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### Neglected Responsibilities:

#### America's Failure to Support Native Alaskan Students

When the United States purchased Alaska from the Russian Empire in 1867, it did not simply grow by 663,000 square miles; it also accepted responsibility for the people living within its new borders. But America has not fulfilled its responsibilities. Today, 142 years after becoming subjects of the United States and 50 years after becoming its citizens, students from Alaska's Native communities still lag behind those from other ethnic backgrounds. On average, Native students score more than two grade levels below their white and Asian-American peers in both reading and mathematics (National Conference of Native American State Legislators 12-13), and their test scores have remained stagnant while other students' have improved (McCarty 15-17).

Test scores are not the only indication that Native students are doing poorly. They also face institutional challenges which block them from being able to obtain a quality education. One of these is learning disabilities. Native students in Alaska are 50% more likely to be placed in special education programs for general learning disabilities compared to other students (National Center for Culturally Responsive Education). These designations are usually based on a student's academic progress

relative to their peers (NCNASL 15), treating the symptom of underachievement rather than its cause.

Treating the symptoms isn't working. A 2007 study by the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center found that only 42% of Native students in Alaska graduate from high school, compared with 70% of white Alaskan students (4). Native students in general are also expelled from school at higher rates than non-Native students, and are much less likely to pursue higher education (NCNASL 14-16)<sup>1</sup>. Alaska Natives make up one-fifth of Alaska's school-age population (McDiarmid et al. 8), and yet their needs are not being met through current education policy. The fact that Native Alaskan students are academically so far behind other groups of students indicates that the United States has not fulfilled its duties in caring for these people, and that changes need to be made to ensure that these students have the opportunity to succeed.

While unacceptable, it is certainly understandable why federal education policy has trouble dealing with Native Alaskans. Rural Alaska offers a number of challenges to education policymakers because of its size and diversity. Alaska is a massive and sparsely populated area, with a statewide population density less than 2 people per square mile and even less in distant areas. Within that space, there are twenty distinct Alaska Native languages recognized by the Alaska Native Language Center at the University of Alaska Fairbanks ("Mission"). These languages are spoken by an estimated 110,000 people (Alaska Dept. of Labor), and over a quarter of Native children live in homes where their language is spoken more often than English (DeVoe iv). While Hispanic and Asian/Pacific Islander students are more likely to speak another language

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<sup>1</sup> Based on data from the US Department of Education and the National Center for Education Statistics.

at home (DeVoe 106), the sheer number of indigenous languages and the small populations speaking each of them makes it much more difficult for the federal government to address the language needs of Native students than those of other groups.

Rather than making advances in this area, however, the No Child Left Behind Act marked a significant setback in language and cultural awareness. While Section 7115 of the Act claims “special regard for the language and cultural needs of [Native] students” (NCLB), the act eliminated the entire concept of bilingual education. Everywhere that the word “bilingual” existed in federal law was replaced with references to “English Language Acquisition” (McCarty 13), clearly demonstrating Congress’s intentions with regard to indigenous languages. From 1968 to 2002, the Bilingual Education Act was a major source of funding for culturally and linguistically integrated education programs in Native schools; removal of bilingual education funds has for all practical purposes eliminated these programs (McCarty 13).

This elimination has had clear and measurable effects on Native achievement. Teresa McCarty, an educational anthropologist at Arizona State University, observed a school in the Lower 48<sup>2</sup> which serves 600 Native American students in grades K-12:

Between 1988 and 1998, students in the program consistently improved their oral English and English reading scores as measured by a locally developed reading assessment, student portfolios, and standardized tests. Meanwhile, the students were becoming bilingual and biliterate in the Native language and English. (19)

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<sup>2</sup> Alaskan vernacular for the continental United States.

After NCLB was implemented in 2002, the school lost its bilingual education funding and was required to implement a phonics-based English reading program. In the years following, standardized test scores at the school sharply declined – in some cases over 50% (McCarty 19-20). This data supports the assertion of the Alaska Federation of Natives that native-language instruction is “intrinsic to community wellness, cultural survival and subsistence” and “vital to the processes of teaching and learning” (AFN). Yet bilingual education has been systematically reduced and eliminated through the provisions of NCLB. It is understandable and reasonable for federal education policy to encourage proficiency in English, but this cannot be done at the expense of Native students and communities.

Teachers in rural Alaskan schools obviously play an important role in integrating Native languages and cultures with curriculum standards, yet this is another area where federal policy fails to consider the needs of Native communities. One of the requirements of NCLB is that teachers be “highly qualified” to teach their subjects – in high school, this means that teachers must have a graduate degree or academic major in every core subject that they teach (Girard 2). However, this is an impossible requirement for many Alaskan schools. About 240 of the roughly 300 high schools in Alaska have student populations under 100, and many are much smaller (“Rural Alaska” 1). These schools cannot hire separate teachers for every area of instruction, and certainly cannot afford to bring in staff with multiple master’s degrees. It is clearly ridiculous to expect that every subject be taught by an individual with an advanced degree in that area. This is not to say that Native students do not deserve highly qualified teachers; rather, the definition of who is highly qualified needs to be

reevaluated. Federal law, however, has little recognition for the rural and Native perspective.

The Department of Education did make a small effort to provide for rural school districts in its Small Rural School Achievement Program. The SRSA is a grant program for rural schools which included a one-year extension of the deadline for “highly qualified” certification to “veteran teachers in sparsely-populated districts with fewer than 600 students” (Eppley 3). However, this program does not solve the problem of unrealistic qualification standards; it simply pushed back deadlines for the existing standards. Delaying implementation of impossible requirements is a useless endeavor.

NCLB also made provisions for states to certify teachers through a program called “High Objective Uniform State Standards of Evaluation,” or HOUSSE. This program allows existing teachers to request Highly Qualified status based on various types of education experience (American Institutes for Research). While this program has undoubtedly been valuable to many teachers, it was designed a temporary measure to prevent veteran teachers from losing their jobs based on a lack of academic degrees. The program will eventually be phased out (Eppley 4), and cannot be seen as a long-term solution.

These policy attempts have had little impact on the devastating effects of “highly qualified teacher” provisions on Native students. School districts are forced to look outside their communities for teachers who meet federal standards – over 70% of Alaska teachers are brought in from other areas (McDiarmid et al. 1). These outside teachers are ill-equipped to deal with the “physically and culturally foreign environment” of rural Alaska schools, and often stay in their positions for only one to

three years before moving on to another district (Barnhardt 2). The impact of high turnover outweighs any benefit students might enjoy from having a “more qualified” instructor.

Teacher turnover has a significant effect on school climate and academic performance – in small schools, new teachers are jarring to the academic environment and require an adjustment period from students. This adjustment period has a negative impact on student achievement: even in urban areas, high turnover rates are associated with lower numbers of students passing statewide standardized tests (Guin 7). Reducing teacher turnover is therefore key to addressing the underachievement of Native students, who experience some of the country’s highest rates of turnover.

In Alaska, disproportionately high turnover rates are unique to rural areas. Urban Alaskan school districts have attrition rates similar to the national average of 13.7%. By contrast, many rural schools annually experience at least 30% staff turnover, and sometimes even come close to a 100% change in teaching staff (McDiarmid 9). This is clearly unacceptable, and offers a unique insight on the causes of Native underachievement. Because much of this turnover is the result of federal policies, we must look to Congress for a solution to the problems it has caused.

To address the problems caused by existing federal policy, we should focus on ensuring that Native Alaskan students have access to schools where their cultures, languages and heritages are respected and embraced. While this has the potential to be an expensive and daunting endeavor, I believe that we can make significant improvements simply by helping Native communities become involved in their local schools. It is no secret by now that the academic experience and performance of

students improves when family and community members are part of the process, and it is hard to imagine a situation more appropriate for such involvement than rural, Native Alaskan communities – a place where the proverb “it takes a village to raise a child” can be implemented quite literally.

To facilitate this involvement, Congress must first modify the federal requirements for “highly qualified” education personnel in rural areas. The national standards requiring teachers to have an academic major or a master’s degree in every subject they teach may be reasonable for urban settings, but in small rural schools it is simply unfeasible. Congress needs to recognize that there are settings where one high school teacher is likely to teach multiple subjects, and make exceptions in federal law to allow for such situations. It should also be recognized that there are times when a teacher who is culturally competent and connected to the community is infinitely more valuable than an unexperienced teacher fresh out of an Outside school of education. To account for these variables, the HQT requirements should be altered or waived for rural Alaskan schools, and similar schools in other areas of the country.

Relaxing the HQT provisions will make it more likely that Native adults and other members of rural communities can become teachers in their own children’s schools. Teachers who live in or have grown up in Native communities are already used to the environment of rural Alaska and the culture of their particular area, so they will not have the same disruptive effects as an Outside teacher. Likewise, their connection to the community will reduce the chances that they will leave the district within their first three years, resulting in greater stability and more experienced educators for Native students.

Teachers who have connections to their communities are also more likely to be able to draw on the multitude of resources available to them, especially Native elders and other community members. An excellent example of the potential benefits from such resources is the tutoring program of the Morongo Band of Mission Indians in California, which was created in 1991 to address problems similar to those experienced in rural Alaska. The program started with a single community member who went from school to school helping students, and now consists of fourteen tutors who serve over 175 members of the Morongo tribe (ASH Institute). The tutors assist students directly in the classroom as well as helping after school with homework and general one-on-one advising, and stay with the same student for several years.

That program has had an undeniable impact: according to Harvard University, which gave the tutoring program an award in 2006, the Morongo Indian Reservation now has a 90% graduation rate and its students have made incredible improvements in grades and test scores (ASH Institute). Native elders are an incredibly valuable resource that are too often forgotten in education strategies for rural areas. If teachers were connected enough to draw on elders and other community members for their support and wisdom, we could see incredible changes in the state of Alaskan education.

Of course, changing federal teacher certification requirements is not going to result in an overnight increase in the number of Native teachers in rural schools. It will take an investment of time and money to ensure that there are community members qualified to teach in rural schools. Congress could help make this investment by designating funds from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act to support Native Alaskans who wish to pursue careers in education. Funding has already been created



through the Department of the Interior and the Department of Education for workforce development and postsecondary education opportunities (Department of the Interior). If some of these funds were offered to Native Alaskans with a match from Alaska's Native Regional Corporations<sup>3</sup>, we could in a few short years dramatically increase the number of Native teachers in Alaska.

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) also offers an opportunity for early childhood education in Alaska. The Department of Health and Human Services has designated \$2.1 billion dollars in ARRA funds to be used for Head Start early childhood education programs. If some of this money is designated for schools in rural Alaska, it could provide further opportunities for community members to support the education of Native children.

While short-term action is needed to address the problems faced by Native Alaskan youth, it is also important to ensure that Native communities have a say in education policy for the future. In addition to encouraging direct participation on the local level, Congress and the Department of Education should create spaces on federal education commissions and advisory bodies for Native representatives to share their perspectives and ensure that their communities' needs are met. They should also establish special regional advisory bodies to address the unique needs of rural areas. This would not need to be an expensive endeavor; nonprofit organizations and local governments as well as the State of Alaska are quite used to meeting and making important decisions via teleconference, and the same thing could be done here. Such steps will ensure that Native Alaskans are not only empowered to be a part of the

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<sup>3</sup> Special entities created by the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971.

education of their community's children, but also given the opportunity to have a say in the education of future generations.

The education of Native children in rural Alaska is undeniably a difficult proposition, but the United States has a duty to fulfill its responsibilities when it comes to indigenous peoples. There are undoubtedly many other issues facing Native Alaskan schools and communities, and I have no intention of trying to address all of them with this plan. However, I believe that federally backed efforts to increase community involvement in schools can be a comprehensive first step towards equality in Alaskan education. It's time for America to finally deal with the responsibilities it accepted 142 years ago – Native Alaskans deserve better.

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