

Village Mock Council

- *The stage is set, and the council members are all on stage in a u-shape at their seats. The lights on the set are darkened, and all is quiet.*
- *A light comes on, spotlighting the Narrator. The Narrator is standing in front of the stage, apart from the council members. The council members are still sitting in the dark.*

Narrator (Christine): We are at the scene of one of our local village councils, and the council is in session. It has just wrapped up most of the business on its agenda, but there is still the most important item left. “Open Discussion” allows council members to bring up and discuss the concerns they have for the village. It is a time to discuss issues and find solutions.

This village council represents a village hub community anywhere in Alaska, with a population of 1200. Let’s go to the meeting now.

- *Narrator turns to the Mock Council meeting, and the spotlight on the Narrator turns off as the lighting turns on, highlighting the Mock Council.*

Mr. Chair (Bryan): Okay, next agenda item is “Open Discussion”. Does anyone have an issue they’d like to bring to the Council?

Gordon: Yes, I have an issue that needs to be brought to attention. I just read this education report, and all it focuses on is how Alaska Native students are not succeeding in schools.

This is something I have a lot of concern for, and we know it affects us all. The Department of Education and our schools say that our Native students are failing. This is not just a problem in our village, its all across the state. That’s why I want to discuss why our kids aren’t doing as well as they could.

Warner: Well, if you ask me, the problem lies with the way our school is being run. Look at the small amount of funding our schools gets. I know it’s because we’re in rural Alaska.

Andria: Not only that, but our school has a 30% teacher turnover rate from last year. It’s hard to have a good curriculum when your teacher’s always changing.

Gertrude: If I may, Mr. Chair! I’ve noticed that a lot of our kids think that, if they go out and make money, then they’ve been successful. But don’t you think true success has to be **more** than that?

Amber: Right, it doesn’t just mean a job position or wealth. Success is connected with values. I believe that if you are happy being a subsistence fisherman and you provide for yourself and the ones you love, that is an OK thing. That **is** success.

Warner: Well, the root of our problem is that we're living with two cultures. We're living our Native culture, and then we try to bridge into western culture through education. Somewhere there's a disconnect, and that causes our young people frustration.

Woodrow: I agree with that. It's like, all of your young life, you're doing fine; you understand what you're supposed to do. And then you get tossed into this new world that doesn't fit. That's what causes some of these frustrations. It leads to problems like alcoholism, suicide, crime... and crime not because they are trying to get something out of it, but because they are frustrated and acting out, making poor choices.

Mr. Chair: It sounds like most people here think a successful person with a lot of money is a different thing from success in values. Okay, so if it's not just to make good money, what does it mean to be a successful student?

Adrienne: I would say a student who is successful is somebody who understands the self-discipline that's needed to be in school, in just attending classes and turning in your homework.

Amber: That's right. You can get culture shock when you move out of the village or go to another school, and that can stress out our kids... but someone who has that self-determination to work hard is someone I call a success.

Gordon: I agree—a successful student is in school and learning something. They are preparing for some kind of life. That doesn't have to be college; it could be vocational training or joining the military. Those are also good things. We know that every job now needs a high school diploma, so successful students have to have at least a high school diploma.

Gertrude: Well, I believe a successful student is one that has the courage to venture outside their village, beyond their boundaries. A lot of these students live in small villages like ours, and they go off to school in Anchorage and Fairbanks where they're among thousands of other students from all over the country and the world.

Mr. Chair: So, people are saying that a successful student works hard, gets a high school diploma, and enrolls in college, or vocational studies, or the military outside of their village? I don't know if I agree with all that... what do you think?

Kim: Well, I have a nephew who's successful, but he's not following that path that you all are talking about. He wants to stay in the village to teach math and coach basketball. We know he'll have to leave to get his education, but he wants to come back. That's successful because he wants to contribute to his community.

Kristen: That's what I think, too. It's important for our kids to be rooted in our culture. That means our kids understand the importance of our Native values, having Elders involved in life, to be role models and culture bearers. Our Elders help our students learn the traditions.

Anita: This is a tough question, but I see success as being the idea that our kids are successful in both worlds; western and non-Native ideas of success and knowing our Native traditions.

Andrea: Any Native graduate, no matter where they are from is gonna know who they are as a person, and they're gonna know their people, whether they are Tlingit, or Aleut, or Inupiaq, or Yup'ik or Athabascan. They would be proud of being their own person, and of their people and cultural background.

Woodrow: I can see that as important because it would give them a sense of where they fit in the world. They'd be grounded in being Alaska Natives and could appreciate what our ancestors have taught about being humble, and grateful, and kind, and hospitable, and all of those things that are our values. Our principles are our legacy, and they go back thousands of years.

Andrea: People find it hard to do both; they try to live a subsistence lifestyle and try to go to work full-time. Most kids, even teachers, believe you can only do one. Either you live a subsistence lifestyle and drop out of school and a cash job. Or you leave the village, and you get your skills, and you forget where you come from. But people have a hard time doing both.

Gordon: That's deadly; it tears our kids apart socially, psychologically, spiritually; and it ultimately hurts them physically. If our school system was going to do it the right way, kids would be able to hold it together - to be, on the one hand, who you are as a person and a member of your community; and on the other hand, **without apology**, to know your school subjects as well as everyone else.

Woodrow: That's true, we need Native people to hold on to the culture, the traditions, the art, the music, the dance, the spirituality of the past; but we also need Natives who can run corporations and practice law, write textbooks and teach at the college level. It's a matter of survival for us.

Mr. Chair: I agree with all this that you're saying, but I don't know if I buy into this notion of having to be in two worlds. It doesn't seem right.

Warner: I don't see us as living in two worlds either. I see us living in one world that is changing. There's technology, and TV, and the email. I know that I have to change with my environment. When I was living in Anchorage, I switched gears for a few years; and then, when I came back to the village, I was the same person, I felt the same, but I just had to switch gears.

Adrienne: Well, I've walked in two worlds in a way. But the ultimate goal for me is to walk in one world. Where everybody, no matter who they are, or whatever world that they come from, recognize that they are human beings, and all begin to work for unity as human beings.

Gordon: Yeah, it doesn't really make sense, 'walk in two worlds.' Look at our kids, there are so many different environments they come into contact with all the time—the world at home with parents or grandparents, the world of being a good student, and most importantly, the world of just being themselves. It makes sense to think about it as being a good human being in all of these worlds. But what does that mean—to be a good human being?

Kim: Unless you know how to be a human being, you can't be much of anything. Those things are taught at childhood: how to love and respect yourself, how to love and respect others, how to forgive yourself. These are things we teach our children.

Kristen: Agreed! You need to love and respect yourself and others. When I look into a person's eyes I can feel that they have an understanding of who they are and where they come from; and that allows them to love themselves, have pride, and to understand how to live a healthy life.

Gordon: I remember when I was first entering a leadership role, someone asked me: what are the things you see as important for a leader of our people? And I said, well, if a hundred years from now all of our people have \$100,000-a year jobs, but they don't know our language anymore, they can't eat our foods because the land has been devastated, they don't know who they are (or their clans or tribes) – I would consider myself, as a leader, a failure for my people.

Kristen: Being a good human being is really two connected things....knowing who you are and where you come from *and* giving back to your community. A successful student is someone who shares in our Native ways, and shares in our community; but they excel at school, and they pass their success on to the people around them.

Gordon: Responsibility to your community is important. One way to show responsibility is by being a supportive parent. Lots of students find it hard to survive without that family support, or at least someone in the school they can go to... But some students just have that inner drive to succeed, for whatever reason.

Andrea: Family support is important, but students need to understand the problems and issues they see with our communities too. If the school could connect today's issues with what's happened to our people over the generations, it would make more sense. Then the students could find a way to resolve that.

Adrienne: Defining success is something I tried to do when I worked as a teacher. We discussed it for years. When you work in education, you end up dealing with whether or not the school is being successful, and with making sure your students are successful. In my opinion, whether you judge a student as a success or not depends on what they do when they leave school.

Woodrow: I heard someone say that schools were set up to prepare students to *make a living* for themselves, but that's not enough for Native students. They have to develop identity and understand their cultural heritage. School should prepare students to *make a life* for themselves in a world that's changing and very different from what their parents and grandparents experienced.

Amber: You can certainly define failure in terms of not passing tests, but there are students who won't ever pass the tests and are still successful. I met this kid from another village, and he was mentally never going to grow all the way up. But, his grandparents raised him in the traditional way because there was no way he was going to survive in school. He's now the youngest speaker of their language, the best dancer, the youngest and one of the best hunters and trappers, and he's been prepared to make a life for himself that is tailor-made for him. You have to include him as someone who is successful.

Anita: That's very true. I'd have to say that a student is going to be successful if they are going after their interests in life and it's going to sustain them. If you want to be a bio-chemist and it takes care of your family, that's great. Or, if you want to be a clown and to go to clown school, and that brings you joy and self-sufficiency, that's great too. It's fulfilling who you are as a person and taking care of yourself and your family in a quality way. That's success.

Mr. Chair: So, what I've heard is that a successful Native student is one who goes to school but also knows their language and culture and does not get that taken away by the time they graduate from high school. They feel good about themselves, and feel that they can do anything they put their hands to. They can be successful at hunting and fishing, and then they can become successful as an airline pilot or any other profession. And yet, they know exactly who they are and where they are from, and they never forget those things. Now, what should this Council actually do about these issues in our own community?

Kristen: Mr. Chairman, I move that the Council meet with our advisory school committee and with the principals of the elementary school and high school to discuss four actions: 1) to hold an open meeting with the entire community to discuss these ideas; 2) to plan and operate a reading program for young children of elementary or pre-school ages; 3) to get the parents of our village to do everything they can to encourage learning in school and at home (for example, keeping books and magazines in the house, working with teachers, turning off the TV for an hour of homework or reading at night, and making sure our kids have good nutrition and sleep to do well in school); and 4) always using our Native language at home, so that our kids will begin to understand it as toddlers.

Woodrow: I second the motion.

Mr. Chair: It has been moved and seconded that we meet with them on these four items. Discussion on the motion?

Kristen: Mr. Chairman: I would like to speak on my own motion.

Mr. Chair: Please go ahead.

Kristen: I especially want to emphasize the part about involving the whole community if we're going to change our children's lives for the better.

Warner: Sounds like a good idea, but there are many people in this community who simply won't attend.

Kristen: I agree, but we should try to get as many people as possible there – and encourage them to say what they think.

Gordon: That's right. If they won't speak up, we're merely talking to ourselves. All these good ideas will never happen just because the Council says they should. It takes every adult we can reach.

Woodrow: I love the idea of turning off the TV. That's why I seconded the motion.

Kim: I agree especially with the part about reading with our kids. Literacy is the most important skill of all. And, besides, children love to read - and to be read to.

Gordon: I call for the question.

Mr. Chair: The question has been called. Any further discussion? *[pause]* Hearing none, we will proceed to vote. All those in favor of the motion, please say "AYE." *[vote]* Those opposed, say "NAY" *[vote]* The AYES have it, and the motion is adopted. -- Because that completes our agenda for today, we stand adjourned.