SPOTLIGHT ON THE TANANA CHIEFS CONFERENCE

How the Tanana Chiefs Conference is Advancing Teacher Retention in Interior Alaska

This spotlight is part of a series documenting districts and collaborators implementing TRR strategies. TCC's work is grounded in a straightforward premise: communities should have the opportunity to educate their own children, and Native teachers, who understand Alaska students' language, culture, and lived experiences, are uniquely positioned to do so effectively.

This spotlight highlights their work and is part of a series that shares stories of how different communities are improving TRR efforts.

Since 2020, the Alaska Department of Education & Early Development (DEED) has worked to improve teacher retention and recruitment (TRR) across the state. These efforts included the development and 2023 release of the evidence-based Alaska's Teacher Retention and Recruitment Playbook. The TRR Playbook contains strategies and action steps—informed by conversations with school staff members, communities, and partner organizations as well as government officials—that districts can use to guide TRR efforts.

The Tanana Chiefs Conference (TCC) is a Tribal consortium representing 42 federally recognized Tribes across Interior Alaska, one of the largest such organizations in the state. TCC's member communities are home to Alaska Natives, predominantly Athabascan, living across the vast and remote Interior region of Alaska, where access to services, infrastructure, and educational resources remains a persistent challenge.

The Native Teacher Retention Initiative

The need for Native educators in this region is acute. Alaska has some of the highest teacher turnover in the nation, particularly in rural and remote areas. Data shared by REL Northwest show that in the 2020–21 school year, 31 percent of teachers and 26 percent of principals in rural-remote areas left their positions. This level of turnover is ten and 16 percentage points higher, respectively, than in Alaska's urban areas.

Additional data show that turnover rates are higher among teachers who are prepared outside Alaska, whether in the contiguous U.S. or through international teacher programs.

The TRR Playbook encourages the development and expansion of Grow-Your-Own programs as a strategy for retaining and recruiting educators. These programs emphasize providing education and ongoing professional development to local community members so they can become certified educators. Newcomers to Alaska, especially its rural-remote areas, can find it difficult to adjust to geographic and cultural differences. In contrast, local Native teachers already know and are integrated with their community's geography and culture. Additionally, Grow-Your-Own programs can increase the diversity of the teacher applicant pool and support representation so that students have teachers who share their background and cultural experiences.

The TCC Native Teacher Retention Initiative supports Grow-Your-Own efforts in Interior Alaska by supporting Native educators and focusing on retention through financial support and peer networking.

How The Initiative Supports Native Teachers

TCC hosts education summits across Interior Alaska. At the summits, teachers cultivate connections and discuss teacher development, recruitment, and retention challenges, offering support beyond what districts provide. Stemming from discussions at these summits, TCC focused its teacher retention initiative on two high-leverage strategies: direct financial support for education costs and facilitation of a peer network of Alaska Native educators.

Financial support for education costs. TCC currently supports 11 teachers with approximately $6,000 a year. This relatively low-cost initiative provides concrete, practical support for Native teachers in the region, including:

- Travel scholarships so teachers can attend professional development experiences.
- Assistance with credentialing costs, including funds for recertification tests, course registration fees, textbooks, and other supplies.
- Internet reimbursement to support connectivity in remote communities.
- Classroom supply funds up to $500.

YOU ARE NOT ALONE.

One of the most powerful outcomes of the Native Teacher Retention Initiative is the peer network of Native teachers who support one another across Interior Alaska communities.

Teaching in a remote village can be an isolating experience. In this peer network, teachers share resources, problem-solve together, and remind each other that they are part of something larger. For many participants, knowing they are not alone has been as meaningful as any financial incentive.

Peer networks for Alaska Native educators. Professional isolation is one of the most unacknowledged challenges facing teachers in remote areas. A wide geographic catchment along with small communities means that teachers have few peers in their local areas. Alaska Native teachers feel this isolation more acutely when navigating dynamics with educators from different cultural backgrounds. The limited teacher pool in remote areas means that Alaska Native teachers may not have a peer or mentor who can help them process these experiences and advocate for them. To support Alaska Native educators, TCC fosters a peer network of Native teachers who connect with and support one another across communities. This peer network reflects an understanding of the importance of community among colleagues.

Assessing Your District's Support for Alaska Native Teachers

We invite districts and organizations to reflect on whether their existing support systems encourage the retention and recruitment of Alaska Native teachers with the following questions:

- What structures exist to connect Native teachers with one another, and how supported do they feel within the broader professional community? How can your district facilitate connections among Alaska Native educators and among all teachers in the district?
- To what extent does your district invest in growing teachers from within the community alongside external recruitment efforts, especially in areas with strong representation of Alaska Natives? What are some strategies that the district can use to grow its own educator workforce?
- What financial barriers do Alaska Native teachers have in your district? What funding sources can be leveraged to support Alaska Native teachers' professional development?

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