

Recommendations for improving student success in the Yupiit School District

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The priority of the local and regional Yupiit School Board are clear: their schools must prepare young people for active roles in the sovereign nations of the three villages of the Yupiit School District. In the long run, this is a vision of Yupiaq educators using a Yupiaq curriculum to educate their children both in Yup'ik and Western ways of knowing. To move toward that vision, the District must take some critical first steps.

I have had the unique opportunity to become embedded in the village of Tuluksak for three months in the spring of 2019. These recommendations come from conversations with youth, educators, tribal leaders, community members, and various professionals who come through Tuluksak to assist in school or community needs. My recommendations also come from my own experience of working with and for rural Alaskan schools to promote student success.

Create a lasting infrastructure for a high-turnover environment

The Yupiit School District reports a 50% staff turnover each year. Actual turnover over the past five years is likely higher.

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The high turnover of superintendents, principals, and teachers in the District has lasting and profound effects. Fundamental systems such as attendance policy, curriculum, classroom management, assessments and reporting are lost. Expectations of students' behavior and subsequent consequences for discipline are reinvented every one or two years at each school with each new principal. It necessarily takes a few years to create a strong learning culture in any school, but the high turnover keeps any impactful changes from taking root. Institutional knowledge of students, such as the best methods for behavioral intervention or the best grouping of students for classrooms for the next year, is lost.

High turnover is also expensive. With each new wave of superintendents or curriculum directors comes new curriculum materials. Classroom cabinets and school storage areas are literally stuffed full of unused books, project materials, and kits, some of which are quite expensive. As materials pile up, teachers are less likely to sort through them to find something useful. Time is wasted on creating (or recreating) policies, procedures, and practices for each school every year with new staff.

SUGGESTED PATH FORWARD

Adapt the State System Of Support (SSOS) Coaching system to meet these needs. Rather than assigning a SSOS Coach to an individual, assign the Coach to a school, as well as one for the District Office, with a three to five year contract to provide continuity across time. As part of their duties, have SSOS Coaches systematically identify where systems (whether administrative or as part of a positive school climate) need to be put into place and institutionalized. As staff turn over, create the expectation that the SSOS Coach will help introduce and implement these policies, procedures, and practices to incoming staff.

Adopt project-based learning model

Project-based learning is the foundation for Yup'ik Ways of Knowing, and remains a strong cultural element in the YSD communities.

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The YSD school board vision is explicit that the curriculum and instruction is based in Yup'ik values and traditions. Angayuqaq Oscar Kawagley, a Yup'ik and Western scholar who was raised in Bethel and Aniak, and extensively studied the education system in the YSD, writes that the traditional way for young people to learn is “by patiently studying, observing, experimenting, and discussing.” This is exact purpose of project-based learning! Observation is still a deeply ingrained learning practice among the youth of the Yupiaq people. Engage in any activity in a public setting, and within minutes children will be grouped around asking what you are doing and why.

Project-based learning (PBL) is not easy to implement. It requires skill and planning from the teachers, and a commitment from the administration to allot the necessary time and resources to make a meaningful experience.

While the District has made some steps towards PBL through a large grant from the Alaska Native Education program, the project has mostly languished in its first year, and is dependent upon in-service training from outside contractors that did not happen in a meaningful way.

SUGGESTED PATH FORWARD

Commit to implementing project-based learning district-wide through a focused and scaled approach. Start by narrowing the PBL focus in each school to a targeted grade or group. Middle-school aged youth may be the best to target as PBL units can “grow and follow” this class through their high school years.

Begin by implementing one project per school per year, adapted for teachers, grade level, and community. Use the SSOS Coach model for initial PBL design and for ongoing support of teachers. Assure that the necessary time and resources are available. A successful PBL approach will require two teachers working as a team, plus a paraprofessional, for the final two periods of a school day, several days per week. Adopt a policy at the District level that supports PBL design and implementation in the schools.

It may be possible to revise the current Alaska Native Education grant Ilakuyulluta to meet these goals.

Apply project-based learning to current village issues

The villages of the YSD want their schools to prepare young people for life in their villages.

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The current emphasis on education and youth leadership tends towards engaging youth in programs that occur outside of the villages. However only a few students each year are able to participate at a level and frequency that really propels student along these career paths - due to inconsistent funding and support at the district level. A local project based approach would have the potential to reach all of the students with real-time issues that young people are facing in their village right now.

SUGGESTED PATH FORWARD

Project-based learning is perfectly suited for engaging youth in helping to solve community issues. Indeed, youth-led initiatives for community change can often overcome the inertia of the city or tribal government to move towards solutions to multiple areas of concern in a village. The more that community members see the school and their youth actively engaged in their community, the more the community will invest in the school and its youth.

Ready opportunities for project based learning in YSD communities exist, such as:

- examining the issue of waste disposal, landfills, non-renewable materials, and initiating solutions
- examining the challenges of building structures on tundra, experimenting with solutions,
- examining the effect of 4-wheelers on paths and tundra, experimenting with mitigation efforts.

Prepare youth for engagement in their communities

Effective tribal governance requires an understanding of how a tribal government operates and the active participation of its citizens.

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If the YSD communities are to move towards self-sufficiency, they will need more engagement from their own residents first. In Tuluksak, at least, there is a clear and present need for leadership in the tribal government. The government is only functioning through intensive support from outside entities. High school students are not aware of how their government works, nor what it means to be members of a sovereign nation.

While there are materials available from other school districts that would address this (and many other Yup'ik-centered education issues) the YSD has been unable and/or unwilling to take any steps to adopting curriculum that studies and practices the administration of the village through classroom models.

SUGGESTED PATH FORWARD

The Lower Kuskokwim School District has a Tribal Management Career Pathway that is one of the most popular classes offered in the District. The LKSD has offered the use of their developed materials at no cost to the YSD. This would be an easy yet tremendous step towards realizing the goals and vision of the YSD school board.

Here's a brief overview of the LKSD pathway:

Middle School Exploration:	Social Studies Tribal Government A & B
Content:	Tribal Management, Rural Utilities Maintenance, Tribal Justice
High School Concentration:	Upper level LA menu, Algebra 2, Psychology preferred
Industry Connection:	Community agencies
Post-Secondary Bridge:	KUC, UAF. Possibility of internships with community agencies.
Certificates or Credits:	Occupational endorsement through UAF

Historically, the YSD school board has resisted adopting new curriculum, even when it meets their own goals and visions. This is true for curriculum from other districts, as well as that which is developed within YSD. If the agencies and advisors that are engaged with YSD and the school board were to focus their efforts on helping the school board adopt just one cultural and community-based educational component, perhaps this barrier could be overcome, and open the District (and its youth) to more opportunities.

Invest in high-quality staff

Even with the highest-qualified administration and teachers, student success in YSD would be a challenge.

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Recruiting competent educators and administrative staff for the YSD is a challenge.

The YSD does not have an attractive benefit package for teachers and staff. The insurance offered is very poor because the District has low buying power with so few teachers. There are no airline ticket incentives, no sign up bonuses, no bonuses for remaining with the district for a number of years, and no tuition incentives of paying for master's work - all of which are offered in some combination at other remote rural school districts.

The salary scale has no provisions for multiple master's degrees or PhDs compared to other Alaska school districts. The District does not offer moving expenses, which makes recruiting new teachers from outside Alaska difficult. The District is not covered by the NEA (the union for teachers and education support personnel), which does not make positions here attractive to any pro-union teachers which represents over 50% of the current population of teachers in the state Alaskan teachers - those who have the greatest chance of supporting student success and remaining in the District for many years. District contracts state that the District may move teachers to different school sites at will, which undermines the need for household stability and teacher-community engagement. Housing in Akiak is substandard. In addition, teachers are not guaranteed to stay in the same house each year.

SUGGESTED PATH FORWARD

The most straightforward step here is to make educator salary and benefits comparable to the LKSD. While the LKSD's pay scale starts lower than the YSD, the benefits offered more than compensate.

Institute an exit interview survey to gain an understanding of why educators and administrators are leaving the District. Include questions that also help the District understand why the person initially took the job.

Foster a team spirit. One of the greatest strengths of the YSD is their vision. Many of the educators and staff that I've spoken to attest that it was the strength of the vision that overcame the mitigating factors for choosing to work in the YSD. Build on that strength in order to foster a unified effort among teachers, support staff, and the administration.

Experienced educators want a challenge. They also need to know they will be supported by their fellow teachers and by administrators, and that their life outside of school will be safe and reasonably comfortable. Building a strong team takes time and effort. The YSD could start by making a commitment to focus on the middle-school grades of the three schools first. If a strong learning environment is created and instilled in this group, they will carry it to the high school as they are promoted. This may also help address the sharp drop in female students in the upper grade levels. Use the SSOS Coaches to assist the principals in building a strong team of middle-school educators. Make this a named initiative to show that the District has strong intent to follow through. Use this initiative when recruiting new teachers. Create the systems to fully support the educators and this learning environment, then carefully build the same system for lower and upper grades.