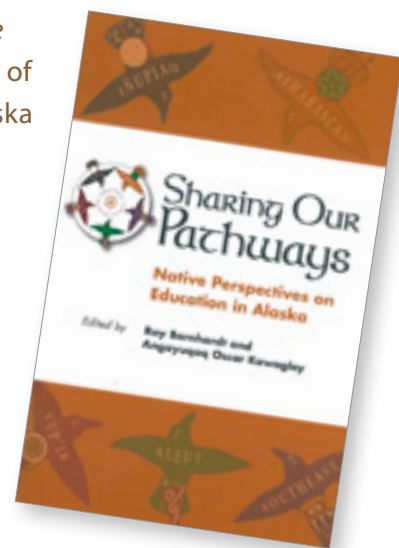


# Native Perspectives On Education in Alaska

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Ray Barnhardt and the late Angayuqac Oscar Kawagley in *Sharing Our Pathways: Native Perspective on Education in Alaska* bring together 63 essays published in the newsletter of the same name between 1996 and 2005 contributed by staff and associates of the Alaska Rural Systemic Initiative (ARSI). Frank Hill, one of the contributors, writes,

*Those of us associated with the Alaska Rural Systemic Initiative for the past seven years have been promoting the concept of culturally-responsive schools as a means to create systemic reform in Alaska's rural schools—especially those whose student populations are predominantly Alaska Native. Improved student academic achievement is the ultimate goal. We understand and believe that if we base teaching and schools on the local environment and culture, giving respect and credit to students and heritage, we can begin teaching at a higher level. We also understand and believe that students who have healthy self concepts are better learners. (p. 27)*



The essays are divided into five sections—Athabascan, Iñupiaq, Tlingit/Haida, Unangan/Alutiiq, and Yup'ik/Cup'ik Pathways to Education—representing the different Native groups across Alaska. Barnhardt in his introduction notes how the ARSI sought to “implement a set of school reform initiatives that systematically documented the indigenous knowledge systems of Alaska Native people” for use in schools (p. xi). Indigenous or

traditional knowledge according to Nakutluk Virginia Ned “is the knowledge of the local environment that people have developed to sustain themselves and thus it serves as the basis for cultural identity. It is the knowledge built up by a group of people through generations of living in close contact with nature” (p. 9). Thus as Kawagley notes, “nature is our textbook,” and it is through close observation of nature that one learns (p. 305).

Harking back to the African proverb that it takes a village to raise a child, Bernice Tetpon declares, “everyone in the community is a teacher” (p. 105) and Paul Ongtooguk affirms “the community is a school” (p. 100). In the United States too often for Native peoples their village was excluded from its rightful role, even to the point of putting Alaska Native students into government boarding schools in the lower 48 states where they were punished for speaking their Native languages.

“First and foremost a person must have a solid foundation in his or her own culture and be able to walk solidly in that one world, learn all about it, believe in it and live it. Then, if a person chooses to do so, he or she can add to that one world the best from others: Japanese, Russian, German, American...”

— Cecilia Tacuk Martz

This legacy of exclusion has created hard feeling about education for some Native people. “If we are to make parents and grand grandparents feel welcome in the school,” according to Ruthie Sampson, “we must invite them into the school and publicly apologize for what happened to them or their parents in the past. We must hear their story and validate it. We must not ignore it or it will continue to fester and more bitterness will grow” (p. 118). Today, according to Sampson, “Not only or we trying to save our languages, but also our history” (p. 119). “As we lose our Native languages,” Kawagley writes, “more and more of us begin to take part in the misuse and abuse of nature.... [English words] are a product of a mindset that is given to individualism and materialism in a technomechanistic world” (p. 296). Too often, as stated by one Alaska Native elder quoted by Barnhardt, “The schools are more concerned about preparing out children to make a living than they are in preparing them to make a life for themselves” (p. xvi).

Ongtooguk makes an excellent point in his essay on “Aspects of Traditional Iñupiat Education” that some progressive approaches to teaching, including “learning by doing,” are problematic. He writes that “The Iñupiat were not successful hunters because they threw themselves into ‘learning by doing’ situations. To learn about sea ice conditions and safe travel ‘by doing’ alone would be suicidal” (p. 95). He concludes that students need information, which can come from Elders and by becoming close observers. Then they need apprenticeships to become skilled in the tasks they set themselves to.

The contributors to *Sharing Our Pathways* echo again and again the thought of Cecilia Tacuk Martz that “first and foremost a person must have a solid foundation in his or her own culture and be able to walk solidly in that one world, learn all about it, believe in it and live it. Then, if a person chooses to do so, he or she can add to that one world the best from others: Japanese, Russian, German, American...”

(p. 279). Overall, the contributors document efforts by Alaskan Natives to take back control of the education of their children from colonial attempts to assimilate them into mainstream American society in order to develop an education system that melds Alaskan Native knowledge with “Western” education. The appendices include the Alaska Standards for Culturally Responsive Schools adopted by the Assembly of Alaska Native Educators and lists of Alaska Native values sorted by region. It is a companion volume to the editors’ *Alaska Native Education: Views From Within* that was reviewed in the April/May 2010 issue of *NABE News*. ★

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**Note:** All page numbers are from Ray Barnhardt and Angayuqaq Oscar Kawagley (Eds.), *Sharing Our Pathways: Native Perspective on Education in Alaska* (Fairbanks, AK: Alaska Native Knowledge Network, University of Alaska Fairbanks, 2011).

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