

Grant Approval Memo



Grantee: Alaska Humanities Forum
Request Amount: \$75,000.00
Project Title: Strengthening Protective Factors for Bristol Bay Youth through Classroom Storytelling
Grant Term: 1/1/2027 to 12/31/2027
Trust Staff: Tina Voelker-Ross

Staff Analysis:

- What does this project do?
Trust funds will support the expansion of Story Works—an evidence-based classroom storytelling program that strengthens protective factors for rural youth—into the Bristol Bay region. Funding will cover program delivery, including teacher training, travel to participating communities, classroom materials, and staff time needed to implement workshops and support five local teachers who will be trained to deliver Story Works independently. The program provides a structured, culturally responsive storytelling curriculum that builds resilience, promotes emotional regulation, increases school engagement, and strengthens teacher-student relationships.
- Who is receiving the funds?
Funds will be awarded to the Alaska Humanities Forum (AKHF), a statewide nonprofit that connects Alaskans through stories, ideas, and shared experiences that inspire understanding and strengthen communities. AKHF offers programs in youth, cross-cultural competency, leadership, stories and conversations. Story Works will be delivered *in partnership* with the Bristol Bay Foundation—an Alaska Native education and cultural organization serving Alutiiq/Sugpiaq, Dena'ina, and Yup'ik peoples of the Bristol Bay region.
- Why is staff recommending this project?
Staff recommend this project because it will directly strengthen protective factors for Trust beneficiaries in rural Alaska, the Bristol Bay region. Story Works meets youth where they spend a considerable amount of their time, in the school setting. Story Works occupies a distinct position in the landscape of youth mental health programming. Unlike opt-in or pullout models, it reaches every student in a classroom through English Language Arts instruction, eliminating stigma and engaging students who wouldn't self-select into mental health programming. It increases protective factors for youth, such as promoting high self-esteem and emotional regulation skills, connecting them to their teacher and school, increasing school engagement, and increasing the likelihood of seeking support in response to trauma. These outcomes reduce the likelihood that youth will experience worsening mental health challenges and create earlier opportunities for intervention when students are in crisis. The program's classroom-based, teacher-delivered model also addresses barriers common in rural Alaska—stigma, transportation, and limited availability of specialized staff—while building local capacity to sustain supports long after the grant period.

The initial Trust-funded Story Works project in the Bering Strait region successfully expanded culturally responsive storytelling programming to six rural communities—Unalakleet, White Mountain, Golovin, Savoonga, Brevig Mission, and Koyuk. Across the grant period, 128 students completed the full five-day workshop model and an estimated 60 Trust beneficiaries were served using the approved methodology.

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An additional 179 students participated in one-day Story Circle activities that introduced relationship-building and prepared schools for deeper engagement.

Evaluation results showed clear, meaningful outcomes. Among students completing the full workshops, 88% reported increases in protective factors tied to positive relationships, self-expression, and belonging. More than half (54%) felt more connected to others, and one-third (33%) felt more understood. These outcomes demonstrate that culturally grounded storytelling is an effective upstream prevention strategy that strengthens resilience and fosters supportive relationships.

A major achievement of the initial project was the creation of a culturally responsive train-the-trainer model. Working with local educators, the curriculum was adapted to reflect community traditions, incorporate elders, and honor oral storytelling practices. Five educators completed facilitator training and are now equipped to independently deliver Story Works in their schools, ensuring sustainable local leadership and long-term impact beyond the original grant.

Together, these results show that the initial Trust investment produced strong, measurable benefits and built durable local capacity—evidence that supports expanding Story Works to a new rural Alaska region.

Alaska Humanities Forum has significant leveraged funding and broad support for this project. They have developed a model that builds sustainability into this vital and culturally adapted prevention programming for rural youth.

- Will this be a multi-year project?

No. This is a one-time funding request. The teacher-training model supports ongoing program delivery at significantly reduced cost, enabling AKHF to sustain Story Works in Bristol Bay through existing funding streams after the grant period.

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Trust Five Year Funding History

<u>Fiscal Year</u>	<u>Project Title</u>	<u>Amount</u>	<u>Status</u>	<u>Final Expended</u>
2026	Strengthening Protective Factors through Classroom Storytelling	\$50,000	Pending final report	Final report due 6/30/2026

<u>Comp Plan - Area of Focus</u>	<u>Strategic Priority Area</u>
Area of Focus 1: Early Childhood & Youth	Priority 1: Prevention & Early Intervention

Project Description (from grant application)

Alaska's rural youth face a mental health crisis: 24% of Alaska Native high schoolers have seriously considered suicide in the past 12 months. The Alaska Humanities Forum (AKHF) requests \$75,000 to expand Story Works – a classroom storytelling program with demonstrated results in rural Alaska – into the Bristol Bay region in partnership with the Bristol Bay Foundation, the region's Alaska Native education and cultural organization. This project will train five local teachers to directly serve 125 middle and high school students, 79 of whom are Trust beneficiaries. It will mitigate the risk of 46 additional students becoming beneficiaries. The teachers will sustain the program beyond the grant period at a fraction of the initial investment. The communities we are engaging across Bristol Bay are in Dillingham City School District (Dillingham), Bristol Bay Borough School District (Naknek), Southwest Region School District (New Stuyahok & Togiak), and Lake and Peninsula School District (Newhalen).

The need for strengthening protective factors among Alaska's youth is clear. According to the 2023 Alaska Youth Risk Behavior Survey (the most recent available), 23% of Alaskan high schoolers seriously considered suicide in the prior 12 months, and 43% felt so sad or hopeless almost every day for two weeks or more in a row that they stopped doing some usual activities. These figures increase to 24% and 47% respectively for Alaska Native youth. The CDC classifies all of these respondents as having poor mental health. These statistics are compounded by findings that 65% of students would not feel comfortable seeking help from three or more adults besides their parents if they had an important question affecting their life, and 44% of students do not believe that their teachers care about them. The 2026 Alaska School Climate and Connectedness Survey further finds that 58% of students report that students at their school are often teased or picked on.

Story Works addresses this crisis through a clear theory of change. Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are a leading predictor of mental illness, and rural Alaska Native youth experience ACEs at rates significantly higher than the general population. The CDC identifies specific protective factors that buffer against ACEs translating into mental illness: safe relationships with trusted adults, connection to community, emotional regulation skills, and peer support networks. Story Works is designed to build each of these protective factors through an evidence-based classroom intervention, directly reducing the projected lifetime mental health burden among participating beneficiaries.

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Story Works occupies a distinctive position in the landscape of youth mental health programming. Unlike opt-in or pullout models, it reaches every student in a classroom through English Language Arts instruction, eliminating stigma and engaging students who wouldn't self-select into mental health programming. Unlike interventions that rely on outside facilitators, it strengthens the everyday teacher-student relationship, which is the relationship most likely to catch emerging mental health concerns and persist beyond a single program cycle. Embedding the program in the school day also eliminates barriers that limit participation in rural prevention programming: transportation, cost, stigma, and scheduling.

Over a week, students develop and share personal stories in a structured environment that produces six evidence-based mental health benefits, detailed in the Trust Beneficiaries section: protection against trauma, stronger self-esteem and emotion regulation, peer support skills, stronger teacher-student relationships, increased school engagement, and connection to mental health resources for students in crisis. A critical safeguarding mechanism runs throughout: trained adults, either the teacher or a community volunteer, review every story before it is shared with the class, ensuring that students in crisis are connected with appropriate support and that no story is shared publicly that shouldn't be.

Story Works' evidence base is substantial. A rigorous evaluation for an Alaska Children's Trust-funded grant demonstrated that 88% of participants showed increases in protective factors as defined by SAMHSA, and the AMHT-funded 2025 Bering Strait School District pilot replicated this result at 89% in a rural Alaska Native context. Since 2014, Story Works has served over 6,000 students. While most of this historical evidence comes from urban populations, the Bering Strait School District pilot provides direct evidence that the program's effects hold in the rural Alaska Native context that characterizes Bristol Bay. Story Works' evaluation instruments were developed with and reviewed by mental health professionals, and qualitative feedback indicates that teachers report students are more likely to seek their support in response to traumatic events.

The 2025 AMHT-funded Bering Strait School District pilot in Unalakleet, Koyuk, and Brevig Mission also demonstrated the feasibility of the teacher training model that this proposal scales. AKHF adapted Story Works to be culturally appropriate for the region, shifting to primarily oral story drafting, incorporating guidance for meaningfully engaging Elders as story coach volunteers, and identifying new student story models reflective of the region. Giaana Petersen, an Inupiaq language arts teacher from Unalakleet, provided guidance on adapting the curriculum to be more culturally relevant. AKHF trained five teachers to deliver the programming independently, serving 128 students, 82 of whom are beneficiaries. AKHF continues to provide materials and remote support to Bering Strait School District teachers through other funding streams, demonstrating the low-cost sustainability of the model after initial investment.

AKHF's expansion into Bristol Bay is grounded in partnership with the Bristol Bay Foundation, an Alaska Native organization representing the Alutiiq/Sugpiaq, Dena'ina, and Yup'ik peoples of the region. Through AKHF's Cross-Cultural Competence teacher training program, AKHF and the Bristol Bay Foundation already work together with educators and administrators across the Bristol Bay Borough, Lake and Peninsula, Southwest, and Dillingham City school districts. The attached letters of support show widespread regional enthusiasm for this project. This existing network of teacher relationships, regional logistics, and institutional partnership with the Bristol Bay Foundation provides both the operational infrastructure and the cultural grounding necessary to implement Story Works

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appropriately and sustainably across the four districts within the one-year grant period. The Bristol Bay Foundation has committed to donating 60 hours of their staff time to travel alongside Story Works staff to villages to observe Story Workshops and provide recommendations for culturally relevant adaptations to the curriculum.

This project will reach all 125 students in the participating classrooms, the majority of whom are Alaska Native Trust beneficiaries (79). Further, it will serve as prevention for the remaining 46 students, mitigating their risk of becoming Trust beneficiaries. Research shows a particularly high incidence of ACEs among Alaska Native youth. To estimate beneficiaries experiencing mental illness, AKHF applied the 47% rate of Alaska Native high school students reporting sustained depressive symptoms from the 2023 YRBS to the projected participant population, recognizing that this extrapolates from a statewide figure and assumes the participating classrooms are predominantly Alaska Native, consistent with the demographics of the four partner districts. To estimate beneficiaries with developmental disabilities, AKHF applied a weighted percentage using the average number of students with an IEP who spent more than 80% of the day in the "regular classroom" across the four partner districts, drawn from the Alaska Special Education Data Profile.

This proposal comes at a strategic moment. AKHF has just concluded the Bering Strait School District pilot, which means fresh programmatic lessons and increased staff capacity are in place. The January 2027 start date aligns with academic calendar requirements for teacher recruitment and a late-spring and fall-semester delivery.

The outcomes of this project will be strengthened protective factors for 79 Trust beneficiaries, 5 new teachers trained to deliver Story Works programming independently, and an additional 46 students whose risk of becoming a Trust beneficiary is mitigated by increased protective factors.

Grantee Proposed Evaluation Measures (from grant application)

How much did you do?

- a) Number (#) of student participants with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) who participated in the project.
- b) Number (#) of extrapolated Trust beneficiaries served, based on YRBS data.
- c) TOTAL number (#) of student participants (both Trust beneficiaries and non-Trust beneficiaries, if applicable) who participated in the project, broken down by School.
- d) Number (#) of staff members involved in the project.
- e) Number (#) of staff members trained through the pilot training model to deliver programming independently.

How well did you do it?

- a) Provide a narrative describing the timeline, activities, successes, challenges, and any lessons learned during the project, including the development of a pilot training model.
- b) Number (#) and percentage (%) of participants who completed the workshop, measured by the telling of a story or completing an alternative assignment (e.g., writing out their story, sharing 1:1 with staff).
- c) Number (#) and percentage (%) of participants who felt respected and

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encouraged during the workshop sessions.

d) Number (#) and percentage (%) of participants who were satisfied with the workshop.

Is anyone better off?

a) Number (#) and percentage (%) of participants who felt more understood as a result of their participation in the workshop.

b) Number (#) and percentage (%) of participants who felt more connected to their peers and community as a result of their participation in the workshop.

c) Two stories from participants describing (in their own words) how their participation in the project has improved their quality of life.

Proposed Project Performance Measures (developed by the Trust)

How much did you do?

- a. Number (#) of student participants with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) who participated in the project.
- b. Number (#) of extrapolated Trust beneficiaries served, based on YRBS data.
- c. TOTAL number (#) of student participants (both Trust beneficiaries and non-Trust beneficiaries, if applicable) who participated in the project, broken down by school.
- d. Number (#) of staff members involved in the project.
- e. Number (#) of staff members trained through the pilot training model to deliver programming independently.

How well did you do it?

- a. Provide a narrative describing the timeline, activities, successes, challenges, and any lessons learned during the project, including the development of a pilot training model. Please provide information as to how the Story Works program was adapted to be culturally responsive to the needs of rural Alaskan youth.
- b. Number (#) and percentage (%) of participants who completed the workshop, measured by the telling of a story or completing an alternative assignment (e.g., writing out their story, sharing 1:1 with staff).
- c. Number (#) and percentage (%) of participants who felt respected and encouraged during the workshop sessions.
- d. Number (#) and percentage (%) of participants who were satisfied with the workshop.

Is anyone better off?

- a. Number (#) and percentage (%) of participants who felt more understood as a result of their participation in the workshop.
- b. Number (#) and percentage (%) of participants who felt more connected to their peers and community as a result of their participation in the workshop.
- c. Two stories from participants describing (in their own words) how their participation in the project has improved their quality of life.

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Sustainability (from grant application)

This project is designed with sustainability as a core feature, not an afterthought. The teacher training model fundamentally shifts the cost structure after year one: once the five Bristol Bay teachers are trained, the marginal cost to sustain programming drops from the full \$75,000 grant to approximately \$10,000 per year across all four districts – roughly 13% of the initial investment. Ongoing costs cover student booklets, materials, and remote coaching support from AKHF staff, while the trained teachers deliver the workshops directly within their own classrooms. A \$75,000 investment in year one therefore produces a programmatic capability that AKHF can maintain with local support for many years at a fraction of the startup cost.

Early indicators from the Bering Strait School District pilot support this model. All five trained teachers completed the pilot, and AKHF is continuing to provide materials and remote support to sustain programming in the district through other funding streams. While the pilot only recently concluded and long-term sustainability data is still emerging, the training model itself is functioning as designed: teachers are equipped to deliver the program independently, and AKHF's role has shifted from direct implementation to ongoing support.

AKHF will fund the \$10,000 annual continuation cost through a diversified mix of local funding, individual donations, and federal humanities funding. We want to be transparent with the Trust about the current federal funding context: recent cuts to the National Endowment for the Humanities created real challenges for humanities councils nationwide. AKHF has weathered this period by diversifying our revenue streams, strengthening relationships with Alaska and Lower-48-based funders, and growing our staff capacity over the past year. While the immediate federal funding landscape remains uncertain, AKHF's financial base is broader and more resilient than it was a year ago, and the low ongoing cost of sustaining Story Works in Bristol Bay is well within the range of what AKHF can maintain through non-federal sources alone if necessary. The alignment of Story Works with Bristol Bay Foundation's long-term goals, as evidenced by their \$5,000 donation to support this project, shows local buy-in for project sustainability.

Who We Serve (from grant application)

Story Works will provide services to an estimated 79 Trust beneficiaries in the Bristol Bay region. This estimate is built from two sources. Applying the 47% rate of Alaska Native high school students who reported feeling so sad or hopeless for two weeks or more that they stopped usual activities (2023 YRBS), respondents whom the CDC classifies as having poor mental health, to the projected participant population yields approximately 59 beneficiaries experiencing mental illness. Applying a weighted IEP rate drawn from the Alaska Special Education Data Profile for the Bristol Bay Borough, Lake and Peninsula, Southwest, and Dillingham City school districts yields approximately 20 beneficiaries with developmental disabilities. Both calculations assume a participant population that is predominantly Alaska Native, consistent with the demographics of the four partner districts. Story Works will improve the mental health of Trust beneficiaries through six interlocking mechanisms:

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1. Buffering against trauma. Research on childhood resilience identifies three buffers that protect kids from the long-term impact of trauma, and Story Works addresses two of them by building at least one place where students feel safe in the community and at least one adult they feel safe with. The workshop builds trust within the classroom between peers and between students and the teacher, reducing the likelihood that traumatic experiences translate into lasting mental health symptoms.

2. Strengthening the teacher-student relationship. Because the relationship being built is specifically organized around sharing personal stories, students become more likely to go to their teacher with difficulties in their lives. This increases the likelihood that students in crisis will be connected to the resources and support they need.

3. Connecting students in crisis with support. Every story is heard by a trained adult, either the teacher or a community volunteer, before it is shared with the full class. These adults are trained in trauma-informed approaches: they listen non-judgmentally, validate what has been shared, and ensure students receive any support needed, often by coordinating with the school's mental health professional. Stories that are not appropriate for the full class are either kept between the student and the adult or redirected to a story appropriate for public sharing. This built-in review process functions as a screening mechanism that identifies students who need support.

4. Building self-esteem and emotion regulation. Story Works coaches students through the nervousness of public speaking and the vulnerability of sharing personal stories with peers, building both self-confidence and emotional regulation skills.

5. Developing peer support skills. Students learn to listen intently without interrupting, to ask questions that build up their classmates, and to vocalize appreciation for one another. These are the foundational skills of peer support networks that protect mental health over time.

6. Increasing school engagement. Developing and verbally sharing a personal story is an unusual experience in the standard public school curriculum, and students who struggle with conventional schooling often flourish in the workshop. This creates a point of school connection for students at risk of disengagement.

Estimated Numbers of Beneficiaries Served Experiencing (from grant application)

Mental Illness:	59
Developmental Disabilities:	20
Number of people to be trained	5

Project Budget (from grant application)

Personnel Services Costs	\$47,183.00
Personnel Services Costs (Other Sources)	\$97,000.00
Personnel Services Narrative	0.3 FTE and Fringe for Program Manager: \$28,350 0.15 FTE and Fringe for Program Director: \$18,833

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Travel Costs	\$7,940.00
Travel Costs (Other Sources)	\$0.00
Travel Costs Narrative	2 round trip tickets for staff to New Stuyahok at \$900 each: \$1,800 2 round trip tickets for staff to Togiak at \$1,100 each: \$2,200 4 round trip tickets for teachers to hub: \$1,600 Per diem for staff and teachers on travel status: \$2,340

Space or Facilities Costs	\$5,000.00
Space or Facilities Costs (Other Sources)	\$14,000.00
Space or Facilities Narrative	A portion of the cost of office space for Story Works staff

Supplies Costs	\$3,060.00
Supplies Costs (Other Sources)	\$3,000.00
Supplies Narrative	Cost to print Story Works booklets: \$2,550 (150 booklets at \$17 each) Program supplies (pens, markers, etc.): \$510

Other Costs	\$11,817.00
Other Costs (Other Sources)	\$0.00
Other Costs Narrative	Contracts for local teachers for guidance on adapting curriculum: \$5,000 Indirect rate (10%): \$6,817

Other Funding Sources (from grant application)

Bristol Bay Foundation (Secured)	\$5,000.00
ConocoPhillips (Secured)	\$10,000.00
Alaska Children's Trust (Secured)	\$1,000.00
Alaska Emergency Medicine Associates (Secured)	\$5,000.00
Major Donor Contributions (Secured)	\$18,000.00
National Endowment for the Humanities (Pending)	\$75,000.00
Total Leveraged Funds	\$114,000.00