

Alaska's rural schools struggle with NCLB

Los Angeles, Seattle, Anchorage, Kenai and Seldovia. These communities are about as different as one could imagine. Yet they all have one thing in common: They are home to public schools that serve to educate the next generation of Americans.

The No Child Left Behind Act -- the Bush Administration's flagship piece of education legislation -- attempts to bridge that commonality with some 1,300 pages of regulations for the United States' public schools.

That attempt, however, has drawn fire from critics across the country, calling it a "one-size-fits-all" law that doesn't account for the diversity of the nation's schools.

Kenai Peninsula Borough School District educators can relate with the argument.

The KPBSD is a perfect example of where one size doesn't fit all, said Superintendent Donna Peterson. The district includes 43 schools spread across a piece of land the size of West Virginia. They range from high schools of more than 500 students to rural schoolhouses serving just handfuls of students from kindergarten through 12th grade.

Peterson said all schools -- in the district and the country -- are confronted with the same issue: "How do we keep public education the best show in town?"

The answer to that question, however, is different in different places, she said.

"When we talk about K-12 education, there are lots of ideas of what works, lots of ideas for how to move forward," she said. "Some

are very successful, some are less successful. Quantifying what works is the real task, and we do better at the local level than at a state or federal level."

For example, the KPBSD is home to nine village schools that serve less than 150 students in kindergarten through 12th grade. Four of these are "across-the-water" schools, located in communities accessible only by plane or boat.

Nanwalek, Port Graham and Susan B. English School in Seldovia are on the east side of Kachemak Bay, while Tebughna School is in Tyonek, on the west side of Cook Inlet. Most of the others are miles off paved highways, carved out of wilderness far from any other cities or towns.

Voznesenka, Razdolna and Kachemak Selo are at the terminus of East End Road, about 30 miles outside Homer at the head of Kachemak Bay. Nikolaevsk is set back from the Sterling Highway, about 12 miles of rough road outside Anchor Point. Hope is a tiny, isolated community at the top of the peninsula, located several miles off the Seward Highway between Anchorage and peninsula communities.

These schools already face challenges likely unimagined by the authors of the No Child Left Behind Act, Peterson said. Then, the Act offers up a few more challenges for the small schools.

"The pieces (of the Act) that are of particular issue to us are certainly the one-size-fits-all, or cookie cutter, approach; the highly qualified teaching mandates; and the parts that seem designed for

Editor's note: This is the second story in a five-part series examining the federal No Child Left Behind Act and its impact on the Kenai Peninsula Borough School District's smallest and most unique schools. Look for the rest of the series throughout the week:

Wednesday - A look at Russian Old Believer schools

Thursday - A look at across-the-water, Native schools

Friday - Looking to the future

urban areas: for example, the transportation piece," Peterson said.

The No. 1 challenge facing the small schools is turnover of teachers and administrators, she said.

"I don't know if urban areas have the same swinging door problem," she said.

Norma Holmgaard, the district's director of small schools and alternative programs, said she believes the problem is unique to rural schools.

"In urban areas, folks don't move as much because their culture is in the area. When a teacher goes to one of the rural schools, they step totally out of their culture. Eventually, they want to get back to things that are familiar," she said.

Rather than addressing the turnover problem, NCLB in some ways exacerbates the issue. The law defines "highly qualified" teachers as educators who are certified in each subject they teach.

Small, rural schools, however, need teachers to cover multigrade classes and many subjects. Hope, the smallest school in the district,

has just one teacher to provide elementary, middle and high school classes for its 20 students. The largest village school, Voznesenka, has 10 teachers for 138 K-12 students. In comparison, Skyview High School, the district's largest school, has about 36 teachers providing ninth- through 12th-grade classes for about 500 students.

District administrators explained that it's highly unlikely to find teachers who are certified in every subject they would need to teach in a small school. Even if such a person were found, it would be more unlikely to keep them in the high-turnover village communities.

That doesn't mean the rural schools must forgo quality teachers, though, Peterson said.

"We've found ways to help them become content savvy, and it's certainly our intent for folks to know upper math and science," she said. "But when you have one teacher in a K-12 school, what we hear from parents is that they'd rather have a really good, dynamic person who knows how to teach rather than someone who knows everything in a content area.

"There has to be some balance between teaching content and teaching children how to learn. We don't want to go too far down one path. It seems the intent of (NCLB) is more on the content (path)."

Teacher certification and retention isn't the only challenge faced in small schools.

Peterson said the community cultures also can present challenges to education. For example, four of the nine village schools on the peninsula -- Nikolaevsk, Razdolna, Voznesenka and Kachemak Selo -- serve Russian Old Believer communities, where English often

isn't the primary language and school attendance is not a cultural norm, Holmgaard said.

"In many places, just going to school is a change," Peterson said.

In addition, she explained, students in those communities enter school speaking Russian and must learn English as they go. Yet those students must pass their third-grade assessment tests in English for the school to make adequate yearly progress, or AYP.

Holmgaard said that's a part of NCLB she doesn't understand.

She explained that a majority of students in the "low-English proficiency" subgroup must pass language tests for a school to make AYP.

"But the only ones in the subgroup are the ones who are not proficient," she said. "Once they master the language (and can pass the tests), they move out of the subgroup. It's an anomaly. I'm wondering how we're ever going to meet AYP."

Another four of the district's rural schools -- Tebughna, Port Graham, Nanwalek and Seldovia -- are in communities off the road system. Tebughna School serves children in Tyonek, on the largely unpopulated west side of Cook Inlet, while the Native villages of Port Graham and Nanwalek are on the east side of Kachemak Bay, across from Homer.

Peterson said accessibility is a primary challenge in these across-the-water schools. Not only does the isolation make the schools a hard sell for some teachers, it also poses problems in terms of supplies and staff support.

However, the small size of the schools and the relative isolation from larger communities also has its benefits.

"There is closer teamwork, closer relationships," said Nanwalek Principal Maurice Glenn. "Whereas at inner-city schools drugs, alcohol and fighting are concerns, the concerns I have are teasing and kids not making it to school on time."

There are larger challenges in these communities as well; challenges that don't start in the schools but spill over into them.

"Visiting over the last seven years, the changes that have occurred are so visible," Peterson said. "The size is about half of what it was seven years ago. They're struggling with the existence of their communities."

As the communities shrink, so, too, do the schools, she explained.

For example, Port Graham has gone from 39 students in 2000 to 30 in 2004. While the loss of nine students doesn't seem huge, in Port Graham it's nearly a fourth of the student body.

"When I first went to Port Graham and told them they'd be losing staff (because of enrollment declines), I didn't know if I'd make it out of there," Peterson said. "This year, they're so resigned that they're getting smaller and can't do much. The community itself is struggling for its existence."

In Seldovia, originally a fishing and logging outpost, the Susan B. English School is facing similar problems, trying to offer a complete education to a declining number of students. Though enrollment has jumped up and down from year to year, overall the school has gone from 88 students in 1998-99 to 73 students this year.

Peterson said the community members in Seldovia have stepped up to try to make the tough situation work for their children, though. Community members

volunteer to provide students with opportunities like music and art, which are no longer offered in school.

“They’ll do what they can to keep it going,” she said.

Ultimately, she said, rural communities in the borough are declining quickly.

“That’s a shift I don’t see turning around,” she said. “It’s an economic issue bigger than what the school district offers.”

Still, she said, those communities are fighting to keep whatever semblance of schools they have.

“The school is the center of the communities. That’s one thing I learned in the consolidation conversation. They still want the full meal deal, but they say if they can’t have it, leave the school. If they don’t have a school and a church, they’re not going to have a community,” Peterson said. “I would have to agree. If I lived in a community that didn’t have a school, I don’t think I’d stay long.”

In the meantime, the school district will continue struggling with how to address all these challenges while still meeting the

requirements of No Child Left Behind -- or working to get the federal government to acknowledge rural Alaska’s unique situations.

“We all have the same goal,” Peterson said. “With some kids, we’re going to try 16 strategies and we don’t know which one is going to work, but we’ll keep at it.

“As we ask for flexibility, we’re not just trying to get out of things. We’re working, not whining.

“We’ve invested a lot, and I think it’s going to work. This is our business, and we kind of know what we’re doing.”

Rural schools dot peninsula

The Kenai Peninsula Borough School District is home to nine small, rural schools that each serve less than 150 students in kindergarten through 12th grade. Spread throughout the 25,000-square-mile borough, the small schools mark the corners of the school district. According to the district’s Web site, “To travel from Hope School to Nanwalek School requires four hours of driving time and a 20- to 30-minute plane ride across Kachemak Bay.” The student populations of these schools is almost as diverse as their locations.

Hope: With 20 students and one teacher, Hope is the smallest of the district’s schools. It is located in a historic gold mining community of about 140 people at the northern end of the peninsula, off the Seward Highway between Anchorage and the rest of the peninsula communities. Hope’s student body is primary white and English speaking with a small percentage of Alaska Native, Hispanic and economically disadvantaged students.

Kachemak Selo: One of three conservative, Russian Orthodox Old Believer communities at the head of Kachemak Bay, Kachemak Selo is the last school -- and community -- at the terminus of East End Road. More than 30 miles out of Homer, the last several of which are dirt, gravel and treacherous hills, Kachemak Selo School serves a little more than 80 students, almost all of whom are English-learners whose primary language is Russian.

Nanwalek: The southernmost of the district’s 43 schools, Nanwalek is a Native village on the tip of the Kenai Peninsula. A trip to the village of about 200 people requires a flight across Kachemak Bay, though the seaside village actually fronts the mouth of Cook Inlet, hovering between the bay and Prince William Sound. More than 99 percent of the 63 students at the school are Alaska Native and more than half come from economically disadvantaged homes. Though today’s youth speak English, the village’s original language is Sugt’sun, which is taught in the public school.

Nikolaevsk: The original Russian Orthodox village on the peninsula, Nikolaevsk is the more liberal of the four Old Believer communities. Religious schisms and economic struggles have led to a significant decrease in the village’s population in the past several years. Still, more than 300 people live in the village, with almost 100 students at the school, which lies about 10 miles inland from Anchor Point. While the religion and language remain important to villagers, more than half of first-year students now come to school speaking English rather than Russian.

Port Graham: Another Native village on the east side of Kachemak Bay, Port Graham is only about 12 miles from Nanwalek as the crow flies. There’s no road connecting the villages, though. Home to about 180

people, the village has about 30 students in school. Almost all students are Alaska Natives and most are English speakers, though poverty is a bit high in the village. The school places value on helping students adapt to both village and outside culture.

Razdolna: The most remote of the Russian Orthodox communities on the peninsula, Razdolna also generally is considered the most conservative. The community sits about nine miles down a dirt road that spurs off East End Road just before the pavement ends. The school serves about 36 students, almost all English-learners. Though the school has existed for 17 years, it has never graduated a high-schooler. That stands to change this year, though, as one student is on the verge of graduation.

Susan B. English: Located in Seldovia, a fishing and logging outpost on the east side of Kachemak Bay, across from Homer, Susan B. English School serves a little more than 70 students in kindergarten through 12th grade. The student body is about two-thirds Caucasian and one-third Native, though the community has a significant population of low-income families.

Tubughna: This Native school is located in the village of Tyonek, on the west side of Cook Inlet. Accessible by plane year-round or boat in the summer months, the village is home to about 160 Athabascan Alaska Natives. Villagers are known as “Tebughna,” which means “beach people,” according to the school’s Web site. The school serves about 40 students in kindergarten through 12th grade. All are English-speakers, though this village also has a significant poverty rate.

Voznesenka: Another Russian Old Believer village at the head of Kachemak Bay, Voznesenka is the second-to-last community before the terminus of East End Road out of Homer. Serving almost 140 students in kindergarten through 12th grade, the school boasts a successful bilingual program that helps youth who speak Russian at home graduate high school proficient in both Russian and English.