

**THIRTY YEARS LATER: THE LONG-TERM EFFECT  
OF BOARDING SCHOOLS ON ALASKA NATIVES  
AND THEIR COMMUNITIES**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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In 2004 and 2005 we gathered information on how boarding school and boarding home experiences affected individual Alaska Natives, their families, and communities. From the early 1900s to the 1970s Alaska Natives were taken from rural communities that lacked either primary or secondary schools and sent to boarding schools run by the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), by private churches or, later, by Alaska's state government. Some were also sent to boarding homes to attend school in urban places. We interviewed 61 Alaska Native adults who attended boarding schools or participated in the urban boarding home program from the late 1940s through the early 1980s, as well as one child of boarding-school graduates. Their experiences, some of which are shared in this report, reveal a glimpse of both the positive and negative effects of past boarding schools.

Many of those we interviewed spoke with ambivalence about their boarding school experience, finding both good and bad elements. Some of the good experiences included going to schools that had high expectations of the students; educators and other school personnel who developed personal relationships with students; individualized support for students who were struggling; and discipline and structure that was supportive, not punitive. For many of those we interviewed, boarding school offered an opportunity to learn about the world beyond village boundaries and to develop lasting friendships. But these good experiences came at a cost. The cost for some was abuse; interviewees reported physical and sexual abuse at the Wrangell Institute. At that school, children were forbidden to speak their native languages and were even beaten for speaking them.

The goal of many educators at the time of mandatory boarding schools was to assimilate people of different cultures and ethnicities into the dominant culture. This cost many students not only the loss of their language, but also their culture and identity. These practices had lasting effects on individual students, their families, and communities. Those we interviewed told of finding it difficult to return home and be accepted. They felt that by being sent to boarding school they had missed out on learning important traditional skills and had a harder time raising their own children. For communities, the loss of children to boarding schools created a tremendous void, one that interviewees said was filled by alcohol and a breakdown in society. Drugs, alcohol, and suicide are some of the effects interviewees spoke of as coming from boarding home experiences and the loss of cultural identity and family.

In 1976, the State of Alaska agreed to build schools in rural communities having eight (later ten) or more school-age children. When these schools were built, it was no longer necessary to send Native children to boarding schools. However, there is now an ongoing policy debate over the cost and quality of these local schools and whether Native children might be better off attending schools outside their communities. We hope that policymakers consider Alaska Natives' past experiences with boarding schools reported here and learn from them.

One important caveat to this report is that it is not a comprehensive analysis of the boarding school experience. It is based on experiences of the people who were able to participate in our survey. There are many who were unable to participate, for a variety of reasons. Some have left the state; others are homeless; some live in remote rural villages and either did not hear about our project or were unable to come to the urban hubs where we did our work. Sadly, too, some have died. For these reasons, we use caution in drawing conclusions about the experience. Instead, we have done our best to present some of the stories shared with us in the hope that they will encourage others to come forward with more stories from their experiences. Only as people share their experiences can we learn more about the lasting effects of the boarding home experience on individual Alaska Natives and their communities.

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

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The history of formal schooling for Alaska Natives, from the time of the U.S. acquisition of Alaska in 1867 to the present, is a troubled one. The initial goals of formal education in the North were to Christianize and “civilize” Alaska Natives (Darnell and Hoem, 1996, p. 62). Over time, the federal, territorial, and state governments established a boarding school system to accomplish these goals. For the first three quarters of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Alaska Native children were sent to boarding schools or boarding homes either inside or outside Alaska.

The federal Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) developed the boarding school system for American Indian students in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the explicit intent of assimilating these youngsters. By 1881, there were 68 boarding schools throughout the country, serving 3,888 students (McDiarmid, 1984). In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, academically talented Alaska Native students were sent to vocational boarding schools outside Alaska. These students had largely unsuccessful experiences, and in the 1920s the federal government created three vocational boarding schools for Natives in Alaska. For two decades these schools functioned as the sole BIA-operated secondary education option for Alaska Native students. However, these first boarding schools fell into disrepair, and in 1947 the BIA opened a single consolidated boarding school in Sitka, Mt. Edgecumbe (McDiarmid, 1984; Cotton, 1984).

Until 1966, students living in rural communities that did not have local high schools had few options for secondary education. Options were limited to the BIA-operated Mt. Edgecumbe, the only public boarding school in Alaska, and church-run schools such as St. Mary’s Catholic School, Copper Valley at Glennallen, and Covenant in Unalakleet (McDiarmid, 1984). When Mt. Edgecumbe was full, Native students were sent to BIA boarding schools in other states, including Chemawa Indian School in Salem, Oregon and Chilocco Indian School in Chilocco, Oklahoma (Alaska Natives Commission, 1994b). At one point over 1,000 children from Alaska attended these out-of-state boarding schools (Cotton, 1984). The BIA also operated the only public K-8 (later K-9) boarding school, the Wrangell Institute, in Wrangell, Alaska. In 1966, the State of Alaska increased options for Native students by establishing a boarding home program in which Native students moved to urban areas to attend school and live with families that were compensated by the state. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the State of Alaska also opened three regional boarding schools for secondary students in Nome, Kodiak, and Bethel (Cotton, 1984; Kleinfeld and Bloom, 1973). Smaller community boarding home programs and foster care programs offered two more alternatives for Alaska Native students.

Figure 1 (page 35) shows the 22 boarding schools and homes attended by Alaska Native students, including a short-lived program in New Mexico, the American Indian Arts Institute. Tables 2 and 3 (pages 38 and 39) show the number of students from Alaska enrolled in secondary and elementary boarding school programs. The number of students who participated in the boarding home program is less clear, since state enrollment data did not separate out these figures in the 1960s. Table 4 (page 40) indicates participation in both publicly funded boarding schools and the boarding home program in 1973, but excludes enrollment in the religious boarding schools.

In 1972, attorney Christopher Cooke filed a class action lawsuit on behalf of Alaska Native children in villages lacking secondary schools. The Alaska Supreme Court remanded Hootch v. Alaska State-Operated School System, also known as the Molly Hootch case, for trial on the claim that that state's failure to provide local high schools in Native villages constituted a pattern and practice of racial discrimination. Plaintiffs showed how predominately white communities received high schools, while Native communities—even larger ones—were required to send their children to boarding schools or homes. After a year of negotiations, the state and the plaintiffs reached an out-of-court settlement. Under the 1976 Tobeluk v. Lind consent decree the State of Alaska agreed to build a system of village high schools serving any community with eight or more students of high-school age (later changed to ten or more students). Within six years, the state implemented new or expanded high school programs in more than 100 Native villages (Cotton, 1984).

With the development of local, rural high schools, interest in the lasting effects of the old boarding schools on Alaska Natives and their communities has been scant. Attention has shifted instead to the successes and failures of small rural high schools. The last major study of Alaska boarding schools, conducted by Judith Kleinfeld, was published in 1973. That study examined one rural boarding home program, one regional boarding school, and one urban boarding home program during a three-year period. The study did not include the most widely lauded boarding school in Alaska, Mt. Edgecumbe in Sitka. While much research has been done on the long-term effect of boarding schools on American Indians in the continental United States (e.g., Adams, 1995; Child, 1998;), and on First Nations peoples in Canada (e.g., Deiter, 1999; Iwama, 2000; Jaine 1993), almost nothing has been written on the Alaska Native boarding school experience since Kleinfeld's study.

Currently, some Alaska policymakers argue that state-funded boarding schools should be reestablished. They are concerned about both the cost of maintaining rural secondary schools and the quality of the education provided in those schools. Policymakers often point to the accomplishments of the graduates of one school, Mount Edgecumbe High School, as justification for expanding the state-funded boarding school program and eliminating many of the small rural high schools. Some also argue (albeit incorrectly) that since the Tobeluk consent decree was implemented, and is now “terminated,” the state is not legally obligated to maintain high schools in every rural community.

At the same time as some policymakers argue for a return to the boarding school system, a number of Alaska Natives have come forward publicly to share their experiences at the Wrangell Institute, a boarding school where much abuse occurred. There have been healing ceremonies at the site where the school was located and discussions at conferences and gatherings about the affects of the physical, sexual, and emotional abuse inflicted there.

It is crucial that we now look at the long-term effects of boarding schools on Alaska Natives, both to better understand the effects of the old system of rural education in Alaska and to inform the current policy debate. We need to know how Native adults' boarding school experiences have affected their communities and schools. Some of the questions we address include whether boarding school experiences influenced students' decisions about returning to communities and families; whether those who attended boarding schools would choose to send their children to

boarding schools; and how the boarding school experience shaped their education and later life. We also consider the effect of the boarding school experience on Alaska communities. If the state does expand the boarding school system, we need to know how to avoid repeating past mistakes and how to create successful boarding schools for students who choose that option.

## STUDY METHODOLOGY

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In this report we rely on semi-structured, open-ended interviews conducted with 62 Alaska Native adults who attended boarding schools or participated in the urban boarding home program from the late 1940s through the early 1980s (see Appendix A).<sup>1</sup> Respondents attended schools both within Alaska and outside the state (see Appendix B). They were from all over the state; their communities of origin are shown in Figure 2 (page 37).

Our study participants are not a representative sample of students who attended boarding schools in Alaska. We recruited them via e-mail listservs and through the Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN) annual conference, where we placed flyers in all of the delegates' bags. In addition, we publicized our study through talk shows on Alaska Public Radio Network and KNOM, a radio station run by the Catholic church in Nome. We placed information about the study on a Web site and made that information available during the radio shows. Our sample, therefore, includes adults who are participants in AFN and those who are either connected to the Internet or who listen to public or talk radio. We had funding to conduct interviews in major hub communities around the state, including Nome, Kotzebue, Fairbanks, Juneau and Barrow, but we were not able to travel to small villages, of which there are many. Also, there are people we simply could not reach, either because they are homeless (especially in Anchorage), incarcerated, or sadly, no longer with us. We know of many suicides that occurred in some of the boarding schools in the 1970s, and we were also told of multiple suicides in families of those whom we interviewed. These voices unfortunately will never be a part of the stories we can tell.

While we had a set of questions we wished to address (see Appendix B), we found it necessary to let respondents guide the interviews. This is an incredibly sensitive topic, especially for those who had bad experiences in schools, and it was important to let people tell their stories in their own time and way. We are truly humbled and honored by the stories our participants shared with us. We heard from many that they had never before talked about these experiences. In some cases we cried as our subjects talked. Often we were amazed by their strength and resilience, and occasionally we were just stunned by what they told us. We appreciate and thank all who participated in this study and hope that our reporting represents and honors their histories accurately and respectfully.

This study represents one of the first efforts to systematically examine the experience of Alaska Natives in boarding schools since the Tobeluk consent decree. As such, we tried to address both the experiences of students in the schools and programs as well as the lasting effect from a historic perspective. The major topics we covered in our interviews included:

1. How did students end up at particular boarding schools and homes; did they have any choice?
2. What was the quality of the school like?

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<sup>1</sup> Sample includes one respondent whose parents both attended boarding school and who wanted to comment on that experience, as well as two respondents who attended boarding school into the 1980s.

3. What was the general atmosphere or culture of the school?
4. Were there Alaska Native educators?
5. Was there any Alaska Native history or culture taught as part of the curriculum?
6. What did students do after high school? Were they encouraged to attend college?
7. Looking back, what was the affect of the schools on the respondents?
8. Would they recommend that their children or current students attend boarding schools?
9. How do they think today's schools should be improved?

As noted above, we didn't cover every topic or question with every respondent. In some cases, conversation focused on the stories of abuse and violence in schools and we did not feel it appropriate to push further. In other conversations, participants chose to tell their story in their own way, and we let the discussions progress naturally without concern that all our prepared questions be answered. Despite our lack of uniform interviewing, or perhaps because of it, we learned something from every participant. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interviews were coded according to themes that emerged in the interviews. We looked for patterns and commonalities in the responses to our questions. This report presents the major themes and results that emerged in our analysis.

Since this is our first effort at pulling together all the information gathered in this study, we hope for feedback from both those who participated in the study and from those who were unable to participate for one reason or another, but who also shared in these experiences. In the short time between when we conducted our interviews and finished this write-up, some of those who shared their experiences have died. We hope our work encourages and enables others to share their experiences and reflections before it is too late.

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## FINDINGS

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Although our discussions with participants ranged widely across educational, political, and social issues, we save many of those issues for future reports. In this report, we address two broad areas: the experiences of study participants in boarding schools and homes *and* the long-term effect of these experiences on participants and their communities. We begin with the boarding school experience, which includes how participants came to the boarding school; an overall assessment of the experience both in terms of education and “climate and culture” of the school; and finally, the post- high school experience, including college and the military.

### **Experience in Boarding Schools and Homes**

#### ***Boarding School Assignment: Choice or Mandate?***

The process by which students applied to or were sent to schools was not entirely clear. In some cases, respondents clearly recalled applying to boarding schools. In at least four cases, respondents chose to attend boarding schools even though they had a local secondary school option, mostly because of racism in their local schools. In other cases, students had no choice about whether and where they attended boarding school. It appeared that the more sophisticated parents, who had some knowledge of the system, could get their children enrolled in schools of their choosing. For other students, key people in the village such as pastors, priests, and teachers, directed them toward the schools with better reputations.

In communities with elementary schools, run either by the BIA or by church missions, children tended to stay until secondary school age. In communities that did not have a primary school, children were sent away to boarding school from as early as age 5. The Wrangell Institute enrolled children roughly from ages 5 to 15. While Wrangell served children who were orphans or who had been removed from families due to problems, it also served many children who were taken away from healthy families living in communities that did not have primary schools.

Thirty-eight study participants said either they or their parents had some influence on the school selection process, though several students reported not getting into their first choice of school (in particular, Mt. Edgecumbe, which was often full). Seventeen reported having no choice about where they went, or no knowledge of how that choice was made for them. In addition, even though they might have been able to pick the school or program they attended, most students did not have the option of staying at home when there was no age-appropriate school in their community. With few exceptions, students were forced to go away to school. Among those we interviewed, at least one student described how his family took great measures to avoid having him sent away. After just one year at the Wrangell Institute this respondent’s family decided to move from a small village with no secondary school into the larger community of Bethel, so their child could be with them.

### ***The School Experience: An Overall Assessment***

When we looked at the experience study participants had in boarding schools and homes, we found a situation more complicated than we expected. The majority—about 60 percent—of our respondents were generally pleased with their boarding school experience. However, responses varied greatly depending on the particular schools and even within the schools. Seventy percent or more of the respondents who attended Mt Edgecumbe, Copper Valley, Chemawa, and St. Mary's were positive about their experience, compared with fewer than half those who attended Wrangell Institute, Nome Beltz, or boarding home programs. However, many respondents were equivocal about their praise or criticism.

Many interviewees attended more than one school, with good experiences at one and bad at the other. In particular, students who attended both the Wrangell Institute and Mt. Edgecumbe often told distressing stories about the former institution and then described Mt. Edgecumbe as being just the opposite. Individual students also had hugely varying experiences at the same institution.

A number of respondents talked about good experiences in boarding schools and programs. However, as we looked more closely, we found many contradictory or conflicting comments within the interviews, both good and bad. For example, individuals who told us that they enjoyed their experiences in school also talked about their inability to maintain long-lasting relationships, their distress at losing their first language, or the difficulties they saw others endure in school. Conversely, people who had experienced abuse or neglect in school also told us of enjoying certain activities like cheerleading and music classes.

Several participants commented that their boarding school experience happened thirty or more years ago, and thus it was difficult to recall events or courses in detail. On the other hand, some of those who experienced traumatic situations at boarding school vividly recalled what happened to them.

### ***The School Experience: Quality of Education***

#### **St. Mary's and Copper Valley Boarding Schools**

The most consistently positive descriptions of educational experiences were about St. Mary's and Copper Valley boarding schools. The four respondents who went to St. Mary's spoke enthusiastically about the school faculty having high expectations of students, as well as being tough, caring, and highly qualified. Graduates felt they received a well-rounded education, and that they were prepared for college. One described it in the following manner:

...they made people develop their skills and abilities. Whoever was musical they, you know, let them play the organ in church and whoever was artistic they, developed their art. Whoever was the expert sewer, you know, they – so everyone who had talents they were able to develop. Also, in the classrooms, we had different ones who were gifted in leadership so they'd be on the Student Council and then there were those who were also gifted in speaking in front of groups.

Two St. Mary's graduates told of being encouraged to go to college, including a focus, for one, on attending medical school. Two graduates also described extensive involvement with, and support from, the village.

Copper Valley attendees also praised the education they received. Seven of the nine respondents described having a very good academic experience. They used terms such as “challenging,” “excellent,” and described the educators as trying to inspire them. One participant noted that there was a lot of hands-on teaching in small classes. The respondents told us the teachers at Copper Valley were quite good. One described a teacher as “by far the best teacher I’ve ever experienced in my schooling, even going to college.” Another graduate described the “huge” transformation in his learning at the school:

Of course my experiences in Copper Valley when I went to the eighth grade down there were really something because they emphasize quality in their entire educational process, it took the teachers down there - it was quite a task for them to bring up, you know, from probably a first or second grade reading and writing levels to eighth grade level. I had to work pretty hard to try to become competent and by the time I left the eighth grade I felt there was a huge transformation in me —I learned how to read, I learned how to write. In fact, I wrote home a letter to my mother when I first got down there and my mother kept a copy of it because for a 13-year-old eighth grader, she could not believe that I could write so poorly.

#### **Nome Beltz Boarding School**

In contrast to St. Mary’s and Copper Valley, none of the respondents who attended Nome Beltz felt that the institution provided a good educational experience. Three described the quality of education as poor, and one mentioned that she was not prepared for college and had to do remedial coursework in several subjects. Three interviewees also talked about there being very different treatment of Native and non-Native students at the school. Non-Native students were expected to achieve academically and pursue a college education, while Native students faced low expectations and were directed into vocational courses. Two respondents described little to no counseling or support for pursuing college, and one was actively discouraged from applying. On top of that, there was segregation and conflict between Native students who came to Nome Beltz from outlying villages and Native students from the town of Nome.

#### **Mt. Edgecumbe**

We found that opinions about the quality of education provided at Mt. Edgecumbe were not as overwhelmingly positive as references to the overall experience of attending the school. Indeed, the views expressed were sharply split. Of the twenty-six who commented directly on the quality of education or teaching, sixteen offered positive comments, ranging from good to “awesome”. Ten thought the education was fair to poor, describing it as “fairly mediocre,” “not challenging” and as not preparing them adequately for college.

Several students talked about the different attention paid to and expectations of high- and low-achieving students. One described feeling that “they took those of us who scored at the top of the class and put us in a stream of this is college-bound, and this is voc-ed bound.” Indeed, our respondents’ experience with college counseling reflected this. Eight received counseling that directed them toward college or college preparatory classes. However, two described being told they were not smart enough for college, and a counselor told one respondent that she expected her to fail. A couple of interviewees also described being directed toward careers in clerical or

nursing fields and one man said there was heavy emphasis on blue collar and vocational avocations.

### **Chemawa in Oregon and Boarding Homes in Alaska**

Students who attended Chemawa were divided in their opinions on the school quality. Two described it as great, while two felt it was not good—one describing large classes with students who were not prepared and another talking of the low expectations. Three felt that the teaching staff was good, while one felt it was poor.

The boarding home students had very mixed opinions on the quality of the education they received. Two in Anchorage thought it was good. Another in Anchorage was unhappy with the vocational track she was placed in and transferred to another program. Those in Nenana and Fairbanks also were split in describing their education as good or poor. All described experiencing racism from non-Native classmates in their schools.

### **Native Educators and Native Curriculum**

Native educators were virtually non-existent in boarding schools. The notable exception was one teacher at Mt Edgecumbe known by almost all who went there; he was a returning graduate who taught Alaska and U.S. history. Almost all spoke of him in glowing terms. However, he did not fuse Alaska Native history or culture into his curriculum. Students mentioned a couple of other Native educators at Mt Edgecumbe; they taught shop or home economics, and it is not clear whether they were certificated teachers or support staff. At Wrangell, former students recalled only a couple of Alaska Native teachers. They enjoyed being around those educators, and in some cases the teachers took students home for short visits.

Native language, history, and culture also were almost entirely absent from the curricula at all the boarding schools. In only four cases did students describe Native dance or arts as being a part of their schooling. Two of those students attended boarding school in the 1980s. While students were allowed to speak their Native languages outside class in most of the secondary programs, Native languages were not taught in any of the schools until the mid to late 1970s. And, as we will describe below, at Wrangell many children were beaten if they spoke their indigenous languages at any time. In the mid 1970s Alaska Native history and politics emerged as a topic of study at Mt. Edgecumbe in the context of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, but Native cultural studies did not appear until much later.

## *The School Experience: Climate and Culture*

### **Good Experiences at School**

Many of our study participants enjoyed their boarding school experience, whether or not they found the education itself to be of high quality. We heard repeated stories about how excited students were to return to school after the summer. As one said: “After the first year, you know, we couldn’t wait to go back and we had friends from all over Alaska.” While we heard many stories of homesickness, a few told us they were ready to leave home. One respondent said, “I would say it was the best thing that ever happened to me. I was ready to leave home. I wanted to go out and just get away from the family life. And I enjoyed the sports, the academic life, meeting other people from other regions ...”

Three areas in particular emerged as contributing to a positive climate: an atmosphere of high expectations combined with support for meeting those expectations; extra-curricular activities; and the opportunity to make friends from many places.

For many of our participants, boarding school represented the first time they were really expected to work hard and learn. They enjoyed their accomplishments. One Copper Valley graduate noted: “[In grade school]...you could just get by, by just being quiet. So you didn’t have to learn...but at Copper Valley, they were always trying to inspire us...And I think that makes a huge difference.” Another respondent commented: “[T]hrough grade school, you were basically on your own... and at Victory, we had to do our work, and it was like, hey, I can do this...as a person, I could shine, and I loved it.”

The discipline provided by the schools was another benefit a number of respondents cited; this is explored further in the section on lasting affects of the schools.

The extra support from caring educators contributed to positive experiences for many of our interviewees. One noted: “I couldn’t catch on to Algebra II for the longest time, so I had to come in every day to meet with the math teacher. And we did that until he felt I was ready and caught up with the class. So I just enjoyed the whole scene.”

Respondents cited extra-curricular opportunities provided by boarding schools—drill team, basketball, Civil Air Patrol, and other activities—as significant in their enjoyment of the boarding school experience. One interviewee commented: “We had a drill team there too and I was in chorus for three years. I really enjoyed that. I remember our school coming in first in music festivals.” Another added: “I like sports and that’s what I did.” Indeed a couple of students at Copper Valley said they worked hard in school so they could retain eligibility for these extra-curricular activities. Even students who had a very difficult time in boarding school, especially at the Wrangell Institute, as is described below, talked of enjoying extra-curricular activities in school.

The friendships at school were important to many, as well; this is described in detail in the section on long-term effects. Many spoke specifically about the benefits of getting to know students from all over the state, and learning about the different Alaska Native cultures. As one student put it, “...it was a close-knit community and then what was really nice about it was there

were students from all over Alaska, plus we had some students from the lower 48...” Two students who attended Chemawa also talked of their opportunity to get to know Navajo students and to spend time with Navajo families during Thanksgiving and Spring Break.

### **The Darker Side of the Boarding School Experience**

#### *Physical and Sexual Abuse*

A truly difficult piece of this study comes from learning about respondents’ experiences not as students, but as residents in boarding schools and boarding homes. A large number of interviewees described incidents of abuse and oppression to us, in particular at the Wrangell Institute. The table shows the number of respondents who reported physical abuse, sexual abuse, or sexual harassment (e.g., being kissed by teachers or solicited to pose nude) at several of the institutions. One incident of sexual harassment resulted in teacher removal (at Mt. Edgecumbe). In all other cases, students indicated they had no effective avenue of reporting abuse.

**Reports of Physical and Sexual Abuse**

	<b>Mt. Edgecumbe</b>	<b>Wrangell Institute</b>	<b>Copper Valley</b>	<b>Nome Beltz</b>	<b>Boarding Homes</b>
Sexual Abuse	1	4	1	1	2
Sexual Harassment	3				
Physical Abuse		7	1		1

Moreover, during a handful of interviews, respondents asked that we turn off the tape recorder so that they could share stories of sexual abuse from their time at both Wrangell and elsewhere, which they were not comfortable sharing on tape. This report does not include information from unrecorded interviews. Thus, in this summary we under-report the incidence of abuse in schools.

We heard of incidences of sexual and physical abuse in many of the educational settings, but the most consistent descriptions of systemic abuse emerged from our conversations with students who attended the Wrangell Institute. It was a violent place. Seven different respondents described the physical abuse or beatings they either witnessed or experienced firsthand. Others who did not attend Wrangell told us they heard horror stories from their siblings and friends who had attended the institute. Three respondents talked about the regular beatings of boys who spoke their indigenous language. One described it as follows:

And the thing that I remember most about Wrangell, to this day, is they used to pull everybody from the boy's dorm, I don't know whatever happened with the girls' dorms, but every night for one year there, every night, well not every night, but whenever they caught somebody, they'd bring the whole dorm down there, and they'd have the two biggest boys in the dorm, and they would give them razor straps, you know the kind you sharpen razors with, and if a Native boy, now that's all that was in Wrangell Institute at the time, if they spoke their own language, they got swatted 10 times by two of the biggest boys in school. The reason they used the big boys is because after they got whipped, they couldn't go and jump on top of the guy that whipped them because they were usually the biggest and toughest guys in school. So they would use the biggest boys in school for speaking one word in their language. Even to this day, I can't maintain or hold my own language.

This adult-sanctioned violence created an atmosphere in which children perpetuated a culture of brutality. As another Wrangell attendee noted:

I didn't like the beating dynamics and the cruelty thing that went on, although there was some of that in Bethel, not as bad as Wrangell, though. There were just some pretty angry big kids. They terrorized the young guys all the time. It was just outright cruelty. They just did it and nobody did anything about those big kids that did it. And some of those guys were pretty big.

Another person described this phenomenon and the larger effect on the children:

But at home I remember on Christmas we'd sing our songs and our dances and then my cousin was telling me this he said, this one kid from (a village), on Christmas they went into the shower room to sing and they were caught and beaten and whipped for singing their songs—our Athabascan songs. So that was really hard, you know? Not only did I feel like they were taking away our identity, they were taking away our language and our culture and they were trying to make us into another culture that we were not familiar with or at least I wasn't.

Six different people described additional disturbing images from Wrangell including children crying every night in the dorms, censored mail, and a concentration camp-like atmosphere. As one noted: "I do remember that at lights off, when one would start crying, then the whole dorm would start crying." Later in the interview she added: "Sometimes I still hear these little children crying, you know."

Four respondents told us that the dorm staff used to open and censor their mail. Three told us they felt like prisoners in jail; two described the environment as "military style." Some talked of not being able to go beyond building boundaries and feeling that the school was "dark and oppressive." They compared it to a concentration camp. Four participants told us they felt the educators at Wrangell were trying to take their culture away and turn them into white people. Rather than talk about "graduating" from Wrangell, four respondents talked about "surviving" the institute.

Not everyone who went to Wrangell had such a dire experience. Those who made positive comments, however, often did so in comparison to very dysfunctional home lives. Two people specifically talked of Wrangell as a refuge from an abusive home. One described it as follows:

[W]hen I went to Wrangell Institute I was just taken care of really well. I was thoroughly checked... the doctor told me at that time...I was malnourished. I had bruises all over my back from being beaten up because of the child abuse at home. I had pinworms. I had a touch of TB. I needed glasses real bad. I was hard of hearing; I couldn't say my S's. And so they did speech therapy. And when we stayed in the dorm, I felt very safe except I didn't like how it was run, military style... And their inspections, when they did bed inspections and have quarter flip. And if the quarter don't bounce, you had to redo your bed. I didn't mind doing all the chores because that's what I did all my life, scrub floors. They let us have a razor blade, and to me, it

was way better than being at home being kicked around and being starved and being beaten up with sticks...even though they give you a little piece of army wool blanket, and you fold it in half, and you buff the floor all like that. To me it was way better than being abused at home.

### *Alcohol and Drug Abuse*

Alcohol and drug abuse among students were mentioned as problems at both Chemawa and Nome Beltz, and to a lesser extent at Mt. Edgecumbe, Copper Valley, and in the boarding home program. Two respondents remembered positive ways staff at Chemawa dealt with alcohol abuse. One person mentioned that Chemawa had an alcohol education center. Another told of how the dorm matrons noticed her drinking problem and tried to help her. In contrast, respondents told us that at Nome Beltz dorm staff provided illegal substances.

### *Suicide and Other Difficulties*

Suicide was a problem in some of the schools and boarding homes. It also occurred after students graduated and returned to their home communities. Several of our participants told of attempting suicide themselves, either during or after their school years. The most shocking statistic shared in the study was that in one year, nine students at Nome Beltz committed suicide. A graduate of Nome Beltz told us: "It was safer, you had a higher statistical rate of survival doing a tour of combat in Viet Nam at the time than of graduating from Nome Beltz. It was an Alaska Native hell. It was...one of the guys who committed suicide later that said, 'Yep, the odds are better.'"

Other aspects of life at boarding school were difficult for students. Three respondents talked of either not being able to go home for funerals or not finding out about family deaths until they went home at the end of the school year.

### ***The Best and the Worst: Two Stories***

So far in this report we have discussed the aggregate experiences of our study participants—shared experiences and views on select topics. This does not, however, allow for individual stories that differ in important ways from the more widespread experiences. In this section, we briefly describe a couple of notable stories we heard, one good and one bad.

#### *The Best of Experiences*

One of our respondents described attending the Institute for American Indian Arts (IAIA) in Santa Fe, New Mexico. IAIA's short-lived secondary school is an example of how exciting an educational institution can be when it embraces and celebrates indigenous cultures and children.

After one year in her local school, this student decided she was tired of dealing with racism in her school and was concerned about making it through to graduation. A friend told her about the IAIA, and she applied. She went from being a minority in a large high school to being embraced as one of almost 400 American Indian and Alaska Native students. She described it as: "[T]here was no racism. There was no prejudice. You were celebrated and validated. Your culture, your arts, and your person was all embraced, and you were told that here's our school."

The teachers challenged her, the curriculum was rigorous, and the routines structured. She noted: "I found my self being a successful student instead of failing." Half of each day was spent in

academics, and the other half was spent taking art classes, with working artists teaching the latter. Indigenous history and culture were woven into all activities, and there were cross-cultural celebrations. The school also made sure that students had college and career counseling, and a plan in place for after graduation. The students still dealt with homesickness, but the overall experience was positive: “It was good for me, it was challenging and I can’t believe I did it. I reflect back—it was the turning point in my life.” She then added that this school provides a model for what can work in a school:

I think that schools like the Institute, it was an experiment and it lasted for I think 14 years, and then it went away, and now the Institute has been reorganized and is more of a postsecondary program now. I think that the experiment worked and it -- it is a model for what schools should and could be like. I think we can't forget about that experiment. I think educators need to really look at it as a model and don't forget it because I think it worked. I really do. It had all the right ingredients and it had a vision for what could empower students to be able to do and I think our present educational system, we're losing that vision. And I wish -- I know there was some talk about when the Institute was closing to look at relocating it in Alaska, and it didn't happen. The -- looking at Mount Edgecumbe and saying could this be the new Institute of American Indian Art and could it be here -- housed here at Mount Edgecumbe. That didn't happen. So I guess what I'm saying is it was a good model for education and knowing today what we're up against because I'm an educator right now and I see what I'm dealing with Alaska Native students in my building and I don't think it needs to be this bad.

### *The Worst of Experiences*

In stark contrast, another of our study participants told a disturbing story of abuse that began with her being removed from a healthy, loving family when she was five years old because her village had no primary school. She, and all the other children in her community over five, were sent to Wrangell. Her story shows how an abusive school can have a devastating effect on a young life. The emotional and physical problems created by this situation caused a downward spiral through brief stays in a series of institutions, including a juvenile detention facility and a school for mentally ill children.

This respondent told of leaving a fully intact and healthy family for a punishing school experience at Wrangell Institute. Her experiences at Wrangell ranged from being hit for speaking her first language to mandatory de-lousing showers and having matrons abuse her when she used the restroom at night. She attended Wrangell for nine years and talked of forgetting what her parents looked like: “Eventually, I didn’t know who my parents were.” After Wrangell, she went to Mt. Edgecumbe for a year, but did not have a good experience there. That summer she attempted suicide and was placed in foster care. As a foster child she attended a local high school and attempted suicide again. This time she was sent to a psychiatric facility. She attended a local high school while living in the psychiatric facility and eventually was released to another foster home. She ran away from the foster home, where the adults were neglectful and was put in a juvenile detention facility. While in the juvenile facility she was injured—her fingers were cut off in an accident—and she was sent outside to attend a psychiatric care school in the Lower 48.

Despite being in yet “another school with the criminals, prostitutes [and] murderers” she was able to graduate from high school.

This respondent has since reconnected with her biological family and has gone through intensive therapy and other healing work for two decades to sort out what happened to her. She said: “I regained what I lost or didn’t get, so I feel centered. I don’t feel good but the pain and loss of all those people that I knew growing up, the people who froze to death, that died in their own vomit... there’s too many... but it’s on the healing side now.”

That this respondent was able to share this tale with us is a testimony to her resilience. We have no idea how many others went through such horrific journeys and whether they survived. We heard a couple of similar stories and can only hope that they were truly exceptions and not widely shared experiences.

## ***Post-High School Experiences***

### **Pursuit of Higher Education**

Many of the study participants have attended college and a number have degrees. However, we heard repeatedly from participants that their college experiences were delayed, interrupted, and in many cases incomplete. Several people we interviewed only recently graduated or are currently pursuing a degree. For example, of the four respondents who completed their secondary education through the boarding home program, two went to college right away. However, a third started college much later, finishing an AA degree in the late 1990s; this respondent is now studying for a bachelor’s degree.

All four of the St. Mary’s graduates went to college. However, only two completed their degrees within a few years of finishing high school and one completed a degree after a 14-year gap. Six Copper Valley respondents started college immediately after graduating, but none completed a degree. One decided to go to college much later, after deciding to change careers. Three of the Nome Beltz graduates started college, but only one finished a degree.

Among the Mt. Edgecumbe graduates we interviewed, eighteen attended college for at least some period of time. However, only one completed a bachelor degree immediately after finishing high school. Eight of the eighteen eventually obtained their degree, and two became teachers. One is still pursuing a degree.

### **Military Service**

Many of our study participants completed high school in the 1960s and early 1970s, during the Vietnam War. Thus, upon graduation they faced being drafted or, in many cases, opted to enlist in the military. For instance, two of the Copper Valley graduates joined the military, and one stayed in for a nearly 30-year career. Two of the Mt. Edgecumbe graduates we interviewed also served in the military; one enlisted, and the other was drafted while attending a vocational college. Both commented that the discipline instilled in them at Mt. Edgecumbe served them well in their military service.

## **LONGER-TERM EFFECTS OF BOARDING SCHOOLS ON INDIVIDUALS, FAMILIES, AND COMMUNITIES**

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One of the most difficult challenges in this analysis has been making sense of the lasting impact of boarding schools on Native adults and communities. The people who shared their stories with us felt they gained access to the wider world, learned when taught, and had richer lives than they could have dreamed of as children. However, the costs of these experiences were also quite high. Indeed, many who talked with us expressed ambivalence and conflict about what was gained and what was lost. We heard much about the lasting effects of the schools on individuals, but we also heard about the impact of the boarding school system on families and communities. Both are addressed below.

### ***Positive Outcomes for Individual Students***

There were several key ways in which individual respondents felt that boarding schools benefited them in the long run. Most focused on skills and knowledge learned and lasting friendships developed. While some reading this might note that boarding schools also gave students opportunities for education they would not have had otherwise, this is a false argument since these students had little choice but to attend some form of boarding home or boarding school to have any secondary education at all.

#### **Opportunity to Learn About the Outside World**

A significant outcome of attending boarding school, according to many of our respondents, was the opportunity to learn about the world beyond their village and state. Eleven respondents described the boarding school experience as giving them exposure to the broader world. Many felt that they would not have had such experiences had they attended school in their home communities. This broader world-view gave them tools to make more informed and bold career and educational choices.

#### **Independence and Discipline**

Eight graduates talked about their boarding school experience making them independent and self-sufficient. One of them commented:

It was good to get away from those people who protect you, like your parents and your older brothers, people that you've always relied on for protection because you're out on your own there... I think boarding schools are the way to go. I'm going to try to send my boy out... I want him to become successful and that's, you know, to me I'm really sorry that almost all children can't go out there and get that independence and learn the system... learn how to do things on their own rather than becoming so dependent and so protected by their parents while they're here.

Several also described how the discipline of the boarding school system gave them tools to succeed in school, the military, and their careers.

#### **Lifelong Friendships**

Many students reflected positively on the social aspects of the boarding school and boarding home experience. In particular, they talked about the lifelong friendships developed at these places. Over one-third of our respondents (26) specifically mentioned the lifelong friendships

developed at the schools as being important. It is widely acknowledged in Alaska that many of the leaders of Native political, economic and social institutions today are graduates of Mt. Edgecumbe, St. Mary's, and Copper Valley boarding schools. Indeed some of our interviewees talked of how the relationships developed at these schools created powerful social networks that drove key events in recent Native history such as the development of the Alaska Federation of Natives and the passage of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act. One respondent put it this way:

You can't help but have lasting relationships when you have the same experiences for four years of your young life. And I was 14 when I first went down there. And we were 18 by the time we got out, I mean, those are formative years. And you have friendships that are lifetime. And I know couples that got married right out of high school and are still married. In fact, some of my closest friends are high school sweethearts. I just love these relationships because invariably the people from the boarding school, especially from Mt. Edgecumbe, are in leadership roles in the state. Now we have senators, we have representatives, and I was a mayor at one time... We have mayors in the community. I mean, there's a whole lot of people. Heads of corporations went to Mt. Edgecumbe and all that stuff. And I think a lot of the success of some of those institutions are directly related to those connections we made in high school."

Another described the same phenomenon, though with the added thought that the closeness was related to their status vis-à-vis the dominant society:

Because the friendships that we established in Mt. Edgecumbe are a bond that we have today, and our guys were the ones that went to war for this generation and it doesn't matter what we did in our life. It seems like we all ended up back in Alaska and we still have that bond and nothing will break it, not the corporation, not the politics because we have classmates that serve in state legislature, but they don't act like they're better than we are no matter what our status is, you know, because we have a mutual respect that started in Mt. Edgecumbe. And we had to support each other back then because unknowingly we were outcasts of society. They put us in our own place. And we sort of realized that. We were even on an island that we couldn't get off of. So naturally the bond was unbreakable and that goes -- it's not -- you know, it goes across genders.

Two others expressed similar thoughts about how the intense bonding was in part a mechanism for survival. One person who had gone to Wrangell noted that lifelong friendships were formed with other students "because if we didn't stick together we'd get into trouble. And togetherness was a way of holding on to your own self."

### **Would They Make the Same Choice? Would They Want the Same Experience For Their Children?**

We asked respondents if they thought they would, if given a choice, attend boarding school again. Twenty-two said they would go again. However, two of those also did *not* recommend

boarding schools for others. We also asked if they wanted to or had sent their own children to boarding school. Of those who responded to this question, we were surprised that twenty-five said, “no,” while only seventeen said, “yes.” Of those who said no, eight were emphatic, making statements such as, “I would never consider sending my kids to the boarding school...,” or “there was no way...” Even some, who themselves had good experiences, did not want to send their children to boarding school. Conversely, some parents expressed regret that they had not sent their children to boarding school, or had not allowed their children to return after one year away. A couple told of their children having very successful experiences at Mt. Edgecumbe or at private boarding schools out of state. Still others told of generational clashes, where they did not want their children to go, but their parents encouraged their grandchildren to go.

### ***Negative Outcomes for Individual Students, Families, and Communities***

Our study participants described to us a number of long-term negative outcomes from boarding schools. These affected not only individuals, but also their families and their communities.

#### **Lasting Trauma**

Six individual respondents described suffering from ongoing trauma related to their boarding school experiences. They talked about experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder and social phobias as well as lasting emotional scars. One even talked of contemplating suicide. Several interviewees talked about their own struggles with alcohol abuse that they felt were a direct outcome of their boarding school experience. As one said:

But a lot of veterans that have experienced trauma, I think there was a lot of trauma in boarding schools where there are people still dealing with a kind of post-traumatic stress disorder. It's still there because of the horrendous psychological damage that happened to people, to live in fear. And unfortunately when you don't deal with it, you self-medicate and become alcoholic and all the other negative things that go on. And so I'm still dealing with all my own issues with Vietnam. I'm now taking counseling. At least I can talk about it now. Because there was a time when I would not admit it, would never even volunteer the information, and I did the same thing with Wrangell, never really said a lot of things I'm saying now.

These respondents also detailed the effect of boarding schools on their friends and relatives, telling us of many classmates and siblings who had committed suicide, as well as one who had murdered others. They also attributed the alcohol and drug abuse of many of their friends to boarding school experiences. One said to us:

Most of them went back and when I look at my classmates, almost every single one of them was plagued with alcoholism and drug abuse and a lot of them are gone because of either alcoholism or drugs or suicide. I mean it was a devastation and I would say that after all these years, I can see a glimmer of hope that our people are coming out of that and starting to realize what boarding schools did to us because here we are. We've become grandparents, you know, and I think that you can measure the health of the person by their grandchildren. That's what I heard one time and I always wondered if it was true, you know. But I think that it takes how many generations for us to begin to heal so that we live true to ourselves, you know, where we feel whole inside and be Inupiat and not try to be what we're not, you know, because that is not conducive to harmony within the soul.

### **Difficulty Integrating Back Into Family and Community**

Fifteen respondents described difficulty integrating back into their home communities. While for some it was issues of job opportunities or adjusting to life without amenities such as running water, for several the conflicts occurred on the more fundamental level of community, family and individual identity. They described how community members viewed them as somehow “different” after getting an education. They spoke of damage to their sense of identity and well-being as a result of being away from their families in their early formative years. Twelve respondents mentioned how they are not close to their family members; they feel like strangers in their home. One person described it this way:

My family -- my siblings went through what I went through so we were pretty much alike in that, but there was a real gap in the relationship -- a close relationship between my parents and us. It wasn't there anymore. It was like -- I mean when you think back, I mean we were gone a majority of the year and that bonding or something just disintegrated maybe. So I -- all my life I was never able to communicate freely with my mother or my father and -- there was no intimacy at all. There wasn't. And then I think that affected my inability to have good relationships, you know, safe relationships or whatever.

Indeed, some told of parents and elders being angry at them because they had lost their understanding of culture and traditional practices. One said:

Well, when I look back now, I think I was a lost individual who was looking for my identity and didn't know how to have relationships. I don't know. Although we got to know, you know, a lot of people all over the state and became close to many because we had to hang on to each other. We had no other parents and I remember from Wrangell us going home and we had been like indoctrinated or something where we went back home thinking differently than we had the year before. And there were quite a few of us in my family, and I remember one year a few years later, my father getting real angry at us because we hadn't learned how to do things that were a basic necessity of the Inupiat lifestyle and I never forgot that. I never forgot his frustration and I didn't tie it to anything then, but it was those two worlds clashing and trying to find ourselves, that loss of identity and being told to think white and be a white person inside of us and that assimilation - - forced assimilation was with me until probably my -- close to 30s when I realized, finding my own identity about my roots and that's when I went back home up north and said this is where I belong and was at peace with myself.

Some also expressed negative attitudes toward their parents because their parents allowed them to be sent away to boarding school.

### **Failure to Learn Parenting Skills**

We heard from several respondents that their time away at boarding school, even when a good experience, contributed to their lack of parenting skills. One respondent said the following:

Although we had some chances to do things, but we did miss out a lot that we could've learned from our parents. And then one thing that I often talk to my friends about is the fact that we missed out on being raised by our parents, being taught by our parents. And we missed out in having the opportunity to observe our parents raise kids our age. Because we were kids, we were 12 years old, 11, 12, 13 year old kids being away. The guidance, we missed out the guidance that we could have received from them... So when I see parents not doing anything with their children, not talking to their children, not disciplining their children, parents that are my age, I think about that. Because when I look at the parents, I see they've gone to St. Mary's or Bethel or Edgecumbe or Chemawa, Oregon, Chilocco, Oklahoma, all those boarding schools that were popular at that time, they're the parents that went away. And I really think that had an effect on how we parent today.

### **Loss of Culture and Identity and the Need to Connect and Heal**

About one-third of our respondents told us they felt that attending boarding school had contributed directly to their loss of culture, and also created identity conflicts. Many of these described their sadness at not learning subsistence practices and traditions from their parents and grandparents and, therefore, being unable to pass these cultural traditions onto their own children. One respondent described how he's never been able to make up for the time lost to him when he should have been learning vital traditional skills:

[M]oose hunting, berry picking time, okay, it was prime time to do all of those things and I wasn't there. Of course, I was kind of fortunate when I was growing up here. Dad was fortunate enough to take me out hunting and showed me some of the areas where to go to hunt and fish. I experienced some of the spring and hunting but the prime time was, you know, when I was supposed to be ...know all this stuff already. To be on my own to go and do those things, I wasn't there. I wasn't taught that. I wasn't ready. That was the saddest part. And then now, I find it really hard to take classes. You don't take classes in Inupiat because that's not the real spirit of teaching. The real spirit of teaching comes from the parents, you know, from the aunts and uncles who were supposed to raise you to teach you all this. In other words, when I finished high school I was too old for that, for my uncles, you know, to go and teach me all that. I was too old. And my parents, you know, they were getting old. That cultural part of me that was really important was never fulfilled, you know, and then I'd constantly get teased, you know, boy, you don't know how to Inupiat, you know, you don't know how to speak correctly. And I struggled with that. Even if I know that - if I take Inupiat classes, I'll be able to understand partially but not fully. That really hurts because that was taken away from me and I don't think that part can ever be fulfilled. No matter how many times I go and do hunting. No matter how many times I go out caribou hunting. I'll still never be able to fulfill that part of when that was not fulfilled. I have a void that I can't fill. Okay? That really hurt and how can I pass that on to my kids, you know, my children, because I don't know that part that I don't know which is really important.

### **Loss of Language**

Study participants also described how boarding school attendance led directly to the loss of their Native language. This occurred because some schools forbid them to speak their language. In other cases, students lost their language because they didn't use it in formal schooling. One participant described how this affected former classmates of his:

There were two brothers that came in from Point Barrow. They came down and they could not speak one word of English. Every night, every time they decided they were going to whip them, the students that spoke their language, those two boys, time and time and time again. I was working in '76 for North Pacific Rim, and that person, one of the two boys, was up there, I saw him, he was working there for a short time. I went to talk to him. I said, 'I know you from Wrangell Institute.' He says, 'Yeah, I remember.' He asked me when I was there, and I told him. He said, 'Yeah, we were there the same time.' I remember him very plainly, talked to him. And I asked him, 'Do you remember, can you speak your language?' He says, 'No.' And I says, 'Are you kidding me?' I said, 'When you first came to Wrangell Institute that's all you could do is talk your own language.' He says, 'I never knew how to speak my language.' He got mad at me, saying I never knew how to speak my language.

### **Loss of Identity**

Perhaps the worst tale of lost identity was offered by one respondent who went through the children's home/foster care system. When his mother contracted tuberculosis, he and his sister were sent to a church-operated children's home, while his older brothers were sent to Wrangell and Mt. Edgecumbe. In the children's home, he and others were forbidden from speaking their indigenous languages. This is what he remembers:

The thing is about these dependent children's homes and also the missions that were in a number of communities like Eklutna, Nenana had a mission also. They were church operated homes, essentially boarding homes throughout the state. One of the things they did was arbitrarily outlaw anything Native including the language, including the heritage, the history study, ceremony participation...

He was kept in a separate dorm and not allowed to see his sister without permission from the home officials. When this respondent was fourteen, the children's home administrator moved outside and invited him to go along as a foster child. In this new home outside Alaska, he was forced to work full-time to pay rent to the administrator's family. Upon turning 18 he was kicked out of the house. He joined the military, served a few years, and then his sister connected him with an older brother who had moved to Los Angeles. It was only when he joined his brother in L.A that he found out he was Alaska Native. Here's what he said about discovering his heritage:

Here I am, 24 years old and realizing that I had been absolutely and totally brainwashed, completely. I didn't know a single thing about my Athabascan tribe. The only person in the whole state of Alaska I knew was my sister and but I'm not unique. There's untold numbers of us that ended up that way with the foster care and boarding homes.

He has since spent many years working to learn his history and culture, and learning from elders in the interior. His family, however, was devastated by boarding school and foster care experiences. His sister committed suicide in the early 1990s, and his other full and half siblings have been gone from the state for decades.

### **A Different Perspective on Loss of Culture from Southeast Alaska**

A different perspective on this loss of language and culture was offered by respondents from Southeast Alaska. In particular, one participant talked of the deliberate choice by Tlingits to pursue a Western education, even at the expense of loss of language and traditional practices.<sup>2</sup> He stated:

[O]ur people made a decision to become educated to a non-Tlingit education system. They knew what the price was and it was not dollars and cents. Like my father said, when you go from Hoonah to Sitka, it was the Sitka Training School then before it became Sheldon Jackson. There was no plane service. There was not high-speed ferries. It's not like you could go back and forth for holidays. A lot of people went there 12 months out of the year until they finished the school and the conditions were really bad because Sheldon Jackson was run by a Presbyterian church. The church people mistook our emblems as worshiping animals, being heathenistic so they -it was against the rules and it was forbidden to speak your Tlingit language. You were punished if you did. You couldn't practice the dancing or any of the cultural things because it was heathenistic. That's part of the price we're talking about. And we're also talking about taking some leadership people out of their tribes and relocating them to a place where they can't speak or practice or anything with their own language and the people knew that was the cost to go but they elected to do it so when people - I have a difficult time when people tell me somebody's taken something away from us. We fought tooth and nail and went to court for 30 years to get this and so in my mind anyway, and my father's and the people of his time we find it very difficult to believe somebody who tries to convince us that we're losing something or they're taking it away from us. We forced the change.

### **Healing Process**

Ten respondents described their efforts to reconnect and relearn their culture and language as part of their healing process. They actively study their language and art, but spoke of the loss they feel from not growing up within their culture. Two told us how this effort has allowed them to address their dependence on alcohol.

Another discussed how talking about the boarding school experience is a part of the healing process. This respondent said: "I think people need to talk about it...For my own healing I had to talk about it. I had to, you know, say, 'Hey, this really happened to us.' ... You can't deny it. It

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<sup>2</sup> Russell (2002) writes: "From its creation in 1912, the ANB [Alaska Native Brotherhood] promoted an English-only, pro-Christian policy within its membership." He ascribed this in part to the need for Tlingits to speak English in order not to be physically assaulted. While this English-only policy is no longer official ANB policy, it was at the time of which our respondent was speaking.

did happen to us. We were taken away from our parents. We were sent to a boarding school. Some of us not just for one year but, you know, for quite a number of years.”

### **Community Disruptions**

#### *Drug and Alcohol Problems*

The phenomenon of children being removed from their homes affected not only the students, but their home villages as well. One respondent described the phenomenon of a healthy village being turned upside down: When the children were taken away to boarding school the parents turned to alcohol for solace. Three other interviewees, from two additional communities, shared similar tales about the adults from their villages becoming alcoholics after the children were sent away to school. One described how this led both to the accidental drowning of children left unsupervised while adults were drinking, as well as a rash of suicides by younger community members. As one participant put it:

Yeah, because of the abuse in Wrangell and being bright and intelligent and just the changes that happened every year, every fall, every spring and that was kind of like, now I notice a lot of people still get real restless in the spring and in the fall. It's just when they expect change or something happens and they're depressed or they kill themselves or they drink too much or it's this annual thing in the spring and fall. It's like a pattern, at least in my village and I can't imagine being in the village. I've since gone back and lived there and I can't imagine the village without kids over the age of five. Twenty, 30 kids a year leaving and the only kids there are under five. How do you think their parents felt?

Indeed, several respondents directly attributed alcohol and drug abuse problems in villages not only to children being taken away but also to those people who returned to their communities after the boarding school experience. The loss of culture, identity, language and traditions among those who attended boarding schools contributed to a breakdown in the cultural fabric and greater alcohol and drug abuse in the community. One put it as follows:

That same village... that I mentioned on how beautiful it was, well my youngest brother lives there, he was adopted by my mom's younger sister. And he said that his son came home naked because these other boys outdoors took his clothes away, and he had to run home with no clothes. Tells me something's really bad there, and it's a really scary place to be because of alcoholism and drug abuse. And so that cultural dynamics is missing in some parts of our society from that several generations of boarding home experiences; where you lost the culture, your cultural education died.

In some places, the effect of the children being taken away to school is just being uncovered. One person commented, "... it isn't until just recently that our parents started talking about it when we began to voice our experiences about the boarding home program, that they began to talk about it, and they began to talk about what it was like being left at home without children.”

*Learning to Deal with Teens after 30 Years of Having Children Sent Away*

Another post-boarding school difficulty that several adults mentioned was villages not knowing what to do with teens once local high schools were opened. Much like those individuals who talked of not knowing how to parent their own children, we heard that villages that had not had teenagers around for thirty or more years had problems dealing with them. One respondent commented:

[W]hen the boarding program -- and villages opened up, schools opened up, there was a big -- people didn't know what to do with these teenagers. You know, they had -- all of a sudden, they had teenagers and nobody knew what to do with them. Because really there's not a whole lot to do in a lot of these villages for these kids, unless they really like hunting and getting out. There's not a whole lot to do. And so there was this -- what do we do with these kids, you know, and they're getting in trouble and all of a sudden they're having to deal with this. You know, and it was just... when the high schools started in the villages. There was a big social problem and I think it's continuing. I think it's continuing. A lot of these kids still -- there's not enough for them to do. And I'm not a proponent of boarding schools at all. I don't think that worked at all.

## DISCUSSION

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The data and analyses presented in this summary offer some important lessons for policymakers looking at current education policy issues. First, our research suggests that any monolithic view of the outcomes of pre-Molly Hootch boarding schools is false. They neither were so successful as to be wholly responsible for the success of current Native leaders, nor so bad as to have created all the social pathologies affecting Native villages. Rather, they were both good and bad. Boarding schools did provide access to education, exposure to the broader world, and an opportunity for students to meet peers from all over the state and, in some cases, the nation. However, they also created settings in which some students were subject to severe abuse and contributed to a significant loss of culture, language and cultural continuity in many communities. This study shows that we are only starting to understand the significance of the boarding school experience in Alaska.

Moreover, the educators in the schools were, for the most part, doing what they believed was right. With the exception of those who intentionally engaged in violent and predatory behavior, most of the adults in the boarding schools were acting according to what was, at that point, considered acceptable practice. We now know the importance of maintaining indigenous cultural practices and languages in Alaska, of using culturally appropriate curriculum and pedagogy in schools, and of engaging families and communities in the formal schooling arena. In the 1950s and 1960s, non-Native educators worked within paradigms that assumed non-majority cultures to be deficient, and it was not until the 1980s that this mindset was broadly challenged.

There are lessons that can be taken away from this work. Whether policymakers choose to develop regional boarding schools in Alaska, to focus on strengthening rural high schools, or to do both, they should look at what worked and what did not work in the boarding schools. The successful practices were those that work anywhere: high expectations of students; educators and other school personnel who developed personal relationships with students; individualized support for struggling students; discipline and structure that is supportive, not punitive, of students; and the opportunity for students to learn about the world beyond the village boundaries. This seems rather obvious, but it also seems, unfortunately, not to be the norm across all schools in Alaska. Indeed, in creating successful schools, it's not a question of boarding schools versus local schools, but rather that *no* school will succeed without these elements in place.

That said, there are real dangers in boarding school and home settings. When students are removed from their families and placed in the care of other adults, they are left vulnerable to abuse. Immediate intervention must occur at the first sign of abuse. If it does not, a culture of abuse can easily develop. The tales we heard from the Wrangell Institute are a clear indication of this.

A number of respondents expressed ambivalent feelings about their boarding school experience and the trade-offs between good and bad. One, in particular, expressed what we feel is a key sentiment, that we can and should take the lessons of the boarding school, both good and bad, and apply them to our current and future education system:

And so -- those were some of the things that, when you look at boarding schools in general, I could say, you know, it was bad or it was good and I could say both, good and bad parts of it, you know. What it did to me personally is, you know, a lot of harm that I had to -- and I'm still overcoming that, you know. I have to have support people around me in order to keep on the right path and stuff like that and make sure that I -- but they also if you look at other -- in the villages, if you're looking to study for boarding schools and trying to look at the pros and cons, sometimes boarding schools were good if the family had a lot of alcoholism, lot of domestic violence, and if it just wasn't good, then boarding schools would be good for them. Or if you have a student who is just way beyond their, the challenges of a home school in the village, then being in a boarding school that had a more broader curriculum, so -- there was a lot of give and take in boarding school versus school at home. But it could be -- nowadays we know enough we could structure boarding schools and school at home that give good foundations for self-identity, being proud of who you are and your heritage. So in both places, a person's education would be enhanced.

We have tried not to make too many leaps in our analyses and interpretations of the data, but rather have opted to let the voices of those who shared with us speak for themselves. We will not make a claim of being totally unbiased; we had to make choices about what we did and did not share in this report. Our own lenses and views, of course, affect these choices. We are certain that we do not know how representative the experiences are of those who talked with us. It is not possible to know from our study the extent to which problems such as alcohol abuse and depression in some Native communities are directly attributable to the affects of boarding schools, beyond that told to us by our respondents. We also do not have a sense of who knew of our study, but chose not to participate, and who may have participated had they been able. People in rural villages may not have had access to the media we used to publicize our study. If they had heard about the study, they still may not have been able to meet us in the hub communities where we did our work. We do feel that there are many stories out there that should be heard but haven't yet been told. We do hope that this study will encourage more people to tell this important history.

## CONCLUSION: WHAT NEXT?

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There are questions the study raises that beg further research. What role did boarding schools play in furthering or hampering the movements toward greater civil, economic and political rights for Alaska Natives? How much of the success of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) can be attributed to the western education received by boarding school attendees, or did it happen despite what Native leaders were and were not taught in school? Certainly our respondents did not learn of their history, culture, and rights in school (except for the youngest study participants). Also, while those who attended Copper Valley and St. Mary's were told that they were future leaders, Mt. Edgecumbe graduates did not report this same encouragement, and far more people graduated from the latter school than the former two. But we know that graduates of Mt. Edgecumbe, along with those from other boarding schools are leaders in the Native community. How did this happen? The social networks developed in these schools appear to have been very important. Could the ANCSA movement have happened without them? Our research was not intended to answer these questions, but hopefully can provide some data to those who are exploring these topics directly.

We did not share much of what was told to us of respondents' experiences in BIA and mission primary schools. We did hear numerous stories of young students being hit or being made to stand in a corner when they spoke their indigenous languages. Many of our respondents said they were not prepared by their primary education for the rigors of the boarding schools. A few experienced just the opposite, finding little challenge at their secondary school. How much did primary school experiences shape participants' boarding school experiences? At present, we cannot answer this question.

The content of the interviews suggests that it is necessary to conduct many more interviews before drawing broader conclusions about the character and impact of the boarding home and boarding school programs on Alaska Native adults. Former attendees from several additional groups should be interviewed, including individuals who left the state, those who are now homeless in urban areas, and former students who returned to rural communities and are not available to interview in hub or urban communities. Also, there are some who did not respond to our request because our initial recruitment did not indicate that we were providing financial incentives. For some, especially elders in northern communities, an honorarium, however small, is expected. In addition, for others who live in cash poor subsistence communities, a cash payment is not unreasonable to expect. We added an honorarium payment after our first set of interviews were completed, but not in time to allow us to reach some who might otherwise have talked with us.

There are other questions that cannot be answered with this work. For example, how many students did not complete boarding school? Repeatedly, Mt. Edgecumbe graduates told us that only a few students from their class left or were expelled. However, when we examined four years of yearbooks, from 1963 to 1966, to determine how many students actually graduated, we found that of 142 freshmen in 1963, only 89, or 62%, graduated in 1966. We know from our interviews that some students who didn't graduate from Mt. Edgecumbe simply transferred to other schools, such as Chemawa or the Anchorage Boarding Home program. However, we do not believe that transfer explains the whole number. We heard from respondents that some of

their classmates left school due to pregnancy or marriage, and that others were expelled for alcohol or other violations. We also do not know how many young people chose not to attend school at all. We heard that the BIA tracked down several students who had decided not to attend secondary school, and threatened their parents with disciplinary action. But how consistent was this? How many students attended until they were old enough to drop out legally? How many students took more drastic measures, such as suicide?

We hope to continue and expand this research in the coming years. In the meantime we invite comment on our initial work and analyses, in an effort to ensure that the meaning we make from this work reflects that of the Alaska Natives who so generously gave of their time and spirit in this work.

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## APPENDIX A

### Schools Attended & Location for Boarding School Study Participants

<i>Schools attended</i>	<i>location</i>	<i>Type of school</i>	<i># of participants/ school</i>	<i>Opened/ closed</i>
Institute of American Indian Arts	Santa Fe, New Mexico	Lower 48 Boarding School	1	1962 <sup>1</sup>
Anchorage Boarding Home Program	Anchorage, Alaska	Boarding Home	5	1966
Chilocco Indian School	Chilocco, Oklahoma	Lower 48 Boarding School	1	1884-1980
Chemawa Indian School	Portland, Oregon	Lower 48 Boarding School	7	1880
Copper Valley Boarding School	(near) Glenallen, Alaska	Religious/Private	9	1956 – 1971
Dillingham Foreign Study Program	Dillingham, Alaska	Special BIA Boarding Home Program	2	1970s
Fairbanks Boarding Home Program	Fairbanks, Alaska	Boarding Home	2	1966
Friends High School	Kotzebue, Alaska	Religious/Private	2	1887
Haskell Institute	Lawrence, Kansas	Vocational School	1	1884
Holy Cross Boarding School	Holy Cross, Alaska	Boarding School	1	1880's-1956
Jesse Lee Home	Seward, Alaska	Orphanage	1	1890-1970 <sup>2</sup>
Mt. Edgecumbe Boarding School	Sitka, Alaska	State/Public Boarding School	29	1947-present
Nenana Boarding Home	Nenana, Alaska	Boarding Home	1	1966-1976
Nome Beltz Regional High School	Nome, Alaska	Regional Boarding School	4	1972/73-present <sup>3</sup>
Palmer Boarding Home	Palmer, Alaska	Boarding Home	1	1966 – 1976
Pius Tenth Mission	Skagway, Alaska	Religious/Private	1	1930s-1950s
Seward Sanitarium	Seward, Alaska	Tuberculosis hospice	1	1940s-1950s
Sheldon Jackson Boarding High School	Sitka, Alaska	Religious/Private	2	1917-1965
St. Mary's Catholic High	St. Mary's, Alaska	Religious/Private	4	1902-1987
Victory Bible School	Palmer, Alaska	Religious/Private	1	1947-
Wasilla Boarding Home	Wasilla, Alaska	Boarding Home	1	1966
William E. Beltz Boarding School	Nome, Alaska	Regional Boarding School	2	1966-1972/73
Wrangell Institute	Wrangell, Alaska	State/Public Boarding School	16	1932-1975

<sup>1</sup>Became a post-secondary institution sometime in the late 1960s or early 1970s

<sup>2</sup>Opened initially in Unalaska, moved to Seward in 1925, damaged in the 1964 earthquake, and merged with other programs in Anchorage in 1970 to become Anchorage Children's Services Inc.

<sup>3</sup>Now a local (non-residential) high school

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## APPENDIX B

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### Schools Attended by Five or More Boarding School Study Participants

Mt. Edgecumbe	Wrangell Institute	Copper Valley	Chemawa	Anchorage Boarding Home	St. Marys	Nome Beltz
29	17	9	7	5	4	4

## APPENDIX C

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### Thirty Years Later: A Study of the Long-Term Effect of Alaska's Boarding Schools on Alaska Interview Protocol

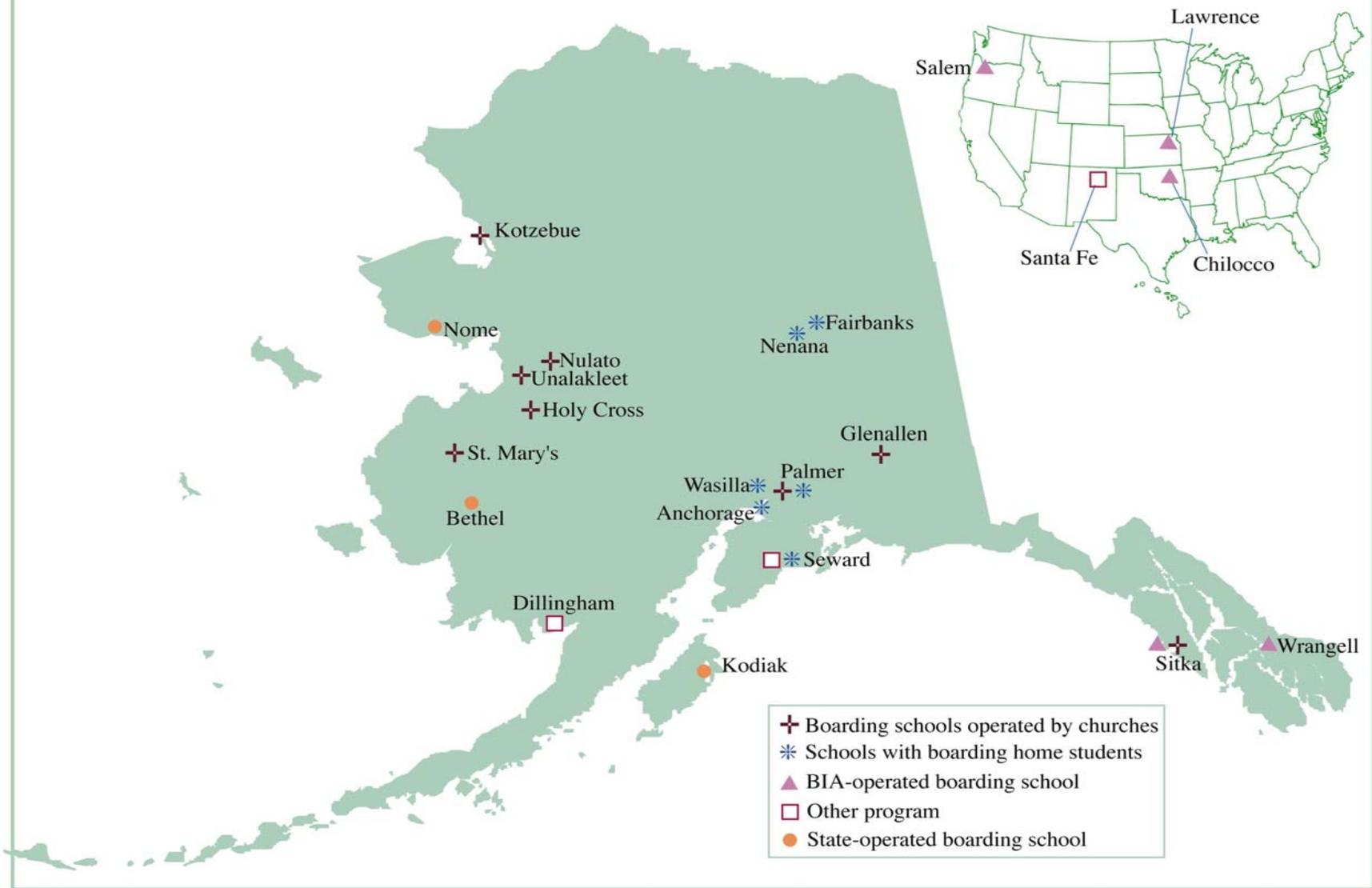
- 1) Tell us a little bit about yourself. Where did you grow up? Where did you go elementary school?
- 2) Where did you attend high school? What years?
- 3) How did you end up there?
  - a. Probe for choice of schools/placed there/parent involvement
  - b. Were you happy with this choice? Was there another school you wanted to attend?
  - c. How did you get to and from school?
- 4) Tell me about your experience in this school?
  - a. Did you like it?
  - b. What did you think about the quality of the education overall?
  - c. What kinds of courses did you take? Did you have a major?
    - i. academic versus vocational courses
  - d. Were there discussions about your future after high school?
    - i. What kinds of things? College? Jobs? Training?
  - e. Did you study any Alaska Native literature?
  - f. Alaska Native language?
  - g. Alaska Native history?
  - h. Was there any discussion of Alaska Native traditions? Subsistence activities?
- 5) Were there things you didn't learn in school that you wish you had?
- 6) Tell us about the other kids in your school.
  - a. Do you think the experiences of others in your school were similar to yours? Why or why not?
  - b. What kinds of friendships did you develop at the school? Are you still in touch with other students?

- 7) How was your relationship with the teachers? Other staff at the school?
  - a. Tell us about a favorite teacher (what did you like about him/her?)
  - b. Was there one that you especially did not like? (what didn't you like?)
- 8) Did you have any Alaska Native teachers? Were there Alaska Natives on the staff at the school?
  - a. Probe for whether Alaska Natives were teachers or in other roles in the school
- 9) Were there other adults that helped you get through school?
  - a. If yes, who were they, and in what ways did they help you?
- 10) I'd like to ask you a bit about the experience of being away from your family and home community.
  - a. How was it being away from home during the school year?
    - i. Probe for homesick versus not too difficult...
  - b. Were there others from your community or village at your school?
- 11) Were you able to go home at holidays? Over the summer? Did your family visit you at all during the year?
- 12) Did you graduate?
  - If yes, did you go on to college?
  - If yes, probe more about how that was...
  - If no, were you encouraged to go to college?
- 13) Looking back, overall, what did you think of your high school(s)?
- 14) Do you think, if you were given the choice, you would have chosen to attend this school?
  - a. Why or why not?
  - b. Would you have recommended it your friends or family?
- 15) After school, did you return to your home community?
  - a. If yes, how was that?
    - i. Probe for reintegrating into the community and family.
  - b. If no, where did you go? Why?
- 16) If you have children, did you send them to boarding school?
  - a. Why/why not?
- 17) How do you think attending (this) school has affected you?
  - a. Probes if needed, more opportunities than if you had a school in your home village?
- 18) How do you think attending boarding school affected your relationship with parents? Friends? Other members of community?

19) What else do you think we should know about your experience in school? Are there questions we didn't ask that you think we should?

20) Reflecting on what we've discussed, what do you think is needed to improve the current education system in Alaska for Alaska Native students?

## Schools Attended by Alaska Native Boarding School/Boarding Home Students



**Figure 1**

## Communities of Origin for Alaska Native Boarding School/Boarding Home Study Participants

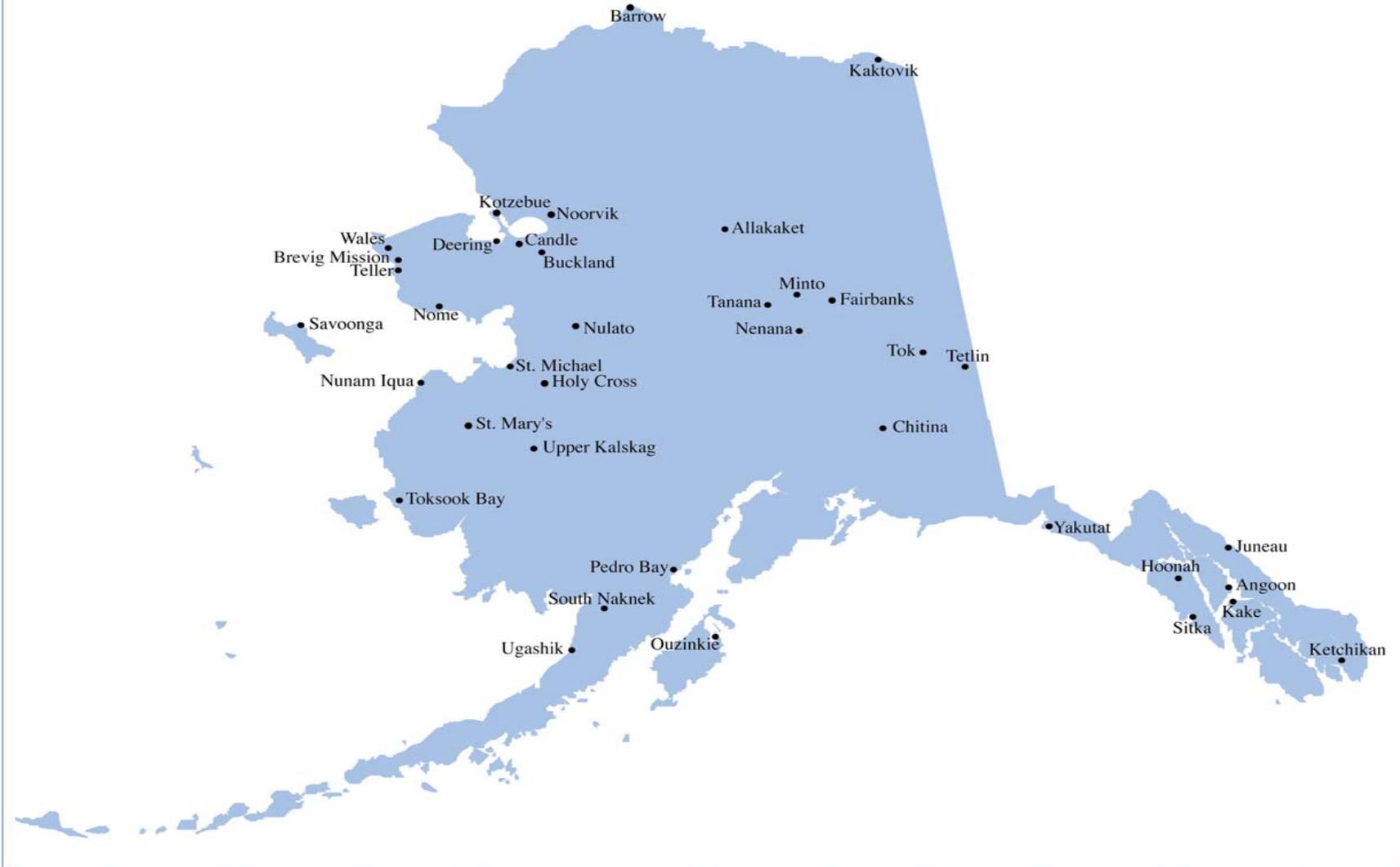


Figure 2



**Table 2. Alaska Native Enrollment Figures: Secondary Boarding Schools 1958-59 to 1968-69**

	1958- 1959	1959- 1960	1960- 1961	1962- 1963	1963- 1964	1964- 1965	1965- 1966	1966- 1967	1967- 1968	1968- 1969
<b><i>BIA Boarding Schools</i></b>										
Chemawa Indian School (Salem, Oregon)			153	299	426	583	676	657	735	717
Chilocco Indian School (Chilocco, Oklahoma)								171	266	370
Mt. Edgecumbe	388	292	672	677	672	671	669	632	619	622
Wrangell <sup>1</sup>				29	28	29	29	20	28	115
<b><i>Religious Institution Boarding Schools</i></b>										
Copper Valley <sup>2</sup>	47	41	39	50	57	73	114	75	61	83
Covenant	42	30	29	26	26	42	50	48	58	63
St. Mary's	44	42	50	77	80	75	101	108	106	106
Sheldon Jackson <sup>3</sup>	110	86	107	83	102	86	70	39		
<b><i>State Operated Boarding Schools</i></b>										
Nome Beltz <sup>4</sup>								154	154	154
Bethel Regional High School <sup>5</sup>										
Kodiak Aleutian Regional High School <sup>6</sup>									N/A	N/A
<b>Total Number of Students</b>	<b>631</b>	<b>491</b>	<b>1050</b>	<b>1241</b>	<b>1391</b>	<b>1559</b>	<b>1709</b>	<b>1750</b>	<b>1873</b>	<b>2076</b>

<sup>1</sup>Wrangell only enrolled students through grade 9, and only for a few years; <sup>2</sup>Enrollment counts include only Native students; Copper Valley enrolled non-Native students as well; <sup>3</sup>Sheldon Jackson became a post-secondary only institution in 1967; <sup>4</sup>Beltz opened in 1966 and was a stand-alone boarding school up until 1972, when it was consolidated with Nome High School into a regional school, with both residential and local students; <sup>5</sup>Opened in Fall 1972; <sup>6</sup>Residential school opened in 1967, but enrollment data is not available; residential school enrollments were merged with local high school attendance figures

**Table 3. Alaska Native Enrollment Figures: Elementary Boarding Schools 1958-59 to 1968-69**

	1958- 1959	1959- 1960	1960- 1961	1962- 1963	1963- 1964	1964- 1965	1965- 1966	1966- 1967	1967- 1968	1968- 1969
<b><i>BIA Boarding Schools</i></b>										
Mt. Edgecumbe	289	366								
Wrangell*	255	266	262	230	224	232	230	230	216	114
<b><i>Religious Institution Boarding Schools</i></b>										
St. Mary's	44	42	48	75	78	75	101	108	106	106
<b>Total Number of Students</b>	<b>588</b>	<b>674</b>	<b>310</b>	<b>305</b>	<b>302</b>	<b>307</b>	<b>331</b>	<b>338</b>	<b>322</b>	<b>220</b>

\*grades served at the school changed from K-8 to K-9

**Table 4. Enrollment of Village Native Students in Public High Schools, 1972-1973**

<b><i>BIA Boarding Schools</i></b>	
Mt. Edgecumbe	360
Chemawa Indian School (Salem, Oregon)	348
<b><i>State Operated Boarding Schools</i></b>	
Nome Beltz Regional High School	173
Bethel Regional High School	205
Kodiak Aleutian Regional High School	73
Wildwood Boarding School*	158
<b><i>Boarding Home Program</i></b>	
Urban Boarding Home Program (Anchorage, Fairbanks)	554
Rural Boarding Home Program (Other – Bethel, Dillingham, etc.)	556
<b><i>Village Ninth and Tenth Grade Programs</i></b>	158
<b>Total Number of Students</b>	<b>2,585</b>

\*opened in 1972-73 with Johnson O'Malley Program federal funds

Table from: Kleinfeld, J., (1973), *A Long Way From Home: Effects of Public High Schools on Village Children Away from Home*. Fairbanks, AK: Center for Northern Educational Research & Institute of Social, Economic and Government Research, University of Alaska.

**Table 5. Alaska Native Population Ages 14-18, 1960 & 1970**

	<i>1960</i>	<i>1970</i>
<b>Total Population</b>	<b>4,685</b>	<b>5,563</b>
Enrolled grades 9-12	1,693	2,983
Enrolled in another grade (not 9-12)	1,695	1,753
Not enrolled – H.S. graduate	0	50
Non enrolled – not H.S. graduate	1,297	777
Total Population	100%	100%
Enrolled grades 9-12	36.1% %	53.6%
Enrolled in another grade (not 9-12)	36.2%	31.5%
Not enrolled – H.S. graduate	0%	0.9%
Non enrolled – not H.S. graduate	27.7%	14%

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