

Building Character, Confidence, and Academics Through Physical Endurance: Nikolai Ski Challenge

In 2011-2012, my husband and I taught at a very small school in Nikolai, Alaska. At the beginning of the year we had ten students enrolled.

As teachers, we believe it is valuable for students to have a goal and achieve it. The idea for a 53-mile ski to McGrath as a goal originated at the beginning of the year in-service. We started talking about it with the students and community as soon as school started. We presented it as a natural part of our school year, saying over and over again, "When we ski to McGrath, ..." Most of the parents, kids, and community members thought it was a crazy idea, and that the kids wouldn't be able to do it. Many times I wondered if we actually could do it. Our kids were not experienced skiers and did not have much physical endurance. We did not have any appropriate ski gear or clothing when the year began.

We started skiing in our very old 3-pin binding skis, jeans, and hoodies. Our first excursions were ½ to 1 very slow mile. After Christmas vacation, our new ski equipment arrived. There was a definite moral change with new skis. We began skiing for longer periods of time and distance. Unfortunately, the interior Alaskan winter was an extremely cold one. We stopped skiing at -10 degrees, and it was -10 degrees a lot!

Gradually we acquired the appropriate clothing: base layers, fleece layers, thick socks, warm gloves, etc.... Most of our clothing was donated from ski clubs and people who were interested in our project. I just started putting the word out, and people were excited to help.

When the community believed we were really going to do this, they helped extensively. People carried our gear and food. The kids only carried daypacks with what they needed for the day. Our first camp was a wall tent with a stove. Volunteers went out and set it up for us. The other camps were in cabins along the way. Although we planned and pre-cooked our dinners, people were happy to feed us, and we were happy to oblige them! Without the community support, we would not have been able to do it.

We delayed our original start date because of cold weather. We did a practice campout near the village, and the temperature dipped to -30. We decided that one night at that temperature was enough, so we waited two weeks. We left on March 21st and that night the temperature was -20! We were prepared and stayed plenty warm in our wall tent. It finally warmed up to the lovely March temperatures we dreamed of when we planned the trip on the last day as we skied into McGrath.

The trip was probably one of the greatest activities we have done as teachers. The students and community were proud of their accomplishment. This unit contains most of the activities we did in preparation for, during, and after the trip. The lessons and activities are organized by content area. The cover sheet gives you an overview of the entire unit. We did these lessons and activities with 3rd through 9th graders. I hope you will be inspired to do something great with your students. —Joyce Gardella, Teacher