



Alaska's Culturally Responsive Solution

When Alaska's legislature decided to set standards for teacher evaluations, they threw the education establishment a curveball: Not only would new standards include culturally specific requirements, but the requirements had to be blended in with the existing standards.

This is a fine idea in theory, but in practice it created a number of problems. To address the standards, Alaska's Southeast Regional Resource Center, or SERRC, told Gerry Briscoe to convene a committee of experts and develop a model that would work in Alaska and, hopefully, in other states as well.

Put simply, the new standards required changes in both the width and depth of teacher evaluation.

First, the state allowed districts to choose from one of three existing teacher evaluation models, or districts could develop a model of its own and have the state Department of Education sign off on it. Briscoe and his committee had to develop standards that would be applicable for all the models.

Second, Alaska's student population is vastly diverse. For example, more than 100 languages are spoken among Anchorage's 50,000 students, and three of Anchorage's six high schools are listed among the nations' most diverse.

This means that teacher evaluations had to account for relevancy that crossed hundreds of cultures that include not only Native American culture, but cut across the Pacific Rim and Latin America as well as through Europe and Africa.

Third, many of Alaska's schools are accessible only via plane or boat, so face-to-face training isn't feasible. Any program training has to be understandable through video conferencing and documentation.

The committee received a three-year grant from the federal Department of Education and supplemented it with a variety of state funds. Using that three-year timeline, they began to tackle each problem one by one.

Of the three available evaluation models, the committee chose to focus on Robert Marzano's Art and Science of Teacher Instruction. Briscoe said they believe standards based on that model can be translated easily to the other two evaluation options or to any homegrown option.

Then the committee found a district willing to work with it for three years to develop the standards. The Bering Strait School District agreed to work with the committee.

Then came the hard part: determining where and when cultural relevancy would be embedded in teacher evaluations.

"Remember, we have to embed, align and infuse the cultural relevancy standards into the existing evaluation, not make it an additional part of the evaluation," Briscoe said.

Ultimately, they were able to adapt the Marzano evaluation software so that when an evaluator sits in a class to observe a teacher, they can pull up on their computer not only the content-specific criteria but also the Alaska-specific cultural evidences - all in one view.

"Not every subject is going to be culturally responsive," Briscoe said, "but when an evaluator observes a teacher using new content, the amount of culturally specific content can be rated accordingly."

The evaluations can be used for any subject in any district for any culture.

The next two hurdles will be addressed with a new grant.

First, the standards have to be translated to the other teacher evaluation models. Briscoe said the committee is working with the companies and software engineers to get this done.

And last, they have to get the information into the hands of evaluators in every Alaska school district no matter how remote. To work out the bugs in this long-distance learning effort, SERRC has partnered with eight remote districts in southeast Alaska and will train them on conducting the evaluations. Using what they learn from that project, they can roll the evaluations out statewide.

Briscoe is proud of the work he and his committee have done. He is certain that their method of inserting cultural evidences into teacher evaluation can be used in any district in any state.

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