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RTBAK

Raising the Bar for Rural Alaskan Educators

RAISING THE BAR FOR RURAL ALASKAN EDUCATORS (RTBAK)

BUILDING CAPACITY ACROSS THE LAST FRONTIER

How seven Alaska districts created sustainable systems for teaching, learning, and leadership

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ALASKA COUNCIL OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Alaska's rural school districts face a set of interconnected challenges that make sustained instructional improvement difficult to achieve: chronic teacher turnover, geographic isolation, limited access to professional learning, and leadership teams stretched across responsibilities that larger districts distribute across departments. For many districts, the question is not whether to improve, but how to build systems capable of sustaining improvement when capacity is always constrained.

Raising the Bar, a multi-year initiative led by the Alaska Council of School Administrators (ACSA) in partnership with Corwin Publishing and the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET), was designed to address that question. Rather than introducing a new program for districts to implement, the initiative focused on strengthening the conditions that make continuous improvement possible: shared instructional frameworks, stronger leadership structures, professional learning communities, and cultures of ongoing growth and reflection.

Over three years, the seven participating districts worked alongside ACSA, Corwin, and NIET to develop common language around effective instruction, expand teacher and leadership capacity, and build systems that could endure beyond the life of the grant.

KEY FINDINGS FROM THE INITIATIVE INCLUDE:

- **A shared instructional framework created the foundation for everything else.** Grounded in Dr. John Hattie's Visible Learning research, a common language around learning intentions, success criteria, feedback, and student ownership changed how teachers planned, how leaders observed, and how students talked about their own learning.
- **Distributed leadership proved to be the most durable form of sustainability.** As teacher leaders took on larger roles in facilitating professional learning and peer observation, improvement became less dependent on any single administrator.
- **Structures outlasted the grant when they were embedded in daily practice.** Districts that saw the most sustained progress were those that built improvement into organizational routines—district-wide visions for learning, professional learning flow charts, instructional leadership teams, and induction systems—rather than relying on individual initiatives.
- **Educator growth and retention are instructional issues, not just HR ones.** Districts that invested in recognition, coaching, collaboration, and professional growth saw meaningful gains in retention. One partner district reduced open vacancies from more than a dozen per year to three.
- **Meaningful improvement is possible regardless of geography or district size.** Districts serving fewer than 500 students, accessible only by air, with two-teacher schools and chronic turnover, built lasting instructional systems. Their experiences offer transferable lessons for any school system seeking to improve under constrained conditions.

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In many school systems, instructional improvement is the responsibility of a dedicated team. In parts of Alaska, it may be the responsibility of one person.

In one district, a leader oversees 12 grants while also serving as a testing coordinator and instructional coach. In another district, two principals are responsible for five schools. Some schools operate with just one or two teachers serving students across multiple grade levels. In others, losing a handful of teachers can mean rebuilding a significant portion of the instructional staff.

These examples reflect the reality of leading schools across a state where more than 80 percent of communities are inaccessible by road and depend on air or marine transportation for everything from food and medical supplies to professional learning opportunities.

While Alaska's districts vary widely in size, geography, and culture, they share a common challenge: how to create lasting school improvement when leadership capacity is limited, staffing is fragile, and access to professional learning opportunities can be difficult.

Yet Alaska's educators are not defined by those challenges. Across the state, districts are deeply committed to helping students succeed. They are building strong schools, supporting diverse communities, and continuously looking for ways to improve teaching and learning. The question is how to build the systems and support that sustain improvement over time.

That question became the foundation for Raising the Bar, a multi-year initiative led by the Alaska Council of School Administrators (ACSA) in partnership with Corwin and the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET).

Rather than introducing a new program for districts to implement, Raising the Bar focused on strengthening the systems that make continuous improvement possible. Participating districts engaged in professional learning grounded in John Hattie's Visible Learning research, developed stronger instructional leadership practices, expanded opportunities for educator growth, and explored performance-based compensation strategies.

CORWIN

NIET | NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR EXCELLENCE IN TEACHING

SEVEN RURAL/ REMOTE DISTRICTS PARTICIPATED IN THE INITIATIVE:

1. Alaska Gateway School District
- 415 students
- 7 schools and 1 district-wide correspondence school. All schools are K-12 except Tanacross, which is K-8.

2. Bering Strait School District
- 1,800 students
- 15 K-12 village schools
- Almost 100% Alaskan Native Inupiat, Yup'ik or Siberian Yup'ik.
- Area served covers approximately 80,000 square miles. All schools are accessible only by small bush aircraft.

3. Kodiak Island Borough School District
- 2,000 students
- Main island school: 3 elementary, 1 middle, 1 high, 1 homeschool/distance ed program
- 5 K-12 village schools, only 1 of which is accessible by road.

4. Kuspuk School District
- 320 students
- 9 schools covering more than 12,000 square miles

5. Nenana City School District
- 2,100 students
  CyberLynx K-12 Program, Nenana City School
- The Nenana Student Living Center (boarding facility) houses 120 high school students

6. Nome Public Schools
- 700 students
- 1 elementary, 1 middle/high, 1 charter magnet (5-8), 1 correspondence (K-12)
- No road access; transportation limited to air and water.

7. Petersburg School District
- 465 students
  1 elementary, 1 middle, 1 high school
- No road access; transportation limited to air and water.

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

"Building a community of educators across Alaska focused on increasing instructional impact has been one of the initiative's greatest successes, and I'm really proud of that."
—Sam Jordan, Executive Director, ACSA

"We will continue to weave Visible Learning into the fabric of our district."
—Suzanne Bell Pascuzzi, Director of Grants, Alaska Gateway School District

"When I do walkthroughs, I ask students why they're learning what they're learning. Some are able to connect it to a skill or a larger body of knowledge and explain why it matters."
—Jamie Burgess, Superintendent, Nome Public Schools

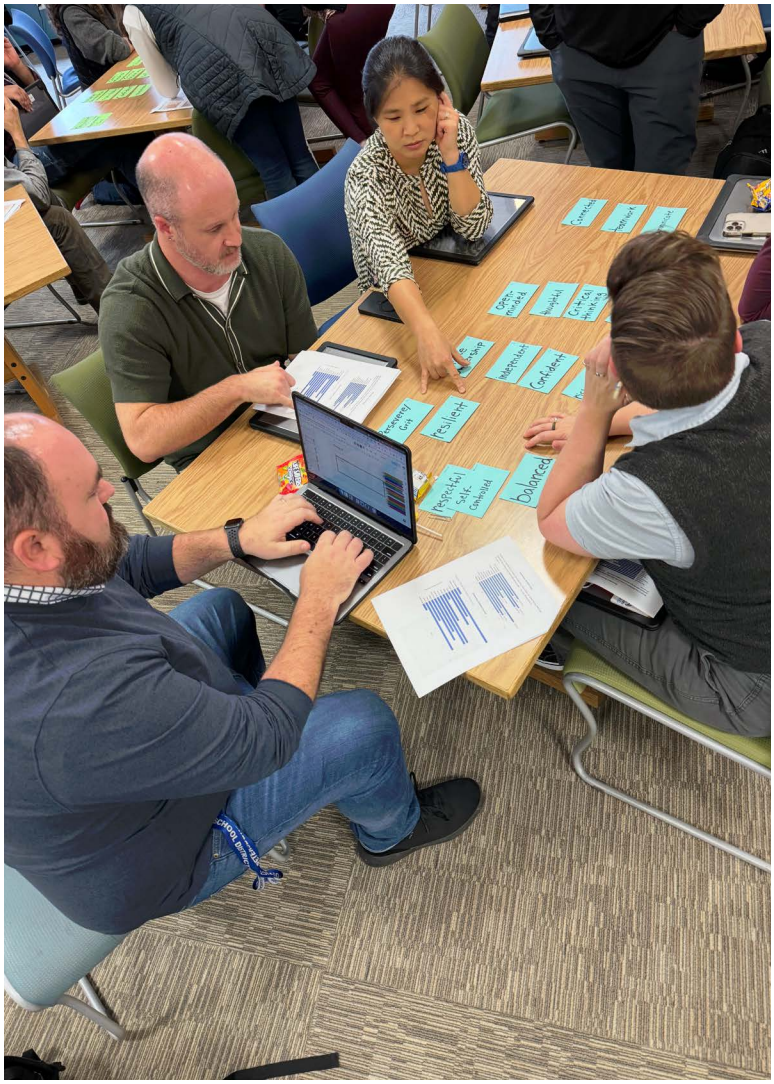
"We all have a common understanding of success criteria and the rest of the Visible Learning framework. When we're consistent with what we mean, that leads to changes in practice, achievement, and growth."
—Katrina Stewart, Director of Secondary Instruction, Kodiak Island Borough School District

"Previously, our teachers never watched others to learn from their practice, but now we give peer feedback and everyone is comfortable with it."
—Jaime Cabral, Principal, Petersburg School District

"The grant's impact has been significant in developing teacher leaders."
—Stephen Calkin, Superintendent, Nenana City School District

"We talk about impact more than activities. We made learning targets explicit, which was never really a thing before."
—Alex Roberts, Director of Curriculum and Instruction, Bering Strait School District

"One of our lead teachers moved into a principal position this year. She'd done a lot of PD with Visible Learning and NIET, and when she became a principal she had the language and was very effective."
—Emily Vanderpool, Director of Curriculum and Instruction, Kuspuk School District



Each district (see sidebar on page 4) entered the work from a different starting point. Some were looking to create greater consistency across classrooms. Others wanted to strengthen leadership capacity, improve professional learning structures, or create a common language around effective instruction. What united them was a shared belief that meaningful change requires more than a workshop, a new initiative, or a short-term infusion of funding.

During the project's three years, educators across the seven districts worked to strengthen teaching and learning, develop leaders at every level of the system, and create cultures of continuous improvement. Professional conversations became more focused on evidence, impact, and student learning. Leaders gained new tools for coaching and feedback, and districts began building structures that could endure beyond the life of the grant itself.

This white paper explores how seven Alaska districts, supported by ACSA, Corwin, and NIET, worked to strengthen instructional practice, leadership, and educator growth. Their experiences offer lessons not only for rural Alaska, but for any school system seeking to build sustainable capacity for improvement.



WHY CAPACITY MATTERS

The participating districts in Raising the Bar differed in size, geography, and community context. Some served students in a single community. Others supported schools spread across vast regions of the state. Some had relatively stable staffing, while others faced persistent turnover.

Despite those differences, district leaders described a common challenge: finding the capacity to focus on improving teaching and learning while managing the day-to-day realities of running schools. Leaders emphasized that the barrier was not a lack of commitment to students or improvement. It was the limited time, staffing, and organizational infrastructure available to sustain that improvement over time.

“We wear a lot of hats,” says Suzanne Bell Pascuzzi, Director of Grants at Alaska Gateway School District. “I’m testing coordinator, instructional coach, and in charge of 12 grants, and I’m not the only one in the state like that.”

Her experience reflects a broader reality across rural Alaska, where responsibilities that larger districts distribute across departments often fall to a handful of individuals. Improvement efforts frequently depend on a small number of educators carrying multiple roles simultaneously.

Staffing turnover adds another layer to that challenge.

“We’re in remote rural Alaska, the most economically impoverished area in the nation,” says Emily Vanderpool, Curriculum and Instruction Director of Kuspuk School District. “The cost of living is extremely high. Teacher turnover is our biggest challenge; even well-intentioned people get burnt out.”

While turnover manifests differently across districts, leaders consistently described its impact on continuity. When teachers, principals, or district leaders leave, institutional knowledge and momentum often leave with them. The challenge is not simply replacing personnel—it is building systems that can withstand those transitions.

Geography further complicates those efforts. In Alaska, geographic isolation often becomes instructional isolation.

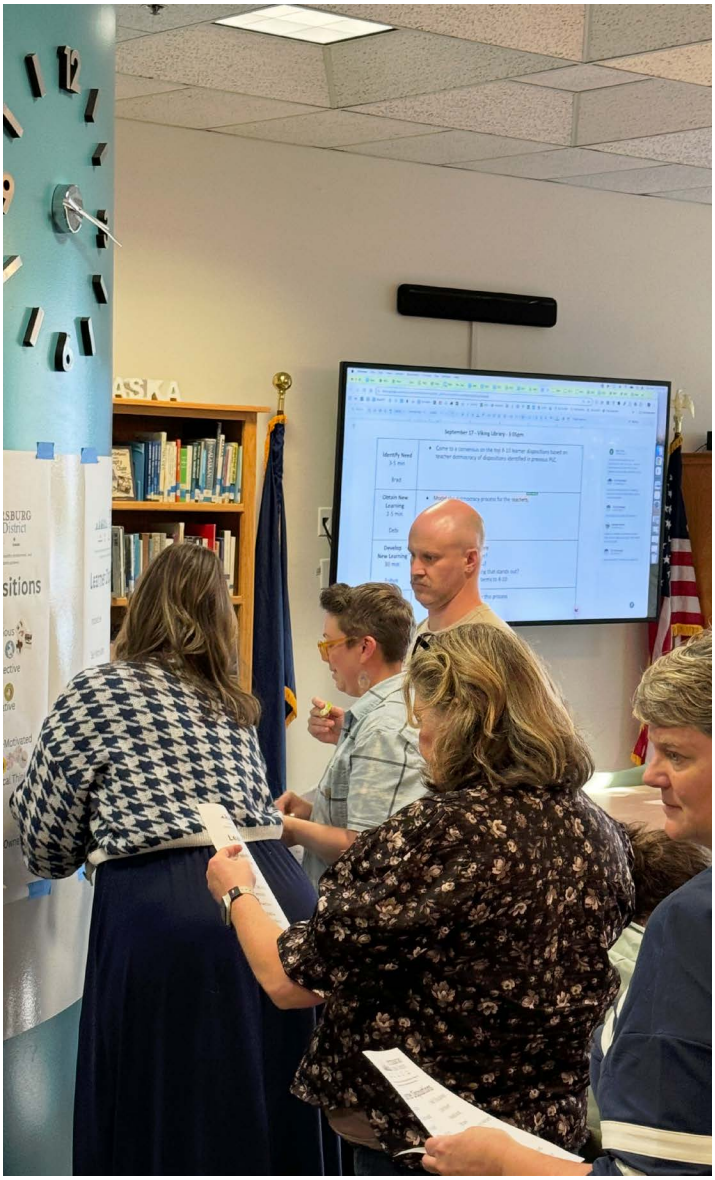
Many participating districts serve communities accessible only by air or water. Educators may be the only teacher in their grade level or content area, limiting opportunities for collaboration, coaching, and professional learning. What might be a short drive to a conference or training event elsewhere can require multiple flights, overnight travel, and significant expense.

“We can’t get in a car and drive,” says Jamie Burgess, Superintendent of Nome Public Schools. “It takes multiple days and red-eye flights.”

These realities create more than logistical challenges. They limit opportunities for educators to learn from one another, access coaching, and build the professional networks that support continuous growth. In districts already stretched thin by turnover and distance, those gaps widen. Professional learning became one of the few scalable ways districts could expand leadership expertise, connect isolated educators, and create a common instructional language across schools.

Taken together, these challenges help explain why traditional school improvement efforts often struggle in rural Alaska. Limited capacity, staffing instability, geographic isolation, and restricted access to professional learning can make sustained improvement difficult to achieve.

Yet they also clarified what districts needed most: stronger systems to support educators, develop leaders, and create consistency across schools. Rather than introducing another standalone initiative, Raising the Bar focused on helping districts build the leadership structures, instructional systems, and professional learning practices necessary to sustain improvement over time.





A DIFFERENT KIND OF PARTNERSHIP

Rural Alaska districts have long grappled with staffing shortages, leadership turnover, geographic isolation, and limited access to professional learning opportunities. Rather than asking districts to navigate those challenges independently, Raising the Bar brought together three organizations with complementary strengths to help districts build the capacity to improve teaching and learning.

The Alaska Council of School Administrators (ACSA) coordinated the work across the seven participating districts. Corwin contributed research-based instructional practices grounded in John Hattie's Visible Learning framework. The National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET) provided leadership structures, coaching systems, and processes that helped districts translate ideas into daily practice.

Together, the partners addressed a challenge that many small districts face: improvement efforts often depend on a handful of leaders who are already stretched across multiple responsibilities. By aligning research, implementation support, and facilitation, the partnership provided districts with a level of coherence and sustained support that would have been difficult to create independently.

For ACSA Executive Director Sam Jordan, the partnership addressed an issue he had observed throughout his career.

> "In the midst of challenging circumstances, how do we take what we have and make it better?" he asks. "Can we create educational systems in all communities where people feel supported and are growing professionally?"
>
> —Sam Jordan, Executive Director, ACSA.

District leaders consistently described the partnership as more than a collection of trainings or consulting services. Corwin, NIET, and ACSA addressed different but complementary needs, creating a unified support system rather than a collection of disconnected initiatives or new curriculum purchases.

"We never did our own thing," says Karen Grose, Senior Specialist at NIET. "We continually made connections between the work. It wasn't, 'You do Corwin today and NIET tomorrow.' We showed up together, debriefed together, and reinforced each other's work."

That alignment was intentional. Corwin introduced concepts such as learning intentions, success criteria, feedback, teacher clarity, and student ownership of learning. NIET helped districts build leadership teams, strengthen professional learning communities, establish coaching practices, and create structures for continuous improvement. ACSA served as the connective tissue across the initiative, helping ensure that districts received coordinated support aligned to their goals.

"I appreciated the intentional pairing of what each partner brings," says Katrina Stewart, Director of Secondary Instruction at Kodiak Island Borough School District. "NIET's structure plus Corwin's professional development and research led to a beautiful dovetailing of support. And ACSA's facilitation has been perfect too."

The partnership also differed from traditional professional development in its responsiveness. Rather than delivering a predetermined program, the organizations adapted their support to local contexts and evolving district needs. Leaders described the experience as collaborative, relationship-driven, and focused on reducing the burden on already stretched administrative teams.

The work also connected districts that often operate in relative isolation from one another. Through shared learning experiences, district leaders and educators were able to exchange ideas, discuss challenges openly, and learn from one another's successes.

"The benefit of that intentional community is there's cross-pollination," says Jordan. "People are willing to talk about what's working and what's not working."

For districts facing persistent turnover, geographic isolation, and limited capacity, those relationships became more than a benefit of the grant. They became part of the infrastructure supporting long-term improvement.



New teacher meetings are not just informative, but fun when you work at Alaska Gateway District.

CREATING A COMMON LANGUAGE FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING

Before Raising the Bar, educators were working hard to support students and improve instruction. What many lacked was a shared framework for discussing what effective teaching and learning looked like across classrooms, schools, and districts.

Visible Learning helped change that.

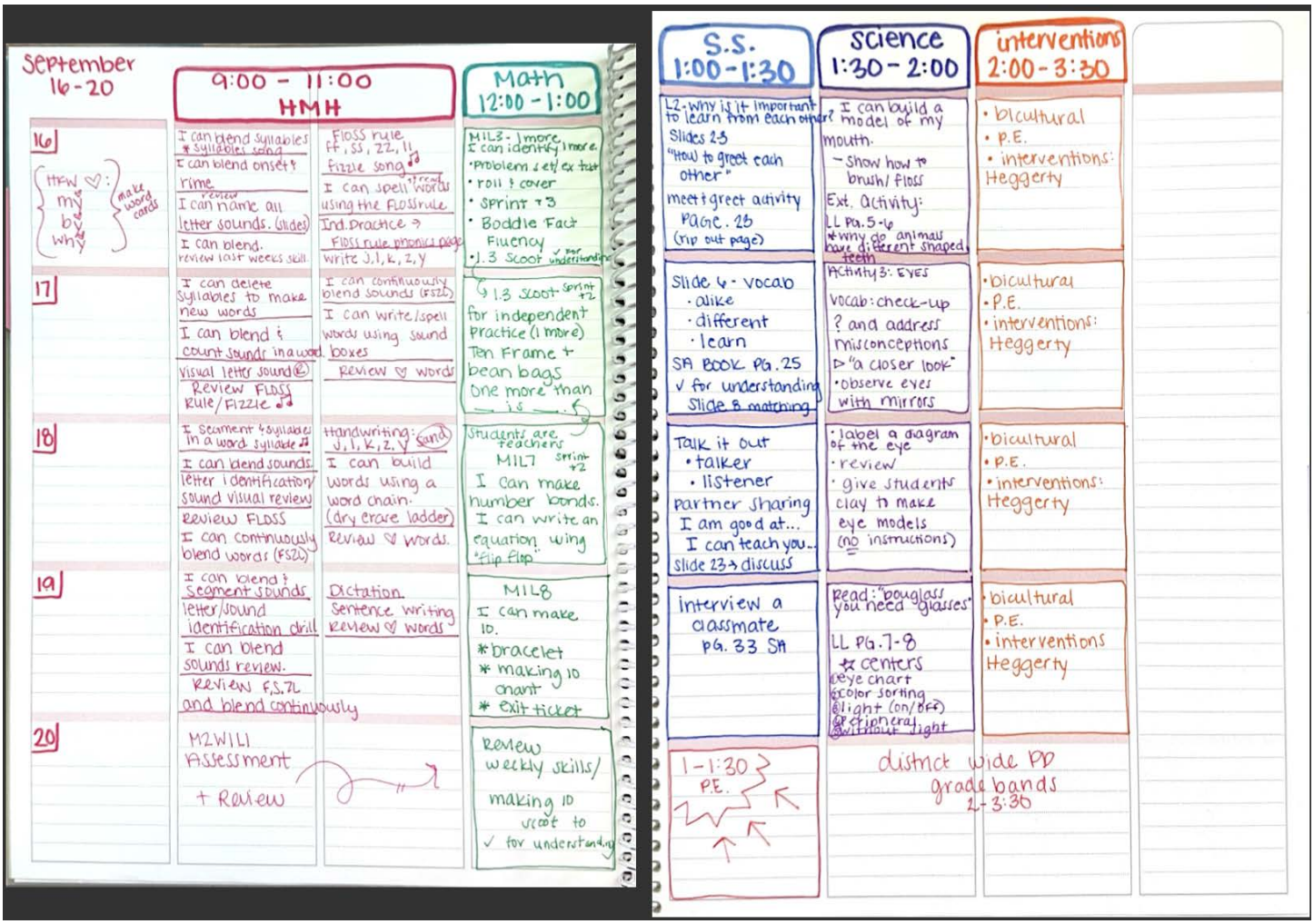
Grounded in the research of Dr. John Hattie, Visible Learning introduced concepts such as learning intentions, success criteria, feedback, teacher clarity, and student ownership of learning. More importantly, it provided educators with a common language for discussing instructional practice and student learning.

“When we started, it was the ‘wild wild west,’” says Angela Hietala, Director of Elementary Instruction at Kodiak Island Borough School District. “Now we can see consistency across classrooms in terms of instruction.”

Across participating districts, leaders described Visible Learning as more than a collection of instructional strategies. It became a framework that aligned classroom practice, leadership feedback, professional learning, and student expectations. By establishing common language and shared expectations, districts created greater coherence across schools and more productive conversations about teaching and learning.

The shift was evident in how educators approached instruction. Rather than focusing primarily on activities or lesson completion, teachers increasingly focused on evidence of student learning and the impact of their instructional decisions.

In the Bering Strait School District, educators began making learning targets more explicit and grounding professional conversations in evidence of student growth. The district even developed a lesson-planning template informed by Visible Learning research, creating a more consistent approach to planning and reflection across classrooms.



Bering Strait's lesson plan template helped teachers plan lesson openings and close with assessments every day.

For Nome Public Schools Superintendent Jamie Burgess, one of the most significant changes was students' ability to articulate their own learning. "Today, when I ask students what they are learning, they can tell me," she says. "When I ask how they know they've learned it, they can explain it."

The impact extended beyond classrooms. Leaders reported that the shared language helped focus professional learning, strengthen collaboration, and create clearer expectations for instructional practice across their districts.

In Petersburg School District, educators saw that shift reflected in their professional learning.

> "Now our professional learning is targeted and driven by what staff and students need. We have 30-year veterans buying in."
>
> —Jaime Cabral, Principal, Petersburg School District

Kuspuk School District experienced a similar transformation. Through the grant, district leaders established a dedicated instructional leadership team focused exclusively on teaching and learning.

"We've never had a meeting focused on student learning," says Kuspuk District's (Director of Curriculum & Instruction) Emily Vanderpool. "People used to show up with lists of complaints. Now they come with data and focus on student learning for two hours."



Kuspuk educators, Dr. John Hattie, + Corwin presenters = effective PD

FROM INITIATIVE TO OWNERSHIP

For change to take root, districts needed structures that helped educators apply what they were learning, reflect on their practice, and support one another's growth. Raising the Bar helped build those structures while ensuring that instructional improvement was no longer owned by a single administrator or district office leader.

Across participating districts, leadership increasingly became a shared responsibility. Teacher leaders facilitated professional learning, principals became more active instructional coaches, and leadership teams created new opportunities for collaboration and feedback. As expertise spread across schools and roles, districts became less dependent on individual champions and better positioned to sustain improvement over time.

"We had some pretty good success with getting teacher leaders on board," says Nome Public Schools' Burgess. "I'm really proud of how the teacher leaders have had an opportunity to step up and be the model for others. We've given opportunities for a variety of individuals to contribute."

The impact was visible not only in new leadership opportunities, but in how educators approached their work. In Nenana City School District, one teacher leader's growth was recognized nationally with a Milken Educator Award, reflecting the district's broader commitment to developing leadership capacity throughout the system.

District leaders also reported significant growth among school administrators. "One of our principals struggled as a leader, in part because he didn't know how to articulate common goals and vision with staff," says Alex Roberts, Director of Curriculum and Instruction for Bering Strait School District. "Throughout the grant, teachers noticed he got better at giving feedback and sharing resources and ideas. He now quotes John Hattie. By year three, his school's data showed exceptional progress. We're seeing instructional things we never saw before."

Other districts saw leadership development emerge through collaborative practices such as learning walks, peer observation, and instructional feedback. In Petersburg School District, teachers regularly visit one another's classrooms and provide feedback as part of an ongoing culture of professional learning. In Kuspuk School District, leaders strengthened evaluator training and established clearer expectations around observation and feedback, creating greater consistency across schools.

The shift extended beyond individual leaders.

"We've seen a large shift in leadership from classroom management to owning the idea that you must lead instructional change," says Kim Saunders, Assistant Superintendent of Kodiak Island Borough School District. "It's gone from, 'We do what we have to do' to being more proactive and leaning into supporting teachers in the growth of their instructional practices."

Across participating districts, leadership development emerged as one of the most significant outcomes of the work. Teacher leaders, principals, instructional coaches, and district administrators became increasingly responsible for supporting professional learning, facilitating collaboration, and guiding instructional improvement.

In districts where turnover is a constant reality, distributed leadership became a form of sustainability. When leadership exists at multiple levels of the system, knowledge and expertise are more likely to survive staffing changes and continue driving improvement over time.

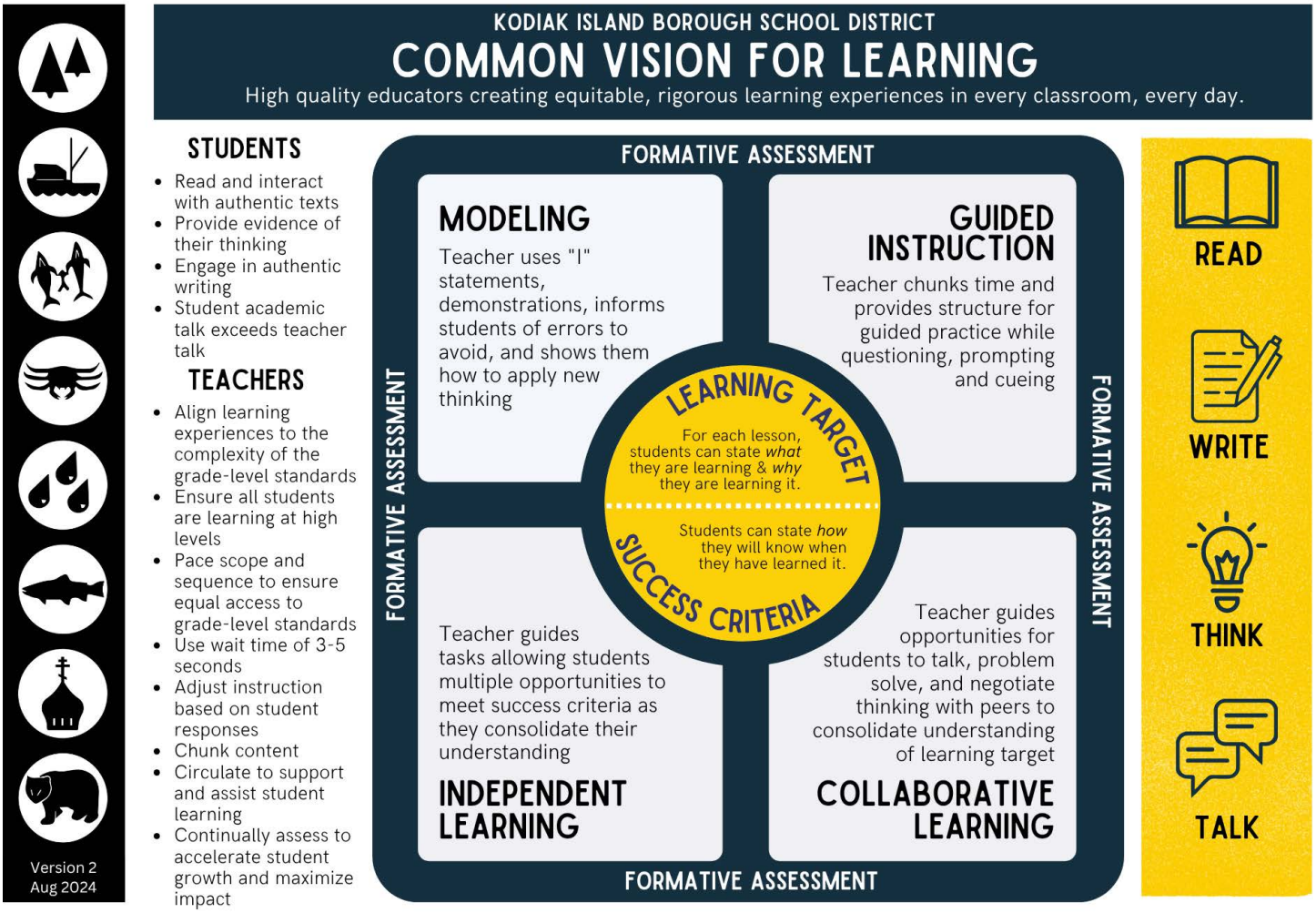
BUILDING SYSTEMS THAT LAST

From the beginning, Raising the Bar focused on building structures that would outlast the grant itself. The goal was not simply to improve individual educators, but to create systems—shared expectations, leadership structures, professional learning processes, and instructional frameworks—that could continue functioning regardless of who occupied specific roles.

In districts where staffing turnover is a persistent reality, sustainability mattered as much as any immediate improvement.

Although participating districts took different approaches, they shared a common objective: embedding improvement into organizational routines rather than relying on individual initiative. Some developed districtwide visions for learning. Others formalized leadership teams, professional learning systems, coaching structures, or common instructional practices. In every case, the work focused on creating consistency that could endure through leadership transitions and staffing changes.

In Kodiak Island Borough School District, that effort took shape through the development of a Common Vision for Learning that established shared expectations for instruction across the district.

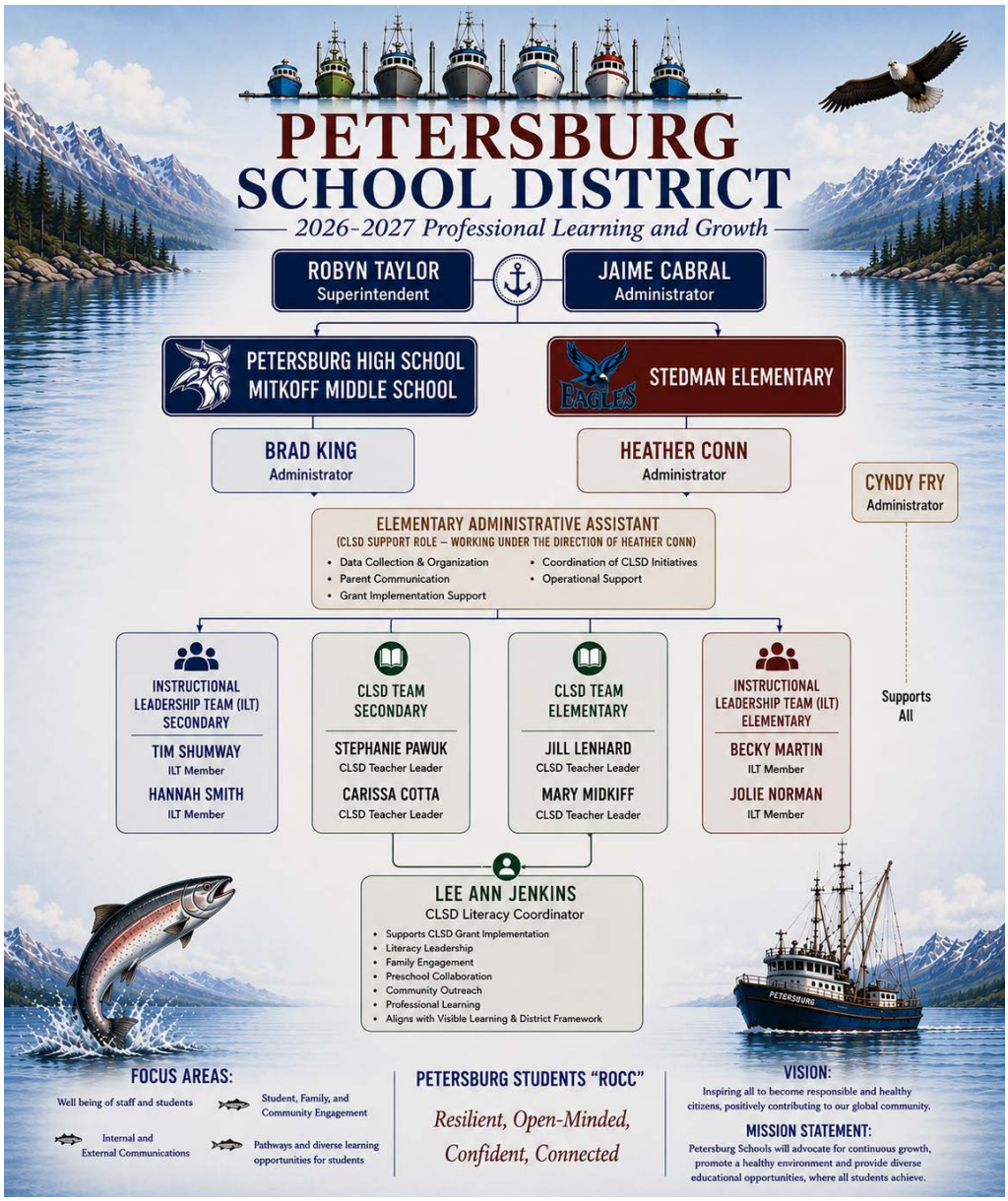


By naming what students and teachers should be doing in every classroom and anchoring both to a shared learning target and success criteria, Kodiak Island's Common Vision for Learning gives staff a common language for instruction.

"I took a group of teachers I didn't know well to the Alaska Reading Symposium," says Kodiak District's Hietala. "After the conference, I asked them, What are we doing in Kodiak that is based on what we just learned? and in unison they all said, 'Our Common Vision for Learning!'"

For district leaders, moments like that signaled that the work had moved beyond implementation and into culture. Shared expectations were no longer confined to leadership meetings or professional development sessions; they were becoming part of how educators talked about teaching and learning every day.

Other districts built sustainability through different structures. Petersburg School District developed a professional learning flow chart that connected coaching, observations, feedback, and professional learning into a coherent system. Alaska Gateway School District strengthened leadership teams and professional learning communities. Bering Strait School District focused on common instructional practices and lesson-planning structures grounded in Visible Learning research.



Petersburg School District's professional learning flow chart helps educators understand the interconnectedness of the work.

"Our teachers speak using the language of the research," says Bering Strait District's Roberts. "They're always saying things like, 'Hattie says we shouldn't just put our kids on computers.' It's a big shift hearing them say those things."

By embedding improvement into routines rather than relying on individual initiatives, participating districts created systems capable of sustaining progress through leadership transitions, staffing changes, and shifting priorities.

Programs come and go. Grants begin and end. Strong systems endure.



Alaska educators and administrators at the NIET National Conference 2024 in New Orleans.

INVESTING IN EDUCATOR GROWTH AND RETENTION

From the beginning, Raising the Bar sought to strengthen the systems districts use to recruit, support, develop, recognize, and retain educators. District leaders understood that retention is closely tied to professional culture.

Educators are more likely to remain in schools where they feel supported, valued, connected to colleagues, and able to grow professionally. Throughout the grant, participating districts invested in professional learning, leadership opportunities, collaboration, coaching, and recognition as strategies for strengthening both educator effectiveness and retention.

At Alaska Gateway School District, those efforts included a structured induction program designed to support new teachers as they entered the profession and learned Visible Learning practices. “One Saturday a month I meet with new teachers, and we go over a chapter on Visible Learning to help them implement,” says Pascuzzi. “They have permission to try things and fail, get feedback, add scaffolding, and try again.”

Several districts also explored ways to recognize and reward educator growth and contribution. Performance-based compensation provided one avenue for doing so, while districts also invested in leadership opportunities, collaboration, professional development, and other incentives that supported educators’ growth and engagement. Together, these approaches allowed districts to think more broadly about how recognition, professional opportunity, and compensation could contribute to recruitment and retention.

For many districts, the most meaningful return on investment came from creating environments where educators felt supported and connected to a larger purpose.

Kodiak Island Borough School District saw that shift reflected in its staffing data. “People want to be part of something that’s working for kids,” says Saunders. “The energy in school has started to shift.”

In a state where recruiting and retaining educators remains an ongoing challenge, that shift may prove just as important as any instructional framework or improvement strategy. Educator growth was not a separate outcome of Raising the Bar. It was one of the primary ways districts built the capacity to sustain improvement over time.



Petersburg District teachers identifying keywords to figure out learner dispositions.

WHAT CHANGED IN CLASSROOMS AND FOR STUDENTS

The ultimate goal of Raising the Bar was to improve teaching and learning for students.

While districts measured success in different ways, leaders consistently described changes in both instructional practice and student experience. Educators reported greater consistency in teaching, students demonstrated a clearer understanding of what they were learning, and several districts observed encouraging improvements in achievement and engagement.

“The data shows that we’re seeing improvements to Tier 1 instruction,” says Kodiak Island District’s Stewart. “Fewer kids are in need of intervention. It’s starting to look like Tier 1 is robust enough to meet the needs of most students.”

District leaders also reported that students were increasingly able to articulate what they were learning and why it mattered.

“When I do walkthroughs, I ask students why they’re learning what they’re learning,” says Nome District’s Burgess. “Some are able to connect it to a skill or a larger body of knowledge and explain why it matters.”

Several districts also reported evidence of academic growth alongside changes in instructional practice.

In Bering Strait, leaders point to both instructional and academic gains over the course of the grant. “Student performance over the past three years has skyrocketed,” says Roberts. “While it’s not completely related to the grant, we wrote a novel-based curriculum and included Hattie’s research.”

District reading achievement increased from approximately the 12th percentile to the 35th percentile, and math achievement also improved significantly. Roberts attributes part of that growth to a stronger instructional focus and increased access to resources that supported literacy and learning.

The changes were not always captured in assessment data alone. In some districts, leaders saw evidence of impact in the language students used and the way they talked about themselves as learners.

Petersburg School District Superintendent Robyn Taylor recalls reading letters to Santa written by second-grade students. “There were kids who wrote about how they were working hard at ‘ROCC-ing’* in school,” she says. “Second graders! We are having an impact.”

**Petersburg District’s acronym for ROCC is Resilient, Open-Minded, Confident, and Connected*



AFTER THE GRANT ENDS

Grant funding eventually comes to an end. Leaders change roles and teachers retire, relocate, or pursue new opportunities. New initiatives emerge and priorities shift.

The real test of any improvement effort is what remains after the grant ends.

For these seven participating districts, the strongest answers are not tied to a specific program, training, or event. Instead, they are visible in the structures and practices that have become part of daily work: professional learning communities continue to meet, learning walks remain embedded in school culture, teacher leaders continue supporting colleagues, and instructional leadership teams continue guiding improvement efforts.

At Alaska Gateway School District, the new teacher induction process established during the grant has become a permanent part of onboarding. “The new teacher induction and Saturdays have become the norm and will be a two-year cohort going forward,” says Pascuzzi.

District leaders also described lasting shifts in mindset. “I saw pretty significant growth in our staff when we started talking about student data and using it as evidence of teacher effectiveness,” says Stephen Calkin, Superintendent of Nenana City School District (Grants Director and Principal during the initiative). “Instead of externalizing and saying why kids aren’t learning, we now internalize that we have a chance to make a difference.”

Across participating districts, educators increasingly viewed themselves not simply as managers of schools or classrooms, but as leaders of learning. “I don’t think any of our campus leaders think of themselves as managers anymore,” says Cyndy Mika, Superintendent of Kodiak Island Borough School District. “This work has taken our campus leadership from managers to instructional leaders.”

The experiences of these seven districts offer lessons that extend beyond Alaska. Sustainable improvement did not begin with a new program or initiative. It began with creating a shared vision for teaching and learning, developing leadership capacity at multiple levels of the system, and building structures capable of enduring through staffing changes and shifting priorities.

The challenges facing Alaska’s schools have not disappeared. Districts continue to navigate turnover, geographic isolation, leadership transitions, and limited resources. What has changed is how many educators are equipped to lead improvement efforts and the systems available to support them.

“You can do this kind of work even in a small place like Nome, Alaska, in a 700-student four-school district without a lot of resources,” says Nome District’s Burgess. “Take advantage of the resources you do have. Take advantage of the things each teacher is good at and let them support others.”

The most important outcome of Raising the Bar may not be a program, a framework, or a set of strategies. It is the capacity districts built to continue improving long after the grant is gone.

LESSONS FOR THE FIELD

The experiences of these seven districts point to a set of lessons that extend beyond rural Alaska. While every school system operates in a unique context, the principles that emerged through Raising the Bar offer guidance for any district seeking to build sustainable capacity for improvement.

LESSON 1: START WITH SHARED LANGUAGE BEFORE LAUNCHING NEW INITIATIVES.

Improvement accelerates when educators share a common understanding of effective teaching and learning. Learning intentions, success criteria, feedback, and evidence of impact gave participating districts a foundation for more productive conversations about instruction and student growth.

LESSON 2: BUILD SYSTEMS, NOT DEPENDENCIES.

Programs can create momentum, but systems sustain it. Districts that made the most lasting progress embedded improvement into organizational routines through leadership teams, professional learning communities, coaching structures, observation processes, and shared instructional frameworks.

LESSON 3: DEVELOP LEADERSHIP AT EVERY LEVEL.

Distributed leadership proved to be one of the strongest safeguards against turnover. Teacher leaders, principals, instructional coaches, and district administrators all played important roles in supporting improvement.

LESSON 4: BRING SUPPORT TO EDUCATORS RATHER THAN EXPECTING EDUCATORS TO FIND IT.

For many rural districts, access to professional learning is limited by geography, staffing, and resources. Raising the Bar succeeded in part because partners adapted support to district needs and contexts rather than expecting districts to adapt to a predetermined model. Meeting educators where they are remains one of the most effective ways to build trust and accelerate implementation.

LESSON 5: SUSTAINED PARTNERSHIPS OUTPERFORM ONE-TIME PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT.

The initiative spanned three years and created ongoing opportunities for coaching, collaboration, reflection, and feedback. That continuity allowed relationships to deepen, support to evolve, and improvement efforts to build on one another over time.

LESSON 6: RETENTION IS A CULTURE STRATEGY AS MUCH AS A STAFFING STRATEGY.

Participating districts found that educators were more likely to stay when they felt supported, recognized, connected to colleagues, and able to grow professionally. Leaders identified financial incentives, professional culture, leadership opportunities, and meaningful collaboration as important, interconnected factors in engagement and retention.

LESSON 7: CAPACITY IS THE ULTIMATE MEASURE OF SUCCESS.

The most significant outcome of Raising the Bar was not a program, framework, or initiative. It was the increased capacity of educators and districts to continue improving long after the grant ends. Sustainable improvement occurs when systems and people grow together.



Kuspuk educators were thrilled to discuss Visible Learning with Dr. Hattie himself.

WHY BRING NATIONAL EXPERTS TO RURAL ALASKA?

It's a fair question. Rural districts already run on thin staff and tight budgets. For the partners behind Raising the Bar, though, that reality was exactly why outside support mattered.

"Every system needs both structure and content," says ACSA Executive Director Sam Jordan. Corwin brought research grounded in Hattie's Visible Learning work. NIET brought leadership teams, coaching systems, and evaluation processes designed to develop people rather than simply check a box. "It's been a really nice marriage of vision between those two entities," says Jordan. That structure mattered most, he adds, because of how thin rural leadership already runs.

The partners were also mindful that outside help could become one more burden. "It was extremely important that district leadership understood we were coming in to work in concert with them," says Mike Petersen, Corwin's senior professional learning advisor. "We were not coming in to add another layer, one more thing to their plate."

That commitment extended to showing up in person. Karen Grose, senior specialist at NIET, recalls visiting a school in Dot Lake, part of Alaska Gateway School District, run entirely by one principal-teacher serving roughly a dozen K-12 students. "One person making this difference by herself," she says. "That was one of those moments where I was like, 'Wow.'" For Grose, it captured something essential about Alaska educators and about why coming to them, rather than asking them to come to you, mattered.

"We were so intentional to learn about them, get to know them," says Corwin consultant Dave Nagel. "The success came from really trying to build relationships and meeting them where they were."

ABOUT THE ALASKA COUNCIL OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

The Alaska Council of School Administrators (ACSA) is the premier organization providing leadership, unity, and advocacy for Alaska public education. ACSA provides the collective professional voice in setting the educational agenda for Alaska, composed of professional educational leaders of Alaska's schools and school systems. alaskaacsa.org

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The National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET) is a national nonprofit based in Arizona that serves states and districts nationwide. For 25 years, NIET has partnered with schools, districts, states, and universities to build educator excellence and give all students the opportunity for success. NIET's initiatives, including the TAP System, teacher and leader development, school improvement, rubric and observation systems, and educator preparation, have impacted more than 350,000 educators and 3.5 million students across the U.S. niet.org

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