A

Wagner Iworrigan, a seventeen-year-old high school senior on St. Lawrence Island in Alaska, knows a lot about biology, meteorology and maths.

He’s an expert at telling whether a walrus is too sick to eat, if the weather is likely to turn dangerous, and the best angle for throwing a harpoon at a bowhead whale.

B

On a recent unseasonably warm day last autumn, he missed class to join his uncle on their boat. With nets and hooks, they motored through the choppy grey waves of the Bering Sea until the lights of their village, Savoonga, seemed further away than the stars above. They hoped to catch a plump seal to feed the rest of the family: Wagner’s two younger sisters, a younger brother, four cousins and a grandfather. All ten of them share a three-bedroom house.
C

Wagner might make a good scientist, but he’s not planning on going to college. He feels a responsibility for his siblings – his mother died and his father lives in another village – and college is ‘so far from home’. He’s also unclear about what he would do with a degree: ‘We don’t have a lot of jobs here,’ he says. After graduating, he plans to become a commercial fisherman to ‘make some good money’ at one of the most dangerous jobs in the US.

D

Many St. Lawrence students say they want to go to college but half of them drop out of high school, and only two percent graduate from college. The benefits of a degree are not obvious for people living on this remote island. Families have a subsistence lifestyle, hunting walruses, seals and whales in the spring, and gathering berries in the summer. The largest employer is the school system; otherwise, there are only a handful of jobs in fishing, oil and the airlines that connect the island to the mainland. There isn’t much demand for anything else and more than a quarter of adults are unemployed.

E

Many people feel that the educational programs are too stifling, not allowing students to go beyond the curriculum, with little connection to the real world. ‘We want our children to achieve academically, but we need to be able to design programs that deal with the challenges they face day-to-day,’ said one teacher. Those challenges are profound with no easy solutions: what is the relevance of school to kids who spend much of their time hunting and gathering berries?
Families also worry that sending children away to study in Higher Education could endanger the Yupik language and culture. Already, the younger generation is losing its fluency and grasp of skills like sewing, walrus-ivory carving and fish-cutting. Respect for the old ways and knowledge of traditions are disappearing. Can the community send more students to university without sacrificing its desire to preserve Native culture and language?

The Yupik Eskimos have inhabited St. Lawrence Island continuously for the last 2,000 years. Today two villages remain with a population of just 1,400. People there are used to the harsh landscape and climate – in the summer, meadows of grassy tundra stretch from snow-capped ridges to the stony shorelines, but in winter the sun disappears, there is a lot of snow, and polar bears arrive on ice floes. Leaving the island is not an option, as a ticket on a bush plane costs $400, a week’s earnings for many islanders. The sense of community is strong. When a whale is killed, the houses and school empty as everyone races to the beach to take a share of the meat. As Wagner put it, ‘We’re all one big family because we’re so isolated.’

But the old ways are inevitably changing. The children drink soda and eat macaroni-and-cheese in addition to the traditional diet of fish, sea mammals and berries. They ride snow machines instead of walking. And in the evening, they prefer playing video games and watching satellite television to listening to their elders tell stories.
Unsurprisingly, locals are protective of their independence and their heritage. They recognize the value of ‘education’, but feel that the definition is too narrow. ‘I think about when my grandmother taught me to cut fish,’ remembers one resident. ‘It wasn’t do it once and I’ll give you a grade. It was hours of practice until you get it right ... . There’s a distinction between an education and school. Education is what Native people have been doing for their children since the beginning of time. School has been what has been imposed on people from outside,’ she adds. ‘We need to get in the business of education again.’