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Alaskan Schools: What Matters to Students?

**Listening to the Voices of Engaged
and Disengaged Alaska Native and
Non-Native Students**

Full Report of Findings

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Introduction¹

The relationship between school climate and student academic engagement is well documented (e.g., see Center for Social and Emotional Education, 2007). Within Alaska, student experiences in good or bad school climates, measured by the School Climate and Connectedness Survey (SCCS)², seem to play a significant role in academic engagement, but they are not the sole determining factor. To maximize the effectiveness of the SCCS as a measure, we need to ensure that we are capturing accurate student perceptions and experiences to give us a precise picture of how students perceive school climate.

There are factors beyond school climate that influence student academic engagement and outcomes. But where school climate does play a role, capturing those aspects of school climate that are most relevant and meaningful for students may increase the relationship between school climate ratings, measured by the SCCS, and student academic outcomes.

The following questions need to be asked:

1. How well do the areas of school climate currently measured on the SCCS align with what is most relevant and meaningful for students in their perceptions of school climate?
2. Are there aspects of school climate that are not captured on the current SCCS that are important for students?
3. What other factors besides school climate play a role in determining student academic engagement? Do these other factors have a place in a school climate survey, or should they be monitored or evaluated through different methods?

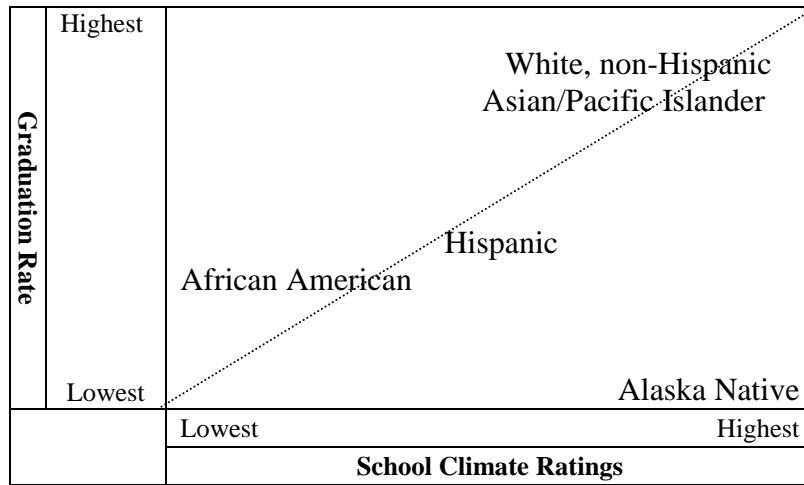
School Climate and Academic Outcomes Among Alaska Native Students

Among Alaska Native students, the relationship between school climate (measured by the SCCS) and academic engagement follows a different pattern from that of Alaskan students of other ethnic backgrounds (see Figure 1). Alaska Native students have consistently given among the highest average ratings for their school climate of any ethnic group—whether they attend a primarily Native school in a rural area or a mixed school in an urban area—yet have the lowest graduation rates. Among students from other ethnic groups, the relationships are in the expected direction, with higher school climate ratings associated with higher graduation rates.

¹ A summary report of key findings is available at www.aasb.org

² The School Climate and Connectedness Survey (SCCS) was developed in 2005 by the American Institutes for Research (AIR) for the Association of Alaska School Boards (AASB). The SCCS has been administered annually to students in grades 5 and higher as well as school staff across multiple school districts in Alaska.

Figure 1. School Climate Ratings and Relative Graduation Rates by Ethnicity³



The relationship between school climate and achievement, measured by state tests, is similarly unexpected for Alaska Native students. In an analysis of SCCS and achievement test scores, researchers at American Institutes for Research (AIR) found that the ethnic composition of a school powerfully moderates the relationship between climate and achievement. Both in Anchorage and statewide, for schools where *fewer* than 50 percent of the students are students of color, school climate continues to be a strong correlate of achievement ($p = .002$). Both in Anchorage and statewide, climate was *not* strongly correlated with achievement in schools where more than half the students are students of color. This finding is consistent with previous observations that many Alaska schools, particularly in rural areas, report positive climate even though achievement is lower than desired.

To answer the three questions identified earlier, focus groups were conducted with young people to identify (1) what aspects of school climate are most meaningful and relevant for students, (2) what school climate factors play significant roles in their academic engagement (or disengagement), and (3) what other factors in their lives play significant roles in their academic engagement. Where possible, separate focus groups were held with engaged students and disengaged-but-still-enrolled students—as well as with youth who recently dropped out of school. There also were focus groups with Alaska Native and non-Native students (in urban areas) and separate groups with middle school students and high school students. These groupings were possible only in schools with a sufficient number of students to form separate focus groups. As a result, focus groups held in urban schools were more likely to feature distinct subgroups than focus groups held in small, rural schools.

In addition, Alaska Native students and students from other ethnic backgrounds participated in “think-aloud” interviews (as in cognitive laboratory procedures) in which each student discussed his or her understanding of key items from the SCCS.

³ As of 2011, statewide graduation rates were 75 percent for white, non-Hispanic students; 74 percent for Asian/Pacific Islander students; 63 percent for black students; 62 percent for Hispanic students; and 51 percent for Alaska Native students (Alaska Department of Education and Early Development, 2012).

The information from the focus groups and think-aloud interviews was expected to do the following:

- Tell us whether Alaska Native students interpret items on the SCCS the same way as students from other ethnic groups.
- Tell us whether there are aspects of school climate key to academic engagement that are missing from the SCCS. These aspects of school climate may be relevant for all students or just relevant for a subgroup of students (such as Alaska Native students).
- Identify factors besides school climate that influence student academic engagement and indicate whether these factors are different or more salient for Alaska Native youth.

In the remainder of this report, we describe how this study was undertaken, present the results, and provide conclusions and recommendations based on the findings.

I. Methods

This research was designed to answer the questions identified in the introduction. In this section, we describe the approach, sample, data collection procedures, and data analysis procedures used to complete this evaluation.

A. Approach

A combination of focus groups and think-aloud interviews was used to answer the research questions. Focus groups allowed interviewers to talk in depth with students to learn about what made a school a place where students did or did not want to be, their thoughts on the relevance of existing SCCS scales, and the influences both inside and outside school that they believe play a role in whether students stay in school or drop out. These focus groups were held with Alaska Native and non-Native students, engaged students and disengaged students, and middle school students and high school students from urban and rural communities. These diverse focus groups allowed us to identify where student opinion converged or diverged on these topics, in concert with student or school characteristics. Think-aloud interviews also were held with individual Alaska Native and non-Native students from different age groups in urban and rural communities to identify any areas where Alaska Native and non-Native students might differ in their interpretation of key SCCS items.

B. Sample

The sample consisted of approximately 280 students, drawn from 26 schools in four school districts (Anchorage, Juneau, Lower Kuskokwim, and Yukon-Koyukuk⁴). These districts were selected for their diversity and their interest. Focus groups also were conducted with young adults who had recently dropped out of school in Anchorage (urban) and Lower Kuskokwim (rural). Appendix A provides a full list of the participating communities and schools.

School and district personnel were asked to help identify students by one of four relevant characteristics:

1. Alaska Native or non-Native (according to school records)
2. Engaged or disengaged, with *engaged students* defined as those students who have at least 90 percent attendance and are passing all their classes—regardless of their level of performance or whether they were in advanced classes or remedial classes—and *disengaged students* defined as those students with both poor attendance (less than 90 percent attendance) and one or more failing grades
3. Middle school or high school (where such clear divisions exist)
4. Urban or rural (with urban students drawn from Anchorage and Juneau, and rural students drawn from Lower Kuskokwim and Yukon-Koyukuk)

Groups were separated where possible (e.g., Alaska Native students who were engaged were separated from Alaska Native students who were disengaged). However, groups were combined

⁴ In the course of processing focus group results from Yukon-Koyukuk, audio recordings were accidentally deleted for all but one focus group; as a result, information from that school district was less than expected.

where the school population was too small to form separate focus groups (e.g., both engaged and disengaged Alaska Native students). It is important to note the following confounding associations between group characteristics arising from the characteristics of the participating school districts:

- Although both Alaska Native and non-Native students attended urban schools, only Alaska Native students attended rural schools.
- Separate middle schools were found only in urban areas. In rural areas, students completed their middle school years in multilevel schools (K–8, K–12, or 7–12)

When grouping combined characteristics, analyses were based on the subgroups that could be identified. For example, for a focus group conducted with engaged Alaska Native students in a rural area in a multilevel school, responses from that group were included in the overall analyses and also were reported separately as engaged students and as Alaska Native students but not as middle school students or high school students because responses could not be isolated on that characteristic within a group of students from mixed grade levels.

For the think-aloud interviews, school staff or the interviewers were asked to identify a few Alaska Native and non-Native students who were articulate and interested in participating.

C. Procedures

Focus groups and think-aloud interviews were led by trained local staff who had experience working with young people in their respective communities but were not in a position of authority and did not know students and their families personally. Both Alaska Native and non-Native interviewers conducted the focus groups and think-aloud interviews. Data collectors were trained by telephone by AIR staff.

Prior written parental/guardian consent was obtained for all participants. In addition, each student reviewed a consent form and gave his or her own informed consent prior to participation in any data collection activities.

The focus groups and think-aloud interviews were held within participating schools during the school day. They were held in rooms where students would not be overheard or disturbed by others.

Focus groups typically lasted from 30 to 60 minutes and were audio recorded. See Appendix B for a copy of the focus group protocol.

Think-aloud interviews typically lasted from 30 to 60 minutes and were audio recorded as well. See Appendix C for a copy of the think-aloud interview protocol.

D. Analyses

Focus group and think-aloud interview audio files were reviewed, and a transcript was made of the session. These transcripts were mostly word-for-word, but some fillers (*um, you know*) or extraneous talk about unrelated topics was excluded, especially if they contained identifiable information about individuals.

Transcript responses were then summarized, and AIR staff members (who had listened to the complete, original audio recordings to ensure that the summaries accurately reflected what had been expressed during the sessions) reviewed the summaries.

In the case of focus groups, response summaries were organized through a thematic analysis, and these results were then independently reviewed by an AIR staff member with special expertise in the field who had not been involved in transcribing or summarizing the original transcripts.

Where possible, responses were categorized according to whether they were provided by students who were engaged or disengaged, Alaska Native or non-Native, or from middle school or high school. If only small numbers of students were available, some focus groups contained mixes of students (e.g., engaged and disengaged together)—an issue mostly in small rural schools but also in some urban schools. In those cases, responses from those focus groups were included in the overall responses but could not be included in any breakdown of responses based on the characteristic that was mixed (e.g., engaged with disengaged) in that group of students.

Students from rural communities (all Alaska Native) tended to give more concise responses to questions than did students from urban communities; students from rural communities provided less spontaneous elaboration (regardless of whether the interviewer was also Alaska Native). Therefore, we did not make comparisons between rural and urban Alaska Native students because unequal amounts of information could lead to erroneous conclusions.

II. Focus Group Results

In this section, we present results from the focus groups. In each section, results are presented for all groups combined. Then results are presented for three subgroup comparisons: engaged students versus disengaged students, Alaska Native versus non-Native students, and urban middle school students versus urban high school students. (Although rural high school students also took part in focus groups and their responses are included in this report, responses from rural high school students were not directly compared with responses from middle school students because all middle school students were from urban areas.) Results specific to urban and rural areas are presented in the appendixes.

A. School Climate Characteristics

We first asked students open-ended questions to learn what made a school a place where they wanted to be (positive school climate) and what would make a school a place where they did not want to be (negative school climate). These questions were asked to get a sense of what students thought about in relation to school climate before we started introducing specific SCCS topic areas. Note that the two open-ended questions were added after some early data collection with Alaska Native students in rural, multilevel schools, so there is less information about these two questions from those types of schools and students.

The specific forms of the questions were as follows: “What kinds of things make a school a good place for students to be?” and “What kinds of things make a school a place where students do *not* want to be?” Responses fell into five general categories: (1) adult-student relationships; (2) relationships among students; (3) academics and pedagogy; (4) the school environment (e.g., safety, equality, rules); and (5) school resources, facilities, and infrastructure. There were several pervasive themes that emerged across all groups of students (engaged and disengaged students, Alaska Native and non-Native students, and middle school and high school students).

A.1. Adult-Student Relationships

Students from all groups believed that teachers and other school staff played a significant role in creating a positive or negative school climate. These responses mostly concerned teacher support for students and how teachers did their jobs and managed their classrooms.

Students talked about general styles of teacher behavior toward students, saying that “nice” teachers created a good school climate, and “mean” teachers created a bad school climate. But students also went beyond teachers’ surface behavior (nice or not nice) and described how teachers created a positive school climate by intentionally establishing good communication with students. In contrast, teachers created a negative school climate when they did not care about students as individuals—or, worse, were openly disrespectful of them (especially in front of other students).

Students from most groups also described the importance of having teachers and other school staff members who reached out to help students one-on-one, who respected students, and who were reliable and trustworthy. They believed that teachers and other school staff members created a positive school climate by advocating for students and by helping them to succeed.

Students also appreciated teachers who did not overreact to minor misbehavior (e.g., forgotten homework).

In contrast, teachers created a negative school climate when they were unfair, nagged students, refused to provide students with needed help or support, or “took out their bad mood on the students.” Students also did not appreciate staff who appeared to be nice but really had a patronizing attitude (treated them “like babies”). Students described mean/abusive behaviors on the part of other school staff members (e.g., janitors, school security, hall monitors) as part of a negative school climate, but they did not mention these adults doing anything to contribute to a positive school climate.

A.1.a. Adult–Student Relationships: Responses That Were Unique to Engaged Students Versus Disengaged Students

We compared responses to identify those responses that were unique to engaged students or unique to disengaged students (versus responses that came from both or neither group). It seems that students who were engaged (attending school regularly and passing all classes) may place *less* weight on personal respect and connections with teachers than do disengaged students (who have poor attendance and are failing one or more classes). This finding is in contrast to the stereotype of disengaged students not valuing relationships with teachers and may provide an entry point for intervention by building or using teacher–student relationships to encourage greater engagement in school. This inference is consistent with literature that suggests the importance of relationships in dropout prevention. The following chart shows responses that were unique to engaged students and unique to disengaged students.

Engaged Students	Disengaged Students
<p>Only <i>engaged</i> students mentioned that a <i>positive</i> school climate was created when the following occurs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Teachers do not overreact to minor errors or misbehavior (e.g., forgotten homework). <p>A <i>negative</i> school climate was created when the following occurs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Teachers nag.• Adults at school baby the students.• There is teacher-student conflict.• Staff members are mean/abusive (e.g., janitors, school security, hall monitors).	<p>Only <i>disengaged</i> students mentioned that a <i>positive</i> school climate was created when the following occurs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Staff are respectful.• Students have opportunities to speak with teachers one-on-one. <p>A <i>negative</i> school climate was created when the following occurs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• There are poor teacher-student connections.• Teachers put students down or put them “on the spot” in front of peers.

A.1.b. Adult–Student Relationships: Responses That Were Unique to Alaska Native Students Versus Non-Native Students

We compared responses of Alaska Native students with those of non-Native students (of any background). Non-Native students were somewhat more likely than Alaska Native students to identify poor adult–student relationships as contributing to a negative school climate. They want teachers and other school staff to be respectful, reliable, helpful, and personally connected with students. The following chart shows responses that were unique to Alaska Native students and unique to non-Alaska Native students.

Alaska Native Students	Non-Native Students
<p>Only <i>Alaska Native</i> students mentioned that a <i>positive</i> school climate is created when the following occurs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Teachers do not overreact to minor errors or misbehavior (e.g., forgotten homework).• Students have opportunities to speak with teachers one-on-one.• Adults want the students to succeed. <p>A <i>negative</i> school climate is created when</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• There are poor student–teacher connections.• Teachers put students down or on the spot in front of peers.	<p>Only <i>non-Native</i> students mentioned that a <i>positive</i> school climate is created when the following occurs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Students receive help from teachers and other school staff.• Staff are respectful to students.• Adults at school are reliable and trustworthy.• Adults at school will advocate for students.• Students have informal relationships with teachers who know them personally. <p>A <i>negative</i> school climate is created when the following occurs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Teachers take out their bad mood on students.• Students cannot get help/support from adults at school.• Teachers nag.• Adults at school baby the students.• There is teacher-student conflict.

Note that non-Native students came only from urban areas (Anchorage and Juneau), whereas Alaska Native students were drawn from both urban and rural areas, so results should be generalized with caution.

A.1.c. Adult–Student Relationships: Responses That Were Unique to Urban Middle School Students Versus Urban High School Students

We compared responses of urban middle school students with those of urban high school students. Overall, high school students focused more on adult-student relationships and connections than did middle school students.

Middle School Students (Urban Only)

Only *middle school* students mentioned that a *positive* school climate is created when the following occurs:

- Teachers do not overreact to minor errors or misbehavior (e.g., forgotten homework).

A *negative* school climate is created when the following occurs:

- Staff are mean/abusive (e.g., janitors, school security, hall monitors).

High School Students (Urban Only)

Only *high school* students mentioned that a *positive* school climate is created when the following occurs:

- Students have opportunities to speak with teachers one-on-one.
- Adults at school are reliable and trustworthy.
- Adults at school will advocate for students.
- Students have informal relationships with teachers who know them personally.

A *negative* school climate is created when the following occurs:

- There are poor teacher-student connections.
- Students cannot get help/support from adults at school.
- Teachers take out their bad moods on students.
- Teachers put students down or put them “on the spot” in front of peers.
- Teachers are unfair.
- Teachers nag.
- Adults at school baby the students.

Note that comparisons between middle school and high school student responses were based on responses from urban areas only because there were no separate middle schools in the rural areas included in this evaluation. Although there were rural high schools, the lack of rural middle schools prevents a balanced comparison. Therefore, comparisons between responses from middle school students versus high school students are not generalizable to rural settings.

A.2. Relationships Among Students

Students agreed that relationships among students played a significant role in creating a positive or negative school climate. This conclusion was the case for all groups.

Students wanted to spend time with friends while at school. Time with friends could become negative, however, if there was “too much drama” among students. Attaching undue importance to what happened among students in their personal relationships detracted from students’ ability to concentrate in school. Students believed that peers could contribute to a positive school climate if they were nice, kind, helpful, and focused on their schoolwork.

Students from all groups uniformly cited the importance of physical and emotional safety. Their message was that a school is a place where students want to be if they are safe and not bullied or

harassed by peers. In contrast, school becomes a place where students do not want to be if there is bullying, intimidation, peer pressure, gangs, cliques, social exclusion, or other forms of peer mistreatment or there are obvious threats to physical safety, such as fighting, violence, or weapons at school. Students also believed that their peers could create a negative school climate by being rude to others, being disrespectful to teachers, sleeping through class, or generally behaving badly.

A.2.a. Student Relationships: Responses That Were Unique to Engaged Students Versus Disengaged Students

We compared responses to identify the ones that were unique to engaged students or unique to disengaged students (versus responses that came from both or neither group).

Engaged students focused more on how peers could create a positive school climate, and disengaged students focused more on how peers could create a negative school climate. It is interesting to note that bad behavior in class was of more concern to disengaged students than to engaged students. It is possible that students who were not doing well in school were more likely than other students to be placed in classes with peers who did not behave well, further contributing to a negative school experience and further disengagement. Alternatively, their lack of attention control makes them more susceptible to the off-task behaviors of their peers. The following chart shows responses that were unique to engaged students and unique to disengaged students.

Engaged Students	Disengaged Students
<p>Only <i>engaged</i> students mentioned that a <i>positive</i> school climate was created when the following occurred:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Students have good friends who help them.• Students are kind and helpful.• Students have good relationships with one another, with no tensions.• Students focus on their work. <p>A <i>negative</i> school climate was created when the following occurred:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Students are rude.	<p>Only <i>disengaged</i> students mentioned that a <i>positive</i> school climate was created when the following occurred:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• There are no cliques among students. <p>A <i>negative</i> school climate was created when the following occurred:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Students intimidate peers.• Students behave badly.• Students are disrespectful to teachers.• Students sleep through class.• There is peer pressure.• There are cliques among students or social exclusion.

A.2.b. Student Relationships: Responses That Were Unique to Alaska Native Students Versus Non-Native Students

We compared responses among Alaska Native students with those among non-Native students (of any other race). Alaska Native students seemed somewhat less focused on the threats of gangs and intimidation than were non-Native students—perhaps because they were more likely to come from rural areas. Alaska Native students also were somewhat more focused on positive relationships among students overall, not just students who were friends. The following chart shows responses that were unique to Alaska Native students and unique to non-Alaska Native students.

Alaska Native Students	Non-Native Students
<p>Only <i>Alaska Native</i> students mentioned that a <i>positive</i> school climate is created when the following occurs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Students are nice.• Students are kind and helpful.• Students have good relationships with one another, with no tensions. <p>A <i>negative</i> school climate is created when the following occurs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Students behave badly.• Students are disrespectful to teachers.• Students sleep through class.	<p>Only <i>non-Native</i> students mentioned that a <i>positive</i> school climate is created when the following occurs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Students have good friends who help them. <p>A <i>negative</i> school climate is created when the following occurs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• There are gangs at school.• Students intimidate their peers.• Students are rude.• There is peer pressure.

Note that non-Native students came only from urban areas (Anchorage and Juneau), whereas Alaska Native students were drawn from both urban and rural areas, so results should be generalized with caution.

A.2.c. Student Relationships: Responses That Were Unique to Urban Middle School Students Versus Urban High School Students

Although middle school is commonly viewed as a time when peers play a very prominent role in how students perceive school climate, high school students actually provided far more unique examples of how their peers contributed to a positive or negative school climate. All aspects of negative influence that middle school students mentioned also were mentioned by high school students but the reverse was not true. The following chart shows responses that were unique to urban middle school students and unique to urban high school students. As noted earlier, only urban schools were included in this comparison, due to the absence of separate middle schools in rural areas.

Middle School Students (Urban Only)

Only *middle school* students mentioned that a *positive* school climate is created when the following occurs:

- Students have good friends who help them.
- Students focus on their work.

(No unique responses for *negative* climate)

High School Students (Urban Only)

Only *high school* students mentioned that a *positive* school climate is created when the following occurs:

- Students are nice.
- Students are kind and helpful.
- There are no cliques among students.
- Students have good relationships with one another, with no tensions.

A *negative* school climate is created when the following occurs:

- Students intimidate their peers.
- Students behave badly.
- Students are disrespectful to teachers.
- Students are rude.
- Students sleep through class.
- There is peer pressure.

A.3. Academics and Pedagogy

Across all groups, students believed that a school was a good place for students to be when teachers taught well, made learning fun, and provided a good education with academic supports, if students needed them.

Students described a variety of ways in which academics and pedagogy could create a positive school climate, including how teachers taught and the opportunities that were provided to students. Teachers created a positive school climate by showing students that they wanted to do their jobs, by teaching well, by knowing how to have fun or teaching in a way that is fun for students, and by taking time to make sure all students understood the material. Teachers created a negative school climate when they acted as if they did not want to do their jobs, did not teach well, or were boring. Students also believed that teachers created a negative school climate when they gave students too much homework, work that was too difficult, or “busywork” that seemed meaningless; were excessively strict about schoolwork; or did not ensure that all students understood the material.

Students want to be able to have good academic classes and enrichment classes (e.g., art, technology) available, to have assistance with schoolwork, if needed (e.g., tutoring), to be able to choose classes that are meaningful to them as individuals, and to be able to learn things that would help them in their future careers. Within the classroom, students valued being able to learn at their own pace, having opportunities to learn challenging material, having opportunities for hands-on learning and field trips, and being in a classroom environment that was free from distractions such as others talking. Looking to their futures, students believed that school was a

place where they would want to be if they were given opportunities to develop goals, to learn about different vocations, and to learn how to live a healthy life.

A.3.a. Academics and Pedagogy: Responses That Were Unique to Engaged Students Versus Disengaged Students

In the area of academics and pedagogy, there was little overlap in the responses of engaged students and disengaged students. Engaged students focused more on the *quality* of pedagogy in their classrooms. Disengaged students focused more on the practicality and usefulness of their learning experiences. The following chart shows responses that were unique to engaged students and unique to disengaged students.

Engaged Students	Disengaged Students
<p>Only <i>engaged</i> students mentioned that a <i>positive</i> school climate is created when the following occurs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers make sure that students understand class material. • Students have opportunities to learn more challenging material. • Students have opportunities to develop goals. • Students have few distractions in class (e.g., others talking). <p>A <i>negative</i> school climate is created when the following occurs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schoolwork is too difficult. • Schoolwork is not meaningful (busywork). • Teachers do not teach well. • Teachers never do anything fun in class. • Teachers are excessively strict about schoolwork. 	<p>Only <i>disengaged</i> students mentioned that a <i>positive</i> school climate is created when the following occurs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers want to do their jobs. • Students have opportunities for hands-on learning. • Students have opportunities to learn about different vocations. • Students have opportunities to learn about how to lead a healthy life. <p>A <i>negative</i> school climate is created when the following occurs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students are required to take courses that they do not feel will be useful to them. • Teachers do not really want to do their jobs. • Teachers do not make sure students understand class material.

A.3.b. Academics and Pedagogy: Responses That Were Unique to Alaska Native Students Versus Non-Native Students

We compared responses of Alaska Native students with those of non-Native students (of any background). Overall, Alaska Native students were more likely to attribute a positive school climate to features of academics and pedagogy—especially ideas of opportunity—than were non-Native students. Alaska Native students valued having opportunities that would both enrich their lives in the present (field trips, classes in fields such as the arts and technology) and help prepare them for the future (good academic learning, goals, knowing how to live a healthy life). Non-Native students were more likely than Native students to focus on how issues of academics

and pedagogy could contribute to a negative school climate. The following chart shows responses that were unique to Alaska Native students and unique to non-Native students.

Alaska Native Students	Non-Native Students
<p>Only <i>Alaska Native</i> students mentioned that a <i>positive</i> school climate is created when the following occurs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers make sure students understand the material. • Students have good academic classes available to them. • Students have opportunities to learn more challenging material. • Students have opportunities to learn things that will help them in their careers. • Students have opportunities to develop goals. • Students have opportunities to learn about how to lead a healthy life. • Students have opportunities to take enrichment classes (e.g., art, technology). • Students have opportunities to take field trips. <p>A <i>negative</i> school climate is created when the following occurs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers do not teach well. • Teachers never do anything fun in class. 	<p>Only <i>non-Native</i> students mentioned that a <i>positive</i> school climate is created when the following occurs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers want to do their jobs. • Each student can learn at his or her own pace. • Students have opportunities to learn about different vocations. • Students have few distractions in class (e.g., others talking). <p>A <i>negative</i> school climate is created when the following occurs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schoolwork is too difficult. • Schoolwork is not meaningful (busywork). • Students are required to take courses that they do not feel will be useful to them. • Teachers do not make sure students understand class material.

Note that non-Native students came only from urban areas (Anchorage and Juneau), whereas Alaska Native students were drawn from both urban and rural areas, so results should be generalized with caution.

A.3.c. Academics and Pedagogy: Responses That Were Unique to Urban Middle School Students Versus Urban High School Students

Overall, high school students were more likely than middle school students to mention the importance of academics and pedagogy, but it also is important to bear in mind that high school students may have more options to choose their classes than middle school students have. The following chart shows responses that were unique to urban middle school students and unique to

urban high school students. As noted earlier, only urban schools were included in this comparison due to the absence of separate middle schools in rural areas.

Middle School Students (Urban Only)

Only *middle school* students mentioned that a *positive* school climate is created when the following occurs:

- Students have few distractions in class (e.g., others talking).

A *negative* school climate is created when the following occurs:

- Teachers give too much homework.
- Schoolwork is not meaningful (busywork).
- Teachers never do anything fun in class.
- Teachers are excessively strict about schoolwork.

High School Students (Urban Only)

Only *high school* students mentioned that a *positive* school climate is created when the following occurs:

- Teachers want to do their jobs.
- Each student can learn at his or her own pace.
- Students have opportunities to learn more challenging material.
- Each student has opportunities to select classes that are meaningful to him or her.
- Students have opportunities to develop goals.
- Students have opportunities to learn about how to lead a healthy life.

A *negative* school climate is created when the following occurs:

- Students are required to take courses that they do not believe will be useful to them.
- Teachers do not want to do their jobs.
- Teachers are boring.
- Teachers do not make sure students understand class material.

A.4. Overall School Environment

Across all groups, students believed that a school was a good place for students to be when there was equality among students and a lack of favoritism from adults at school, and when students were safe to express their own ideas and opinions in an open-minded atmosphere. Students from many groups also believed that a positive school climate was created by having physical and emotional safety, structure, fairness, opportunities for personal development, and opportunities to be part of a friendly and encouraging environment. School also could fulfill a positive role for vulnerable students by offering a safe haven and support for students having difficulties at home and by providing a place where students could spend their time constructively and stay out of trouble.

Students from every group identified racism, sexism, and a judgmental school climate as components of a negative school climate. Students from all groups also strongly believed that school became a place where students did not want to be and did not want to do well when they felt physically unsafe and when they saw peers under the influence of or selling drugs and alcohol. And students from all groups mentioned that a bad school schedule, with insufficient

breaks for students, was detrimental to the school climate. Students from most groups believed that bad or excessive school rules, unfair application of those rules, and excessive consequences for minor misbehavior made for a negative school climate.

A.4.a. School Environment: Responses That Were Unique to Engaged Students Versus Disengaged Students

There were some differences in focus on school environment between engaged students and disengaged students. Only engaged students focused on how a positive school environment would support their personal development (positive attitude, self-awareness). They believed that a negative school climate was characterized by student mistrust or lack of interest in what students thought or needed.

Only disengaged students mentioned that a school has a positive climate when students are treated fairly and provided with good boundaries. And only disengaged students described school as a place where students could go for safe haven or to stay out of trouble. On the negative side, only disengaged students talked about how receiving excessive consequences for minor misbehavior made students not want to come to school or not want to work hard in school. Several disengaged students described having gotten into trouble with teachers and then receiving harsher consequences than other students for minor infractions (or not being trusted to do things such as go to the restroom during class), then getting angry with the teachers for treating them unfairly, and then having more negative consequences. It sounded as if some students had gotten themselves into negative cycles and could not find a way out. Disengaged students also talked about the negative consequences for them at school when they had gotten into trouble *outside* of school, but the issue became known within school.

The following chart shows responses that were unique to engaged students and unique to disengaged students.

Engaged Students	Disengaged Students
<p>Only <i>engaged</i> students mentioned that a <i>positive</i> school climate is created when the following occurs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students have opportunities to develop positive attitudes. • Students have opportunities to learn about themselves. • Students have opportunities to be part of a school community. • The school has a diverse student body. <p>A <i>negative</i> school climate is created when the following occurs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students have insufficient opportunities to use the restroom. • The school campus is closed (e.g., students cannot leave during lunch). • There is mistrust of students (e.g., locker searches). • School administration does not listen to or consider the needs of students. • The school advisory board does not include students or parents. • There are bad school rules or too many rules. • Unfair treatment of students is tolerated. 	<p>Only <i>disengaged</i> students mentioned that a <i>positive</i> school climate is created when the following occurs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is fair application of the rules. • The school has good boundaries with regard to acceptable behavior. • School provides a place for young people to stay out of trouble. • Students have some control over what happens at the school. • The school provides a safe haven and support for students who are having difficulties at home. • School is a place where each student can feel good about himself or herself. <p>A <i>negative</i> school climate is created when the following occurs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students receive excessive consequences for minor misbehavior. • Students have little privacy. When a student does something wrong outside school, the information becomes public at school. • There is a lack of concern for students' futures. • There is a dress code. • There are stereotypes. • Harassment of students is tolerated. • Drugs and alcohol are present or sold at school.

A.4.b. School Environment: Responses That Were Unique to Alaska Native Students Versus Non-Native Students

We compared responses among Alaska Native students with those among non-Native students (of any background). In the area of school environment, there were many differences in focus between Alaska Native and non-Native students (but note the confound between being a student in a rural school environment and being Alaska Native—non-Native students were drawn *only* from urban school environments). Alaska Native students were more likely than non-Native

students to describe a positive school climate as protective—a safe haven for students having difficulties outside school. The following chart shows responses that were unique to Alaska Native students and unique to non-Alaska Native students.

Alaska Native Students	Non-Native Students
<p>Only <i>Alaska Native</i> students mentioned that a <i>positive</i> school climate is created when the following occurs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The student body is diverse. • The school provides a safe haven and support for students who are having difficulties at home. • School provides a place for young people to stay out of trouble. • Students have opportunities to develop positive attitudes. • Students have opportunities to learn about themselves. <p>A <i>negative</i> school climate is created when the following occurs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The school day starts too early. • The school campus is closed (e.g., students cannot leave during lunch). • School administration does not listen to or consider the needs of students. • The school advisory board does not include students or parents. • There is a lack of concern for students' futures. • There are stereotypes. • Unfair treatment of students is tolerated. • Drugs and alcohol are present or sold at school. 	<p>Only <i>non-Native</i> students mentioned that a <i>positive</i> school climate is created when the following occurs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The school has good boundaries with regard to acceptable behavior. • School is a place where each student can feel good about himself or herself. • Students have some control over what happens at the school. • Students have opportunities to be part of a school community. <p>A <i>negative</i> school climate is created when the following occurs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students have insufficient opportunities to use the restroom. • Students have little privacy. When a student does something wrong outside school, the information becomes public at school. • There is mistrust of students (e.g., locker searches). • Harassment of students is tolerated. • There is a dress code.

A.4.c. School Environment: Responses That Were Unique to Urban Middle School Students Versus Urban High School Students

High school students were far more likely than middle school students to identify aspects of the overall school environment as important in the creation of a positive school climate and also were more likely to cite school environment as potentially creating a negative school climate. The reason for this difference is unclear—it could be because more high school students participated, because older students were able to take a broader view of their school situation than younger students, or for some other reason. High school students cited multiple factors that made a school a place where students wanted to be and wanted to do well, including safety and support, opportunities for students, and a welcoming environment that they could take pride in. They believed that a school would be a negative place for students if students were not trusted, were not involved in making decisions that affected them at school, or were not safe.

The following chart shows responses that were unique to urban middle school students and unique to urban high school students. As noted earlier, only urban schools were included in this comparison, due to the absence of separate middle schools in rural areas.

Middle School Students (Urban Only)	High School Students (Urban Only)
<p>Only <i>middle school</i> students mentioned that a <i>positive</i> school climate is created when the following occurs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• There is a diverse student body.	<p>Only <i>high school</i> students mentioned that a <i>positive</i> school climate is created when the following occurs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• There is a structured school environment.• The school rules are applied fairly.• The school has good boundaries with regard to acceptable behavior.• School is a place where each student can feel good about himself or herself.• The school provides a safe haven and support for students who are having difficulties at home.• Students have some control over what happens at the school.• The school provides a welcoming, friendly environment.• The school environment motivates students in a positive way (e.g., motivational posters).• There are opportunities for students to develop positive attitudes.• There are opportunities for students to learn more about themselves.• Students have opportunities to be part of a school community.• There is good school spirit or pride. <p style="text-align: right;"><i>(continued)</i></p>

A *negative* school climate is created when the following occurs:

- There are insufficient opportunities to use the restroom.

A *negative* school climate is created when the following occurs:

- The school campus is closed (e.g., students cannot leave during lunch).
- Students receive excessive consequences for minor misbehavior.
- Students have little privacy. When a student does something wrong outside school, the information becomes public at school.
- There is mistrust of students (e.g., locker searches).
- School administration does not listen to/consider the needs of students.
- The school advisory board does not include students or parents.
- There is a lack of concern for students' futures.
- There are stereotypes.
- Unfair treatment of students is tolerated.
- Harassment of students is tolerated.
- School is not safe (e.g., violence or weapons present).
- Drugs and alcohol are present or sold at school.

A.5. School Resources and Activities

Across all groups, students believed that school was a good place to be when there were opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities (e.g., clubs, opportunities to engage in the arts), sports, and gym class or physical activity. School food also was important to students from all groups, with good-quality food (lunch, snacks) contributing to a positive school climate and bad food contributing to a negative school climate. This issue may be especially important for students whose school meals are subsidized by the U.S. Department of Agriculture because lower income students are also at higher risk for dropping out of school as a result of factors associated with poverty—so factors contributing to a positive school climate may be of special benefit to these students.

A.5.a. School Resources and Activities: Responses That Were Unique to Engaged Students Versus Disengaged Students

Responses were somewhat different for engaged students than for disengaged students, with disengaged students focusing more on the physical attributes of school (buildings and facilities).

The following chart shows responses that were unique to engaged students and unique to disengaged students.

Engaged Students	Disengaged Students
<p>Only <i>engaged</i> students mentioned that a <i>positive</i> school climate is created when the following occurs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students do not have to wear gym uniforms. • Students have bigger lockers. <p>A <i>negative</i> school climate is created when the following occurs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Textbooks are poor. • There is a lack of student activities. • Students cannot access facilities (e.g., gym) during recess. 	<p>Only <i>disengaged</i> students mentioned that a <i>positive</i> school climate is created when the following occurs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a large school library with a good selection of books. • The school environment is physically comfortable (e.g., warm). • Students have adequate time to pass between classes. • Classes are small or medium-sized. • The school practices recycling. <p>A <i>negative</i> school climate is created when the following occurs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are no food vending machines. • There are no water fountains. • There is no school gym.

A.5.b. School Resources and Activities: Responses That Were Unique to Alaska Native Students Versus Non-Native Students

In the area of school resources, facilities, and infrastructure, Alaska Native students were somewhat more likely than were non-Native students to mention a lack of resources as an issue. This difference may be because non-Native students were drawn only from urban environments, where students may have had more choices for how to get certain needs met (e.g., extracurricular activities). The following chart shows responses that were unique to Alaska Native students and unique to non-Alaska Native students.

Alaska Native Students

Only *Alaska Native* students mentioned that a *positive* school climate is created when the following occurs:

- There is good school security.
- The school environment is physically comfortable (e.g., warm).
- Students have transportation to and from school.
- The school practices recycling.

A *negative* school climate is created when the following occurs:

- There are poor textbooks.
- There are no food vending machines.
- There are no water fountains.
- There is no gym.
- The school does not offer adequate extracurricular activities.
- There are graffiti at school.
- The school buildings are in disrepair.

Non-Native Students

Only *non-Native* students mentioned that a *positive* school climate is created when the following occurs:

- There is a large school library with a good selection of books.
- Students have opportunities to use technology.
- Students do not have to wear gym uniforms.
- The school environment is physically colorful (not just plain walls).
- Students have bigger lockers.
- Students have adequate time to pass between classes.

A *negative* school climate is created when the following occurs:

- Students cannot access facilities (e.g., gym) during recess.
- The school has too many students.

A.5.c. School Resources and Activities: Responses That Were Unique to Urban Middle School Students Versus Urban High School Students

Both middle school students and high school students mentioned several areas of school resources, facilities, and infrastructure that were important to them, and both groups mentioned several areas of school resources, facilities, and infrastructure that could create a negative school climate. The following chart shows responses that were unique to urban middle school students and unique to urban high school students. As noted earlier, only urban schools were included in this comparison, due to the absence of separate middle schools in rural areas.

Middle School Students (Urban Only)

Only *middle school* students mentioned that a *positive* school climate is created when the following occurs:

- There is a large school library with a good selection of books.
- Students do not have to wear gym uniforms.
- Students have bigger lockers.
- Students have adequate time to pass between classes.
- The school is big.
- The school practices recycling.

A *negative* school climate is created when the following occurs:

- There are no food vending machines.
- There are no water fountains.
- There is no gym.

High School Students (Urban Only)

Only *high school* students mentioned that a *positive* school climate is created when the following occurs:

- Students have opportunities to use technology.
- The school environment is physically comfortable (e.g., warm).
- The school environment is physically colorful (not just plain walls).
- Students have transportation to and from school.
- Classes are small or medium sized.

A *negative* school climate is created when the following occurs:

- There are poor textbooks.
- The school does not offer adequate extracurricular activities.
- Students cannot access facilities (e.g., gym) during recess.
- There are graffiti at school.

B. Appropriateness of Existing SCCS Scales

In this section, we present information on how important the existing SCCS scale areas are to students. These scales highlight high expectations, respectful climate, peer climate, school safety, caring adults, school leadership and student involvement, and family and community involvement. Students were presented with a description of each scale, including examples of what conditions would lead a student to provide a high or low rating on that scale. Students were then asked to decide whether that scale area was *not important*, *somewhat important*, or *very important* in determining whether they worked hard in school and learned as much as they could. A count was made of how many students provided responses for each scale, so this section of the report is more quantitative in nature than are other sections.

Although students were not asked to justify each response, many provided explanations for their ratings or expanded their answers. Note that students in urban areas were much more likely than students in rural areas to elaborate spontaneously upon their answers; therefore, qualitative information in this section is based mostly on responses from students in urban areas.

In the remainder of this section, we present results for all students and also specific results for engaged students versus disengaged students, Alaska Native students versus non-Native students, middle school students versus high school students, and rural students versus urban students.

B.1. High Expectations

Students were provided with the following definition of *high expectations*: *Having high expectations means that teachers and other school staff let a student know that he or she can do well in school and can achieve his or her goals. They encourage each student to work hard and provide support to help that student be successful. The student feels like teachers and other school staff are there to help them succeed. In contrast, when teachers and other school staff do not have high expectations for a student, they may not encourage that student to work hard or may not provide that student with the support he or she needs to do well. The student may not feel that teachers or school staff have high hopes for them or believe in them.*

Students were then asked, “How important do you think expectations [as defined above] are in determining whether you work hard in school and learn as much as you could? Would you say that teacher and school staff expectations for students are not important, somewhat important, or very important?”

A total of 213 students provided responses to this question. See Table 1 for information regarding responses overall, responses of engaged students and disengaged students, responses of Alaska Native students and non-Native students, and responses of middle school students and high school students.

Table 1. Importance of High Expectations

	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important
Overall	2%	39%	59%
Engaged	2%	40%	58%
Disengaged	2%	27%	71%
Alaska Native	3%	35%	63%
Non-Alaska Native	1%	49%	50%
Middle School	1%	57%	42%
High School	2%	27%	71%

Most students believed that high expectations were important and that high or low expectations could influence students. One student summarized this idea by saying, “It’s different for each teacher. If that teacher does have high expectations, you’re almost forced to work harder to get those good grades. With teachers that don’t expect much, you won’t have the motivation to do well.” Several students noted that high expectations needed to be accompanied by adequate support in order for students to be able to meet those expectations. This observation aligns with a conceptualization of academic rigor or challenge as including academic support (Osher & Kendziora, 2010.) This type of support could address the concerns of some students across groups that having expectations that were too high or were emphasized too much could make adults at school become pushy or intrusive. For example, some students said, “High expectations bring too much stress [because teachers] will be expecting more of you,” and “You can’t push someone too hard past what their limits are.”

Many students saw expectations as changeable and at least partially up to the student, saying things such as, “Even if the teacher doesn’t believe you can do something, you could just totally try to change it and work harder,” and “If you believe in yourself, you don’t need the teachers and staff to push you forward.”

The following between-group differences emerged regarding how students felt about expectations:

- Disengaged students were more likely than engaged students to mention how important it was for teachers to motivate students and to say that students would not do their work if their teachers did not motivate them.
- Disengaged students were more likely than engaged students to remark that there should be high expectations for student behavior, not just for academic achievement.
- Alaska Native students were somewhat more likely than non-Native students to mention that teachers who held high expectations helped them to achieve their goals.
- Middle school students were more likely than high school students to see expectations as related to respect and caring, whereas high school students were more likely to mention high expectations in the context of a positive working relationship (e.g., teachers doing their jobs well, and students working hard).

B.2. Respectful Climate

Students were provided with the following definition of a *respectful climate*: *When adults at a school treat a student with respect, they are polite to that student, use a positive tone when asking that student to do something or when discussing any concerns with that student, and the student will feel like he or she is being treated fairly. In contrast, when adults at a school do not treat a student with respect, they may not make an effort to be polite to that student, may take a negative tone when dealing with that student, or the student may feel like he or she is being treated unfairly.*

Students were then asked, “How important do you think respect from adults at school is in determining whether you work hard in school and learn as much as you could? Would you say that respect from adults at school is not important, somewhat important, or very important?”

A total of 236 students provided responses to this question. See Table 2 for information on responses overall, responses of engaged and disengaged students, responses of Alaska Native and non-Native students, and responses of middle school students and high school students.

Table 2. Importance of Respectful Climate

	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important
Overall	7%	18%	75%
Engaged	1%	8%	91%
Disengaged	0%	22%	78%
Alaska Native	9%	23%	68%
Non-Alaska Native	0%	7%	93%
Middle School	1%	14%	84%
High School	1%	14%	86%

Overall, a large proportion of students believed that a respectful climate was very important. Many believed that the creation of a respectful climate was a mutual effort on the part of students and school staff, but that school staff set the tone first and students responded accordingly. One student summarized the prevailing viewpoint well, saying, “It’s very important for a teacher to give respect to a student because, in return, it solidifies kind of a good bond between student and teacher. If you don’t have a good bond, the student won’t show respect in return. The student reflects what the teacher does.”

Although Alaska Native students gave lower ratings to the importance of a respectful climate, this result can be attributed partially to one school in a rural area that served only Alaska Native students, where all participants said that respectful climate was not important. Although the students did not elaborate on why they thought respectful climate was unimportant, their responses to other focus-group questions revealed a significant disconnection between teachers and students at that particular school. For example, participants said, “They don’t teach us anything,” and “The teacher just sits,” and “I don’t want [the teacher] to be friendly.” However, these attitudes were not apparent among other Alaska Native students in rural schools.

B.3. Peer Climate

Students were provided with the following definition of peer climate: *When there is a positive peer climate at school, students treat one another with respect and help one another (even if they are not friends). When there is a negative peer climate at school, students think it is okay to disrespect one another, and some students may feel picked on or isolated.*

Students were then asked, “How important do you think peer climate is in determining whether you work hard in school and learn as much as you could? Would you say that peer climate is not important, somewhat important, or very important?”

A total of 222 students provided responses to this question. See Table 3 for information on responses overall, responses of engaged and disengaged students, responses of Alaska Native and non-Native students, and responses of middle school students and high school students.

Table 3. Importance of Peer Climate

	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important
Overall	5%	25%	70%
Engaged	1%	13%	85%
Disengaged	8%	36%	57%
Alaska Native	4%	19%	76%
Non-Alaska Native	5%	28%	67%
Middle School	4%	17%	80%
High School	5%	28%	67%

Overall, although some students believed that students should be able to learn regardless of the behavior of peers, most respondents believed that students would not want to come to school or would have difficulty paying attention and succeeding in school if they had negative relationships with peers. Many students believed that peer climate (especially a negative peer climate) could be an issue for less resilient students. For example, students said, “It’s probably very important because there are some people who if they get picked on, they don’t take it [well] and don’t show up,” and “Some people probably wouldn’t mind being hassled as much as others. But at the same time, other people—because they get treated badly—they might not want to go to school.”

The following between-group differences emerged in how students felt about peer climate:

- Disengaged students were less likely than engaged students to say that peer climate was very important and were much more likely to say that they did not care what others thought of them.
- Alaska Native students placed somewhat greater importance on peer climate than non-Native students. When elaborating on their answers, Alaska Native students tended to focus more on peer climate in terms of whether peers made them feel good or bad, affecting their mood and their learning at school. In contrast, non-Native students tended to view peer climate in terms of whether other students were a threat or a source of protection. This pattern was apparent even between Alaska Native and non-Native students who attended the same schools.
- The finding that middle school students believed that peer climate was more important than high school students is consistent with the prevailing view that early adolescence is the time when peers have the greatest influence.

B.4. School Safety

Students were provided with the following definition of school safety: *When there is a positive peer climate at school, students treat one another with respect and help one another (even if they are not friends). When there is a negative peer climate at school, students think it is okay to disrespect one another, and some students may feel picked on or isolated.*

Students were then asked, “How important do you think school safety is in determining whether you can concentrate in school and learn as much as you could? Would you say that school safety not important, somewhat important, or very important?”

A total of 228 students provided responses to this question. See Table 4 for information on responses overall, responses of engaged and disengaged students, responses of Alaska Native and non-Native students, and responses of middle school and high school students.

Table 4. Importance of School Safety

	Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important
Overall	4%	13%	84%
Engaged	3%	14%	83%
Disengaged	4%	12%	84%
Alaska Native	2%	10%	88%
Non-Alaska Native	5%	17%	77%
Middle School	5%	18%	77%
High School	2%	10%	88%

There was a high level of consistency across groups on the importance of school safety. Respondents believed that if a student did not feel safe, he or she was likely to have trouble concentrating in school and even may not come to school. Some students from urban areas mentioned that they did not want safety taken too far, resulting in excessive law-enforcement involvement in the school. When students talked about feeling unsafe, they tended to focus on whether others could bring weapons to school and on physical fights. Although Alaska Native students believed that school safety was more important than did non-Native students, there were no clear differences in how they thought about the topic.

B.5. Caring Adults

Students were provided with the following definition of *caring adults*: *When a student feels like there are caring adults at school, this means that the student has one or more adults at school that he or she can talk to if they have a problem. Having caring adults also means that the student feels like he or she is someone that adults at school value as a person. In contrast, when a student does not feel like there are caring adults at school, he or she may feel like adults are not there to help them if they have a problem, or that adults do not care about them as an individual.*

Students were then asked, “How important do you think having caring adults at school (or not) plays a role in whether you work hard in school and learn as much as you could? Would you say that caring adults are not important, somewhat important, or very important?”

A total of 203 students provided responses to this question. See Table 5 for information on responses overall, responses of engaged and disengaged students, responses of Alaska Native and non-Native students, and responses of middle school students and high school students.

Table 5. Importance of Caring Adults

	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important
Overall	2%	22%	76%
Engaged	0%	27%	73%
Disengaged	2%	17%	81%
Alaska Native	1%	22%	77%
Non-Alaska Native	5%	23%	72%
Middle School	3%	18%	78%
High School	2%	26%	71%

Students across groups were fairly consistent in their views of the importance of caring adults at school. They believed that caring adults helped students by noticing whether the students were having difficulties and reaching out to them and by being someone students could talk to if they had problems. For example, one student said, “In elementary [school], I had a teacher that I would talk to if I had problems, and she would encourage me. I really think you need an adult to be successful in school.” Many students mentioned that having caring adults was especially important for students who did not have caring adults at home or who were facing difficulties at home. For example, one student said, “A lot of kids have family problems at home, and if they had a teacher or a counselor to talk to, they might feel like someone cares about [them].” Some middle school students mentioned that caring adults could be somewhat smothering if they babyed their students over small things (e.g., paper cut).

B.6. School Leadership and Student Involvement

Students were provided with the following definition of *school leadership* and *student involvement*: “*Leadership*” refers to the adults who make decisions at the school, such as rules and planning what will happen at the school. When schools have good leadership and good student involvement, a student will feel like the leaders at the school value student opinion and make decisions based on what is best for students. When schools have poor leadership or poor student involvement, a student will feel like the leaders at the school are not interested in what students like him or her have to say, and do not make decisions based on what is best for students.

Students were then asked, “How important do you think school leadership is in determining whether you work hard in school and learn as much as you could? Would you say that school leadership is not important, somewhat important, or very important?”

A total of 202 students provided responses to this question. See Table 6 for information on responses overall, responses of engaged students and disengaged students, responses of Alaska

Native and non-Native students, and responses of middle school students and high school students.

Table 6. Importance of School Leadership and Student Involvement

	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important
Overall	5%	50%	45%
Engaged	0%	52%	48%
Disengaged	13%	53%	34%
Alaska Native	3%	49%	49%
Non-Alaska Native	9%	48%	43%
Middle School	5%	63%	32%
High School	7%	48%	45%

Students across groups were very consistent in giving lower ratings for the importance of school leadership and student involvement than for other scales. Students believed that school leadership was a good thing if it was fair and reasonable, but many students made statements about the importance of student involvement. For example, they said, “Leadership from the adults is important, but they need to listen to us,” or “It’s not to say the kids can run the school, but it’s good to have their insight,” and “If adults make all the rules, that will not make students as motivated to do well, [or] even show up for school.” Some students pointed to dress codes forbidding hats and baggy pants as examples of rules that seemed to them to serve no purpose and to be contrary to the students’ wishes. A few students also believed that the school administrators used students in student government or in other activities to help them carry out their own agendas, rather than helping them to learn about what the students wanted. There were no consistent differences in patterns of responses across students from different groups.

B.7. Family and Community Involvement

Students were provided with the following definition of *family and community involvement*: *Family and community involvement can come from the school reaching out to people in the community as well as the community supporting the school. When students feel like there is family and community involvement at school, they may feel like the school welcomes and values their family’s involvement, that their families and other community members are interested in what happens at their school, and that their families and other community members show support for their school (for example, by attending school events). When students feel like their family and community is uninvolved at school, they may feel like the school does not welcome or value families like theirs, that their families and other community members are not interested in what happens at their school, and that their families and other community members do not show support for their school (for example, few parents or other community members attend school events).*

Students were then asked, “How important do you think family and community involvement is in determining whether you work hard in school and learn as much as you could? Would you say

that family and community involvement is not important, somewhat important, or very important?”

A total of 216 students provided responses to this question. See Table 7 for information on responses overall, responses of engaged students and disengaged students, responses of Alaska Native and non-Native students, and responses of middle school students and high school students.

Table 7. Importance of Family and Community Involvement

	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important
Overall	13%	38%	50%
Engaged	23%	23%	54%
Disengaged	6%	49%	45%
Alaska Native	9%	36%	55%
Non-Alaska Native	17%	37%	45%
Middle School	16%	34%	50%
High School	15%	42%	43%

In responding to this question, students spoke about both academics and extracurricular activities. In terms of academics, students spoke of the importance of parents being aware of how their children were doing in school and knowing how to help them, saying “If your parents come in [to school], they can figure out what you need help with so they can help you at home, too,” and “If your parents don’t get involved, then you’re not going to try at all,” and “Your parents can push you and encourage you to do your best.” In contrast, many students believed that if parents did not care about school, then their children would care less as well. But some students (especially high school students) believed that it was primarily the student’s responsibility to do well in school and that family support was not essential.

In terms of extracurricular activities, students talked about how having family attend school events (that the students were involved in) would make the students try harder to do well in that event. For example, one student said, “It makes me feel special when my parents come see me,” and another said, “I think [parents] should be there for their kids and cheering them on, instead of [just] their coaches.”

C. Academic Relevance

Students may base their decisions about whether to stay in school on whether they believe school will be helpful to them in the future. We asked students, “Do you think your school is teaching you everything you need you know in life?” Note that this question was added for the 2011 focus groups and was not asked in the focus groups that took place in some rural villages (with Alaska Native students) in 2010.

Students had very mixed opinions about whether their schools were teaching them what they really needed to know in life. Students tended to fall into the following three categories:

1. Students who thought that their school was teaching them what they needed to know
2. Students who believed that they needed to know some of the subjects they were being taught, but that other subjects would not be of any use
3. Students who believed that they did not need to know what they were being taught in school and that school subjects should have a more practical orientation toward life skills and job-specific skills

The most common responses were in the second category, with students believing that school taught some things that they needed to know, but that some subjects were a waste of time (unless the student would use that subject matter for a specific career). Within that category, nearly all students who mentioned English/language arts/literacy believed that the subject was important. Most students who mentioned mathematics believed either that mathematics was one subject that was useful or that applied mathematics oriented to life skills (e.g., being able to manage a household budget) was important, but some students said that higher mathematics would not be useful. Many students did not believe that history was relevant and thought that there should be a greater focus on the present and the future. Some students also believed that related subjects such as geography or social studies dealing with world cultures would be of use only to people planning to go to the countries being studied. And students who mentioned science did not see how the information learned in science classes was or would be relevant to daily living.

Students in the first category gave several reasons for believing that their schools were teaching them what they really needed to know in life. Many students believed that the subjects they were studying would be necessary for them to be able to do well in college or at their jobs or—in the case of middle school students—prepare them for high school. Students also believed that their schools provided them with opportunities to develop skills, such as social skills, the ability to work with authority figures, and the ability to get up in the morning. Some students who attended larger schools with more opportunities for elective, diverse coursework or special programs (e.g., Reserve Officers' Training Corps [ROTC]) believed that these extra opportunities helped students learn things that were relevant to their personal interests and goals.

Only a few students in the third category said that they did not think young people should have to go to school at all. Most of these students believed that school could teach them things that would help them in their lives if they could study different subjects than were currently offered. Many of these students thought that school should provide more life-skills education, such how to care for one's self and run a household (e.g., cooking, home repairs, driving, gaining employment, staying healthy), how to raise children and be a good parent, and how to survive in the wilderness. Some students also believed that academic coursework could be very useful if it was tailored to the interests and goals of the individual student. In addition, some youth who had dropped out reported that they had become bored at school because their academic work was not sufficiently challenging and/or they believed that their teachers underestimated their abilities.

Responses of Engaged Students Versus Disengaged Students

Although one might expect that engaged students would believe that their schools were teaching them what they needed to know and that disengaged students would not believe that idea, the pattern of responses was mixed. Responses from students in both groups fell into all three categories. Disengaged students were somewhat more likely than engaged students to directly state that they were not learning what they needed to know or that they should not be required to go to school at all, but most of these students still thought that their schoolwork (or some of their schoolwork) was relevant. Engaged and disengaged students provided similar suggestions for making coursework more relevant by adding more life-skills components or allowing students to focus their coursework on their interests and goals.

Responses of Alaska Native Versus Non-Native Students

Alaska Native students provided much more positive responses to this question than did non-Native students. Responses from Alaska Native students fell into all three categories, and many Native students pointed to the importance of diverse course opportunities to keep students interested. Alaska Native students also were somewhat more likely than non-Native students to have trusting attitudes that the curriculum was based on what students would need later in their lives, even if the purpose was not apparent at the moment.

In contrast, although non-Native students also provided responses in all three categories, they were much more likely than Native students to directly state that their schools were not teaching them what they really needed to know in life. Non-Native students who gave negative responses tended to list classes they thought were relevant and classes that were not—considering basic skills important (e.g., basic mathematics) but considering advanced coursework irrelevant for students who did not intend to pursue careers in that field (e.g., advanced mathematics).

Responses of Urban Middle School Students Versus Urban High School Students

Both middle school students and high school students provided a variety of responses to this question. In each group there were some students who believed that their schools were teaching them what they needed to know, some students who believed that their schools were not teaching them what they needed to know, and a larger percentage of students who believed that their schools were teaching them only part of what they needed to know (or that only part of their coursework was irrelevant). There were no distinguishable differences in patterns of responses between middle school students and high school students.

D. Influences on School Completion

Alaska has one of the highest student dropout rates of any state, with substantial differences in dropout rates by ethnicity. According to recent data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), Alaska Native/Native American students drop out of school at a higher rate than students from other racial groups, and this result is also true within Alaska (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). We were interested in learning more about why students drop out of school and in learning about possible differences among groups that could help explain why

Alaska Native students left school at higher rates than non-Native students (and giving higher rates for their school climate and connectedness on the SCCS, mentioned in Section B).

We already addressed how school climate relates to student engagement with previous questions, so we now asked students, “What influences at home or in the community determine whether a student stays in school or drops out?” We also asked participants, “When a student drops out of school, is it usually because of issues at school, because there are better things to do outside of school like work or help out at home, or a combination of both?” If issues at school were mentioned, we could then identify whether these areas were currently addressed on the SCCS. Although the first question was about home and community, many students discussed school as well, so results from those questions are combined. In response to the second question, an overwhelming majority of participants believed that students dropped out of school because of factors specific to the students or their families or home situations rather than because of poor school environment.

Across groups, participants most commonly cited the following reasons for peers dropping out of school (listed according to frequency of response):

1. Drug or alcohol use
2. Choosing to spend time with peers or a boyfriend or girlfriend who had dropped out
3. Lack of family support for education
4. Needing to help support their family (from a financial or practical perspective)
5. Early parenthood
6. Laziness or not wanting to get up in the morning
7. Depression
8. Negative experiences with peers at school (bullying, being picked on, being isolated)
9. Negative experiences with teachers or other authority figures at school, such as getting caught up in a cycle of misbehavior, excessive punishment, anger, and then further misbehavior
10. Lack of positive connections with or support from teachers
11. Belief that school will not help them in their future careers, so it would be better to drop out and start earning money

A subgroup of respondents who already had dropped out of school gave responses that were consistent with these reasons.

Responses of Engaged Students Versus Disengaged Students

Both engaged students and disengaged students mentioned each of the 11 reasons. When discussing this topic, disengaged students were more likely to refer to the specifics of friends and family who had dropped out, whereas engaged students were more likely to talk in terms of guessing what was happening with students who dropped out.

Many disengaged students said that they were determined to stay in school and graduate (and indeed, they were still enrolled in school despite poor attendance and failing classes). Several

students said that they wanted to stay in school for reasons such as continuing a family pattern of graduating or overcoming a family history of not graduating. Others said that they knew peers who had dropped out who were now bored or unemployed, and they did not wish to end up in the same situation. Disengaged students also talked about the importance of encouragement from family, school staff, and friends.

Both engaged students and disengaged students believed that it was important for students to have opportunities to engage in meaningful coursework and meaningful extracurricular activities. Disengaged students and both engaged and disengaged students in rural areas also talked about how requirements for extracurricular activities (such as having to pass one's classes to play on the basketball team) were strong motivators for some students to stay in school and pass their classes.

Results for Alaska Native Versus Non-Native Students

We did not find significant differences in responses to these questions between Alaska Native and non-Native students. Students from both groups referred to each of the 11 dropout reasons.

Results for Middle School Students Versus High School Students

Although middle school students and high school students provided fairly similar responses, many middle school students stated that they did not actually know anyone who had dropped out of their schools, so they were basing the responses on personal experiences (e.g., older siblings) or making guesses about why students might drop out.

E. Summary of Focus Group Results

In sum, there were far more similarities than differences among students from different groups (engaged students and disengaged students, Alaska Native and non-Native students, middle school students and high school students). Some patterns of difference in focus did emerge among groups.

In the case of Alaska Native versus non-Native students, note that Alaska Native students were drawn from both urban and rural areas, whereas non-Native students were drawn from urban areas only, so results should be generalized with caution.

The following key findings emerged from these focus groups:

1. **What creates a positive school climate.** Across all groups, students believed that a school was a good place for students to be when there was equality among students and a lack of favoritism from adults at school, when students were safe to express their own ideas and opinions, and when there were opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities. Many students also believed that a positive school climate was created by physical and emotional safety, structure, fairness, opportunities for personal development, and opportunities to be part of a friendly and encouraging environment.

2. **What creates a poor school climate.** Across all groups, students believed that racism, sexism, judgmental attitudes, poor safety, drug and alcohol by students, and insufficient breaks during the day all created a negative school climate. Students from most groups also believed that bad or excessive school rules, unfair application of those rules, and excessive consequences for minor misbehavior made for a negative school climate.
3. **What differentiates the experiences of engaged students and disengaged students.** There were a significant number of differences in focus between engaged students and disengaged students. Rather than being detached and uncaring about their school environments, disengaged students seemed to place *more* importance on their relationships with adults at school, to appreciate good school rules and structure, and to see poor peer behavior as detrimental.
4. **What differentiates middle school students and high school students.** Differences between middle school students and high school students seemed more developmental in nature, with high school students taking a broader view of all the actors and pieces in the creation of a positive or negative school climate than middle school students did.
5. **What differentiates Alaska Native versus non-Native students.** There were far more similarities than differences between Alaska Native and non-Native students. However, Alaska Native students placed greater importance on peer behavior at school than non-Native students. Alaska Native students were more likely than non-Native students to emphasize that their school could provide safe haven to students with family problems. And Alaska Native students in rural areas placed an especially high value on school-based opportunities to engage in recreational and enrichment activities.
6. **How schools provide a nurturing environment.** In several contexts, students spoke about how schools created safe havens for and gave support to students having difficulties at home and provided places where young people could spend their time constructively and stay out of trouble. They believed that caring school staff helped students by noticing if they were having difficulties and reaching out to them and by being available to students who wanted to reach out.
7. **How schools escalate disengagement.** Disengaged students often described situations in which their problems started off with small issues with teachers, believed that they were disproportionately punished, expressed anger or unhappiness toward the teachers for what the students perceived to be inappropriate or unfair treatment, and were punished again. These kinds of situations contributed to a downward spiral of misbehavior and punishment that students did not want but did not know how to stop or reverse.
8. **How students explain why their peers drop out.** Overall, students believed that peers were more likely to drop out of school because of their own personal issues than because of a poor school climate. Students also saw an interaction in which a student with personal or family problems either could find safety and support at school or could come to view school as too much to manage and just another problem. Although schools do not seem to create most of the issues that cause students to drop out, they can play roles in helping vulnerable students to stay in school and benefit from a safe and supportive school environment, a point that is suggested by the responses of disengaged students. Although the dropout rate is especially high among Alaska Native students, these students did not identify different reasons for dropping out than did non-Native students.

It is possible that school factors play less a role in contributing to dropout rates than the prevalence of factors in some communities that make it more difficult for Alaska Native students to stay engaged in school, despite their generally positive views on education and on their school environments.

III. Think-Aloud Interview Results

In this section, we present results from the think-aloud interviews. Results are presented by SCCS scale area: high expectations, respectful climate, peer climate, school safety, caring adults, parent and community involvement, and social and emotional learning. Students were asked to talk through their responses to key survey items in each area, and their responses are summarized in the following discussion. (See Appendix C for a copy of the protocol.) There were no significant differences in responses between Alaska Native and non-Native students unless noted.

A. High Expectations

Teachers and other adults at this school think that all students at this school can do good work.

When responding to this statement, students thought about their teachers and other school staff such as counselors, security guards, and lunchroom staff. Some students did not know how they would determine whether teachers and other adults at their schools thought that students could do good work. Others assumed that believing that all students could do good work was just part of being a teacher. Where students were able to identify specific behaviors, they identified teachers telling students when they could do better and then supporting them in doing so.

I try hard to do well in school.

Nearly all students defined “doing well” as getting good grades, and several students also mentioned good behavior and taking school seriously. They thought students could try hard by making sure they understood their lessons and completed their work. Some students also mentioned avoiding negative behaviors (e.g., using drugs or alcohol, watching television before homework was done) as part of trying hard to do well.

At this school, students are encouraged to work to the best of their abilities.

Respondents believed that teachers could encourage students to work to the best of their abilities by supporting their academic achievements and encouraging them to avoid behaviors that could have negative impacts on their learning, such as having bad attendance, using drugs and alcohol, or not taking school seriously. Teachers encouraged students by saying, “I know you can do it” and “This is going to help you in the long run.”

B. Respectful Climate

My teachers are fair.

Most students viewed this item in the context of the individual teacher–student relationship (e.g., if the student is respectful, then a fair teacher is respectful) and whether teachers were reasonable (e.g., moderate amount of homework, logical and proportional responses to misbehavior). Some students also viewed this item in terms of how teachers treated students in relation to one

another, such as not letting one student get away with something and punishing another for the same behavior.

It pays to follow the rules at my school.

Students were easily able to identify rules that they needed to follow (e.g., dress code, attendance, not harassing or distracting other students). For nearly all students, this statement meant that good behavior either leads to good consequences or at least helps the student avoid bad consequences. One student out of the 10 participants thought of receiving money from a relative as a reward for good grades.

C. Peer Climate

Students here treat me with respect.

In responding to this item, some students focused on positive behavior (e.g., caring, asking people how they are doing, treating people well even if they are not your friends, sharing). A few students viewed respect in terms of the absence of negative behaviors (e.g., not being mean, not making fun of others).

D. School Safety

I am safe at school.

Students thought of safety in terms of crime and physical safety (e.g., theft, fights). Students also talked about the importance of trust—being able to trust that their peers would not harm them and that teachers would intervene if a student was upset—and emotional safety, such as not being made fun of.

Crime and violence are major concerns at school.

Students thought of crime as any breaking of school rules or laws. Violence was viewed in terms of physical assaults. Students differed somewhat in their ideas about what constituted a “major concern,” with some students believing that any breaking of the rules should be of concern and others believing that the situation had to be more severe to be of concern (e.g., weapons rather than a fight without weapons).

E. School Leadership and Student Involvement

Students are involved in helping to solve school problems.

Some students thought of school problems in terms of a larger group of students (e.g., prevalent bullying), but others read this item in terms of personal problems (an individual student is behind academically, or has family problems). Although some students mentioned direct student involvement in solving school problems (e.g., through student government), many thought of “solving” more in terms of how the school dealt with individuals or helped a student with his or

her personal problems. It seems that many students may not have read this item as it was intended (whether the school encourages students to come together to help solve schoolwide problems).

F. Parent and Community Involvement

Adults in my community support this school.

Some students had trouble thinking of the makeup of their communities, but most students viewed their communities as neighbors, people involved in local entities such as churches or businesses, and people who lived around the school. They viewed community support in multiple ways, such as direct financial support, assistance with fundraising, and attending sporting events.

This school is a welcoming place for families like mine.

Students were easily able to come up with a multitude of ways that schools could welcome families. Some students suggested schoolwide events such as potlucks, open houses, or auctions. Students also thought about how their individual family members were treated when they came to school (spoken to politely, encouraged to get to know teachers and counselors). When reading the words *families like mine*, most students thought about families that go through a mix of good times and bad times. Some students also thought about culture (e.g., welcoming of Alaska Native families).

G. Social and Emotional Learning

I set goals and then work to achieve them.

Students were able to explain what goals were (thinking about what they wanted in the short term or long term, then making a plan to achieve their goals).

I respect the ways in which people are different.

When responding to this item, many students thought about how it was important to treat others the way they would like to be treated. They believed that when someone did *not* respect the ways in which other people were different, it was usually a case of that person (or a clique of students) looking down on others as inferiors. Students also talked about respect in terms of tailoring their actions to the needs and differences of other people (e.g., explaining things in greater detail to someone who does not learn as quickly as they do).

I seek help from teachers or others when I need it.

Students mostly viewed this item in terms of getting academic assistance or support, such as a teacher explaining something again. Some students also mentioned being able to get support from school staff, such as counselors or school principals.

H. Summary of Think-Aloud Interview Results

There were no apparent differences in responses between Alaska Native and non-Native students. Overall, students thought about the survey items in the way they were intended. One item in the area of school leadership and student involvement, however, did seem problematic, with many respondents interpreting the item *Students are involved in helping to solve school problems* through the lens of the *school* helping the *student* solve problems rather than the other way around.

IV. Discussion and Recommendations

In this section, we summarize key findings from this evaluation, and then we provide conclusions and recommendations based on these results.

A. Summary of Findings

School Climate

Students provided a rich description of a positive school climate where they have good relationships with adults and peers; they have good teachers and opportunities to engage in learning; there is a welcoming environment where there are reasonable boundaries, students are safe, treated fairly, and they have opportunities for personal growth; and where students have opportunities to engage in extracurricular activities.

Students described a negative school climate as one that had poor social relationships, had safety issues, was unfair, had too many or bad rules, and lacked opportunities for students.

There were far more similarities than differences between students from different groups (engaged students and disengaged students, Alaska Native and non-Native students, middle school students and high school students). Some patterns of difference in focus, however, did emerge between groups.

Although there were many more similarities than differences between Alaska Native and non-Native students with regard to what aspects of positive school climate they identified, Alaska Native students exhibited the following characteristics:

- Were more focused on the importance of academics and pedagogy
- Had more interest in the kinds of learning opportunities that a school could provide
- Were more likely to mention the negative impact of poor peer behavior in the classroom
- Noted how a lack of student and parent involvement in decision making was detrimental to a school
- Described how tolerance for unfair treatment of students would make a school a place where they would not want to be and not want to do well
- Stated that a negative school climate was created when drugs or alcohol were present at school

Note, however, that Alaska Native students were drawn from both urban and rural areas, whereas non-Native students were drawn from urban areas only, so results should be generalized with caution.

There were a significant number of differences in focus between engaged students and disengaged students. Rather than being detached and uncaring about their school environment, disengaged students seemed to attach *more* importance to their relationships with adults at

school, to appreciate good school rules and structure, and to see poor peer behavior as detrimental. Disengaged students were much more likely than engaged students to exhibit the following attitudes or behaviors:

- Focus on the quality of the overall school environment—especially the importance of structure, fairness, and good boundaries
- Focus on the role that school could play in providing a supportive and positive environment for students who may be having some difficulties in their lives
- Identification of poor behavior among peers in class as a negative influence on whether they wanted to come to school and wanted to do well
- Being personally caught up in negative cycles of misbehavior and excessive consequences from teachers

Differences between middle school students and high school students seemed mostly developmental in nature, with high school students taking a broader view of all the actors and pieces involved in the creation of a positive or negative school climate than middle school students did. More focus groups were held with students from high schools than with students from middle schools, so it is not surprising that there are more responses that are unique to high school students than to middle school students. High school students, however, did seem much more likely than middle schools students to provide responses that related to the overall school environment. It could be that older students are better able than younger students to consider the “big picture” at school.

Relevance of Existing SCCS Scales

Students were presented with the areas of school climate currently covered by the SCCS and were asked how important each one was in determining whether they wanted to come to school and do well. Students from across groups were generally in agreement that the areas of school climate assessed on the SCCS were relevant to them. Students from across groups believed that the presence of caring adults at school, school safety, a respectful climate, and a positive peer climate were all very important and that high expectations from adults at school were important (but many students also believed that expectations should be internal, from the student himself or herself, and not something externally imposed by teachers).

The area that seemed least relevant to students was also the area with the weakest relationship to student outcomes: school leadership and student involvement. Students also said little about this topic when they were first asked open-ended questions about what makes for a positive or negative school climate.

Students also placed less importance on family and community involvement than on what happened inside their schools. Students did not spontaneously mention family or community involvement when they were asked open-ended questions about what made a school a good or a bad place for students. What was happening at home and with family was an important factor in whether students stayed in school or dropped out, but the family *connection* with school or school outreach to families was less important to students than other aspects of school life in determining whether they came to school and learned as much as they could.

Academic Relevance

Students had very mixed opinions about whether their schools were teaching them what they really needed to know in life. Students tended to fall into the following three categories:

1. Students who thought that their school was teaching them what they needed to know
2. Students who believed that they needed to know some of the subjects they were being taught, but that others would not be of any use
3. Students who felt that they did not need to know what they were being taught in school and that school subjects should have a more practical orientation toward life skills and job-specific skills

Students in the second category were most common, believing that school taught some things that students needed to know, but that some subjects were a waste of time (unless students would use that subject matter for specific careers). Alaska Native students (mostly from rural areas) had a strong interest in having greater course options available to them in order to diversify their learning, and to match their areas of special interest

Students in the first category gave several reasons why they believed that their school was teaching them what they really needed to know in life. Many of these students believed that the subjects they were studying would be necessary for them to be able to do well in college or at jobs or—in the case of middle school students—prepare them for high school. Students also believed that their schools provided them with opportunities to develop skills, such as social skills, ability to work with authority figures, and ability to get up in the morning.

Among the students in the third category, only a few said that they did not think young people should have to go to school at all. Most of these students believed that school could teach them things that would help them in their lives if they could study different subjects than were currently offered—especially subjects oriented toward life skills. Some students also believed that academic coursework could be very useful if it were tailored to the interests and goals of the individual student.

Influences on School Completion

Overall, students believed that peers were more likely to drop out of school because of their own personal issues rather than because of a poor school climate. Nevertheless, they saw an interaction in which a student with personal or family problems could either find safety and support at school or could come to view school as too much to manage and just another problem. Although schools did not seem to create most of the issues that caused students to drop out, they played a role in helping vulnerable students to stay in school and benefit from a safe and supportive school environment. Many disengaged (but still enrolled) students mentioned that they were determined to stay in school and graduate. Several of these students said that they wanted to stay in school for reasons such as continuing a family pattern of graduating or overcoming a family history of not graduating. Others said that they knew peers who had dropped out who were now bored and/or unemployed, and they did not wish to end up in the

same situation. Disengaged students also talked about the importance of encouragement from family, school staff, and friends.

Understanding Key SCCS Items

Think-aloud interviews were used to learn more about how students understood key SCCS items and whether there were differences in interpretation or frame of reference between Alaska Native and non-Native students. With one exception (in the area of school leadership and student involvement), students thought about the survey items in the way they were intended. There were no apparent differences in how Alaska Native and non-Native students read these questions or thought when responding to them.

B. Conclusions and Recommendations

The existing school climate topics on the SCCS seemed relevant equally to students from all groups. The SCCS scales that were least relevant to students were school leadership and student involvement and parent and community involvement. Because the work of the Association of Alaska School Boards has shifted since the original introduction of the SCCS, the association may wish to reexamine these scales to determine whether they should remain part of the SCCS or some of them should be replaced in new areas that students identified as important (such as a challenging and relevant academic curriculum and opportunities to engage in enrichment activities). There were no systematic differences in how Alaska Native and non-Native students interpreted selected key survey items from the SCCS, so differences in SCCS responses between Alaska Native and non-Native students do not seem to be based on differences in how they think about the survey questions (e.g., what *respect* or *safety* means to them).

There were far more similarities than differences between Alaska Native and non-Native students in the aspects of school climate that were important (or unimportant). There also were no apparent differences in how Alaska Native and non-Native students think about key items on the SCCS across a variety of areas. Therefore, it seems that the disconnection between school climate ratings and academic achievement or outcomes for Alaska Native students is *not* based on a misalignment between what is important to them and what is asked on the SCCS. Other aspects of personal and family life seem to play a role in whether students stay in school or drop out, and the risk factors for dropping out may be greater for Alaska Native students. It seems, however, that schools can keep students engaged if students are provided with safety and support to help them manage difficulties. School can act as a safe haven that provides a positive environment and fills a student's time with constructive learning that will help the student develop goals and healthy behaviors and will keep a student away from negative influences during the day. In contrast, schools may contribute to the dropout problem by ignoring or punishing students who are struggling.

Students from across ethnic/racial groups who were disengaged (but still enrolled) seemed to attach *more* importance than engaged students did to their relationships with adults at school, to appreciate good school rules and structure more, and to be more likely to see poor peer behavior as detrimental. The stereotype of disengaged students as not caring about what adults at school think, disliking school rules and boundaries, and encouraging negative peer behavior is incorrect. School rules and relationships with adults, in particular, seem to be problematic for disengaged

students. They appreciate school rules and boundaries *if they are applied fairly* and value relationships with teachers *who listen to them and give them second chances*. Disengaged students from several schools described getting into negative cycles with teachers when students broke the rules, believed that they were then treated unfairly by the teachers, responded to the teachers with hostility or disrespect, and then experienced even greater unfair consequences (such as no longer being trusted to go to the restroom during class, when other students were allowed to do so). These students described being in negative cycles that they had difficulty breaking. Adults at school may be able to recognize these cycles when they start and intervene before a negative spiral of misbehavior and punishment becomes fully established.

In particular, Alaska Native students placed a high value on having academic coursework that was challenging and engaging. They also emphasized the importance of having opportunities to learn about a diversity of topics (e.g., arts, technology) and to be able to engage in extracurricular activities, such as clubs and sports. Although it may be difficult to offer a great diversity of academic subjects and extracurricular activities in rural communities, increasing academic rigor and opportunities may pay off in greater student engagement in school.

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Appendix A. Participating Communities and Schools

The following schools and communities took part in this project:

Anchorage
Benson Secondary School
Central Middle School
Dimond High School
East High School
Hanshew Middle School
Mears Middle School
SAVE High School
Service High School
Wendler Middle School
West High School
Youth who had dropped out of Anchorage schools
Juneau
Floyd Dryden Middle School
Juneau Douglas High School
Thunder Mountain High School
Yakoosge Daakahidi
Lower Kuskokwim
Ayaprun School
Bethel Alternative Boarding School
Bethel Regional High School
William Miller Memorial School
Youth who had dropped out of Lower Kuskokwim schools
Yukon-Koyukuk
Allakaket School (Participated but data unavailable)
Andrew K. Demoski School (Participated but data unavailable)
Jimmy Huntington School (Participated but data unavailable)
Kaltag School
Merrelaine A Kangas School (Participated but data unavailable)
Minto School (Participated but data unavailable)

Appendix B. Focus Group Protocol

General Focus Group Protocol: School Climate and Academic Engagement October 1, 2010

Welcome to our session today! **My name is _____.** I want to thank you for taking your time to participate in our discussion group. We really need to hear your opinions and your voice about what makes a school a place where students want to be and want to do well. **The purpose of today's discussion group is to find out whether the areas of school life currently covered in the School Climate and Connectedness Survey are the areas of school life that are really the most important to students.** Your opinion is very important.

We will use the results of this and several other discussion groups to help us determine what works well and what might need to be improved on the survey already given to students every year to learn what they think about their schools. We do **not** need to learn about what is good or bad about your school specifically. Rather, we want to know what parts of school life play the largest role in helping students like you perform well academically and graduate.

Before we begin, **I would like to review some rules we will follow during the session.** **Nothing you say will affect your grades or be shared with your teachers or principal or anyone else at the school. The conversation we have today should be considered private.** What is said in the room should stay in the room and not be discussed with other people. Please speak up. Only one person should talk at a time. Everyone's opinion is really important so we will try to make sure that each person has an opportunity to speak.

We will only use your first name today. Your name will not be included in any written comments or appear in the report of this meeting. **You may be assured of complete privacy.** Keep in mind that we're just as interested in negative comments as positive comments. Sometimes the negative comments are the most helpful.

Our session will last about an hour. We really value your time. If there are no questions, let's begin.

First, **we need to get your permission to participate in this session.** I will read the Permission Form to you and answer any questions you may have. **You must sign this form in order to participate in this discussion group.**

[Read the form to the group and address any questions. Have each form signed and witnessed by one of the note takers. Collect all of the forms and place them in the envelope provided. Excuse those who decide not to participate.]

Introductions

We've placed name cards on the table in front of each of you so that we can remember each other's name during the discussion [*this is not necessary in small communities where participants already know one another*]. Let's find out some more about each other by going around the room one at a time. Please tell us your first name and something about you that other people here might not know. For example, [*facilitator give own example*]

School Climate (5 to 10 minutes)

Now we would like to talk with you about what is important to students about their school.

1. What kinds of things make a school a good place for students to be?

2. What kinds of things would make a school a place where students do **not** want to be?

We would like to spend the rest of our time asking your advice on a few issues. We will talk about each of the areas of school life currently covered on the School Climate and Connectedness Survey. We would like to know how important you think each of these areas of school life are in making school a place where students like you want to be and want to do well. We will finish by asking if there are any other parts of school life that you think are important that are not currently part of the survey.

High Expectations (5 minutes)

Let's begin by talking about expectations. Having high expectations means that teachers and other school staff let a student know that he or she can do well in school and can achieve his or her goals. They encourage each student to work hard and provide support to help that student be successful. The student feels like teachers and other school staff are there to help them succeed. In contrast, when teachers and other school staff do not have high expectations for a student, they may not encourage that student to work hard or may not provide that student with the support he or she needs to do well. The student may not feel that teachers or school staff have high hopes for them or believe in them.

3. How important do you think expectations [as defined above] are in determining whether you work hard in school and learn as much as you could? Would you say that teacher and school staff expectations for students are not important, somewhat important, or very important?

Respectful Climate (5 minutes)

Now let's talk about respect between school staff and students. When adults at a school treat a student with respect, they are polite to that student, use a positive tone when asking that student

to do something or when discussing any concerns with that student, and the student will feel like he or she is being treated fairly. In contrast, when adults at a school do not treat a student with respect, they may not make an effort to be polite to that student, may take a negative tone when dealing with that student, or the student may feel like he or she is being treated unfairly.

4. How important do you think respect from adults at school is in determining whether you work hard in school and learn as much as you could? Would you say that respect from adults at school is not important, somewhat important, or very important?

Peer Climate (5 minutes)

Now let's talk about relationships among students—something we call “peer climate.” When there is a positive peer climate at school, students treat one another with respect and help one another (even if they are not friends). When there is a negative peer climate at school, students think it is okay to disrespect one another, and some students may feel picked on or isolated.

5. How important do you think peer climate is in determining whether you work hard in school and learn as much as you could? Would you say that peer climate is not important, somewhat important, or very important?

Safety (5 minutes)

Now let's talk about school safety. When a student feels like they are safe at school, he or she does not have to worry about being hurt or threatened by other students or adults while at school. In contrast, when a student does not feel safe at school, he or she may worry about being hurt or threatened by other students or adults within the school, or that crime or violence in the community will affect him or her even at school.

6. How important do you think school safety is in determining whether you can concentrate in school and learn as much as you could? Would you say that school safety not important, somewhat important, or very important?

Caring Adults (5 minutes)

Now let's talk about the presence of caring adults at school. When a student feels like there are caring adults at school, this means that the student has one or more adults at school that he or she can talk to if they have a problem. Having caring adults also means that the student feels like he or she is someone that adults at school value as a person. In contrast, when a student does not feel like there are caring adults at school, he or she may feel like adults are not there to help them if they have a problem, or that adults do not care about them as an individual.

7. How important do you think having caring adults at school (or not) plays a role in whether you work hard in school and learn as much as you could? Would you say that caring adults are not important, somewhat important, or very important?

School Leadership (5 minutes)

Now let's talk about school leadership and student involvement. "Leadership" refers to the adults who make decisions at the school, such as rules and planning what will happen at the school. When schools have good leadership and good student involvement, a student will feel like the leaders at the school value student opinion and make decisions based on what is best for students. When schools have poor leadership or poor student involvement, a student will feel like the leaders at the school are not interested in what students like him or her have to say, and do not make decisions based on what is best for students.

8. How important do you think school leadership is in determining whether you work hard in school and learn as much as you could? Would you say that school leadership is not important, somewhat important, or very important?

Family and Community Involvement (5 minutes)

Now let's talk about parent and community involvement at school. Family and community involvement can come from the school reaching out to people in the community as well as the community supporting the school. When students feel like there is family and community involvement at school, they may feel like the school welcomes and values their family's involvement, that their families and other community members are interested in what happens at their school, and that their families and other community members show support for their school (for example, by attending school events). When students feel like their family and community is *uninvolved* at school, they may feel like the school does not welcome or value families like theirs, that their families and other community members are not interested in what happens at their school, and that their families and other community members do not show support for their school (for example, few parents or other community members attend school events).

9. How important do you think family and community involvement is in determining whether you work hard in school and learn as much as you could? Would you say that family and community involvement is not important, somewhat important, or very important?

Other Areas (10 minutes)

10. Do you think your school is teaching you what you really need to know in life? [*Probe for why they feel this way?*]
11. Are there other aspects of school life that we didn't talk about that you think play a role in determining whether you work hard in school and learn in school as much as you could? [*Probe for what these areas are and how important?*]

12. What influences at home or in the community determine whether a student stays in school or drops out? [*Probe: What influences encourages students to stay in school and graduate? What influences encourage them to drop out?*]
13. When a student drops out of your school, do you think it's usually because of problems with school, because there are better things to do outside of school like work or help out at home, or a little of both? Why do you think that way? Are there other reasons that students drop out of your school?
14. Any other comments or things that you think are important that we didn't discuss?

Closure

Thank you for participating in this discussion group!

Put all of the forms (Informed Consent and questionnaires) in the large envelope provided.

Appendix C. Think-Aloud Interview Protocol

Alaska Cognitive Lab Screening Protocol Student Grade 5–12 Survey

April 2010

PRACTICE EXERCISE:

I am going to ask you to read some statements out loud and respond to them. Some of these statements will take a lot of thinking. Others will be easy. We are interested in what you are thinking when you respond to the statements. In order to find out what you are thinking, I want you to think out loud as you answer. In other words, I want you to say out loud everything you say to yourself silently, when you are thinking. This is kind of different. It's not what people usually do. So, I'll give you an example.

NOTE: HAND PRACTICE EXERCISES PRINTED ON THE SEPARATE SHEET OF PAPER TO THE PARTICIPANT.

I'm going to ask you to read each statement and think out loud as you respond to it. This includes saying out loud if you don't understand the statement, or if there is a word in it that you don't know the meaning of. Basically say anything that is on your mind as you figure out your answer. Let me show you what I mean. Suppose there was a statement that said: "I liked what I ate for dinner last night." If someone asked me to respond "Strongly Disagree," "Disagree," "Agree Some/Disagree Some," "Agree," or "Strongly Agree" to this statement and think aloud while I was answering, I would say:

Well, last night for dinner I had salad, chicken, and some pasta. I don't really like vegetables so I didn't like the salad too much. But I did like the chicken and the pasta. So I would say "Agree," because I did like most of what I ate for dinner last night.

Now, you try it:

"I liked what I ate for dinner last night."

"Strongly Disagree," "Disagree," "Agree Some/Disagree Some," "Agree," or "Strongly Agree"?

Great. Now, let's try another question so you can practice this kind of thinking out loud some more.

"I like to play sports."

"Strongly Disagree," "Disagree," "Agree Some/Disagree Some," "Agree," or "Strongly Agree"?

Note to interviewer: Have the participant read the statement aloud and indicate his/her response. If the student is thinking aloud well, move on to the interview. If the student still needs more practice thinking aloud, give them feedback and then have him/her try this statement for additional practice:

"Summer is my favorite season."

"Strongly Disagree," "Disagree," "Agree Some/Disagree Some," "Agree," or "Strongly Agree"?

General Notes on Verbal Probes

- Probes are used to prompt respondents to provide more information about how they comprehended targeted parts of items. The primary goal is to identify items that prove problematic to respondents in terms of **general comprehension, recall, and decision and response processes**.
- With each item, consider the different factors that can render an item problematic, such as:
 1. Construct validity (item doesn't measure what we think it is measuring)
 2. Formatting (difficulty in determining what parts of the question to read, conflicting instructions)
 3. Intent or meaning (question is lengthy or awkward, wording is too complex or vague, multiple ways to interpret item)
 4. Burden (overall instrument length or individual item length is too cumbersome)
 5. Accuracy of response categories (response options are not complete or representative)
 6. Sensitivity and bias
- Don't assume you know how the participant arrived at a conclusion. It is informative to know what a participant thinks something *is*, but it is also informative to know what he/she thinks it *is not*. For every key survey word, you should leave with a good sense for how the participant defines it, including what things they would include in their definitions and what they would exclude.
- Generally, if a respondent answers "Agree Some/Disagree Some," ask him/her to explain why he/she is in between; probe to see if there is any confusion regarding what the item is asking or describing.
- Be aware of nonverbal communication. Note if the participant seems frustrated or looks confused by an item, for example.
- If participant has done a good job with thinking aloud while answering the item, certain probes may seem redundant and may not need to be asked.
- Make a note of any item problems. If you find an item problem, try modifying it on the spot if possible and asking it again.
- Underline parts of the item the participant covers as he/she thinks aloud while answering. This is a good way to track if participants are only paying attention to certain parts of items.
- Remember to continually positively reinforce the participant for thinking aloud while responding.

Survey Items

Directions

Okay, now let's begin going through the survey questions.

Pretend we are at your school and you are taking this survey. Read each question aloud and then indicate if you "Strongly Disagree," "Disagree," "Agree Some/Disagree Some," "Agree," or "Strongly Agree" with it. Please circle your answer for each question in your own booklet. And remember to **think aloud** while responding. I will then ask you some follow-up questions.

Items on Participants' Page 1

- | | | | | | |
|--|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|--|--------------------------------|---|
| 1. Students here treat me with respect. | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree | <input type="radio"/> Agree | <input type="radio"/> Agree Some/Disagree Some | <input type="radio"/> Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree |
| 2. Teachers and other adults at this school believe that <i>all</i> students can do good work. | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree | <input type="radio"/> Agree | <input type="radio"/> Agree Some/Disagree Some | <input type="radio"/> Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree |
| 3. I try hard to do well in school. | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree | <input type="radio"/> Agree | <input type="radio"/> Agree Some/Disagree Some | <input type="radio"/> Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree |
| 4. I am safe at school. | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree | <input type="radio"/> Agree | <input type="radio"/> Agree Some/Disagree Some | <input type="radio"/> Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree |
| 5. My teachers are fair. | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree | <input type="radio"/> Agree | <input type="radio"/> Agree Some/Disagree Some | <input type="radio"/> Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree |

Probes for Items 1–5

- | | | | | | |
|---|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|--|--------------------------------|---|
| 1. Students here treat me with respect. | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree | <input type="radio"/> Agree | <input type="radio"/> Agree Some/Disagree Some | <input type="radio"/> Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree |
|---|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|--|--------------------------------|---|
-

Construct: Peer Climate

Probes:

What do you think they mean by "respect"?

Can you give me an example of how your classmates might treat someone with respect?

2. Teachers and other adults at this school believe that *all* students can do good work. Strongly Agree Agree Agree Some/Disagree Some Disagree Strongly Disagree
-

Construct: High Expectations

Probes:

Who did you think of as the “adults at this school”?

If a teacher or other adult believed that all students could do good work, how would you know that?

3. I try hard to do well in school. Strongly Agree Agree Agree Some/Disagree Some Disagree Strongly Disagree
-

Construct: High Expectations

Probes:

What do you think they mean by “do well in school”?

How might a student try hard to do well in school?

4. I am safe at school. Strongly Agree Agree Agree Some/Disagree Some Disagree Strongly Disagree

Construct: School Safety

Probes:

What does it mean to be safe at school?

5. My teachers are fair. Strongly Agree Agree Agree Some/Disagree Some Disagree Strongly Disagree

Construct: Respectful Climate

Probes:

What do you think they mean by the word “fair”?

How would you know if a teacher was being fair?

Participants' Items 6–10

- | | | | | | |
|---|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|--|--------------------------------|---|
| 6. Crime and violence are major concerns at school. | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree | <input type="radio"/> Agree | <input type="radio"/> Agree Some/Disagree Some | <input type="radio"/> Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree |
| 7. It pays to follow the rules at my school. | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree | <input type="radio"/> Agree | <input type="radio"/> Agree Some/Disagree Some | <input type="radio"/> Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree |
| 8. Adults in my community support this school. | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree | <input type="radio"/> Agree | <input type="radio"/> Agree Some/Disagree Some | <input type="radio"/> Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree |
| 9. This school is a welcoming place for families like mine. | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree | <input type="radio"/> Agree | <input type="radio"/> Agree Some/Disagree Some | <input type="radio"/> Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree |
| 10. At this school, students are encouraged to work to the best of their abilities. | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree | <input type="radio"/> Agree | <input type="radio"/> Agree Some/Disagree Some | <input type="radio"/> Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree |

Probes for Items 6–10

- | | | | | | |
|---|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|--|--------------------------------|---|
| 6. Crime and violence are major concerns at school. | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree | <input type="radio"/> Agree | <input type="radio"/> Agree Some/Disagree Some | <input type="radio"/> Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree |
|---|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|--|--------------------------------|---|
-

Construct: School Safety

Probes:

What do you think they meant by the word “crime”?

What do you think they meant by the word “violence”?

How would you know if something was a “major concern”?

7. It pays to follow the rules at my school. Strongly Agree Agree Agree Some/Disagree Some Disagree Strongly Disagree
-

Construct: Respectful Climate

Probes:

What does following the rules look like at your school?

What does it mean when it “pays” to do something like follow the rules?

8. Adults in my community support this school. Strongly Agree Agree Agree Some/Disagree Some Disagree Strongly Disagree
-

Construct: Parent and Community Involvement

Probes:

Can you describe what you thought of as your “community”? What sorts of places and/or people did you think about?

Who did you think of as the “adults” in your community when answering this item?

In what ways might adults or other people support a school?

9. This school is a welcoming place for families like mine. Strongly Agree Agree Agree Some/Disagree Some Disagree Strongly Disagree
-

Construct: Parent and Community Involvement

Probes:

What kinds of things make a school a welcoming place?

What do you think about when you read the words “families like mine”?

10. At this school, students are encouraged to work to the best of their abilities. Strongly Agree Agree Agree Some/Disagree Some Disagree Strongly Disagree
-

Construct: High Expectations

Probes:

What do you think they mean by the word “encourage”?

What do you think they mean by “best of their abilities”?

What sorts of things might someone do or say to try to encourage someone else?

Who at a school might encourage students to work to the best of their abilities?

Participants' Items 11–15

- | | | | | | |
|--|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|--|--------------------------------|---|
| 11. Students are involved in helping to solve school problems. | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree | <input type="radio"/> Agree | <input type="radio"/> Agree Some/Disagree Some | <input type="radio"/> Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree |
| 12. At this school, decisions are made based on what is best for students. | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree | <input type="radio"/> Agree | <input type="radio"/> Agree Some/Disagree Some | <input type="radio"/> Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree |
| 13. I set goals and then work to achieve them. | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree | <input type="radio"/> Agree | <input type="radio"/> Agree Some/Disagree Some | <input type="radio"/> Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree |
| 14. I respect the ways in which people are different. | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree | <input type="radio"/> Agree | <input type="radio"/> Agree Some/Disagree Some | <input type="radio"/> Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree |
| 15. I ask for help from teachers or others when I need it. | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree | <input type="radio"/> Agree | <input type="radio"/> Agree Some/Disagree Some | <input type="radio"/> Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree |

Probes for Participants' Items 11–15

11. Students are involved in helping to solve school problems. Strongly Agree Agree Agree Some/Disagree Some Disagree Strongly Disagree
-

Construct: School Leadership and Student Involvement

Probes:

What kind of school problems did you think about when you read this?

In what ways might students be involved in helping to solve school problems?

12. At this school, decisions are made based on what is best for students. Strongly Agree Agree Agree Some/Disagree Some Disagree Strongly Disagree
-

Construct: School Leadership and Student Involvement

Probes:

What kinds of decisions did you think about when you read this?

Who would be making these decisions at your school?

How would you know if decisions at your school were made based on what was best for students?

13. I set goals and then work to achieve them. Strongly Agree Agree Agree Some/Disagree Some Disagree Strongly Disagree

Construct: Social and Emotional Learning Skills

Probes:

What does “set goals” mean to you?

Can you give me an example of some goals someone might set for themselves?

How might a person work to reach their goal(s)?

14. I respect the ways in which people are different. Strongly Agree Agree Agree Some/Disagree Some Disagree Strongly Disagree

Construct: Social and Emotional Learning Skills

Probes:

What do you think they mean by “respect the ways people are different”? How might someone do that?

What kinds of things might make someone “different” from you?

15. I ask for help from teachers or others when I need it. Strongly Agree Agree Agree Some/Disagree Some Disagree Strongly Disagree

Construct: Social and Emotional Learning Skills

Probes:

What sorts of things might your classmates ask your teacher for help with?

Who else might kids go to for help when they need it?

Cognitive Interview Wrap-Up

Overall, how did you feel about answering these questions?

Are there any further thoughts or questions you would like to share with me about the questions?

What about the two different ways the questions appeared—did one way seem easier or better to you?

Thank you for participating!

Appendix D. Summary of School Climate Results – All Responses

This appendix contains a summary of responses to the two open questions about the features that create a positive or a negative school climate.

D.1. Characteristics of a Positive School Climate

We first asked students open-ended questions to learn what made a school a place where students wanted to be (positive school climate) and what would make a school a place where students did not want to be (negative school climate). These questions were asked first to get a sense of what students thought about in relation to school climate before we started introducing specific SCCS topic areas to them. Note that these two questions were added after some early data collection with Alaska Native students in rural, multilevel schools, so there is less information about those two questions from those types of schools and students.

The specific forms of the questions were as follows: “What kinds of things make a school a good place for students to be?” and “What kinds of things make a school a place where students do *not* want to be?” Responses fell into five general categories: (1) adult–student relationships, (2) relationships among students, (3) academics and pedagogy, (4) the school environment (e.g., safety, equality, rules), and (5) school resources, facilities, and infrastructure. There were several pervasive themes that emerged across all groups of students (engaged and disengaged students, Alaska Native and non-Native students, and middle school and high school students).

Adult–Student Relationships

Students believed that positive adult–student relationships were an important feature of a positive school climate, including the following:

- Help from teachers and other school staff
- Nice teachers
- Respectful staff
- Teachers who did not overreact to minor errors or misbehavior (e.g., forgotten homework)
- Good student–teacher connections/communication
- Opportunities to speak with teachers one-on-one
- Being around reliable, trustworthy adults
- Being around adults who want to help the student to succeed
- Having adults who will advocate for students
- Having informal relationships with teachers who know the students personally

Relationships Among Students

Students also believed that a positive school climate was characterized by good relationships among students (whether or not they were friends), including the following:

- Being able to talk/socialize with friends
- Having good friends who could help you
- Being nice students
- Having kind and helpful peers
- Having no cliques among students
- Having good relationships among students, no tensions among students
- Including students who focus on their work

Academics and Pedagogy

Students described a variety of ways in which academics and pedagogy could create a positive school climate, including both how teachers taught and the opportunities that were provided to students. Specifically, students mentioned the following:

- Assistance with schoolwork, academic support (e.g., tutoring)
- Teachers who teach well
- Teachers who know how to have fun/teach in a fun way
- Teachers who want to be doing their jobs
- Teachers who make sure students understand the materials
- Getting an education
- The classes available (language arts, mathematics, science, history)
- Being able to learn at your own pace
- Opportunities to learn challenging material
- Opportunities for hands-on learning
- Opportunities to choose classes that are meaningful
- Learning things that will help you in your future career
- Opportunities to learn about different vocations
- Opportunities to develop goals
- Opportunities to learn how to have a healthy life (e.g., no drugs)
- Enrichment classes available (art, crafts, technology)
- Opportunities to take field trips

- Classes with few distractions (e.g., others talking)

School Environment

There were several aspects of the school environment that contributed to a positive school climate, including physical and emotional safety, structure, fairness, opportunities for personal development, and opportunities to be part of a friendly and encouraging environment. Students specifically mentioned the following:

- No bullies, no harassment
- A structured environment
- Equality, no favoritism
- Diverse student body
- Fair application of the rules
- Good boundaries
- Safety
- An environment where students are free to express ideas/where people are open-minded
- A place where every student can feel good about himself or herself
- A safe haven and support for students having difficulties at home
- Going to school as a way to keep young people out of trouble
- A place where students have some control/impact
- A good/welcoming/friendly environment
- An environment that motivates students in a positive way (e.g., motivational posters)
- Opportunities for students to develop a positive attitude
- Opportunities for students to learn more about themselves
- Being part of a community
- Good spirit weeks, school pride

School Resources, Facilities, and Infrastructure

Students mentioned the following school resources, facilities, and infrastructure as contributions to a positive school climate:

- Good school security
- Extracurricular activities (e.g., art club, homework club)
- A large library with a good selection of books
- Being able to use technology
- Sports

- Exercise; gym
- No gym uniforms
- Good food
- A physically comfortable environment (e.g., warm temperature)
- A colorful physical school environment (e.g., not just plain walls)
- Bigger lockers
- Adequate time to pass between classes
- Transportation to and from school
- Recycling
- A big school
- Small or medium class size

D.2. Characteristics of a Negative School Climate

Adult–Student Relationships

Students believed that poor adult–student relationships could create a negative school climate, including the following:

- Poor student–teacher connections
- Mean or disrespectful teachers
- Teachers who take out their bad moods on students
- Teachers who put a student down in front of his or her peers or put a student “on the spot”
- Not being able to get help or support
- Teachers who do not listen to or care about individual students
- Teachers who are unfair
- Teachers who nag
- Adults who “treat the students like babies”
- Teacher–student conflict
- Mean or abusive staff (e.g., janitors, school security, hall monitors)

Relationships Among Students

Students also believed that a negative school climate was characterized by poor relationships among students, including the following:

- Bullies

- Gangs
- Fighting, violence, weapons
- Mean students, students who mistreat others
- Students who intimidate others
- Students who behave badly
- Students who are disrespectful to teachers
- Rude students
- Students who sleep through class
- Too much drama among students
- Peer pressure
- Social exclusion, cliques

Academics and Pedagogy

Students described a variety of ways in which issues with academics and pedagogy could create a negative school climate. Specifically, students mentioned the following:

- Too much homework
- Schoolwork that is too difficult
- Schoolwork that is not meaningful (busywork)
- Being required to take courses that students believe will not be useful
- Bad teachers
- Teachers who do not really want to do their jobs
- Teachers who are boring
- Teachers who never do anything fun in class
- Teachers who do not make sure that students understand the material
- Teachers who are excessively strict about schoolwork
- Parent–teacher conferences

School Environment

There were several aspects of the school environment that could contribute to a negative school climate, especially on the topic of rules and lack of fairness. Students specifically mentioned the following:

- School day starting too early
- Bad school schedule/insufficient breaks

- Insufficient opportunities to use the restroom
- Having a closed campus (e.g., students not allowed to leave during lunch)
- Excessive consequences for minor misbehavior
- Poor privacy so that when students do something wrong outside school, the information becomes public at school
- Mistrust of students (e.g., locker searches)
- A school administration that does not listen to or consider the needs of students
- A school advisory board that does not include students or parents
- Lack of concern for students' futures
- Bad school rules, too many rules
- Dress code
- Racism
- Stereotypes
- Sexism
- Students being judged by others
- An environment where unfair treatment of students is tolerated
- An environment where harassment of students is tolerated
- Lack of safety
- Violence, weapons
- Presence or sale of drugs and alcohol
- Peers under the influence of drugs or alcohol

School Resources, Facilities, and Infrastructure

Students mentioned several resources that, if absent, would create a negative school climate. They also mentioned the presence of some school attributes that contributed to creating a negative school climate. Students cited the following:

- Poor textbooks
- Bad food
- No food vending machines
- No water fountains
- No gym
- Lack of activities
- Lack of access to facilities (e.g., gym) during recess

- Too many students in the school
- Graffiti
- Building in disrepair

Appendix E. Results for Urban Areas

In this section, we present results specific to urban areas (Anchorage and Juneau).

E.1. School Climate Characteristics (Urban Responses)

We first asked students open-ended questions to learn about what they thought made a school a place where students want to be (positive school climate) and what would make a school a place where students do not want to be (negative school climate). These questions were asked to get a sense of what students thought about in relation to school climate before we started introducing specific SCCS topic areas to them.

The specific forms of the questions were as follows: “What kinds of things make a school a good place for students to be?” and “What kinds of things make a school a place where students do *not* want to be?” Responses fell into five general categories: (1) adult–student relationships, (2) relationships among students, (3) academics and pedagogy, (4) the school environment (e.g., safety, equality, rules), and (5) school resources, facilities, and infrastructure. There were several pervasive themes that emerged across all groups of students (engaged students and disengaged students, Alaska Native and non-Native students, and middle school students and high school students).

E.1.a. Characteristics of a Positive School Climate

Students were first asked, “What kinds of things make a school a good place for students to be?” Across groups, responses fell into five general categories: (1) adult–student relationships, (2) relationships among students, (3) academics and pedagogy, (4) the school environment (e.g., safety, equality, rules), and (5) school resources and activities.

The responses in each category appear in the following tables. In each table, an *x* indicates where engaged students or disengaged students, Alaska Native or non-Native students, and middle school students or high school students provided responses. Note that when an item has no *x*, that area was not mentioned when the open question was asked, but the reader should not assume respondents from that group would have disagreed necessarily with the item.

Table E1. Characteristics of a Positive School Climate: Urban Responses

Adult–Student Relationships						
	Engaged	Dis-engaged	Alaska Native	Non-Native	Middle	High
Help from teachers and other school staff	x	x		x	x	x
Nice teachers	x	x	x	x	x	x
Respectful staff		x		x	x	
Teachers who do not overreact to minor errors or misbehavior (e.g., forgotten homework)	x		x		x	
Good student–teacher connections/communication	x	x	x	x	x	x
Opportunities to speak with teachers one-on-one		x	x			x
Being around reliable, trustworthy adults	x	x		x		x
Having adults who will advocate for students				x		x
Having informal relationships with teachers who know the students personally				x		x

Relationships Among Students						
	Engaged	Dis-engaged	Alaska Native	Non-Native	Middle	High
Being able to talk/socialize with friends	x	x	x	x	x	x
Having good friends who can help you	x			x	x	
Nice students			x			x
Kind and helpful peers	x		x			x
No cliques among students		x	x	x		x
Good relationships among students, no tensions among students	x		x			x
Students who focus on their work	x		x	x	x	

Academics and Pedagogy						
	Engaged	Dis-engaged	Alaska Native	Non-Native	Middle	High
Assistance with school work, academic support (e.g., tutoring)	x	x	x	x	x	x
Teachers who teach well	x	x	x	x	x	x
Teachers who know how to have fun/teach in a fun way	x	x	x	x	x	x
Teachers who want to be doing their jobs		x		x		x
Teachers who make sure students understand the materials	x		x		x	x
Getting an education	x	x	x	x	x	x
Available classes (language arts, mathematics, science, history)	x	x	x		x	x
Being able to learn at your own pace				x		x
Having opportunities to learn challenging material	x		x			x
Having opportunities for hands-on learning		x	x	x		x
Having opportunities to choose classes that are meaningful for the individual student	x	x	x	x		x
Learning things that will help you in your future career	x	x	x		x	x
Having opportunities to learn about different vocations		x		x	x	x
Enrichment classes available (art, crafts, technology)		x		x	x	
Classes with few distractions (e.g., others talking)	x			x	x	

School Environment						
	Engaged	Dis-engaged	Alaska Native	Non-Native	Middle	High
No bullies, no harassment	x	x	x	x	x	x
A structured environment		x	x	x		x
Equality, no favoritism	x	x	x	x	x	x
Diverse student body	x		x		x	
Fair application of the rules		x	x	x		x
Good boundaries		x		x		x
Safety	x	x	x	x	x	x
An environment where students are free to express ideas/where people are open minded	x	x	x	x	x	x
A place where every student can feel good about himself or herself		x		x		x
A safe haven and support for students having difficulties at home		x	x			x
A place where young people can keep out of trouble		x	x			x
A place where students have some control/impact		x		x		x
A good/welcoming/friendly environment	x	x	x	x		x
An environment that motivates students in a positive way (e.g., motivational posters)						x
Being part of a community	x			x		x
Good spirit weeks, school pride	x	x	x	x		x

School Resources and Activities						
	Engaged	Dis-engaged	Alaska Native	Non-Native	Middle	High
Extracurricular activities (e.g., art club, homework club)	x	x	x	x	x	x
A large library with a good selection of books		x		x	x	
Being able to use technology				x		x
Sports	x		x	x	x	x
Exercise; gym	x	x	x	x	x	
No gym uniforms	x			x	x	
Good food	x	x	x	x	x	x
A physically comfortable environment (e.g., warm temperature)		x	x			x
A colorful physical school environment (e.g., not just plain walls)				x		x
Bigger lockers	x			x	x	
Adequate time to pass between classes		x		x	x	
Transportation to and from school			x			x
Recycling		x	x		x	
A big school	x	x	x	x	x	
Small or medium class size		x	x	x		x

E.1.b. Characteristics of a Negative School Climate

Students were then asked, “What kinds of things would make a school a place where students would *not* want to be?” Across groups, responses fell into five general categories: (1) adult–student relationships, (2) relationships among students, (3) academics and pedagogy, (4) the school environment (e.g., safety, equality, rules), and (5) school resources and activities.

The responses in each category appear in the following tables. In each table, an *x* indicates where engaged students or disengaged students, Alaska Native or non-Native students, and middle school students or high school students provided responses. Note that when an item has no *x*, that area was not mentioned when the open question was asked, but the reader should not assume respondents from that group would have necessarily disagreed with the item.

Characteristics of a Negative School Climate: Urban Responses

Adult–Student Relationships						
	Engaged	Dis-engaged	Alaska Native	Non-Native	Middle	High
Mean teachers	x	x	x	x	x	x
Disrespectful teachers		x	x	x	x	
Not being able to get help/support	x			x	x	
Teachers who do not listen to students		x	x	x		x
Teachers who do not care about individual students’ needs and situations	x			x	x	
Teachers who are unfair				x		x
Teachers who nag	x			x		x
Adults who “treat the students like babies”	x			x		x
Teachers who take out their bad mood on students		x	x	x		x
Teachers who put a student down in front of his or her peers		x	x			x
Mean/abusive staff (e.g., janitors, school security, hall monitors)	x		x	x	x	x

Relationships Among Students						
	Engaged	Dis-engaged	Alaska Native	Non-Native	Middle	High
Bullies	x	x	x	x	x	x
Gangs	x	x	x	x	x	x
Fighting/violence/weapons	x	x	x	x	x	x
Mean students/students who mistreat others	x	x	x	x	x	x
Students who intimidate others	x		x			x
Students who behave badly						x
Rude students						x
Too much drama among students	x	x	x	x	x	x
Peer pressure		x		x		x

Academics and Pedagogy						
	Engaged	Dis-engaged	Alaska Native	Non-Native	Middle	High
Too much homework	x	x	x	x	x	
Schoolwork that is too difficult		x	x			x
Schoolwork that is not meaningful (busywork)	x			x	x	
Bad teachers	x		x		x	x
Teachers who do not really want to do their jobs		x		x		x
Teachers who are boring	x		x	x		x
Teachers who do not make sure that students understand the material		x		x		x

School Environment						
	Engaged	Dis-engaged	Alaska Native	Non-Native	Middle	High
School day starts too early	x	x	x		x	x
Bad school schedule	x	x	x	x	x	x
School day is too long	x		x		x	
Bad school rules/too many rules	x			x		x
Excessive consequences for minor misbehavior				x		x
Not being able to eat in class				x		x
Not being able to use telephones				x		x
Racism		x		x		x
Stereotypes		x		x		x
Students judged by others				x		x
An environment where harassment of students is tolerated	x		x			x
Presence/sale of drugs and alcohol	x	x	x	x	x	x
Peers under the influence of drugs or alcohol	x	x	x	x	x	x
Too many students in the school				x		x

School Resources and Activities						
	Engaged	Dis-engaged	Alaska Native	Non-Native	Middle	High
Bad food	x		x		x	x
No food vending machines		x	x		x	
No activities	x		x			x
Dress code		x		x	x	x
Building in disrepair						x

E.2. Existing SCCS Scales

In this section, we present information about the importance of the existing SCCS scale areas to students in urban communities (in contrast with those in rural communities). These scales are high expectations, respectful climate, peer climate, school safety, caring adults, school leadership and student involvement, and family and community involvement. For each scale, students were presented with a description of the scale, including examples of what conditions would lead a student to provide a high or low rating on that scale. Students were then asked to decide whether that scale area was not important, somewhat important, or very important in determining whether the student would work hard in school and learn as much as he or she could. A count was made of how many students provided each response, so this section of the report is more quantitative in nature than other sections.

Note that students in urban areas were much more likely than students in rural areas to spontaneously elaborate upon their answers, so the qualitative information in this section is based mostly on responses from students in urban areas.

	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important
High Expectations			
Urban	2%	38%	61%
Rural	3%	50%	47%
Respectful Climate			
Urban	1%	13%	86%
Rural	26%	26%	48%
Peer Climate			
Urban	5%	26%	69%
Rural	2%	22%	76%
School Safety			
Urban	4%	14%	83%
Rural	2%	9%	89%
Caring Adults			
Urban	3%	20%	77%
Rural	0%	31%	69%
School Leadership and Student Involvement			
Urban	6%	52%	42%
Rural	0%	46%	54%
Family and Community Involvement			
Urban	16%	40%	43%
Rural	0%	26%	74%

Although some students in urban communities also mentioned community involvement in school (especially in terms of helping with things like fundraising), active community involvement was mentioned somewhat more often among students from rural communities—especially in relation to school events. For example, one student said, “I think [family and community involvement] is very important because if the school hosts something and the community or families do not get involved, it doesn’t give the event much meaning.”

E.3. Academic Relevance (Urban Responses)

Students may base their decisions about staying in school on whether they believe school will be helpful to them in the future. We asked students, “Do you think your school is teaching you everything you need you know in life?”

Students had very mixed opinions on whether their school was teaching them what they really needed to know in life. Students tended to fall into three categories:

1. Students who thought that their school was teaching them what they needed to know
2. Students who believed that they needed to know some of the subjects they were being taught, but that others would not be of any use
3. Students who believed that they did not need to know what they were being taught in school and that school subjects should have a more practical orientation toward life skills and job-specific skills

Students in the second category were most common, believing that school taught some things that they needed to know, but that some subjects were a waste of time (unless the student could use that subject matter for a specific career). Nearly all students who mentioned English/language arts/literacy believed that the subject was important. Most students in this category who mentioned mathematics believed that mathematics was one subject that was useful or believed that applied mathematics oriented to life skills (e.g., being able to manage a household budget) was important, but some students said that higher mathematics would not be useful. Many students did not believe that history was relevant and wanted a greater focus on the present and the future. Some students also believed that related subjects such as geography or social studies dealing with world cultures would be of use only to people planning to go to the countries being studied. And students in this category who mentioned science did not see how the information learned in science classes was or would be relevant to daily living.

Among the students in the first category, there were several reasons why they believed that their schools were teaching them what they really needed to know in life. Many believed that the subjects they were studying would be necessary for them to be able to do well in college or at jobs or—in the case of middle school students—prepare them for high school. Students also believed that their school provided them with opportunities to develop skills such as social skills, to the ability to work with authority figures, and the ability to get up in the morning. Some students who attended larger schools with more opportunities for elective, diverse coursework options or special programs (e.g., Reserve Officers’ Training Corps [ROTC]) believed that these extra opportunities helped students learn things that were relevant to them, based on their personal interests and goals.

Only a few students in the third category said that they did not think young people should have to go to school at all. Most students believed that school could teach them things that would help them in their lives if they could study different subjects than were currently offered. Many of these students thought that school should provide more life-skills education, such how to care for one’s self and how to run a household (e.g., cooking, home repairs, driving, gaining employment, staying healthy), how to raise children and be a good parent, and how to survive in

the wilderness. Some students also believed that academic coursework could be very useful if it were tailored to the interests and goals of the individual student.

Responses of Engaged Students Versus Disengaged Students

Although one might expect that engaged students would think that their schools were teaching them what they needed to know and that disengaged students would not think so, the pattern of responses was mixed. Students in both groups fell into all three categories. Disengaged students were somewhat more likely than engaged students to directly state that they were not learning what they needed to know or that they should not be required to go to school at all, but most of these students still thought that their schoolwork (or some of their schoolwork) was relevant. Engaged and disengaged students provided similar suggestions for making coursework more relevant by adding more life-skills components or allowing students to focus their coursework on their interests and goals.

Responses of Alaska Native Versus Non-Native Students

Alaska Native students provided much more positive responses to this question than did non-Native students. Responses from Alaska Native students fell into all three categories, and many Native students pointed to the importance of diverse course opportunities to keep students interested. Alaska Native students also were somewhat more likely than non-Native students to express a trusting attitude that the curriculum was based on what students would need later in their lives, even if the purpose was not apparent at the moment.

In contrast, although non-Native students provided responses in all three categories, they were much more likely than Native students to directly state that their school was not teaching them what they really needed to know in life. Non-Native students who gave negative responses tended to list classes they thought were relevant and classes that were not—considering basic skills important (e.g., basic mathematics) but considering advanced coursework irrelevant for students who did not intend to pursue careers in that field (e.g., advanced mathematics).

Responses of Urban Middle School Students Versus Urban High School Students

Both middle school students and high school students provided a variety of responses to this question. Each group included some students who believed that their schools were teaching them what they needed to know, some students who believed that their schools were not teaching them what they needed to know, and a larger percentage of students who believed that their schools were teaching them only part of what they needed to know (or that only part of their coursework was relevant). There were no distinguishable differences in patterns of responses between middle school students and high school students.

E.4. Influences on School Completion (Urban Responses)

Alaska has one of the highest student dropout rates of any state, with substantial differences in dropout rates by ethnicity. According to recent NCES data, Alaska Native/Native American students drop out of school at a higher rate than do students from any other racial group, and this statistic is also true within Alaska (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). We were

interested in learning more about why students drop out of school and possible differences between groups that could help explain why Alaska Native students left school at higher rates than non-Native students (while giving higher rates for their school climate and connectedness on the SCCS, as mentioned in section B).

We asked students, “What influences at home or in the community determine whether a student stays in school or drops out?” We also asked participants, “When a student drops out of school, is it usually because of issues at school, because there are better things to do outside of school like work or help out at home, or a combination of both?” Although the first question was about home and community, many students discussed school as well, so results from those questions are combined. In response to the second question, an overwhelming majority of participants believed that students dropped out of school because of factors specific to the students or their families or home situations rather than a poor school environment.

Across groups, participants most commonly cited the following reasons for peers dropping out of school (listed according to frequency of response):

1. Drug or alcohol use
2. Choosing to spend time with peers or a boyfriend or girlfriend who had dropped out
3. Lack of family support for education
4. Needing to help support their family (from a financial or practical perspective)
5. Early parenthood
6. Laziness or not wanting to get up in the morning
7. Depression
8. Negative experiences with peers at school (bullying, being picked on, being isolated)
9. Negative experiences with teachers or other authority figures at school, such as getting caught up in a cycle of misbehavior, excessive punishment, anger, and then further misbehavior
10. Lack of positive connections with or support from teachers
11. Beliefs that school will not help them in their future careers, so it would be better to drop out and start earning money

A subgroup of respondents who already had dropped out of school gave responses that were consistent with these reasons.

Responses of Engaged Students Versus Disengaged Students

Both engaged students and disengaged students mentioned the 11 dropout reasons. Disengaged students were more likely to refer to the specific situations of friends and family they knew who had dropped out, whereas engaged students were more likely guess about what was happening with students who dropped out.

Many disengaged students mentioned that they were determined to stay in school and graduate (and indeed, they were still enrolled in school despite poor attendance and failing classes). Several students said that they wanted to stay in school for reasons such as continuing a family pattern of graduating or overcoming a family history of not graduating. Others said they knew peers who had dropped out who were now bored or unemployed, and they did not wish to end up in the same situation. Disengaged students also talked about the importance of encouragement from family, school staff, and friends.

Both engaged students and disengaged students believed that it was important for students to have opportunities to engage in meaningful coursework and meaningful extracurricular activities. Disengaged students and both engaged and disengaged students in rural areas also talked about how requirements for extracurricular activities (such as having to pass one's classes to play on the basketball team) were strong motivators for some students to stay in school and pass their classes.

Results for Alaska Native Versus Non-Native Students

We did not find significant differences in responses to these questions between Alaska Native and non-Native students. Students from both groups referred to the 11 main dropout reasons.

Results for Middle School Students Versus High School Students

Although middle school students and high school students provided fairly similar responses, many middle school students stated that they did not actually know anyone who had dropped out of their current school, so they were basing the responses on personal experiences (e.g., older siblings) or making guesses about why students might drop out.

Appendix F. Results for Rural Areas

In this section, we present results specific to rural areas (Lower Kuskokwim and Yukon Koyukuk School Districts).

F.1. School Climate Characteristics (Rural Responses)

We first asked students open-ended questions to learn what made a school a place where students want to be (positive school climate) and what would make a school a place where students do not want to be (negative school climate). These questions were asked to get a sense of what students thought about in relation to school climate before we started introducing specific SCCS topic areas to them. Note that these two questions were added after some early data collection with Alaska Native students in rural, multilevel schools, so there is less information about them from those types of schools and students.

The specific forms of the questions were as follows: “What kinds of things make a school a good place for students to be?” and “What kinds of things make a school a place where students do *not* want to be?” Responses fell into five general categories: (1) adult–student relationships, (2) relationships among students, (3) academics and pedagogy, (4) the school environment (e.g., safety, equality, rules), and (5) school resources, facilities, and infrastructure. There were several pervasive themes that emerged across all groups of students (engaged students and disengaged students, Alaska Native and non-Native students, and middle school students and high school students).

F.1.a. Characteristics of a Positive School Climate

Students were asked, “What kinds of things make a school a good place for students to be?” Across groups, responses fell into five general categories: (1) adult–student relationships, (2) relationships among students, (3) academics and pedagogy, (4) the school environment (e.g., safety, equality, rules), and (5) school resources and activities.

Responses in each category are as follows:

Adult–Student Relationships

- Nice teachers

Relationships Among Students

- Being able to spend time with friends

Academics and Pedagogy

- Teachers who teach well
- Teachers who know how to have fun
- Getting an education
- The classes available (mathematics, art)

- Learning things that will help you in your future career
- Opportunities to develop goals
- Opportunities to learn how to have a healthy life (e.g., no drugs)

School Environment

- Opportunities for students to develop a positive attitude
- Opportunities for students to learn more about themselves

School Resources, Facilities, and Infrastructure

- Exercise; gym
- Sports

F.1.b. Characteristics of a Negative School Climate

Students were then asked, “What kinds of things would make a school a place where students did *not* want to be?” Across groups, responses fell into three general categories: (1) relationships among students, (2) the school environment (e.g., safety, equality, rules), and (3) school resources, facilities, and infrastructure.

The responses in each category were as follows:

Relationships Among Students

- Bullies
- Fighting
- Students who behave badly
- Students who are disrespectful to teachers
- Students who sleep through class

School Environment

- Excessive consequences for minor misbehavior
- An environment where unfair treatment of students is tolerated

School Resources, Facilities, and Infrastructure

- Bad food
- Building in disrepair

F.2. Existing SCCS Scales

In this section, we present information on how important the existing SCCS scale areas are to students in rural communities (in contrast with those in urban communities). These scales are

high expectations, respectful climate, peer climate, school safety, caring adults, school leadership and student involvement, and family and community involvement. For each scale, students were presented with a description of the scale, including examples of what conditions would lead a student to provide a high or low rating on that scale. Students were then asked to decide whether the scale area was not important, somewhat important, or very important in determining whether they worked hard in school and learned as much as they could. A count was made of how many students provided each response, so this section of the report is more quantitative in nature than other sections.

	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important
High Expectations			
Urban	2%	38%	61%
Rural	3%	50%	47%
Respectful Climate			
Urban	1%	13%	86%
Rural	26%	26%	48%
Peer Climate			
Urban	5%	26%	69%
Rural	2%	22%	76%
School Safety			
Urban	4%	14%	83%
Rural	2%	9%	89%
Caring Adults			
Urban	3%	20%	77%
Rural	0%	31%	69%
School Leadership and Student Involvement			
Urban	6%	52%	42%
Rural	0%	46%	54%
Family and Community Involvement			
Urban	16%	40%	43%
Rural	0%	26%	74%

Although some students in urban communities also mentioned community involvement in school (especially in terms of helping with things such as fundraising), active community involvement

was mentioned somewhat more often among students from rural communities—especially in relation to school events. For example, one student said, “I think [family and community involvement] is very important because if the school hosts something and the community or families do not get involved, it doesn’t give the event much meaning.”

F.3. Academic Relevance (Rural Responses)

Students may base their decisions about staying in school on whether they believe school will be helpful to them in the future. We asked students, “Do you think your school is teaching you everything you need you know in life?” Note that this question was added for 2011 focus groups and was not asked in the focus groups that took place in some rural villages (with Alaska Native students) in 2010.

Students had very mixed opinions about whether their schools were teaching them what they really needed to know in life. Students tended to fall into three categories:

1. Students who thought that their school was teaching them what they needed to know
2. Students who felt that they needed to know some of the subjects they were being taught, but not all
3. Students who felt that they did not need to know what they were being taught in school

Students in the second were most common, believing that school taught some things that students needed to know, but that some subjects were a waste of time (unless they would use that subject matter for specific careers). Among the students in the first category, there were several reasons why they believed that their schools were teaching them what they really needed to know in life. Many students believed that the subjects they were studying would be necessary for them to be able to do well in college or at jobs. Most of the students in the third category believed that teachers were not particularly interested in teaching them, just going through the motions of giving them assignments and grades.

F.4. Influences on School Completion (Rural Responses)

Alaska has one of the highest student dropout rates of any state, with substantial differences in dropout rates by ethnicity. According to recent NCEES data, Alaska Native/Native American students drop out of school at a higher rate than do students from any other racial group, and this statistic is true also within Alaska (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). We were interested in learning more about why students drop out of school and about the possible differences between groups that could help explain why Alaska Native students left school at higher rates than non-Native students (while giving higher rates for their school climate and connectedness on the SCCS, mentioned in section B).

We asked students, “What influences at home or in the community determine whether a student stays in school or drops out?” We also asked participants, “When a student drops out of school, is it usually because of issues at school, because there are better things to do outside of school like work or help out at home, or a combination of both?” Although the first question was about home and community, many students discussed school as well, so results from those questions are combined.

Across groups, participants most commonly cited the following reasons for peers dropping out of school (listed according to frequency of response):

1. Laziness, not wanting to get up in the morning
2. Lack of family support for education
3. Drug or alcohol use
4. Desire to earn money
5. Needing to stay home to help because of family problems
6. Negative experiences with peers at school (bullying, being picked on, being isolated)
7. Lack of positive connections with or support from teachers
8. Negative experiences with teachers or other authority figures at school
9. Depression

In sum, students believed that their peers primarily dropped out of school because of student-specific issues rather than because they were pushed out by negative school experiences (but note that some students did seem to drop out based on negative relationships with classmates and peers). This finding points to the opportunity that schools have to identify and intervene with students who have these issues before they drop out.

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