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OUR SCHOOL

*An Arctic community prepares
its young people for the future*

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
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AMONG THE FEW THINGS that those of us from beneath the Arctic Circle are likely to know about polar Alaska is that the Inuit peoples have dozens of words for *snow*. It's such a darling and oft-repeated fact that one wonders if it's legend. Yet inside a warm, fifth-grade classroom in Barrow, Alaska, on the edge of the Chukchi Sea—it's twelve below zero outside and the wind is scouring the tundra—a group of nineteen students sit at rapt attention, copying their new vocabulary words onto loose-leaf paper: the many Iñupiaq words for snow.

"*Qanataag*," the teacher writes on the board at the front of the class. The students repeat it back to her in a ragged chorus.

"Good," she says. "*Qanataag* means 'ice or snow overhang.'"

"*Apua*," she writes next. It means "snow on the ground."

The lesson continues. *Nutagaq*: freshly fallen, unpacked snow. *Silliq*: snow made crusty and hard by the wind.

This is one of three classrooms at Ipalook Elementary School that teach Iñupiaq, the language of the Iñupiat people who are native to this flat, frozen stretch of North America. In the North Slope Borough School District, of which Ipalook is a part, Iñupiaq is a required class for all students, kindergarten through twelfth grade. Even non-Iñupiaq students—about a quarter of the North Slope population—must take a course in Iñupiaq, the language of the place where they are being raised. Thanks to the wounds of history and the pressures of modern life, Iñupiaq is fast disappearing, not unlike the sea ice that historically surrounds the North Slope for the majority of the year.

"*Pukak*," the teacher writes. That's the word for granular snow, she explains, which is best for melting into drinking water.

RIGHT: Teacher Chrisann Justice, with children in her bilingual early childhood education class, learning the Iñupiaq word for *wolf*.



“We were made to feel ashamed of who we are,” says Martha Stackhouse, an Iñupiaq elder who recounted her boarding school years. “Yes, we were.”

“*Salumaniq*,” she adds beneath it.

One of her students knows this word already. “To clean the water!” she exclaims.

The vocabulary lesson is preparation for an upcoming five-week unit called Winter Sources of Drinking Water, or *Immiugniq*, in which the class will study the varied nature and scientific makeup of snow; how to turn it into safe drinking water, like their ancestors did and many of their family members still do; the impacts of dehydration; and the physical constitution of living things and their relationship to water. The unit is part of the Iñupiaq Learning Framework, an education-reform effort born in 2010, right here in Alaska’s North Slope, which is designed to couple contemporary, standards-based public schooling with the traditions, skills, and place-based knowledges native to this region. Like all units in the Iñupiaq Learning Framework, the drinking-water curriculum is based not just on scientifically observed facts, but also on storytelling and students’ experiences in the world around them. It’s an education custom fit to the fact that, while all of these children live in homes with modern plumbing, nearly every one of them depends to some extent on subsistence fishing and hunting—on the caribou, ducks, Arctic foxes, walrus, and bowhead whales their families are able to find and kill. Many of the things they’ll be taught they already know, at least in part, but the curriculum is about connecting their practiced knowledge of the world to scientific understanding.

“*Sitchiyuiliq*,” the teacher writes. “Waterproof.”

“Like my coat!” a boy shouts. “Got one on right now,” he says. Despite the heat that’s on full blast, he’s zipped up in preparation for a fire drill. His classmates’ coats are on hooks by the door—Gore-Tex jackets from the AC Value Center hang next to traditional handmade fox furs and seal skins lined with bright-patterned fabric and decorative ribbon.

Waterproof: like these jackets, like the roof over the students’ heads, like walrus hide stitched into thigh-high boots for whaling crews. Like seal skin stretched over bone hulls forming the base of the crews’ canoes. Like Gore-Tex mittens. Like caribou stomach, which, when dried and turned inside out, can melt snow into water and hold it like a thermos.

In a couple of weeks, the students will be outside dressed in their waterproof coats, traditional and modern, drilling for core samples in the thinning ice. They’ll be collecting snow to observe and measure its properties and to learn its varied names and uses. The educators who developed the Iñupiaq Learning Frame-

work feel confident that, by the end of the unit, students will better understand the world around them and be able to name and order that world in two languages. They’ll be a bit closer to holding a hybrid education: one that is situated in the context of contemporary life, but that incorporates long-held communal knowledge and old systems of oral, narrative instruction—the way all education used to be.

THE NORTH SLOPE OF ALASKA is a political assemblage of eight Iñupiaq villages scattered throughout eighty-nine thousand square miles above the Arctic Circle, stretching from the Brooks Range to the Chukchi Sea. None of the villages are accessible by road. Barrow hovers on the continent’s rim, against the ever-receding sheet of sea ice; with a population of 4,373, it’s the area’s largest town by far and the North Slope’s capital. A whaling hub past and present, it’s comprised largely of Iñupiaq people who have hunted and fished in this landscape for over ten thousand years. (“Iñupiat” means “the real people.”) Though three-quarters of the North Slope’s 8,000 residents are native, only 988 of them—about 12 percent—are fluent speakers of Iñupiaq.

The language began to disappear because the state-run education system effectively banished it. In the late 1800s, Alaska’s general agent of education reported to the US Congress that the “savages” in native Alaska needed to be educated “out of and away from the training of their home life. They need to be taught both the law of God and the law of the land.” During that period, and long after, the US government, along with religious missionaries, opened repressive boarding schools for native children. These schools were far from students’ homes and the children were often taken against their families’ wills; parents were sometimes threatened with jail for refusing to send children away. The curriculum was Eurocentric: it focused on subjects that had little connection to students’ lives, and instruction was exclusively in English. Children who spoke their native languages were rapped on the knuckles, beaten, and forced to stand, facing the wall, holding stacks of encyclopedias until their arms quivered and burned. Versions of these institutions persisted through the 1970s.

“We were made to feel ashamed of who we are,” says Martha Stackhouse, an Iñupiaq elder who recounted her boarding school years. “Yes, we were.”

So it’s no surprise, says Jana Pausauraq Harcharek, a longtime educator and the director of the Iñupiaq Learning Framework,

that formal education became a suspect enterprise in the minds of many North Slope families—one from which students for generations would flee or within which they would fail. Yet attending school was, and is, the law of the land.

Harcharek is a commanding woman in her fifties with long, black hair and a studied stance on educational equity. She likes to emphasize the difference between “education” and “schooling.” In a 2015 article in the *Journal of American Indian Education*, she wrote that the advent of schooling in the North Slope was “a total strange concept”:

[It] meant that children no longer spent the days with parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles and extended family learning how to be human beings as they went along in life. In school buildings, they were told that speaking their language was bad; these negative images worked to deter them forever from the path of becoming full human beings.

Harcharek, herself Iñupiaq, explains that, along with the loss of the Iñupiaq language, her community has also lost access to long-held knowledge of their landscape, cultural history, and ancestry—in essence, knowledge of themselves.

Harcharek remembers noticing, even as a young child how her native identity was denigrated and erased in the classroom. It happened in ways both big (the lessons about the “discovery” of Alaska by Europeans, for example) and small (she recalls being asked in elementary school to draw pictures of apple trees, a tree she had never seen before). Because of this, and in spite of it, Harcharek became an educator. Is there not some way, she wondered, to integrate *schooling*—the modern and government-mandated practice of children learning together, guided by a state-credentialed teacher—and *education*, the time-tested practice of learning from your surroundings and your family, as well as your community and its stories?

She knew that her vision would require a vastly different kind of education system: a classroom, a curriculum, and an overarching philosophy that could bridge the gap between modern schools and the generations-old knowledge of the Iñupiat people. It would also require thinking in what Harcharek calls “a decolonized context.” “We need to internalize the notion that no one is going to tell us what is right,” she says. “We know what is right.” With approval and encouragement from the school board, she and her team made a proposal, which started, as all

TOP: Children await the celebration of a successful whale hunt. MIDDLE: Bones of a bowhead whale, piled at a hunting camp outside Barrow. BELOW: A student in Beverly Hugo’s Iñupiaq Language and Culture class sews a skin hat.





LEFT TO RIGHT: Jana Harcharek, director of Iñupiaq Education at the North Slope Borough School District, and teachers Beverly Hugo and Jamie Harcharek.

good innovation does, with a question: What does a successful eighteen-year-old Iñupiaq student look like?

Beginning in 2006, Harcharek spent two years asking a version of that question to elders throughout the North Slope. She wanted to know: What should Iñupiaq students understand, value, want, and dream? What do they need to get there? What should our schools look like and feel like, and what should we teach in them? The elders' response was almost unanimous: given that the modern world is encroaching, and that the earth itself is changing in ways both subtle and swift, it's important to integrate the old ways *and* the new ways—traditional knowledge *and* contemporary thinking—into what the community's young people are taught.

Today, the North Slope Bureau School District's twelve Iñupiaq values—identified during those conversations with elders—hang in classrooms throughout the region:

- Avoidance of Conflict
- Humility
- Spirituality
- Cooperation
- Compassion
- Hunting Traditions
- Knowledge of Language
- Sharing
- Family and Kinship
- Humor

- Respect for Elders and for Each Other
- Respect for Nature

Harcharek and her team also developed four “realms” of the district's core curriculum, all related to the Iñupiaq values: the Environmental Realm, which includes lessons about hunting, survival, and respect for the land; the Community Realm, which includes units on parenting, cooperation, and the roles of elders in the community; the Historical Realm, which includes storytelling and discussions of Iñupiaq culture in a global context; and the Individual Realm, which includes learning about leadership, values and beliefs, naming systems, and the cycle of life. Harcharek and others then painstakingly mapped the Iñupiaq Learning Framework to the state-mandated student-learning standards. (The Winter Sources of Drinking Water unit, for example, incorporates both the Alaska state standard for earth science and the Iñupiaq Learning Framework's standard for lessons about the complex technology developed by the Iñupiat people, which allows them to live in the harsh Arctic climate.)

Harcharek explains that the curriculum in the North Slope is about looking forward, but also about looking back—it's about bridging the gulf between what was and what is. After a hunt, for instance, students dissect whale eyes to understand how the retina makes images with light, and they experiment with the animal's fat to understand density. They build traditional sleds in geometry class, dissect sharks in a biology unit, and cook Iñupiaq food in a course on nutrition science.

“The story of the Iñupiaq Learning Framework,” Harcharek and a colleague wrote in the *Journal of American Indian Education*, “is a story of the process by which our community engaged in claiming our existence, our vision, and our connection with places that change with the seasons.”

This spirit of reclamation is spreading beyond the classroom. In October, the residents of Barrow voted to change the name of their town to its original name, Utqiagvik.

FLYING INTO ATQASUK, one of the North Slope's smallest villages, the ten-seater Cessna dips and scoops through thick fog before touching down on a long sheet of ice. Out the window, I watch caribou chew the permafrost, seemingly unfazed by the plane or the dozen or so people waiting for us below.

Atqasuk, home to roughly three hundred residents—95 percent of whom are Iñupiaq—has one school, the Meade River School, where seventy-eight students enrolled in kindergarten through twelfth grade go each day to learn. As the largest building in town, Meade River is also the de facto community center, hosting events like basketball games and weddings. This Friday, a funeral is scheduled to take place in the gym—a young woman from Atqasuk passed away suddenly. The teachers will be responsible for locking and unlocking the school so mourners can grieve.

I've come to Atqasuk to see the Iñupiaq Learning Framework Winter Sources of Drinking Water unit in action. Perfect timing, Harcharek said: I could take the curriculum kit along with me, packed into two large boxes, and deliver it to Christine Cassidy, a teacher piloting the program in her combined fourth and fifth grade class at Meade River. “We don't want teachers to have to find anything,” Harcharek explained as she handed the kit to me back in Barrow. “Especially out in the villages.”

Cassidy, who is in her early twenties and originally from South Carolina, is in her second year in the North Slope. “I came to this district because of its focus on cultural integration,” she tells me while seated on a child-sized plastic chair in the after-school quiet of her classroom. With less than two years of teaching experience, Cassidy has already seen the extent to which locally familiar anecdotes, examples, and stories impact students' learning. For example, last year, a simple multiplication and division lesson had students imagine looking under a fence at the legs of horses; once she changed the image to caribou, or *tutu*, which she had students draw while swapping stories about their personal experiences with the animals, the lesson was instantly more engaging. The math, she says, “just clicked.”

The main Winter Sources of Drinking Water text is a storybook, a narrative about a mother, father, grandfather, and two children who load up a snow machine for a caribou hunt. Over the course of the multiday journey, the grandfather and parents

teach the children to read the map and the landscape, how and where to collect snow, and about the perils of getting thirsty.

“Ataata explained that he used both silliq and pukak to melt into water,” the book reads, as the grandfather demonstrates the difference between the various layers of snow coating the ground. “Silliq yields the most water per volume because it is densest, but pukak is far easier to scoop into tea kettles or skin containers for melting.” Students will begin reading next week.

A difficult irony of the Iñupiaq Learning Framework is that the vast majority of people teaching the curriculum are, like Christine Cassidy, outsiders. Much as the region's communities want full control of their education system, very few people of Iñupiaq heritage become teachers: though the North Slope Borough School District accounts for 18 percent of the region's employment, the overwhelming majority of teachers here are non-native. They're often from the lower 48, and they often plan to return home sooner or later—and usually sooner. (The North

The Coywolf

Neither the smells of your yard nor
your street's chemical sweet
do I find demeaning, but the way

you move past this tree from car to door
each night, scuffing your feet
like verbs which aren't verbs

of smelling or hearing—as if your position
atop our kingdom will never turn
toward end. You've forgotten

how much you've burned the frontier,
every pine-stick chewed by beaver.
Here inside the moon's bedroom,

which you always cross carrying
your spade of fear, I mist the space
between driveway and trees, clear them

of ego. Don't think I pity you
because your wire gardens will blow down
or because you've eased me into

myth. I pity you because you believe
you will die someday beside a stretch of woods
with some god watching over you.

—David Roderick

Slope is not alone in this struggle. Whether in inner cities or on native reservations, US public schools grapple constantly with a lack of teachers who are representative of the communities in which they teach.) Teacher shortages plague the North Slope, so much so that the district has an advertisement in Alaska Airlines' inflight magazine: a photo of two smiling Iñupiaq children with a caption that reads, "Teach in the North Slope Borough School District. Have the Adventure of a Lifetime."

The dynamic sometimes makes Christine Cassidy and other teachers from the lower 48 uncomfortable. "But at the same time," she reasons, "if we aren't teaching this, the culture and language could easily disappear."

"Historically, teaching has not been seen in our communities as an honorable profession," Harcharek explained to me. "My theory is that the more students begin to see themselves reflected in the content, in the school aesthetics, in the school lunches, the more they will want to become the teachers. They will begin to see it as honorable." Of course, she wishes she

could fast forward five or ten years. In the meantime, teachers like Cassidy are expected to learn everything they can about the Iñupiaq language, history, and culture. They receive trainings during annual "culture camps," led by Iñupiaq elders and young people, in which they learn to hunt, break trail, make camp, carve baleen, identify native plants, and cook.

"The key," Harcharek told me, "is helping teachers connect to their own stories and cultures," and how they were, could, or should have been valued in their own schooling.

Cassidy opens the boxes I've brought as though cracking a treasure chest. Inside is a classroom set of the Winter Sources of Drinking Water storybooks, as well as goggles, water bottles, maps of the route the storybook hunt takes through the inland Arctic Slope, a package of ziplock bags, an inflatable globe, tracing paper, disposable gloves, a giant bottle of rubbing alcohol (wrapped twice in plastic, as bottles tend to freeze and break in the plane), a hot plate, Dixie cups, plastic spoons, and a few diapers that students will use to measure water density and absorption.

BELOW: Lucy Richards, the only fully fluent Iñupiaq speaker in Barrow's schools, teaches the language through song to her kindergarten class at Ipalook Elementary School.



If I were teaching this unit where I live in California, I could get most of this stuff at Walgreens on my way to work—but not so in Atkasuk, or even Barrow. "I'd have to do an Amazon order two weeks in advance just to get these diapers," Cassidy says, laughing, as she rifles through the box. Inside is even a bag of gravel, to be used for experiments. This time of year, any gravel in Atkasuk is encased in layers of snow and ice, and will be for several months to come.

During the upcoming unit, Cassidy will invite elders to share their experiences collecting water on the hunt, and to accompany the class into the field to collect snow. Back in the classroom, students will do a series of experiments, measuring their snow's density, salinity, and melting rate. One will teach children the necessity of water for survival: they'll dissolve the shells of eggs and drop one, still encased in its membrane, into a vat of water, while submerging another in rubbing alcohol. Each hour they'll remove the eggs to weigh them. By the end of the day, the egg in alcohol will have shriveled almost unrecognizably.

"The purpose of the experiment is to understand the importance of hydration, but the challenges of alcoholism will also inevitably come up," Cassidy predicts. The unit is simultaneously one of biological science, ecology and the human relationship to it, wilderness survival, history, and an opportunity to talk about contemporary challenges in the community.

"As Iñupiat, we are natural researchers," says Emily Roseberry, the Meade River School principal and the only Iñupiaq principal in the North Slope. "We're natural scientists." Emily's educational philosophy is not just about inspiring children to learn, but also about validating the knowledge they already have. As a science teacher, she encouraged students to look into things that truly interested them. She recalls one student who was at risk of failing because of his family's several-week-long hunt, which would cause him to miss the class's big research project. So she worked with him to plan a project he could conduct while hunting. They came up with a question, one that I was curious about myself: What do caribou eat in winter? He created a hypothesis, and, once he and his family killed the caribou, he opened the stomach and tested his idea. Sure enough, the animal was full of lichens that survive in permafrost.

The Iñupiaq Learning Framework makes hands-on projects like this possible, and normative, for all students—not just the ones who are lucky to have particularly dedicated teachers. "These are my people," Roseberry says, "and I take their education very seriously. We need all of our students to have positive experiences here." Which means that they need to see themselves reflected in what they learn.

ON A SUNDAY AFTERNOON, I drive around Barrow with Abel Hopson-Suvlu, an Iñupiaq man in his mid-twenties who was



The home of a whale-crew captain.

born and raised here. He left for boarding school, by choice, when he was thirteen, and recently returned after several years working in politics in both Anchorage and Washington DC. (Politics seem to run in the family: his grandfather was Eben Hopson, the first Iñupiaq mayor of the North Slope.) Living outside the North Slope had been important to Hopson-Suvlu, but now, at least for a while, he's chosen to bring home what he learned outside. In DC, he interned at the Senate; here he works in communications at the local hospital and with the Arctic Slope Native Association. He considers running, someday, for town council. Today he's in the midst of planning the Democratic caucus, in which residents will cast their votes for their favorite candidate by standing on either side of a room.

Hopson-Suvlu doesn't speak much Iñupiaq, but he can understand it. And in addition to knowing his way around the United States Senate, he can break trail and work on a whale crew. He believes that the Iñupiaq Learning Framework—something that didn't exist when he was in school—will give the North Slope's children the tools to understand their home and their culture, and also equip them to leave, like he did, if they choose.

He tells me he's happy to show me around, and happier still I'm writing about his home town. He hopes I won't turn out yet another "depressing" tale of Barrow and its hardships. Maybe, by being my tour guide, he can help me see the good side of things, too. "But at the same time you shouldn't romanticize it," he says, moving the car into gear and over the snow roads. It's an understandable concern, and one I grappled with while writing this story. When a non-native writes about native cultures, she is susceptible to painting a grim portrait of history or, just as likely, to

wax lyrical about the “wisdom” (as opposed to the modern knowledge) of native communities, now tarnished by time and the outside world. The ways of native peoples are often reduced to tired clichés that risk exoticism—*Oh, here we go again, talking about all the words for snow.* In the car, Hopson-Suvlu hands me a book to borrow: *Alaska Native Cultures and Issues: Responses to Frequently Asked Questions.* “I give to all my white friends,” he jokes. “Not allowed to ask me any questions that are answered in here.”

As we drive around, he points out the sights: the elementary school, the middle and high schools, the community rec center, the hospital where he works, the Iñupiat Heritage Center where a group of women will soon haul in seal skins and stitch together the hulls of this year’s whale canoes. About fifteen minutes out of town is Utqiagvik College, a point of North Slope pride: it’s where, all the way up here in Barrow, you can take college-level classes and earn an associate’s degree. Farther on, we pass a football field covered in snow and ice, and then the remains of the Shell Oil staff housing, where rows of buildings resembling shipping-container barracks sit empty and windblown. A polar research station stands where the tundra meets the sea, looking like some far-flung outpost on the moon.

Closer to town, Hopson-Suvlu shows me the spot on the ice where, in a few weeks’ time, the whale crews will break trail. From a camp farther out, they’ll wait, and watch, for whales to pass by. “It’s thin this year,” he says of the frozen platform between land and sea. I could see it from the plane when I flew in, the sturdy ice of the continent rimmed by white-blue sheets that, as they spread toward the open water, crack and dwindle until they’re nothing but a thinning membrane.

People from here know the freeze’s hidden bounty—the fish and marine mammals that become newly reachable by hunters, the herds and flocks that are given room to migrate, the berries and greens that push up into air once the top layer of ice melts in June. In the North Slope, 98.7 percent of people live off of food caught by their own hands, with more than 53 percent relying on these foods for over half their diet. On the outskirts of town, indications of the hunt are everywhere: houses with whaling cellars carved below ground to preserve the meat year round, seal-skin boats waiting to be repaired, a frost-caked polar bear skin flapping from a sawhorse like a shirt on a line. They’re all connected, in one way or another, to the reliable formation of ice.

Of course, even when the hunting is good, the North Slope can be a punishing place to live. In 2010, almost a quarter of

Iñupiaq households fell below the federal poverty line, with a 26.5 percent rate of unemployment and a 49.5 percent rate of underemployment. About a third of households in the area just outside of Barrow say that, in the past year, there were times when they did not have enough food to eat. To make matters worse, depression and alcoholism are rampant in many native and Arctic communities. Eighty-eight percent of villages outside of Barrow report that, in the past year, their community was either sometimes or often hurt by alcohol or drugs. As a result, the sale of alcohol is prohibited in Barrow; in the other villages, merely being in possession of it is a crime.

Because it’s complicated to import goods to the region (Hopson-Suvlu’s father bought the truck in which we rode in Fairbanks, five hundred miles away as the crow flies; to get it home, he drove until he reached the sea ice, hooked west, and continued for over twenty-four hours along the frozen shore), the cost of living is extremely high. Earlier this morning, at the AC Value Center, I saw a thirty-pack of Charmin toilet paper selling for \$47. (A teacher friend of mine told me that he often sees visitors Instagramming the outrageous price tags, and I myself was tempted.) Nonfrozen food, and sometimes frozen food, too, is nearly twice the price in Barrow as compared to Anchorage, and even more in the seven smaller North Slope villages. A dozen eggs, which costs \$2.59 in Anchorage, are \$5.19 in Barrow and \$6.99 in Nuiqsut, a four-hundred-person village forty minutes by air from Barrow. A pound of apples, which costs \$2.29 in Anchorage, goes for \$3.79 in Barrow and \$4.79 in Nuiqsut.

Back in town, Hopson-Suvlu and I make two more stops. Outside the local fur shop (which doubles as a craft and convenience store), he points to a row of sandbags positioned along the shoreline. It’s where, last year, the sea came so close to the permafrost that it began to lap the continent away in hunks. At the town’s main cemetery, we pull over and idle, beholding row after row of chest-high white crosses standing resolute against the ice and snow. They stretch to the polar horizon as far as my eye can see.

In the North Slope, you can spend a long time counting all the things that are vanishing or gone for good. There’s the melting sea ice, which makes the whale hunt riskier and the whales trickier to spot and spear. There’s the dwindling population of caribou, which has declined by 50 percent over the last six years. And there are the old dances and shamanic customs, which only a few people remember. Everyone here has heard of Kivalina, a peninsular village in western Alaska that is so close to sinking into

The one-size-fits-all school system in the United States tends to fail people on the margins of American society.



Skins of a polar bear and an arctic fox hang in Beverly Hugo’s classroom at Eben Hopson Sr. Memorial Middle School in Barrow. Students in Hugo’s class must pass an Iñupiaq language test before they can begin a sewing activity.

the rising sea that it will soon relocate entirely. The North Slope, along with the rest of Earth, is changing. It’s not unfathomable that someday Barrow, too, will have to think about moving—that for one reason or another, life will become untenable.

“We’ll turn around here,” Hopson-Suvlu tells me when I get back in the car. I was snapping pictures of the endless, forlorn cemetery, and it felt good to warm hands that felt dead from exposure. “But the road keeps going that way,” he says, pointing into the white vastness.

THE ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL education system in the United States fails people on the margins of society—whether it is impoverished communities in Appalachia, immigrants in Baltimore, African Americans in Chicago, or First Nations from New Mexico to Alaska. Free and universal education pretends to be our democracy’s great equalizer—but the system was made by and for a certain subset of people decidedly *not* on the margins. It can perpetuate inequality while intending, or pretending, to do away with it.

The Iñupiaq Learning Framework, then, raises a question that applies to schools everywhere: How can we build our curricula, and our educational philosophies, to inspire and reflect the communities they serve?

Of course, teaching to relevancy carries risks. If we teach children from agricultural communities only about farming, indigenous Alaskans only about whaling and hunting, and urban youths only about the ways of the city, then the system will be inequitably confining. The Iñupiaq elders knew this. They wanted their schools to pair the so-called relevant with the universal—so that students can thrive at home but also be equipped if they choose to strike out into the great wide open.

I know how important this balance can be. In addition to writing, I work with refugees and immigrants in the Oakland Unified School District, in California. Our students come to the United States with knowledge and expertise that, on a daily basis, puts mine to shame. They know how to grow food; speak multiple languages; travel alone by foot and train and wits; name plants in Thai forests along with their uses; care for babies and



TOP: After a whale hunt, kids play and await a chance to take home a share of blubber. BOTTOM: Outside Barrow, a makeshift basketball hoop is ready for summer visitors.

children and elders; work hard in school while fasting for Ramadan or working nights at a full-time job; resolve conflicts and start fires and navigate a new app on a cell-phone screen in the blink of an eye. (“Miss,” they say, rolling their eyes and snatching my confounding phone away, “it’s so *easy*.”) Yet they arrive in our classrooms and are made to feel unknowing, or that the things they know are irrelevant. Even in the hands of committed and brilliant educators, I’ve seen students forced to adhere to a fixed curriculum and take high-stakes assessment tests in which knowledge is reduced to facts, and facts are reduced to bubbles in multiple-choice exams.

The disassociation between what students have learned in their communities and what is expected of them in school widens the achievement gap between and among people of different ethnicities and classes. And the stakes are high. We know that our education system is failing—but it’s also failing disproportionately. If trends continue, one in three black men born today, according to the NAACP, can expect to spend time in prison, and yet each and every one of them will go to school. Twelve percent of Latino students drop out of high school, as opposed to 5 percent of students who are white. And only 67 percent of native students graduate, the lowest national graduation rate of any ethnic group in the United States. All of this is in addition to the criminalization of certain young people within school walls—think back on the recent story of the Muslim boy in Texas who built a clock and was arrested when educators assumed it was a bomb, or of the African-American girl body-slammed by a school security officer for refusing, in typical teenage fashion, to go to the principal’s office. It’s not just that our system is failing to transmit knowledge as registered on culturally skewed state tests. It’s far worse than that. Our education system is perpetuating systems of inferiority—like it did during the boarding school era in Alaska.

It troubles Jana Harcharek, as it should us all, that we assume that children come to school as empty vessels whose brains need to be filled by state-certified teachers. One day, when I visit her in her office in Barrow, she points outside to where the late-morning sun gleams off the snow, the temperature up to a balmy ten degrees. Her ancestors lived here before modern buildings, before central heating and cars, before restaurants and Amazon Prime, before the United States Postal Service and the AC Value Center. “We wouldn’t be here,” she says, “if we hadn’t already figured a lot of things out.”

I tell Harcharek that, before coming to the North Slope, I’d thought of the Iñupiaq Learning Framework as a cultural-preservation project. But now that I am here, I say, I’m starting to see her work as a kind of cultural-resuscitation project. She agrees, though she takes polite issue with my word choice: “I never liked the word ‘preservation,’” she says. “It’s so limiting, as if you’re putting something in a box to look at and then just set aside.” And “resuscitation” seems to suggest something already dead, she adds. The Iñupiaq Learning Framework, she stresses, is about *perpetuation*.

Harcharek’s words remind me of what happened when, as I prepared to leave California for Alaska, I nearly forgot to print her piece from the *Journal of American Indian Education*. In a rush to leave work, I grabbed a stack of scrap paper from the copy room and printed the article on the blank side. Once in Barrow, I noticed what was on the back: instructions for how to handcuff a student. There was an image of a boy standing with legs spread

and arms behind his back as a school security officer approaches him. “The SSO then removes the near handcuff,” the text read, “still controlling the handcuff with a full hand grasp at the chain, swinging the cuff out and away from the subject, and takes a shuffle step away to the rear so as to create distance.”

On the other side of the paper were Harcharek’s opening words to the article about the Iñupiaq Learning Framework: “This is a story about healing.”

THE BELL RINGS and the students in Megan Donnelley’s kindergarten class, in Barrow, open their notebooks and begin their morning work. Today they start a unit about careers, and Ms. Meghan encourages them to write in their journals about what they might want to do when they grow up.

“I want to be a firefighter,” says a little boy with a slight speech impediment. “I love fire trucks.” He informs me that a brand-new fire truck was recently airlifted into his town.

“From where?” I ask him.

“From far away!” he says.

A few minutes later, during circle time, the class takes turns naming all the jobs they can think of: Pilot. Scientist. Cleaner. Someone who works at the AC Value Center. Teacher. Firefighter, of course.

“Hunter,” another student adds.

“That’s an important one,” Ms. Megan says, and writes it on the board at the front of the room.

The morning announcements come on over the loudspeaker. They include a pledge of allegiance, first in English, then in Iñupiaq (admittedly an uncomfortable scene to behold, given the historical context). After, the announcer introduces the word of the week: *miñuaqtuḡvik*, Iñupiaq for “school.”

“Miñuaqtuḡvik,” the children repeat.

“Why is it important to learn Iñupiaq?” I ask the kindergartners, table by table, as they scribble away at their assignments.

“To talk to people,” one says.

“I have to teach my mom,” says another.

“I’m Iñupiaq!” squeals one girl, named Alani, as she pulls off her jacket. She’s come in late, and is eager to get to her table and join the conversation. “Only my *Aaka* knows how to talk it, so I have to remember,” she says. She shows me the half-heart pendant her *Aaka*—her grandmother—had given her for Christmas. Her *Aaka* wears the other half.

A few weeks ago, Ms. Megan organized a round of show-and-tell. One of the students, Aaḡluaq, age six, brought in two frozen foxes she’d caught almost entirely on her own—her first catch. She had instructed her father where to set traps, and went out with him on a snow machine a few days later to check them. Sure enough, she’d caught two *kulhaak*, or Arctic foxes.

She brought them to class to show her friends, who lined up at the back of the classroom to stroke the newly dead creatures’ thick fur. The young fox hunter, I learn, is Jana Harcharek’s granddaughter. ✎

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Ode to the Schorren

& their skin-thin silt the Scheldt ground down
from rocks, slopes & swamps—

that rainy-day-gray mud, a satin muck
that slips through fingers & escapes toward
the insatiable North Sea,

Neptune was born there a farmer told me,
in that estuary where the sky is so low,
you can sip it from your lips.

No horizon, not a farm or field or path—
only unbound marshes moored under the constant
giggle of cloud-ghosting gulls.

It’s this sludge, marsh-soaked, that the winds
whistle to & wrinkle—braiding pickleweed
& widgeon grass—where cat-sized

muskrats shriek & pull bitterns down into the sludge
by the feet. Everything there is sopped
with everything: light with silt,

silt with clouds, clouds with rain & sloughs
with rot & slime. But in the Spring, when griseous
clouds swell high in the air, sun-shafts

dive—sudden & brilliant—deep into the gulleys’
throats, & if you wait long enough, right there:
out of the vaguely swaying sedge,

you’ll hear it: the soar of the marsh warbler’s
song— & it’s then that you’ll press both hands
to your heart. Both hands to your heart.

— Laure-Anne Bosselaar

*The *Schorren* are large tidal salt marshes bordering the estuary of the Scheldt River in Antwerp, Belgium.