, high-quality early childhood education that would be available to all families but voluntary. That would expand enrollment and help ensure that all students are prepared for kindergarten and first grade. Investing in school readiness will save money in the K-12 system and beyond.
2. We need to ensure that our high-school graduates are prepared for college or careers. Whether this should be through more rigorous high-school graduation requirements, better counseling, increased investments in career and technical education, or some combination of these and other approaches is not clear. But too many of our high-school graduates are unprepared for life.
3. The University of Alaska must be involved. UAF, UAS and UAA should communicate, as a single entity, their academic expectations for entering students. Increases in the number and quality of distance-delivery courses mean that students anywhere in the state can take classes, especially at the introductory level, from any campus. They should be able to do so without discovering they are unprepared for beginning college-level work.
4. The state should support these efforts and muster the resources to overcome the inevitable difficulties. Because change across so many institutions and interests is required, leaders should be prepared to persist over the long haul. Establishing a council to coordinate education at all levels is a step in the right direction.
5. Alaska is ahead of many states in developing its longitudinal student data system. It needs to continue to develop that system and improve links with other data systems.

This summary is based on a longer working paper of the same title. It will be available on ISER's Web site, [www.iser.uaa.alaska.edu](http://www.iser.uaa.alaska.edu), under Education Studies. That paper includes full references for research cited here.

The authors thank Gary Rice and Yuan-Fang Dong of UAA's Office of Institutional Planning, Research, and Assessment; Diane Erickson of UAA; and the public school superintendents and principals who gave us their time.

## Alignment Phase Two

The second phase of our Alignment Study will focus on deepening our knowledge of the gaps that we described in our Phase One report, and building a consensus for action. Specifically, Phase Two will focus on two key areas: early childhood the transition from high school to the work world. It is clear the state faces challenges in both of these areas; however, we need better information on the scope and details of both of these challenges in order to craft effective policy responses.

Research has shown that among education reforms, early childhood education holds the greatest promise of return on investment, from reduced expenditures on remedial and special education in the K12 years to reduced welfare and corrections expenditures in the future. Our Phase I study recommended expanding early childhood education opportunities, but there are three areas we need to understand more fully in order to do so effectively and efficiently. First, we believe there are at-risk children without access to early childhood education, but we don't know how many, or where. We propose to compile the available data on at-risk populations and program enrollment, and supplement that with information collected from Head Start providers in order to quantify the scope of the unmet need. Second, although research demonstrates effectiveness of early childhood education in general, and Head Start in particular, there is no research specific to Alaska on this topic. There are 17 Head Start providers located in all parts of the state, and while data from these programs is compiled nationally, it is not reported at the state level. We propose to help the largest Alaska Head Start providers to compile and analyze their data to show the skills and knowledge levels of children as they enter the program, the gains they make, and their abilities when they exit Head Start for public schools. The third area we need to explore is the alignment between what children know as they exit early childhood programs, and what they are expected to know entering kindergarten. Results of Alaska's Kindergarten Developmental Profile suggest that in some communities there is a disconnect. We will take the results of our exploration of children's growth in Head Start to public school districts, and explore the extent of this disconnect and possible ways to improve early childhood-K12 alignment.

The other area where systematic research is lacking is around the readiness of Alaska's high school graduates for the work force. There is substantial and convincing anecdotal information that indicates that many Alaska high school graduates are not prepared to enter the workforce or technical job training. What is less clear is how many of our high school graduates are unprepared, and in what areas. As the state invests in workforce development programs and assessments, we need to better understand both the problem, and how programs and policies in place might address ...

We will look at both sides of this issue. We will draw on national research around the skills employers need and those they find in their new employees reported in "Are They Really Ready To Work?"<sup>1</sup> We propose to interview hiring professionals in Alaska's largest businesses about the skills identified in that report, and the extent to which their new hires have or lack those skills. While our survey will not be large enough to represent all Alaska employers and locations, it will begin to more clearly define the problems to be addressed.

As efforts are already underway to improve high school graduates' work-readiness, the state has chosen the WorkKeys® tool from ACT to help Alaska's high school students, parents and educators assess skills and career readiness. Current state regulations mandate that students in sixth and eighth grades take three of the WorkKeys® assessments, starting with the 2009-2010 school year. Proposed

regulatory changes would delay that to the 2010-2011 school year.

We propose to examine this tool in depth to help the state determine how best to implement it. How do WorkKeys® levels relate to Alaska Standards? What additional information do the tests provide beyond other assessments? How do Alaska's employers view the WorkKeys® assessments and the Career Readiness Certificate™? How do districts plan to incorporate the curriculum and assessments into their counseling and instructional programs? How would middle schools use the sixth-grade results? We will interview personnel at ACT, EED, DOL, and school districts involved in implementing the pilot that is underway to answer these questions.

Phase two will produce two short (2 to 4-page) research summaries, one on early childhood education and one on high school graduates' work-readiness, targeted at policy makers, stakeholders and the general public. In addition we will produce a background report with more detailed information, incorporating the findings from both phases of the study. Both the research summaries and the background report will be available on ISER's web site.

## Phase 2 budget

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K
1	Rate (includes leave, benefits, F&A)	\$ 83.64	\$ 72.86	\$ 61.04	\$ 75.77	\$ 58.34		Total Cost			
2											
3	<b>Task Hours</b>	Hill	Killorin	DeRoche	Leask	Merrill					
4	<b>Early Childhood</b>							\$ 5,186			24%
5	identify data and plan for analysis	16									
6	conduct analysis	30									
7	share with K12/alignment analysis	16									
8											
9											
10	<b>High School to Work</b>										
11	draft and conduct employer survey	8	64	60				\$ 8,995			41%
12	compile and analyze workkeys info	20	20	20				\$ 4,351			20%
13											
14											
15	<b>Prepare reports</b>	10	8		20	8		\$ 3,401			15%
16											
17	Subtotal: Hours	100	92	80	20	8					
18											
19	<b>Personnel Costs</b>	\$ 8,364	\$ 6,703	\$ 4,883	\$ 1,515	\$ 467		\$ 21,932			
20											
21	<b>Supplies, Long Distance, Etc.</b>	\$ 68									
22	(includes F&A)										
23											
24	<b>Total</b>	\$ 22,000									