

Lower Kuskokwim Bilingual Programs

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The Lower Kuskokwim School District (LKSD) is Alaska's largest rural school district in number of sites, teachers, and students. The district is comprised of 21 village schools as well as three schools headquartered in the city of Bethel, the largest community in western Alaska. The LKSD covers an area approximately the size of Ohio and is located in western Alaska along the Bering Sea coast and Kuskokwim River. Two-hundred forty teachers serve over 3,000 K-12 students of mostly Yup'ik Eskimo background. One-fourth of the district's certified teachers are Yup'ik, the largest percentage of indigenous teachers in any Alaskan school district.

The district's mission is to promote the indigenous languages of the region as well as to ensure equitable, culturally-appropriate, and effective educational opportunities for all its students, thereby enabling them to succeed in a rapidly changing world. It also seeks to ensure the development of English for both social and academic purposes.

Alaska's schools are fortunate to receive sufficient bilingual funding from the state, in addition to federal funds. The LKSD has received a larger share of state funding for rural districts because of its large number of "language minority" students who are classified as "limited English proficient." Until recently, LKSD bilingual programs were, for the most part, transitional, with their primary goal being English language proficiency. However, last year the State of Alaska agreed to LKSD's request to modify its bilingual education funding formula to a dual-proficiency model allowed under current regulations. This, in effect, puts the "bi-" back into bilingual education, as schools receive funding based upon students' language of least proficiency. One of the district's goals is to produce students fluent in both the first and second languages.

With this funding comes the tremendous obligation to develop and measure student proficiency in both English and Yup'ik. In order to identify each student's initial language proficiency and to document language growth, the LKSD has selected and developed language assessment instruments in both Yup'ik and English. In addition, the district has created English Language Leader and Yup'ik Language Leader positions at each school. These individuals are trained to administer language assessments, assist the district's Bilingual Department in record keeping, help to develop new curricular units (especially in Yup'ik), and work with their colleagues to improve language learning in the "mainstream" classroom.

The LKSD has a variety of bilingual programs to meet the unique linguistic needs of its various communities. These programs are outlined in a state-approved Bilingual Plan of Service which is revised every three years. Since the majority of LKSD students come to school speaking their indigenous language, many communities have chosen the Yup'ik First Language (YFL) program. Stu-

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dents in this program begin kindergarten with all instruction delivered in the heritage language by a certified first-language teacher. The transition to English increases gradually each year at a rate determined by each school's plan of service. (The full transition to English can occur anywhere from third to sixth grades.)

Unlike these Yup'ik-speaking villages, there are some communities (generally speaking, those closer to Bethel) where English is becoming the language of preference. Several of these villages have chosen to implement a Bilingual/Bicultural program with instructional support given by Yup'ik-speaking instructors who focus on the quick development of English language skills by using the native language only when necessary. Other villages are considering Two-way Immersion programs to counter this trend. Where a village has few children who speak the indigenous language, there is a Yup'ik as a Second Language (YSL) program designed to reintroduce it. These programs have, unfortunately, experienced mixed results.

In an effort to reverse this language loss, the LKSD recently began a Yup'ik Immersion program in Bethel under the state's Language Other than English as a Second Language program option. Thirty-two kindergarten children are enrolled in this program. A Parent Steering Committee oversaw the selection of the Yup'ik instructors and continues to play an integral part in the planning process. As this pilot project proceeds, plans are to add an additional year to the program until the year 2000 when the sixth graders will begin their transition to the English program. Additional Yup'ik staff will be hired and materials developed as this program evolves. Eventually, the district plans to expand the program to several villages that are experiencing the same threat of language loss. With this effort, it is hoped that the Yup'ik language will be revitalized in Bethel and its surrounding communities.

One of the many challenges faced by the LKSD continues to be in increasing the effectiveness of its overall educational program. One way the district is attempting to accomplish this is to re-think its approach to education, particularly the curriculum. Although there have been well-intentioned attempts to bring Yup'ik language and culture into the classroom, much of what we have called "school" in western Alaska has looked and sounded like any school in the Lower 48, particularly at the secondary level. Activities such as "heritage weeks," native dance festivals, language classes, and so forth are not the sum total of Yup'ik culture and identity. It is not even enough to translate Western curricula into Yup'ik; nor is it enough to have Yup'iks teaching Western concepts in Yup'ik using English-language materials. Many Yup'iks are calling for a curriculum which reflects a Yup'ik world view. To that end, a Yup'ik Framework Committee has been established to identify cultural values, beliefs, and essential concepts. Once this culturally-based curriculum framework is identified, subsequent revisions to district curricula will adhere to it. This curriculum will, when finished, reflect a culturally-appropriate world view that meets Alaska "Goals 2000" standards.

Already, there are groups that are getting a head start in developing this "new" curriculum. For example, the village of Kasigluk has begun developing a

performance-based Yup'ik Studies Program curricula with identifiable outcomes. Last summer a group of Yup'ik teachers and elders met to develop dozens of Yup'ik-language materials in the content areas of language arts, science, and math. Additional Yup'ik materials developers and graphic artists have been hired to speed the production of high-quality, Yup'ik-language materials. These efforts recognize Yup'ik as a legitimate language of instruction and will help ensure the survival of Yup'ik into the next century.

The progress that has been made over the past several years has not come easily. These efforts are not always easily accepted by those who have been educated under the old Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) system or who take at face value the arguments presented by "English-only" advocates. Some community members, for instance, mistakenly feel they must choose between the desire to have an indigenous curriculum and feelings of loyalty to the Western curriculum they grew up with. Others are suspicious that bilingual education may be yet another way to keep Yup'iks from experiencing academic success. This perception is sometimes reinforced by those teachers and principals who neither view themselves as English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers nor feel bilingualism will benefit Yup'ik children.

In support of bilingual education, the district provides various services to each community. At the invitation of interested school boards and community members, staff from the LKSD's Curriculum-Bilingual Department travel to villages to provide information about current bilingual methods and theories and inform them of the benefits of bilingual programs. With this help, each community determines a three-year Plan of Service appropriate to their unique linguistic and educational needs. Regional and site-based inservices are offered periodically and courses for college credit are provided via the district's distance delivery (satellite) system and telephone audioconferencing. ESL methodology, the writing process, classroom management, cooperative learning, and other appropriate topics provide district teachers and paraprofessionals with professional growth opportunities in bilingual education.

Because many of the district's Yup'ik paraprofessionals are uncertified (serving either as associate teachers who have some post-secondary education or as teacher aides), programs are being developed in association with the University of Alaska to deliver academic credit leading toward a teaching certificate. Classroom experience will count toward a degree as well as summer institute courses and satellite courses.

In partnership with each community, the LKSD plays a significant role in maintaining and developing the Yup'ik language. The district points with great pride to the bilingual education program, the increasing participation of community members, the greater number of Yup'ik certified staff, the rapidly-increasing amount of Yup'ik language materials, and to increased training of all district instructional staff in bilingual methods and theory. Collectively, these help to symbolize the LKSD's commitment to the revitalization, stabilization, and development of the Yup'ik language.