

# From Decolonization to Conscientization: Implementing the Alaskan Inuit Education Improvement Strategy

Bethel, AK Think-Tank Report



Prepared by

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for ICC Alaska and the Bethel Participants

April 11 & 12 2017

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## INTRODUCTION

On April 11 and 12 ICC Alaska held a Decolonization Conscientization Think-Tank as part of its Inuit education strategy. There were 17 participants from the various regional villages and Bethel present to discuss the topic of Inuit education, the impacts of colonization, and to think about the future of education for Inuit youth in their region. During the two-day workshop there were many discussions about how to begin to break down the frameworks and world views colonization has created for Inuit people. Additionally, language and cultural preservation were topics with a lot of passion and the participants dreamt about how to make education better in their region. Lastly, the group was able to tour and have lunch at the Ayaprun elitnaurvik immersion school to get a glimpse at a school that is using language and culture as is basis for teaching and building up young Yup'ik children.

The beginning conversations had the group thinking about the current education system they are a part of and how we can begin to move beyond the current frameworks we find ourselves a part of. The discussions also focused on how we can break down the frames and world views of colonization that have shaped so much of Inuit life in the last century and become ingrained to a point that has detrimental and devastating effects on the identity and lives of Inuit youth. In this way it is about a systemic unfreezing, reshaping, and reintegration of the traditions that make Inuit whole and healthy. Decolonization is about re-forming the children and Conscientization is about re-forming the system.

## OPENING ACTIVITIES

Our session opened with Chief Louie Andrews opening remarks and invocation. He admonished the group to continue in this important work. He reminded us that in life "you never stop learning, it's never too late to learn something new". He stated that education is so important and children with strong identities and mastery over their language and knowledge of their traditions are the foundation and future. He prayed over the group and our work and

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then we enjoyed a performance by the children’s dance and drumming group from Ayaprun.

To break the ice the group started with a story sharing activity that asked them to identify a challenge they had overcome in education in their life. They also were asked as a group to develop answers to questions about pain points in education, what is working well, and what gives them hope for the future. The activity is outlined and captured below.

## Shared learning and breaking the ice: Setting the context

To create more basis for context we participated in small group work in the afternoon to help us have an idea of where we all were coming from, we needed this context and foundation to be able to set the tone for strategy work on day two. The intention of the small groups was to help ground the group in reality and build trust as well as highlight positive momentum by sharing the stories of how challenges were overcome and where the region is experiencing success in education. Below are the transcribed points from the small group discussions.

Story themes	What is painful?	What is working well?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being treated as less than from outsiders</li> <li>• How could a student from a small village attend and ivy league school?</li> <li>• Not being able to pass the standardized testing</li> <li>• Going to school being far from family</li> <li>• My parents always told me I could do anything, so it wasn't impossible to go to college</li> <li>• Boarding school experience not hearing Yup'ik language</li> <li>• Deciding to speak up</li> <li>• Schools saying tests are more important than cultural activities</li> <li>• The importance of language in the home</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Systems do not validate our ways</li> <li>• Lack of support and feeling discriminated against</li> <li>• The history of education and how it began in our region</li> <li>• Teacher turnover – no connection between teacher and student</li> <li>• Institutionalized racism and stereotypes</li> <li>• Kids having kids</li> <li>• FASD</li> <li>• Diet of students too dependent on food stamps</li> <li>• How to communicate with elders</li> <li>• Learning about roles, how to be a woman or man, learning from grandparents</li> <li>• The impacts of religious organizations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Immersion schools</li> <li>• Elders in the schools</li> <li>• Conversations about teaching local history in schools</li> <li>• Language programs</li> <li>• Promoting growing our own</li> <li>• New hire training</li> <li>• Self-identity</li> <li>• Teach them how to listen</li> <li>• Local principals understanding the communities and children</li> <li>• Language being recognized as wellness</li> <li>• College programs that are teaching language and building local teachers</li> <li>• Funding support from local entities</li> </ul>

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## What gives us hope for the future?

- This meeting and other meetings like this.
- Legislation supporting teaching indigenous language
- Seeing our kids speak our language
- The youth are hungry for their culture and language
- Seeing young people use their voice.
- C/Yup'ik
- Tribal Government curriculum
- ANCSA
- Nurturing a healthy mindset about alcohol

The main themes from this dialogue stem from the effects of colonization and how indigenous peoples were forced into systems and told that their ways were not the right ways, and in many ways today still experience that. Much of the discussion highlights the regions focus on Yup'ik values, traditions, culture, and the loss of language that came with colonization over time. There is hope in the younger generation, current momentum in immersion schools or language programs, the fact we still have fluent speakers, young people are perpetuating the language and culture and that there are education models in place for education systems that integrate their way of life.

## TRANSFORMATIVE DIALOGUE

To get us prepared for strategizing work and to get to know each other further the group participated in a transformative dialogue session. They learned how the words we share with each other build community one room and one conversation at a time. We went over the basic premise that is based on Peter Block's model as it is outlined in his book "Community: The Structure of Belonging".

We are not here alone but often we feel that we are. What these dialogue sessions do is bring us together in way that liberates us to do what we were created to do, to create a new future that is distinct from the past, to let go of our old story and create a new one in a more forgiving way. Western culture fosters an environment of isolation and competition it causes us to look inward and in that we lose out on precious relationships, quality relationships. We are

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here to create a safe environment and to take back our ownership in building something we can all be proud to be a part of, together. We can create our future one step at a time, one room at a time.

The reason I share this section of the report in so much detail is so that anyone can feel that they can use this model to bring people together to build up their tribes, villages, schools and communities.

## Overall Premise:

- To build social fabric and transform isolation in our communities to connectedness and caring for the whole.
- Shift our conversations from the problems and blame to the possibility of community.
- Commit to creation of a future distinct from the past.

## Operating guidelines:

- Social fabric is created one room at a time. The room we are in.
- The key to creating a new future is to focus on our gifts and assets, on associational life or our connectedness, on the thought that all our transformation occurs through language, through how we communicate and relate to one another. (This is why our Native Language is so important).
- We already have what we need to create an alternative future.
- We can do it in small groups, they are the container for the experience of belonging and transformation.

## The main barriers in this journey are our inability to address, redress, or let go."

- Address – take a look at ourselves and what is going on inside us in relation to others and the tensions that exist. How am I feeling? What does this interaction bring up for me.
- Redress – Make right the wrongs.
- Let go – give up the stuff we don't need anymore.

## Rules for small groups:

- Get in groups of 3, people you know the least
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- Sit in a circle knees 9 inches apart
- Each person gets the same amount of time to answer (3 minutes or so)
- Listen intently and look each-other in the eyes
- No advice. Ask tell me more instead
- At the end tell your group members something you appreciated about the conversation

We used the following four dialogue sessions for our time.

## The Possibility Conversation

The Possibility Conversation is one that focuses on what we want our future to be as opposed to problem solving the past. This is based on an understanding that living systems are really propelled to the force of the future. The possibility conversation frees people to innovate, challenge the status quo, and create new a future that makes a difference. In new work environments this conversation has the ability for breaking new ground and in understanding the prevailing culture.

## The Ownership Conversation

The Ownership Conversation is one that focuses on whose organization or task is this? The conversation begins with the question, "how have I contributed to creating the current reality?" Confusion, blame and waiting for someone else to change are a defense against ownership and personal power.

## The Dissent Conversation

The Dissent Conversation is allowing people the space to say "no". If we cannot say "no" then our "yes" has no meaning. People have a chance to express their doubts and reservations, as a way of clarifying their roles, needs, and yearnings within the vision and mission being presented. Genuine commitment begins with doubt, and "no" is a symbolic expression of people finding their space and role in the strategy. It is when we fully understand what people do not want that we can fully design what they want. Refusal is the foundation for commitment.

## The Commitment Conversation

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The Commitment Conversation is about individuals making promises to their peers about their contribution to the success of the whole organization. It is centered in two questions: What promise am I willing to make to our education system? And, what is the price I am willing to pay for the success of the whole effort? It is a promise for the sake of a larger purpose, not for the sake of personal return.

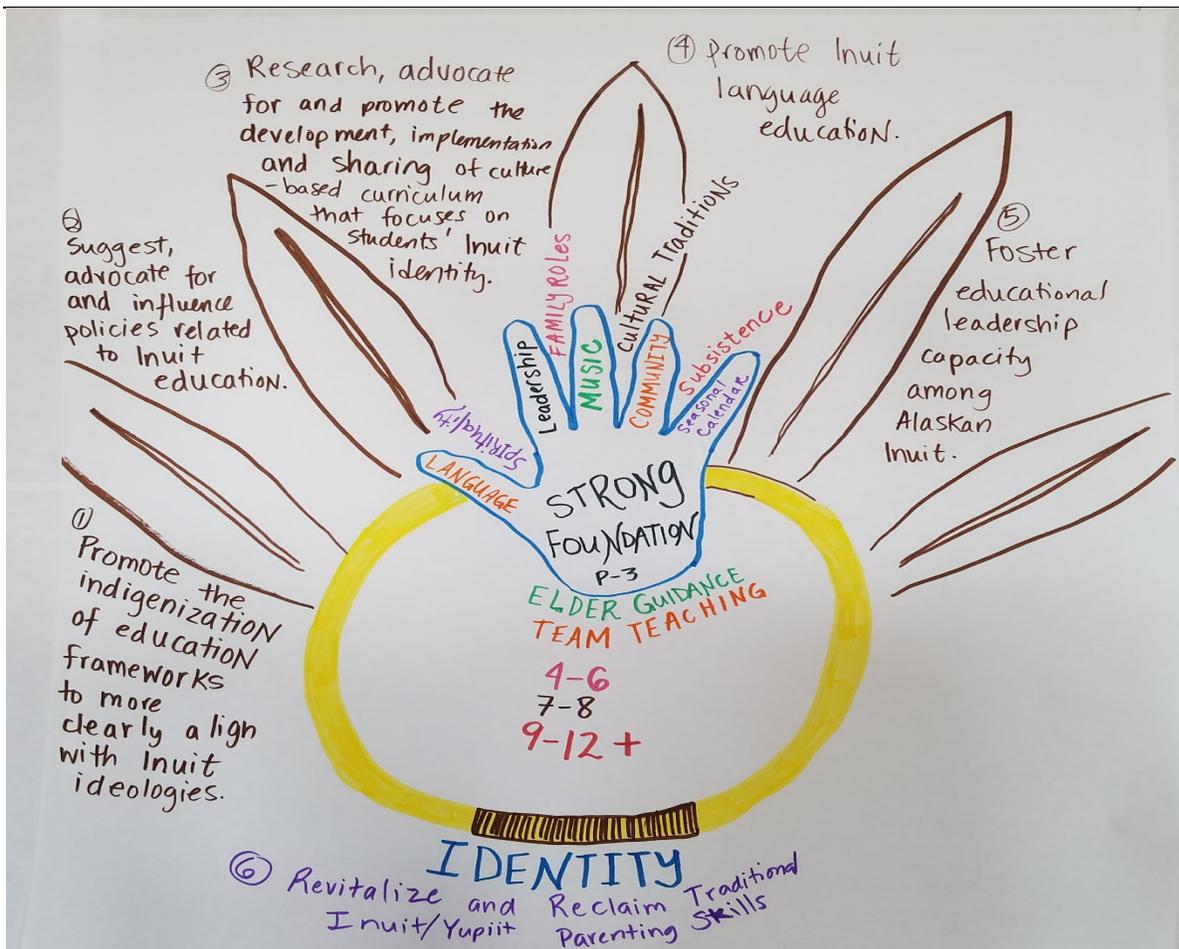
I hope that participants can use this dialogue model in their schools and communities to bring people together to make an impact for Inuit education. I am happy to support you in this journey in anyway but please feel free and empowered to use any workshop ideas yourself.

## Visioning workshop

After we set the context, we spent time discussing what a vision for the future could look like if we had the perfect education for the children in the region. The participants were broken up into four groups to brainstorm and develop and image of their most perfect future. These images were to be representative icons of what the perfect future would look like. Additionally, the exercise has the effect of aligning the participants to what is important to them and how to go about moving towards their aspirations. Below are the images and a summary of themes.

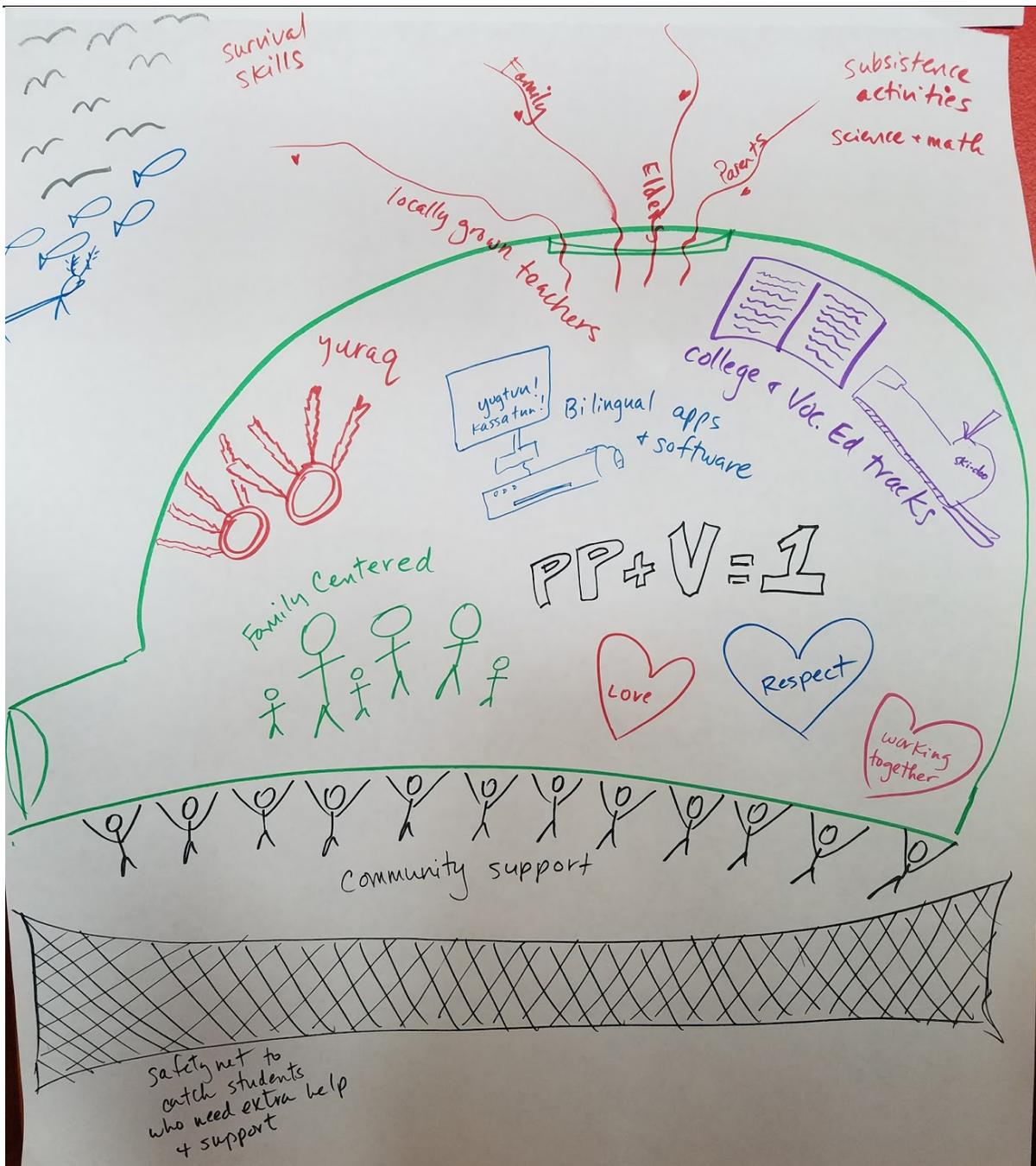
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QASGFIQ Year 2067

- Parent Involvement
- Elders in Schools
- Yuraq
- Locally grown Teachers
- College Track and Vocational Ed
- Traditional garment + Tool making
- Blending of Academics + Culture
- Policies + Procedures align with values
- Safety net/Support system for students who make mistakes
- Using subsistence activities to teach Math + Science
- Computer apps + programs for Yugtun

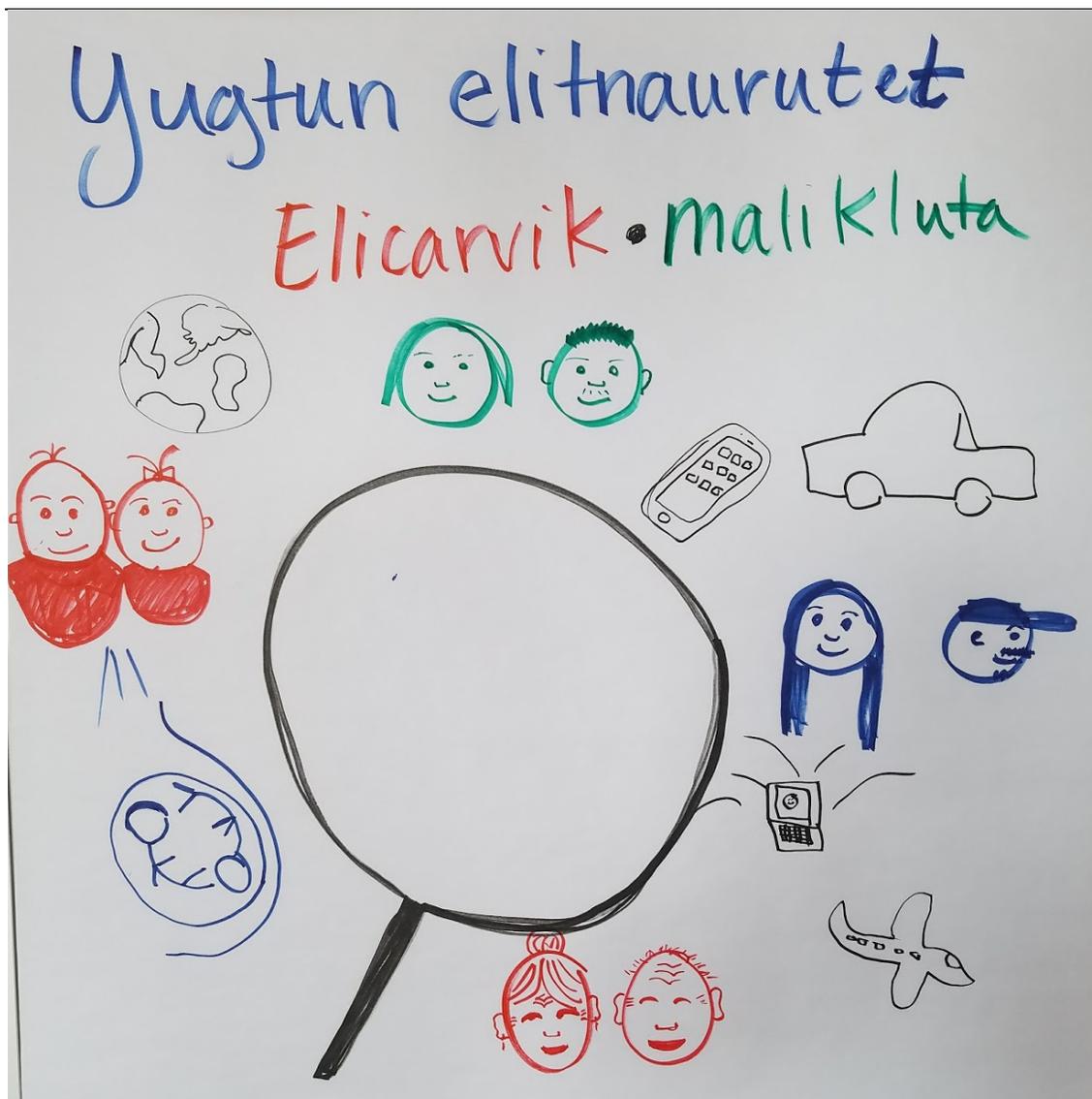
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The common themes for the visioning session are as follows.

1. Language immersion schools.
2. Schools that are calendared with the community's seasonal needs in mind and that teach from traditional culture and values.
3. Homegrown teachers.
4. Education based on Yup'ik tradition, history, and culture.
5. Using technology to teach language.
6. Family as the central place of learning.

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7. College tracks for language and teacher development.

## A look at our strengths: A resilient, beautiful, spiritual, life giving people

To highlight the strengths of the people in the Bethel region we held a dialogue to talk about what makes the Yup'ik, Cup'ik, and other indigenous people of the region resilient, beautiful, spiritual, life giving forces. The discussion mostly centered around the heritage and values of the people or the principles of the y/c-uyaraq. This was a special conversation and below is a summary of the themes.

We are resilient, beautiful, spiritual, life giving forces because:

- We have a strong language and culture
- We work together and practice the value of sharing
- We engage the community to inform important decisions
- We take care of and learn from our elders
- We can adapt to change and use technology
- We respect the land, water, animals, and traditions that have helped us learn to survive
- We understand that the youth are our future and keeping all generations connected through love and respect will take us far
- We have overcome many challenges and we have done so through our values

## REVIEWING THE INUIT EDUCATION STRATEGY

The whole day on April 12th was focused on reviewing the ICC Alaska Inuit Education Improvement strategy. We worked in small groups to develop lists of practical and implementable ideas. I have summarized each strategies ideas below.

Strategy 1: Indigenization of Education Frameworks

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- First teachers
- Parenting class
- Gender roles and topics
- Material values and issues – everything is taken for granted
- St. Patrick's day – Change to culturally relevant holidays
- Add yup'ik/cup'ik language nest model
- Blogs and Vlogs for discussion and self reflection
- Community discussions about racism, colonization, and oppression to create a space for healing and reconciliation and how we have also contributed and passed it on.

## Strategy 2: Education Policy Influence

- Tribes can pass resolutions and develop codes, advocating for culturally based curriculum, learning about policies that are barriers to culture based curriculum.
- Utilize AFN, AASB, SBE, gathering around big regional events, having more think-tanks/events, NIEA.
- Google Tribal education codes (Native American Rights Fund)
- Bring the community in as part of the school.
- Classes for new educators/ professional development focused on the local area (year long)
- Alliance (elder, teacher, festival with voluntary support)
- Invite other districts to Yuraq
- Organizations in the region (YKHC, LKSD, LYSD, Kuspek, Yupiit, Kashunamiut, SD, Saint Mary's SD, AVCP, Calista, CVRF, KVC, Non-profits, ONC, Moravian seminary, YDFDA, USFW)

## Strategy 3: Culture Based Curriculum

- Gather resources from archives. District office, other cultural teachers, parents, Calista, Yuyaraq, AVCP, elders, other school districts, Partnering with college classes, community members and other countries.
- Radio, facebook, Instagram, community events, posters, parent teacher conferences, GCI ad channel, websites
- Introduce our culture then present with research to back up our purpose and ensure it meets cultural standards.
- Specific Resources: Smithsonian, Moravian archives in Pennsylvania, KYUK archives of elders and events; LKSD media center, UAF Museum of the North, AK Native heritage center, Personal copies of family films, published books, Gonzaga University Archives, Santa Clara University. Museum in Bethel, Knowledge from elders through interviews, recording, video taping, Yup'ik curriculum mapping (ANKN) Clearing house, ICC, JOM funds
- Disseminating: Newspapers, google drive, word of mouth, Clothing and other stuff like pens, Car magnets, hats, pins, "Speak Yup'ik or Cup'ik to me", Major leaders such as AFN, AVCP disseminating info as to where to find culture based curriculum, We media personalities like Rohnda McBride, Jeannie Greene, Use talented artists, Remind.com (text message reminders), youtube videos, Flyers from JOM, Businesses, churches, bingo.
- Encourage creation of resources and advocate implementation: More books and materials developed by a variety of entities (not just teachers) Need a central place to access materials, Contact and asking for assistance to various agencies, for example National Park service and ADF&G. Locally driven creation and implementation. Partner with Indian Education for tutors and presenters

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## Strategy 4: Inuit Language Education

- Open or start more immersion schools, Daycare, Pre-k, High School, and college.
- Writing letters of support to legislature to pass bills re: immersion and immersion certification house bill 216.
- Ongoing teacher training for immersion teachers.
- Keep language education as natural and simple as possible.
- Home-based language programs. Develop and distribute to families to use.
- Support (emails, letters, phone calls, of house bill 216) bill would add 20 AK native languages to Alaska's official language list.
- Working with established institutions like head start, and preschool that includes C/Yup'ik language
- ESSA set aside for school districts and other activities.
- Require new teachers to take KUC Yup'ik class, UAF Yupik with Charles, at least 2 courses of conversation and orthography, or offer as a requirement for summer institute.
- Network by tele and video conference with ANLPAC report or share language education projects here after
- Develop Long Term learning language proficiency goals to raise the bar

## Strategy 5: Educational Leadership Capacity

- Talk about how people become leaders
- Leaders are the foundation of an organization
- Educational leadership qualities; calm, patience, listen, be able to voice your concerns
- Student council
- Give students the opportunity to be leaders
- Mentored and guided toward leadership (shadowing, involved in meetings, governing bodies)
- After students participate in meetings give them feedback, "You did great"
- State board of education needs Inuit/Native representation
- Leadership skills courses, after school programs, RAHI, example: Boys and Girls state ANSEP, Della Keats, Excell, VTE

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## Strategy 6: Traditional Parenting Skills

- Increase knowledge of traditional parenting (Elders Know, Starts at home teaching children from the time they wake up)
- Parent and child communication from the time the wake-up to when they go to sleep and particularly at meals.
- Communication creates healthy connections between parent and child.
- Gentle teachings, children were taught empathy.
- Volunteer in the community.
- Love yourself, help others, respect yourself and others (including property)
- Parents and teachers need to be aligned and together so that they are on the same page about their child's education
- Family camping to teach traditions, language and subsistence
- Research, promote and create awareness
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The strategy discussions were very robust and lively. The participants generated a lot of ideas. I left these ideas mostly in tact with the intention of leaving a clear record of the discussions and so that your regional group can begin deciding which of these areas are of main concern and priority. The summary and recommendations section offers suggestions for keeping momentum and sustaining this important work.

## COMMUNICATION AND NEXT STEPS

To close the meeting, we asked what we would like to have happen next. Below is what the group developed as a set of next steps.

- Stay connected and share contacts – [www.iccalaska.org](http://www.iccalaska.org) – arctic languages resources
- Move this information to the school boards and work to bring all school district leadership together (Willie and Piyuuq to lead the charge)

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- Share this information with you peers
- AVCP head start and immersion?
- Bring to AFN elders and youth
- Work to create alliances

## SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In summary, the workshop was very well participated in, there were many practical and visionary ideas generated. If we are to create a movement, it starts at the individual level. Every individual we can have this conversation with is a potential advocate for improved Inuit education. While some changes require fundamental systemic changes, reallocation of system funding/resources, and much advocacy and support at the policy level, there are many of the practical/tactical ideas that can have immense and immediate positive impacts. My recommended course of action is outlined below.

1. Keep the group momentum going by continuing to stay connected through conference calls and other online social media outlets such as facebook groups, linkedin groups or meetup groups.
2. Work on the priority to bring your school district leadership together to prioritize areas of implementation for these strategies.
3. Use this report to inform and build upon your good work, be iterative, try things, if they don't work, try new things until it does work, continue to build on what you already know is working.
4. Categorize each area by systemic changes required, and changes that can be carried out in shorter timeframes with individual and small group effort.
5. Develop communication outlets to build more momentum and create passionate advocates.
6. Continue to have conversations with policy makers about putting funding and resources to areas in the education system that are not currently seen as a priority to begin to create the shifts required for a new framework and system to emerge that gets you to your vision.