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ALASKA NATIVE LANGUAGES GO DIGITAL

How Digital Publishing Empowers Teachers, Connects Native Students To Their Culture, and Supercharges Language Immersion Programs

by Steve Nelson

During the final days of the 2014 session, the Alaska Legislature enacted House Bill 216, which designated twenty Alaska Native languages as official languages of the state.

In addition to English, Inupiaq, Siberian Yupik, Central Alaskan Yup'ik, Alutiiq, Unanga, Dena'ina, Deg Xinag, Holikachuk, Koyukon, Upper Kuskokwim, Gwich'in, Tanana, Upper Tanana, Tanacross, Hän, Ahtna, Eyak, Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian are now officially recognized Alaska languages.

This legislative action was profoundly significant to the Alaska Native population.

Language Revitalization

All languages are fluid and ever-changing, requiring new speakers to perpetuate their evolution. It is estimated that some Alaska languages have fewer than 100 fluent speakers left, most elderly, placing them at risk of being lost. This

urgency has sparked statewide efforts to preserve Native languages and make them more accessible to younger generations.

Each of Alaska's indigenous languages are direct reflections of the people who speak them, and serve as a kind of verbal encyclopedia of regional information. Words, phrasing and descriptive nuances convey a depth of knowledge about the area where a language is spoken, as well as the collective experiences of those who have inhabited it for many generations.

As a Native elder once told me, "Our language IS our culture."

Regional stories and legends, passed orally from adults to youth, were designed to teach important lessons about cultural traditions, beliefs, and survival skills. In this way, indigenous languages have long played an important role in the education of Alaska Native children.



Chevak teachers use an iPad to gather content for a digital book.



In-service workshop participants learn to use digital publishing tools to make instructional materials that incorporate Cup'ik text and spoken language.



Chevak teachers work on book projects during a digital publishing in-service workshop.

Connecting Students To Their Culture

Today, school-based strategies, including Native language immersion programs, are increasingly being utilized to strengthen connections between Native youth and their culture, to help improve their academic success and well-being.

New digital publishing tools have put the power to integrate Native languages into curriculum in the hands of classroom teachers, allowing them to create materials that can effectively engage today's generation of technologically adept learners.

Language Immersion, Chevak Style

One example of a successful language immersion effort is underway at Chevak school in Kashunamiut school district. Over the past few years, AASB's Consortium for Digital Learning has worked intensively with the district to

facilitate the production of interactive digital materials to support their elementary-level Cup'ik language immersion program.

To date, fifteen Cup'ik language digital story books featuring interactive multimedia elements have been created and are available free online. Another digital book based on the local story, Arnaq Tunucillek-Illu (The Young Lady and the Loon), is currently in production. Making these books has been a collaborative effort between the school leadership, students, teachers, AASB, and an app developer.

With 15 Cup'ik language digital books completed, the focus of Kashunamiut's immersion program has turned to building self-sufficiency among the teaching staff. So far this year CDL has delivered four days of inservice workshops to over 20 Chevak school teachers on how to produce interactive books and classroom materials that incorporate written

and spoken Cup'ik language.

Workshop topics have included digital book pre-production, design, layout, integration of multimedia elements, and audio/video production techniques. Mastering these skills are enabling Chevak teachers to produce instructional materials that can deliver powerful and engaging new learning experiences to their Cup'ik immersion students.

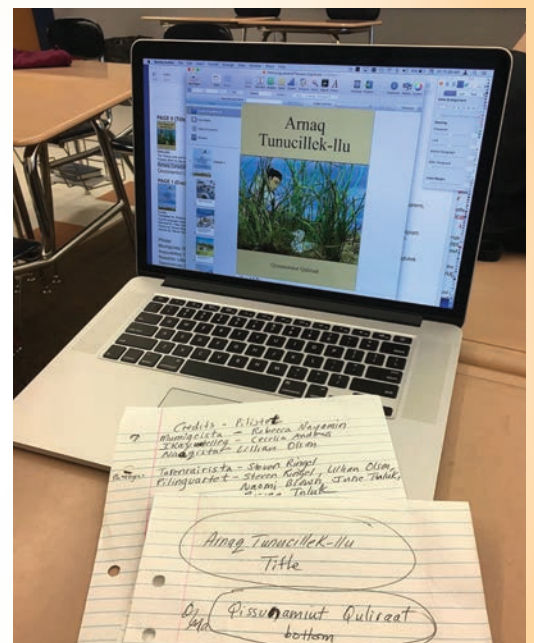
Empowering Teachers

The Kashunamiut teaching staff now has the ability to create their own classroom materials that include Cup'ik language text and audio, as well as incorporate digital publishing into student assignments, and involve family and community members in the digital book creation process.

Some teacher-initiated projects currently



A team of Cup'ik speakers work on translating part of the Arnaq Tunucillek-Illu book for digital publication.



Transcribing the story from spoken Cup'ik, to written, to digital text.

underway include interactive Cup'ik word books for young immersion program students, illustrated local legends, and an atlas that documents the geography and history of the Chevak area as told by local residents.

The district IT department is providing high-level project support to the teaching staff, furnishing laptops, iPads, technology assistance, and configuring the school network to facilitate book file storage and sharing. Once produced, all digital instructional content will be archived on a school server and accessible over the network for access by staff and students.

Making A Spoken Language Digital

Accurately transcribing a traditional story that until recently had only been passed on orally, requires a dedicated team of fluent speakers. As a non-speaker of Cup'ik, it was a fascinating process to observe.

For the production of the Arnaq Tunucillek-Illu (The Young Lady and the Loon), translating the oral story to text and audio for the digital book required the participation of a Cup'ik linguist, an elder fluent in Cup'ik, a narrator fluent in Cup'ik, and a focus group of five Cup'ik speakers to review the final text for precision and correctness.

Spirited debate ensued about the nuances of specific words. Books containing written Cup'ik language were consulted for usage guidance. Phone calls were made. Eventually, consensus was reached.

The responsibility for ensuring that the digital book text accurately conveys the spirit and meaning of the story was taken very seriously by each team member. This complex review process placed the weight of an entire culture on the participants' shoulders. Being on the front lines of transitioning their ancestral language from oral to written form required getting it right, not just for themselves, but for the benefit of previous, current and future generations of Cup'ik people.

Improving Student Success

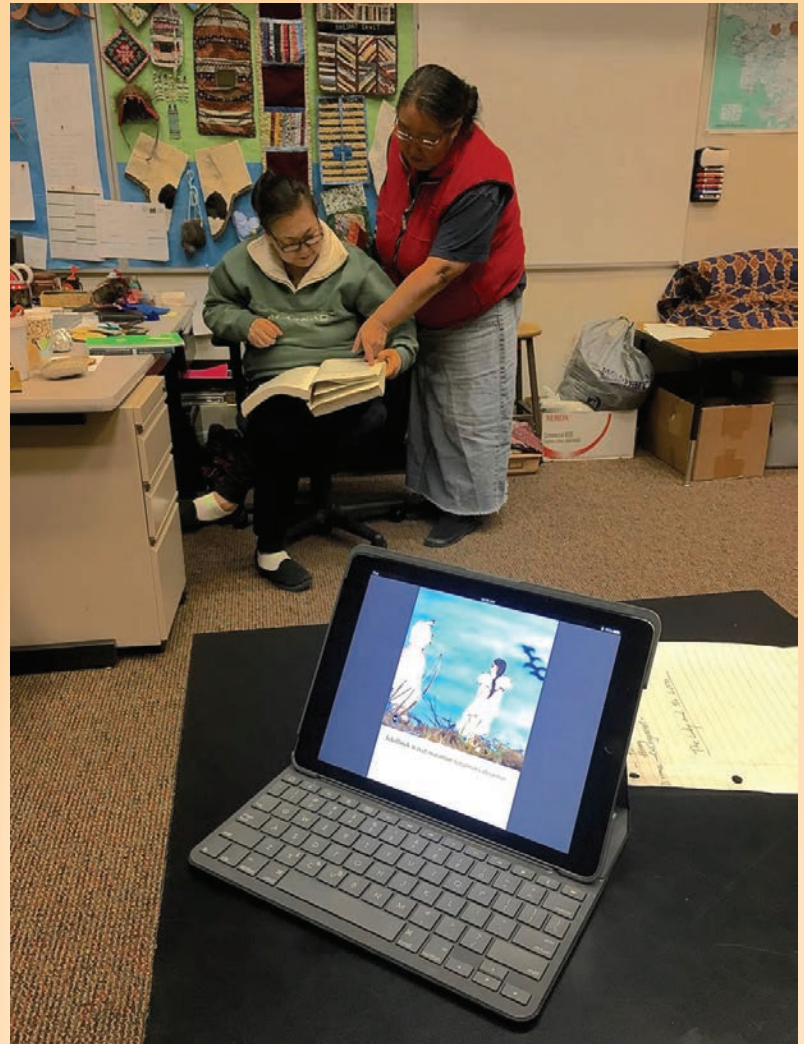
A stated goal of the Association of Alaska School Boards is empowering local boards to increase the academic success and graduation rates of Alaska Native students.

AASB supports language revitalization efforts, and believe that grounding Alaska Native students in their cultural identity, and offering culturally responsive personalized learning, teaching practices, and school environments for Alaska Native students, are important elements of success.

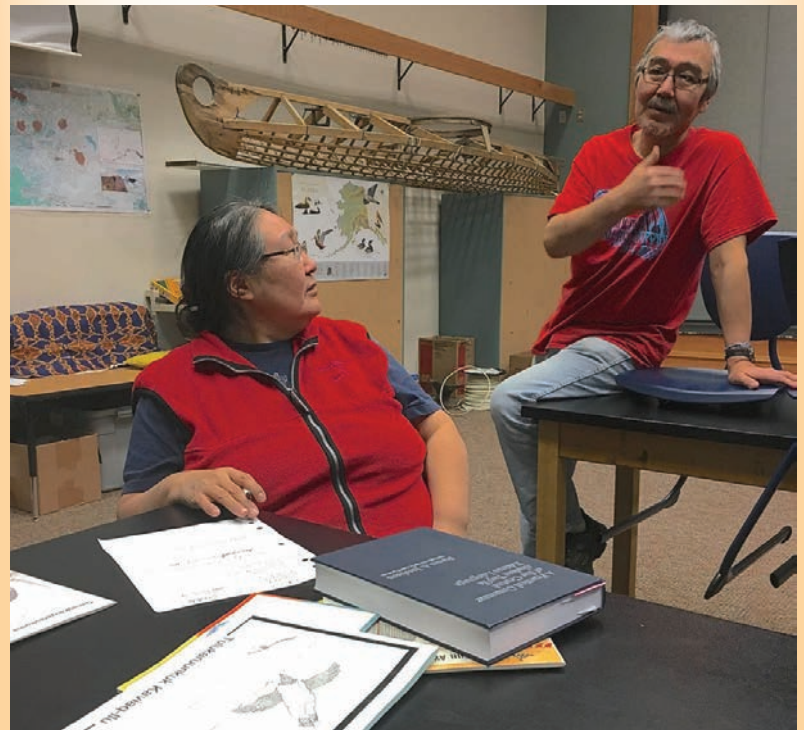
We actively work to assist local school boards in understanding their role in creating learning environments that are conducive to the learning styles of Alaska Native students in the various regions and diverse cultures of our state.

Interested in digital publishing in-service workshops?

Please contact us for details and scheduling information:
Bob Whicker: rwhicker@asb.org Steve Nelson: snelson@asb.org



A team of Cup'ik speakers work on translating part of the Arnaq Tunucillek-Illu book for digital publication.



Deciding on the best words to use for the book's title.

MOVING FORWARD: The Role of Digital Learning in a Modern School System



Dr. Robert Whicker
*Director of
Consortium for
Digital Learning*

As debate heats up on how Alaska's budget situation will affect education delivery and policy, keeping a firm grasp on what is most important for our children during the next school year would be helpful to remember.

Each year, students have one opportunity to learn at the grade level dictated by their age. In other words, you're only in 3rd grade once. During that year, important age-appropriate learning concepts are introduced, providing the best opportunity for learning, then and only then. After that, the curriculum moves on, with or without you.

Solutions to meet fiscal and policy challenges should consider the vital connections, relationships, and safe, caring learning environments that help students make the most of each year of their K-12 education. Human connections between teachers, adults and other students who share and support each other during this learning time are the most meaningful. It's also about creating learning environments within institutions that are safe, caring, and compassionate while presenting relevant, challenging and inspiring learning opportunities for all.

Innovation will be key in crafting solutions to present day challenges. The Association of Alaska School Boards defines innovation as any opportunity, methodology or technique that facilitates a more personalized learning environment, resulting in a positive effect on student achievement. Meaningful innovation will not be found in just one answer, such as technology or online learning, but in a combination of effective strategies that affect student achievement.

Personalizing learning brings these vital connections to bear. Personalized learning environments can encompass a variety of strategies that help learners take control of managing their own learning.

The emphasis here is on personalized learning systems. Qualities that provide enhanced

learning in all subjects come as hands-on activities: pacing, using multiple senses, repetition, visualization, simulations, real-life experiences, and the list goes on. To personalize learning for 28 students, 28 variations may be necessary. Systems require common elements that can be used to provide a personalized learning experience for each student, while still being applicable to a system-wide approach. Technology and digital learning are essential elements to meet these demands.

Digital learning originates in the classroom and shifts to any-time, any-where learning. It may, or may not, include online classes. True digital learning is dependent on teachers understanding how technology fits within all the curricular activities they do, and bringing appropriate technologies into that learning experience. The power of digital learning is realized when a teacher designs a learning activity of relevance and rigor, knows the level of technology use that is appropriate, can integrate that technology to its best advantage, and utilizes the technology to generate an exemplary outcome in the end.

The use of broadband greatly expands the kinds of opportunity needed in our 21st century and greatly enhances digital learning. It does not "make or break" digital learning. In fact, teachers from Alaska who teach in a device-per-child learning environment are presenting at national conferences on how to effectively use technology in teaching subjects such as math without Internet access, even when they have access to adequate bandwidth.

The implementation of digital learning into a learning model expands possibilities. Some districts are combining classroom digital learning, online learning, flexible scheduling, real-life/real-world experiences, and leveraging private sector partnerships with great success. As a result, student engagement, achievement, opportunity, and success are being realized.

Two major components must be present to modernize our Alaska's education system to a model in which all students benefit from a personalized approach: access to technology, and a well-educated, well-trained teacher workforce who know how to utilize digital tools to effectively educate students.

Student access to technology has improved over time. Today, every school district in our state has some students using district-purchased personal devices for learning. Unfortunately, this group comprises less than 20% of our entire student population. As a state, we're still operating in two worlds: analog vs. digital. This 'digital divide' creates inequities and increases district costs to provide both forms of learning materials. Expanding access to personalized devices for all students creates a more equitable system, dramatically reduces learning materials costs, and opens many new learning opportunities.

High quality teachers for this kind of learning environment must have knowledge of instructional technology integration. Alaska's higher education systems are slowly recognizing that they must include high-access learning environments for their pre-service students, if those students are going to become effective teachers in our schools. For instance, the University of Alaska Fairbanks now requires a personal laptop and tablet for all of their education majors, a critically important step.

However, many of Alaska's teachers arrive from the Lower 48 without adequate professional development in how to integrate technology into their learning activities. Acknowledgement and support from state leaders to help districts move teachers into higher levels of technology adoption would expedite the transition of our education system to a digital learning model. Partners in both the private and public sectors are already working together to make this type of training available at an affordable cost.

Without state support for a shift in education delivery and structure, infrastructure, hardware and services ends up costing individual districts more than it should. Those districts that prioritize this shift still are scraping together funding for programs. These programs work, serve as a future model, and bring long-term value and sustainability. Prioritizing the development of a statewide system of support will bring economy of scale, equity in student experience, and expanded opportunities.

And it may be the last shot next year's third graders have at a 3rd grade education.

Sharing Your Story



**TIFFANY
JACKSON**

FROM the PRESIDENT

What an exciting time of year with spring just around the corner, the weather getting warmer, and daylight getting longer! I'm sure most of you have been watching the action of the legislature with bated breath; waiting to see how the work they're doing now will impact the work we have to do in our districts. It can get

discouraging sometimes to see what's going on, anticipating some of the cuts coming down the line. As always, I encourage you all to do what you do best, share your story. Let your legislators know what's going on in your district, and how you're providing your students a quality education with the resources you have.

Something which gets referred to frequently when we talk about providing education in the face of budget cuts is utilizing technology to help fill some of the gaps created by budget cuts. Now, there are some districts in Alaska who are doing some amazing things with technology. Chevak's expansion of the digital books in Cup'ik, and Kodiak's literacy programs utilization of robots are two excellent

examples! However, there are also districts which have experienced difficulty in implementing technology and recognizing some of the highly anticipated gains technology promised.

Bandwidth access continues to be an issue for many of our schools. Cost to implement technology and increasing bandwidth to adequately utilize various technologies is an issue. Not properly planning how technology is going to be utilized or training teachers on how to effectively implement technology in the classroom can negate some of the benefits technology offers. Technology can be a great tool, but there are some hurdles we need to overcome in order to implement it effectively.

I encourage you all, if you haven't already, to educate yourselves on what the technology challenges and benefits your district may be facing. When you're talking with your legislators and advocating for you districts (notice I didn't say if, we all need to be advocates for our students), let your legislators know what your reality is in your district. If you have challenges, share those. If you have successes which have increased student learning and success, share those too! Just be sure to know what your story is, especially in this environment where some may be asking us to cut costs by relying more on technology.

The Road to Better Endings

I must confess I find change to be discomfiting and at times even frightening. We toss out phrases like "think outside the box" and "move outside your comfort zone". But even though the "rut" may be a safe place to stay, the world we now live in has removed that option. I recall when I was a small business owner I was truly one month away from insolvency every month. I found myself always looking for a competitive edge to make my company more attractive and a better deal for bidders. Today's businesses are no different. How many times have you dialed a help line and spoken with someone with a foreign accent? I can't help but think, "another job moved out of the U.S." Our vocabularies have new words that didn't exist fifty years ago – "downsize" and "outsource" or "right size" and the connotation of them all denotes change.

Nowhere is it truer than in our world of school boards. Change is all around us and it seems as if we cannot change quickly enough. In this fast-paced atmosphere of education it is frightening to consider that we may make the wrong choice. Remember the "whole reading vs. phonics" debate or "new math vs. traditional"? This is reminiscent of one of my favorite poems.

The Road Not Taken

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;*

*Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,*

*And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.*

*I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*



**NORM
WOOTEN**

FROM the EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

With the fiscal situation in Alaska school boards must be willing to change. Whether that is finding efficiencies, sharing services, or yes, even reducing services we cannot do business as usual. It is inevitable that our districts will look different – but we must be diligent in ensuring that as we determine what road to take, in a variation on the words of Robert Frost, it must make a difference in the lives of our students. A good difference!

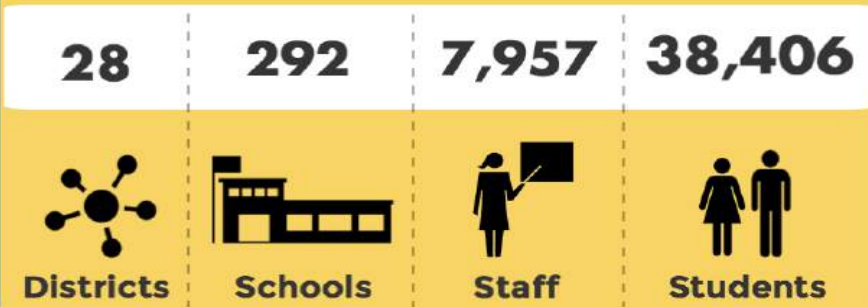
School Climate and Connectedness Survey



The School Climate and Connectedness Survey (SCCS) is a voluntary statewide survey taken by students and staff since 2006, developed by the American Institutes for Research (AIR) in partnership with AASB. It measures positive school climate, how connected students feel to adults and peers, social and emotional learning (SEL), and observed risk behaviors at school or school events.

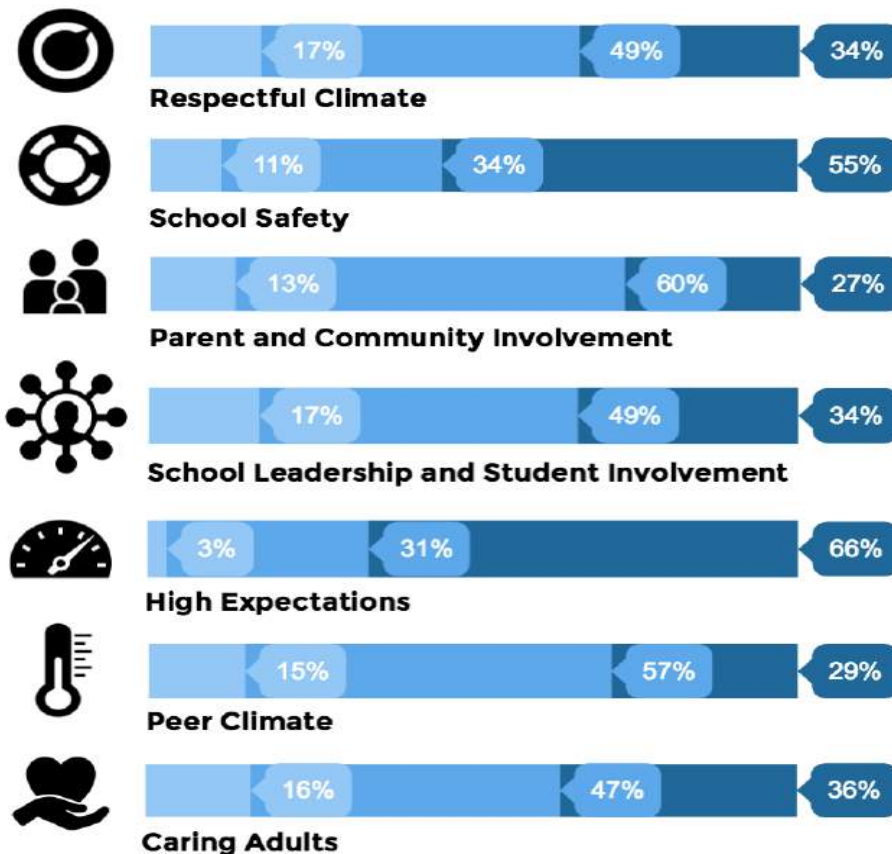


Survey Participants



2015 Statewide Highlights

- A positive school climate linked to academic performance: Strong relationships between school climate and student rates of meeting standards on the Alaska Measures of Progress (AMP).
- The higher a school's climate ratings, the fewer student risk behaviors reported at school or school events.
- Increase in social & emotional learning (SEL) student ratings from 2010 to 2015.
- First year results for grade 3-5 younger student survey.



Student Results Grades 5/6-12 Survey

From 2010-2015:

- Significant declines in School Safety, Parent and Community Involvement, and School Leadership and Student Involvement.
- Modest improvement in Peer Climate.
- Ratings in other areas remained relatively stable.





Respectful Climate



School Safety



Parent and Community Involvement



School Leadership



Student Involvement



Staff Attitudes

Staff Results

From 2010-2015:

- Increase in School Safety, School Leadership and Student Involvement.
- Decrease in Respectful Climate, Parent and Community Involvement, and Staff Attitudes
- Student Involvement remained stable.

- Agree/Strongly Agree
- Agree Some/Disagree Some
- Disagree/Strongly Disagree

Select Findings



I feel safe at school



Adults in the community support this school

Observed Student Risk Behaviors



Student Results Grades 3-4/5 Survey

94%

I feel safe at school

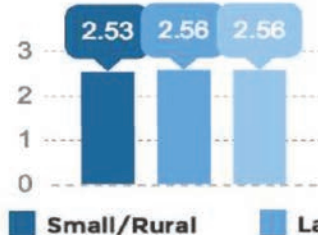
98%

The adults at this school believe that all students can do good work

94%

Students here treat me with respect

Caring Others



Social Emotional Learning



2015 Alaska School Climate & Connectedness Survey Results Summary
For more information on this survey, contact Jenni Lefing at jlefling@aaasb.org or 907-463-1660.

Icon Credits: The Noun Project, Gerald Wildmoser, Mike Wirth, riyazali, Dianne Kathleen Navarro, Andrew Searles, Dalpat Prajapati, Gregor Črešnar, Jamie Rothwell, Nut Chanut, TukTuk Design, and Nicky Knicky.

ASSOCIATION OF ALASKA SCHOOL BOARDS



Calendar

MARCH

18	June Nelson Memorial Scholarship Committee - <i>Juneau</i>
19	AASB Board of Directors Meeting <i>Juneau</i>
19-22	AASB Spring Academy/ Legislative Fly-in - <i>Juneau</i>

APRIL

6	NSBA Executive Directors' Liaison Committee <i>Boston, MA</i>
7	NSBA Executive Directors' Leadership Development Committee – <i>Boston, MA</i>
7	NSBA Executive Directors' Conference Institute <i>Boston, MA</i>
9-11	NSBA Annual Conference <i>Boston, MA</i>
18	Legislative Sessions Ends
TBD	Teacher Job Fair - <i>Anchorage</i>

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Laurie Miller	Administrative Assistant

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