



## ISER RESEARCH SUMMARY

Institute of Social and Economic Research, University of Alaska

November 1985, R.S. No. 29

# Alaska's Small Rural High Schools: Are They Working?

### INTRODUCTION

A recent University of Alaska study reports that despite popular belief to the contrary some small village high schools in Alaska are providing students with quality education. The report also recognizes that other small schools are having serious problems.

The report, prepared by the Institute of Social and Economic Research and the College of Human and Rural Development, is based on information collected from each of Alaska's 162 small rural high schools (defined as schools with fewer than 100 students). Researchers obtained the information through site visits to 32 small high schools and through face-to-face or telephone interviews with principals, district board presidents, local board members, teachers, and students. In addition to analyzing achievement test scores from virtually all the small high schools, study team members also worked with Native educators who did studies of small high schools in their communities. The response rate for the total data collection effort was well above 90 percent.

### FINDINGS

#### **PART I: Most Rural Communities and Rural Educators Want Village High Schools—and a Boarding School Option.**

Most local boardmembers and educators in the rural communities visited support the small high schools and do not want to lose them. Non-Native communities with small high schools wanted these schools as much as Native communities.

Rural residents and rural educators see, and statistical evidence documents, major advantages as well as disadvantages to small high schools.

#### **Advantages**

- More students now graduate from high school.

- Children can grow up with their families and parents can take part in their children's lives.
- Low student-teacher ratios in small high schools afford students much more individual attention.
- Students have more opportunity to hold key roles in school activities and have greater access to such scarce resources as travel programs and computers.
- Parents can exert considerable informal, as well as formal, control over local schools.
- Parents in Native communities can use the local high school to pass on the cultural traditions, economic skills, and language of their community.
- Small high schools provide important community services and employment and have increased or stabilized local population.

#### **Disadvantages**

- Small high schools offer few advanced or specialized courses or programs for academically advanced or special education students.
- Small high schools offer little variety in extra-curricular activities or student social life.
- Students are exposed to few teachers, and many of these are teaching subjects outside their areas of specialization.
- Students have limited exposure to the world outside the village.

Most rural residents and educators think students should also have a boarding option. Three groups of students need or want a boarding option: social referrals, academically advanced students, and students who like more activities and social life.

Rural residents and educators do not agree on what the boarding option should be. About half of the rural residents interviewed, for example, wanted a local boarding option within the school district or region. About a third thought Mt. Edgecumbe should be reopened as a statewide boarding school. Mt. Edgecumbe was reopened in 1985.

**PART II: Some Small High Schools are Working and Some Are Not.**

Small high schools have dramatically increased graduation rates among rural students. Drop-out rates in rural Alaska are now actually *below* the national average.

Parents who are high school graduates are usually more knowledgeable about schools, more involved in shaping the educational program, and more likely to help their children with schoolwork.

In rural communities where a majority of adults are high school graduates, the researchers found that students had significantly higher achievement test scores. The greatest impact of the small high schools may well be on the next generation—the children of the many rural students who are now graduating from high school.

Some small high schools are offering a high-quality program well adapted to local circumstances and community priorities. Others are having serious problems.

In small high schools that are working well:

1. The community and school have forged an educational partnership and support each other's goals.
2. The school has developed a clear focus (for example, language development, college preparation, or cultural maintenance) that gives direction to the educational program.
3. The school staff consists of enterprising educators who are not hide-bound to a single image of what a high school looks like and who can design an innovative program.
4. The school staff has the broad intellectual range and broad interests (such as dog mushing, taxidermy, art, house building) that add variety to the program.
5. The school is in a district where the central office administrators encourage local professionals to consult with the community and to fit the instructional program to local priorities.

**PART III: Problems Exist, But So Do Solutions**

Alaska's small rural high schools have devised many innovative strategies to deal with the educational difficulties of small high schools.

**Issue 1: Limited numbers of teachers, courses, and extracurricular activities.**

To increase variety, small high schools are employing instructors from the community, using elementary teachers to teach their academic specialties in the high school, and enrolling students in summer programs and university programs.

**Issue 2: Providing vocational education.**

Local board members and educators both see vocational education as the single weakest area of small high schools. To offer vocational training, small high schools are using such methods as starting student-run businesses, using itinerant vocational teachers and local instructors who are expert in a craft, and sending students to a central vocational facility.

**Issue 3: Helping students become comfortable and competent outside the village.**

Rural schools increase students' awareness of the outside world and their urban skills through a variety of travel programs. Over 90 percent of small high schools offer travel to Alaska cities or outside the state.

**Issue 4: Raising low achievement test scores.**

Rural school districts are attempting to raise test scores by teaching test-taking skills, using tests aligned to the curriculum, and developing ways to get parents interested in helping their children do better on standardized tests.

**Issue 5: Preparing students for college.**

College success rates of rural students have remained low both in the village high school period and in the preceding boarding school period. Some small high schools are establishing special classes to teach students the type of academic skills college requires. Summer programs for talented high school students at the university campus are showing exceptional promise.

**Issue 6: Helping students make the transition to adulthood.**

Rural students have their greatest difficulties not during high school but in making a successful transition to adult roles. One district has developed a postsecondary counseling program that has been successful in helping students move from the nurturing world of the small high school to the independence of adulthood.

*This Research Summary is based on the report Alaska's Small Rural High Schools: Are They Working? by Judith Kleinfeld, G. Williamson McDiarmid, and David Hagstrom. This study was supported by the Alaska Department of Education and the Alaska Legislature. The report is now available in an abridged edition (\$3.00) from the Institute of Social and Economic Research, 707 A Street, Suite 206, Anchorage, Alaska 99501, telephone 907-278-4621.*

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