

The Alaska Humanities Forum is proud to nominate its Sister School Exchange program for the 2019 Helen and Martin Schwartz Prize for Public Humanities Programs.



Teacher Amelie Fischer leads students from Juneau on their exchange to Buckland.

A Vast Divide

Alaska is a massive state with rich diversity of language, culture, and perspective. Fewer than 800,000 people live in remote villages, towns, and urban centers spread across over half a million square miles with about a third living in Anchorage, its largest city. In some ways, Alaska is two distinct states rolled into one. For reasons of geography and history, rural Alaska and urban Alaska have developed different economies, cultures, and norms. They have much to learn from each other. About how to navigate the complexities of a cityscape. About the hard work and honed skills it takes to feed a village from the land. About how to interact with strangers. About how to embrace the elegance of silence.

Building Understanding and Connection: Sister School Exchange

Committed to the belief that differences are best understood in context, the Alaska Humanities Forum administers programs that enable Alaskans to learn about and from each other, as well as the chance to walk in each other's shoes. Over the past two decades, one of these programs, the Sister School Exchange, has provided this opportunity to more than 2,000 students and 400 teachers and other school professionals from all corners of the state.

The Sister School Exchange program, which has evolved through the years, was born of misunderstanding, emphasized by an incident on a horrific night in 2001 that forced the state to take a long, hard look at itself. That winter night three teenagers went on a "hunting" expedition in Anchorage. "We're going to nail some Eskimos..." one of them said, his words captured on a videotape seized by police. The white teens spent the night targeting Alaska Native men and women they wrote off as "drunks," shooting them with paintball guns, including blasting one man in the face. The incident prompted the Legislature to condemn the hate crimes, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights to investigate, and Alaska's Governor Tony Knowles to assemble a Governor's Commission on Tolerance, which held public hearings across the state.

The initial exchange program was formed in response to this incident and the climate of disconnect that it reflected. It was based on the idea that an urban and rural exchange experience would foster understanding and empathy among communities and individuals. It would form a basis for a lifetime of cross-cultural relationships and result in wise political and economic decisions made through the filters of knowledge, friendship, and trust. Because democracy demands empathy, the Sister School Exchange serves and strengthens our state by engaging youth in Alaska's diverse heritage, traditions, and history and the current conditions of the thriving indigenous languages and cultures of our state.

In 2004, the Sister School Exchange model replaced the individual exchange student model (RURE) and continues today. Now, students take part in a five-module, highly interactive course during the school year that prepares them to be effective cultural ambassadors. The curriculum integrates elements of self-reflection and personal understanding that often lead to a better understanding of communities and provide young people with the tools to conduct this cultural examination. The course is specifically designed to challenge the participants to consider the world outside of themselves and it asks young people to consider and immerse themselves in different worldviews.



Students from Eek speak with their State Representative Tiffany Zulkosky during their visit to Juneau, Alaska's capital.

The teams also chat with each other over the internet (which wasn't possible in the early days.) And, the curriculum has shifted from a more academic focus, especially when Alaska Studies was introduced as a high school graduation requirement, to now being more aligned with current best practices in teaching (student driven, inquiry-based learning approach). Teachers have the flexibility to tailor the curriculum to meet the needs of their students and to connect with topics they are covering in the regular school day. They are also able to arrange their travel to fit the students' schedules and to plan hosting at a time when the entire community has a chance to be involved.

The integration of online course work has provided participants the opportunity to engage with a robust learning management system (LMS). This is a priceless skill for rural youth, especially those who may want to access distance learning. Additionally, all teachers who participate in the program increase their engagement with technology and abilities over the course of a school year. The LMS requires teachers to post to blogs, create and develop video and audio, and engage with video conferencing. Teachers have

become increasingly proficient to the point that they redesigned and recreated the entire curriculum using an online environment. This is the fourth year that the program has implemented the teacher-created curriculum.

Financial Structure

The program, originally part of a Congressional earmark, has operated since 2008 with funding from a competitive grant issued by the US Department of Education under the Alaska Native Education Equity program. This funding will end this year, but the Forum will continue to lead cultural exchanges and programming to build networks of friendship and connection, and to deepen a statewide sense of community.

The total annual cost of the program is approximately \$425,000 to support 15 exchanges (30 teams.) This includes transportation, housing, educational program activities, teacher orientation gathering, staffing and operational costs, and teacher honoraria. Because of Alaska's geography, most of the locations outside of a few urban hubs are not on the road system and can only be accessed by plane. Every exchange requires travel - airfare is roughly \$225,000 of the annual program cost.

Program Impact

Annually, the Sister School Exchange reaches over 15 rural and 15 urban classrooms, over 150 participants, across the state of Alaska. Participants are peppered around the state and the program has allowed the Forum to establish collaborations with school districts and Native Corporations as full partners for over 14 years. While the group of students and educators who participate in the curriculum and travel from any given community is small, the impact of the program extends to a wide range of community members, Elders, families, classmates, and local organizations engaged through the exchange visits.

Each year, pre- and post-surveys are used to report on the most important elements of the immersion experience from beginning to end. Included in the survey are questions to determine students' understanding of culture, what skills they believe are needed to be an effective cultural ambassador, their understanding of the difference between heritage and culture, and a variety of belief statements. This 12-item assessment develops a baseline and gives the program staff some insight into how the participants incorporated and understood the content.

Amy Mack of King Cove had been to Anchorage before, but had never experienced full immersion as she did during her school exchange in 2002. She remembers feeling alarmed by flying 60 miles an hour down the Seward Highway ("Is this okay?") and how changing classes at Service High felt like being caught in a stampede. But what shocked her most was how she was perceived,

"I got a lot of strange questions, like if we live in igloos. I didn't fully understand the images people of the city had of me. I was an alien to them. We were explaining the Native Youth Olympics, which is big in rural communities, and the seal hop was brought up. And one of the kids in class was like, 'So do you balance a ball on your nose?'" The best part of her experience was helping her host mother in her classroom. After three days, Mack was hooked. She knew she wanted to be a teacher, too. Now 33, she's in her 10th year of teaching preschool in King Cove.

Amanda Dale went from Anchorage to Scammon Bay the first year of the exchange. It was her first time traveling off the road system. She was out of her element, unsure of herself and nervous. But that didn't last long. "I had the world's greatest host family," she said. "They just took me every-

where. I went snowmachining, I went on a hunt for rabbits, I went ice fishing, I went to a basketball tournament a few hours (via snowmachine) away. I froze my face off.”

Dale is still connected to her Scammon Bay family, and plans to see them this summer. The experience built her confidence and curiosity for world travel. She’s since lived, worked, and studied in Japan, Chile, Denmark, Spain, and Sweden. “I think all of that started because of this one trip to Scammon Bay,” said Dale, now the Forum’s Public Programming Manager who oversees the educator immersion program. “Scammon first got me thinking that if I approached new places with true curiosity, flexibility, and openness, I would be just fine.”

Amelie Fischer, a Floyd Dryden Middle School teacher in Juneau, has taken students to Buckland twice, an experience she calls “life changing.” The highlight was an ice-fishing excursion, 90 miles roundtrip by snowmachine. “We caught over 150 sheefish that day, one after another, after another. It was crazy. Everyone was helping out, everyone was in. Then the next day we handed out all the fish to people who helped, but also to community members who didn’t have the means to get fish on their own. Their first harvest of the year is a gift for the community, not for themselves. And so teaching values like that went really far, and the kids really embraced that. So there were a lot of really deep lessons there.”

Back home, one student’s parents told Fischer that before the trip their son had been balking about doing chores. “But as soon as he returned, he was like, ‘Mom and Dad, what can I do? Can I wash the dishes? Take out the trash?’ Being in that community and seeing how much everyone works together he came back a totally different kid.”

Arthur Padilla, a nonprofit management/strategy consultant based in the Seattle area, has been the programs’ evaluator the past several years. “The learning, it’s phenomenal,” he reflects. “When you talk to the folks who’ve gone through it, it’s what gets them to college, it’s what changed their life, it’s what changed their family, it’s what made them finally have conversations about racism at their dinner tables. The model is really sound. Maybe part of that sound model is that it can be replicated in other places because it’s needed all over the country. Our biggest challenge in the United States right now is we can’t have these conversations because we don’t know how. This is a process that lets people know how.”

Attachments and Links

- [Alaska Humanities Forum website:](#)
- [“Unfamiliar Territory – Students reflect on two decades of cultural exchange programs”](#), FORUM magazine, Spring 2019
- [“Across the Ice”, Sister School Exchange Documentary](#)
- [“On the Snowy Tundra, Alaska Students Bridge Differences and Eat Moose Snout”](#) (video)
[“On the Snowy Tundra, Alaska Students Bridge Differences and Eat Moose Snout”](#) (story)
Letters from Alaska series, Education Week.
- [“Buckland Students Explore Ways to Address Rural Alaska Energy Challenges”](#), energy.gov
- [“Out of the Office: A Sister School Experience”](#), Peninsula Clarion
- [“Sister School Exchange brings Napakiak Students to Sitka High”](#), kcaw.org
- [“Juneau Students on Exchange Get a Taste of Life in Western Alaska”](#), KTOO