

Alaska Avalanche School

Strategic Plan

2022 - 2025





About Alaska Avalanche School

The Alaska Avalanche School (“AAS”) was founded in 1976 as a snow safety program within the Alaska Division of Parks and Recreation. The school’s early tenure was guided by avalanche education pioneers Doug Fessler and Jill Fredston, who sought to carry out their mission of teaching avalanche safety courses in Alaska. In 2005, the school became a standalone 501(c)3 nonprofit organization. As interest in outdoor recreation has exploded in recent years we have strived to grow and meet high community demand.

Since 1976, we have taught tens of thousands of people how to recognize avalanche hazard and travel in the winter backcountry environment, minimizing their risk of getting caught in an avalanche. Currently, AAS is staffed by 37 professional instructors teaching programs that range from short awareness programs for youth and the general public, to basic three-day field courses and week-long professional development courses. We serve both the motorized and non-motorized communities teaching courses statewide (including in communities off the road system).

Our students include snow recreationists, outdoor professionals, military personnel, and search and rescue teams. During the 2021 - 2022 season, over a thousand students were enrolled in our courses.



Our Mission

The Alaska Avalanche School provides exceptional experience-based avalanche safety education to all users of the mountain environment.

Our Vision

Access: Avalanche education is available to all Alaskans who live, work, or travel in avalanche terrain.

Community Culture: Alaskans work together to have a culture of respect for mountain hazards.

Decision-making: Alaskans embrace & foster educated decisions in avalanche terrain.

Reduce Fatalities: Alaska lowers the rate of accidents and deaths in avalanche terrain.



About the strategic plan format:

To fulfill the organization's mission and vision, five strategic initiatives have been identified for AAS to focus on during the years to come. Each of these bigger picture initiatives are supported by a set of goals and will be reviewed often to ensure progress.



Initiative #1: Meet community demand for recreational avalanche education statewide while maintaining the high quality of our course offerings and **better supporting a talented instructor base.**

Goal 1a. By October 2022, create an instructor development plan that clearly articulates how we will recruit, train, and retain instructors in the years to come, which includes a clear pathway from shadowing a course to becoming a course lead instructor.

Goal 1b. Ensure the school is administratively prepared to serve a rapidly expanding student base, both before and after courses. This includes considerations such as office staffing, website/course registration processes, access to online resources, and backend considerations like insurance coverages.

Goal 1c. Be more intentional in how we serve a diversity of skill levels and transportation modes in our Level 1 and Level 2 courses by considering equipment- and skill-specific courses and strengthening course pre-work requirements.

Initiative #2: Serve Alaska's professional avalanche community by continuing our focus on **professional course offerings** to meet Alaskan needs.

Goal 2a. Ensure that Alaska-based avalanche professionals can receive high quality in-state education opportunities to meet their professional needs, with an eye on improving our professional-track rescue offerings.

Goal 2b. Continue engagement on the national level, by partnering with the American Avalanche Association and other schools to help set industry standards and bring them to Alaska.

Goal 2c. Create pathways for recreational students who are interested in professional-track training to achieve their education goals.



Initiative #3: Grow our capacity to **serve Alaska's snowmachine community** and raise awareness for the need for avalanche education in the snowmachine community.

Goal 3a Build and sustain a skilled motorized instructor pool trained to national avalanche standards with the necessary riding skills and background to teach all aspects of a Level 1 course.

Goal 3b. Grow snowmachine-specific courses offered each year through intentional outreach and diverse program offerings, including more advanced courses. To ensure that demand exists for expanded course offerings, constantly monitor and react to factors that cause some motorized users to forgo avalanche education, including but not limited to course structure, length, and price.

Goal 3c. Help catalyze a culture of avalanche safety in the snowmachine community where savvy backcountry riders acknowledge the importance of avalanche preparations.

Goal 3d. Aim to teach at least 16 snowmachine-specific courses in 2024-25 (up from 8 in 2021).

Initiative #4: **Offer more recreational courses** that are less lengthy and/or advanced than a Level 1 course, tailoring offerings to those unaware of how they interact with avalanche terrain and/or those with limited exposure to avalanche terrain.

Goal 4a. Work with partners, instructors, and others community members to identify and develop new courses that will complement our other recreational courses.

We have identified a need to provide avalanche education to Alaskans who, for whatever reason, are unwilling to commit to a full Level 1 at this time. We intend for new offerings under this initiative to be a natural choice for newer backcountry enthusiasts less comfortable with backcountry travel. We envision that these new offerings will take some pressure off our Level 1 courses and will improve student readiness for the Level 1 courses that we do teach.

Goal 4b. Offer at least one pilot class of an entry level offering under this initiative during the 2022-2023 season.

Courses to consider under this initiative should include, but not be limited to: a more robust “Know Before You Go” offering, a lecture + one-day field course up to [A3 Avalanche Awareness](#) standards, and an even more introductory course designed to teach Alaskans how to identify and avoid avalanche terrain.

Goal 4c. Consider partnerships and other tools that increase the standards and expectations of backcountry travel experience prior to a Level 1 course.

We have identified a need to ensure that our Level 1 students have a baseline familiarity and comfort with using their gear in the backcountry setting prior to Level 1 courses. While we intend for the new offering under goal 4a to be a natural fit for someone without backcountry travel experience, the school will explore additional tools to better prepare students for their Level 1 course.



Initiative #5: To prepare the school for forty years to come, invest in **sustainable office administration** and grow a diverse board with robust governance that **represents the avalanche community**.

Goal 5a. Increase public awareness of the school's operations through publishing an annual report and keeping tax/other governance documents easy to access online. Create a dashboard of organizational successes.

Goal 5b. Audit our existing systems, including finances, safety protocols, and other standards of operations to make certain we meet and exceed national standards.

Goal 5c. Ensure that board of directors roles and expectations are clear. Specific areas to clarify include: fiduciary responsibilities, the role of subcommittees, term limits, expectations for new board members, representation of the school in public, engagement between board meetings, meeting attendance, and implementation of best practices that foster a healthy Board, Executive Director, and staff relationship.

Goal 5d. To ensure the long-term fiscal stability of the school, financial reserves will be maintained so that the lowest balance of earned revenue will be 50% of a year's budget.





About This Strategic Plan

This strategic plan is the result of a multi-step process that was designed to be responsive to stakeholder input and community needs. It included several stages:

Stage 1: In May 2021, the Board of Directors sent an online survey to a broad list of alumni, staff, and other stakeholders in Alaska's avalanche community. In total, we received 328 responses! Using this input, we conducted a series of in-depth interviews with instructors, staff, and recreational/professional users of avalanche terrain. Finally, we synthesized this information into a comprehensive report, located in Appendix A.

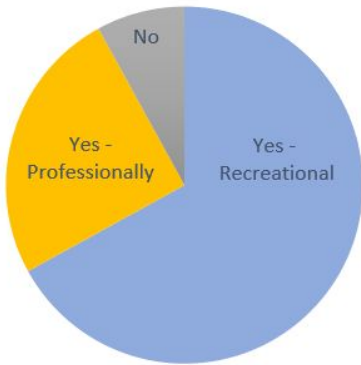
Stage 2: In October 2021, the Board of Directors and Executive Director met for a full day to review this community research, discuss the mission and vision for the school, and make progress on outlining initiatives to drive the school's focus during the years to come. Detailed notes of this meeting were taken, from which a draft vision, mission, and initiatives materialized. Monthly board meetings continued working through language.

Stage 3: In March and April 2022, the resulting draft vision, mission, and initiatives were provided to our staff and the board of directors for feedback. Feedback from this stage not only modified portions of the final plan, but it also helped guide how the plan should be implemented in the month and years to come.

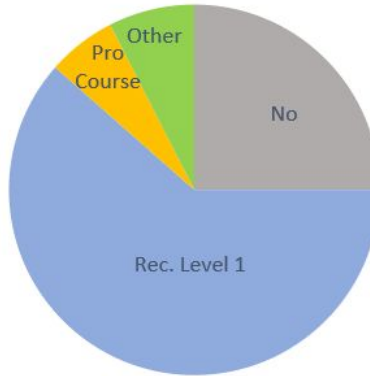
Stage 4: The final draft plan was adopted by a unanimous vote of the Board of Directors on June 8, 2022. The Board of Directors intends to revisit this strategic plan before and after each season to ensure we are on track to meet our vision and mission. Further, this Strategic Plan is intended to help guide the school's decision-making during each season.

Appendix A: Community Feedback

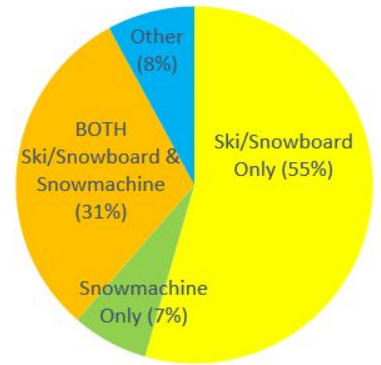
AAS sent out an electronic survey in June 2021 asking a variety of questions, via email and social media. In response, we received 328 responses, from the following constituencies:



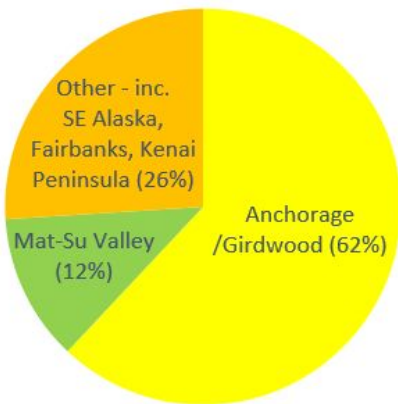
92% had taken an avalanche course



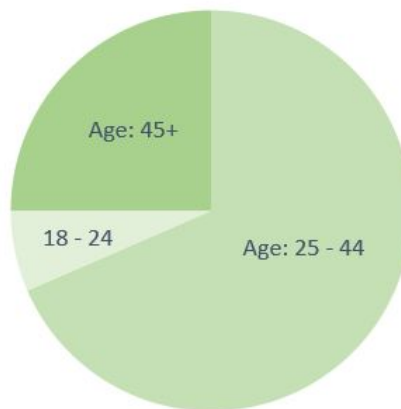
75% had taken an Alaska Avalanche School course



92% Ski, Snowboard, and/or Snowmachine in Avalanche Terrain



Responses came from across Alaska...



... and from a variety of age groups.



84% of people who responded had 2+ years of experience

In addition to the surveys, AAS board members conducted 7 interviews with a cross-section of instructors, office staff, and recreational/pro users to get reactions to this survey and additional thoughts for AAS as they continue strategic planning. These interviews included people that access avalanche terrain in a variety of ways, and in a variety of regions throughout Alaska.

Many people also included free-form written feedback, with 27 pages in total of thoughtful comments for the school to consider, on top of feedback provided via multiple choice questions.

A summary of all responses - including from interviews, written feedback, and survey questions - was used by the Alaska Avalanche School board in shaping this plan, with all feedback considered in the planning process. The short list of 'top themes' follows on the next page.

Appendix A: Community Feedback (Summary)

AAS Strengths/positive things about our current course offerings

AAS instructors are what make the school strong (92)

Interviews confirmed that we are keeping quality high, key even as we attempt to meet demand, and that investments here will go a long way to addressing our other challenges.

Lots of field time, effective field time, “hands on” (19)

Location of classes, terrain, overnight lodging (18)

Good balance of classroom and field time (7)

AAS room for improvement

Hard to get into classes, offer more to meet demand (32)

Interviews confirmed this is a nationwide trend.

High cost of classes, lack of scholarship opportunities (19)

Interviews highlighted this hurdle, particularly among those underrepresented in survey

More outreach/engagement of the snowmachine community (interviews)

Interviews noted this is a place to grow – underrepresented in this survey and in day one signups with AAS this season. Keeping product strong while increasing demand as goal.

More field time (10)

Better communication (8)

Increased focus on route and terrain decision-making, human factors (8)

Other students (6)

Access to course materials, debriefing (5)

Sustainability of office backend (interviews)

Those interviewed have more insight into the backend of the school; they noted good instructor/office communications, but flagged sustainability and burnout as concerns.

Suggestions for course we should offer (that we do not currently)

Level 0.5, basics, how to use your gear, how to ski (24)

Interviews showed excitement for this concept, as a route to meet demand, provide a clearer path for a new user, show users what they don't know, and expand user groups (among other reasons)

Glacier travel (19)

Interviews noted that – for any of these types of additions – partnerships could be great and make things easy... but even with a partnership success is not guaranteed and depends a lot on specifics.

Lectures, workshops, etc. (7)

Ski Mountaineering, how to do multi-day winter trips (7)

Winter backcountry skills (7)

Rec 3, or allow non-professionals take to pro courses (5)

Interviews noted need to better accommodate advanced rec users post-Pro/Rec split

Trends to consider, what AAS should focus on in years ahead?

Increased volume of BC users, new users, user type trends (57)

Youth education, teaching avalanche safety in schools (33)

Interviews confirmed this need, and noted models that can be utilized here in other states

Expand Courses: Fairbanks and interior (15), Southeast Alaska (12), Kenai (8)

Interviews noted that demand is there, instructors/logistics are a bottleneck