



## FEATURE

### Improving teacher retention in rural Alaska: an experiential place-based model

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# Improving teacher retention in rural Alaska: an experiential place-based model

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## Abstract

This paper presents an innovative program focusing on teacher retention in Alaska's Bristol Bay region, developed through a partnership between the University of Alaska's (UAA) School of Education, the Bristol Bay Foundation (BBF), and four rural school districts. This program offers a replicable model for supporting school districts and teachers in rural communities where high teacher turnover rates are an enduring challenge. The program in the Bristol Bay region has achieved a 95% retention rate among participating teachers, significantly higher than the regional average of 66%. The paper describes the program's structure, emphasizing its place-based experiential learning approach that connects educators with local culture and community.

**Keywords:** teacher retention, rural education, Alaska, experiential learning, teacher professional development, culturally responsive teaching

## Introduction and background

Most teachers in rural Alaska are from outside the state (Cano, Amor, and Pierson, 2021). Rural Alaska offers remarkable opportunities for teachers to live in Alaska Native communities on land cared for by Indigenous peoples for thousands of years. Despite these benefits, teacher turnover in rural-remote schools is notably higher than in other areas of Alaska: 31% compared to 18% in urban-fringe communities and 21% in the three urban centers, Anchorage, Fairbanks, and Juneau (Cano et al., 2021). This high rate of turnover disrupts classrooms and communities and puts a costly strain on school districts' budgets (DeFeo, Tran, Hirshberg, Cope, and Cravez, 2017).

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Spring of 2020, two superintendents from the Bristol Bay region proposed an innovative approach to teacher retention that values educators' experiences in rural communities, emphasizes culturally responsive education tailored to the region's Indigenous communities, and leads to a master's degree. Leaders in the University of Alaska Anchorage's (UAA) School of Education and the Bristol Bay Foundation (BBF)—an Alaska Native organization dedicated to increasing access to education for Indigenous students and preserving the cultural heritage of the people of Bristol Bay—saw promising potential in improving teacher retention and enhancing culturally responsive practices in the districts. Thus, these parties partnered to design a model to enact the superintendents' vision.

Between 2020 and 2023, the partners created a pathway for teachers to earn the M.Ed. in Teaching and Learning at UAA through 15 credits of online courses and 15 credits of experiential learning. The first cohort graduated in May 2023, with additional graduates in 2024 and 2025, totalling 18 teachers. Interest in the program is growing statewide, with rural districts—including Alaska’s largest—adopting the model, and discussions underway to expand beyond Alaska.

The experiential learning program is grounded in the teachers’ hands-on work in rural schools and communities. Key features of the program include an experiential learning portfolio, a place-based curriculum, distance technology for mentoring and coursework delivery, and a vibrant community-university partnership. This article focuses on the experiential learning component.

Teacher retention data in the Bristol Bay partnership are encouraging: Participants remained in their schools at significantly higher rates than other teachers in the Bristol Bay region. By 2023, participating teachers’ average retention rate was 95% compared to 66% of non-participating teachers (Education Northwest, 2024). Data also show promising indicators of teachers’ growth in culturally responsive practices: 88% of participants rated themselves as competent or advanced in incorporating local ways of knowing and teaching compared to 44% of non-participants. Furthermore, 100% of M.Ed. participants identified themselves as competent or advanced in participating in local community events and activities compared to 78% of non-participants (Merrill and Rooney, 2024).

### **Research-based program design**

The author conducted research that informed the design process of the experiential learning program using Geoffrey Mills’ (2018) action research (AR) framework. This framework includes identifying an area of focus, collecting and analysing data, and creating an action plan (Mills, 2018). The AR approach was conducive to the iterative design process summarized below. The question for the action research study was: How can we design a path for teachers to earn the M.Ed. in Teaching and Learning through experiential learning and online courses that facilitate the partnership goals of improving teacher retention rates and enhancing teachers’ culturally responsive teaching?

The researcher collected data from documents and an external evaluation. Document sources included notes from partner meetings—monthly meetings in fall 2020 and spring 2021, followed by at least two meetings each school year from fall 2021 through spring 2024. Student assessments, completed each school year, served as a second source of document data. These assessments evolved from a self-reflection paper in 2020–2021, to a culturally responsive work sample in 2021–2022, and finally a comprehensive portfolio in 2022–2023, which was also used in 2023–2024. Over the four school years, the researcher collected assessment data from 18 students.

The researcher also incorporated findings from an external program evaluation examining teacher retention rates and M.Ed. Teaching and Learning students’ culturally responsive teaching practices. This evaluation compared retention rates of program participants with those of teachers in the Bristol Bay region who were not enrolled. It also assessed participants’ self-reported confidence, competence, and frequency of using culturally responsive practices compared to non-participating teachers.

Data analysis involved a systematic review conducted each summer from 2021 through 2024 to identify themes related to program design and outcomes. Findings from each review informed an action plan for the following school year. For example, in summer 2021, the researcher used meeting notes and students' self-reflection assignments to revise student assessments and experiential learning mentoring processes for 2021–2022.

The partners engaged in an iterative process to design the program using a conceptual framework outlined by Tim Brown (2008), which includes inspiration, ideation, and implementation. Inspiration refers to the “circumstances that motivate the search for solutions” (Brown, 2008, p.87). This inspiration phase was initiated in the spring of 2020 when superintendents from the Bristol Bay region shared their vision for improving teacher retention rates by enrolling teachers in a three-year master's degree program. The superintendents sought a university to offer the graduate degree, and the UAA School of Education was a receptive partner.

Ideation, the “process of generating, developing, and testing ideas that may lead to solutions” (Brown, 2008, p.87), began in the summer of 2020 with the creation of a partnership Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) between UAA and the school districts. The Bristol Bay Foundation emerged as an instrumental partner during the fall of 2020 by contributing funds to support the design work.

The ideation phase continued through summer 2023, with partners focusing on developing the program's experiential learning component. The action research project played a key role in “testing ideas,” such as collecting participants' performance and feedback data on the experiential learning program. This process informed the development of program processes and procedures, including the portfolio evaluation introduced in the 2022–2023 school year, the final year of the ideation phase.

The implementation phase is “charting a path to ‘market’” (Brown, 2008, p.87). With the basic structure of the experiential learning system in place, the partners launched the implementation phase in the fall of 2023. After two years of implementation (2023–2025), the model is well-established in the Bristol Bay region and replicated in three rural districts in other areas of Alaska.

The partners selected the M.Ed. in Teaching and Learning program as the appropriate degree for the project's goals because it emphasizes culturally responsive education and offers extensive flexibility in professional focus areas. The primary design task was to create a model that translates educators' experiences teaching and living in rural communities into 15 graduate credits for the M.Ed. professional concentration, ensuring that UAA, an accredited higher education institution, recognizes these credits. Between 2020 and 2023, the project's first three years, the partners adopted an experiential learning approach aligned with UAA's policy for nontraditional credits. The resulting model is described below.

### **Theoretical framework: Kolb's experiential learning model**

The partners selected David Kolb's (2015) experiential learning model to ground the program in a research-based theoretical framework. Kolb (2015) defines experiential learning as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (p.49). In this model, immediate and concrete experiences form the foundation for learning through observation, reflection,

and action. The process unfolds as learners both receive information and interpret and act upon it. Kolb's experiential learning cycle encompasses four processes: experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting.

The experiential learning program incorporates these four processes, with a priming stage at the start of each school year and a closure stage at the end. Table 1 provides a summary of the experiential learning cycle as applied in the M.Ed. Teaching and Learning partnership program.

Table 1: Kolb's Framework in the M.Ed. Teaching and Learning Partnership Experiential Learning Program

| Phases  | Program-related actions   |
|---|---|
| <i>Priming:</i><br>Pre-experiential learning preparation    | Experiential learning coordinator introduces the program's purpose, foundations, expectations, and procedures, while students identify their own goals and plans for the process. |
| <i>Concrete Experience:</i><br>Experiencing                 | Students engage in classroom teaching   |
| <i>Reflective Observation:</i><br>Reflecting                | Students reflect on teaching experiences through individual and facilitated processes.  |
| <i>Abstract Conceptualization:</i><br>Thinking              | Students construct conceptual understandings and generalizations of teaching and learning through strategic cognitive processes.  |
| <i>Active Experimentation:</i><br>Acting                    | Students take action informed by the <i>experiencing-reflecting-thinking</i> process to continue the experiential learning cycle.   |
| <i>Closure:</i><br>Experiential learning artifact/portfolio | Students identify artifacts from the year's teaching experiences to demonstrate district-selected experiential learning theme.  |

Table 1 shows how the experiential learning cycle is integrated into the program design. After an early introduction to the program, students focus on concrete classroom teaching experiences, followed by self-reflection and conceptual understanding. They then apply their learning through active experimentation in their practice and demonstrate outcomes by selecting teaching artifacts for evaluation in their experiential learning portfolio.

### **Experiential learning program overview: general requirements and key roles**

The partners established five requirements for teachers to participate in the experiential learning program. Teachers must be employed in a partner district and actively enrolled in the M.Ed. in Teaching and Learning program at UAA during the three-year experiential learning program. They are expected

to participate in district-coordinated activities and processes within the program. In addition, they must earn satisfactory reviews on formative assessments in Years 1 and 2 and receive a “Pass” grade on the final portfolio in Year 3.

The experiential learning program in the Bristol Bay region is collaboratively implemented by a team consisting of the district’s superintendent, experiential learning evaluation team, experiential learning coordinator, the dean of the UAA School of Education, faculty in the M.Ed. Teaching and Learning, and the President and CEO of the Bristol Bay Foundation (BBF). Each team member’s role is summarized below.

*Superintendent.* The superintendent oversees the experiential learning program by collaborating with the School of Education’s dean and M.Ed. faculty to develop and implement the MOA, select the program’s guiding theme, and identify the coordinator and evaluation team. The superintendent also participates in partnership meetings to support continued collaboration.

*Experiential Learning Evaluation Team.* During the three-year program, the students create a portfolio, which is explained below. The experiential learning evaluation team provides formative feedback to each student in Years 1 and 2 and a summative evaluation of the portfolio in Year 3.

*Experiential Learning Coordinator.* The experiential learning coordinator manages the logistics of the experiential learning program and supports the students’ professional learning and portfolio development. The coordinator may be a private contractor, a partner district staff member, or an employee of an outside organization. In the Bristol Bay partnership, the experiential learning coordinator is an employee of the Bristol Bay Foundation.

*School of Education Dean and M.Ed. Teaching and Learning Faculty.* The dean of the School of Education helps develop the MOA and attends partnership meetings. M.Ed. Teaching and Learning faculty developed the standards and rubrics used by the evaluation team to assess student portfolios and conduct the final evaluation before requesting UAA’s Office of Academic Affairs to award 15 nontraditional credits. The program lead maintains ongoing communication with the experiential learning coordinator about student progress, experiential learning theory, research, strategies, and program implementation.

*Bristol Bay Foundation, President and CEO.* The Bristol Bay Foundation’s President and CEO provides strategic guidance for the program’s development and implementation, helping partners and participants connect with the region’s land, cultures, and Indigenous peoples. The Foundation also provided key resources for early program design and external evaluation and served as the Alaska Native organization sponsoring a U.S. Department of Education’s Alaska Native Education Program grant that supported the program’s implementation from October 2022 to September 2025. The experiential learning coordinator is an employee of the Bristol Bay Foundation.

*Experiential learning portfolio assessment system.* The University of Alaska Anchorage’s nontraditional credit policy allows students to earn academic credit for demonstrating mastery of knowledge or skills gained outside an accredited institution. The credit-by-portfolio option, used in the Bristol Bay

partnership program, is one such pathway. UAA requires a consistent process for all students pursuing this option, and the partners used the portfolio assessment components described below to ensure consistent evaluation across the experiential learning program.

*Experiential Learning Theme: Program Student Learning Outcomes (PSLO).* The M.Ed. Teaching and Learning is organized around five program outcomes that students must demonstrate through a comprehensive program assessment process—all M.Ed. Teaching and Learning students must pass a program assessment process that is separate from the experiential learning portfolio assessment. The five PSLOs are:

1. Demonstrate advanced content and pedagogical knowledge for teaching.
2. Use research to inform professional practice.
3. Explain the relationship between social justice and education.
4. Demonstrate leadership skills in the professional context.
5. Translate educational theories into culturally responsive practice.

For the experiential learning program, the partner school district’s superintendent identifies a theme drawn from one of the PSLOs. For the Bristol Bay partnership, the superintendents selected PSLO #5, Culturally Responsive Practice, to support teachers’ development in culturally responsive pedagogy. This PSLO aligns with the five Alaska Cultural Standards for Educators (Alaska Native Knowledge Network, 1998), outlined in Table 2.

Table 2: Alaska cultural standards for educators

| <b>Culturally Responsive Standards</b> | <b>Performance Definition</b>   |
|--|---|
| Standard 1: Connection to Culture      | Incorporates local ways of knowing and teaching   |
| Standard 2: Connection to Place        | Links local environment and community resources to teaching   |
| Standard 3: Connection to Community    | Participates in community events and activities   |
| Standard 4: Connection to Families     | Collaborates with students’ parents/guardians to achieve a high level of complementary educational expectations between home and school |
| Standard 5: Connection to Students     | Recognizes the full educational potential of each student and provides the conditions to achieve that potential                         |

The partners selected these standards because they directly support the program’s focus on teachers’ culturally responsive, place-based practices, including the incorporation of local culture and resources, as well as connecting with community, families, and students. For evaluation purposes, the partners agreed to use a rubric developed by the M.Ed. in Teaching and Learning faculty that contains three

indicators for each of the five Cultural Standards, organized into three levels of performance: Unsatisfactory, Proficient, and Exemplary. To “pass” the portfolio assessment, students must demonstrate performance at the Proficient or Exemplary level. Table 3 provides an example of the rubric using Cultural Standard 1.

Table 3: Cultural standard 1: Cultural connections--incorporates local ways of knowing and teaching

| <b>Indicator and Description:<br/>The educator:</b>   | <b>1: Unsatisfactory</b>  | <b>2: Proficient</b>  | <b>3: Exemplary</b>  |
|---|---|---|--|
| <b>5.1a: Curriculum/Content</b><br>Presents lessons or other activities that incorporate knowledge of students’ cultural backgrounds or practices into the teaching content (e.g., curriculum unit, lesson plan). | Content of lessons or other activities do not incorporate knowledge of students’ cultural backgrounds or practices into the teaching content. | Content of lessons or other activities incorporates knowledge of students’ cultural backgrounds or practices into the teaching content. | Content of lessons or other activities incorporates knowledge of students’ cultural backgrounds or practices in unique or creative ways to make connections to the teaching content. |
| <b>5.1b: Teaching/Instruction</b><br>Incorporates knowledge of students’ cultural background or practices to engage students in learning (e.g., teaching strategies)  | Teaching strategies (i.e., instruction) does not incorporate students’ cultural background or practices.                                      | Teaching strategies (i.e., instruction) incorporates students’ cultural background or practices.  | Teaching strategies (i.e., instruction) incorporates students’ cultural background or practices in unique or creative ways.  |
| <b>5.1c: Classroom or School Environment</b><br>Incorporates knowledge of students’ cultural background or practices into the classroom or school environment.  | Classroom or school environment does not incorporate students’ cultural background or practices.  | Classroom or school environment incorporates students’ cultural background or practices.  | Classroom or school environment incorporates students’ cultural background or practices in unique or creative ways.  |

*Artifact Report.* Each year, students select one artifact from their teaching practice and prepare a report highlighting their culturally responsive practice as defined by the standard and indicator(s). Examples of artifacts include lesson plans, curriculum units, and community engagement projects.

The artifact report includes an introductory section where students identify their place of employment and the standard and indicator(s) addressed in the report. Students also identify and concisely describe the artifact and explain how it shows enactment of the selected standard and indicator(s). Finally, students include a copy of the artifact with the report.

In Years 1 and 2, the partner district’s evaluation team provides formative feedback on students’ artifact reports to support growth in the district-selected focus area and guide portfolio development, indicating whether students are progressing toward the culturally responsive standard. In Year 3, the team reviews the third artifact report as part of the portfolio’s summative evaluation.

*Portfolio.* In Year 3, each student prepares a portfolio demonstrating the district-selected PSLO theme, showing they meet at least one PSLO standard through its indicators. Each spring, the partner district’s

evaluation team reviews the portfolios, and M.Ed. Teaching and Learning faculty conduct the final evaluation and submit the grade, resulting in 15 nontraditional credits.

In addition to demonstrating enactment of the district-selected theme, the portfolio is designed to deepen student learning through analysis and self-reflection. The significant sections of the portfolio include:

*Section 1: Introduction.* Students situate the portfolio in key autobiographical, community, and school contexts. For instance, they write about their geographical and cultural origins, describe the rural community where they live and teach, and tell about the school and classroom.

*Section 2: Evidence of Enacting the PSLO in Professional Practice.* Students make a case for meeting the experiential learning expectations defined by the selected standard and indicator(s) during the three-year experiential learning program. They reference concrete examples from the three artifacts and link these directly to the standard and indicator(s). Students end Section 2 with a self-reflection about the key takeaways, insights, or learning outcomes they attribute to participation in the experiential learning program.

*Section 3: Artifact Reports and Formative Assessments.* Students include the three artifact reports developed in Years 1-3, as referenced in Section 2 above. They also include the evaluation team's formative assessment reports prepared in Years 1 and 2. This requirement ensures the student has gathered all pertinent documents related to the portfolio project and that the evaluation team has ready access to these documents when conducting the summative evaluation.

While a detailed discussion of student portfolios is beyond the scope of this article, it is noteworthy that all students in the first three cohorts have effectively demonstrated culturally responsive practices. Examples of artifacts showing integration of local and Indigenous knowledge include a curriculum unit on community-based subsistence resources, a service-learning project aligned with academic standards in which students built a school deck, a family-based writing project, and a community-engaged cookbook featuring local subsistence foods.

## **Concluding remarks**

This feature article presents a promising model for improving retention and enhancing professional development opportunities for teachers in rural communities. The distance-delivered coursework allows teachers to continue working full-time while earning a master's degree. Furthermore, the experiential learning component leverages teachers' practical, hands-on experiences as the content and context for facilitated professional learning and to meet credit requirements in the M.Ed. Teaching and Learning program.

The program model is ready for strategic transfer to other rural districts, requiring careful planning to ensure sufficient resources and action plans to maintain quality and key components. Supporting the experiential learning coordinator's mentoring and administrative roles is essential. In addition, enrollment growth will increase administrative and instructional demands on the M.Ed. Teaching and

Learning program lead and faculty, including the need for more instructors and expanded portfolio evaluation capacity.

To date, research has focused on the program design process. With a concrete model now in place and implementation underway, the author will examine key areas related to program design, teacher retention challenges, and strategies to improve retention. Additional areas of study include experiential learning in graduate and professional education, teacher development in rural contexts, and program implementation in Indigenous communities. The following summarizes three of these research themes.

First, research should examine the experiences and perspectives of Indigenous community members and K-12 students to enhance the program's place-based approach. Key research questions include: What are community members' and students' impressions of the program? What are their perspectives on, critiques of, and recommendations for the program? Given this line of research's direct connection to Indigenous people, partnering with Indigenous researchers and using decolonizing, Indigenous methodologies (Kovach, 2021; Smith, 2021), such as storytelling (Phillips and Bunda, 2018) and participatory action research (Caxaj, 2015) would be imperative.

Second, research on the program can expand knowledge about the issues related to teacher retention in Alaska's rural settings by examining the successes, challenges, and effects of this partnership model. This line of research would also study the teachers' experiences, insights, and recommendations for program enhancements related to teacher retention in rural settings.

A third area of research should examine and critique teacher learning and professional practice related to the model's use of online graduate courses and a portfolio-based experiential learning approach to teacher professional learning. Key questions would include what teachers learn and what role online coursework and the experiential learning system play in the learning process and practice outcomes. Moreover, it would be essential to analyze the students' experiential learning portfolios extensively, observe their teaching practices, and conduct in-depth interviews.

This article highlights an innovative approach to addressing teacher turnover in rural Alaska while strengthening culturally responsive teaching. The program supports retention by requiring participants to stay in their schools for at least three years while completing the M.Ed. in Teaching and Learning and engaging in school-based experiential learning. It also promotes inclusion and sustainable teaching through professional development in place-based, culturally responsive education, expecting teachers to integrate local and Indigenous knowledge, participate in community activities, and engage with students' families.

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