

Parental Roles in Rural Alaska Education: A Model for the Circumpolar North?

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Public confidence in community schooling is always an important barometer of governmental and policy effectiveness. In Western democratic societies, schools are public institutions under popular majority control. In some communities, that control is more theoretical possibility than historical fact, and the actual operations of schools are most influenced by education professionals.¹ In others, local community groups and school boards or councils at the regional, district, or state/provincial levels control schools in the public interest. Tension over issues of school control often permeates relations between the community and the professionals. The degree of popular control over the routine operations of schools is of interest because it may have a bearing on student academic achievement.²

Research over several decades demonstrates that parents advance their children's learning by reading to them, providing an environment conducive to study at home, and by sending them to school rested and on time.³ What range of parental participation in education might be required to improve student achievement and foster better school performance? Issues of parental participation generate considerable discussion but little systematic research exists on the types and degree of parental involvement that would advance the student's learning capacity.⁴ National assessments in the United States on parental involvement also have not addressed village circumstances where the majority of the population is aboriginal.⁵

The questions of participation in, and control over, schooling are doubly relevant in remote and northern communities because schools may represent in these regions an alien culture and institution. Schools may insulate themselves and be isolated from the people they serve. As the International Director of the Clearinghouse for Circumpolar Education observed, the purposes of Native education in the arctic are by no means uniform:

Southern goals espoused by non-Native teachers are not necessarily the goals of Arctic residents. Parents and educators, both Native and non-Native, must agree on goals. . . . Some parents do not recognize the value of formal education. Some teachers and administrators see preparation for college as the only desir-

able goal. The goals of schooling must be agreed upon and then reflected in ongoing school district operations.⁶

Cross-pressures among the players in the Arctic educational process mean that parents and community residents may lack a sense of ownership in their schools, which, in turn, affects student learning and public support.

In order to clarify the role of parents in the Native educational process, and to explain the relationship between parental involvement and educational outcomes, we have studied, over the past fifteen years, the context and atmosphere in which communities and schools interact, closely examined popular involvement in schooling, and attempted to ascertain the shifting patterns of control and their relationship to educational results. Between 1982 and 1993, we conducted interviews with parents, teachers, administrators, and influential community members in over twenty rural Alaska sites.⁷ We postulated that the higher levels of overall parental involvement, the higher the rates of student achievement and adaptation to school. For the most part, the indicators of parental involvement and student outcomes are qualitatively assessed from our interview data. The following work is the latest dissemination of our research findings.

The academic literatures that provides the background relevant to our study included two streams of works, one focusing on *control* over schools and the other centering on *involvement* in school processes. In the case of parental or professional control, the research asks two questions: first, whether parents have significant influence at all over school programs in comparison to the professionals who design and operate them; and second, whether membership and participation in education boards and committees, and activity in school elections increase school achievement and satisfaction with educational programs.

The first question is addressed in several studies of school boards. Summarizing over three decades of research, authorities in *School Boards: Changing Local Control* observe that formally elected governing bodies tend to be a buffer between schools and the community. On a small number of occasions, especially in "ages of reform," boards may react to perceived adverse conditions of schooling, put politics aside, and increase the effectiveness of schools in their jurisdictions.⁸

A broader, and richly descriptive summary of this literature is found in Tucker and Zeigler's *Professionals Versus the Public*. They compare school board actors, agendas, participation, and policy voting. They find that often boards are rubber stamps for decisions elsewhere, most frequently because public preference information is insufficient in quantity and quality.⁹ Most educational decision-making bodies, they argue, are unwilling to defer to

lay preferences that demand sacrificing professional values.

Results from a number of studies addressing the second questions have been conflicting. Some studies, such as those reported on by Davies and Zerkov, show a slight relationship between participation and school achievement, varying by ethnicity. Increased participation had little effect on Caucasian students but was associated with improved achievement rates of non-Caucasians.¹⁰ Other studies, such as Salisbury's report on participation in St. Louis education, find a modest relationship between participation and improved rates of efficacy and satisfaction with school affairs.¹¹ Studies of campaigns to defeat superintendents and bond propositions find efficacious attitudes among voters and participants in boards and committees, but no greater feeling of satisfaction with school systems as a result.¹²

The other major stream of research that provides the background for our study centers on documenting and analyzing the *involvement* parents have in school processes. The involvement ranges from helping children with homework and contacting teachers regularly about their children's progress to working as a resource person in the school. Although the patterns of involvement are not clear cut, recent research has underscored the significance of parental roles in children's learning processes. Some studies have focused on direct linkages between parental involvement and student performance;¹³ other works emphasize the complex nature of the relationship between the parental input and student achievement.¹⁴ A recent Alaskan study views parental participation as an important and inexpensive way to improve achievement in school, and therefore attempted to identify the barriers to parents' becoming involved.¹⁵ An earlier Alaskan review of parental participation literature concluded that, although they were scarce beyond elementary school, the programs designed to encourage strong parental involvement produced students who "perform better than [in] otherwise identical programs that do not involve parents as thoroughly."¹⁶

A comprehensive analysis of the myriad factors influencing educational outcomes has emphasized the value of the home environment. In their article "Toward a Knowledge Base for School Learning," Wang, Haertel and Walberg note that not only the educational characteristics of the home but also parent activities and attitudes support student learning. Compared to all other external variables, they observe that "[the] home functions as the most salient out-of-school context for student learning, amplifying or diminishing the school's effect on learning."¹⁷

In short, research findings to date are virtually unanimous in indicating that the involvement of parents in the education of their children enhances the performance. On the other hand, parents with control over schools are

not likely to comprehend school operations and, although parental control may increase satisfaction with the schools in the community, it is not invariably related to improved student outcomes.

Research Design

Our long-term research design was based on studying local control and different forms of parental activity to determine whether they would be associated with improved outcomes in Alaska's rural schools where a majority of students were Natives. In the early 1980s, our studies showed no correlation between high rates of community participation and most educational outcomes; however, strongly participant parents and board members were more likely to evaluate the school program favorably than weak ones.¹⁸

We focused the research more narrowly during the interviews in 1991, 1992, and 1993. In 1991, information on rates and types of parental involvement was collected from school principals in each of Alaska's rural communities. Three broad areas of parental involvement were designated: trust-building efforts with the school; educational support activities in the home and classroom; and parental participation in the control and governance of the school.¹⁹ Most of the principals (86 percent) responded to a lengthy questionnaire; we correlated responses with building test scores in reading and mathematics, and found relationships for all three types of parent activity.²⁰ Schools that demonstrated high levels of communication with parents and encouraged parental involvement in the schools were also those with relatively higher student outcomes. However, schools with local councils or boards involved in operations, such as setting the school budget and influencing personnel decisions, had lower student achievement and adaptation indices than schools with inactive or non-existent councils.

In 1992, we visited fifteen communities in rural Alaska, which represented different cultures and ranges of parental participation in education. We conducted interviews with parents, teachers, school administrators, and other community residents.²¹ In general, the rural school communities we observed were ones in which there was a moderate level of parental involvement. Parents were more likely to be present in the schools than during any of our previous visits. Parents were also more comfortable with matters of organization and the practice of schooling, including what curricula would be most likely to be effective. Based on our observations, it was easy to conclude that village schools were more accepted parts of their communities than had been the case historically. Adding to the stability of the school as a community institution was the fact that, because of economic hard times, the rate of teacher turnover was somewhat lower during our 1992 visits than

REAs, Alaska has borough-operated school districts and city-operated districts. Two of our sites, Tri-Valley and Ambler, were in the Denali and Northwest Arctic boroughs, respectively. Finally, one of the schools, Hyda-burg, was located in the city-operated school district.

Our selection of school sites also reflected a considerable range of ethnicity. Although the majority population in six of the seven sites was Native, two of the sites had a small Caucasian population (the Kalskags and Ambler) and one was nearly all-Caucasian (Tri-Valley). The Native populations represented were Athabaskan, Haida, Yu'ik and Kowagmiut Eskimo.

The objective in our focused interviews of 1993 was to refine further our understanding of the intricate relationship between the role of parental involvement, on the one hand, and student achievement, on the other. We continued to give primary attention to the three roles that we viewed as critical in connecting parents to their children's schooling. The first role reflects the degree and kind of trust that exists between all parents of the community and the schools. Communication is basic to that trust, and we asked how well schools communicated with parents, and through what means the schools attempted to provide parents with a sense of ownership. The second role concerns parents as educators. We asked what methods were used by schools to involve parents in the actual learning process. For example, were parents involved as teachers and/or classroom resources? The third role addresses parents as participants in governance. Our questions were designed to determine the degree to which parents had taken part in decisions about hiring teachers and staff, about curriculum and textbooks, about the school calendar and budget, and about the construction and use of school facilities.

The model in Figure 2 postulates a range of causal relationships between the three parental-role factors we examined and a number of student outcomes. Outcomes were defined, in the first instance, by student attendance and retention, and also by expectations and satisfaction with the school. The efficacy of the school environment is further represented by the extent of cultural integration of the curriculum and the service of community members on the school staffs. Distal outcomes of the projected causal connection between parental roles and student performance are indicated by standardized test results, and college enrollment and career development.

The association between parental role typologies and student achievement cannot be explained without considering a combination of intervening factors. These factors inform the processes of education and thus suggest a tentative causal relationship to student outcomes. The intervening variables of our study are site stability (rates of turnover of teachers and ad-

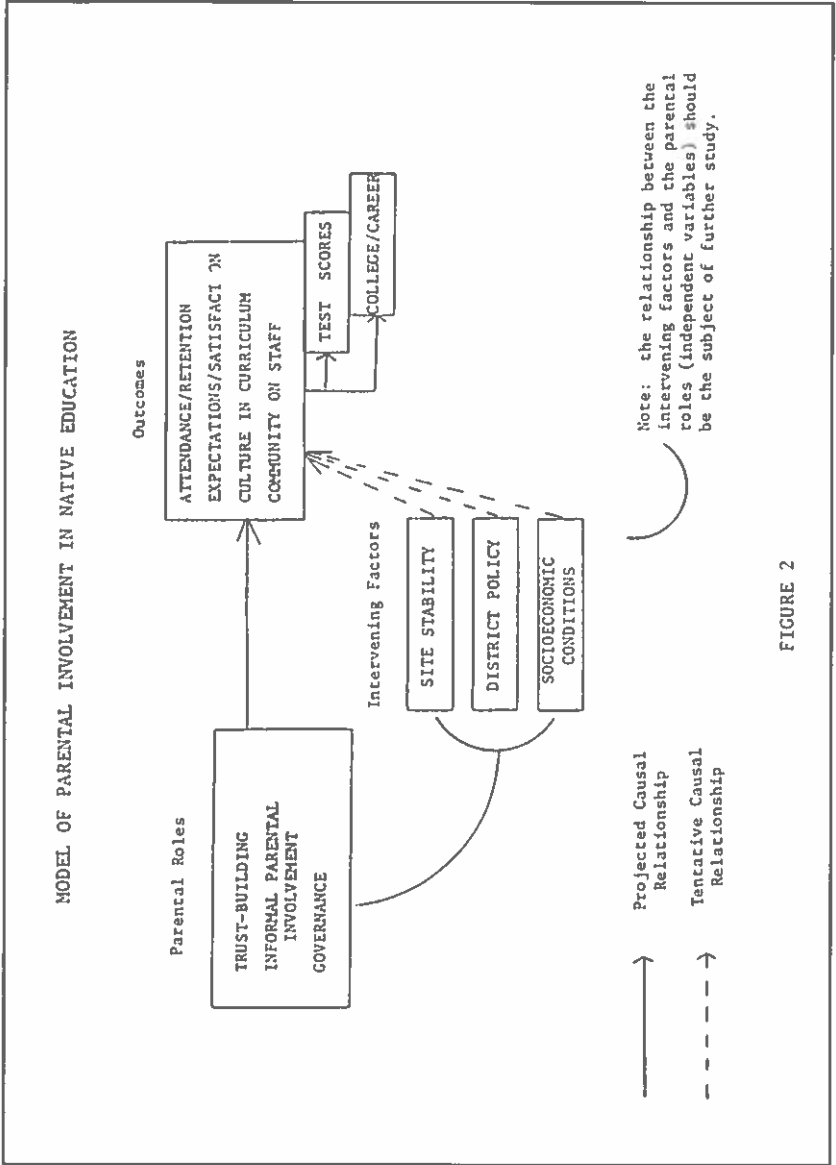


FIGURE 2

Figure 2 Model of Parental Involvement in Native Education

ministrators), district policies (including the superintendent's influence), and a pervasive array of social and economic factors that not only have an effect on student outcomes but also may indicate vast detail about the extent and

intensity of parental involvement. The significance of these factors, as well as their relationship to the parental roles, remains unclear and should be the subject of further study.²³

Our model differs to some extent from what is often assumed in the research on parental involvement.²⁴ Demographic and site-institutional factors are conventionally posited as independent variables, whereas we hypothesize that they are mediating factors. The purpose of our model is to fasten attention on the construct of the parental role. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler have also focused on the makeup of the parental role but in the context of analyzing the motivations for a parent's decision to become involved. Their model, like ours, suggests a causal path that leads from an interpretation of the complex nature of the parental role to student outcomes.²⁵ On the other hand, research that emphasizes the effects of a child's achievement on getting parents involved proposes an entirely different approach to examining patterns of parental involvement. For example, Watkins employs a bidirectional theoretical model suggesting parental involvement as the dependent variable that is influenced by child achievement and other key independent factors.²⁶ Our model, in turn, recognizes the complex relationship between parental involvement and learning outcomes, and also allows for the ambiguities that have yet to be resolved in understanding the relationship. We emphasize the current importance of identifying and differentiating the roles of parents in the rural setting as the empirical basis for projecting further causal relationships.

Research Results

The impact of parental roles as the independent variable in explaining relationships between parental involvement and student achievement offers a broad scope for analysis. At each school site we observed important variations in development of the three fundamental roles of trust-building between community and school; informal parental involvement in the classroom and home; and participation in formal governance processes. Based on our observations in the field, we can summarize the results as follows:

- Notwithstanding outreach efforts to build trust between the school and community, schooling remains defined as the province of the school, and tends to be separated from the life of the Native community;
- Parental involvement through activities initiated at home or through classroom assistance is related to achievement gains by students in a positive way; parental involvement of this type, how-

ever, tends to occur at a relatively low rate in Native communities; and

- Parental participation in formal governance processes is prevalent, but is negatively associated with higher achievement by students in every community; it is, however, linked to creation and maintenance of culturally relevant schooling in Native communities.

Addressing each of the parental-role typologies in the context of the seven sites of the study, we can elaborate the similarities and differences that inform our model of the educational process in rural Alaska's communities.

Parental Roles

Trust-Building

Staff in most of the seven schools of our study used several means to reach out to their communities. They prepared newsletters and daily or weekly bulletins, often sent notes home for parents and, less frequently, would visit parents at home.

The parental response in building relations of trust with the school was observed first and foremost in their presence at the school and in school activities. Parental visits to the classrooms occurred on a limited basis, but parents were highly likely to attend afternoon and evening events: concerts, open houses, award assemblies, and basketball games. At three of the seven schools, staff used special material incentives—fuel oil, food articles, meals at the school—to attract parents and community members to conferences (Mekoryuk, the Kalskags, and Hydaburg).

All of the schools with Native majority enrollments had Native culture days or weeks. Inupiaq Days, for example, were initiated into the curriculum by parents in Ambler, and are held four times a year. The majority of parents in all the sites we studied tended to participate in culture days. Parents also turned out often for rural Alaska's most popular sport, basketball. Each school opened its gym to the community, thereby strengthening a vital linkage between the people and the school.

The many efforts at informally communicating school objectives and popularizing school programs did seem to give community members a sense of ownership in the schools. Only one community, the Kalskags, had experienced vandalism at a school in the five years before our visits. Ironically, the Kalskags had one of the highest levels of involvement of parents and teachers in building trust between the school and community. A longtime resident, teacher, and former Kalskags principal told us that the school's emphasis on community projects was based on the belief that "we work under a mandate from the people to educate their children."²⁷

However, the division between the village school teachers and the residents was obvious in all the Native communities. Most of the teachers are transient and Caucasian; moreover, the education gap separating teachers from residents made parents somewhat uncomfortable at the schools. They tended to look at education as happening in the school and at teachers as solely responsible for it; home and school were perceived as distinct and separate environments. A teacher with more than a decade of experience living in Ambler mused, "I wish I knew more about what the community really wanted."²⁸

Informal Parental Involvement

The importance of the parental role as a teacher, helping in the classroom and providing the necessary support at home, would be difficult to exaggerate. Among the seven schools in our study, only three regularly had parents in the classroom (Ambler, Tanacross and Tri-Valley). These were classrooms at the elementary level and were in communities with the longest history of contact with Western institutions. The other schools occasionally used parents as resource persons. When parents played teaching roles at school, they spoke highly of the experience, both for themselves and for their children. This form of involvement was not compatible, however, with work schedules and heavy family commitments, and only a small number of parents took advantage of it.

As is typical throughout Alaska, all the schools had classroom aides who were residents of the community. Usually they had been at the school longer than the teachers and the principal. Invariably, they were a conduit for information and reactions about the ways in which school programs and personnel operated in the community. Aides learned content areas and pedagogical techniques from teachers; in turn, they used these for instruction of their own children. Several aides had returned to school to obtain their teaching certificates and had assumed certificated positions in the schools.

In four schools—again, those with the history of contact with Western institutions—staff had developed programs to have children take books home and encourage their parents to read them (Ambler, the Kalskags, Tanacross, and Tri-Valley). At Tanacross, we learned that the principal teacher made many books available to students over the summer. Ambler was the first site in the Northwest Arctic Borough to develop a take-home book program. Each grade level was a team; the second- and third-grade students, for example, all had backpacks imprinted with "Ambler Awesome Readers."

The significance of parental involvement in the educational process in the home setting received uniform emphasis throughout our interviews. A Kalskags principal in 1993 put the issue succinctly: "Although there are

politics to be played and policy to be made, the parents' role in education is to get students ready for school."²⁹ School staff in three villages noted that parents were not getting their children ready for school or to school on time (Tuluksak, the Kalskags, and Ambler). The reason, some teachers felt, was that the current generation of parents was likely to have attended boarding school away from home and had not been exposed to the demands of household management. In Hydaburg, for instance, most of the parent generation educated beyond eighth grade went to boarding schools. Living in dormitories and eating at cafeterias with other adolescents, they missed the chance to learn parenting skills first-hand and year-round. The boarding school generation now has adolescents of its own, and they lack experience to guide them in molding their teens' behavior. The Hydaburg principal took note of the phenomenon in 1993: "We have two generations of boarding school kids who have no parenting skills."³⁰ Only one of the seven schools in our study had started a parenting skills program (the Kalskags).

Three communities had had serious discipline problems that, in the view of the school staff, reflected the changing norms of parenting in rural Alaska (Ambler, Mekoryuk, and Tuluksak). In these communities, expectations of teachers for student behavior sharply varied from parental expectations. One school official in Tuluksak explained that parents wanted the school to "tell my son such and such because he won't listen to me." The official continued,

Seven-year-old children. . . literally sock their parents in the face. . . . I wish parents had more parenting skills in how to discipline their children. . . .

Some [parents] see the school as baby-sitters or entertainment. One parent was angry we sent a child home with a 102-degree temperature without feeding him lunch first and brought him back to eat.³¹

During our final set of interviews, at no site was discipline more a focal point in discussions pertaining to parental involvement than at Ambler. Parents and staff alike remarked about the steady deterioration of discipline. We were told of instances that included throwing desks, disrobing in the classroom, and setting a teacher's dog on fire. One parent, who also served as a substitute teacher, said that parents needed to make their presence felt more in the school and should witness their children's behavior:

Parents don't know how bad their kinds are in school. . . . When I was in school we had discipline because the teacher had a paddle in the desk. . . . Children have to learn like animals do, to survive. A wolf, you know, beats her little pup sometimes just to show him that's not the way to do it.³²

Another Ambler parent was incredulous: "The bigger kids nowadays are almost the bosses of their parents." He explained that Eskimo culture teaches that "loving is not protecting from punishment."³³ Although such discipline

problems are a common element of urban school life, they have been rare until recently in rural Alaska.

It remained clear, nonetheless, that the responsibility for student behavior in the complex educational process in the village communities was a bit of a “hot potato” that parents and the school tended to lob back and forth for the other to bear.

Parental Participation in Governance

The overarching issue in an analysis of parents as governors in the schooling of Native communities centers on the relative priority of the role itself. The differing views of the priority attributed to parents-as-governors were evident in the interviews in the Kuspuk District. A longtime administrator in the district office stated, “I would rather see parents taking the time to make a supportive home atmosphere than get all involved in school politics.”³⁴ On the other hand, a Kalskags parent and member of the Kuspuk District Board maintained that

The best participation by parents is to get involved with policy—that is more important than anything else. It is natural to take care of your kid; you are supposed to do that anyway. But what will benefit the kids most? The policies you make because they are long-term.³⁵

The position of the Kuspuk District, in particular, gradually changed over the period of our study. The earlier notion that the district administration strongly promulgated was that parental involvement in policy did not necessarily result in informed decisions; by 1993, however, the district had begun to move in the direction of encouraging parental input into policy and participation in policy planning.

Parent councils, called Advisory School Boards (ASBs), Parent Advisory Committees (PACs) or Community School Committees (CSCs), were present in each of the schools we visited and were strong agents of community for all schools except Tri-Valley. In recruitment and retention of principals and principal teachers, these parent committees usually played significant roles. In Ambler, for example, twice over the decade that we visited the site (1983-1993), parents organized to take action against school principals. Both actions resulted in the principal’s departure.

Parent councils were not always directly involved in teacher hiring and evaluation but our respondents were nearly unanimous in saying they would expel a teacher who lacked the village’s confidence. In practice, teachers appear to be less vulnerable than principals in the face of parental action over retention. At only one of our sites, Hydaburg, were parent complaints a factor in the non-retention of a teacher. At another site, Tanacross, the parental ASB

succeeded in having the principal teacher placed on medical leave when personal problems interfered with his teaching performance.

In most of the village sites, local school board representatives brokered school jobs for community members. The parent councils were, in fact, the most active in regard to these jobs. During our Hydaburg interviews, the superintendent spoke about the hiring of non-certificated personnel: "There is a lot of favoritism, especially when it's relatives. . . the board [ASB] gets hung up on family politics."³⁶ In Ambler, one of the teachers felt that the ASB interviews for teacher-aide positions could lead to difficulties, with the process turning into a "popularity contest" rather than a job search.

Parent councils had little influence over the school curriculum, with one important exception: participation in Native majority schools to provide critical support for Native culture and language programs. The majority of districts where our school sites were located did include parental representation on curriculum advisory committees but the practical impact of the parents' perspectives remained unclear. The principal at Mekoryuk concluded that the curriculum had undergone a continuous process of incremental revision, based on cooperative relations between parents and the school. In the Kuspuk District, an annual questionnaire is sent to all parents, and their concerns were to some extent reflected in a revised curriculum mission statement of 1993.

Of all the areas of influence where parents as governors might be heard, the size and sufficiency of the site budget proved the least susceptible. School staff and parents alike conveyed to us a sense of being powerless to affect budget matters. At Ambler and Hydaburg, ASB members expressed concern over the portions spent on basketball and sports trips. An Ambler parent was eminently clear on the point that the future of the youth of Ambler did not lie with the National Basketball Association, and that the school budget should reflect the fact. In Hydaburg, over-expenditures for the basketball team travel made it necessary to eliminate the hot breakfast program and reduce hours for cooks and custodial staff. An ASB member in Hydaburg told us that to try to make budget changes would be tantamount to losing the board position. On the other hand, when they concentrated their efforts and mobilized on budget issues, Kalskags parents were successful in 1992 in saving programs in music, arts, and sports that the community valued in contrast to district mandates.

Student Outcomes

In Figure 2, student outcomes of parental-role activity are indicated by the primary effects (attendance/retention, expectations/satisfaction, cultural inte-

gration of curriculum, and Native community members on school staffs) and secondary effects (test results and college/career development). Because cultural integration of curricula and the Native presence in schools have been given considerable attention in Alaska studies of rural education,³⁷ our analysis focuses mainly on the other outcome factors. Initially, we thought that the magnitude of parental involvement would be related to that of student achievement. Although it is undeniable that student achievement is a function of the interrelationship of parental-role factors, our on-site observations brought somewhat mixed results. Attendance and retention rates at the village schools, for example, fell along a high, relatively flat, curve (above 90 percent) that did not fluctuate with the way in which the different parental roles were played out at each site.

The parental role that proved the most significant in affecting student performance was that of involvement in the home and in providing classroom support. At Tri-Valley, Tanacross, and Mekoryuk, the moderate to heavy involvement of parents correlated with pride and satisfaction in the schools, with test scores higher than the norm for rural Alaska schools (NCE scores: 45-60), and with higher rates of college enrollment. In the early 1980s, Tanacross was regarded as the highest-achieving Native school in the state.³⁸

Surprisingly, however, in contrast to the positive relationship between informal parental involvement and high student achievement, our study revealed a negative relationship between parental participation in *governance* activities and student achievement. At sites where the parental role in governance was the strongest, the Kalskags, Ambler and Tuluksak, there were also the highest rates of dissatisfaction with the schools, lower test scores, and few students who enrolled in college or completed a post-secondary degree. The strong hold of parents on school governance was conveyed by a Tuluksak principal who observed that if parents did not approve the hiring or retention of certain teachers, those teachers would have to leave because nothing they did in the classroom would "ever be recognized."³⁹

Perhaps the most difficult to make precise, but also of key significance, is the way in which the parental role in trust-building activities between the community and school relates to student achievement. When trust breaks down, disrespect toward the school ensues. Student behavior reflects community attitudes and, as one Ambler teacher explained, "If the community is unhappy then student behavior generally deteriorates in class."⁴⁰

The elusive qualitative measure of success in student performance is addressed by Judith Kleinfeld in an overview of her extensive research and analysis of the field. "What is critical," Kleinfeld concludes, "was the *school culture* the school and community created together."⁴¹ In our study, the con-

gruence of parents' and teachers' expectations of the students appeared to be crucial in fostering high achievement. The congruence was highest at Tri-Valley, which also had the highest rates of student achievement in rural Alaska. The difference between parents' and educators' expectations were the greatest in Tuluksak, which also had among the lowest rates of student achievement.

The dynamic of expectations warrants closer examination because expectations tend to parallel the types of standards students seek to achieve in school.⁴² A revealing example was the Joseph/Olinga Gregory School in Upper Kalskag where the standardized test scores in 1990 were higher (46-48) than the composite average for the other schools in the Kuspuk District (20-30). Among the reasons for the higher test scores in Upper Kalskag was the large degree of interaction between the school and community that meant that the school became the center of community life for students, parents, and teachers alike.

A somewhat different example of how community and school purposes fit together to favor student achievement was at Mekoryuk. The school principal told us in 1993 that student achievement was the product of the community's work ethic: "They want to get a job and know they have to do well in school to do this."⁴³ The school had maintained a consistent record of standardized test scores above average for rural Alaska villages, and each graduating class had sent two or more students to college.

The expectations of parents and school staff tended to divide on the issue of students' attaining a college education. Although parents agreed with school staff on the need for university and vocational education in order to make students employable, it seemed difficult for parents at the same time to accept that the villages lacked the job base to sustain the youth—after high school or after college. One parent believed, in fact, that the village could be attractive under any circumstances, and that "children can come back here and have the best of both worlds—phone, fax, TV and also subsistence."⁴⁴ During the period of our study, the majority of high school graduates did not settle into a productive career or vocation within their communities.

Intervening Variables

A number of intermediate factors aid both in explaining the causal relationship between parental roles and outcomes of student performance, and in providing a closer insight into the nature of the parental roles. During the course of our work, we became aware of the significance of site stability, including the turnover rates of school personnel (teachers, administrators, and local boards). We also observed the independent effects of school district

policy and superintendents' actions. Further, the comprehensive category of socio-economic factors, including the wealthy and ethnicity of the community, would seem to have a vital input on school outcomes.⁴⁵

As Figure 2 suggests, the intervening factors are considered as tentative causal explanations of student performance. A successor study that employed different hypotheses from ours might give primary attention to site stability, district policies, and socio-economic conditions as critical determinants of student achievement in village education. Also subject for further study is a clarification of how the intervening variables we have identified relate to parental roles. Our focus in the current study, however, is directed at an analysis of certain effects of mediating factors on student achievement.

Site Stability

Because all sites in our study reflected good local school board stability, we downplayed this factor in our site stability analysis. On the other hand, it was clear that a high turnover of school personnel lowered the level of satisfaction with the schools and had a dragging effect on the creation of a climate of high expectations for student performance.

Our seven sites reflected a variety of retention patterns for teachers and administrators. The most stable was Tri-Valley, where teachers were long-term residents and principals' tenures averaged over four years. The second most stable was Hydaburg, where, in 1993, the administrator had already served over five years, and one-third of the teachers had become residents (in contrast to our first visit in 1982, when staff turnover was nearly 100 percent). The stability of both school staff and administrators may be related to student achievement because test scores and the rate of college enrollment for Tri-Valley and Hydaburg graduates were high. In a site such as Mekoryuk, achievement was also high—regularly above average for the last five years of our study. Yet, unlike Tri-Valley and Hydaburg, the teacher turnover rate in the Mekoryuk school was relatively high, with an average of one new teacher a year.

On the other hand, Ambler provided a picture of mixed stability to relate to possible student outcomes. It had a large resident teacher population with the lowest turnover rate of any site in the district; its turnover rate for principals was the highest in the district, with seven principals in eleven years. In Ambler, student achievement, measured by standardized tests, ranked about average for the district and somewhat below that for rural Alaska (NCE scores: 20-30). Further, by our last visit in 1993, no student from the Ambler school had graduated from college.

District Policies

The policies at the school district level, on the one hand, reflect attitudes toward parental-role activity and, on the other, indicate types of student outcomes. In the site with the greatest degree of emphasis on school readiness and parental involvement in the schools, district policy was supportive but not directive (Tri-Valley in Alaska Gateway District). The site with the fewest school readiness efforts and the least school involvement had the strongest district policy and activity at the time of our last visit (Tuluksak in the Yupiit District).

We observed in one case that a strong board, and in another case, a powerful superintendent, were both negatively associated with high student performance, and parental expectations. The effective, stable, and experienced Northwest Arctic Borough board, described by a former superintendent as the “nucleus of people who have been the backbone of the district,”⁴⁶ appeared to have little positive impact on student achievement and expectations for student performance in the Ambler site located in the district. The perceptions of our Ambler respondents were that the district board had accumulated an excess of power. In the Kalskags (Kuspuk District), we observed a negative relationship between a powerful, long-serving superintendent and student outcomes. Despite the superintendent’s programs to cement community-school relations through lunches that drew elders into the school, the Kalskags students, we were told, lacked motivation and were not serious about school. Test scores proved low for the district, and the majority of our respondents remained dissatisfied with student achievement levels throughout the period of our visits to that site.

Socio-economic Conditions

In six of our seven cases, Alaska Natives were the majority of the population. The exception was Tri-Valley, where the population was nearly all Caucasian. Ambler’s small resident Caucasian population appeared to be an issue in village politics. However, it was the nature and extent of economic opportunities in the villages that bore a decided impact on aspiration levels in the schools.

Although reliance on subsistence tends to be a defining characteristic of the village economy,⁴⁷ some rural areas are integrated into the Alaska market economy. For example, almost all adults in the Tri-Valley attendance area have full-time jobs at the Usibelli mine, Golden Valley Electric Association, or Denali Park. Other villages, such as Mekoryuk, have a reindeer industry that provides steady jobs to some residents. A number of villages—the Kalskags and Hydaburg in our sample—benefit from seasonal employment in mines, forestry, or fisheries or, like Tanacross, are close enough to regional centers to benefit from seasonal state jobs in road maintenance or

firefighting. Two of our sites, Ambler and Tuluksak, had few income-earning opportunities and relied extensively on subsistence and transfer payments.

Because the socio-economic situation of most villages provided scant opportunity for full-time employment of youth, school staff often held out expectations for youth to leave the community and, perhaps, attend college or vocational institutes. Parental expectations, in many cases, were based on notions of the family and security of the village, and thus conflicted with the goals of the school staff. Where parental expectations for student achievement—leaving the village for further education or employment—were highest, the socio-economic conditions were also the most favorable (Tri-Valley). Where parental expectations were the least aspiring, the economic conditions were poorest (Tuluksak).⁴⁸

Applications to Other Regions of the Circumpolar North

Six other circumpolar countries have aboriginal populations: Indian and Inuit, as well as Métis, populations of northern Canada, the Greenlandic population of Greenland, Denmark, the Saami population of Fennoscandia, and the Native peoples of the Russian Far North. Although interview studies of parental involvement in Native education have been more numerous in the United States than in other northern nations,⁴⁹ it is still possible to examine some of the ways in which the model of the three parental roles may be applicable to the circumpolar North.⁵⁰

Trust-Building

Trust-building activities are premised on the need to develop community ownership in schools, which will then become congenial environments for education. Such activities are particularly necessary in communities where teachers and school administrators are non-Natives, and where rates of transiency are high. By communicating frequently with Native parents, teachers and principals often can reduce the distance between home and school. By holding activities in the school for parents and community members, teachers and principals can reduce the apparent foreign nature of the school environment.

In none of the circumpolar countries has there been as pronounced a movement to involve parents in education as in Alaska. This was primarily a response to the campaign for education reform throughout the United States in the 1980s. However, the issue of building trust between the community and the schools goes much deeper when one considers the boarding school experience of Alaska Natives and that of many Inuit and status Indians in northern Canada.⁵¹ Where Native youth, in the past, have been relo-

cated from their traditional villages to be educated, the need for trust-building between schools and the youth of that generation (parents in the contemporary generation) is particularly great.

On the other hand, the example of Greenland should be noted. In Greenland, trust-building activities would seem to be less needed because a large minority of the teaching positions and a majority of aide positions in the schools are held by Inuit.⁵² Indeed, the extensive system of self-government that Greenland has fashioned under Home Rule also permeates the educational process. One expert summarized the Greenland case thus, "It is no longer tenable to view the Greenland Inuit, unlike some other aboriginal peoples, as an oppressed minority in relation to a dominant nation-state."⁵³ Thus, despite the widespread adoption of the Danish system of education, trust-building between the community and schools in Greenland is less problematic than elsewhere in the circumpolar North.

Informal Parental Involvement

Broadly seen, this role is defined by the degree of integration of Native parents into the instructional system. Integration may proceed manifestly, when parents assume classroom or other instructional functions in schools, and as parents enhance their involvement with their children's education in the home environment. In addition, integration proceeds indirectly, when the indigenous culture, expressly the Native language and values, become part of the school curriculum. It is the latter indicator of parental involvement that we will address in the circumpolar countries. Some areas have proceeded further than Alaska in involving the parents and the culture in schooling; others are less well advanced.

Home Rule in Greenland, established in 1979, has been the chief force in program and language integration for Inuit there. Although educational instruction has been in Danish, the first and official language used in schools today is Greenlandic.⁵⁴ The presence of many Danish teachers in Greenland, however, has prompted a distinct "Greenland solution" to the issue of language integration in the school program: young Inuit have a bilingual education.⁵⁵ With a school in every settlement, several vocational schools, a teacher training college, and its own university, Greenland has significantly reduced the number of students traveling to Denmark for their education, and the cultural content of Greenlandic academic programs departs from solely Danish themes.

The cultural integration of the schools in the Saami communities of Norway, Sweden and Finland has suffered the characteristic problems of keeping the Saami language alive, and of lacking teachers and teaching ma-

terials. Sweden has been the most forward of the countries in providing support for Saami education and language training in Swedish schools.⁵⁶ In Norway, Saami parents may request language lessons for their children's first six years of school, and also that Saami be the language of class instruction for children up to about nine years of age.⁵⁷ Norway's position on Saami education was embodied in the Primary School Act of 1969, and its subsequent revisions.

Earlier, a visit to the Saami homeland in Finland would have revealed a somewhat different story from that of Sweden or Norway. In 1956, and again in 1959, we visited the surrounding areas of Rovaniemi, Äkäsjoki, and Muonio. There we interviewed Saami reindeer herders in Finnish, and observed parents helping their children with the difficult conjugations and eighteen declensions of the Finnish language. Saami children, as well as their parents, conversed in Finnish. Until 1970, Saami children were subject to the educational system that applied throughout Finland. Saami was taught only on a small scale, mainly in Utsjoki with a majority Saami population. Unlike Sweden and Norway, there are no Saami schools but by 1995, legislation on the status of Saami had led to a fivefold increase in the number of schools providing instruction of and in the Saami language. Saami has gradually come to be taught in all schools in the Saami region of Finland, including a pre-school language immersion program at Inari.⁵⁸

One might expect that the indigenous peoples of the Russian Far North would fare better than the Fennoscandian Saami with respect to school reinforcement of cultural values. The initial ideology of the Soviet regime favored cultural preservation of minorities, and this was reflected in preparation of dictionaries, primers, and other Native language instructional materials—perhaps more than in any other country of the circumpolar North.⁵⁹ Yet a surge of Russian nationalism in the 1930s and 1940s countered this approach, and a generation of indigenous youth were educated in the Russian language, thereby “admitting” them to “world culture.”⁶⁰ Never officially mandated by Moscow, the language policy for the Northern Minorities was nevertheless clear:

Around 1957, school teachers throughout the North began to exert pressure on the children with regard to their native languages. They were punished if they were heard to speak anything but Russian at school, and parents were requested not to speak their native language to their children at home. The usual explanation was that it would be better for the children to study only Russian at school since their education and understanding of the future mono-ethnic “Soviet” state would be made easier.⁶¹

For the post-Soviet period, the assessment Nikolai Vakhtin makes of language preservation is bleak:

Although the languages of the Northern Minorities are taught in schools in the North, education in its present form can provide little or no support for their preservation. There is a shortage of teachers, schools, and books. The teachers are often young people who are themselves not proficient in the Northern Minority languages while the technique of teaching them as "mother tongues" through primers, reading and writing, a technique which was developed in the 1930s, is now hopelessly outdated.⁶²

Canada presents considerable variety in providing an environment for parents as educators of Native youth, largely because it, like Alaska, has a federal and pluralistic system. Devolution and decentralization plans in recent years have brought major development in northern education and many curricular changes. In the Northwest Territories, the 1983 Indigenous Languages Development Fund of a million dollars supported language teaching and regional curriculum development in an unprecedented fashion. In general, Inuit have worked for years to develop a curriculum around the cornerstone of their language and culture, as have the Dene and Gwich'in.⁶³ For nearly two decades, a teaching program has existed at Iqaluit to train Inuit to be teachers. Of equal importance was the decision by the Department of Education to allow teacher's aides with classroom experience to earn a teaching diploma by getting credit for course work in their home communities in the North.⁶⁴ Ian Creery summarized the dynamic of change:

In the 1970s many Inuit parents had come to believe government assertions that only through an education in English could their sons and daughters fit into the new society. Now that Inuit teachers have shown them that it is possible to learn such subjects as mathematics or history in Inuktitut without any drop in academic standards they hope that an innovative educational system can be developed to function in native languages as well as English.⁶⁵

It is unclear whether any of the developments providing greater integration of Native culture in the academic program have or will have an impact on student outcomes, as conventionally defined. They have been popular with parents, however, and usually associated with an increase in parental and community support for education. Moreover, Linda McDonald's insight in her analysis of First Nations education in the Yukon is instructive:

What is becoming apparent to Yukon First Nations people is that culturally-relevant educational processes are as important as the conventional outcomes of mainstream education: a degree, certificate or diploma. Many First Nations people have achieved a variety of post-secondary credentials, but this does not necessarily guarantee that the person is well-educated according to First Nations' definitions. The critical issue, again, is that a balance must be achieved between both realities.⁶⁶

Parental Participation in Governance

The government providing the most authority to indigenous people, and thus permitting them the greatest control over their educational system, is the Home Rule system of Greenland. The Home Rule parliament has legislative authority over education. It provides for public school education, vocational training, and establishes a compulsory education system. It may decentralize its authority to local councils.⁶⁷ Most significant in considering indigenous control of education is that young Greenland Inuit are being trained in increasing numbers to replace Danes in administrative positions. This is largely possible because of the University of Greenland, where the main language of instruction is Greenlandic; furthermore, over half of all courses taught in the schools are in Greenlandic.⁶⁸ Perhaps to a greater extent than elsewhere in the circumpolar North, indigenous participation in the control of education is irrevocably established and there seems little fear that Greenlandic culture will disappear.

The decentralization of education programs in Canada has resulted in more local control than ever envisioned in the former era of federal and provincial centralization of education decision-making.⁶⁹ The Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND), for example, signed an agreement with the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs in 1991, which proposed acceleration of Indian control and management of Indian education in Manitoba. By the early 1990s, almost all of the "Indian Affairs schools" were band-operated. Of particular note was the work of the Special Committee established by the Northwest Territories Council in the late 1970s. The Committee recommended control by elected regional boards of education, the use of Native languages, and responsiveness to local areas by, for example, incorporating indigenous lifestyles into school calendars.⁷⁰

In his scholarly assessment, Creery posits a positive relationship between local participation in education decisions and student outcomes in the case of Canada's Northwest Territories. He cites figures to show that the number of Native students who went on to post-secondary institutions rose from 16 in 1978-79 to 154 in 1983-84 as a result of implementing Special Committee recommendation on local control.⁷¹ Creery also observed an increase in the general level of interest in education in N.W.T. communities.⁷² It is significant that Canadian scholars have played an active role in designing programs to educate Inuit leaders in operating a school board.⁷³ Scholars have not played a comparable role in other northern countries.

Rules vary among the Fennoscandian countries with respect to Saami control of education. Devolution and local control is most pronounced in

Sweden, where a Saami School Board was established already in 1980 in Jokkmokk. There are six Saami elementary schools in Sweden, and older students may attend the Saami Folk High School in Jokkmokk. The Saami School Board makes selections of teachers, textbooks, school rules, and monitors budgeting, the curriculum, and teaching.⁷⁴ The board is elected by the Saami people. In both Norway and Finland, local control of Saami education is limited mainly to the establishment of language courses and making them available to Saami students. In Finland, the Saami Educational Administration organizes meetings of parents, municipal decision-makers, and school authorities to foster communication and discussion especially about attitudes on bilingual education for the Saami-speaking population.⁷⁵ The finances of education remain dependent on central government decisions in all the Nordic states.

The least empowered parents in the circumpolar North reside in the Russian Far North. Under the Soviet Union, Terence Armstrong notes, "[there were] no school boards, school managers, or boards of governors."⁷⁶ Local control of education will ultimately depend on general political development and the way in which Russia's democratization proceeds. Vakhtin reviews several transitional models for the development of indigenous peoples and calls the Soviet model "the least successful."⁷⁷ For the future Russian model, Vakhtin defers to what one expert said of the Canadian Inuit, i.e., "their future is linked to the preservation of a strong local identity,"⁷⁸ and Vakhtin adds,

To find a way forward, great efforts are needed. Much work will be required from the Northern Minorities themselves, as well as the special attention and professional work of experts and politicians over the coming years.⁷⁹

Conclusion

In working with a range of village schools in Alaska, we developed a model of causal links between parental roles and educational outcomes in the system of Native education. The three parental roles that we identify in the model proved important in the educational process: trust-building between the community and school, informal involvement in supporting children at home and in the classroom, and participation in school governance. On the basis of case studies of seven rural sites, we showed that the parental roles influenced student outcomes as indicated through a qualitative assessment of the combined factors of school attendance, general expectations and satisfaction with the school, standardized test scores, and post-secondary career development. The role of informal involvement by parents in supporting their children's education was the most important in determining student

performance. We found a negative relationship between parental participation in school governance and student outcomes. Our on-site experience revealed that parental participation in educational decision-making often became a vehicle for community in-fighting and the politicization of the educational process. One might suggest that the key to strengthening the education infrastructure in rural Alaska is to raise the level of informal parental involvement (parents as supporters, providers, and mentors) at the same time that the parental role in school governance is rendered more effective. The issue of effectiveness in venues of parental control has been the subject of a continuing dialogue in Alaska.⁸⁰

Although comparable interview data from local sites are not available for other regions of the circumpolar North, we used the three parental roles as a tool of analysis for comparing the relative engagement of Native parents in their children's education. Differences in government policies toward education in the northern areas were evident. Not surprisingly, the greatest challenges in parental involvement are in the Russian Far North where the existence and identity of the Northern Minorities cultures may depend entirely on the parental roles that are assumed in the education of the younger generation. However, with regard to all nations of the circumpolar North, it is important to remember that we are working, ultimately, within a community of research that, as Cynthia Chambers observes, "has struggled with the question of how best to integrate the culture of the North into the culture of classrooms," and where "the answer is not yet clear."⁸¹ The model based on parental roles is intended to help focus the ongoing discussion.

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Endnotes

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3. David M. Rosenthal and Julianne Young Sawyers, "Building Successful Home/School Partnerships: Strategies for Parent Support and Involvement," *Childhood Education* 72 (Summer 1996), 194-200.
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 6. Ann Vick, "A Clearinghouse for Circumpolar Education," *Arctic Research of the United States* 6 (Fall 1992), 45. The Rogers Lang Clearinghouse for Circumpolar Education, established in 1989, is an NSF-supported initiative to identify and locate educational resources for use in village schools of the Arctic.
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13. J. S. Eccles and R. D. Harold, "Parent-School Involvement During the Early Adolescent Years," *Teachers College Record* 94 (1993), 568-587.
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17. Margaret C. Wang, Geneva D. Haertel, and Herbert J. Walberg, "Toward a Knowledge Base for School Learning," *Review of Educational Research* 63 (Fall 1993), 278.
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20. McBeath and Clayton, "Parental Participation and School Achievement."
21. The interviews were conducted by Gerald A. McBeath, Cornell Clayton, Karen Erickson, and Benjamin Kline.
22. McBeath, Erickson, and Kline, *Parental Involvement*.
23. A Canadian study of school dropouts, for example, suggests that socioeconomic status might be more important than cultural differences in explaining a high

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24. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, "Parental Involvement in Children's Education," 311.
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 26. Watkins, "Teacher Communications, Child Achievement, and Parent Traits," 8-11.
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 32. *Ibid.*, 7.
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 37. See, e.g., Ray Barnhardt, ed., *Cross-Cultural Issues in Alaskan Education* (Fairbanks, AK: Center for Cross-Cultural Studies, 1982); Ray Barnhardt, *Culture, Community and the Curriculum* (Fairbanks, AK: Center for Cross-Cultural Studies, 1981); J. S. Kleinfeld, G. Williamson McDiarmid, and William H. Parrett, *Inventive Teaching: The Heart of the Small School* (Fairbanks, AK: Center for Cross-Cultural Studies, 1992).
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58. Ulla Aikio-Puoskari, "Instruction of and in the Sami Language in Finland," trans. Kaija Anttonen (Inari: Finnish Saami Parliament, 1997), August 1999, available from <http://www.netti.fi/samediggi/Instru.htm>, accessed 12 December 1999.
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65. *Ibid.*, 133.
66. Linda McDonald, "Some Thoughts About the Flood and First Nations Education in the Yukon," *The Northern Review* No. 12/13 (Summer/Winter 1994), 109.
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77. Vakhtin, *Polar Peoples*, 75.
78. Louis-Jacques Dorais, "Knowledge, Identity and the Future of Inuktitut in Canada," conference paper, Seventh Inuit Studies Conference at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, 19-24 August 1990, n.p., quoted in Vakhtin, *Polar Peoples*, 80.
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81. Chambers, "Worlds Apart," 53. The dialogue on promoting education in a cultural context continues in the circumpolar North. An example is the Circumpolar Education Seminar held 21-22 October 1996 at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, sponsored by the College of Rural Alaska/Department of Alaska Native and Rural Development and the Consortium for Research in Rural Alaska.