



Alaska Statewide Mentor Project

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State Investment Results in Increased Success for Rural Teachers and Students

Increased student academic performance and improved teacher retention in Alaska's highest-need school districts are the hallmarks of the State of Alaska investment in the Alaska Statewide Mentor Project.

For eight years, the state has supported mentoring services for new teachers in rural districts of Alaska — areas characterized by low student achievement and high teacher turnover. Recent research shows that the Alaska Statewide Mentor Project has improved the retention of early career teachers in rural Alaska and has increased the test scores of their students.

The Alaska Statewide Mentor Project serves teachers in their first and second years in the classroom because these years are challenging for new educators. Difficulty with classroom management and trouble juggling the many responsibilities required of the profession can leave new teachers feeling overwhelmed and disillusioned. In rural Alaska, where early career teachers frequently join small staffs, instruct multiple subjects, and experience geographic and

professional isolation, these feelings can be amplified.

In the absence of Alaska Statewide Mentor Project support, the test scores of students in classrooms taught by new teachers (without mentors) are substantially lower than the test scores of students in classrooms of veteran teachers. This is not the case when new teachers have the benefit of a mentor.

The Alaska Statewide Mentor Project strives to ensure that every student in Alaska has the benefit of a great teacher. Since the 2004-05 school year, the program has paired early career teachers in rural Alaska with educators who have undergone rigorous mentorship training and have extensive classroom experience. Mentors participate in eight weeklong academies of instruction, bimonthly online professional development, and ongoing specialized research.



Mentor Abby Augustine

Mentor interaction with early career teachers is equally rigorous.

All mentors collaborate with their assigned early career teachers weekly, and meet together monthly to share in data-driven formative assessment.

The formative assessment system is designed to help

new teachers deliver standards-based instruction that is responsive to the diverse academic needs and cultural backgrounds of their students.

The state's annual investment in the Alaska Statewide Mentor Project has helped early career teachers in rural Alaska become more effective faster.

Recent research results are summarized on the back page of this newsletter, and are further detailed on the program website, www.alaskamentorproject.org/research.php.



Federal Government Recognizes Mentor Model Success

The success of the Alaska Statewide Mentor Project rests on its data-driven model. The core of the “continuous improvement” model is ongoing rigorous training for mentors. This training ensures mentors employ current research-based best practices for supporting new teachers.

Selection of mentors is a competitive process. Successful candidates are teachers with a documented history of exemplary classroom instruction and a willingness to work fulltime to support new teachers. In addition to 8 or more years of Alaska classroom experience, mentors undergo yearlong training in four intensive weeklong Academies followed by biweekly classes, online forums, monthly coaching visits, and specialized research.

“These mentors are the best of the best of teachers,” said Dr. Norman Eck, superintendent of the Northwest Arctic Borough School District. “The lessons of these experienced, well-trained mentors greatly benefits rural teachers. Due to the Alaska Statewide Mentor Project, the practice of new teachers in rural Alaska

becomes more effective much faster.”

Training ensures that mentors remain current on state standards, instructional best-practice methods, classroom technology, and a formative assessment system used to guide weekly conversations with early career teachers. The Alaska Statewide Mentor Project formative assessment system provides documentation and data for the mentor, the new teacher, and the project.

Because the model is data-driven, the Alaska Statewide Mentor Project employs a researcher who analyzes data that gauge the growth and effectiveness of mentor instruction, new teacher learning and student achievement.

The annual \$2 million state investment in the project ensures mentoring is available to all early career teachers in rural Alaska. The state’s investment is critical because rural districts are often plagued with high teacher turnover and low student achievement.

New federal funding will expand the project to enable research on the mentor model using the highest form of experimental design. It will also expand

services to several urban districts. The experiment will enable external evaluators to gather data on model effectiveness, and to determine if the Alaska Statewide Mentor Project model can be used to increase teacher retention and student achievement nationally.

The federal award was made based on a firm foundation of long-term state investment and strong private sector commitment, particularly from The Chariot Group, Alaska Communications, First National Bank, the University of Alaska Foundation BP and Conoco Phillips funds, the Usibelli Foundation, and several individual donors.

First-year Teacher Sonta Hamilton Roach works with students in rural Shageluk, Alaska. Roach attributes much of her success as an early career teacher to the Alaska Statewide Mentor Project.

Mentor Model Helps Retain Special Education Teachers in Rural Alaska



The Alaska Statewide Mentor Project has increased the retention of newly hired special education teachers in rural districts.

Alaska Department of Education & Early Development funds ensure that first-year special education teachers newly employed in rural districts across Alaska are matched with mentors specializing in this area.

Over the life of a 5-year grant, 128 special education teachers have been supported by the Alaska Statewide Mentor Project. In the first cohort, 66% of these

special education teachers remained teaching in Alaska’s public K-12 schools after four years.

These results show an increase in comparison to the findings from Hill and Hirshberg (2008), which show that only 51% of all new special education teachers remain teaching in Alaska after four years.

This increased retention rate is significant considering the difficulty Alaska districts have in filling special education positions. More than half way through this 2012-2013 school year, for example, nine positions requiring special education certification remain unfilled, primarily in rural areas.

State Investment Fosters

Long-Term Retention of Rural Educator

Marlene Schmitt is a woman with a strong sense of adventure. That's what brought her to rural Alaska. The Alaska Statewide Mentor Project is one of the reasons she stayed (for 9 years and counting).

The state's investment in the project ensures that all first- and second-year teachers newly hired in rural districts of Alaska are assigned a mentor. Schmitt's first year of teaching coincided with the first year of the project.

"The same is true now as it was back then," Schmitt said. "The Alaska Statewide Mentor Project is a lifeline for village schools."

The daughter of a teacher, Schmitt never thought that she would become a K-12 teacher. Her interest was in science and research. With a master's degree in science, she landed a job at the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry (OMSI) Hancock Field Station in Fossil, Oregon, and then became an adjunct community college professor.

When Schmitt noticed that many of the freshmen she taught did not have the background knowledge needed to be successful at the college level, she decided to become a K-12 classroom teacher, like her mother.

Equipped with teaching credentials, Schmitt got her first K-12 teaching position in rural Cheforanak, Alaska. She was looking forward to meeting new people and experiencing a new culture. Because she had grown up close to a reservation and had previous college teaching experience, she imagined being a new K-12 teacher in rural Alaska would be easy. She was wrong.

"As a new teacher I didn't even know what was available," Schmitt said. "Sometimes as a new teacher you don't even know what to ask."

Fortunately, Schmitt was assigned a mentor through the Alaska Statewide Mentor Project. Although Schmitt was an



Marlene Schmitt is now a principal in Napakiak.

expert in math and science content, it was her first time teaching it to high school students. Together, she and her project mentor covered statewide basics, such as effective instructional strategies and working with the Alaska Standards. "My mentor also helped with pacing and resources," Schmitt said.

She describes her mentor as a caring, knowledgeable, supportive advocate who had no strings attached to the school district, or to her supervisor.

"Having someone to bounce ideas off of, her coming in and observing and helping me with my teaching was a huge benefit. I always felt that I could ask anything that would help me become a better teacher. Knowing that you could ask your mentor anything, and not get in trouble for asking or feeling stupid, that was a huge help."

Over the next eight years, Schmitt taught in Chignik Lake and Eek. In Chignik, she was promoted to Head Teacher; in Eek, she was often the Acting Site Administrator. Recently, Schmitt accepted a job as principal in Napakiak. All early career teachers in her school are paired with mentors in the Alaska Statewide Mentor Project (ASMP).

"ASMP mentors bring their training and their many years of experience and expertise to new teachers' classrooms and give more in-depth help than I can provide, especially in the realm of teaching methodology and in content areas," Schmitt said.

In addition to improving teacher instructional ability and student achievement, early career teachers paired with Alaska Statewide Mentor Project mentors are more likely to remain in rural Alaska and to feel part of the local community.

"In addition to helping new teachers become more effective in the classroom, ASMP mentors help new teachers adjust to life in rural Alaska and understand the community's cultural perspective," Schmitt said.

Marilyn Rosene, principal of Dillingham Elementary School, credits the Alaska Statewide Mentor Project with the retention of new teachers in her district.

"Recruiting and retaining quality teachers continues to be a challenge throughout our state," Rosene said. "The Alaska Statewide Mentor Project is the finest—and I do not say that lightly—way our state has provided professional support for educators throughout the state. Period. I believe that if a school site can support and help a teacher's foundation of classroom instruction and management, and can keep a teacher for two years instead of one, or three years instead of two, the students and community are the winners."





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“The Alaska Statewide Mentor Project is a lifeline for village schools.”

—Napakiak Principal
Marlene Schmitt



State Investment Increases

Student Test Scores and Teacher Retention

Recent research reveals the success of the state investment in Alaska Statewide Mentor Project services to rural districts. Before the Alaska Statewide Mentor Project began, the retention rate of new teachers in rural Alaska was 67% on average. Since the inception of the Alaska Statewide Mentor Project, the retention of early career teachers served by mentors has improved to an 8-year average of 77%.

Similar success exists among students taught by new teachers served by the Alaska Statewide Mentor Project. Historically, the tests scores of students guided by new teachers start about 20 points lower than students in classrooms of veteran teachers. In a 2009 study of the effects of the Alaska Statewide Mentor Project on students, the results of a statistical analysis show that in classrooms of early career

teachers receiving program mentoring the students’ test scores are within 4 to 7 points of the comparison group of students with veteran teachers (with an average of 12 years of teaching experience). In this study, 75% of the new teachers and 71% of the veteran teachers were from rural districts.

ASMP Trend in Rural Teacher Retention Rates

