Eskimo School on the Andreafsky
A Study of Effective Bicultural Education

By Judith Smilg Kleinfeld

Adolescence is a pivotal developmental period, particularly in cross-cultural education. It is the stage where the young confront a crucial developmental task—finding some productive adult role. For Alaska Native adolescents, forming a satisfying adult identity is extremely difficult because of the rapid changes, the conflicting values and styles, in their social world. The high rate of suicide among young Native men indicates the more general difficulty that these young people face in "getting it together."

Dr. Kleinfeld, a professor of psychology with the Institute of Social and Economic Research, has for the past ten years been studying the effects of different types of educational environments on Indian and Eskimo adolescents as they make the transition to adulthood. Some of these educational environments lead to serious problems, as evidenced by high rates of depression, alienation, and school drop-out. Other educational environments help to create strong Native adults who are competent and at ease in the world.

In the book summarized here, Eskimo School on the Andreafsky, Dr. Kleinfeld examines St. Mary's, a Catholic boarding school in Southwestern Alaska, which has been unusually successful in educating Native adolescents. Her approach is a pragmatic one: St. Mary’s seems to work. She has tried to find out why and whether similar educational principles can be applied elsewhere.

The study on which Eskimo School is based was supported in part by a research grant from the National Institute for Education and in part by the general research funds of the University of Alaska's Institute of Social and Economic Research.

The Success of St. Mary’s

St. Mary’s is a financially strapped private boarding school that lacks the well-trained teachers, adequate equipment, or special programs that are taken for granted in public high schools. Yet, in contrast to Native graduates of public boarding high schools, St. Mary’s graduates have attained high rates of college success and are noteworthy for leadership in their home villages. Many observers have noted the unusual psychological well-being of St. Mary's students—their organized system of values and secure identity, their self-confidence and autonomy, their sense of being comfortable in the world and thoroughly in control of it.

On the other hand, Native graduates of public boarding schools tend to be ambivalent about their high school experience and at best feel they have gained limited academic skills. They often feel alienated and depressed. Their success rate in college is low and their drop-out rate is high. St. Mary’s graduates, in contrast, believe that their high school experience profoundly affected their development as people. As one wrote:

I think I learned a lot from that school and I accomplished more than I've ever done before. It changed my whole outlook on life. I'm proud and happy, knowing I graduated from this school.

The Questions

The book addresses three questions:
1. How did St. Mary's produce graduates who were so often successful in both college and the village, although it:
   - Spent one-fifth the money per student that public boarding schools spend.
   - Lacked basic school facilities and equipment.
   - Had no special bilingual-bicultural or vocational programs.
   - Had no local control.
   - Used predominantly inexperienced teachers with no professional teacher training.

2. What was the source of graduates' psychic well-being when the breakdown of established cultural patterns was leaving so many Eskimo youths stranded between two cultures, caught in a web of drinking problems, and unable to make productive adult commitments?

3. What educational principles did the school use, how did these arise, and to what extent was it the school's influence, as opposed to selective student admissions, that explained the success of the St. Mary's graduates?
Heart of the Matter:
The Closeness Between Students and Staff

A crucial part of the educational process at St. Mary’s results from the warm personal relationships that grow between students and teachers. Most classroom teachers are young, unmarried volunteers and religious staff who board at the school and devote themselves with single-minded intensity to the education of the students. Coming from a common religious background, St. Mary’s teachers implicitly communicate to students a lucid system of values and principles for organizing one’s life despite the disorganizing pressures of cultural change.

Through the close relationships that form between the teachers and the students, much informal learning and intimate discussion occur outside the classroom. Openness outside the classroom also warms the atmosphere inside the classroom, and students become much more relaxed and willing to talk about what matters.

The Ends of Education

The primary end of education at St. Mary’s is not developing academic skills but developing character. Unlike public school teachers interviewed, St. Mary’s teachers stressed clear shared educational goals: (1) developing in students an organizing value system oriented around concern and responsibility for others, and (2) developing in students an emotional stability that enabled them to cope with the processes of cultural change. Public school teachers saw their school system as inescapably attempting to change Natives into Whites, but could suggest no educational alternative.

Principles of Education

The educational influence of St. Mary’s is the kind of influence that families exert—repetitive and cumulative—extending over many years and over many facets of experience. The school’s methods of education are not methods of classroom instruction but principles for creating a total educational environment that acts as a unified force.

The essence of education at St. Mary’s is to create a school society ordered by the ethic of responsibility toward others. The school communicates this ideal through the teachers it selects, the examples they set, and through the network of community created between teachers and students. Through very specific educational procedures, St. Mary’s develops (1) a sense of responsibility, (2) leadership skills, (3) autonomy in making decisions, and (4) an emotional sense of growing up well.

The Character Ideal

In contrast to many Native adolescents who have attended public schools, St. Mary’s students develop a strong character ideal centered on helping others and supporting the group. This ideal is harmonious with traditional Eskimo values of sharing and helping others. St. Mary’s students see a fundamental continuity between what is important at home and at school. Eskimo adolescents interviewed in other public high schools, in contrast, held no clear and unified values. They saw the public schools as emphasizing little but getting good grades.

The Students Who Select St. Mary’s

Selective admissions alone do not explain St. Mary’s students’ unusual qualities or their academic success. St. Mary’s students do not score high on the characteristics usually related to school achievement, such as reading test performance or family socioeconomic status. However, the school attracts students from more stable, religious, and traditional families who have developed an initially strong identity framework. Instead of trying to change students, St. Mary’s builds on this primary identity framework. The school shows students how traditional values apply in the modern world. Achievement, for example, is presented not as a means of getting ahead of others but as a means of becoming competent and able to do something useful in the world. St. Mary’s students see themselves not as changing in high school in any fundamental way but rather as maturing, as growing up.

By attracting students whose values are consistent with those of the school, St. Mary’s creates a peer culture which supports the school’s goals. St. Mary’s thus adds the powerful pressure of peer opinion to the influence of the staff and formal curriculum.

Conclusions: What Can be Learned from St. Mary’s?

St. Mary’s demonstrates that what is important about a school is not the quality of the facilities, nor the number of special programs, nor the professionalism of the teaching staff. What is important about a school is that elusive but unmistakable quality of school climate or “spirit.” This spirit arises from clear educational goals, shared by the staff and the students. It arises from warm, personal relationships between teachers and students and from informal teaching that occurs outside the classroom. It arises from taking the business of education seriously. In these areas, the public schools have much to learn from St. Mary’s.

This research, however, also suggests the intrinsic limitations of public schools in performing certain critical educational tasks. Helping students work out a system of values and a satisfying approach to adult life is not a task which public, secular schools can easily accomplish. This study suggests the importance of other types of educational institutions, such as churches, private schools, and youth associations in helping Native students develop the abilities to cope with the shifting world of village Alaska.

Eskimo School on the Andreafsky has recently been released by Praeger Publishers (383 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10017) and can be ordered through the publisher for $22.75. Teachers and students, however, can obtain the book for $11.00 from the Institute of Social and Economic Research, 707 "A" Street, Suite 206, Anchorage, Alaska 99501. Telephone 907-278-4621.