



# Alaska Native Cultural Charter School

Anchorage, AK | Elizabeth Hancock, Administrative Assistant

**Grades Served:** pre-K-8 ■ **Enrollment:** 207 ■ **Year Opened:** 2007-2008

**Instructional Strategies:** Project-based learning focused on Alaska Native culture and languages

**Student Demographics:** Alaska Native or American Indian 52%; Hispanic 8%; White 3%; Black 2%; Asian 2%; Other 33%; FRL eligible 88%; Special education 11%

## A Mission to Serve

The Alaska Native Cultural Charter School (ANCCS) was created to offer a holistic approach that combines Alaska Native language, culture, history, and traditional practices into an inquiry- and standards-based educational program for the students and families of Anchorage, Alaska. As a public school, ANCCS welcomes and serves all students who apply regardless of ethnicity, race, language or gender, and Alaska Native values provide a framework to develop students' academic achievement and social/emotional growth. ANCCS was the first Title I charter school in the state of Alaska, serving a nearly 100 percent economically disadvantaged and more than 50 percent Alaska Native student body.

Research has shown that Native language and cultural programs are associated with improving students' academic performance and personal behavior—especially when students strongly identify with the culture. ANCCS was founded in response to an outpouring of demand from parents, Alaska Native organizations, and Anchorage citizens who wanted a school to address the unique needs of Alaska Native students, with particular emphasis on those who moved to Anchorage from rural and remote parts of Alaska. To meet student needs, the ANCCS curriculum combines statewide standards with best practices to teach cultural sensitivity in the classroom. In addition to core academic subjects, technology, fine arts, and the language of the Alaskan Yup'ik tribe are taught to all students.

## From Vision to Reality: How CSP Funds Enabled Alaska Native Cultural Charter School to Open

Funding through the federal Charter Schools Program (CSP) was critical to open Alaska Native Cultural Charter School. ANCCS "would not have been able to open without that startup funding. We would not have had money to purchase all the supplies that we needed to open our doors," explained administrative assistant and parent Elizabeth Hancock. She went on to note that, "because we are a charter school and because we chose to be different, we have to pay all our own bills. We have to find our own building to rent. We have to make sure we have enough money to pay for our staff and to pay for our supplies. One of the biggest issues that faces charter schools is finding a building—especially a building that is suitable as a school."

ANCCS opened in shared space rented from a church while it renovated a furniture factory to be able to house the school the following year. Even when the facilities upgrades were complete, the renovated space was still imperfect—notably lacking the gymnasium and playground space essential for elementary students to get exercise during the long winter. Eventually ANCCS was able to purchase a former Anchorage School District building from a private organization. Sixth grade student Octavius

## STATEWIDE IMPACT

- ANCCS received the Title I Distinguished School for Alaska for "Closing the Achievement Gap between Student Groups"
- Highest overall growth in students' Language Arts and Mathematics scores in the Anchorage School District on statewide standardized assessments

*"We founded our school to make it a safe place for students to come and feel successful. When you make children happy with themselves inside, it opens their lives for learning."*

— Elizabeth Hancock, administrative assistant and ANCCS parent



McCleskey said, "I've been going to this school since I was in kindergarten, and we've moved through three different schools so far. Our first school was just in some old church, and then not really a school but a big building, and now this school that's actually a school. I'm really thankful that we have this."

To help public charter schools, Ms. Hancock believes that Congress could help, "by a funding education better. They need to realize that these children in our building are the future leaders of the U.S., and they need to take the time and the initiative to properly fund schools. If parents choose to send their children to a public charter school, they shouldn't be punished."

## Teacher's Lounge

Many educators at ANCCS have a personal connection to the school's mission. For fifth grade teacher Danielle Riha, she was immersed in Alaska Native culture while teaching in several villages in rural Alaska. Ms. Riha, a San Antonio, Texas native of Italian descent, noticed that the cultural values of family and community were very similar to her Italian customs. She also observed that her Alaska Native students in the Yup'ik community were not connecting with the curricula sent to the school by the district. Many of her students had never been to a city, so terms found in the textbooks like "curb" or "screen door" were foreign to them. Ms. Riha invited elders from the village into her classroom to tell tribal stories, and her students were better able to grasp literary concepts like identifying the protagonist and lesson in a story context that reflected their life experience. Ms. Riha used this experience to help design ANCCS' curriculum that incorporates Alaska Native cultural practices with state standards.

First grade teacher Veronica Kaganak is a member of the Yup'ik tribe and incorporates the values of a subsistence culture into her classroom practices. In addition to core academic subjects, her students learn Yup'ik skills such as how to dry fish skin for use in art projects. Parent and board member Mikan Outwater noted that parents and students have said that ANCCS was their home away from home, and it's very much like village life where everybody is looking out for each other.

## Heard in the Halls



"A lot of families that are not Alaska Native connect to the cultural values that we're teaching. They are welcomed and everybody has formed a really nice unity."

—Danielle Riha, 5th grade teacher



"Once kids get some confidence as to who they are, then it helps them be better students."

—Mikan Outwater, parent and board member



"I think the school is really important to me because we get to do lots of stuff that other schools don't get to do, like Culture Week! During Culture Week, we get to connect with our ancestors and what they have done."

—Abby Hancock, 2nd grade student

## IN THE COMMUNITY

- Students develop service learning projects related to Alaska Native values and principles of a democratic society
- Ongoing service projects include a recycling program and working with elders in the community
- A partnership with the Alaska Native Heritage Center provides enrichment experiences for all students
- As a reflection of Alaska Native values, community involvement from parents, elders, and community organizations is encouraged at ANCCS

