SPOTLIGHT ON THE BRISTOL BAY PARTNERSHIP

How to Build and Sustain a District Partnership

This spotlight is part of a series documenting how districts and collaborators are implementing TRR strategies. The spotlight describes the Bristol Bay Teacher Retention and Recruitment Partnership, the practices that helped it succeed in retaining teachers in partner districts, the challenges it faced, and advice emerging for other districts from its experience. District leaders and community partners, especially those focused on teacher retention and recruitment, can use this guide when moving from a promising idea to a working partnership.

The Bristol Bay Partnership (BBP) is a collaboration of four small, rural districts in the Bristol Bay Region—Bristol Bay Borough, Dillingham City, Lake and Peninsula, and Southwest Region—along with the University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA), the Alaska Humanities Forum (AKHF), and the Bristol Bay Foundation (BBF). Schools across these four districts are not on road systems, instead being reached by plane, boat, and snow machine. District student enrollment ranges from 113 to 574 students.[1]

The partnership developed out of an existing relationship between two neighboring districts, Bristol Bay and Lake and Peninsula, whose superintendents had collaborated on a robust career and technical education (CTE) effort. After the districts' success in setting up CTE experiences for students, continued discussions led them to focus on increasing teacher retention (both are rural districts, which have higher turnover than their urban counterparts). Understanding that many teachers are from outside of their communities and experience culture shock when arriving, the districts wanted to incorporate experiential learning as part of teacher preparation. It took time, but they found collaborators at UAA and the BBF who shared their vision. Together, they began a collaboration to design a learning track incorporating experiential and cultural learning within UAA's existing Master of Education (M.Ed.) in Teaching and Learning program. In the program's experiential learning component, participants earn 15 graduate credits through hands-on work in their classrooms, schools, and Alaska Native communities and document their

[1] Jester, T.E., Dousay, T., Hill, B., Mase, T., & Towns-Bain, A. (2025). *Retaining Teachers in Rural Schools: A Partnership in Alaska's Bristol Bay Region.* Shared Voices Magazine.

place-based learning and professional growth in a portfolio. The districts also sought and received $25,000 in funding from the Bristol Bay Native Corporation (BBNC).[2]

Seeing shared values and goals, BBF connected BBP with AKHF, which facilitates the Cross-Cultural Competence (C3) Educator program across Alaska. AKHF conducted listening sessions with the four districts, representatives from the UAA School of Education, BBNC and BBF. AKHF convened monthly meetings with BBP informed by these conversations, which representatives of all four districts regularly attended. During these meetings, districts shared the teacher retention and recruitment strategies that were working for them as well as the changes they were seeing in their C3-enrolled teachers. One outcome of the relationships developed during these monthly meetings was that the UAA M.Ed. program mirrored C3 practices by adding in-person mid-year gatherings to their educator cohort experiences. Additionally, AKHF connected C3 completers with the UAA M.Ed. program and many went on to get their master's degree. UAA also referred M.Ed. students who had not yet experienced C3 to AKHF.

Key practices and processes

As with the C3 Educator Program, completing the UAA experiential learning program is associated with high teacher retention rates,[3] pointing to the success of the BBP. Key BBP actors identified six practices critical to a successful partnership that may benefit other districts interested in forming their own collaborations. The most important lesson is that partnership success depends as much on process as it does on program design. Strong partnerships create routines for communication, decision-making, accountability, and repair when things become difficult.

Relationships and trust as a key focus. Partnerships are easier to maintain when people know one another before they need to solve complex problems together. The BBP was founded on the friendly and professional relationship of two superintendents. After bringing in two additional districts, early meetings in BBP created space for partners to share their contexts, priorities, constraints, and hopes. This helped partners avoid assumptions and allowed later decisions to be more firmly grounded in mutual understanding. The partnership expanded to include others with the same vision of experiential learning for teacher retention, including UAA, BBNC, BBF, and AKHF. An AKHF staff member said, "we could not do the work as well as we do without our Tribal partners" at BBF.

[2] You can read more about the partnership and the program at UAA in this article.

[3] Rooney, K., Denton, A. & Merrill, B. (2026). *Bristol Bay Teaching and Learning Collaborative: Final Evaluation Report.* Education Northwest. https://bristolbaycerc.org/case-studies

Trust among BBP partners was built by following through on commitments; even small ones matter, like sending a promised email with follow-up steps after a meeting. When partners do what they say they will do, the partnership becomes more credible.

Defined and shared purpose that is regularly revisited. A shared purpose keeps partners aligned when priorities compete or circumstances change. As BBP found success in CTE, its focus shifted to teacher retention, but the partnership's purpose was always clear. Districts developing a partnership could write a short purpose statement that answers three questions:

- **What are we trying to do?** (The BBP focused on increasing teacher retention through improving non-local teachers' knowledge and experiences in Alaska Native culture.)
- **Why is this important?** (This was important to BBP because teacher turnover is a persistent issue for all partners.)
- **What can we do together that we cannot do alone?** (Together, BBP districts had enough teachers to populate a master's program with an experiential learning component—something no single district had on its own.)

Regularly returning to a clear, shared purpose helps the partnership stay focused. The shared vision and commitment to teacher retention and recruitment was crucial for BBP when grant monies ran out. Owing to the strength of the partnership built around a shared vision, BBP organizations continued reaching out to share opportunities and support each other, bridging the gap in funding sources with a commitment to collaboration.

Consistent communication routines. Successful partnerships do not rely on occasional updates. BBP superintendents hold time to meet weekly to keep district partners up to date with changing retention and recruitment needs. Successful partnerships establish predictable meeting rhythms, identify who communicates with whom, document decisions, and make sure information reaches people who are not in every meeting. BBP superintendents created a text thread to communicate updates and stay in touch between meetings. Clear communication is especially important when partners are spread across communities or when schedules, travel, and staffing make coordination difficult.

Shared decision-making and clear roles. Partners need to know how decisions will be made, who has authority to approve changes, and how disagreement will be handled. In BBP, there is a "lead" superintendent who organizes, brings everyone together, and communicates news and progress. For BBP, lead responsibilities naturally fell to the most tenured superintendent, though this may not make sense for other partnerships. However, decisions in the partnership are made together with no single district having more authority than another. One BBP superintendent noted that a transparent decision process builds trust because partners can see that decisions are not being made privately or for one district's benefit over another. For example, when the lead superintendent had to make a quick BBP decision, they quickly communicated the decision to the rest of the group, checking for approval. Even when one organization or

person holds formal responsibility, they have the responsibility to communicate openly, gather feedback, and inform all partners about decisions. When developing a district partnership, clarify who will convene, who will communicate, who will make decisions, and who will implement those decisions.

Concrete and celebrated work. A partnership becomes real when people can point to what changed as a result of their work together. BBP celebrated early wins internally at district partner meetings and at partner meetings hosted by AKHF but also celebrated publicly. The partners used some of their funding for an external evaluation of the UAA master's program, using the findings from the evaluation to publicize their success to funders and the community. The evaluation found that graduates of the experiential master's program co-developed by UAA and BBP have higher retention rates compared to teachers in similar districts.

Districts should identify early actions that are meaningful but manageable, such as coordinating services, aligning training, planning joint events, sharing data, or improving support for educators and students. When possible, partners should gather data to share with current and potential funders and the community. Sharing early wins helps partners see value, create momentum for larger work, and open doors to new opportunities.

School boards on board. BBP introduced school board members across districts through in-person meetings. The partnership also presented its progress at school board meetings, including evaluation findings from the experiential learning master's and C3 programs. This was an important step for getting districts to approve BBP initiatives, and future district partners joined partly because this outreach generated school board interest. Contact and communicate with at least one member of each local school board and present your partnership's work at school board meetings. Regular communication keeps your priorities in front of decisionmakers and may create future avenues for the partnership. Furthermore, connect school board members across districts to facilitate stronger partnerships. The timing of this work depends on your respective school boards and the strength and clarity of your partnership.

Common ground with organizations in your region. Partnerships may need to think outside of their usual network to make progress on their goals. BBP engaged the BBNC, whose focus is on shareholders and descendants of the corporation within Bristol Bay, for initial CTE funding and for its experiential learning master's program initiative for both Native and non-Native participants. BBP made its case to BBNC by explaining how increasing retention and teaching quality for all teachers in the region will improve educational outcomes for Alaska Native students. The key lesson learned is that when it comes to educating students, there is a lot of common ground among different organizations.

Overcoming challenges

Successful partners slow down enough to get aligned, then move forward with specific commitments. They do not treat conflict, confusion, or delays as signs that the partnership has failed. Instead, they use those moments to improve the partnership's structure and strengthen relationships.

Like most partnerships, the BBP faced practical, relational, and structural challenges. Partners persevered through habits that allowed them to name problems early, stay in conversation, and adjust without abandoning the shared purpose. Key BPP actors mentioned the following challenges and how they addressed them:

- **Single districts alone could not solve recruitment and retention problems.** The partnership addressed this by bringing the four regional districts, an Alaska university, the state humanities council, and regional education foundation together around a shared goal: increasing the longevity of educators in Alaska so students could experience stronger relationships and more stable instruction. One key actor in the partnership described the partnership mindset as trying to say yes before saying no, staying curious, and continuing forward even when progress was slow.
- **Superintendent turnover threatened the continuity of the recruitment and retention work.** At first, the partnership relied heavily on trust and informal collaboration. As turnover occurred, partners developed bylaws, governing board routines, and onboarding practices such as historical presentations for new members. The involvement of school board members also created continuity during times of turnover.
- **The experiential learning model that the partners envisioned did not fit traditional university structures.** After listening to the community, the partnership believed that its approach could be an innovative solution to teacher retention. Partners continued conversations with post-secondary institutions over several years, staying committed to an Alaska-based university partner, and eventually found champions at UAA who shared their vision of a place-based, experiential master's program for rural educators. A second critical partner in this work was AKHF, whose C3 Educator Program modeled the experiential learning process that the district partners sought. Through this partnership, C3 completers could carry credits into the UAA M.Ed. program.
- **Sustaining trust across districts, communities, and organizations required ongoing effort.** The partnership sustained relationships and built trust by keeping students and communities at the center, meeting consistently, bringing school board members together in person, celebrating successes, and maintaining a shared belief that districts could do more for teacher recruitment and retention together than they could alone. BBP strove for each district to contribute funding and resources equitably, meaning each district contributed what they could. The trust built among superintendents was crucial to navigating financial decisions.

Partnership advice from key BBP actors

Districts interested in forming a partnership can use the Bristol Bay experience as a guide. Each partnership is unique, but districts can adapt this advice to local needs, contexts, and capacity.

1. **Collaborate—that's it.** Establishing and sustaining a successful partnership around specific goals and shared resources can be just that. Do not let fears around consolidation of districts prevent the progress that could be made through collaboration.
2. **Leave competition on the court.** Keep perspective, whether your district won or lost last week in high school sports against a potential partner district. The effect of district partnership for your students can last long after the final buzzer.
3. **Begin with listening.** Before designing a structure, talk with families, educators, community leaders, and potential partners about what they see, need, and hope for.
4. **Keep the early structure simple.** Start with a purpose statement, a meeting rhythm, a list of partners, and a small set of actions. Add complexity only when the partnership needs it.
5. **Plan for turnover.** Document decisions, create shared records, and make sure the partnership does not depend entirely on one champion. Quickly invite and involve new partners after turnover has occurred.

Conclusion

Districts that want to form partnerships, especially those tackling teacher retention and recruitment, can use the BBP partnership as a model. They should begin with relationships, focus on a concrete need, keep the structure manageable, and create routines that help people stay aligned. Feel free to use the questions in the appendix as a start-up checklist to stay on track. If you are looking for thought partners as you consider a district partnership, consider a statewide organization that has contact with multiple districts and schools for breadth of perspective as well as regional organizations that know the local politics. The most successful partnerships are not perfect from the start; they become stronger because partners keep listening, learning, and adjusting together.

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Appendix. Partnership Start-Up Checklist

- ☐ Have we identified a shared need that matters to the district and community?
- ☐ Have we invited the partners who are most connected to the issue?
- ☐ Have we partnered with Tribal entities?
- ☐ Have we written a clear purpose statement?
- ☐ Have we agreed on a regular meeting rhythm?
- ☐ Have we clarified roles, responsibilities, shared costs, and decision-making authority?
- ☐ Have we chosen one or two concrete early actions?
- ☐ Have we created a way to document decisions and track follow-through?
- ☐ Have we planned how to evaluate and communicate progress to people outside the core partnership group?
- ☐ Additional step:
- ☐ Additional step:

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