

2019 National Teacher of the Year Finalist



Danielle Riha

2019 Alaska Teacher of the Year
Alaska Native Cultural Charter School
Anchorage, Alaska

Subject: Math, Science, Social
Studies, English, Culture
Grade: 5-8

School Location: Suburban
School Type: Charter Public

Years in Teaching: 18
Years in Position: 11

District Size: 8,569
School Size: 300

Danielle Riha moved to Alaska in 1995 and fell in love with the state. Substitute teaching in Alaska inspired her to earn a teaching degree from the University of Alaska. Riha taught in rural Alaska for seven years with Southwest Region School District, where she learned the value of culturally responsive teaching which incorporated indigenous knowledge and developed a successful reading program that included Yup'ik elders in the classroom. In 2008, she was recruited to help open the Alaska Native Cultural Charter School where she helped develop culturally infused curriculum, created the Morning Gathering, and implemented Culture Week. Riha also works on the Alaska Humanities Forum Educational Advisory Board to help new teachers and all students understand and connect to indigenous culture and lifestyle and she helped create Math in the Cultural Context modules used in districts state-wide.

Riha holds high expectations for every member of the learning community. She inspires everyone to be their best self and master personal challenges by recognizing strengths and working through difficulties. She believes that teachers must work collaboratively to form bonds that create supportive, successful learning communities.

Riha holds a bachelor's degree in education from the University of Alaska, a master's in education from Grand Canyon University, and is working on her doctorate in education at Capella University.

Application Questions

1. Describe a content lesson or unit that defines you as a teacher. How did you engage students of all backgrounds and abilities in the learning? How did that learning influence your students? How are your beliefs about teaching demonstrated in this lesson or unit?

Imagine you are a 7th grade student living in a rural, Yup'ik speaking, Alaskan community. The only way to get to your village is by small plane or boat in the summer and snow-machine in the winter. You have never been to a city or had life experiences that include seeing an elevator, stores, restaurants, or roads. Your family survives by subsistence hunting and gathering from the land of their ancestors. Now imagine yourself in math class considering a word problem that takes place in California and involves distance, rollerblades, a convenience store, and a curb. With this in mind, Math in the Cultural Context (MCC) was created as a supplemental Common Core aligned curriculum through ethnographic work with Yup'ik elders and teachers. I helped develop and test an incredible module, the Kayak Module, which defines me as a teacher in several contrivances. Working with elders allowed me to look at someone else's culture to gain more perspective on how math is used to survive in a subsistence lifestyle. I believe in place-based learning and utilizing cultural ways of knowing to implement culturally based curriculum and pedagogy. When kids identify with content, student ownership through inquiry develops and engagement leads to knowledge retention. Each year I teach,

seventy to one-hundred percent of my students are Alaska Native. This unit lends ideas and practices relative to all cultures and is easily adaptable to all backgrounds.

The Kayak Module teaches scientific method, statistical analysis, and includes key concepts of mean, median, mode, and range. In addition to the math and science contents, the module includes Native literature and historical focus on indigenous people's use of tools and technology to survive. With a generous variety of content the module allows me to create a thematic unit suited to each class's interests and needs.

To begin this unit lesson, students share their knowledge and engage in discussions on different uses for boats including traveling distances and carrying heavy loads. A traditional story, Kukugyarpak, told by Annie Blue, is shared. The traditional oral story is about a young hunter who endures an epic journey filled with fantasy, adventure, perilous situations, and unforgettable sights. Kukugyarpak correlates directly with our 7th grade required story, *The Adventures of Ulysses*, by Bernard Evslin. Students learn that literature connects many cultures and storytelling is rich in any culture.

Students are put into groups of three and given three slabs of clay, each weighing one pound. Together the students design and make three boats (kayaks): v-shaped, round-bottom, and flat-bottom and write how each boat could have a purpose. The three boats are tested for speed, water disbursement, and capacity. All tests include a hypothesis, understanding of controlled, dependent and independent variables, data collection and recording of mean, median, mode and range. Competition is always a part of the excitement in this lesson and every student is accountable for their work. Students design and redesign to create boats that are the fastest, least likely to tip, and best suited to hold the greatest capacity/load. An extension to this lesson is to give students one more pound of clay to invent a boat that will be fast, hold a large load, and be sea-worthy enough not to take on water and tip over. Students write a scientific conclusion using data and apply it to real world by searching a variety of boat designs and purposes.

I have taught the Kayak Module in my 7th grade classes connecting math, science, social studies, Alaska Native culture, and language arts, covering the core standards for each content. I have modified the lessons for summer school programs and camp activities for students in grades second through eighth. Teaching this module allows students to engage with water, clay, design, technology, and exploration. Students of various ability levels have always been able to participate with rigor and enthusiasm. I sincerely believe that student engagement leaves no time for behavior problems and this unit is indicative of my classroom management practices. Because I personally worked with Yup'ik elders, mathematicians and other teachers to help develop the module, I gained ownership of the value and educational pedagogy. Students retain the mathematical and scientific practices and social studies knowledge from this unit lesson and connect their understanding to other lessons throughout their lives. As an educator, nothing feels better than witnessing students grasp and hold on to significant learning practices, procedures and content taught through culturally based lessons that allow students the opportunities to bridge what they already know to new content.



2. Describe a project or initiative you have been involved in which contributed to the improvement of overall school culture. What was your role, how did you collaborate with others, and what is the status of this project today?

Culture Week at the Alaska Native Cultural Charter School (ANCCS) began the second year of the 10 years of operation. Initially each teacher selected something to teach and all students rotated through the activities. The supplies and ideas were not authentic Native materials, nor were the traditional ways of teaching modeled. The products made by students were not authentic, valued, quality, keepsakes, but simply replicas. At the end of our fifth year, I had a dream, which I shared with the Academic Policy Committee (APC) with the hopes of gaining support and funding. I proposed that we hire traditional indigenous artists and subsistence specialists to teach grade/age appropriate skills through art and food preparation. The APC loved the idea, used grant money from the Tides Foundation, and let me plan and manage the entire project.

I explored the wealth of knowledge from across the state of Alaska and found twenty people to participate. The first year, some of our activities included: Tlingit copper jewelry, Aleut bent wood hats, Athabascan birch bark baskets, fur head-dresses, beaded jewelry, soapstone carving, and we rendered seal oil, smoked/canned fish, tanned seal hide, and prepared several traditional dishes. Each artist had to be approved by the district, sign a contract, supply active lesson plans and supply lists. Artists/specialists were paid well, lunch was provided, and much respect and honor was given at all times to show students the value of becoming a distinguished educator of art and subsistence. We used only authentic materials including moose hide, beaver, wolf and otter fur, mallets and carving tools. The culminating event was a family night where student work was displayed and food was shared. The parents, students, and community members were in awe at the quality of the work students created. Student behaviors were positive all week with no negative issues. All age levels from kindergarten to adults were able to participate and learn. There was much pride and respect between everyone.

Now the process of hiring artists, gathering supplies, organizing classrooms and events is shared as more staff and parents are involved. The yearly event has grown from my dream to the learning community's culture. Each year, students, parents, and staff eagerly anticipate the event with enthusiasm. Over the five years of this event's success, we have built a screened fish drying house, smoke house and created a storage of supplies and tools to meet the needs of a diverse group of artists/specialists. All learning styles and needs have been utilized to include all learners and many cultural backgrounds. In an interview with National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, one student stated: "I think the school is really important to me because we get to do lots of stuff that other schools don't get to do, like Culture Week! During Culture Week, we get to connect with our ancestors and what they have done." —Abby Hancock, ANCCS student.

3. How do you ensure that education transcends the classroom? Describe specific ways in which you deliberately connect your students with the community.



A desire to learn, speak up and engage in life as a learner must transcend outside of the classroom. A strong learning community where students become leaders and are empowered to teach each other takes an entire school staff, parents, and community members to model, practice and support independent success for everyone. To inspire and establish life-long learners, education must include core curriculum, social emotional learning, character education, and a significant amount of practice in an environment that is culturally responsive to all. To ensure that education transcends the classroom, I have implemented a Morning Gathering, have students participate in meaningful practice, debates, and community events throughout the year, and help students prepare for summer jobs or academic endeavors outside of school.

The Alaska Native Cultural Charter School (ANCCS) uses several traditional ways of learning. One method is for younger students to learn from older students. I created a script and practice where middle school students lead our Morning Gathering for all students, parents and community members. There is an Alaska indigenous animal helper with a character trait that is shared and discussed. The American Bald Eagle stands for responsibility and can be seen in nature with one mate for life caring for its young until adulthood. The students invite local elders, youth and adult leaders/ important community members to visit and share their life stories with the school every Monday. Each middle school student leads the Morning Gathering for at least one week with a partner during the school year. Student leaders celebrate birthdays, awards, elder wisdom, and teach daily brain-breaks for classes to practice. The younger students are excited to reach middle school so they can lead Morning Gathering.

The cultural curriculum that I designed at ANCCS involves the middle school students learning about Native corporations, laws, and current issues. Students participate in the Alaska Federation of Natives Elder and Youth Conference, where students have created several resolutions for the state, become state representatives for their regions, and led lectures on the importance of culture in their curriculum at ANCCS. By learning how to debate, students value the ideas and perspectives of others. One of my former students who came from a neighborhood school bullied and ashamed of his heritage, found strength and wisdom in the support given in my classes. This young man learned his Inupiaq language, teaches culture to youth, and has his own drum and dance group. I want my students to feel comfortable in their own skin and beliefs to become strong members of society.

Eighth grade students leave ANCCS with job skills. I have students write resumes, role-play interviews, write questions for interviews and interview each other, fill out applications, video themselves and analyze their interview skills. Students are ready to work right after eighth grade. A Bartlett High School ninth grade teacher wrote explaining how he enjoyed students from ANCCS, "They begin discussions, participate without pleading and enjoy my history class." I believe in connecting students to their community and their culture.



4. What do you consider to be a major public education issue today? Describe how you demonstrate being a lifelong learner, leader, and innovator about this issue, both in and outside of the classroom walls.

One of the major issues facing public education today, especially in the state of Alaska, is the lack of equity when it comes to culturally responsive practices. The Anchorage School District (ASD) has the most ethnically diverse students in the United States with over 100 languages spoken in student homes. Alaska Native students score lower on standardized tests than any other ethnic group in the state. Yet far too many teachers, policy makers, and administrators lack understanding of culturally responsive teaching and how to utilize cultural standards for teaching and evaluation. As a lifelong learner, I consider myself an innovator both in and outside of my classroom as a curriculum developer, seeker of community wisdom, consistent researcher and participant in peer support and education in cultural responsive teaching.

In order to develop curriculum that is culturally responsive to a community of diverse learners, I use the idea of looking through a “cultural lens,” introduced to me by SERRC – Alaska’s educational Resource Center. I take off my own cultural lenses, forget how I was taught and use the cultural lenses of my students to understand where they are coming from. Diverse learners do not have the same life experiences as me. All types of instruction are needed: visual, oral, auditory, kinetic, social emotional, and cultural. ASD has rigorous curriculum that touches on world diversity. By infusing the curriculum with knowledge of the backgrounds and cultural practices of each student, I truly feel that the curriculum is enhanced when all students are represented and acknowledged through cultural connections. I have gone to experts in the Native, Laos, Hmong, Samoan, and Sudanese communities to learn about customs and learning practices in order to be responsive to cultural ways of knowing and infuse curriculum with the beauty and knowledge that comes from each diverse learner. I have learned multi-cultural games and ways to teach math and science utilizing hands-on lessons integrated with brilliant diverse practices from elders. I make world news relative through social media like CNN10 News. I require students to discuss local issues dealing with land, rights, and state law to determine how these issues can or will someday affect each person regardless of race or cultural background. I enthusiastically share what I learn with my students, so that they see, learning is never-ending. Most importantly, I allow students and parents to show/model learning skills they have mastered from their own culture so that they are not just learners, but educators.

Every year teachers feel demands of new implementations and evaluation measures. With the cultural standards being a part of teacher evaluation and critical to student success, I collaborate with teachers to video, peer coach, take classes and develop culturally responsive practices and lessons together. I have been a leader in implementing SERCC’s PASSAGES for Academic Success, lead discussion forums and book studies. I hold high expectations for my students and peers and foster a passion for learning through culturally responsive instruction to promote multi-ethnic classrooms that greatly impact student growth.



5. As the 2019 National Teacher of the Year, you serve as a spokesperson and representative for teachers and students. What is your message? What will you communicate to your profession and to the public?

As a leader in the world of education, I have learned that no matter what your heritage or culture, kindness is the core of being human. I am a sincere activist for teaching tolerance, kindness, and how to support self and peers with positivity and respect for humanity. If selected as the Alaska 2019 Teacher of the Year, I will share my passion for the practice of working together to help create healthy, safe learning and work environments that foster academic achievement while respectfully responding to individual cultural needs. By teaching kindness and cultural responsiveness, children and adults benefit from the practice and lessons in social-emotional skills. Acts of kindness and the appreciation of each person are the roots of our social-emotional trees. Through intentional teachings and practice of character education, social-emotional learning, cultural responsiveness, and ethics, students and all stakeholders will benefit with stronger relationships, safe and healthy working and learning environments, and ultimately become lifelong learners who appreciate and value education with academic success.

Stronger relationships are built on trust. Students need trusting relationships with teachers and peers. An ethical and equitable learning environment allow students to learn without the stress of feeling threatened, ostracize, or neglected. Teaching with cultural modeling, practice, video, books, songs, games, peer interaction, and constant monitoring creates a place where students are valued and heard. When students feel free to share themselves, they grow exponentially in all academia, because they do not fear ridicule, openly share knowledge, ideas, understanding, as well as experiment and play with what they are learning. Students will develop the desire to write and speak for themselves because it is enjoyable in a safe environment. Students will challenge mathematical and scientific theory when they are supported in their endeavors to test and review processes. They become contributors and leaders when they are valued. I believe the most important way to make people feel valued is to promote and teach tolerance with absolutely no acceptance or demonstration of cruelty.

News across all media devices share mass shootings, war, world leaders ridiculing and taunting each other. Bullying is at the height of media attention today as famous musicians, actors, and other leaders stand together against cruelty. Educators must teach students that their own questions and thoughts are valuable and to question news/media to make positive impacts on the world. I believe that teaching kids how to recognize quality character traits, see beauty diversity, and acknowledge that media is not always true or factual. Kids are capable of promoting positivity. They emulate what they see. Without instruction and recognition of why the media shares negativity, kids come to accept cruelty and negativity as a part of who they are. All core contents are enhanced when students, K-12, learn about humanity and experience a learning environment that practices kindness routinely.



Teachers hold such power in promoting a peaceful work environment and positive paths to communication. Casual cruelty must never be allowed. No matter how trivial or seemingly harmless the act or spoken word may seem, if it is cruel, it must be recognized. We do not have the right to make the bully or the aggressor feel bullied in return. Remember, teachers have power. That power should not be used to make another person feel inferior or ridiculed. Rather, notice the beauty in diversity? Teachers must practice equitable treatment of all students and express clear expectations with cultural respect. With a plethora of materials in circulation there is no excuse not to teach all students how to change the way that they approach and interact with each other. By teaching meaningful lessons to promote healthy relations, all benefit from gaining the intrinsic feelings that are self-rewarding when we give kindness, expel or stop intolerable behaviors and recognize the cultural values that are universal to connect all humans.

Because teachers have power to influence and inspire, we must realize that education has to become personal and open our minds so that we do not judge, neglect or discriminate through words or actions that are unkind or inequitable. We must work together to support each other and our communities in becoming kind. Learning to live together harmoniously is a lifelong process that challenges us to be socially and culturally responsible, work with others, and share common values that are cross-cultural in order to sustain relationships in an ecologically sustainable environment. My message is, "Teaching kindness serves the world. Students are the future of our existence. Their success is our success. Be kind, teach kind."

Resume

Education

School	Cappella University
Degree	PhD
Major	Curriculum Design
Years Attended	2013

School	Grand Canyon University
Degree	Master
Major	Reading Specialist
Years Attended	2007

School	University of Alaska Anchorage
Degree	Bachelor
Major	Elementary Ed
Years Attended	2001

Certification

Certification	Gurian Brain-Based Learning Trainer
Year Obtained	2013

Certification	Reading Institute Trainer Certification
Year Obtained	2005

Certification	MS Math, Science, Language Arts & Social Studies
Year Obtained	2004

Certification	Teaching Certificate K-8
Year Obtained	2001

Certification	Emergency Medical Technician
Year Obtained	1996

Experience

Title	Teacher
Organization	Anchorage School District
Years in Position	10

Title	Teacher
Organization	Southwest Region School District
Years in Position	7

Title	Adjunct Instructor
Organization	Alaska Pacific University
Years in Position	1

Title	Special Education Aide
Organization	Unalaska City School District
Years in Position	2

Leadership

Position	Education Advisory Council
Organization	Alaska Humanities Forum
Years in Position	2

Position	Foundations Leadership Team
Organization	Alaska Native Cultural Charter School
Years in Position	3

Position	Cultural Connectivity and Responsiveness
Organization	SEERC Alaska
Years in Position	2

Position	Academic Policy Committee Teacher Representative
Organization	Alaska Native Cultural Charter School
Years in Position	2

Position	Collaborative Community Leader
Organization	Disney Hand Teachers
Years in Position	



Awards and Other Recognitions

Award/Recognition	Alaska State Teacher of the Year
Year Received	2019

Award/Recognition	Outstanding Support for Educators and Students
Year Received	2016

Award/Recognition	Outstanding Technology Integration
Year Received	2007

Award/Recognition	Disney Hand teacher Award
Year Received	2005

