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# **What Is School For?**

## **Dilemmas of Secondary Education in Bush Alaska**

Lawrence Hamilton, University of New Hampshire

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### **ABSTRACT**

The remote towns and villages of bush Alaska confront dilemmas in the design of secondary education. Systems based on a single statewide boarding school, or alternatively on small schools in each individual community, have both been tried. Debates about these two approaches reflect a more basic question: What is the purpose of secondary education? Should it (A) prepare students to become functional members of their home communities, or (B) prepare them to compete for education and jobs elsewhere? This question has implications for all aspects of educational design, and indeed for the future of rural villages themselves.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Like many northern places, the small communities of bush Alaska face a difficult dilemma with respect to high school education (roughly, ages 14 to 18). Most people agree that students should have equal opportunities for education, regardless of where they live. But how can the educational opportunities in small villages, with no more than a few hundred people and a few tens of students, be made equal to those in a city? One possible approach is to gather students from many villages together in one boarding school that serves a region or even the whole state. This takes young people away from their families and home communities, however. The need to relocate becomes a barrier that discourages some from continuing their education. Other students may try boarding school, but drop out after they find themselves uncomfortable or unprepared in the new environment. For both reasons, the proportion of villagers who graduate from high school could be comparatively low. Moreover, among village students who succeed in adapting to a boarding-school environment, some find that their new skills and outlook orient them towards lives outside of the village—so that from one perspective, the individual student's educational gain represents a loss to his or her home community.

A second possible approach is to provide high schools in the villages. This avoids all of the problems noted above. Students can continue their schooling within a familiar family and cultural environment. Education can be tailored to community realities, and need not lead students away. But it is difficult for small schools to offer the same kind of education available in larger schools. For example, a school with ten or twenty students will have a few generalists, rather than a range of specialists, as faculty—so the students are less likely to experience chemistry taught by a chemistry major, history taught by a history major, and so forth. Nor can small schools have comparable libraries, laboratories or other resources, or offer the same variety of sports teams and extracurricular activities. Secondary education in village schools thus tends to be different from education in larger boarding or urban/suburban schools.

In recent decades Alaska rural education has made a journey of discovery, learning first about what happens under a boarding-school approach, and subsequently about village schools. By the mid-1990s, the advantages and drawbacks of both systems were apparent, and rightly the topic of wide discussion. Which system, or what in-between compromise, is best? This question exposes basic uncertainties about the meaning of "best." It leads into a values-laden debate over the question, What is school for?

### **THE VILLAGE SCHOOLS**

The population served by village schools—and hence, most affected by this debate—is predominantly Alaska Native, a designation encompassing Aleuts, Eskimos (Yupik and Inupiat), and Indians (mainly Athabaskan, Tlingit and Haida). Although Natives comprise less than 16% of the state's population,

they make up 54% in communities having fewer than 1,000 people. Many villages are more than 90% Native.<sup>1</sup> Recent anthropological accounts of bush Alaska, including books by Chance (1990) and Jorgensen (1990), emphasize the enormous changes wrought by North Slope oil development (also see Chance and Andreeva 1995). Other anthropologists including Fienup-Riordan (1990) and Condon (1987) describe life in contemporary Arctic villages. Their work underscores the great distances, cultural as well as geographic, separating Native villages from modern metropolitan areas. Nevertheless, they show that the villages too are experiencing rapid social change. A cash economy has largely replaced subsistence; television has become ubiquitous; housing, infrastructure and transportation have been revolutionized; and hundreds of new jobs have opened up.

Alaska's bush villages seem in many respects a world apart from the rest of the U.S. Most villages are unconnected by roads, so that traveling anywhere—by airplane, snowmobile, boat (when water is liquid) or “ice road” (when it is not)—requires more effort, expense and risk than does routine travel in the lower 48 states. Winters are long and cold, summers brief and buggy. Northern Alaska rivers thaw out in May or June, then freeze up again in October. Populations concentrate in small communities separated by wilderness. One town with several thousand people typically serves as the regional transportation, government and commercial hub for a number of smaller villages. For example, the Northwest Arctic Borough has an area somewhat larger than Scotland (or the U.S. state of Maine), but a population of just 6,500 people—half of them in the hub town of Kotzebue, and most of the rest in ten smaller villages of 90–600 people. Away from tourist circuits, jobs derive mainly from natural resources and the large public sector. Like population, employment concentrates in the regional hubs, so that many smaller villages offer almost no full-time jobs outside of their schools.

The dispersed population of rural Alaska complicates the delivery of secondary education. Before 1976, few Native communities possessed high schools. Students wishing to pursue their education had no choice but to leave home, most often for the state-run Mt. Edgecumbe boarding school in Sitka—about 1,800 kilometers by air from northern Alaska. Dislocation and the adjustments to boarding school were difficult, painful experiences for many students. As adults, they did not want to see their own children repeat these experiences.

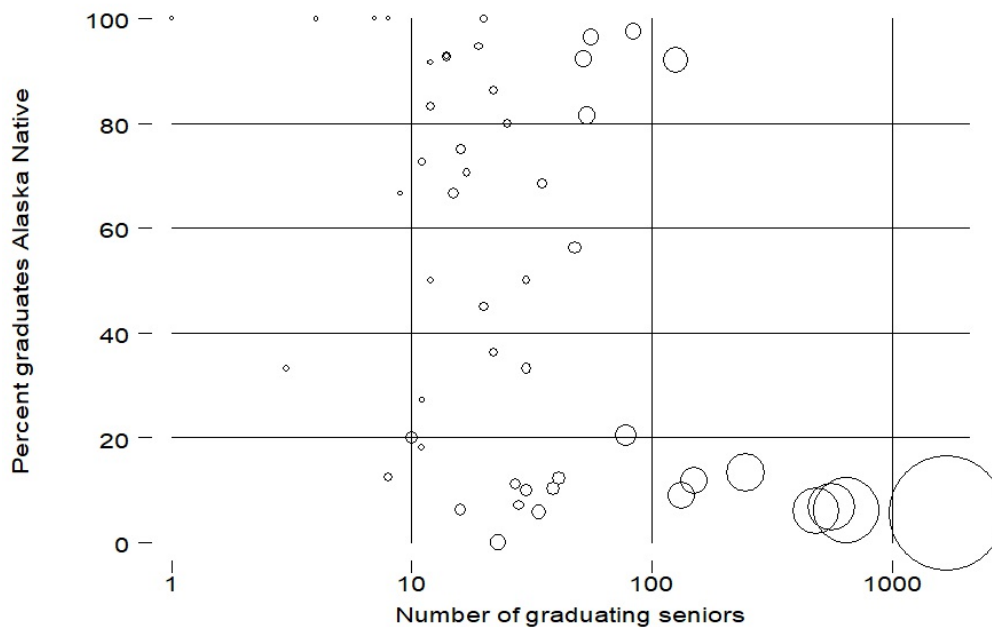
A class-action lawsuit against this practice led to a 1976 settlement (often called “the Molly Hootch decision”) that reshaped Alaska's school system. Using recently-acquired oil wealth, the state agreed to provide high schools in any community requesting one. More than a hundred communities soon did so. **Figure 1** shows the ethnic makeup and size of high school graduating classes across 54 school districts in 1992. The larger districts, with over 100 graduating students, tend to be predominantly non-Native. In contrast, Natives comprise a majority of the graduates in most of the smaller school districts.

Native graduation rates improved with the advent of village schools, but new difficulties arose as well. Bush schooling is expensive. In 1993 for example, per-student expenditures were about \$12,700 in the Northwest Arctic Borough and \$34,000 in the Aleutian Region, compared with \$5,900 in Anchorage, the state's largest city (Knight 1994). Furthermore, even such expenditures could only provide a limited range of resources, activities, courses or teachers in any one village school. Low scores on standardized tests have reinforced concerns that there might exist qualitative differences between village and other schooling (Alaska Federation of Natives 1989; Kleinfeld 1992; Hower and Kelly 1996). **Figure 2** graphs the correlations among district size, percent Native, and 8<sup>th</sup>-grade test results.<sup>2</sup>

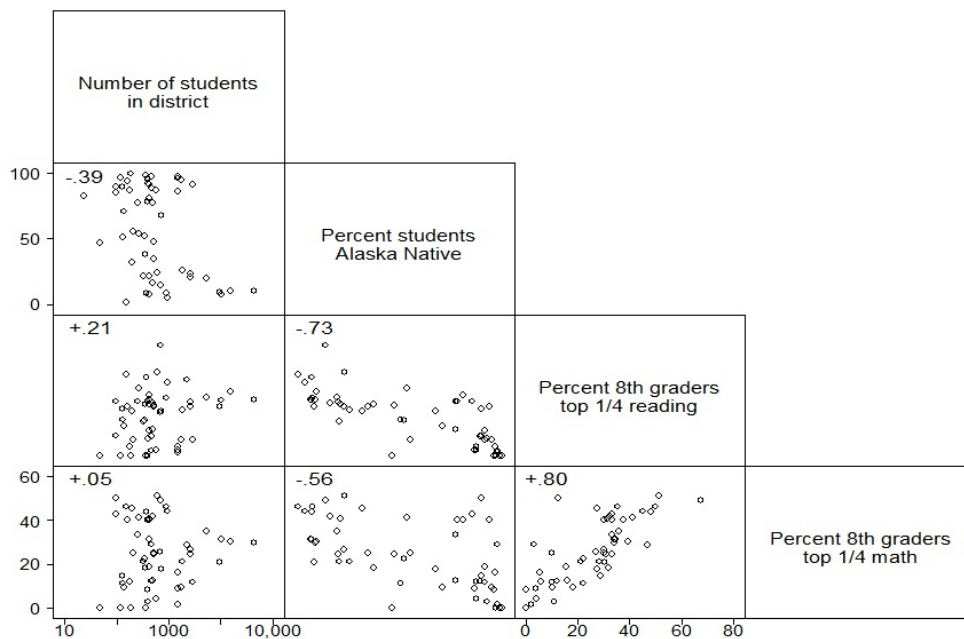
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<sup>1</sup> In this paper I use the term “village” to describe communities with under 1,000 people; a “town” has less than 10,000, and “cities” are 10,000 or more.

<sup>2</sup> Test results are more strongly correlated with percent Native than with school district population. This district-level analysis does not distinguish between village and town schools, however.



**Figure 1:** Percentage of graduates who are Alaska Native, vs. number of graduating seniors (axis log scaled) among 54 Alaska school districts, 1992. Circle areas are proportional to total district population, roughly 230 to 240,000 people. Data from Grimes (1997).



**Figure 2:** Correlations between the number of students (log scaled), percent Alaska Native, and percent of 8<sup>th</sup> graders scoring in top quartile of state reading and math tests, for Alaska school districts in 1992. Data from Grimes (1997).

The apparent limitations of small schools led to a reconsideration and re-opening of the Mt. Edgcomb boarding school, as well as new discussions about starting regional boarding schools to provide an in-between alternative for students from villages. Village schools retain a strong constituency, however. Any boarding school proposal threatens to compete with local schools not only for funding, but also for top students, who one principal described as the “positive leaders”—crucial human resources, especially in small communities. Although some village students board in private homes while they attend town schools, local schools or Mt. Edgcomb remain the two most visible options.

### WHAT IS SCHOOL FOR?

Whether village schools are, on balance, better than boarding schools depends upon what we mean by “better”—that is, upon how we answer the question, What is school for? In the context of bush Alaska, we can discern two polar answers:<sup>3</sup>

- A. School should prepare young people to be functional members of their home community.
- B. School should prepare young people to compete with other Americans for education, training and jobs.

Since most of the opportunities for further education, training and jobs lie outside bush Alaska, answer *B* looks towards life away, whereas *A* remains focused within the village.

Of course, *A* and *B* are not mutually exclusive choices. They are better viewed as endpoints on a continuum, with many possible blends between. Most schools, and enlightened educational strategies, work towards both goals to some degrees. Still, there remain only a limited number of hours in a school day. Trade-offs between time spent on *A* and *B*-directed education are inevitable.

The two goals point towards different decisions on some key policy issues. For example: *Course topics and content.* To prepare young people to become functional members of their home communities (*A*), school should emphasize knowledge that will be most useful there. This could include such topics as parenting and health care, as well as construction and maintenance skills (e.g., small engine repair, village water and heating systems) and Arctic survival. It should relate to local job opportunities, for example in tourism, mining or commercial fishing, as well as public-sector positions in government, health services and education. A central component would surely be learning about indigenous culture, history and traditional knowledge. But students who later seek jobs or education far away from their home communities (*B*) will find themselves competing against people with quite different educations, heavier on subjects such as reading, writing, science and math—and also more acclimated to the deadlines, rules and expectations of urban businesses and institutions. Certain passages would be more difficult for someone taking an *A* education into the *B* world. And conversely, some *B* skills seem irrelevant in the village.

*Level of instruction.* Should the level of instruction—difficulty of texts and assignments; teachers’ expectations about performance and mastery—be the same in villages as elsewhere? If so, education might become a more frustrating experience, with some students discouraged and dropping out. It seems obvious that schools must adjust their expectations to fit local realities, and this is certainly in keeping with the *A* goal. But at the same time, it would undermine the *B* goal if colleges and employers perceive that certain diplomas means less, or if students from those schools find themselves defeated by unfamiliar challenges when they try to move elsewhere.

*Who should teach.* For *A* it seems essential to have teachers with broad practical knowledge about the community, local culture and life in rural Alaska. For *B*, on the other hand, schools ordinarily want someone with deeper knowledge about particular academic areas. Any teacher should know his or her subject

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<sup>3</sup> More detailed discussions of the issues surrounding Native education in contemporary Alaska can be found in a report by Kleinfeld (1992), and a *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner* series by Hower and Kelly (1996).

well—but this criterion means quite different things, and selects for different individuals, depending on how we define that subject.

*Village vs. boarding schools.* Community schools are uniquely positioned to teach about life in their community, and to educate students without separating them from that life. These advantages become drawbacks in preparing students for the different challenges they might face outside of bush Alaska. Village schools' strengths appear most directly to favor *A*-type goals. Boarding schools' advantages are opposite, and primarily support *B* goals.

Clearly, these choices about high schools connect with larger questions about the future of bush villages themselves. Such questions deserve broad discussion, and are not simply matters for the educational authorities. But if not the authorities, then who *should* decide?

### WHO SHOULD DECIDE?

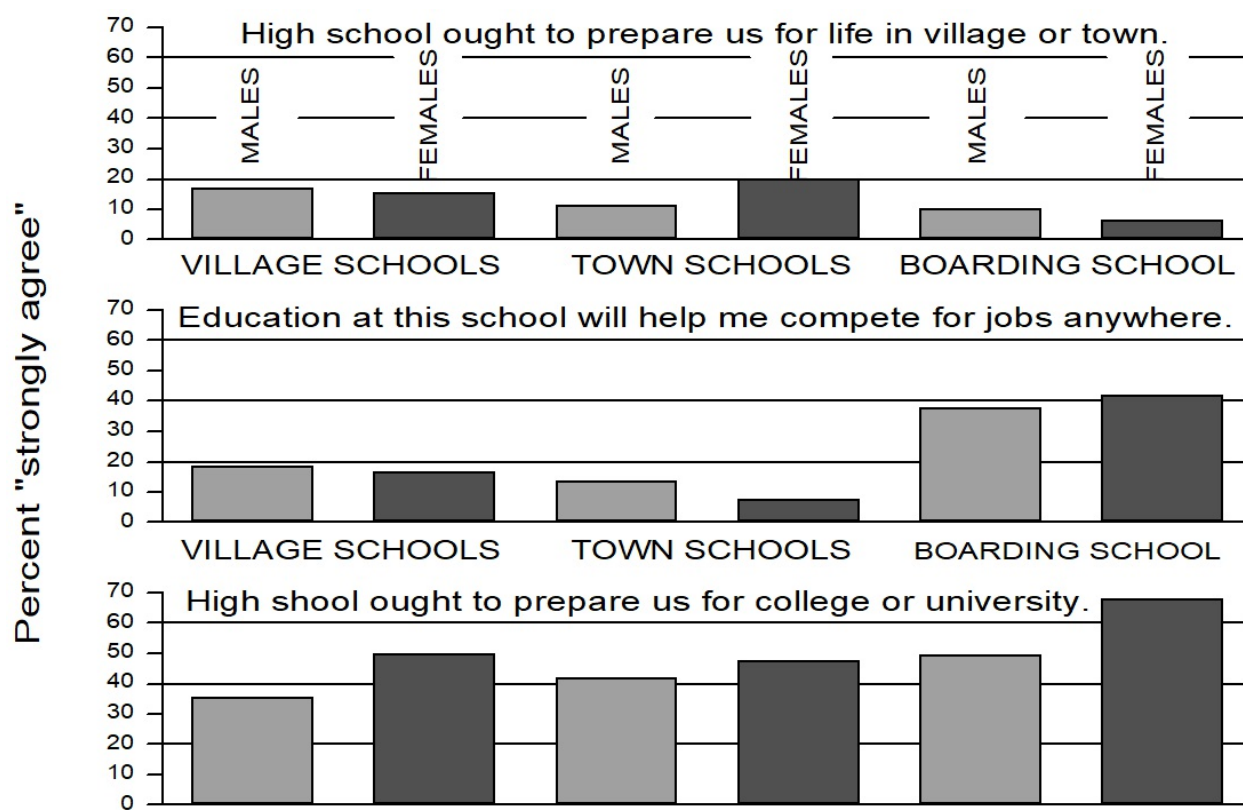
Educational requirements throughout much of the U.S. are set at the state level. Reflecting its size and diversity, Alaska delegates greater educational authority to local levels. Even so, controversies arise over differences within some school districts. High school students in one mid-sized town were dismayed to learn that they were using textbooks meant for younger students, due to their school board's belief that these fit better with the needs of the small village schools. Within another district, there exist school-to-school differences not only in educational philosophy, but in whether English or a Native language is used for instruction in early grades. From these differences, it might seem that key decisions should be made at the local level—allowing one community to choose a more *A*-directed high school system, while another chooses *B*.

Even local decision-making, however, would not benefit all students equally. Surveys of high school students in bush Alaska conducted in 1992 and 1995 found systematic differences of opinion within school districts (Seyfrit and Hamilton 1992, 1997). Town students appeared more outward-looking, in that higher proportions of them expected to live most of their lives outside their home regions (Hamilton and Seyfrit 1993). Native students were less oriented towards college and outmigration than non-Natives; students with mixed Native/non-Native ethnicity form an intermediate group (Seyfrit, Hamilton, Duncan and Grimes 1998).

Gender differences in aspirations are conspicuous among young people in the bush. Female students more often expect to move away or attend college; female graduates wish their high school educations had emphasized skills that could facilitate such moves (Hamilton and Seyfrit 1994a). Demographic data reveal a pattern of disproportionate outmigration by Alaska Native women, towards larger towns, cities, and other states (Hamilton and Seyfrit 1994b). Although many women strive to retain Native cultural identities even in the city (Fogel-Chance 1993), as a group they seem more oriented towards the *B* view of education, whereas more men prefer *A*.

One purpose of the 1995 survey was to let high school students tell us what *they* thought school should be for. **Figure 3** summarizes some key results. Bar heights indicate the percentage of students who “strongly agree” with a statement. (Many other students simply “agree,” but the percentages who “strongly agree” give the best indication of priorities here.) Separate bars appear for males and females, in village schools, town schools and the Mt. Edgecumbe boarding school. Only 10–20% of the students strongly agreed that “High school ought to prepare us for adult life in a small village or town” (top chart in Figure 3). The boarding school students, who have already left their home communities, were the least enthusiastic about this view.

A larger minority of the Mt. Edgecumbe students, 37% of the boys and 42% of the girls, strongly agreed that “The education I’m getting at this school will help me compete for good jobs anywhere in the United States” (middle chart in Figure 3). But the village and town students were less confident about this, and there the girls were less sure than the boys.



**Figure 3:** Percentages of students who “strongly agree” with three statements about the purposes of their schooling. Broken down by gender and location of school (village, town or boarding). Gender/location differences on each statement are statistically significant ( $\chi^2$  tests,  $p < .05$ ). Data from a 1995 survey of approximately 700 9th–12th grade students in 19 Alaska communities (Seyfrit and Hamilton 1997).

Higher proportions strongly agreed that “High school ought to prepare us for college or university” (bottom chart in Figure 3). Among the Mt. Edgecumbe girls this reached 68%. Mt. Edgecumbe boys also more often strongly agreed (49%), than did their counterparts in town (42%) or village (35%) schools. Within each school type, more girls than boys favored college/university goals—a divergence of interests that local control of school policy would do nothing to resolve.

Students are not the only ones with a stake in this question, nor are they necessarily the most wise. Their opinions are surely important, however. If it came to a vote, they would likely favor *B*-directed education. This preference is strongest among females.

## DISCUSSION

In bush Alaska the question, What is school for? connects with divergent views about the most desirable futures for individuals, villages and perhaps even their culture. As an outsider I have not presumed to answer this question, but tried to outline the basic dilemma. Bush community residents, notably the students themselves, are primary stakeholders. Recent surveys of students provide one way to consult their opinions.

Results from our survey, summarized in Figure 3, paint an uncomfortable picture. By margins of 2 or 3 to 1, even village students were more likely to strongly agree that high school should prepare them for college, rather than preparing them for life in a small village or town. These findings fit with earlier results showing that a majority of bush students hope and expect to move out of the bush (Hamilton and Seyfrit

1993; Seyfrit, Hamilton, Duncan and Grimes 1998). But Figure 3 also shows that most village and town students are not confident that their high school educations will help them compete effectively in the *B* world. In effect, they might feel trapped: hoping to leave, but afraid that their educations have not well prepared them for life elsewhere. The perception could be reinforced by observing other young adults who intended to leave their community, but later returned.

The ability of young adults to thrive in a new place, taking on new training, education or jobs, does not depend on their high school backgrounds alone. Families play central roles, both in supplementing whatever students learn from school, and more generally in providing the social knowledge and behavioral tools they will carry on into their lives. Community context matters too, both in terms of cultural values and expectations (including role models), and also in terms of institutional support such as the availability of jobs. Although school is only one of several key influences on the transition from adolescence to adulthood, it is the one most sensitive to policy—which makes the policy’s goals important.

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