



## CASE STUDY: COMMUNITY ADVOCATES

**The Lower Yukon School District (LYSD)** includes 11 schools across 10 villages in western Alaska. The school district covers more than 22,000 square miles along the lower portion of the Yukon River. The school district office is in Mountain Village.

### PROGRAM OVERVIEW

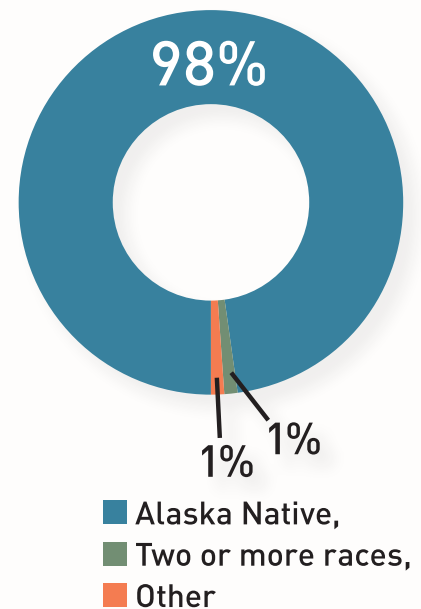
**LYSD's Community Human Service Provider (CHSP)** position utilizes a community-based staffing approach that is deeply rooted in the school district's focus on creating culturally relevant school climates. Since introducing the position in 2017, LYSD has secured grant funding to support numerous local, state, and regional training opportunities for the CHSPs that pair social emotional and mental health approaches with traditional Yup'ik teachings.

### Lower Yukon School District

- » 1,995 students
- » 11 schools

### Demographics

- » 98% Alaska Native
- » 100% free and reduced lunch
- » 12% students with disabilities



## BUILDING A LOCAL WORKFORCE

For LYSD, recruiting and staffing school counselors was a challenge. The school district knew some local people had natural talents for the role. Still, most community members did not have the training required to serve as a school counselor. In 2017, in response to this gap, they created the CHSP position through the school district's Title I funds. The CHSP role provides support to students, serves as a primary liaison between schools and their local communities, and helps fill the gap in social emotional services and supports for school sites.

*"We need to find local people who have the skills, who have the training, who have the knowledge to be good at providing the kids a place to go and [a person] to talk to." – LYSD administrator*

## BUILDING STRUCTURE FOR A NEW POSITION

Today, LYSD has four CHSPs on staff at their Kotlik, Emmonak, Scammon Bay, and Hooper Bay schools. The CHSPs also provide crisis response support to other school sites in the district. Two of the four CHSPs have been in their roles since the program’s start. Some are working toward or have already obtained higher education degrees through online programs while serving in their roles.

### Defining the Role

At the start, the CHSP positions needed additional support and direction. The program had funding, but the vision and goals were not well known, and the day-to-day duties of the CHSPs’ were unclear. LYSD also recognized a broader need to equip the CHSPs with relevant social emotional training. School district leadership expanded an existing partnership with [Association of Alaska School Boards](#) (AASB) to participate in the KAYULI (Strong Person) Grant. The grant provides relevant training, support, and tools to allow CHSPs to expand their skill sets by pairing new knowledge with traditional Yup’ik teachings.

### As their roles have evolved, the CHSPs now provide:

- » *Student individual and small group counseling sessions*
- » *Prevention activities*
- » *Culturally responsive lessons and activities*
- » *Crisis response*
- » *Family outreach and engagement*
- » *Career and post-secondary support*
- » *Connections to community-based resources*



CHSPs work with students and their families and can help connect them with more targeted or intensive mental health services through [Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corporation](#) (YKHC) and other community-based organizations and providers.

The CHSPs also work closely with teaching staff — primarily individuals from out of state — to introduce them to Yup’ik culture and enhance place-based education approaches for curriculum and classroom activities. They also engage with Elders and community members to bring them in to support student activities and experiences. School district leadership described some of their work as thinking “outside of the box” in addressing student mental health needs. One of the CHSPs also leads a Cultural Team consisting of a classroom teacher, paraprofessional, Yup’ik teacher, and administrator to support the school district’s monthly cultural activities.

### Leveraging Training Resources With Cultural Relevance At the Core

Partway into the grant, the school district introduced a new Yup’ik Language and Culture Director role to partner with the CHSPs, specifically focusing on the area of cultural relevancy. In addition to providing training through this new leadership position, the school district also leveraged local, state, and regional resources to get the necessary training, skills, and tools in place for the CHSPs.

*“Having those connections to the regional programs was vital in making this program successful.”*  
– LYSD administrator

*“In our Yup’ik culture, we always focus on the positive side of building strong minds, what can we do to heal and move forward, looking at our strengths and relying on those strengths to help support each other, especially those that are experiencing trauma or have had lost loved ones due to suicide or violence.”*  
– LYSD leadership

LYSD worked with organizations and programs such as YKHC, [Association of Village Council Presidents Healthy Families](#), [First Alaskans Institute](#), and the [UAF Qungasvik ‘Toolbox’](#) to introduce new trainings and approaches to the CHSPs. Throughout the community- and school district-led trainings, school leadership is continuously focused on maintaining Yup’ik culture and knowledge at the core of the CHSPs work.

LYSD’s work to build culturally relevant practices in their schools continues. For example, the school district is currently developing a referral form and assessment that builds on traditional Yup’ik practices of oral traditions.

## IMPORTANCE OF SUPPORTING LOCAL COMMUNITIES

While some CHSPs have pursued higher education, there is potential to continue expanding the possible career tracks for the role. One of the expectations for the position is to participate in the [University of Alaska Fairbanks Rural Human Services Program](#) or a similar career development program. The school district hopes to see more CHSPs pursue this option.

While additional training is valuable, school district leadership also spoke to the innate passion and skills the CHSPs bring to their roles. They explained that the school district is then positioned to help build on this passion and skillset with additional support and training.

*“The CHSPs - they’re local people, and they’re here year-round. And the students and the youth see them out in communities, they interact with them . . . It just builds for a stronger relationship and a trusting relationship between school and community.”*  
– LYSD leadership

School administrators emphasized how important it is to hire an individual who knows their community and has the relevant background to provide social emotional elements of the role. Finding an individual who fits the school’s culture has been crucial to the program’s success.