

EDITOR'S NOTE



The poet William Stafford once answered a question about his influences by saying, “The influence I feel when I write, the voice I hear most clearly, is that of my mother.” I think about that sometimes when sitting down to write, and I thought of it again as I worked on this issue of *Northwest Education*.

Stafford, of course, was speaking about an influence so fundamental and natural that we take it for granted—that of family, parent and child. But what happens when we step out of that inner circle and into the larger world? What if that world does not acknowledge the validity of that first, clearest voice?

For many of us, public school is the first big step we take outside of our inner circle. And how those two worlds—home and school—intersect can have lifelong effects.

This issue of *Northwest Education* is about that intersection. The stories you’ll find here reflect the changes taking place in how schools interact with parents, extended family, and the larger community. Informed by three decades of research—and given new urgency by the No Child Left Behind Act—public schools are in the middle of a paradigm shift. A new model of sustained partnerships and shared decision making is beginning to find its way into the daily operation of schools and districts around the country.

In many schools that model includes an emphasis on culturally responsive practices and a subtle shift in responsibility. As Steffen Saifer, the director of NWREL’s Child and Family Program, says, “Most schools previously put the onus on the family by emphasizing what the parents should be doing. But what happens if the school does the opposite? What if it says: ‘We value you, your family, your community, and your culture.’ That’s a much more powerful and effective message. And the onus should be on the school to make that happen.”

As schools learn how to take that responsibility, they’re also learning how to tap the incredible resources to be found in the community. In the schools profiled here, you’re as likely to find a parent or community volunteer in a classroom, counselor’s office, or resource center as you are in the copy room or on the playground. Here you discover stories of community involvement that is long term and tied to classroom instruction.

You will also find stories about school districts that are finding success—and increased parent involvement—by embracing Latino, Native American, Alaska Native, and other cultural values. While we still have a long way to go, these stories show the giant steps we’ve taken in the last two decades.

Eleanor Laughlin, the principal of a brand new charter school in Fairbanks, Alaska, is representative of that progress. Laughlin, of mixed Athabascan and Irish descent, spent her early childhood in the Alaska interior, immersed in Athabascan culture. Later, she was sent to the public schools in Fairbanks and eventually to a boarding school in Sitka. “My school experience was about assimilation,” she says. “It was about getting rid of my cultural heritage, not embracing it.”

The result, says Laughlin, was a difficult adolescence and young adulthood. Dropping out, drifting as far from home as Texas, and only after many years finding her way back to Alaska, back to her Native culture, and into a successful career in education. For Laughlin, public education was about being cut off from that deepest inner voice—that initial influence—that Stafford refers to. Now, as the principal of a school that incorporates Alaska Native culture into the curriculum, she is at the center of change. Her influence, along with others whose voices are in these pages, will be felt for years to come.

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