



# National Resource Center for American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian Elders

## Boarding School Project: Mental Health Outcome

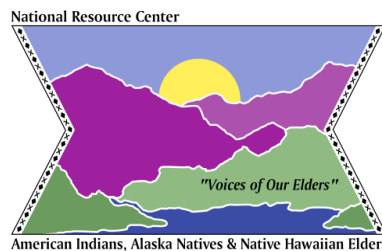
*Prepared by*

Kathleen Graves, Ph.D., MSW  
Louise Shavings, MSW  
Cookie Rose, Cultural Consultant  
Anda Saylor, BA  
Stacy L. Smith, MFA (Editor)

Cheryl Easley, Ph.D.  
Dean, College of Health and Social Welfare  
University of Alaska Anchorage



Kanaqlak (George P. Charles), Ph.D.  
Center Director



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## Executive Summary

The boarding school era is an unclear and tentative time in history for many Alaskans. This era has come to the forefront while the Alaska state legislators work toward reinstating regional schools. The purpose of this timely research project was to listen to the voices of Alaska Natives who attended boarding school thirty years ago in order to learn more about this obscure period.

Researchers for this study performed a secondary analysis on data originally collected in 2005, focusing on different perspectives than the original researchers. Our team was made up of Alaska Natives trained in psychology and social work and involved in healing activities. In particular, researchers spotlighted resiliency factors of students attended boarding schools and attempted to gain a deeper understanding of the mental health impacts of the boarding school experience and the intergenerational long-term effects. The project team wanted to honor those who openly revealed themselves and their experiences.

### BACKGROUND

Little has been published on the Alaska Native experience in boarding schools. However, there is a larger body of academic literature available associated with the American Indian and indigenous Canadian experience. The prevailing viewpoint of the time was that if Native American culture could be destroyed, Native Americans themselves would become “white” or Euro-American. The effort attempted to destroy indigenous tribal groups by taking apart the culture, including the tradition of extended family structures and Native languages.

This research project utilized a group of Boarding School Consultants who had direct boarding school experience and could steer the project toward a paradigm driven by the Alaska Native perspective that was sensitive to mental health and resilience factors. The cultural consultants attended boarding schools in Alaska or the lower 48, and completed high school between the late 1950s and early 1970s. Thus, they were in their late 40s to early 60s. The consultants and research team reached a consensus regarding the goals of the project.

### PROCESS

The original research team (2005) recruited Alaska Native individuals who attended boarding school 30 years ago via the following ways: through emails, at the Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN) conference, through public radio talk shows, and through a radio station in Nome. The team also traveled to hub communities including Nome, Kotzebue, Fairbanks, Juneau, and Barrow. Sixty-two (62) semi-structured, open-ended interviews were conducted with Alaska Natives who directly experienced boarding school or who had parents who experienced boarding schools or boarding homes.





Our team approached the data from a grounded theory/qualitative approach. The analysis of the interviews looked for specific topics such as: disruption of family, multiple losses, coping strategies, and resilience.

## **FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS**

The following themes emerged from the respondents' boarding school/home experiences:

- Many had positive experiences
- Most maintained a positive outlook despite difficulties
- Respondents' lives were disrupted by the experience
- Younger boarding school attendees had more problems adjusting
- Communities were affected by the boarding school experience
- Respondents lost language and cultural traditions
- Cultural identity was disrupted
- Parenting skills were negatively impacted
- Many had difficulties maintaining relationships

The reported mental health outcomes roughly fell into 5 broad groups: severely impacted, ambivalent, positive, activated, and driven. The divisions among these categories are artificial and likely contain overlap, with some respondents fitting into more than one category.

Many of the students attending boarding school faced challenges, yet the majority somehow managed to become productive adults. The participants described various activities, family attributes, and cultural strengths that assisted them through the boarding school experience and beyond. These include: ceremonies, cultural practices, family involvement, being raised traditionally, the process of reconnecting following boarding school, religious and spiritual connections, continuing education, and self-reliance.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER ACTION**

The research team, along with boarding school consultants, developed a set of recommendations to aid in the healing process from the boarding school experience. The team wants the government to provide language classes to each Alaska Native who attended boarding school without charge and encourage churches and the government to apologize for the damage caused. Teaching Alaska Native history needs to be made mandatory in schools across the entire state and Alaska Native artists need to be encouraged to create art depicting the boarding school experience which will become a traveling exhibit. A conference aimed at healing from the boarding school experience needs to be organized and grant funds directed toward villages to encourage development of their own healing projects which will be highlighted at the healing conference. Finally, further research needs to be supported.





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## I. Introduction

The boarding school era was a profoundly controversial and dichotomous time in history for Alaska Natives. This divisive era is coming to the forefront of the minds of many while the Alaska State legislators are working toward reinstating regional schools. There are huge economic incentives for the State of Alaska to revisit boarding schools or “regional learning centers” according to Representative Gail Phillips, District 7 – Republican, while speaking at the Common North Forum on December 5, 2000:<sup>1</sup>

*“...those old boarding schools, they used to work, maybe it's time we started looking at the boarding concept again...One of the other things that we have found is in talking with the leadership as we've gone all around the state especially with the Native leadership a great number of the people who are the business leaders and community leaders today did go to regional boarding schools when they were high school age... And their endorsement of what we're doing is 100 percent strong. They understood that they got an excellent education even though they had to be removed from their parents during that time they did get an excellent opportunity for education, and they want that for their children also....”*

House Bill 16 “Funding for Public Boarding Schools” was signed into law in June 2006. The act has passed the Legislature and has been transmitted to the Governor for signature. The act allows school districts to operate statewide residential educational programs.

Given the political and economic climate in the state of Alaska, listening to the voices of those who attended the boarding schools thirty years ago is particularly timely. With this in mind, a secondary analysis was conducted on data that was collected in 2005 by University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA) Institute for Social and Economic Research (ISER) Diane Hirshberg, PhD and Suzanne Sharp, MA. The purpose of the original project entitled “*Thirty Years Later: The long-term effect of boarding schools on Alaska Natives and their communities*” was to systematically examine the experience of Alaska Natives in boarding schools and programs and the lasting effect from a historic perspective.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Retrieved on December 20, 2006 at <http://www.commonwealthnorth.org/transcripts/phillips.html>

<sup>2</sup> The full report entitled “*Thirty Years Later: The long-term effect of boarding schools on Alaska Natives and their communities*” can be found at: <http://www.iser.uaa.alaska.edu/Publications/boardingschoolfinal.pdf>





## II. Background

### A. History of Boarding Schools

In general, our review of the literature revealed that very little has been published on the Alaska Native experience in boarding schools. However, there is a larger body of academic literature available associated to the American Indian and indigenous Canadian experience. In reviewing the academic literature connected to the history of the development of Native American boarding schools, we found that the primary philosophy of the era was based upon assimilation strategies, and resulting federal policies of forced or coerced assimilation aimed at removing Native children from their homes to relocate them into an institution where they learned to adapt to Anglo American society. The prevailing viewpoint of the time was that if Native American culture could be destroyed, they would become “white” or Euro-American (Adams, 1988/1995; Child, 1998; Hamley, 1994; LeGarde, 1999; McDade, 1997; Murphy, 2003; Smith, 2003). The effort attempted to destroy indigenous tribal groups by taking apart the culture, such as the tradition of extended family structures and Native languages (Momaday, 1975; Murphy, 2003).

Captain Richard Henry Pratt was a key figure in the development of the philosophy upon which the structure of boarding schools for Native Americans was originally built. He opened the Carlisle Indian School at Carlisle, Pennsylvania in 1872 after he had effectively maintained order among American Indian prisoners at Fort Marion in St. Augustine, Florida (Hamley, 1994; LeGarde, 1999; Smith, 2003; Utle, 1964; Wallace, 1995). These American Indian prisoners were far from home which prohibited contact with their families. They were clothed in military uniforms, drilled and disciplined in the ways of the military, and instructed in English and basic academic skills (Fuchs and Havighurst, 1972). Pratt had a strong desire to take the formula for “success” to another level. As a veteran of the Indian wars, he held the belief that Indians could be easily conquered by educating their children, rather than through battle (Hamley, 1994; LeGarde, 1999; Smith, 2003; Utle, 1964). Pratt is quoted as saying the following:

*“...A great general has said that the only good Indian is a dead one, and that high sanction of his destruction has been an enormous factor in promoting Indian massacres. In a sense, I agree with the sentiment, but only in this: that all the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him, and save the man.”<sup>3</sup>*

Pratt believed that by removing Indian children from their parents, enforcing an English-only policy, dressing them in Western clothing, and training them within the Western educational system, he could eliminate their cultural values and assimilate them into the Western culture (Adams, 1988; Gross, 1973; Hamley, 1994; LeGarde, 1999; Murphy, 2003; Smith, 2003; Utle, 1964). His model served as a basis for most of the boarding schools around the United States at the time. The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) controlled off-reservation boarding schools, and churches controlled boarding and day

<sup>3</sup> This quotation was retrieved on August 9, 2006 at: <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/4929>





schools on reservations with federal funds. This philosophy aimed to transform the essential identity the Native students by altering their physical appearance, language, ideals, spiritual beliefs, social roles, and their traditions and way of life in general. Transforming the cultural identify of Indians, both individually and collectively, was a central goal of the schooling experience (Hamley, 1994).

In Alaska, the Russians came with the goal of exploring the land – first to reap the benefits of the wealth of the land, and later to “civilize” Alaska Natives. The missionary period began in 1885-1886 after Alaska was purchased (1857) by the United States. After the Native populations in various geographical regions were divided among a number of religious denominations, the missionaries arrived with the goal of civilizing and saving the souls of Alaska Natives.

This period of change in the history of Alaska resulted in incalculable damage to the Alaska Native population. The cultures of Alaska were devastated by the Russian Era which lasted for two to three hundred years and resulted in a sharp decline in population due to murder, drowning, disease, and starvation (Fortuine, 1989; Freeman, 2000; Graves, 2004; Haycox, 2000; Labelle, 2005; Napoleon, 1991; Weaver, 1988).

Many Native children died from diseases contracted at the school – either at the boarding school or later when they returned home. With no immunity or natural defenses to epidemics of small pox, measles, and influenza, the Alaska Native populations were decimated. (Fortuine, 1989). Poor diet and lack of nutrition were also factors in high mortality rates at these schools (Adams, 1988; Hamley, 1994). Death, social disintegration, anguish, and desertion of traditional housing resulted in such overwhelming individual, family, community, and cultural catastrophe that the effects are still being experienced today.

However, individuals who supported the assimilation policy were surprised when tribes continued to exist. Despite the attempt to destroy them, the tribes were culturally resilient and held onto their cultural values, languages, and spirituality (Hamley, 1994).

## **B. Historical Trauma of Boarding Schools**

Many historical events in Alaska have contributed to multi-generational trauma among Alaska Natives. Contact with other cultures, epidemics, attempted domination through policies laws, and ethnocide have contributed to the cultural crisis<sup>4</sup>.

The effect of boarding school education on American Indian/Alaska Native students remains controversial (Kunitz et al., 1999; Irwin & Roll, 1995). While in the boarding school system, many of the Native American children were traumatized by the separation from their parents, siblings, and extended family members (Coleman, 1993; DeJong, 1993). Many people who attended boarding school reported that the

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<sup>4</sup> "Boarding School: Historical Trauma among Alaska's Native People" by Jim Labelle. Retrieved on December 27, 2006 at [http://elders.uaa.alaska.edu/Publications/yr2\\_2boarding-school.pdf](http://elders.uaa.alaska.edu/Publications/yr2_2boarding-school.pdf).







interruption and disruption of their culture was an ongoing issue that often resulted in feelings of inferiority and discomfort (Cleary & Peacock, 1998; Fuchs & Havighurst, 1972; Hamley, 1994; Metcalf, 1974). After being institutionalized, many Native American attendees reported experiencing feelings of shame toward their parents, and many were left feeling profoundly disconnected from their families and traditions (Hamley, 1994).

For some of the younger children, the psychological effect of being removed from their parents may have been more damaging. When these children became parents themselves, they found they were not able to draw on experiences of growing up in a family in order to guide their own parenting (Special Subcommittee on Indian Education, 1969). Hamley (1994) stated that, the younger the child, the more susceptible they were to the prolonged stress.

The children sometimes experienced nightmares, night terrors, and fears of objects and imaginary objects. School-aged children often became withdrawn, depressed, irritable, restless, disruptive, and withdrawn from substitute caretakers and peers (Hamley, 1994). When adolescents are separated from their families they may become depressed, moody, withdrawn, angry, aggressive, and have frequent headaches, stomachaches, or other psychosomatic symptoms (Hamley, 1994). Not all children suffered these psychological symptoms. Some children formed strong attachments with other children and school staff and did not suffer from ongoing issues related to the experience.

The long-term outcome of the assimilation policy has been associated with negative mental health consequences (Kleinfeld, 1973; Kleinfeld & Bloom, 1977).<sup>5</sup> Dr. Kleinfeld (1977) examined the psychological effects on Alaska Natives who attended boarding school. She found that 49% of the 132 Alaska Eskimo adolescent freshmen in her study developed school related social and emotional disturbances, with 25% of these problems considered serious. Although Kleinfeld attributed the high incidence of problems to the rapid cultural transition, and reported that the type of school attended did not seem to make a difference (whether a regional boarding school or a city/non-Native boarding home), the sample size was small and did not reach statistical significance. Kleinfeld's follow-up studies of public boarding school graduates found that there were high levels of passive, dependent styles of adult behavior and high rates of college failure. However, follow-up studies of *mission school* graduates had unusually high levels of responsibility and motivation, as indicated by a high rate of participation in civic affairs and a high rate of college success (Kleinfeld, 1972, p. 417).

In 1972, Dr. Kleinfeld studied the urban boarding home program in Alaska. She found that most of the boarding home students were either Eskimo or Athabascan living with non-Natives in urban areas. The study focused on the characteristics of boarding school parents who developed positive relationships with students. Both boarding home

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<sup>5</sup> Surgeon General's Report. US Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Surgeon General, SAMHSA (downloaded on 12/6/06). Mental Health Care for American Indians and Alaska Natives.





parents and students were interviewed for the study. Kleinfeld found that communicating warmth to students was the most critical aspect displayed by the boarding home parents. Successful parents also had an understanding of cultural differences.

### **C. Impact of Boarding Schools Today**

The social issues facing Alaska Natives today can be traced to the devastation of culture. Substance abuse, diabetes, suicide, family disruption, community and interpersonal violence, and mental health issues among Alaska Natives may be directly linked to the cultural turmoil experienced by earlier generations (Fortuine, 1989; Freeman, 2000; Haycox, 2000; Napoleon, 1991; Weaver, 1988). DeVries (1996) explained that when cultural patterns, cultural identities, and relationships are lost, existence becomes erratic because culture helps protect against depression and aggression. The problems of the individual are proportional to the cultural disintegration experienced by the group (Devries, 1996).

Currently, Alaska Native families continue to experience extreme social disparities, such as poverty, poor housing, and underemployment or unemployment, which can cause severe trauma reactions in families over time. Socioeconomic disadvantage causes fatigue, irritability, and illnesses, and jeopardizes security and well-being. Over time, social inequalities can lead to an obstruction of intellectual development in individuals despite the complete lack of an organic learning deficit. Trauma generated by assaults to social structure produce demoralizing and long-enduring effects across generations (Kira, 2001). In the wake of widespread cultural loss and assimilation efforts, individuals experience a loss of mental, physical, and spiritual health. Often, unresolved grief and pain held by ancestors are passed down through generations. When any culture is in crisis, there is an increase in violence, substance abuse, and suicide.





### III. Methodology

#### A. Data from 2005

An analysis was conducted by Diane Hirshberg, PhD and Suzanne Sharp, MA, Institute for Social and Economic Research (ISER), University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA) on data collected in 2005. The purpose of the original project, entitled *“Thirty Years Later: The long-term effect of boarding schools on Alaska Natives and their communities,”* was to systematically examine, from a historical perspective, the experience of Alaska Natives in boarding schools and programs, and the lasting effect.<sup>6</sup>

The study focused primarily upon the educational experience, the “climate and culture” of the schools, and the post-high school experience (including college and the military). The study was exploratory and driven largely by theories derived from the fields of Sociology and Education Policy. The authors stated in their report:

*“We hope to continue and expand this research in the coming years. In the meantime we invite comment on our initial work and analyses in an effort to ensure that the meaning we make from this work reflects that of the Alaska Natives who so generously gave of their time and spirit in this work.”(page 28)*

In keeping with the spirit of the above invitation, Dr. Hirshberg and Ms. Sharp agreed to share the data with the team from the UAA National Resource Center for American Indian, Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian Elders (NRC). They fully supported our work by untiringly answering questions and offering advice.

The intent of our reanalysis of the data was to: 1) honor the Alaska Natives who openly shared themselves within the interviews and 2) value the trust that was given to us by the original researchers. The goal of the NRC team<sup>7</sup> was not to challenge or replicate the previous analysis; our perspective was that the original analysis was skillfully, accurately, and professionally executed.

The NRC team re-analyzed the data from several different perspectives: as Alaska Native researchers trained in psychology and social work, and as Alaska Natives involved in healing activities.

<sup>6</sup> The full report entitled *“Thirty Years Later: The long-term effect of boarding schools on Alaska Natives and their communities”* can be found at:

<http://www.iser.uaa.alaska.edu/Publications/boardingschoolfinal.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> The NRC team included: Kathleen Graves, Alutiiq; Louise Shavings, Cup’ik; Cookie Rose, Athabascan; Anda Saylor, non-Native.





## B. Boarding School Consultants

In the first step, researchers engaged a group of Boarding School Consultants<sup>8</sup> who had direct boarding school experience and could steer the project toward a new paradigm driven by the Alaska Native perspective that was sensitive to mental health and resilience factors. The cultural consultants attended boarding school in Alaska or the lower 48, and completed high school between the late 1950s and early 1970s. Thus, they were currently in their late 40s to early 60s.

Collaboratively, the consultants and research team agreed that the goal of the reanalysis was to spotlight different aspects of the data. The main goals of the project were twofold: 1) to closely examine the resiliency factors of the students attending boarding school and 2) to gain a deeper understanding of the mental health impacts of the boarding school experience and the intergenerational long-term effects.

Researchers met two times for 1 to 3 hours with the consultants. These meetings were recorded, transcribed, and summarized. Each consultant received a small gift of \$50 for each consultation meeting.

Early in the study, the Boarding School Consultants reminded us to consider the cohort analysis in terms of the political environment of the time. These factors impacted the policies of the boarding schools. The Euro-American political climate of the early years of boarding schools defined the boarding school policies and philosophy.

One consultant encouraged us to reflect upon our biases when viewing the outcomes. It is important to differentiate between two measures and/or definitions of success: are we utilizing a definition of success from the Western cultural perspective or an Alaska Native cultural perspective? If we define success solely as being a leader in the Western way, then we are not considering the quality of relational connections with our spouse, children, and extended family. Additionally, we needed to measure success by the level of happiness, contentment, and balance in one's own life.

## C. The Study Group

The original research team (2005) recruited Alaska Native individuals who attended boarding school 30 years ago via the following ways: through emails, at the Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN) conference, through public radio talk shows, and through a radio station in Nome. This team also traveled to hub communities including Nome, Kotzebue, Fairbanks, Juneau, and Barrow.<sup>9</sup> Sixty-two (62) semi-structured, open-ended interviews were conducted with Alaska Natives who directly experienced boarding school or who had parents who experienced boarding schools or boarding homes. Most

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<sup>8</sup> The boarding school consultants were: Jim Labelle, Inupiat; Pat Frank, Athabascan; Candyce Childers, Athabascan; Rose Prince, Yupik; Rose Jerue, Athabascan; and Ethel Lund, Athabascan.

<sup>9</sup> A detailed and full description of the methodology related to sampling and selection is the full report entitled "*Thirty Years Later: The long-term effect of boarding schools on Alaska Natives and their communities*" can be found at: <http://www.iser.uaa.alaska.edu/Publications/boardingschoolfinal.pdf>.





individuals attended boarding schools between the late 1940s and early 1980s, with the majority attending in the 1960s and 1970s. Most of the respondents were in their late 40s and 50s and were parents and grandparents themselves.

The respondents were asked the following questions:

1. How did you end up at particular boarding schools and homes; did you have any choice?
2. What was the quality of the school like?
3. What was the general atmosphere or culture of the school?
4. Were there Alaska Native educators?
5. Was there any Alaska Native history or culture taught as part of the curriculum?
6. What did students generally do after high school? Were they encouraged to attend college?
7. Looking back, what was the affect of the school on you?
8. Would you encourage your children or other children to attend boarding schools?
9. How do you think today's schools should be improved?<sup>10</sup>

When the data was transferred, it was stripped of all identifying information and transcribed. For analysis, we used ATLAS.ti qualitative software. Our team approached the data from a grounded theory/qualitative approach. When using this approach, the hypotheses are derived from the data and then validated. The researchers did not come into the project with preconceived ideas of what we were going to find. Rather, they allowed the data to speak and the meaning to emerge from the data itself. Some of the aggregated qualitative data was quantified for clarity. The analysis of the interviews looked for specific topics such as: disruption of family, multiple losses, coping strategies, and resilience.

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<sup>10</sup> Not all of the respondents were asked all of the questions because of the level of the trauma and their emotional reaction. For some, this was the first time they had talked about the experiences.





## IV. Findings

This section presents the substantive findings and interpretations based upon conceptual relationships between categories drawn from the raw data.

The following themes emerged from the respondents' boarding home experiences:

- Many had positive experiences
- Most maintained a positive outlook despite difficulties
- Respondents' lives were disrupted by the experience
- Younger boarding school attendees had more problems adjusting
- Communities were affected by the boarding school experience
- Respondents lost language and cultural traditions
- Cultural identity was disrupted
- Parenting skills were negatively impacted
- Many had difficulties maintaining relationships

### A. Thematic Analysis of Boarding School Attendees

Sixty-two (62) Alaska Natives who attended boarding school or had parents who experienced boarding schools were interviewed. Careful analysis revealed categorical clusters of self-reported outcomes and characteristics.<sup>11</sup> On the surface, perspectives appeared to be divided into those who had positive experiences and those who had negative experiences. However, a deeper look revealed greater complexity and meaning behind responses. While many of the respondents described positive aspects of the experience, they also described challenging aspects that had lasting effects upon them, their families, and communities.

The clusters of self-reported outcomes roughly fell into 5 broad groups (Table 1, next page). The divisions among these categories are artificial and contain overlap. Some respondents may fit into more than one category.

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<sup>11</sup> The clusters of outcomes were developed in consultation with Dr. Bob Morgan, Psychologist and Lakota Elder.





**Table 1. Clusters of Self-Reported Outcomes**

<b>Severely Impacted Outcome</b>	These individuals were traumatized and continued to struggle with the memories, flashbacks, mental illnesses, substance abuse, violence, suicide, and feelings of loss, loneliness, and shame. They did not trust others and were reluctant to talk openly about their experiences. They struggled with memories of trying to sooth the younger children’s cries at night. Many witnessed or experienced physical and sexual abuse.
<b>Ambivalent Outcome</b>	Individuals reported having a positive experience, yet had conflicting experiences and related feelings. For this group, the positive aspects of the experience focused upon expansion of their worldview from a local perspective to a global perspective, academic gains, and the benefits of structure. While sixty percent (60%) of the respondents reported positive experiences (such as constructive academic experiences, reinforced values, excellent guidance, and lasting relationships that supported their leadership in Native politics), many of these same respondents also reported contradictory aspects. Isolating the respondents who reported positive experiences revealed that fifty-five percent (55%) felt as though their lives were disrupted. Disruptions included: interrupted and strained relationships, separation and isolation from culture and communities, interruption of acquisition of language, and identity disturbances. Relationships with parents, siblings, extended family members, friends, elders, and community members were disrupted and compromised. For some, this sense of disconnection continued today. Nineteen percent (19%) of the positive group also reported feeling disconnected, stating that they felt disengaged and detached from culture, traditions, and communities, sometimes for a lifetime.
<b>Positive Outcome</b>	Those who reported a purely positive experience (27%) at boarding school felt respected and were allowed to maintain connection with their family and cultural traditions. This group was curious and empathetic toward those who described negative experiences at boarding school and were not defensive or display anger when the topic came up. Their adult relationships were strong and balanced. They appreciated the structure and academics. Many are leaders today, and, for some, connections with students have lasted a lifetime. Gaining a broader perspective was reported as a positive and appreciated outcome. The prevalent attitude for this group was that boarding schools helped young Natives build character and become successful adults.
<b>Activated Outcome</b>	These individuals were severely impacted but were healing and spoke openly about their experiences. Some reported having troubles with relationships and parenting skills, yet were acutely aware of these difficulties and had begun the healing process or the process of change. Some had abused substances in the past, but were currently sober and were actively working on healing by speaking publicly about their experiences. Some had returned to the boarding school site to help heal their pain. They were actively working toward increasing awareness about the issue. Many had reconnected with their traditional cultural beliefs.
<b>Driven Outcome</b>	These individuals used the boarding school experience for motivation to overcome the past and become leaders and fighters. Some experienced their drive as a hunger they must satisfy. These individuals appeared powerful and driven, but often experienced inner turmoil. They were motivated to find selfhood.





The boarding school era in Alaska has a controversial history as made apparent in the table above. Some viewed the boarding school experience as a constructive period for Alaska Natives, given that a select group of high profile bright adults came out of these schools, becoming our corporate and health administrators, tribal and political leaders, and healers and culture bearers, to name a few.

*“And after the '70s, after the land claims act, then people that went through the boarding home programs became the leaders, became the people that ran the corporations, like ASRC, UIC, all the village corporations...”*

They enjoyed life-long bonds with other Alaska Natives they met at boarding schools, which enhanced their leadership capacity and accomplishments.

*“Now we have senators, we have representatives...We have mayors in the community. I mean, there's a whole lot of people. Heads of corporations went to Mount Edgecumbe and all that stuff. And I think a lot of the success of some of those institutions are directly related to those connections we made in high school...”*

On the other hand, many viewed the time spent at boarding school as a traumatic and terrifying experience. Some believed these boarding school experiences were in part responsible for the “soul wound”<sup>12</sup> at the core of Alaska Native people. For many Native American scholars, the soul wound or historical trauma<sup>13</sup> is a significant underlying factor in the ongoing high rates of family breakdown, suicide, substance abuse, and violence. The ruthless assimilation practices, the physical, emotional, sexual, and verbal abuse by staff and other students, and the lifelong post-traumatic stress symptoms are often mentioned in connection with the experience.

*“...So many of us that went to Wrangell from there have died, have frozen and gotten into alcohol and drugs...if it hadn't been for the help that I personally sought out, I'd probably be either dead, in a mental institution or – that would have happened to me if I hadn't sought out the help that I got and I initiated it...I don't like to say it screwed up my life but I would never want to ever again see boarding schools for children, not to our people ever again...”*

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<sup>12</sup> Native scholar, Eduardo Duran, describes the destruction of the culture as a “soul wound,” from which Native Americans have not healed. Embedded deep within that wound is a pattern of sexual and physical abuse that began in the early years of the boarding school system. Retrieved on January 4, 2007 from Amnesty International USA; written by Andrea Smith:  
<http://www.amnestyusa.org/amnestynow/soulwound.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Dr. Maria Brave Horse, Lakota, defines historical trauma as the collective emotional and psychological injury both over the life span and across generation resulting from cataclysmic history of genocide. Retrieved from: <http://www.du.edu/gssw/faculty/braveheart-wp.htm>.







## B. Emotional Impact of Boarding Schools

### 1. Emotional profile of boarding school students

There is no uniform emotional profile of individuals who attended boarding school. They came with widely ranging ego strengths, capacities, and abilities to adapt. Conceivably, some came with severe psychological problems that may have prevented them from adapting to any boarding school. While most came from strong, stable homes, a few came from chaotic homes with alcoholic and neglectful parents.

Children who came from the typical traditional family may have felt they were dishonoring traditional ways when they were exposed to the assimilation policies. One respondent described it this way:

*“... it was kind of like a violation of our Inupiat culture... Because in the school, okay, you were taught to talk back by answering questions, you know, that the teacher gives to you....Do you know, or what’s the answer to this question, where in our culture, okay, you just sit back and listen. You observe and you don’t ask any questions. Asking questions is a means of talking back which is disrespectful to the elders. And I’m damned if I do and damned if I don’t. So it was a very thin line to cross, okay, without disrespecting both, especially the culture that I was raised up in.”*

Overall, a surface examination of the data revealed a highly dichotomous picture with apparent separation between positive and negative perspectives.

*“...I would say it was the best thing that ever happened to me...”*

*“...how could our parents and godparents sell our soul? Sell my soul for education, you know – education here to the same thing I had to go through, you know, basically the intimidation and stuff like that.”*

A few individuals reported they were relieved to be in boarding school because it provided them with food and a warm bed where they were not responsible for their siblings.

*“...So when I was accepted to Wrangell Institute I was so happy because I got to get away from alcoholic parents. I got to have food to eat. And I was one of the rare kids that was happy at that school to be away from my parents. So I’m grateful that I got to go to boarding school.”*

*“...I think it was positive. I enjoyed, you know, because my mom’s house was too small and there were too many kids so ...”*

Some who had positive experiences felt distressed or perhaps exasperated when they learned that others had vastly different experiences than their own. How could it be that some reported that their Native language was encouraged at the boarding school, while





others were abused for speaking their Native tongue? Some individuals expressed the need to set the record straight.

*“...we were classmates at Wrangell Institute, and he talked just the opposite about how when he was caught speaking his language, he had his head shaved, was put in a striped uniform and locked in a closet. And that is not true. At Wrangell, at Edgumbe, I never heard people say, don't speak your language. They could have cared less.”*

*“The beauty of it was that we were allowed to speak our language (at Mt. Edgumbe). I mean we had Yup'ik speaking their language, Siberian Yup'ik, Inupiaq, some Indians, some Aleut and some Tlingit...there was a concerted effort not to make a big deal of it by the staff of the school.”*

On the other hand, traumatized individuals who had spent a lifetime trying to recover from the trauma had to make sense of that fact that others had positive experiences at boarding school.

*“...it's part of our history and we can't deny it. It's part of my history. I can't deny it. For a long time I said I never went to school there, you know. But I did go to school there and these things did happen, you know...I think some people might have had a good experience, you know, but I didn't. I did not have a good experience there. I had a hard time in school when I came back. I mean, I lost whatever respect I had for any kind of authority. I didn't trust the white teachers anymore and yeah, it made an impact on me. When I got married and had my children I didn't let my kids go to a public school.”*

For many, boarding school was a terrifying and a distressing experience. The ruthless assimilation practices, including physical, emotional, sexual, and verbal abuse by staff and other students, and lifelong post-traumatic stress symptoms were often mentioned in connection with the boarding school experience.

*“...And that's why those kids got, in Wrangell Institute, the reason why they got whacked across the butt 10 times by the biggest students, was for talking their own language. They'd bend over and get hit 10 times with the razor strap for saying one word.”*

*“...I felt so lost and so alone. I couldn't turn to anyone and I thought suicide was the answer so I have this to carry with me the rest of my life...”*

These individuals felt the experience was an underlying factor in the ongoing high rates of family breakdown, suicide, substance abuse, and violence.

*“...It's still there because of the horrendous psychological damage that happened to people, to live in fear. And unfortunately when you don't deal with it, you self-medicate and become alcoholic and all the other negative things that go on...”*





## 2. Impact on younger children

When conceptualizing the adjustment of the boarding school children, it is essential to keep in mind that Alaska Natives come from a collective culture that focuses on the entire group rather than the individual. Of primary importance is the harmonious interconnectedness and unity among all members of the group. The children who were removed from their communities were also removed from their extended family and community members – relationships that were vital to their survival. For Alaska Native children, boarding school disrupted extended family structures, shattering their overall sense of well-being and bonding.

It is normal and healthy for children to develop attachments to the primary caregivers in their lives. It is also normal for children to feel attachment anxiety when that primary caregiver is absent for extended periods of time. When the younger children were suddenly sent to boarding school (beginning at age 6 years), they may have suffered from attachment disruption due to the unavailability of their parents. The data suggest that the younger children suffered more profoundly from attachment disruption than did the older children. One respondent who was barely five years old when she was removed explained it this way:

*“...I remember when I was real young, we were going home and I wondered what my parents looked like. I couldn’t remember. I didn’t have pictures...That always stuck with me, wondering what my parents looked like. Eventually I didn’t know who my parents were...”*

The older children (junior high/high school age) attempted to nurture the younger children (beginning at age 6 years). Some described lifelong feelings of pain and grief connected to the experience.

*“...But those poor little kids were the ones I used to feel sorry for because they used to get together in that one room and cry together. They were pretty small, God they were small.”*

*“...That was the toughest thing. We were, you know, babies, but we felt like we were older because there were even little kindergartners there, you know, and they cried all the time. We tried to mother them and, you know, make them feel good and held them and braid their hairs for them and so -- we tried to keep, you know, them from getting too homesick by babying them.”*

*“...the biggest memories I have are those little children we took care of and I still grieve over them sometimes because they didn’t speak English and we learned -- tried to learn to speak Yup’ik because they were across the wing from us and we felt so sorry for them and my heart still hurts for them today because they just didn’t know any English. They peed their beds all the time and we were told by matrons just to get them cleaned and dressed and take them to breakfast and send them to school. And that has hurt me all my life.”*





Data showed that the children who were removed from their home at very young ages often became withdrawn, depressed, irritable, restless, disruptive, and withdrawn from substitute caretakers and peers. Adolescents were also negatively impacted by the separation from their families, often becoming depressed, moody, withdrawn, angry, and aggressive, and some reported frequent headaches, stomachaches, or psychosomatic symptoms.

*“...It was very scary. And it was scary for almost everyone. And I think what they did, this is only hindsight, is we just simply shut down. I mean, I didn't talk to anyone. Sometimes I do that now, and I freeze. I get so anxious I freeze, but then I come back.”*

*“...13 and 14 years old and being without your parents was very difficult and I just remember all the crying, you know, in the morning and there were little kids too so, you know, I was one of the older ones at Wrangell. There were little ones who were crying for their mom and dad and their families.”*

*“...but in the beginning it was every morning and night the waves of homesickness would just wash over you. They would just wash over you and it was like a feeling of abandonment even though my parent's didn't abandon me but I left them and a time of loneliness.”*

### **3. Attachment disruption**

We can speculate that the strength and character of the child's bond to his/her parent, and the child's previous experience with separations and losses, may have influenced his/her response to being removed. How the child perceived the reasons for being separated from his/her parents, family, and community may have also influenced the child's reactions. Abrupt changes and losses are difficult for young children.

Bowlby and Ainsworth are important theorists in Western psychology on attachment. Although their work centered on infants, it demonstrated the profound importance of stable and lasting parent-child relationship. Bowlby's theory of attachment centered around the idea that infants learn to trust and feel secure as long as they are well loved and have their biological needs met (Wilson, 2001). Bowlby said that the attachment continues to influence one's interpersonal relationships throughout life. Ainsworth expanded Bowlby's work by saying that how well the caregiver meets the needs of the infant will determine the security of the attachment. Ainsworth identified three patterns of attachment: secure, insecure/avoidant, and insecure/resistant (Wilson, 2001).

For the study group, it appears that the stronger the attachments and the more abrupt the separation, the more difficult it was for the respondent to resolve grief.

*“...you don't really know your family. It's like an umbilical cord. So I still, up to this day, I still have real uneasy feelings with some of my brothers and sisters, like we're strangers. I feel like I can't just open and laugh and talk with them, goof with them. I*





*feel like I got to, okay, I got to be careful what I say because we're strangers. It's like that kind of feeling."*

In addition, the new environment was complex and dangerous for young children as described by a respondent:

*"...he [brother] was six years younger than me. So that means I was 14, he would have been eight years old. And when you're that vulnerable, when you're young, the younger ones I think were the ones that suffered the most because they couldn't fight back. They were physically not able to. So in a way, that was the thing, they were physically not able, they were victims."*

#### **4. Lifelong relationship difficulties**

A possible outcome of attachment disruption may be increased difficulty in developing and maintaining relationships with others later in life. Several of the respondents reported having significant troubles maintaining intimate relationships with others as adults. Although the respondents were not asked directly about the quality of their relationships, they seemed to instinctively know this was an outcome of their boarding school experience. One respondent who was six years old when she left for boarding school said the following about her ability to maintain quality relationships:

*"It's hard for me to build relationships with people because I was torn away from my parents and I think my daughters are different where, you know, I have a natural love for them. I'm real close with them and I'm real protective of them now but as far as relationships go, like my ex-husband, it's like I always knew in the back of my mind that I can take care of myself and I really don't need anybody and because I have that and it's been with me for so long it was hard for me to really bond with another person and I think that's always going to be there. It's just so hard. "*

One respondent who moved to boarding school at the age of 14 described struggling with familial bonding and attachment to parents and siblings. The removal process negatively impacted this individual's ability to feel familiarity and closeness in relationships.

*"My family, my siblings went through what I went through so we were pretty much alike in that, but there was a real gap in the relationship – a close relationship between my parents and us. It wasn't there anymore. It was like, I mean, when you think back, I mean, we were gone a majority of the year and that bonding or something just disintegrated maybe. So I, all my life, I was never able to communicate freely with my mother or my father and there was no intimacy at all. There wasn't. And then I think that affected my inability to have good relationships, you know, safe relationships or whatever."*





## 5. Diminished parenting skills

Respondents reported that their parenting skills were negatively impacted by the attachment disruption they experienced at boarding school. Parenting skills are obtained by observation and experience, and without the influence of family and community, respondents felt they missed out on these critical experiences.

*“So those kids that were there don't know how to raise kids, and so therefore they lost the cultural training.”*

*“...We didn't get a chance to observe our parents parenting us during those critical years. So when I see parents not doing anything with their children, not talking to their children, not disciplining their children, parents that are my age, I think about that. Because when I look at the parents, I see they've gone to St. Marys or Bethel or Edgecumbe or Chemawa, Oregon, Chilocco, Oklahoma, all those boarding schools that were popular at that time. They're the parents that went away. And I really think that had an effect on how we parent today...”*

*“...another bad part is that...I didn't learn teen parenting skills because I was away from my family during my teen years so I didn't learn how to be a teen parent... I didn't learn the skills.*

*“...You know, and one of the things is the parenting skills. You know, we're gone nine months out of the year and you're learning a foreign language and they're not really teaching you any life skills either.”*

*“...it was really hard because it created a kind of a gap because they didn't have the experience of being parents to teenagers because we weren't there and so some of the bonding that should have occurred didn't occur.”*

*“...I didn't learn teen parenting skills because I was away from my family during my teen years so I didn't learn how to be a teen parent...when I had my own kids I had trouble with them when they were in their teens...and a counselor or somebody pointed that out to me that I had missed that important part of those years.*

Attachment disorders may be cyclic, passing from one generation to the next. In this way, the attachment disorder becomes a multi-generational issue.

*“...when I had my own kids I had trouble with them when they were in their teens...and a counselor or somebody pointed that out to me that I had missed that important part of those years...Because when I turned 16 then my parents weren't bossing me around anymore. They just allowed me to make my own choices. They thought I was old enough to do that. Well, besides they had 10 other kids to take care of so I just had to be grown up and make my own decisions and choices and become an adult at around that time.”*





## C. Impact on Community and Culture

### 1. Community level outcomes

While it is important to focus on the impact of boarding schools upon the individual, it is also essential to analyze what impact the removal process had at the community level. Alaska Natives come from a collective culture that places high value on the entire group. The primary focus is upon harmonious interconnectedness and unity among all members. How were communities affected when children were removed and sent away to boarding school? How did this change the dynamics of the community? The data were not set up to explore this issue; however, respondents commented on this topic frequently. Due to intermittent contact with their children, parents experienced a disruption in their relationship with their children. They were unsure about their parenting role and felt disconnected from the lives of their children.

*“By then there was a big split, you know, in the communities because they weren’t used to being full-time parents. Kids would come home in the summer and you didn’t know if you had any authority over them. They just kind of did their own thing and I found it really unsettling because I was a step-mother of grown kids almost and they were all used to doing their own thing and their dad let them so I didn’t really appreciate all that but I thought well, you know, the whole town is something like this. So they were reluctant to discipline their kids and kind of like you almost had to hope for the best.”*

While their children were at boarding school, some parents turned to alcohol to ease their pain, guilt, and anxiety.

*“...So I just didn’t do anything after high school and I went home but by then everybody in Allakaket was drinking and I couldn’t live there. It just hurt so much so I ended up leaving there...it wasn’t only the children who were affected by leaving but the parents were also affected because they took their kids away and I think that was harder for the...Feeling guilty, yeah. Yeah, because they allowed them to take us from them...But still it’s so hard to send your kids away. Now that I have my own children I know. I could understand but it must have been really really difficult for them.”*

Alaska Native communities may experience a phenomenon called the “anniversary reaction” in connection with the boarding school experience. The anniversary reaction is a community setback or outburst that is tied to the time of year when children departed or returned from boarding school. The anniversary reaction is associated with incomplete mourning. A respondent described how these anniversaries seriously impacted her entire community:

*“...now I notice a lot of people still get real restless in the spring and in the fall. It’s just when they expect change or something happens and they’re depressed or they kill themselves or they drink too much or it’s this annual thing in the spring and fall. It’s like a pattern, at least in my village, and I can’t imagine being in the village. I’ve*





*since gone back and lived there and I can't imagine the village without kids over the age of five. Twenty/30 kids a year leaving and the only kids there are under five. How do you think their parents felt?"*

*"Because that's the elders' way of saying gee, you're dumb. How come you ask so many questions? You're just supposed to look and observe, okay, and that way you could be able to go teach yourself. I didn't know that. So I was constantly criticized..."*

## **2. Disrupted cultural sense of self**

Culture is a design for life which is passed from one generation to the next. When the children left for boarding school, they had a language and a code of conduct, and they may have noticed inconsistencies between what they were taught and what they experienced. What happens when that language and code of conduct is disrupted? We know that when cultural patterns, identities, and relationships are lost, the group's existence becomes unpredictable. Cultural patterns, identities, and relationships help to protect individuals against depression and aggression. In order to determine the level of cultural breakdown in the group as a whole, we can measure problems with the individual. When conflict occurs within the culture, the outcome may involve individual withdrawal, anger, disillusionment, and rejection of values.

Due to the boarding school experience, many respondents felt they did not belong to their community, and the cultural ways of their community were foreign to them.

*"I didn't feel like I fit in my hometown anymore because I did things differently. I saw things done differently...At that time I thought they'd changed, but it was me who changed...I still don't feel like I fit in...They see me as a visitor. Every time I go home, they know I'm not going home to stay..."*

*"I went through trauma, not only that but cultural change from going to school nine months out of the year to working the whole year. That was a cultural shock, and I missed the summer. Aside from being open to having things done differently, doing things differently, that was my first culture shock coming back."*

Respondents reported feeling afraid that they did not belong in their culture. They wondered who they were: were they Native or non-Native?

*"...there was also like a fear of non-acceptance into my own culture because I was changing. I was changing into this other person and when I would go home later on, you could feel that you were different, that I was different. I could feel it...before we had been practicing our Native culture. All the taboos and, you know, they call them superstitions I guess, but all the taboos and everything and then when we went home we weren't immersed in that anymore so...I would even like shun that cultural knowledge and background and we would be more into music and clothing and our appearance and make-up and...different values."*







*"We now have that other generation that have lost a lot of their culture, they're alcoholic and they have this generation of people that need to rediscover their identity and get back to the cultural knowledge that all of us as a group used to have."*

Forty-six percent (46%) of respondents reported a loss of language. The loss of language can be connected to the loss of culture, challenged or damaged identities, and a loss of direction in life.

*"In Wrangell Institute, the reason why they got whacked across the butt 10 times by the biggest students was for talking their own language. They'd bend over and get hit 10 times with the razor strap for saying one word. There were two brothers that came in from Point Barrow. They came down and they could not speak one word of English. Every night, every time they decided they were going to whip them, the students that spoke their language, those two boys, time and time and time again..."*

Some respondents (19%) said they felt disconnected from their siblings and experienced feelings of shame toward their parents. Respondents reflected on how they felt profoundly disconnected from their families and traditions after being institutionalized. Many of the respondents (55%) identified the interruption and disruption of their culture as an ongoing issue that sometimes resulted in feelings of inferiority and discomfort.

*"And all the turmoil, the shock of like losing our language, of being taken away from our family, and then go home and you don't really know your family."*

*"We now have that other generation that have lost a lot of their culture, they're alcoholic and they have this generation of people that need to rediscover their identity and get back to the cultural knowledge, that all of us as a group used to have."*

*"...I'll be able to understand partially but not fully. That really hurts because that was that cultural part of me that was really important was never fulfilled, you know, and then I'd constantly get teased, you know, boy, you don't know how to be Inupiat, you know, you don't know how to speak correctly. And I struggled with that. Even if I know that, if I take Inupiat classes away from me and I don't think that part can ever be fulfilled. No matter how many times I go and do hunting. No matter how many don't. So it was a very thin line to cross, okay, without disrespecting both, especially the culture that I was raised up in."*

## **D. Coping with Trauma**

### **1. Resiliency**

Resiliency is the ability to bounce back and maintain a positive outlook despite adversity. Many of the students attending boarding school faced challenges, yet the majority somehow managed to become productive adults. The participants described





various activities, family attributes, and cultural strengths that assisted them through the boarding school experience and beyond. These include: ceremonies, cultural practices, family involvement, being raised traditionally, the process of reconnecting following boarding school, religious and spiritual connections, continuing education, and self-reliance.

## 2. Ceremonies

Ceremonies helped the respondents connect to their ancestors, traditions, and the land. Ceremonies also help them remain balanced and harmonious while facing the challenge of being removed from their families, communities, and culture. A Lower Yukon student celebrated achievements with the entire family present.

*"...He was from the Lower Yukon. I've never been impressed by ceremonies that monitor your point of achievement, graduation, for instance...And he didn't go to high school that I know of, but his whole family was there, and they were very, very proud of him."*

A group of participants discussed their return as adults to the location of the boarding school they attended as children. Their ceremonial return was facilitated by Alaska Native clergy. Returning to the boarding school allowed them to express the feelings they had held inside since the boarding school experience, and allowed for a cathartic release of emotions and a sense of cleansing, restoration, and renewal. The experience showed the participants that they were not alone in adjusting to the boarding school experience, which strengthened their bonds to one another while in a safe environment.

*"...and I seen the school and man I just started crying and but I didn't say anything, you know. We went there and oh man, it was horrible. I just really cried. I mean, you know, I couldn't stop. I tried to stop but I couldn't. Well first my cousin and I went up to the school and, you know, I was just really quiet and she was really quiet and we were just standing there and it was all fenced in and she walked up to the fence and I just happened to glance at her and I could just see the tears and that was all it took. Man, I just started crying...I think that was the beginning for us where we had to really acknowledged what was going on and, you know, realize that, hey, we need to talk about this and need healing..."*

*"...I went the second time and I took my 20-year-old son with me...He went back with me and again it was really emotional but you know there was a healing to have up there because I realized my children don't have to go through this. My children don't have to be taken away from their home...You know, I can't fully understand it because I wasn't a part of that but if you were to reach out to someone because so many people have not...I'd say, you know, find somebody you can talk to about it. Either find somebody else that went there or either find someone you trust, you know, that you can just freely talk to because I think some people are afraid to say anything and are afraid to actually say what happened there..."*





### 3. Cultural integrity

The respondents discussed the culturally defined values that helped them adapt to the boarding school experience. Alaska Natives are taught cultural values by their immediate and extended family members and elders. The values contribute to tenacity and persistence and can act as essential elements upon which to build success. Success in the Western system can be enhanced by reliance upon cultural values, such as relying upon a close bond with family members and the community. For members of Alaska Native cultures, the ideal self functions in a highly relational context. For most of the respondents, embracing their relational connection with spouses, children, family members, friends, and community members was at the core of their life experience. In order to feel complete, the respondents felt they needed to experience themselves as part of the family and community. The family and community defined them and, without it, they ceased to have connection and meaning.

*"...I think that it affected in a positive way. I have never come into contact with so many kids my age from all over the state and we got to learn about each other's culture and language and customs and, in that regard, it was quite a learning – kind of a melting pot of our own. I think it went a long ways towards preparing those future leaders that got involved in, for example. They didn't have to stop and think and worry about having to learn someone else's culture during the course of the – because they already knew each other. I think that was one of the positive things..."*

*"I have some real close friends that we still call each other and talk to each other. I grew up with them. You can't help but have lasting relationships when you have the same experiences for four years of your young life. And I was 14 when I first went down there. And we were 18 by the time we got out. I mean, those are formative years. And you have friendships that are lifetime."*

Cultural integrity refers to a culture's capacity to maintain and develop cultural identity, knowledge, and practices despite challenges and difficulties. The integrity of the culture involves facing challenges (such as the boarding school removal) and managing to continue. Some respondents talked about having healthy Elders to teach the stories and songs. Respondents relied upon their cultural values to survive the changes they were experiencing. They described relying upon cooperation, reciprocity, interdependence, and interconnectedness by developing life-long relationships with other students. They shared Native food, and some connected with Native people from the village. They passed their cultural values on to the next generation.

*"Where I was lucky because I was surrounded by healthy Elders that they impacted me that way because I was with them, I heard their stories. While I did not do the dancing, I knew the stories and the singing. I never learned to dance because that was before the dance revival came. But I was surrounded by truly strong healthy Elders that weren't alcoholic."*

*"...I harvest berries and fish and deer and greens and all that I can possibly do but I take a child with me under my wing and I've done this years and years ago..."*





*“Well yeah, we did have a big family and it was a close-knit community and I caught the tail end of the old elders there, you know, that really practiced the old traditional ways of doing things and of relating to the people in the community using the old traditional ways of doing things so I caught the tail end of it and I think I kind of started to experience the new coming Western forms of social life.”*

#### **4. Parental involvement**

Many of the participants reported having parents who helped them transition into boarding school and beyond by maintaining emotional and psychological ties. According to these respondents, parental connection and involvement was critical to their success at boarding school. Their parents helped them retain a sense of belonging and connection with their culture, traditions, and family. They were consistent, responsible, and trustworthy, and maintained contact and interest with their child. These parents also modeled community and political involvement, taught Native language, and practiced subsistence.

*“My dad and my brother came down one time. They were driving from Oklahoma or somewhere, and they stopped by on their way home. And Mom came down for my graduation. Mom and Dad would send me money...Plus, every month they'd send a care package with goodies in it.”*

*“...a lot of kids didn't have as much as I did. Like family support. Yeah. And not only that, financially, too.”*

*“I don't know what my mother did to, what our parents did to motivate us, but I'd like her secret. But when we were camping in the summer, we couldn't wait to get out of the boat to go get kindling for the camp stove and when my brothers and dad, when they killed the caribou... I couldn't wait for the next year.”*

#### **5. Reconnection**

The respondents discussed reconnecting to their culture, traditions, values, families, Elders, and community as a healing experience after their boarding school experience. Returning to a life based upon cultural beliefs sometimes involved confronting feelings and knowledge about the ways boarding school damaged their cultural sense of self, Native language, connection to the spiritual beliefs, land, and traditions.

*“I'm grounded in my culture. If I'm grounded in my culture then I'll have all those spiritual feelings and just be a more well rounded person and the self-esteem and the confidence will be there. I'll know who I am. And the students, I think if they come from that type of background, they won't feel like they're isolated and the curriculum is not relative to them. I'm really hopeful that it will work.”*

*“...when my brothers came later to St. Mary's and told me that they had stopped drinking, I didn't believe them. I said, how could they stop drinking, you know, man, they drank so much. So the following summer I went home and sure enough, they*





*quit drinking. They had become members of the Assembly of God church and, as a result of that, you know, became alcohol free.”*

## **6. Recording history**

Several respondents described how they recorded their history to make sense of their experiences, benefit their tribes and communities, and teach others about Native culture.

*“One of the neatest things I did for myself in the Anchorage school district is I wrote a book, "Tetlin as I Knew It" and it's being used in the social services department and every November I get very popular. But this book shares how I grew up in the hunting and gathering lifestyle of my parents. We lived this lifestyle until I believe I was 10 years old...We'll essentially get assimilated and that's always been the U.S. Government's intent in the first place is to assimilate us completely and that's the reason for my book, is to pass that on because one of my last chapters in the book will be an Indian primer...’The Assimilation Trail.”*

## **7. Religion and spiritual connection**

The respondents discussed how relying upon traditional Native spiritual beliefs and Christian values increased their ability to maintain a positive view of life, as well as to construct and find meaning behind their emotional and psychological injuries. Respondents reported that their Christian values and activities helped them understand grief and loss, restore their faith in human relationships, enable them to trust, and reduce their level of anger and fear. For many, involvement with the church and church leadership helped during times of personal transition. The respondents talked about relying strongly upon faith to help them through difficulties. These beliefs were deeply held and intensely reparative. Their faith assisted in the management of many complicated life occurrences such as addiction, death, and the culture shock of leaving home to attend school.

*“I was a totally different person and it wasn't until I got married and went back home that I started getting into my culture again and now I've been learning about my culture all these years so I have a real deep spiritual grounding and I wish I had that back then. I missed all that by going away.”*

*"...it's difficult to exist and coexist without some spiritual guidance. That's for sure. Spiritualism and spiritual belief has gone on for many centuries amongst Native American people and their and my beliefs are entirely separate. Naturally, you're going to, somebody like me is going to come to the conclusion that I needed to get back to my tribe and learn more..."*





## 8. Self reliance

Some of the respondents discussed going inward to find the strength to cope with being away from their culture and community. They found the strength to survive by learning how to tap into this internal strength.

*"I think it made me more independent and self-reliant. I could never really build relationships with people. It's been hard for me to do that. There's a lot of pain that I don't really talk about and you can't really, I guess because I didn't have any counseling or anybody to talk to all those years. When it happened I was not near my parents so I really didn't have anybody to talk to."*

*"...Self-discipline was one of the main things that I learned there and to budget your money, you know...I mean, the school was self-reliant, you know, in the fact that we had our own school bank and even our own radio station..."*

## 9. Resistance

The respondents did not simply describe themselves as passive victims to ruthless assimilation practices. Many resisted by covertly maintaining their Native language or even running away. The aim of assimilation policies was to destroy traditional culture and Native languages. However, in some cases, the policy actually resulted in strengthening the respondent's resolve to maintain his/her cultural connection.

*"It was after lights out and we were in the circle of whispering telling stories and the matron looks with her flashlight and said, what are you doing? I told her we were saying the rosary. We were talking and telling stories in Yup'ik but I just said we're saying the rosary. Oh, okay and...So you learned how to lie. Well, we had to lie."*

*"...We just ran away and we stayed away for about four days...That was like my big rebellion. And then finally we ran out of food, got hungry and went back to the school...The other times we'd be gone for 24 hours or something. We'd go build campfires and make tea and eat crackers and tell stories. Pretend we're hunting..."*





## V. Conclusion and Recommendations for Healing

The consultants stated that the most profound aspects of the boarding school experience were the disruptions to family, cultural, and spiritual well-being. Healing strategies were an important focus for these individuals. Some of the consultants have been involved in the healing program developed by Reverend Anna Frank in the Episcopal Church.

For our analysis, the most important outcomes centered on the concept of cultural breakdown and its aftereffect. This concept is not only vital to Alaska Native cultural breakdown but to many other cultures as well. While 60% of the respondents reported positive aspects of their experience, 60% also expressed distress over the loss of their language. The assimilation practices succeeded in producing leaders in the Western way, but respondents wondered what price they had to pay for this success. They lost language and connections to elders, family, and cultural practices.

The thematic analysis also indicated that the younger the age of the child when removed from home, the greater the chance of negative impact. Those individuals who entered boarding school at a very young age appeared to have experienced more damaging and lasting psychological effects. However, because the data were not set up to explore this issue, it is difficult to isolate the many mediating factors and variables that influenced the manner in which the younger children adapted to the boarding school experience. These questions remain for further study.

### Recommendations for Healing

The research team, along with boarding school consultants, developed a set of recommendations to aid in the healing process from the boarding school experience:

- Have State/Federal government provide free Alaska Native language classes to each Alaska Native
- Encourage Alaska Natives to organize a conference for healing from the boarding school experience
- Have churches and government apologize to Alaska Natives for the damage from the boarding school era
- Make Alaska Native history curriculum mandatory in schools across the state
- Encourage Alaska Native artist to create art depicting the boarding school experience which will become a traveling exhibit
- Provide grant funds to villages to develop their own healing projects which will be highlighted at the healing conference
- Encourage further study





## **VI. Limitations of the data**

The limitations of the data are related to generalizability, potential bias, and under representation of Alaska Natives who live in small remote villages. There are several matters related to the data and analysis that potentially impacted the findings contained within this report.

### **A. Lack of Generalizability**

The findings cannot be considered representative of all Alaska Native who attended boarding school. The findings are reflective of those interviewed and may not represent the opinions of the entire group.

This report may more clearly state the views and concerns of Alaska Natives who live in hub areas or those who have the resources to travel to the Alaska Native Federation meetings.

### **B. Research Team Bias**

The ethnicity and worldviews of the research team and the boarding school consultants held the potential to bias the results of the report. The research team brought their life experiences, beliefs, and worldviews to the project. However, every effort was made to minimize the bias; the team was invested in the integrity and accuracy of the report.

*Note: The opinions, conclusion, and recommendations in this paper do not reflect the opinion of the Administration on Aging, UAA or the NRC itself. The stated recommendations are only suggestions iterated by the cultural consultants.*





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