

# Experiential Learning Program Design for Teacher Retention in Rural Alaska

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Culturally Responsive Education

Experiential Learning

Teacher Retention

*Rural Alaska offers unique opportunities for educators to live and work in Indigenous communities and support efforts to align schools with Indigenous peoples' priorities for their children. However, teacher turnover in rural Alaska is an enduring challenge, with significant costs to districts and disruptions to students, communities, and schools. This article discusses a partnership initiative in the Bristol Bay Region of Alaska to improve teacher retention and educators' cultural competencies. Partners include the University of Alaska Anchorage School of Education, the Bristol Bay Foundation, and four rural school districts. The partners designed a path for teachers to earn the M.Ed. Teaching and Learning at the University of Alaska Anchorage through online coursework and experiential learning over three years. Research data show higher retention rates for participating teachers and evidence of enhanced culturally responsive practices. The article presents the design process, program model, research findings, and next steps.*

*\*Note: The following was highlighted as a Presidential Session at the Convention.*

## Introduction

Rural Alaska is a remarkable place to live and teach, with opportunities to establish relationships with unique communities, connect to land cared for by Indigenous peoples for thousands of years, and engage in efforts to align schools with Indigenous peoples' priorities for their children's education. Despite these benefits, teacher turnover is higher in rural schools than elsewhere in Alaska: the attrition rate in rural-remote schools is 36% compared to 19% in urban schools (Cano, et al., 2019).

Many factors contribute to retention challenges in Alaska, including teacher salaries not keeping pace with inflation (Berman & DeFeo, 2024) and a retirement system without a defined benefit (Adams, 2021). Furthermore, over 60% of teachers in Alaska are from outside the state, most of whom move from the forty-eight contiguous US states and are unfamiliar with Alaska's Indigenous cultures and living conditions in rural communities (Cano et al., 2019; Hill & Hirshberg, 2013). Teacher turnover is costly—approximately \$20,000 per teacher—and disruptive to students, communities, and schools (DeFeo, et al., 2017).

This article discusses a partnership initiative designing an experiential learning program focusing on teacher retention and cultural competencies in Alaska's Bristol Bay region. The partners include the University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA), the Bristol Bay Foundation (BBF), and four rural-remote school districts: Bristol Bay, Dillingham City, Lake and Peninsula, and Southwest School Districts. The Bristol Bay region is located in Southwest Alaska and is home to three Indigenous groups: Alutiiq/Sugpiaq, Dena'ina, and Yup'ik. About 80% of the students in the region identify as Alaska Native. The schools serve an average of 419 students, ranging from 113 to 574. The average teacher turnover rate in the Bristol Bay region is 32%, comparable to other rural-remote districts in the Southwest region (Education Northwest, 2024)

## Methods

The lead author conducted an action research (AR) project between 2020 and 2024 to inform the program design process. This project used Geoffrey Mills' (2018) AR framework, which includes identifying an area of focus, collecting and analyzing data, and creating an action plan. This AR approach supported the iterative program design process explained below.

The project focused on collaboratively designing a program to improve teacher retention and teachers' cultural competencies which honored teachers' experiences in schools and communities and led to M.Ed. in Teaching and Learning. This focus was the context for the question which guided the research and design processes: How do we design a program for teachers in rural Alaska to earn the M.Ed. in Teaching and Learning via online courses and experiential learning?

Data sources comprised documents (e.g., meeting notes, student work), conversations with M.Ed. TLRN students and partner representatives, and a reflective journal. The researcher also incorporated findings from an external program evaluation conducted by Education Northwest in Portland, Oregon, in 2021-2024, which examined teacher retention rates and M.Ed. TLRN students' culturally responsive teaching practices.

The analysis involved a systematic data review during the summers of 2021-2024 to identify themes related to the design process and program outcomes. The themes were integrated into the action plan for the following school year, which included revising the program and implementation processes.

## Design Process

The partners engaged in an iterative design process informed by AR and enacted a framework outlined by Tim Brown (2008), which includes inspiration, ideation, and implementation.

## Inspiration: Spring-Summer 2020

Inspiration refers to the “circumstances that motivate the search for solutions” (Brown, 2008, p. 87). This phase was initiated in the spring of 2020 when superintendents from the Bristol Bay region shared with the UAA School of Education a vision for improving retention rates and enhancing teachers' knowledge and skills in culturally responsive education. They envisioned offering teachers a master's degree incorporating the experiences of living and working in rural communities and schools. The superintendents were seeking a university to enact the vision collaboratively. The UAA School of Education was a receptive partner.

## Ideation: Summer 2020-May 2023

Ideation, the “process of generating, developing, and testing ideas that may lead to solutions” (Brown, 2008, p. 87), began with the creation of the partnership's Memoranda of Agreement (MOA) in the summer of 2020 and continued through the first three years of the project (2020-2023). In addition to UAA and the four school districts, the Bristol Bay Foundation emerged as an instrumental partner during the fall of 2020. The partners called this period the “pilot phase” to capture the project's experimental nature. The partners held a shared vision and goal of improving teacher retention and cultural responsiveness but did not know the form the program would eventually take.

The partners agreed the M.Ed. in Teaching and Learning (TLRN) was the appropriate degree to offer teachers. It is an established 30-credit online program at UAA designed for practicing educators with flexibility for professional concentrations. The partners also concurred students would earn the M.Ed. by completing 15 credits of online courses and 15 credits from experiential learning. Designing the experiential learning component was a primary task during the ideation stage. A summary of significant events during this phase included:

- Developed Memoranda of Agreement (MOA) between UAA and the four school districts: Summer 2020.
- Engaged in frequent partnership meetings on Zoom to generate, develop, and test ideas for the program design: 2020-2023.
- Selected a culturally responsive education framework for the experiential learning program. The partners choose the Alaska Cultural Standards for Educators (Alaska Native Knowledge Network, 1998) as the framework: 2020.
- Define the experiential learning program's structure and processes. The partners designed the experiential learning program through an iterative process. For example, in Year 1, to demonstrate their cultural responsiveness, teachers independently wrote a reflection paper on ways they integrated the Cultural Standards in their teaching. In Year 2, based on data collected in Year 1, the partners added an experiential learning coordinator to the structure to support teachers in identifying teaching-related artifacts and further refined the expectations in Year 3 to include a culturally responsive portfolio: 2020-2023.
- Identify a theoretical framework for the experiential learning component. The partners selected Kolb's (2015) model for experiential learning: 2021-2022.
- Adopt UAA's credit-by-portfolio policy for nontraditional credits to translate the experiential learning portfolio into 15 graduate credits: 2022-2023.
- Celebrate the first cohort's graduation: May 2023.

## Implementation: 2023-2024

Tim Brown (2008) defines implementation as “charting a path to ‘market’” (p. 87). In this education-related design project, partners translated implementation as creating a path by designing a program for the Bristol Bay partnership and other rural school districts to implement. The main elements of the program include:

- **Partnership:** The partnership is a mutually beneficial collaboration of rural school districts, the UAA School of Education, and the Bristol Bay Foundation. The partners use the MOA to articulate the partnership's mission, goals, and basic structure. They nurture and sustain the collaboration through communication and engagement around the program's vision and goals.
- **Culturally responsive education:** Culturally responsive education is the core focus of the experiential learning program using the Alaska Cultural Standards for Educators (add date) as the primary framework
- **Online/distance technology:** The program infuses online/distance technology for communication among the partners and to support teachers' learning and professional development in experiential learning and online graduate courses.
- **Experiential learning.** Incorporating and honoring teachers' experiences teaching and living in rural communities is an essential element of the program. Consistent with Kolb's (2015) framework, the program views experiential learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through transformation of experience" (p. 49). This perspective plays out through the experiential learning program's structure and processes.
- **University:** The University of Alaska Anchorage delivers the M.Ed. in Teaching and Learning and the policy for translating teachers' experiential learning to graduate credits. The M.Ed. TLRN faculty create the rubrics to evaluate the experiential learning portfolio and shepherd the students through UAA's credit-by-portfolio process. Faculty also support district the partner districts' implementation of Kolb's experiential learning framework and the portfolio evaluation process.
- **School district:** The school district is a critical partner in defining and implementing the program. The district's schools and communities in which they are situated are the spaces where the partners enact the experiential learning program. The partner district's key players include the superintendent and the experiential learning evaluation team. It is also possible the experiential learning coordinator is part of the district's team, although this position is currently housed in the Bristol Bay Foundation.
- **The Bristol Bay Foundation (BBF),** the education-related nonprofit organization of the Bristol Bay Native Corporation, connects the program participants and partners to the region's land and Indigenous people and cultures. BBF has also provided strategic funding supporting the program design process, evaluation research, and sponsoring a US Department of Education's Alaska Native Education Program grant, including holding the experiential learning coordinator's position for the M.Ed. partnership program.

The program is well-established in the Bristol Bay region as new cohorts of teachers have enrolled each year since 2020. In addition, three rural school districts outside the Bristol Bay region have adopted the model. Thus, in 2024-2025, seven rural school districts in Alaska are implementing the program.

## Findings: Teacher Retention and Culturally Responsive Teaching

Teacher retention rates and culturally responsive teaching outcomes are encouraging. Participants in the partnership M.Ed. TLRN program remained in their schools at notably higher rates than other Bristol Bay region teachers. For example, in 2021-2022, the retention rate for M.Ed. participants was 35 percentage points higher than that of other Bristol Bay teachers, with 100% of program participants returning to the same school compared to 65% of non-participating teachers. The average teacher retention rate for the participating teachers in three school years—2020-2023—was 95% compared to 66% retention of non-participating teachers (Education Northwest, 2024).

Teachers enrolled in the program have also reported higher competency levels in using culturally responsive practices than non-participants (Merrill & Rooney, 2024). For example, 88% of participants rated themselves as competent or advanced in incorporating local ways of knowing and teaching and connecting the local environment and resources in their teaching compared to 44% of non-participants. Furthermore, 100% of M.Ed. participants identified as competent or advanced in participating in local community events and activities compared to 78% of non-participants (Merrill & Rooney, 2024).

## Next Steps

Interest in the program is growing across Alaska as rural districts outside the Bristol Bay Region, including the state's largest, implement the model. Discussions are underway to transfer the program to rural districts beyond Alaska's borders. Additionally, faculty are preparing research projects to examine teachers' learning through the experiential learning portfolio, Indigenous communities and students' perspectives about the program's impact, and the role of online/distance technology in experiential learning.

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