

ANCHORAGE SCHOOL DISTRICT
ANCHORAGE, ALASKA

ASD MEMORANDUM #133 (2001-2002)

December 10, 2001

TO: SCHOOL BOARD

FROM: OFFICE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT

SUBJECT: RECOMMENDATION FOR ALASKA STUDIES COURSE

RECOMMENDATION:

It is the Administration's recommendation that the School Board approve a one semester (.5 credit) Alaska Studies course as a graduation requirement for high school students at the junior or senior level. This requirement would begin with the freshman class entering high school in the fall of 2002 (Class of 2006). It is further recommended that this course replace one of the elective choices within the existing social studies requirements; students would be allowed to select one elective semester course from the area studies, geography, history, or the social sciences to fulfill their final .5 credit social studies requirement.

PERTINENT FACTS:

The Need

The Administration is recommending this change to the current social studies graduation requirements because of the importance of the issue at this time in Alaska's history. It is believed that all students in the Anchorage School District will benefit from learning about their State and its diverse peoples at this critical time. Events are unfolding rapidly in Alaska, and a true understanding of our past, current issues, and our future is dependent on our leaders, and future leaders, understanding how we got to where we are today. Significant on-going informed debate of important issues depends on well-educated and well-informed citizens. It is our obligation as educators to respond to the needs of our students and of our community.

The Anchorage School District and the State of Alaska are becoming increasingly diverse. Many people and groups have made significant contributions to the development of this State. It is important for our students to realize what led to

the significant events in our history, beginning with the viable economies of the indigenous peoples for thousands of years. Our students must learn and understand the impact of contact by European explorers on the Native peoples of Alaska in the 1700s, the conflicts which arose with expansion by settlers, miners, explorers, missionaries, and others on the Native peoples as well as on the education, justice, government, and economy of Alaska.

Important events must be understood from both a historical and cultural perspective in order to validate the contributions of all of our peoples. Immigration as a major element in the development of Alaska significantly changes the demographics of Alaska. Issues leading up to Statehood; the discovery of oil; the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act; the construction of the Alaska Pipeline; the economic booms and busts in our State; the federal legislation, ANILCA and its ramifications; the development and decline of various resource industries and the expansion of tourism; the Permanent Fund – its origins and purpose and role in the economy of the State; the subsistence issue; the increasing diversity of the peoples in the State and the issues surrounding this diversity; and the growing rural/urban divide and the impact on all parts of the State are all important issues which must be learned, discussed, and understood by our students. There are many more. Regardless of where Alaskans eventually live, it will be a benefit for all to better understand the issues important to this State. The current national debate on ANWR is an excellent example of why all citizens need to understand this important issue; whether they favor development or not, they need to understand the issues and make an informed decision, not an emotional one based on media propaganda and sound-bites. We owe it to our students to educate them in the important issues of the day; they are our future leaders and citizens.

Research

Students, teachers, counselors, administrators and many parent and community groups were asked to discuss and contribute their opinions to this decision. Numerous community groups have asked us to require Alaska Studies for high school graduation.

Commonwealth North did a major study, Urban Rural Unity Study “U.R.US”, co-chaired by Janie Leask and Rick Mystrom, which was released in September 2000; one of their recommendations was to “Teach Alaska history, starting with prehistory, and include the roles and perspectives of the diverse cultures that make up our current society.” (page 19)

The Administration has been meeting with The Anchorage Task Force for Teaching Alaska History and Cultural Studies for months. This group made a

presentation to the School Board in May of 2001, supporting this required course. The Board asked the Administration to come back to the Board in the future with a recommendation after discussing this issue with teachers, principals, students, parents, and community groups. This recommendation is a culmination of those activities for the past six months. The Community Task Force prepared a packet of information for the Board in the spring and representatives of that group will be testifying in support of the required course at this Board meeting. Many community groups have passed resolutions in support and these were provided to the School Board in the past; more will be forthcoming.

Representative Kapsner, from Bethel, has introduced House Bill 171, and Senator Olson, from Nome, has introduced the companion Senate Bill. The House Bill has 29 co-sponsors at this time, many from Anchorage from both political parties. The Bill has not moved to the Senate yet, but it is expected that many Senators will co-sponsor this piece of legislation when it moves to the Senate. The legislation recognizes the importance of this issue for all students in the State and also allows each district to develop its own class or course of study within the parameters of the legislation.

The Administration and a representative from the Community Task Force met with all high school social studies teachers on November 12, on an inservice day. The teachers spoke openly about their concerns with a separate course and their support for this new course. Most everyone agrees that Alaska Studies be required; the disagreement occurs concerning how the information will be taught and where in the curriculum. There was spirited discussion on the pros and cons of a separate course or integrating it into current courses of integrated history, economics, and government courses; no consensus was reached. These are very valid issues. Although there were dissenting opinions concerning placement in the curriculum, there was significant agreement among teachers that learning about the history of the State, its people, geography, government, arts and cultures was a worthy goal.

High school social studies teachers care deeply about providing a broad selection of electives for their students so that they can benefit from the wide variety of courses within the social studies. By combining the area studies courses with the history and social studies choices, students are still given options in all these areas with the Administration's recommendation. There are also other elective opportunities available to students outside of the four credits required.

High school principals and curriculum assistant principals support a stand-alone course so assurance can be given that all students will have the course;

integrating the information into existing courses is not supported by the majority of administrators. The Administration supports a stand-alone class in order to assure that the students are taught the information consistently.

The Minority Education Concerns Committee supports a semester class in Alaska Studies. A letter of support has been provided to the Administration. They support the course, which reflects the diversity of the people in the State and an emphasis on all of their contributions to the State.

The Governor's Commission on Tolerance recommended that all students in the State be taught Alaska History and Studies. The Education Committee for the Mayor's Task Force on Racism strongly supported a required course in Alaska Studies in their report. AFN recently passed a resolution supporting this requirement.

The Superintendent and Supervisor of the Indian Education Program met with the Native Advisory Committee in the fall and discussed this issue. That group unanimously endorsed a separate course. They mentioned that the AFN had recently passed a resolution in support of this requirement. They stated that teachers would need to teach this course in a culturally sensitive manner and would require training in all aspects of the curriculum and in current issues. The Administration is committed to providing the financial and training resources for teacher training and for curriculum materials. This group emphasized the importance of presenting multiple perspectives on issues as a critical component to the success of all students. They also felt that the curriculum must be written and developed by Alaskans--teachers, community members, and others with knowledge and expertise in Alaska studies. Many have already volunteered to assist us if the School Board approves this recommendation.

Members of the Administration met with the Student Advisory Board recently and spent considerable time discussing this issue. The students understand the issue and a majority of those represented supported the required Alaska Studies course in place of a social studies elective. The SAB did not want the .5 credit taken from math, physical education or the seven other electives, as had been previously suggested. Some other ideas were to move to a seven period day so they could take more classes, combine it in the current economics course, and a few felt they had taken it in middle school and didn't want to repeat it.

Course Description

A course in Alaska Studies already is Board-approved and currently offered for high school students as a social studies elective. The adopted course outline is

in Attachment A. Also appended is a table illustrating the corrections between the elements of the proposed legislation and the existing relevant content and cultural standards (Attachment B). Many groups have expressed an interest in assisting with this development. The Administration will be working with community and University volunteers as well as our own staff of teachers and administrators to develop this new course which would be brought back to the School Board for final approval, along with requests for curriculum materials and training.

Grade Level

Alaska Studies is planned as a junior or senior level course. Although students are exposed to aspects of Alaska studies in elementary and middle schools, the ability to deal with the complex issues challenging our State is felt to be a prerequisite to the course and more consistent with the maturity level and cognitive abilities of older students.

Placement in the Curriculum

Much debate surrounded the question of where to place this requirement. With 22.5 credits needed, students are already challenged with the highest graduation requirements in the State. There was neither support nor desire to add to the number of requirements, especially in the face of additional coursework required of some students to pass the High School Graduation Qualifying Examination. Instead, the existing credits in each curricular area were carefully examined. The natural fit for Alaska Studies is within the social studies area, where four credits are currently required for graduation. Those include four semesters of integrated world/U.S. history, a semester of an elective in history/social science and one in geography/area studies, a semester of economics and a semester of U.S. government. Many students take more social studies courses within their 7.5 credits of required electives.

The Alaska Studies requirement would fit within the social studies curriculum and reduce the elective selection among history, social science, geography and area studies to one semester.

Implementation

To create a quality course, adequate time would be needed to develop the curriculum and identify the best materials. While existing courses would provide a good starting place, this opportunity must not be hampered by a rush to implement before the course is well thought out. Some teachers might be ready to start tomorrow but, historically, equipping a teacher cadre to teach a

new graduation requirement has involved training four to five teachers per comprehensive school. The synergy and mutual support of such a group is essential to the healthy development of the course. We are optimistic that appropriate, on-going training and development of new and appropriate teaching resources, many of our teachers will be excited by this new course. We have so many resource people within this community who are eager to assist us in this endeavor. There is also much interest in pursuing grant-funded opportunities to allow these teachers to travel to rural Alaska so they can experience the lifestyle, learn about the State's issues from other perspectives and get to know people in rural communities.

Quality, current, interesting materials are essential. Our advantage is that so many of the State's history makers are still with us and could be tapped for their perspectives, in written, oral or video format. Many spoke with the Superintendent at the Alaska 20/20 conference and the Native Education Summit of their willingness to assist us. Supporters from Bridge Builders, the University of Alaska, the Alaska Native Heritage Center, and the Alaska Humanities Forum have all volunteered to assist us.

As a graduation requirement affecting the Class of 2006, next year's freshmen, there would be adequate time to develop the course with the intent to pilot at each high school by the second semester of 2002-2003 or, at the latest, the fall of 2003. Full implementation, with sections to accommodate up to 600 students at our largest high schools, would occur by 2003-2004. We would encourage juniors to begin taking the course but some students would not fit it into their schedule until their senior year, 2004-2005 or 2005-2006. Arrangements would need to be made for summer school courses, or other alternatives, as a safety net for students who do not pass the course as their graduation date approaches. No waivers are anticipated, other than the existing situation for a senior transferring into the Anchorage School District in their last year who is permitted to graduate under the requirements of their former school district.

Final Comments

The Administration is committed to this new required course and to working with the community and our teachers and other staff to develop an outstanding semester course which validates the significant contributions of all cultures to the strength of this State. The Administration is also committed to developing an on-going training plan for our teachers in this important class. Adequate and appropriate training and materials are critical to the support of this important effort.

The time has come to step up to this important issue as one way to bridge the differences in this State. Our young people deserve the best education possible to prepare them for their future as the leaders and informed citizens of this State or any other place in the country or the world where they may live. They can't help from benefit from learning more about the significant history and issues so important to their daily lives.

CC/PM

Attachments

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Approved by: Carol Comeau, Superintendent