

Growing Our Own Educators Through UA Program

Many people know that UA offers degree programs to train Alaska's future educators. But not everyone knows that UA is also developing the next generation of Alaska's educators by working with K-12 students – especially Alaska Native youth in rural communities – through the Future Educators of Alaska (FEA) program.

FEA was established in 2003 with a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, and has received two additional three-year grants since then. It is administered within the UA Statewide Academic Affairs Office of K-12 Outreach, in partnership with the Alaska Teacher Placement and Alaska Native Education Association.

"The main goal of FEA is to grow our own educators through a club model. Our approach uses engaging club activities to encourage Alaska Native students in K-12 schools across Alaska to go into the education profession," says Sonta Hamilton Roach, FEA director.

It's an important endeavor, especially in rural school districts, where teacher turnover hovers around 22 percent – almost twice as high as in urban districts. Not only is recruiting new teachers expensive, but research has linked high teacher turnover with lower student achievement.

The good news is that research

also shows that teachers and principals who graduate from programs in Alaska are more likely to stay. According to the Institute of Social and Economic Research at UAA, of the Alaska graduates who came into the state's schools between 2000 and 2005, almost three-quarters were still there in 2007, compared with about half among those who graduated from programs outside Alaska.

By focusing on Alaska Native students, FEA begins to address the low number of Alaska Native teachers. Currently, approximately 80 percent of Alaska's teachers come from out of state, and only 5 percent are Alaska Native. Meanwhile, almost 90 percent of rural students are Alaska Native.

"Growing our own educators sets our students up for success. If Alaska had more teachers and administrators who were knowledgeable about living in rural Alaska, Alaska Native cultures and languages and students, the turnover rate would be lowered, the time spent orienting teachers to rural Alaska would be lowered, and the student success rate in school would be higher," Roach says.

Since its inception, FEA has grown from its three original school district partners to now having 27 district partners and nearly 600 student participants. Roach says the number of participating school districts has doubled this year alone.

One of these new partners is St. Mary's School District, which joined during the 2009 – 2010 school year.

"St. Mary's decided to begin an FEA club due to the fact that the district is always looking for quality teachers who

"The main goal of FEA is to grow our own educators through a club model."

will remain in St. Mary's and provide continuity for the children who attend school here. The community of St. Mary's has been successful in hiring quality local teachers and wants to ensure this tradition will continue," says Dave Herbert, superintendent of the St. Mary's School District.

Approximately 15 students in grades 7-12 are currently involved in the St. Mary's FEA club, which is overseen by a local teacher-adviser, Sophia Aloysius. The club members work in the elementary classrooms, where they read to younger students and help with class work. Members are also teacher assistants at the high school level, where they obtain first-hand knowledge of what teaching is like. The club meets once a week to review and plan member activities.

Through FEA, St. Mary's School District participates in teleconferences where they can share ideas and collaborate with other clubs from across the state. FEA also provides funding to pay a stipend for the club adviser and funds to send students to the annual FEA student gathering, where they can network with each other and with Native teachers, hear inspirational speakers and visit the local UA campus. This year, nearly 100 students attended the student gathering in Anchorage; next year's gathering will be held in Juneau on April 13 – 15.

Increasing the number of Alaska Native teachers is something Herbert says the district is proud to be involved in.

"The district is very proud that we have been able to hire quality local Yup'ik teachers who are members of the community. Quality Alaska Native teachers provide students with positive role models, inspire the youth of the community, and have a unique



▲ A group of St. Mary's School District students play a game. St. Mary's joined FEA during the 2009 - 2010 school year.

tomorrow's workforce

understanding of the lifestyles of the students who attend school here," he says.

FEA is poised to continue its impressive growth. For example, FEA was recently designated as a Career and Technical Student Organization by the U.S. Department of Education. According to Fred Villa, associate vice president of UA workforce programs, this immediately increases the credibility of the program and makes it eligible for additional grant awards. The recognition, Villa says, is well deserved.

"The Future Educators of Alaska program is critical as it has been developed as a culturally-relative and sensitive model for encouraging rural students to go into educational careers, while respecting and encouraging Native culture and identity," he says. "This effort really represents a 'grow your own' workforce philosophy that can keep the local knowledge in the community and still provide economic stability by keeping resources at home."

FEA has also recently expanded membership from primarily west coast school districts to districts in every region of the state.

"We're basically saying that what we've been doing for the past seven years works, and now we're ready to share this model across Alaska," Roach says. FEA's move to a regional organizational structure will allow the program to host regional student gatherings and better connect clubs and members with each other. The first regional student gatherings will be held this fall in FEA's five regions – Southcentral, Arctic, Southeast, Interior and Western Alaska.

As part of the effort to strengthen support for high school students as they prepare to transition into post-secondary education, FEA developed a student pathway model. The model looks at education degree and support programs at each of the UA campuses, with a goal of helping students chart a course for their future.

FEA is also developing four

one-semester high school elective courses, through which students can learn more about the education profession, gain more experience working with students, and learn about incorporating culture into the classroom – all while receiving high school credit.

"Many of our high school students are also involved in sports or other after-school activities, so by offering this course during the school day, they can continue their participation in the FEA program," Roach says.

Roach is particularly excited about FEA's new partnership with the Rural Alaska Honors Institute (RAHI), a bridging program at UAF that assists students from rural Alaska in making the academic and social transition between high school and college. Through the partnership, RAHI will offer an education track for students who attend the six-week summer program, where they live, play and take classes for credit on the UAF campus.

"We are thrilled to be supporting students through this exemplary program where students can receive college credit," Roach says.

FEA's support doesn't stop once students receive their high school diplomas. The program has developed numerous partnerships that continue to offer support to students once they move into the university system. For example, FEA works with the education programs at all of the UA campuses, bridging programs including UAF's RAHI and Interior-Aleutians Campus Bridging the Gap program, student support programs like the Preparing Indigenous Teachers and Administrators for Alaska Schools (PITAAS) at UAS, and clubs such as the Alaska Native Education Student Association at UAF and Club Ed at UAA.

"Partnerships have been essential in creating bridges for students as they transition out of high school," Roach says.

Once students graduate from UA, the support continues through the



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Alaska Teacher Placement program, which serves as a statewide education job clearinghouse by matching teachers and administrators seeking positions with the districts who need them. Another program serving new graduates is the Alaska Statewide Mentor Project, which provides experienced mentors to first- and second-year teachers at participating school districts.

"FEA students who pursue a career in education will eventually utilize the services of both Alaska Teacher Placement and the Alaska Statewide Mentorship Program," Roach says. "Essentially, they continue the support to the teacher workforce in Alaska. This increases the success of new teachers."

The journey doesn't end there, though. The program's vision is truly full circle, Roach says, as one day FEA expects to see its current students serving as mentors to new teachers – and encouraging yet another generation of future teachers.

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