Getting Behind the Numbers

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Review of Research on Alaska Native K-12 Student Dropout

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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. The goal is to present a summary of research that meets three objectives:

1) to guide Alaska Native people and policymakers in analyzing existing data on student dropout;
2) to document the factors and co-factors that contribute to Alaska Native students leaving school; and
3) to identify initiatives and programs that are currently in place and designed to encourage students to complete their high school education, especially those initiatives that are having a positive impact.

As such, this review is organized by three overarching research questions related to these three goals. Further work might identify specific policy implications of this research and highlight strategies to begin to curb the Alaska Native dropout rate.

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

Understanding the Dropout Rate. To understand the dropout rate, there are really two questions to consider. First, how is the dropout rate measured? And second, how high is too high? It is important to consider both questions to identify the complex nature of the dropout problem, as well as its magnitude in Alaska and for Alaska Native and American Indian people.

Defining the Dropout Rate. According to the regulations set by the Alaska State Board of Education & Early Development in 4 AAC 06.170 (j)(3), a student is reported to have dropped out if that student was enrolled in an Alaska public school district at some time during the school year and ended his or her enrollment in that same school year. This does not include students who:

- graduated from high school or completed a state- or district-approved education program;
- transferred to another public school district, private school, or state- or district-approved education program (including adult education programs);
- are temporarily absent, due to suspension;
- are absent, due to an illness or a medical condition; or
- have passed away.

In Alaska, a student who has left the public school system to attend a GED program is counted as a dropout. This is the same definition that is used and recommended by the Common Core of Data survey system of the National Center for Education Statistics, which collects and reports annual data on public school student dropout and completion at the district, state, and national levels (Arronstamm Young, 2003). A majority of states also use this same definition to formulate statewide student dropout rates (2003).

In considering the dropout phenomenon, it is also important to consider the age at which Alaska students are no longer required to attend school. The state's compulsory school attendance law, as stated in Alaska State Standard 14.30.010, requires students to attend school only until they reach the age of 16. Beyond the age of 16, students and their parents do not face truancy consequences when students do not attend school. If students over the age of 16 are enrolled in school, they are counted for reporting purposes until they graduate or leave school. Several states have passed legislation increasing this age to 17 or 18 in an effort to set the expectation that students remain in school to obtain a high school diploma (Weaver, 2006).

How is the Dropout Rate Measured?

There are many ways to measure the high school dropout rate. Research typically cites one of the following three rates: 1) cohort rate (Beatty, Neisser, Trent, & Heubert, 2001; SREB, 2000), 2) event rate, or 3) status rate (school dropout or school completion). Each method of measuring the dropout rate is related to the kinds of data and information a community, school, or other organization wants to gather to better understand how many students are leaving school.

For example, 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 the same group of students is followed to see how many ultimately graduate four years later. Already, we face an issue that this rate might exclude students who take an additional semester or year to finish.

If, however, we want to know, for a given school year, how many students did or did not complete high school, we would consider the school completion rate, or the **event rate**. This rate would provide us with a sense of how many students have dropped out of school in a single moment in time, usually one year, for a particular school or district. School completion does not necessarily mean that students have graduated from high school. Depending on the state, students reported as having "completed school" may have actually earned a GED or other state-approved alternative high school certification.

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**. This rate tells us the *status* of 16- to 24-year-olds in a particular community as relates to how many attained their high school diploma and how many dropped out of school. Here, we begin to see that there is a link between graduation and dropout rates. This link will be discussed further below. On the next page is a chart providing a description of the event, status, and cohort rates along with the benefits and limitations of using each method to calculate the student dropout rate.

Rate	Description	Benefits	Limitations
Cohort Rate (four-year)	This is called the *cohort* rate because it measures the dropout rate of a cohort of students, typically those in 9th grade, over time. It is measured by the average freshman dropout or completion rates.	Follows the same group of students over time to report on their efforts to complete high school. Data typically collected through the National Education Longitudinal Survey and Study.	Difficulty of tracking the whereabouts of students who leave affects count. Difficult to account for students not counted as ninth graders, such as those enrolled in non-graded programs, those who dropped out earlier, immigrants, etc. The Average Freshman Completion Rate does not always account for students who take longer than four years to complete their high school diploma.
Average Freshman Dropout Rate	Estimates the proportion of high school students who enrolled as freshmen, but dropped out of school some time in the following four years, before receiving a diploma or equivalent credential.	Provides an estimate of on-time graduation from high school. It measures the extent to which public high schools are graduating students within the expected period of four years.	
Average Freshman Completion Rate	"[E]stimates the proportion of high school freshmen who graduate with a regular diploma four years after starting 9th grade."[i]		
Event Rate (single year)	This is called the *event* rate because it reports student dropout as a single event in time, rather than as a process over time. "Estimates the percentage of both private and public high school students who left high school between the beginning of one school year and the beginning of the next without earning a high school diploma or its equivalent."[ii]	Used to track annual changes in the proportion of students dropping out of high school in a single year. "Provides information about how effective educators are in keeping students enrolled in school."[iii]	May over-count dropouts if students who transfer to other jurisdictions or who otherwise later complete school are counted as having dropped out. Does not represent dropping out of school as a process; nor does it capture how much attrition there is over time. Results vary, depending on grade levels included and time of year data are collected.
Status Rate	This is called the status rate because it reports the *status* of young adults who are not enrolled in school. It is measured by the status dropout or status completion rates.	Reports the dropout rate for an age group based on data collected largely from Bureau of Labor Statistics and Census Bureau statistics. Labor and Census data are self-reported, rather than collected by school personnel. Avoids the event rate issue of under-counting dropouts due to student transfers. "These estimates are higher than event rates because they include all dropouts, regardless of when these individuals last attended school. Since these rates reveal the extent of the dropout problem in the population, they can be used to estimate the need for further education and training."[iv]	Census data, in particular, is typically collected on a decennial (ten-year) basis and may not provide timely information on dropout status rates. Relying on self-reports, status rates may not offer accurate information on the dropout phenomenon. Typically, does not differentiate rate by type of school (public or private) or type of credential earned (e.g., diploma, GED certificate). Different age ranges yield differing results, with under- and over-counts possible.
Status Dropout Rate	"Reports the percentage of individuals in a given age range (e.g., 16- to 24-year-olds) who are not in school and have not earned a high school diploma or equivalency credential."[v] **"**Includes all dropouts regardless of when they last attended school, as well as individuals who may have never attended school in the U. S."[vi]		
Status Completion Rate	**"**Indicates the percentage of individuals in a given age range (e.g., 16- to 24-year-olds) who are not in high school and who have earned a high school diploma or equivalency credential, irrespective of when [or where] the credential was earned[vii]."		

Source: Unless otherwise noted, the text and format for this table was drawn from Beatty: A., Neisser, U., Trent, W. T., & Heubert, J. P. (Eds.). (2001). Understanding dropouts: Statistics, strategies, and high-stakes testing. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Calculating Alaska's Dropout Rate: Strengths and Limitations. The Alaska Department of Education and Early Development reports student dropout as a **single-year event rate**. The State reported an overall dropout rate of 5.8 percent in school year 2006 for students in 7th-12th grades. While Alaska stands out from other states because it includes 7th and 8th grade students in its dropout rate calculation, there are two elements of Alaska's dropout rate calculation that make it open to scrutiny. First, the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development 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 Alaska students. For example, if there were more students were dropping out in 9th grade, interventions could be developed to support students' transition to and through their freshman year. Second, this 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 through junior high and high school, 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. Alaska policymakers might consider including some innovative measures in use across the nation to understand student dropout.

New Innovations in Measuring the Dropout Rate. Issues of student dropout plague many communities across the United States. Scholars and researchers at various institutions have developed some innovative ways of calculating the dropout rate. These might be helpful to Alaska Native leaders and other policymakers and practitioners across the state as they consider how to develop better methods of collecting and using data to drive decision-making to improve the experiences of Alaska Native students across the state.

> *Cumulative Promotion Index*. While at the Urban Institute, Christopher Swanson developed the Cumulative Promotion Index (CPI). The CPI "approximates the probability that a student entering the ninth grade will complete high school on time with a regular diploma…it does this by representing high school graduation as a stepwise process composed of three grade-to-grade promotion transitions (grade 9 to 10, 10 to 11, and 11 to 12) in addition to the ultimate high school graduation event (grade 12 to diploma)" (Swanson, 2003, pg. 2). As such, it examines a school system's ability to promote students through to graduation by calculating each cohort of students' (e. g., tenth graders) progress through these various transition points. A major advantage of this formula is that it can quickly identify changes in graduation rates due to shifts in students' progress at these various transition points, unlike indicators that rely on longitudinal or retrospective data. This can aid educators and policymakers in determining interventions to curb the dropout rate.
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> *Promoting Power Index*. Robert Balfanz and Nettie Legters of Johns Hopkins University have created the Promoting Power Index, which "estimates how well schools keep students until the start of the 12th grade" (2004). The calculation compares the number of 12th graders in the current year against the number of 9th graders four years earlier. So if a school had 100 students at the start of the 9th grade and 80 students at the start of the 12th grade four years later, it would have a Promoting Power of 80 percent for that year. It does the same calculation for the 12th grade class for the two previous years. Then, it averages the three Promoting Powers to get the school's Promoting Power Index (PPI)" (Center for Public Education, n.d.).
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> *The Greene Method*. Jay P. Greene of the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research developed a method which "produces an accurate estimate of the graduation rate by comparing the number of students that enter a high school class to the number of students receiving a regular diploma, with some adjustments for population change" (Greene & Winters, 2002). This method includes only those receiving regular, on-time diplomas – meaning it ignores those who have repeated a grade. Yet, it is considered more reliable than other measures of graduation because it can be calculated using data from the Common Core of Data, which relies on school and state reports

rather than student self-report. By including this innovative measure of graduation, we encourage policymakers to consider the important relationship between the phenomena of graduation and dropout, as well as to provide data, information, and analyses that help students, their families, educators, policymakers, and the public better understand the challenges facing our students.

Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate. Recently established by the U. S. Department of Education to more accurately report four-year graduation rates, this rate compares the number of regular high school graduates in a given school year to the total averaged number of 8th grade students enrolled five years earlier, 9th grade students enrolled four years earlier, and 10th grade students enrolled three years earlier. As with the Greene Method, this rate can be calculated using the Common Core of Data; but as different from the Green Method, it adjusts for students who repeat 9th grade by averaging the enrollments of 8th, 9th, and 10th grade students. It cannot however adjust for individual student mobility – or students who transfer schools.

These indicators are not substitutes for the current measures of the dropout rate, but when used in concert with the dropout rate they allow policymakers to examine how effective schools are in supporting and promoting students through the process of school completion. They could be used to supplement existing measures of student dropout and school completion to focus both on students' abilities *and* school, or system, effectiveness, as well as to develop targeted interventions to stop the dropout.

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. Per the requirements of the *No Child Left Behind Act*, Alaska reports dropout rates for each of the major ethnic groups, including Alaska Native and American Indian (AN/AI) students. The Alaska Department of Education and Early Development 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.

AN/AI Dropout Rate as a Percentage of Total Enrollment of AN/AI Students. This first rate would tell you, "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." This rate could be used to monitor AN/AI dropout rates over time and to compare this rate to that of other ethnic groups to determine how high is too high.

The Alaska Native/American Indian dropout rate for school year 2006 was 8.4 percent. This means that of the total number of 7th-12th grade Alaska Native and American Indian students enrolled in school year 2006 (15,889), 8.4 percent or 1,333 dropped out of school. The dropout rate represented here is calculated using the following formula, using Alaska Native/AI students as an example:

$$\frac{\text{Total Number of AN/AI Dropouts in a School Year}}{\text{Total Number of AN/AI 7th-12th Grade Students Enrolled in a School Year}}$$

Between school years 2001 and 2006, the dropout rate for Alaska Native/American Indian 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. For example, a 1.0 percent decline in the dropout rate of AN/AI students over four years may seem very substantial. Yet, if we consider that the AN/AI student population in 7th-12th grades grew by 2,206 students over these six years, the decline in the dropout rate may be due to the fact that there are simply more AN/AI students enrolled. Observe what happens to the dropout rate when the total number of dropouts stays the same, but the total number of students enrolled grows:

Simulation: What would happen to the dropout rate if the number of dropouts stays the same, but the total number of students enrolled increases?

$$\frac{TotalNumberofDropouts,2001}{TotalNumberofStudents,2001} = \frac{1293}{13683} = 9.4\%$$

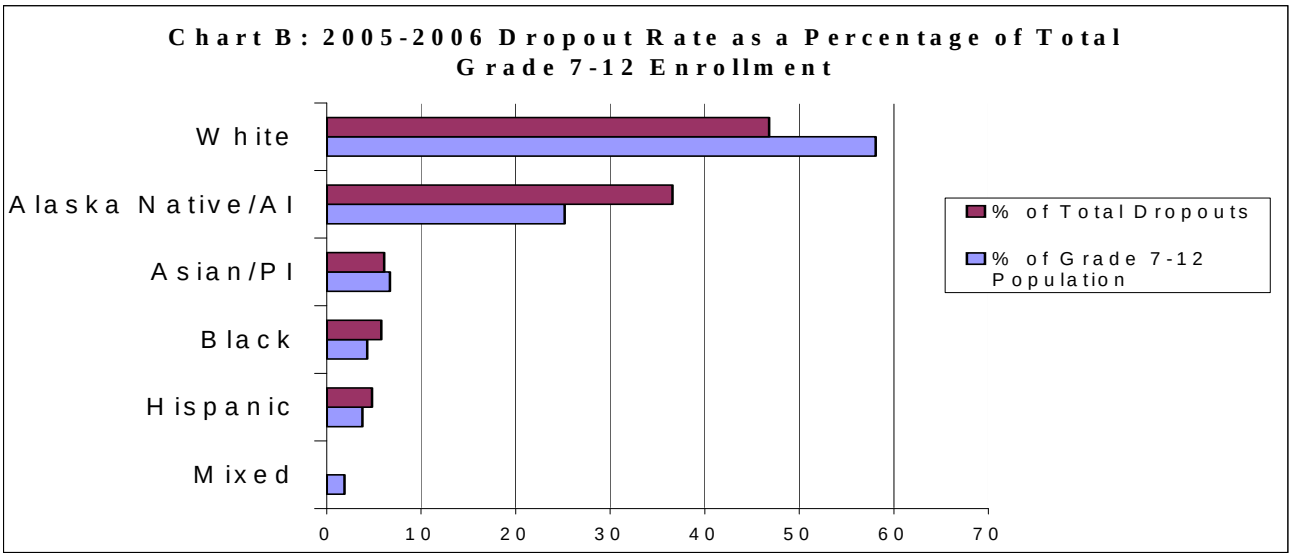
$$\frac{TotalNumberofDropouts,2001}{TotalNumberofStudents,2006} = \frac{1293}{15889} = 8.1\%$$

From this simulation, we see that even when the number of students who dropped out stayed the same, the dropout rate declined. So, it is important to look at the change in the actual *number* of dropouts as well as the *percentage*. According to the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development, between school years 2001 and 2006, forty more Alaska Native/American Indian students dropped out of school, from 1,293 in 2001 to 1,333 in 2006. Policymakers and community leaders might consider this number and the percentage to determine if this is too high given state and community goals, as well as in light of the trends and rates of dropout for other ethnic groups.

Additionally, it is important to note that according to the Census 2000 figures, Alaska is the state with the largest percentage of adults (34.2 percent of the 51,665 in the state), aged 16 and older, without a high school diploma not enrolled in an educational program who are Alaska Native or American Indian (American Council on Education, 2006).

AN/AI 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 would tell you, "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. For example, we would expect that, because White students in grades 7-12 made up 60 percent of the total 7th-12th grade population, that White students would make up approximately 60 percent of the total dropout population. And similarly that because Alaska Native/American Indian 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.

Using the percentage of students enrolled by ethnic group, we would expect that each set of bars in Chart B would be even. However, Chart B shows that of the students dropping out in the 2005-2006 school year, Alaska Native/American Indian students made up nearly 37 percent of this group, while AN/AI students made up only 25 percent of the total grade 7-12 enrollment! This indicates a severe over-representation of Alaska Native/American Indian students. Black and Hispanic students are also over-represented, while White students are greatly under-represented and Asian/Pacific Islanders are slightly under-represented in the state's dropout population.

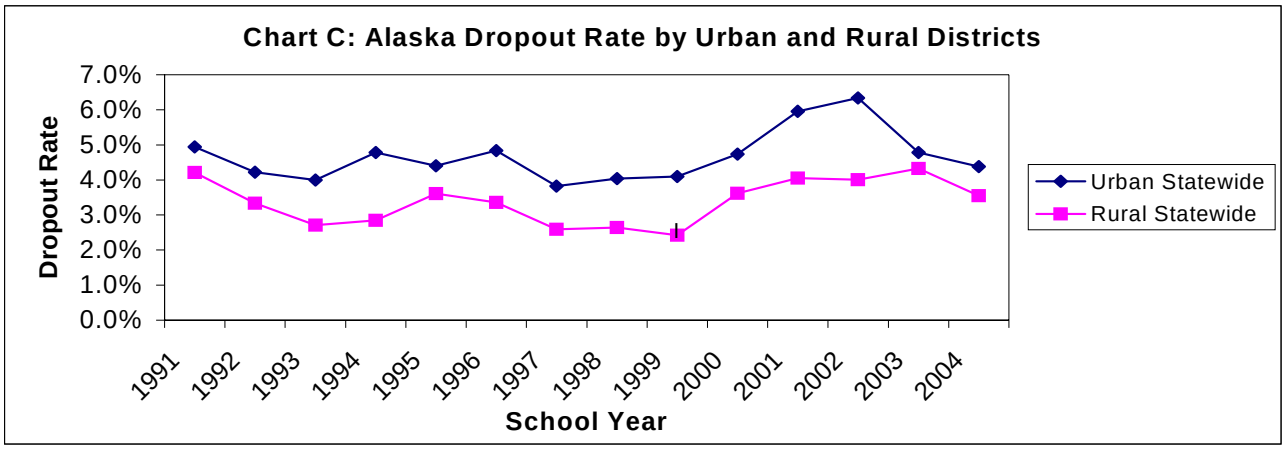


Source: Alaska Department of Education and Early Development.

Relationship between graduation rates and dropout rates. According to Education Trust (2005), Alaska's current method of estimating the graduation rate is more accurate in gauging actual graduation rates than that of other states. And 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). States do have the option to count these students as dropouts if the student's status is unknown, but this can unnaturally inflate the dropout rate. Thus, many states do not include these students when calculating the dropout rate. If these students do not graduate or leave their alternative education programs prematurely, they are not necessarily counted in the overall dropout rate. This can lead to a dropout rate that is lower than the actual rate at which students are not completing high school or some equivalent program.

Because of this complication in how the dropout phenomenon is measured, 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. However, when there are more effective ways of measuring the actual number of students leaving school, there may be a stronger relationship between these two measures.

Differences between urban and rural dropout rates. Using existing data and measures, there appears to be a gap between urban and rural[viii] dropout rates that is consistent over time (see Chart C). Urban students appear to be dropping out at higher rates than rural students based on data gathered from the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development and averaged by urban and rural categories determined by the Alaska Native Policy Center (see footnote).



Source: Alaska Department of Education and Early Development; Alaska Native Policy Center region designations.

The gap between urban and rural students appears to have been smallest in school year 2003. However, urban schools in Alaska consistently report higher dropout rates than rural schools. These data are consistent with earlier research suggesting that rural Alaska high schools are more successful in supporting students through to graduation (Alaska Federation of Natives, 1989; Kleinfeld, McDiarmid, & Hagstrom, 1989). Many factors contribute to dropout of Alaska Native students in urban settings such as the challenges of navigating larger high schools that make it difficult to find the care and supports students need to graduate 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. The Institute for Social and Economic Research in Anchorage reports that 53 percent of all Natives in Fairbanks were new arrivals, 48 percent in Matanuska-Susitna, and 26 percent in Anchorage (2004). Thus, urban Alaska Native students may experience more transience than those in rural villages and communities, which can contribute to dropout.

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

Within the research on American Indian and Alaska Native education, there are several factors that researchers suggest contribute to a student's decision to leave school. Two of the most commonly cited research studies (Colodarci, 1983; Deyhle, 1989), which polled American Indian and Alaska Native students who had left school about their reasons for doing so, identified thirteen factors:

1) Teachers do not care about students
2) Teachers do not provide enough assistance with student work
3) Students have disagreements with teachers
4) School is not seen as important to what students want to do in life
5) School is not seen as important to students as Native Americans [absence of culturally-relevant curriculum]
6) Problems at home
7) Lack of parental encouragement
8) Difficulty with classes
9) Difficulty with reading
10) Work needs at home or job
11) Distance from school
12) Students feel unwanted at school
13) Pregnancy

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 (Finn, 1989; Rumberger, 2001). In a recent presentation to staff of the Fairbanks North Star Borough School District, Sam Drew of the National Dropout Prevention Center used this lens when they explained that, "many of the risk factors [to student dropout] you can't get rid of…they are inherent to the child" (Fairbanks Daily News-Miner, 4/12/07). Drew continued by citing factors such as race and family environment and income level. This view often places much of the burden and responsibility solely on students and families.

However, as captured powerfully by a recent report:

> "Dropout" connotes a general sense of deviance, dysfunction, cultural deprivation, and individual deficiency. This term was influenced by early work on dropping out of school, which examined family background, personal traits, and social group characteristics. From among this clutter of misleading assessments, multiple ways of measuring dropout rates, and scholarly definitions there is, however, a growing consensus that the term "dropout" is anachronistic, pernicious, and indicative of "deficit thinking." As argued by Richard R. Valencia, those who engage in deficit thinking have failed to examine external causes of school failure that exist beyond the control of individual students who "dropout" (Consortium on Race, Gender and Ethnicity, 2004, pp. 4-5).

For these reasons, other researchers may choose to apply a lens that examines school- and system-specific characteristics that constrain students, thereby affecting a student's ability to remain in school. These researchers will often 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 (Consortium on Race, Gender and Ethnicity, 2004; Fine, 1991; Deyhle, 1989; Reyhner, 1992). This does not place the burden of responsibility only on students and families, but largely on the policies and practices inside schools that discourage students' school completion.

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. Throughout Alaska, there are countless seasonal opportunities for employment (e.g., commercial fishing, environment clean-up) that appear to offer large paychecks for short periods of hard work and manual labor. Many students may opt out of school in favor of pursuing some of these opportunities only to find that they do not offer consistent financial support or that they actually require specific education, training, and certification to qualify (e.g., Hazardous Materials Training).

There is some overlap across these three lenses because all describe the same phenomenon, but in different ways. The point is that there are many and layered ways of considering the issue of students leaving school. Addressing this issue may require some multi-faceted understanding on the part of policymakers and local communities to support students in staying in school. It is also important to note that, 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 (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Burke Morison, 2006; Rumberger, 2001). Dropping out is rarely something that happens as a result of a single event. Instead, 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.

> The characteristics of the students most likely to drop out illustrate one of the keys to understanding the phenomenon: that dropping out is a process that may begin in the early years of elementary school, not an isolated event that occurs during the last few years of high school. The process has been described as one of gradual disengagement from school. The particular stages and influences vary widely, but the discernible pattern is an interaction among characteristics of the family and home environment and characteristics of a students' experience in school (Beatty, et al., 2001, p. 14).

Because this has been recognized as a process of "gradual disengagement," much of the research focuses on naming the warning signs or red flags, such as inconsistent patterns of attendance, social

disengagement, increases in discipline problems, or major and negative changes in student achievement patterns. Below is a set of factors connected to each way of framing this issues—dropout, push-out, and lure out—that may help to explain what might contribute to some of these observable changes in student behavior and place students at risk for leaving school.

Factors contributing to student "dropout"

"[D]ropping out is significantly more prevalent among Hispanic and African American [and American Indian and Alaska Native] students, among students in poverty, among students in urban schools, among English-language learners, and among students with disabilities than among those who do not have these characteristics" (Beatty, et al., 2001, p. 14). Research that uses the concept of student "dropout" emphasizes student- and family-specific characteristics that can impact a student's decision to leave school. This research cites the strong correlation between student and family poverty and student dropout.

Family transience or other family issues that affect students' experience in school. Families living in poverty often struggle to have stable living arrangements and may experience frequent moves. Transiency and mobility can create a great deal of inconsistency in students' schooling experiences, as they may move from school to school. Inconsistencies in how schools and districts track student transience or transfer students' school records can further contribute to difficulties in transitioning from one place to the next. Research in this realm also suggests that families living in poverty may struggle to provide supportive learning environments and adequate supports that students need to succeed in school. The claims are related to the idea that parents who are English language learners themselves, or who come from cultural contexts in which they have different expectations for schools, may not provide the kinds of supports that schools and teachers expect. Unfortunately, much of this research frames families with these characteristics (e.g., low socioeconomic status, English language learners, or different cultural context) as lacking when it comes to providing meaningful supports for students—as opposed to providing *different kinds* of supports for students. This framing has been referred to as deficit thinking as noted above, in that it views students and families as being deficient in resources and skills and often places all of the burden for the dropout crisis on students and families. Additionally, it conflicts with research that indicates that Native American students from families who still engage and practice their cultural traditions have higher graduation rates than students whose families do not practice their cultural traditions and practices (Ward, 2005).

Student-specific health issues (both mental health and unhealthy behaviors). There is a great deal of literature that emphasizes the relationship between unhealthy behaviors or mental health issues and the decision to drop out of school. For example, students who engage in underage drinking, drug use, or criminal behavior have been shown to be at greater risk for dropping out of school. This could be related to the fact that students who engage in these behaviors are physically and academically not prepared for learning, are spending their time on activities that do not improve their school learning, or do not have the peer supports to encourage their academic achievement. Mental health problems can also inhibit students' ability to focus on school work, to complete course requirements, or to seek out the supports they need to continue their learning. Research in this arena does not often directly address the fact that many of these unhealthy behaviors are symptomatic of problems experienced by students in other areas of their lives. This is not to say that students have *no* choice in avoiding these behaviors, but that there are a number of factors that contribute to unhealthy behaviors and mental health problems that may not be in the direct control of students themselves.

Students view school as not contributing to their current or future success. There are countless studies and reports about student dropout that mention that some students who leave school are "bored" with the curriculum. Often in these reports, however, this point is marginal and is often glossed over when it comes time to provide recommendations to address the factors contributing to the dropout rate. Given the consistency with which it comes up, especially in studies where students who have left school are polled, this is a major factor in students decision to leave school. Many of these studies focus on low student motivation to persevere in school, when student boredom may actually be closely related to the relevance of the work to student's daily lives and career interests. There are some studies that suggest

that "high-performing" students leave school in their senior year because they are required to attend full-time, although they only have one or two remaining courses to complete.

Factors contributing to student "push-out"

Instruction that is not relevant to students' home cultures or lived experiences. One of the most consistent findings in the literature on American Indian and Alaska Native education suggests that, if classroom and school learning is not relevant to students' interests and day-to-day experiences, they will leave school (FNSBSD, 2005; Sundberg & Stayrook, 2005). This is particularly important especially in light of recent research indicating that American Indian and Alaska Native students who drop out of school are increasingly students who have a record of performing well in school (CCSSO, 2006; FNSBSD, 2005; Sundberg & Stayrook, 2005).

When students discuss the relevance of school, they often report being 'bored' in class or struggling to find connections between what they are learning and 'real life' (FNSBSD, 2005). Throughout the literature on American Indian and Alaska Native education, there are a number of strategies that may provide teachers and students the opportunities to connect classroom learning to students' lived experiences. One strategy is to work with local educators and community members to develop culturally-relevant and/or place-based curriculum. This approach has been shown to provide specific benefits to Alaska Native student learning and achievement (Lipka & Adams, 2004). Effective development and implementation typically requires long-term investment in fostering meaningful school-and-community relationships. Another strategy is to develop more experiential learning or project-based activities in the classroom (Cleary & Peacock, 1997). Finally, teachers of American Indian and Alaska Native students are encouraged to develop coursework that engages various learning styles (Soleste & Tharp, 2002; Swisher, 1991). The Doyon Foundation in interior Alaska currently sponsors a Learning Styles Project to provide support to teachers of Alaska Native students in teaching to different styles.

Lack of caring relationships between students and school staff and/or an absence of a culture of caring within the school. In every study included in this literature review where student leavers were asked what contributed to their decisions to leave school, the fact that they believed their teachers 'don't care' about them or their lives was consistently raised. There are new bodies of literature emerging that take up this theme and emphasize school restructuring (e.g., small schools movement, school within a school) or that encourage policymakers and administrators to create small learning communities or schools-within-schools to foster environments where students are known and can more readily connect with their teachers and other school staff. School and district policies designed to curb student absenteeism and truancy can actually contribute to a school culture that is uncaring and impersonal. A research study on why students of the Fairbanks North Star Borough School District left school made this point loud and clear. The very effort to contact students who had left school to ask what had contributed to their decision resulted in a large number of these students expressing a desire to return to complete their high school education. This small gesture of care and connection had a powerful impact on students' motivations to return to school.

Culture clash between school staff and students. There is a whole body of research that indicates the substantial gap in dropout rates between White students and ethnic minority students. A recent study captured this concept by discussing the "promoting power" of schools, and the fact that majority-minority schools—or those where ethnic minority students are the majority of students in the school—are five times more likely to have weak promoting power than that of schools where White students make up the majority of students (Balfanz & Legters, 2004, pg. v). There is also a great deal of literature indicating how consistently minority students are disciplined for behavioral problems, retained in grade, and suspended or expelled. This research suggests that students whose home and community cultures differ from that of school staff may be at greater risk of being pushed out of school due to disciplinary or other problems. Currently, the Initiative for Community Engagement of the Association of Alaska School Boards is working to address this issue by administering annual students and school staff surveys to monitor school climate and address issues related to culture clash.

Factors contributing to student "lure out"

A lack of connection between students' school and career plans. If students do not see that their school learning is preparing them for higher education or careers, they may not see school as relevant to their future plans. This lends a new layer to the earlier issue of curriculum and instructional relevance. Guidance counselors and teachers should support students in understanding the importance of a high school education in preparing them for a variety of career and educational opportunities. When students do not view school as connected to their career plans, they may seek out other opportunities, including those in entry-level and other workforce positions.

Students believe they have greater opportunities outside of school. Technical training programs (e.g., Job Corps) and the military may present clearer pathways to students than those within high school. These programs may also come with pay or promises of career and higher education benefits (e.g., the GI Bill). If educators help students to understand the increased, though more long-term, benefits of higher education, students may choose to complete their high school education. This is not to say that career and technical training programs are not important. Instead, schools should support students in identifying the various opportunities they have in continued education and in being prepared for a variety of paths—so that students have a full range of choices and are making informed decisions.

Stronger peer networks around non-school opportunities than around schooling options. New research has found that some American Indian students leave school because their peers—who have also previously dropped out—have secured jobs and guide these students in securing their own positions in the same organizations or training programs (CCSSO, 2006). Peers provide information about how to access jobs and training, as well as the immediate monetary benefits of doing so.

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. There are a few studies that emphasize parental engagement and parenting styles (Bridgeland, et al., 2006; SREB, 2000), highlighting the important connections between parents and schools, allowing readers to get a better sense of the various realms of support available to encourage students to stay in school. 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.

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. Many of these initiatives are similar to efforts in other states and local school districts, including after-school programs, alternative school options, vocational and technical programs, and community-based programs. Only a handful of these have been recognized as being effective in encouraging students to stay in school. Three initiatives in Alaska that are most commonly cited in the broader literature on American Indian and Alaska Native education are presented here. Next, a small group of initiatives recently funded by the U. S. Department of Education are discussed. These initiatives are a part of the Alaska Native Education Grant program, established specifically to prevent Alaska Native student dropout. These new efforts are highlighted in order to point out organizations and institutions that have expressed a particular interest in addressing issues of student dropout, push-out, and lure-out as discussed above, and those that have resources across the state to do so.

Commonly cited programs. The three programs most cited for their effectiveness in supporting students staying in school include: 1) Yakoosgé 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. Below is some description of the promising elements and successes of each program, as well as highlight other information about each program that can provide a sense of its future success in supporting students to stay in school.

Yakoosgé Daakahídi Alternative High School. This is one of two high schools in the Juneau School District. It offers students who have left the Juneau-Douglas High School an opportunity to receive individualized support in pursuing high school diplomas. A small staff supports up to 90 students, and the principal is Ronalda Cadiente, an Alaska Native educator. Staff members emphasize learning in small communities, flexible school schedules to accommodate students' work and family commitments, and culturally-relevant instruction and supports (NWREL, 2002a). An average of 35 high school diplomas are awarded each year to the largely Alaska Native student body (NWREL, 2002a). Based on the limited information available about the program, it appears that this school is able to support students through to graduation by approaching the various aspects that can constrain students' abilities to complete high school—family, institutional, and community-based.

Cook Inlet Tribal Council's Partners for Student Success. Partnering with the Anchorage School District, CITC's Partners for Student Success program offers courses to middle and high school students, as well as support and advocacy for students and their parents through dedicated guidance counselors and other staff at each of eight schools (four middle and four high schools). Based on program information from 2002 (NWREL, 2002b), at least 350 students attended the classes offered by the program, and the staff also operate at least one summer program serving approximately 100 students. This program operates in the space between families, students and schools to support each in their efforts to work together to increase the success and graduation rates of Alaska Native students (NWREL, 2002b). Again, this represents an initiative that addresses the various realms, or layers, that can support or inhibit student high school completion.

Fairbanks North Star Borough School District's Dropout Prevention Steering Committee. In 2004, FNSBSD completed comprehensive survey interviews with over 200 students who had previously dropped out of the district's schools. The results of this research have garnered regional and statewide notoriety, largely because a significant number of the students interviewed ultimately took steps to return to school because someone reached out to them. While this is not a specific programmatic intervention, it represents an initiative to understand students' experiences and to develop supports that directly connect to these experiences. Juneau School District has also developed a strategic process to use data to understand the dropout phenomenon and to target interventions with these understandings. The Fairbanks initiative unearthed thirteen primary reasons students leave school, which overlap with the thirteen reasons noted above. These reasons include:

- Employment and the need and/or desire to work rather than finish high school;
- Obtain a GED rather than remain in high school;
- Lack of motivation, which results in not completing high school;
- Pregnancy/parenting, which shifts the primary focus of a young mother's life to child care rather than academics;
- Join the military rather than completing high school;
- Behavior issues, which make it difficult to be successful at school, especially once trouble has occurred;
- Lack of challenge for bright, bored students who do not see the point of high school;
- Lack of individual attention, especially for students with learning needs that are not identified, discussed, transitioned or noticed;
- Treatment programs for students with issues such as drug abuse, alcoholism, depression, eating disorders and other serious problems;
- Distracting social life that overpowers almost everything else, including school and family;

- Academic issues that arise for any number of reasons, including social pressures, cognitive issues, poor attendance, poor organizational skills and study habits, lack of motivation, and a misunderstood learning style, to name a few;
- Lack of relevance, which causes high school to seem meaningless in the minds of the students;
- Enrollment in another type of program, such as the military academy, when problems occur in high school.
  (FNSBSD, 2005, p. 4)

In this list, we see student, institutional and community-based challenges contribute to issues of dropout, push-out, and lure-out. What is also significant about this report is that the Steering Committee identified five levels of recommendations:

1) Quick and easy— a surface fix that does not require much money or restructuring of the whole system;
2) Doable with money—ideas that can be implemented with a little money and without causing too much of a stir in the workplace, with families, or in the community, and which will be helpful, if implemented successfully;
3) Doable, affordable, but difficult—changes in a culture or community, dealing with issues that must be negotiated among various stakeholders or institutions;
4) Difficult, but worth it— ideas that require a cultural shift in the education community or the community at large and that cost money but would really make a difference; and
5) Back Burner for the moment—ideas that are too expensive, too hot to handle but that could be implemented, if the conditions were right.

Developing initiatives to address the dropout phenomenon is a multi-layered process. Yet, from these efforts and other research, we see that it is essential that any initiative address school, institutional and community-based elements because these elements converge in contributing to students' decisions to leave school.

Other Community & School Initiatives. A few schools and communities across the state are responding to the dropout crisis in their regions with some targeted and innovative efforts. These efforts work to link students, families, and educators; to leverage community resources in support of struggling students; and to use data to identify meaningful retention strategies.

For example, in January of 2007, Principal Bernie Sorenson of Juneau-Douglas High School (JDHS) announced their effort to cut the dropout rate and increase the graduation rate from 66 percent to 90 percent (Morris, 2007). By examining school data, staff were able to determine that freshman year is a key transition point as students learn to navigate high school as they come in from middle schools and junior highs, as well as the point at which many are retained for a second year. Affirming national data that indicates that poor academic performance and having to repeat a grade are the most significant school-performance related risk factors associated with dropping out (Communities in Schools, 2006), JDHS staff found that a freshman who has two or more failing grades is very likely to drop out. They also learned that male, low-income, and Native students are most at-risk for leaving school before graduating. JDHS has developed an initiative called Freshman First, which targets support at freshman students who are identified as being at-risk for dropping out. Staff plan entrance interviews with new students; intervention meetings with teachers, families, and students struggling to stay on track; required study halls; and opportunities to earn credits in courses that students previously failed.

Another new initiative has been developed by a national organization called Communities in Schools. They provide adult staff that partner with local schools, districts, and community organizations to stop the dropout. This organization recently established an Alaska affiliate with offices in Anchorage, Nome, Juneau, and Mat-Su regions. Across the state, their affiliates have had some early success in improving targeted students' attendance rates, behavior, academic performance, grade promotion, and graduation (Communities in Schools, 2006). State Director Tom Morgan reports that some of their efforts include sponsoring library programs to ensure access to books, funding care coordinator positions to manage

and support cases of students who are struggling in school, providing re-integration services to students previously incarcerated in juvenile justice facilities, and establishing a program where Elders mentor Native students and families and help them re-connect to their cultural heritage (2006).

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. Of these 32 initiatives, several have elements specifically designed to prevent student 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 Efforts. There is a great variety in the types of programs these districts have proposed to develop. Not all of the programs focus solely on issues of student dropout; several also address curriculum development, student support and teacher professional development.

- Craig City School District $700,000
- Iditarod Area School District $682,218
- City of Juneau School District—US Dept of Ed OESE Alaska Native ED $592,755
- North Slope Borough School District $585,310
- Dillingham City School District $543,603
- Nenana City Public School $509,326
- Lower Kuskokwim School District $494,624
- Yukon Flats School District $478,688
- Kake City School District $448,817
- Bering Strait School District—Educational Support $395,352
- Hoonah City School District $358,059
- Ketchikan Gateway Borough School District $342,062

Although the specific district grant proposals are not available online, some grant administrators described what programs they had proposed to develop as a part of this work. It is important to note that only a few of the administrators were reached, though efforts were made to contact all those cited on the above grantee list. 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. The district had previously been awarded an earlier version of this grant, under which it developed several curriculum modules. The district is using the current grant largely to distribute these modules to other schools in the district. This grant has an external evaluation component, but that grantees are not necessarily being supported in connecting with other grantees across the state or with those developing similar work.

Community-based Efforts. 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. The proposed initiatives are as varied as the sponsoring organizations. For example, the program sponsored by Yuut Elitnaurviat, Inc. (Yup'ik for "The People's Learning Center") has developed a community-based program to support students' and adults' academic and technical development. With a primary focus on workforce development, this initiative brings together stakeholders from healthcare, education, civic, government, and other social service organizations 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.

The Mt. Sanford Tribal Consortium, with a demonstrated commitment to juvenile justice initiatives, has developed initiatives based on its extensive local process to understand students' experiences and

identify strategies to prevent their leaving school. Programs sponsored by the Alaska Native Heritage Center emphasize language and cultural development in order to support and extend academic development. Within this range of initiatives there is a testament to the multi-layered nature of the phenomenon of students leaving school. Each student is different. And each student maintains a variety of resources and faces a variety of challenges in education. It may take a variety of approaches to reach all students.

These initiatives have the potential to support the education of students across Alaska. But questions remain about how these programs are connecting to other initiatives in local and regional communities, and what specific elements of these initiatives are particularly effective in supporting students in completing their high school education. There is much work to do to build local, regional and statewide networks of support for students, as well as to measure the effectiveness of existing initiatives.

- Cook Inlet Tribal Council, Inc $975,539
- Yuut Elitnaurviat Inc. $831,966
- Northern Industrial Training, LLC Admissions $691,104
- Sitka Tribe of Alaska—Education & Training $684,821
- Mt. Sanford Tribal Consortium $668,662
- Southeast Regional Resource Center, Inc. $603,107
- Alaska Native Heritage Center $541,279
- Sealaska Heritage Institute—Education $402,644
- Association of Interior Native Educators $376,550
- Kenaitze Indian Tribe—Cultural and Education Cuya Qyut'anen Head Start $221,374
- Chikat Indian Village $201,703

University-based Efforts. There are a few initiatives that supplement existing efforts—like the Native Student Services Program at the University of Alaska Anchorage or the Rural Student Services Program at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. 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. For example, the “University of Alaska Fairbanks School of Education Math in a Cultural Context” Program continues an over twenty-year investment in developing culturally-relevant math and science curriculum. The effort is driven by the mission to partner with Alaska Native elders and educators to develop curriculum based on Alaska Native ways of knowing in mathematics and science education—to help ensure that instruction is relevant to Alaska Native students’ life experiences. Evaluations of earlier initiatives suggested that this curriculum could improve both Alaska Native and non-Native student achievement in mathematics at the elementary and middle school level (Lipka & Adams, 2004).

- University of Alaska Fairbanks—School of Education Math in a Cultural Context $850,528
- University of Alaska—Office of Academic Affairs K12 Outreach $557,602

Finally, there are a number of grants awarded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention that include some dropout prevention elements. These include a project sponsored by the Akiachak Native Community; the Mt. Sanford Tribal Consortium; the Cook Inlet Tribal Council’s Partnering for Justice initiative; and the Alaska Native Heritage Center’s High School Program.

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. Are students choosing to dropout because of individual or family challenges? Are they being pushed out of school by ineffective and inequitable school and teaching practice? Are they being lured out by entry-level or other vocational and professional opportunities? The answer is probably yes to all of these at any given time across the state. As such, it is essential that no one group places blame on

another. This is in keeping with the public mandate in the Alaska State Constitution that the state provide for the education of all students in the state. To do so, students, families, communities, business and political leaders, and school staff must join forces to work together to encourage students to stay in school.

What follows are some concluding points developed from the themes that emerged from this review along with a set of recommendations.

Dropping out is a process. Research on this issue has consistently pointed out that students' decision to leave school is a gradual process that can start as early as middle school. In most cases, it is not a single event that had no prior indication or warning. Thus, it is essential that schools, communities, and state officials 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. There are so many different ways to measure the dropout phenomenon, and new methods are being developed each year. While these new methods offer a more refined way of capturing aspects of the phenomenon, the methods do not determine the community or school goals around how many student leavers a community or region can reasonably afford—economically, socially, and culturally. It is essential that local communities work together with school, district, and state education officials to set community goals around student graduation and attrition. In this way, the community goals can better drive research, policy, and practice instead of waiting for new statistics and rates that may or may not inspire action around this critical issue. Setting goals is a first important step to identifying effective strategies to meet those goals and to learning more about where students go when they do leave.

Recommendation 3: Set community, 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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Appendix A

Event Rate: Calculated by dividing the number of dropouts in a school year by the number of students enrolled at the beginning of that school year. The formula is:

$$\frac{\text{Number of } 9^{th} \text{ through } 12^{th}\text{-grade dropouts as of October } 1^{st}}{\text{Total } 9^{th}\text{-}12^{th} \text{ grade enrollment count as of October } 1^{st}}$$

Please note that the State of Alaska reports this for 7^{th}-12^{th} grade instead of 9^{th}-12^{th} grade.

Cohort Average Freshman Completion Rate: "[C]alculated by dividing the number of high school completers by the sum of dropouts for grades 9 through 12, respectively, in consecutive years, plus the number of completers. If a hypothetical graduating class began as 9^{th}-graders in year 1, this 4-year completion rate would look like" (Arronstamm Young, 2003):

$$\frac{\text{High School Completers Year 4}}{\text{Dropouts(Grade 9 Year 1 + Grade 10 Year 2 + Grade 11 Year 3 + Grade 12 Year 4) + High School Completers Year 4}}$$

[i] (Laird, J., et al., 2006, p. 2).
[ii] (Laird, J., et al., 2006, p. 2).
[iii] (Arronstamm Young, B. , 2003, p. 15).
[iv] (Arronstamm Young, B. , 2003, p. 15).
[v] Ibid.
[vi] (Freeman, C., & Fox, M. A., 2005, Indicator 3.3).
[vii] Ibid.
[viii] Using regional distinctions developed by the Alaska Native Policy Center of the First Alaskans Institute in their 2004 report "Our Choices, Our Future: Analysis of the Status of Alaska Natives Report," urban districts include those in Anchorage, Fairbanks, Juneau, Kenai Peninsula, and Matanuska-Susitna; rural districts include those in all other regions of the state (p. 38).

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