

# 2023 Schwartz Prize Nomination: **Ilakucaraq (“Being Together”) Program**

(Hear how to pronounce Ilakucaraq [here](#))

*Ilakucaraq* means “Being Together” in the Yup’ik language, and it’s a central component of well-being. The Alaska Humanities Forum’s aim in undertaking the project is to leverage the power of being together to support more than 600 Alaska Native middle- and high-school students across the state in developing **resilient cultural identities**, which research shows is a key component of student academic success.

*I learned to never give up; you’ll always find a way. -IP student, 2022*

## **Program Summary**

The *Ilakucaraq Program* was created to **recognize the unique strengths of all Alaska Native youth and connect them to share and learn together**. It is a grant-funded program funded by the U.S. Department of Education. To date it has directly impacted 674 Alaska middle- and high-school students.

The program is a partnership between the Alaska Native Heritage Center (ANHC), the Alaska Humanities Forum (AKHF), and Mt. Edgecumbe High School (MEHS), a public boarding school in Sitka, Alaska. *Ilakucaraq* supports students in developing resilient cultural identities, strengthens connections between Alaska Native youth across the state, and educates teachers on how Indigenous ways of being and knowing can be centered in classrooms. This grounding sets students up to graduate from high school, determine what postsecondary success looks like for them, and ultimately contribute to the health and cultural fabric of their communities.



*Ilakucaraq* has four components:

- 1) **yearlong student cohorts** that travel together twice (once to a rural community and once to an urban community); students stay connected between trips virtually;

- 2) **statewide student workshops** (virtual and on-site at schools)
- 3) **partnership programming with MEHS** in Sitka; and
- 4) **courses and workshops for educators** (run by the Alaska Native Heritage Center)

### **Overview: Leveraging the Power of Being Together**

#### *Filling the gaps for Alaska Native students*

Colonization has deeply impacted Alaska Native people and Alaska Native students rarely see themselves represented in the schools they attend. In Alaska, roughly 65% of teachers come from other states, 90% are white, and less than 5% of teachers are Alaska Native or American Indian. Mass Western education practices were first introduced in Alaska through Bureau of Indian Affairs-run boarding schools, which between 1878-1975 took children from their families, stamped out language and culture, and used abuse as a tool to separate children from their cultures. This history is recent and in many communities in Alaska, Elders who experienced trauma at boarding schools are still alive to speak about their experiences and the stresses of enduring colonization. The 2016 Calricaraq project, which convened 40 Yup'ik Elders, identified that "Colonization dramatically altered the lives of Alaska Native peoples, and the intergenerational pain – the historical trauma – caused by these changes deeply affects Alaska Native communities today."<sup>1</sup> The impact of historical trauma is well documented, and research finds that it specifically harms the sense of positive cultural identity among Indigenous youth.<sup>2</sup> Today, Alaska Native students have the lowest



<sup>1</sup> 2016. *Calricaraq: Indigenous Yup'ik Wellbeing | Yukon Kuskokwim Delta Tribal Communities*. [View Report \(PDF\)](#)

<sup>2</sup> Evans-Campbell T. (2008). Historical trauma in American Indian/Native Alaska communities: a multilevel framework for exploring impacts on individuals, families, and communities. *Journal of interpersonal violence*, 23(3), 316–338. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260507312290>

graduation rates of all Alaska students.

Despite this difficult history, *Ilakucaraq* is committed to viewing Alaska Native students through a strength-based lens and intentionally resisting and dismantling narratives that view Alaska Native people through a deficit lens. Students need to know how the Western education system was designed to remove their Native identities, and to disrupt traditional community ideas of success. They need to know that their Native culture is a source of strength, not something they need to hide in order to live the life they want, and see examples of this being true. These beliefs are at the core of *Ilakucaraq* program design. In the words of one AKHF staff member, **“We are directly trying to undo generational trauma.”**

Alaska’s size and geography are also barriers to connection between people in the five main Indigenous groups, who together make up roughly 20% of the state’s population. Alaska ranks last in connectivity in the United States, and Internet is almost 200 times slower in some rural areas than in the cities. Only 18% of the state’s communities are on the road system; the rest are reachable only by air or boat travel.

**The Ilakucaraq Project is specifically designed to counter the damage endured from both colonization and isolation.** It is the only program in Alaska that brings Alaska Native students together from all regions, across Native cultures and communities, for a sustained period of time.

*I feel a lot more respected as an Alaska Native.  
-IP student, 2022*

#### *Post-secondary preparation*

**Western research and Alaska Native Ways of Knowing both validate that Alaska Native students who identify their heritage as a source of strength and have a strong support network are more academically successful,** including graduating from high school at higher rates and successfully navigating postsecondary education. *Ilakucaraq* participants develop positive cultural identities through conversations using humanities springboards; cross-cultural experiences; peer-to-peer learning; Alaska Native Elder teachings; and art & storytelling.

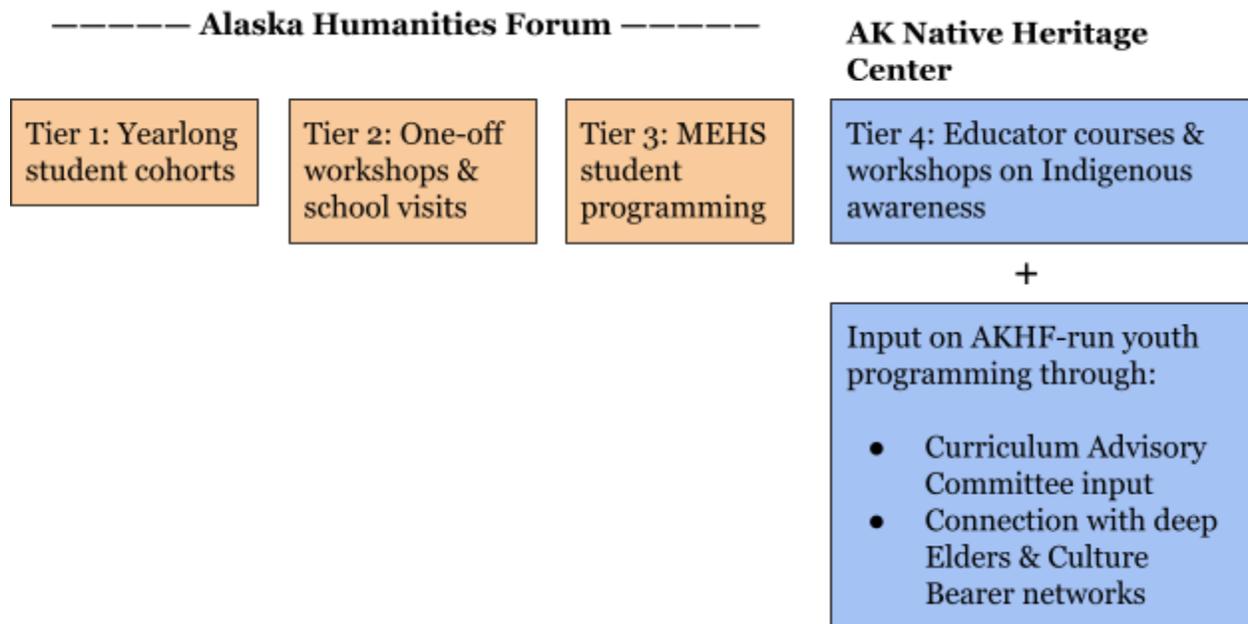
Ilakucaraq  
program impact in  
three words:  
**Self-reflection  
Support  
Resilience**

## ***Ilakucaraq* Partnerships & Outreach**

### *Core Partners*

At the heart of the *Ilakucaraq* program is the partnership between AKHF and the Alaska Native Heritage Center (ANHC). *Ilakucaraq* developed out of ANHC's vision to support and celebrate all Alaska Native cultures, and AKHF's work in youth cross-cultural programming, which dates back to the first piloting of urban-rural student exchanges in 2001. That work eventually developed into the Sister-School Exchange, which paired schools in urban and rural communities and saw teams of students work through curriculum in cross-cultural understanding, culminating in trips to visit their sister school friends. *Ilakucaraq*, which brings students together in-person and virtually for five-day immersions and short "one-off" workshops, is a natural extension of these priorities and experiences.

AKHF and ANHC began co-designing the program in 2020. AKHF is responsible for the student programming and ANHC is responsible for the educator programming. The breakdown is summarized here:



**ANHC** is located in Anchorage and was created by the Alaska Federation of Natives in 1987. It serves as a statewide resources and community center for Alaska Native peoples from birth through Elder stages. ANHC envisions a world where Alaska Native people and cultures are thriving, respected, and valued, and its mission is to preserve and strengthen the traditions, languages and art of Alaska Native people through statewide collaboration,

celebration and education. ANHC's Curriculum Advisory Committee, composed of Elders from multiple regions and Alaska Native cultures, regularly provides input on the student programming that is designed by AKHF. ANHC is also the holder of the \$3.3 million *Ilakucaraq* project grant from the U.S. Department of Education (AKHF serves as a Contractor).

*Other Partners:*

Two other partners are important to recognize in this application: Mt. Edgecumbe High School (MEHS) and General Communication Inc. (GCI).

**Mt. Edgecumbe High School (MEHS)** is a public residential boarding school operated by the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development since 1985 (prior to that, it was a Bureau of Indian Affairs-run school from 1947-1983). It's located in Sitka, a three-hour flight away from Anchorage. MEHS provides academic and extracurricular opportunities for high school students from small, isolated communities and home schools, and currently more than 400 students from 111 villages attend. Seventy-nine percent of students are Alaska Native. *Ilakucaraq* staff fly to MEHS each spring to work directly with students in the Junior Advisory program, a class of juniors working to prepare for their postsecondary journeys.

**General Communication Inc. (GCI)** is one of two major statewide providers of high-speed internet in Alaska. Approximately 33% of rural Alaska households have internet, and it's prohibitively expensive in both rural and urban communities. In order to help participating students join the IP virtual sessions, GCI worked with project staff to set up 22 residential internet connections, plus more than 250 months of pre-paid high-speed internet service.

*Unique collaborations that broaden program impact*

In the spirit of shared learning and to broaden impact, *Ilakucaraq* has built strong ties to several organizations and institutions. Collaborations have included:

- University of Alaska, Anchorage and Juneau campuses (Native Student Services and Rural Student Services)
- tribal entities like Sealaska Heritage Institute and Goldbelt Heritage Foundation
- Alaska Federation of Natives
- Association of Village Council Presidents
- DIG Afognak Culture Camp
- Alutiiq Museum in Kodiak
- Kusilvak Academy (Lower Yukon School District)

- Alaska Association of School Boards

Program staff have also been invited to join the following gatherings:

- Indigenous Post-secondary Education Fair in Juneau
  - Asked to facilitate student sessions around the importance of identity in post-secondary planning
- Presentations at the annual Alaska Association of School Boards conference
  - Resulted in invitation to give input on creation of statewide Culturally Affirming Career Guide
- Presentations at the Elders & Youth Conference run by the Alaska Federation of Natives

### *Creative and successful integration of public and academic programs/audiences*

Postsecondary preparation is central to *Ilakucaraq*. Although not every student will attend a college or university, all need to know more about what college life and demands are like, and what supports exist for them if they do choose that path. They also need to be prepared to experience culture shock. (As one student described in 2022: “I learned what culture shock was, and I had not known what that was. And I didn’t know I had experienced it a lot.”) To this end, they spend time touring college campuses, speaking with students and staff, and even board in the dorms.

In addition, the Alaska Association of School Boards has been an affirming friend to the program, featuring program staff at its annual conferences, connecting them with teachers across the state who can help recruit students and host school visits, and asking them to help create AASB’s Culturally Affirming Career Guide.

### **Intentional Design of Student Programming**

AKHF is the premier Alaskan institution for designing and facilitating cross-cultural programming. The four full-time *Ilakucaraq* staff (bios below) collaborate on all program aspects.

## MEET THE TEAM!

### Emily

My name is Emily Maurveluviiuq Brockman. My mother's people are Yup'ik from Togiak and Aleknagik and my fathers are German-immigrant farmers from Carson, Iowa. I was born and raised in Dillingham in Bristol Bay, made a home and graduated high school in Seward, and now work and play in Anchorage. I enjoy drinking kuuvviaq (coffee) with a good book, eating lavender cookies, and rotating forms of exercise with the seasons!

### Molissa

My name is Molissa Udevitz. My ancestors are European, and my parents moved to Alaska before I was born. I grew up in Eagle River playing outside, taking dance classes, and performing. I left Alaska after high school but chose to come back and now call Anchorage home. Outside of work, I enjoy hiking, cross-country skiing, dancing, and listening to podcasts.

### Gordon

My name is Gordon Aghqunqaq Iya. I am of Siberian Yupik descent, from the communities of Nome and Savoonga Alaska. Family is currently living and working in Anchorage. My hobbies and passions include anything and everything to do with St. Lawrence Island drumming and dancing, spending time outdoors with my fur babies and wife, along with TV/video gaming (also with wife).

### Helen

My name is Helen Panruk Apaliq John. My dad's side of the family is Yup'ik from Nunakauyaq (Tooksook Bay), AK, and my mom's side of the family is Iñupiaq from Unalakleet, AK. I was raised in Bethel and have lived in Anchorage for about 10 years now. I get joy from trying new foods/restaurants, being outside in the summer, and spending time with good company.

The team designs student workshops and five-day immersion trips around the following principles:

- *Incorporate humanities springboards* to ground deep conversations (sample list [here](#))
- *Prioritize self-reflection and self-expression*. The program provides tools and insight for self-reflection through art projects, journaling, storytelling and literature to catalyze reflection on students' own values, assumptions, and dreams ("I Am" poem sample [here](#)).
- *Build community connections*. The five-day student immersion trips are divided into three themes: Connection to Place, Connection to Self and Considering My Future. For all three, the program designers invite local Elders, Culture Bearers, artists, people who have and haven't attended college, people with traditional knowledge, and storytellers, all from different regions and generations, to co-create the spaces where connection happens.

- *Co-create programming with communities and invited guests.* Programming aligns with topics communities and invited guests want to share with students, rather than asking guests to fill slots and speak on particular topics.
- *Invite community and family participation.* Culture Bearers and other guests bring their families to sessions, each immersion includes a community potluck, and students' families and relatives are invited to join activities.
- *Historical context is important.* Conversations about big topics like colonization, the [Land Back movement](#), systemic racism, and generational and historical trauma are welcome during *Ilakucaraq* programming. Staff and guests believe that knowing Alaska's history is important.
- *Success depends on cultural and community contexts, and should be defined by the students.* As one AKHF staff member says, "Whatever goals you have, those are good goals. You define what is important to you. We just want you to be able to feel like you have choices and see a lot of pathways." Students are exposed to different choices and opportunities through the program, from their first traditional dance to staying at a college campus to learning about JobCorps. As one student wrote on a survey, "Getting out of your comfort zone is awesome."
- *Cultural accessibility.* All *Ilakucaraq* students should have the same access to the Alaska Native cultural and traditional knowledge shared through the program, and feel comfortable that they have a right to be there, regardless of their own connection to their culture, or how much their Indigeneity is a part of their heritage. Students who have been adopted by white families, for example, and students who have grown up feeling firmly rooted in their Native cultures should both feel supported and empowered through participation in the program.
- *Every student is a leader.* All students have designated responsibilities for checking on each other, leading routines, helping welcome and connect others, and keeping their groups stay on time.
- *Students shape programming.* Staff asked students what they want to do during evenings on the immersion trips. The most popular requests are practicing [Native Youth Olympic](#) events or dancing, going to the trampoline park or to the swimming pool, and playing basketball. Students also give input on virtual sessions and suggest Culture Bearers and programming themes.

## Our one-off programs happen around Alaska



It's different now because I've been able to see what the culture means to different people. Alaska Native culture is so much more diverse and important to me than it was before. - IP student, 2022

### New Uses of Technology

For many people in rural Alaska, lack of technology is the biggest barrier to connection beyond their immediate community. Many programs for rural students in Alaska are disrupted or discontinued as people realize the challenges of low connectivity. Often the solution has been to ask students to participate in any virtual activity at school, where connectivity is generally better, but being in a school building can be another barrier to open, authentic participation. To work around this, *Ilakucaraq* piloted directly providing residential internet for participating students and their families and Chromebook laptops for

students participating in the yearlong cohorts. Better connectivity has not only meant that students can keep in touch with each other and with program staff, it has also made virtual teaching of traditional crafts possible. Through Zoom sessions, students have been guided by instructors in making beaded bracelets and qupak (decorative trim for kuspuk and atikluk clothing), for example.



qupak example  
Photo by: Janne Beate Reitan

During the program, students also learn that technology, the application of scientific knowledge for practical purposes, also encompasses traditional innovations that date back thousands of years (e.g. kayaks, originally developed by the Unangax̂ people of the Aleutian Islands). Students learn how Alaska Native cultures use plants and berries, practice harvesting, and then make salves and foods themselves from what they harvest. **Technology therefore becomes a vehicle for learning cultural knowledge, and a point of access to cultural achievements.** Students also make drums adapted to materials on hand - for example, using tiki torches and airplane fabric coated with wood varnish instead of animal skins. The lesson is that there is power in technological innovation and adaptation.

### **Commitment to diverse, equitable, inclusive, & accessible programming**

*Ilakucaraq's* commitment shines through in both the planning and execution of this program. Students have filled out applications over the phone, received printed copies in the mail, and attended the Zoom and in-person guidance sessions. Staff take calls in the evenings and have even delivered and picked up applications at students' homes as needed. During immersions, parents have transferred money to staff, who then pass it along to the student so they can have cash to go shopping. Staff drive students to cell phone stores during immersions to replenish their data and cell minutes, and host community potlucks so that students' family members from the community they are visiting can join (staff also give them a ride if necessary). Staff take particular care with students who haven't traveled before (about 20% of immersion participants), making sure they have family to stay with when they have long layovers and waiting for them at the airport to walk them through luggage collection.

Students are selected for the six cohorts based on several factors, curating groups to have a balance of urban/rural students, outgoing/reserved personalities, regional diversity and gender, where possible (most applicants are female). The program doesn't ask about school performance or require an essay, and staff prioritize students who don't have other

opportunities to travel (such as through athletics). By Year 2 of the program, students from every region of Alaska were represented in the program.

A handful of immersion participants have identified as transgender and/or non-binary, and so in Year 1 of the program, AKHF drafted a specific policy for serving students who are gender nonconforming and/or trans. The policy reinforces participants' rights to discuss and express their gender identities openly and to decide when, with whom, and how much to share private information, and to choose how they are referred to (name and gender). All *Ilakucaraq* students are allowed overnight accommodations that correspond with their gender identity, and trans and nonbinary participants are consulted in the planning process, to address any potential concerns and needs for privacy.

*Ilakucaraq* makes an equally strong commitment to respectful treatment of the Alaska Native Elders and Culture Bearers who join the programming. This can look like buying supplies together so the guest doesn't have to front the cost and then fill out reimbursement paperwork; giving people rides to/from programming; setting up Zoom and then sitting next to the person to manage any difficulties; covering travel funds and housing as needed; welcoming guests' families to participate alongside them; and generally ensuring that whatever they are most passionate about sharing with students, they have what they need to do that.

## Looking Ahead

The core *Ilakucaraq* partnership between the Alaska Humanities Forum and the Alaska Native Heritage Center is expected to continue for many years. Currently, staff are designing opportunities for three intern-like positions, open to students who have finished a year with their cohort and are interested in helping design future immersions, and an Anchorage gathering of students who would like to help design the next iteration of the program during winter 2023-24. Possibilities for future program extensions include 1) joint school trips, where AKHF staff work with the students and ANHC staff work with the teachers; and 2) cohorts of students who are connected by a shared interest in becoming teachers.

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## Quote from Kameron Perez-Verdia, Alaska Humanities Forum President & CEO

"In the Forum's decade of doing youth cross-cultural work, we've seen how strong cultural identity acts as a tremendous source of strength for teenagers, guiding and grounding their

decisions about what to do after high school. Students who approach these complex decisions from a place of confidence - I know what values guide me and my community, and I know I'm supported on this journey - are well-positioned to become catalysts for strengthening communities across Alaska.

*Ilakucaraq* means “being together” in Yup'ik, the most widely spoken Alaska Native language. The program is the first in Alaska to intentionally build relationships between Alaska Native students from across the state, who live in different settings, speak different Native languages, have different traditions, and who have different degrees of connection to their cultures. Through participating in *Ilakucaraq*, all of these students - whether they've grown up surrounded by the cultures and traditions of their ancestors, or live in a majority-white community where it can be a struggle to connect to their identity as Native people - build resilient cultural identities and the relationships that will support and sustain them.”

#### **Additional Information:**

- Ilakucaraq webpage: <https://www.akhf.org/programs/ilakucaraq>
- Music video for “After Land Back” song by Tlingit artist Arias “Air Jazz” Hoyle, featuring *Ilakucaraq* students:  
<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/8gkj7wcvr5h90tzaiyn8e/After-Land-Back-VA-4K.mp4?dl=0&rlkey=txfftspho0bypxyojc168c7c>
- Photos: See Google Drive folder ([LINK](#))