

**By Representative Mary Kapsner**  
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Next week most of us will be sitting down with family and friends to enjoy a Thanksgiving meal and reflect on the blessings in our personal lives. It's a good time of year to do this, following summer and fall harvests, back to school activities and the marathon of fall meetings that have become yearly events.

I've attended my share of these meetings myself—AVCP in Bethel, AFN and the Alaska Native Education Summit, for starters. One of the reasons we meet together is to focus on areas that need to be fixed, problems and challenges that affect our daily lives.

Take education, for example. State funding, state mandates for high school exit exams, federal requirements under No Child Left Behind present huge challenges to our educational system and to individual students and families. Issues specific to Alaska Native students, including academic performance, culturally relevant curriculum and strategies that will get more Alaska Natives into the workforce weigh on the Native community statewide. The challenges addressed at conventions, summits, and meetings are significant ones and deserving of our best efforts individually and collectively to change the tide.

My message to participants at the Alaska Native Education Summit, however, focused on celebrating how far we have come in the educational arena. My grandmother was raised to be a wife and mother and began her "career" at the age of 14. My mother attended BIA day school in Kwethluk and was then sent away to Chemawa boarding school. I benefited from the Molly Hootch settlement and am proud today to say I am a product of the Lower Kuskokwim School District.

A whole new standard has been thrust upon us in just one generation's time. NCLB aside, I think we're doing very well.

- LKSD has one of the best programs in the state for training first year teachers and teachers new to Alaska about being culturally sensitive.
- Our bilingual program is probably one of the best in the Nation—look at the work being done by our students and the materials the district has produced to help them become successful learners.
- The Yup'ik Immersion Program is a model heralded across the state, the nation, and even internationally.
- The BABS program has taught us that everyone willing to make a change deserves a second chance.
- Our ROTC program has gone on to win top honors in the Nation and continued to spark enthusiasm and commitment among all those associated with the team.
- Programs like the Tumkanka program places Yup'ik speaking people in homes to work with parents and preschool children on important pre-school learning activities like reading which are both innovative and effective.

- We are finally putting emphasis on the vocational/technical needs of education with the community partnership that is working to make Yuut Elitnaurviat a reality.
- We are working to rise to the challenges presented by NCLB; teacher aides across the district, who have provided stability and the link between the classroom and the community for years, are working now to attain the requisite certificates.

I've used examples from the work at LKSD to try to make the point that as we take stock in our lives, we do have a lot to be thankful for that extends beyond our front doors. I could have written paragraphs about the advocacy and hard work that has occurred over the years and is currently being done at other schools in our region, at YKHC, AVCP, Coastal Villages, Cenailiit, and a host of other organizations too long to mention.

I leave you with my personal wishes for a healthy Thanksgiving Day and a sincere thank you to each and every person in the region who contributes to the blessings of life in the Y-K Delta.