Review of Research on Alaska Native K-12 Student Dropout
SUMMARY

This review serves to "get behind the numbers" or data on Alaska Native student dropout rates in order to assist Alaska Native communities in their efforts to support Alaska Native students in school. Please see the full review for details on the points summarized here and further references and resources on the First Alaskans web site at www.firstalaskans.org

Question 1: What is the Alaska Native dropout rate? How is it formulated? What does it tell us?

According to state regulations, a student is reported to have dropped out if that student was enrolled in an Alaska public school district and ended his or her enrollment in that same school year. This does not include students who have transferred schools, completed another district-approved program, or are on leave due to suspension or illness. It may include those who have left to attend a GED program.

How is the Dropout Rate Measured? The dropout rate is typically measured using: 1) a cohort rate, 2) an even rate, or 3) a status rate (school dropout or school completion). If we are interested in how effective schools are in promoting students from grade to grade in high school, we might look at a four-year cohort rate where we follow the same group of students to find out how many graduate in four years. If, we want to know how many students in a given school year completed high school, we would consider the event rate. Yet, if we are interested in how many young adults there are in a given city or state who have dropped out of high school, we might be more interested in a status rate.

Calculating Alaska's Dropout Rate. Alaska reports student dropout as a single-year event rate. In 2006, there was an overall dropout rate of 5.8 percent for students in 7th-12th grades. While Alaska stands out from other states because it includes 7th and 8th grade students, there are two elements of Alaska's dropout rate calculation that make it open to scrutiny. First, the state does not report totals for each grade. This means that it is not possible to tell if any particular grade transition represents a particular challenge for students. Second, the dropout rate is reported as a one-year rate rather than a four-year cohort rate. It is important to report a single-year statewide rate to track how the state as a whole is doing from year-to-year. Yet, using a four-year cohort rate in order to capture how students are experiencing the system over time and grade level would provide essential information about how a particular cohort of students is supported, as well as how effective the school system is in promoting students through to graduation. Importantly, even an effort to combine the use of cohort rates with the single-year event rate would limit our understanding of student dropout because both of these measures are retrospective. This means that even in combination, we only get a sense of what challenges students are facing after the fact instead of in real time.

How High is Too High? Just as there are many ways to calculate the dropout rate, there are also many ways to determine if it is higher or lower than we would expect for a particular group of students. Alaska reports dropout rates for major ethnic groups in two ways: 1) as a percentage of the total enrollment of each particular ethnic group; and 2) as a percentage of total dropouts.

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- ***Dropout Rate as a Percentage of Total Enrollment of Alaska Native/American Indian (AN/AI) Students.*** This rate tells us, "Of all Alaska Native and American Indian students enrolled in grades 7-12, this percentage of Native students is dropping out of school in a given school year." The AN/AI dropout rate for school year 2006 was 8.4 percent. This means that of the total number of 7th-12th grade AN/AI students enrolled in school year 2006 (15,889), 8.4 percent dropped out. Between school years 2001 and 2006, the dropout rate for AN/AI students declined from 9.4 percent to 8.4 percent. This picture shows a downward trend in the dropout rate. However, we must consider the fact that this way of measuring the dropout rate is affected greatly by annual fluctuations in student enrollment.

- ***Dropout Rate as a Percentage of Total Dropouts.*** It is also important to consider what proportion of the total number of students dropping out is Alaska Native. This rate tells us, "Of all 7th-12th grade students dropping out of school, this percentage is Alaska Native and American Indian." To answer the question of "how high is too high," we would need to consider if the percentage of Alaska Natives dropping out of school is higher than the percentage of Alaska Natives in the 7th-12th grade student population. Thus, because AN/AI 7th-12th grade students made up approximately 25 percent of the total 7th-12th grade student population in 2006, we would expect that AN/AI students would make up about 25 percent, or a similar percentage, of the dropout population. However, in the 2005-2006 school year, AN/AI students made up 37 percent of the statewide dropout population! This indicates a severe over-representation of Alaska Native and American Indian students.

Relationship between graduation rates and dropout rates. Logic might suggest that if Alaska is accurately calculating the graduation rate, students not graduating can be counted as having dropped out from high school. However, this is not the case. One way of explaining the relationship between graduation rates and dropout rates is that there are not simply two choices—a student either graduates or does not—because of the way states have defined graduation and dropout. In fact, it might be easiest to consider that there is a third category made up of students who have left traditional public schools for other schools (e.g., private or home schools) or alternative education programs (e.g., GED or other adult education). Because of this complication, there is not a direct relationship between graduation and dropout rates such that when the graduation rate increases the dropout rate decreases by the same amount.

Differences between urban and rural dropout rates. Using existing data and measures, there appears to be a gap between urban and rural dropout rates that is consistent over time. Urban students appear to be dropping out at higher rates than rural students. Urban schools in Alaska consistently report higher dropout rates than rural schools. These data are consistent with earlier research that indicates that rural Alaska high schools are more successful in supporting students through to graduation. Alaska Native students in urban settings encounter challenges of navigating larger high schools and of facing additional challenges of racism that may be more common when student populations are more racially and ethnically diverse. Also, in recent years, there has been large out-migration of Alaska Natives to regional hubs (e.g., Dillingham, Bethel, Nome, Kotzebue, and Barrow) and urban centers.

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Question 2: What are the factors and co-factors that contribute to a student's decision to leave?

The factors and co-factors cited in the broader literature depend on the lens a particular researcher applies. Researchers can apply a lens that primarily considers student- and family-specific characteristics that may make it difficult for a student to remain in school. With this lens, researchers will often talk about the issue as one of dropout where students' individual motivations and engagement are examined as contributing to their decision to leave school. Others may apply a lens that considers school- and system-specific characteristics that constrain students, thereby affecting a student's ability to remain in school. These researchers refer to issues of push-out rather than dropout, in that students are being pushed out of the school system rather than making an independent decision to leave school. Finally, emerging research by Donna Deyhle and her colleagues at the University of Utah suggests that students—and Native students in particular—may be being lured out of school by employment opportunities that offer clear pathways to training, development and success. While researchers do not necessarily agree when it comes to describing the factors contributing to this phenomenon, there is broad consensus that the decision to leave school is more accurately described as a gradual process of leaving school. There are many experiences and situations that contribute, which can occur as early as elementary and middle school, and aggregate in their impact over time.

Factors contributing to student "dropout"
- Family transience or other family issues that affect students' experience in school.
- Student-specific health issues (both mental health and unhealthy behaviors).
- Students view school as not contributing to their current or future success.

Factors contributing to student "push-out"
- Instruction that is not relevant to students' home cultures or lived experiences.
- Lack of caring relationships between students and school staff and/or an absence of a culture of caring within the school.
- Culture clash between school staff and students.

Factors contributing to student "lure out"
- A lack of connection between students' school and career plans.
- Students believe they have greater opportunities outside of school.
- Stronger peer networks around non-school opportunities than around schooling options.

Much of the existing research on this topic includes lists of factors and co-factors that contribute to student dropout—such as family poverty, the frequency with which a student was held back in a particular grade level, student absenteeism, and student behavior problems. These individual and isolated factors do not help us understand the *process* of dropping out and how these and other factors interact over time to lead a student to leave school. There is a great need for research that examines the interactions among these factors and more process-level elements that contribute. More research is needed to document further which supports are most meaningful and how to connect home, community and school in ways that encourage students to stay in school.

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Question 3: What is being done across the State of Alaska to encourage students to stay in school?

Throughout Alaska there are a number of initiatives in place in schools and local communities to encourage students to stay in school. Only a handful of these have been recognized as being effective in encouraging students to stay in school.

Commonly cited programs. The three programs most cited for their effectiveness in supporting students staying in school include: 1) Yak̲oosgé Daakahídi ("House of Knowledge" in Tlingit) Alternative High School in the Juneau School District; 2) Cook Inlet Tribal Council's Partners for Student Success in the Anchorage School District; and 3) Fairbanks North Star Borough School District's Dropout Prevention Steering Committee. Interestingly, these programs operate in the three largest urban centers in Alaska. Each is cited for different elements and successes.

Other Community & School Initiatives. Juneau-Douglas High School recently announced an initiative called Freshman First, which targets support at freshman students who are identified as being at-risk for dropping out. Staff plans entrance interviews with new students; intervention meetings; and opportunities to earn credits in courses that students previously failed. National organization, Communities in Schools, also recently established an Alaska affiliate. Efforts include sponsoring library programs to ensure access to books, funding care coordinator positions to manage and support cases of struggling students, providing re-integration services to students previously incarcerated, and establishing a program where Elders mentor Native students.

Federally-funded Initiatives. The U. S. Department of Education awarded $16.7 million in three-year grants to 32 Alaska initiatives specifically committed to improving the educational experiences of Alaska Native students, many related to preventing dropout. There are three categories of these programs, including: 1) district-based initiatives; 2) community-based initiatives; and 3) university initiatives. This is not the first time these grants have been offered, and several of the programs are continuations of initiatives that were begun under previous grants.

- **District-based Initiatives**. The Bering Strait School District reported that its grant monies will be used to develop after-school tutoring programs at all grade levels and to re-institute art and physical education programs to support students' holistic development. The Iditarod Area School District representative explained that there were not specific dropout prevention elements, but that they are committed to continuing their work to develop culturally-relevant curriculum to support student learning inside and outside the classroom.

- **Community-based Initiatives**. These initiatives are sponsored by various organizations, including local village councils, regional Native corporations, technical and vocational training centers, cultural organizations, and groups of Native educators. One example is the program sponsored by Yuut Elitnaurviat, Inc. (Yup'ik for "The People's Learning Center") has developed a community-based program to to train local people to meet the employment demands in four specific fields: 1) construction; 2) health care; 3) early childhood and general education; and 4) aviation.

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- **University-based Initiatives**. These programs either target supports at the high school level and earlier to support students in going on to college, or provide research and technical assistance to school and district leaders trying to encourage students to complete high school.

Conclusion & Recommendations

Responsibility for supporting students in staying in school must be shared by community and school stakeholders. As is evidenced by the research, there are many ways of looking at the dropout phenomenon. As such, it is essential that no one group places blame on another. Students, families, communities, business and political leaders, and school staff must join forces to work together to encourage students to stay in school.

Dropping out is a process. Research has consistently pointed out that students' decision to leave school is a gradual process that can start as early as middle school. Thus, it is essential that stakeholders partner to monitor absenteeism and key transition points to identify students at-risk of leaving school.

- *Recommendation 1:* Provide data and tracking mechanisms for communities, schools, districts, and the state to monitor student absenteeism in a systematic way.

- *Recommendation 2:* Disaggregate state, district, and school data by grade level so that school staff and communities can monitor key transition points between elementary and middle/junior high and between middle/junior high and high school. Consider supporting efforts that specifically target support to 9th grade.

There is a need to determine how high is too high. The methods used to measure the dropout rate do not determine the community or school goals around how many student leavers a community can reasonably afford—economically, socially, and culturally. Thus, it is essential that local communities work together with other stakeholders to set community goals around student graduation and attrition.

- *Recommendation 3:* Set local, regional, and statewide goals for student graduation and attrition.

- *Recommendation 4:* Develop the capacity of community and regional organizations to Measure and report on student dropout using alternative measures to ensure state accountability for providing accurate information and interventions.

- *Recommendation 5:* Develop a process for sharing promising strategies across communities and for systematic evaluation and reporting of funded programs.

- *Recommendation 6:* Establish a way to track where students go when they leave school.

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