



**Report to the North Slope Borough School District  
December 3, 2021**

**Academic Achievement**

We had a particularly successful Quarter One. Please join us in congratulating the students who earned academic distinction:

Rochelle Kaleak	Superintendent Honor
Trishelle Okpik	Superintendent Honor
Larissa Kaleak	High Honors
Nina Kippi	High Honors
Destiny Pacheco	High Honors
Kailea Teigland	High Honors
Charysse Gandia	Honor Roll
Eryn Kignak	Honor Roll
ChristineMarie Nayanik	Honor Roll
Lorena Ningeok	Honor Roll
Kevin Reilly	Honor Roll
Zane Wilson	Honor Roll

Overall, Kiita students earned 62 credits in Quarter One. 57.25 credits were earned during scheduled classes, while 4.75 were earned through credit recovery. Our pass rate was 87.5%.

**Congratulations** to Larissa Kaleak, our 2021-22 UAF Scholar!

Quarter Two results will not be known for two more weeks, but given the number of students who have indicated that they will miss a week or more of instruction at the end of the quarter, we are concerned that Q2 results will not be as strong as in Q1. It may be that a greater than usual number of students will need to pursue credit recovery in January.

On November 9-10 scheduled classes were replaced by dual credit trainings presented by Ilisagvik College's Workforce Development Training Facilitator Alex Dattilo. Thanks to Hopson Middle School Assistant Principal Tracy Mulvenon, who kindly agreed to pinch-hit as Acting Principal for Kiita.

Six students received their CPR/First Aid certification, eight earned Food Worker certification, and five received Custodia Safety certificates. At this writing, six are currently working on their Professionalism in the Office training. while the other may be Customer Service Training. Kudos to School Counselor Jen Brower for facilitating.

The return to full in-person instruction has allowed us to resume our traditional Kiita schedule, with Physical Education classes at Ilisagvik, Small Motor Repair in the shop at BHS, cooking (featuring traditional foods) in our own kitchen, and group activities focused on social-emotional wellness.

### **Staffing**

Please welcome Cheryl Heitman to Utqiagvik and Kiita Learning Community. Cheryl joins us through the Retire/Rehire initiative, and will be our Special Education teacher through the end of this school year. Cheryl is Alutiiq, and lives in Kodiak. She has 30+ years experience working with Alaska Native cultures, and a strong interest in archaeology. On December 1, she and student culture-bearers Jennie Elavgak, Eryn Kignak, and Lora Oyagak, appeared on KBRW to describe how they are going to be recording community stories for future generations.

### **Enrollment**

With recent additions at the start of Quarter Two, our enrollment is currently 36. Given the size of our classrooms, we are now near the capacity of our building. The deadline for Quarter Two enrollment was November 2; our next intake will be in January. On the whole attendance has been satisfactory, but three students are in danger of being removed for consecutive absences.

### **MAP Testing**

91% of our students completed MAP testing; those who did not were off-Slope during the testing period. Kudos to Alice Sage, our Building Test Coordinator, for a great job engaging our students and taking them through the process.

### **Alternate School Visits**

Kiita's permanent staff gave up the Inuit Day holiday to travel to Anchorage on Sunday, November 7, for four visits to alternate schools there and in the Mat-Su region. We visited King Tech and SAVE on Monday, November 8, and Benny Benson and Valley Pathways on Tuesday, November 9. Funded by our School Improvement Grant, our purpose was to learn how other schools with a similar mission serve their constituencies and address common challenges.

We can never be King Tech, which is a magnet school rather than an alternate school as the term is generally understood. Their facility is simply extraordinary, and the resources that are available to them in Anchorage are far greater than ours on the North Slope. Special thanks to Principal Kern McGinley, who generously dedicated his morning to giving us a tour and answering our many questions.

SAVE is closest to Kiita in size and constituency. We spent a very rewarding afternoon there with Principal Lisa Mounds-Craft, who explained in detail their system of accountability. In a nutshell, it is based on a points system: students must earn a certain number of points (based on assignment completion rather than grade) each month in order to remain in good standing. If they fall below that threshold, the number of points required in the following month is greater. Alice has been exchanging cultural information with their Social Studies teacher.

Benny Benson follows a similar points-based philosophy, although they are not as closely wedded to attendance as SAVE. At Benny Benson, the indicator of acceptable performance is academic progress. Principal Frank Reuter also emphasized the importance of emotional support: he has even traded teacher FTEs for counselor positions (they have five). Benny Benson is not tied to quarters, as we are: students finish courses when they finish, and are not limited by the constraints of calendar.

Valley Pathways serves a large catchment area, and has a shorter day than we do because of the long bus routes involved. We had engaging conversations with several long-term teachers, students in their leadership class, retiring Principal Jim Wanser, and administrative intern Jeff Carollo. They follow a traditional quartered calendar, as we currently do, and employ many of the same practices regarding credit recovery. Two of their teachers will be coming to Utqiagvik on a return visit to see Kiita's program, and we will be entering into a sister-school relationship with VPS.

Kiita will be using Professional Learning Community time to consider whether to adopt program features from the schools we visited. Given the life circumstances (such as work and family responsibilities, as well as subsistence absences) of many Kiita students, we will be giving serious consideration to the idea of tying credits to completion rather than calendar.

### **Principal Professional Development**

From November 19-21 I attended the *Learning and the Brain* conference in Boston. The theme of this year's conference was "Calming Anxious Brains: Teaching and Treating Students With Anxiety, Trauma, Depression, and Academic Learning Loss." Alice Sage was Acting Principal in my absence.

The conference was well worth attending. Most of the speakers were well-prepared, strong presenters, and relevant. I learned a great deal, and came away with a strong sense of validation for what we do at Kiita. Among the takeaways:

- (a) In current circumstances the social-emotional health of students is of far greater concern than test scores. Scores are predictably down across America, but they will not rebound until students' mental health improves.
- (b) In all states and across all grades, teachers are reporting that students have lost (or not acquired) age-appropriate socialization skills. Schools across the country are dealing with evidence of trauma, including significant increases in fights and other major disciplinary issues.
- (c) Brain development has two periods of great elasticity: during early childhood and again in adolescence. Across grade levels, we need to work to assist the formation of synaptic connections supporting the development of the frontal cortex (where reason and academic learning are located); the pandemic has been stimulating the amygdala (site of the "fight, flight or freeze" response) instead.
- (d) The most important protective factor for students confronting trauma is a caring adult. It is essential that the adults at school be able to serve that role. Several speakers emphasized that teachers' mental health must be taken into account. ("Nothing stresses out a child faster than a stressed-out adult" was one comment that resonated.) We were facing a teacher shortage even before the pandemic; districts across America are now facing unfilled vacancies, a lack of substitutes, and teacher burnout at unprecedented rates. It is vital for districts to recognize that teachers are subject to the same pandemic stresses as everyone else, multiplied by the shifting demands on the profession during the pandemic.

- (e) The effects of pandemic trauma are generational, and will be with us for years to come. Even were COVID to come to an abrupt end tomorrow, we cannot pretend that we can just go back to 2018. Students and adults alike will need ongoing systemic support.

With all that in mind, just as teachers are working to support the social-emotional well-being of students, I would ask the School Board to consider what measures can be taken to support the well-being of teachers across our District.

On December 3, I attended as best I could (which is to say, intermittently) the Alaska Principals Conference, which was held virtually. Sessions included updates on state legislation and reduced expenditures in the upcoming federal budget. Of particular relevance to Utqiagvik schools was the precipitous shortfall in teacher recruitment across the state. Most commentators observed that the 2006 introduction of the odious Tier III retirement system was a major disincentive for teachers to come to the state, compounded by the fact that salaries in Alaska are no longer as attractive—or even competitive—as they once were.

### **Mitigation Efforts**

Though we have had both student and staff absences due to COVID, we have done the best we can within the limitations of our building to follow the NSBSD Mitigation Plan. Temperatures are taken by school secretary Laura Simmonds when students arrive, students have established seats in their classes—though in some rooms are in close proximity—and students are constantly being reminded about wearing masks. (I am sure their enduring memory of the Principal is going to be the phrase, “Masks, please.”) We continue to follow the “symptom-free school” protocol, and have used Binax tests on the few occasions students have indicated that they have been around someone who has tested positive. So far, Binax results have all been negative.

Although the building’s air filters were replaced earlier in the semester, none of our windows open and we have generally less-than-optimal air circulation. We continue to be without custodial services during the day. While we receive only token custodial services at night, I have been assured that the electrostatic sprayer is employed regularly.

**Summary**

We are fully staffed, with steady student attendance, nearly maximum enrollment, and strong results. We have returned to our traditional weekly schedule, inclusive of daily advisory periods, and continue to support students as they strive to make up their credit deficits. Successful as we have been, we are open to more effective ways to address our students' needs and circumstances. Going forward we will be considering what changes to our core model might be productive as we adjust to the lingering trauma and other consequences of the pandemic.

Respectfully submitted,

Geoffrey E. Buerger, Ph.D.  
Principal