

The Arctic Educational Miracle

It has been called “The Arctic Educational Miracle”: the story of ten students from a school in a Siberian-Yupik (Eskimo) whaling and walrus hunting village on blizzard-swept St. Lawrence Island in the Bering Sea. The village, which was poverty-stricken, had no plumbing and no roads. Many people lived in shacks. The school had no computers and almost no books and was so troubled it was under threat of closure. Teachers had been beaten up and shot at. The spring before I arrived, the teacher housing had been set afire – with the teachers in it.

Only two of the school’s 41 students spoke English as a first language. Most had abysmally low reading and writing scores and little world knowledge. Most spent most of their time engaged in subsistence hunting and fishing. Despite those academic deficits, by using my pedagogy the students became determined to prove Eskimos could compete with urban students. They entered what at the time was generally considered the most difficult academic competition open to young people – a timed event that measured reading, writing, research, and verbal interaction skills. The Eskimo students had to compete against students from schools for the gifted from throughout the U.S., Canada, and Mexico on subjects, such as genetic engineering and nuclear waste disposal, the Eskimo students had never heard of before.



They studied while hauling water, while scraping skins, and once while hunting whales. They overcame fire and family tragedy and roadblocks by two district administrators who, wanting the school closed, sought to stop them. None had ever been in a hotel. Most feared riding in an elevator or taking an escalator.

They became the only team of Native Americans ever to win national academic championships – a feat they accomplished twice.

Nine months earlier, one of the ninth graders had a third grade reading level. Another had been unable to write a single sentence; four years later she would

become national essay champion. One of the sophomores had thought the sun goes around the earth; by year’s end, the national evaluators had to bring in a geneticist to understand his answers.

A survey showed that ninety percent of the teams at the finals spent most of their time developing solutions to the scenario the test posited. By contrast, as my pedagogy stressed they do, since a problem cannot be addressed that has not been identified, my students spent most of their time identifying and analyzing the scenario’s problems. Yet the evaluators lauded the Eskimo students’ solutions for creativity, ingenuity, and appropriateness.

The team then used the pedagogy to turn their attention to fiction writing. They submitted thirteen stories to an international fiction competition. Nine placed, including the junior high international championship story and the high school runner-up.

Nor were such successes limited to students on the island. Four eighth graders from another village later shattered the academic competition’s national scoring record. In a pilot study, students from another district who used the pedagogy outscored their counterparts an average of an entire grade. The pedagogy became the backbone of the core classes of the Rural Alaska Honors Institute, a program that prepares rural Eskimo, Indian, and Aleut high school seniors for college. Over a thousand students have used the pedagogy to help assure themselves college success. Many have graduated from some of the top universities in America.