

Award-winning newspaper boosts student self-esteem

by Diana Campbell

In case you haven't heard, missing the school bus is the No. 1 reason why Minto students are late to school. Never mind that there isn't a school bus for miles.

Also, for your information, third-grader Charlene went "boing" after she hit a snowbank while sledding.

And Cory got a h-u-g-e, blue present from Grandma. (It was a bike.)

Third-grader Collette looked lively dancing the Red River Jig with Arvin in Beaver.

All this "good news" has appeared in the *Hunik Zoo*, a children's newsletter published by Tanana Chiefs Conference. In 1996 the paper won the Alaska Press Club's Public Service Award.

For nearly 16 years, Interior rural and urban elementary students have shared their stories and drawings with each other. Hundreds of students have been encouraged to send in their work for publication in the *Hunik Zoo*.

"It gives town kids a chance to learn about village life and village kids a chance to learn about town," said Sue Leap, its editor of 13 years.

Hunik Zoo (pronounced Huhn nick zoo) means "beautiful messenger" or "good news" in Koyukuk Athabascan. It is funded by a grant from the state Office of Alcohol and Drug Abuse and TCC and is intended to provide an abuse preven-

tion message for students. The paper is sent to 42 Interior villages, 21 schools in the Fairbanks North Star Borough School District and then some.

The drug prevention message is subtle because it usually comes from the kids, not in a preachy editorial, Leap said. According to *HZ*'s surveys, kids respond to their peers, she said.

On average, one student drawing or message per page warns the young readers of the dangers of alcohol, drug or tobacco use.

But the most heart-wrenching contributions come when children write of their grief and confusion over the death of a loved one that was caused by alcohol, drug or tobacco use, Leap said.

"It really can be sad," Leap said.

Children gain a boost in their self-esteem when they see their work in the paper, she added. Not only that, the student stories encourage beginning readers and writers alike.

Teachers consistently say the paper has been an essential tool in Interior children's education, according to *HZ* yearly surveys.

The *Hunik Zoo* first appeared in magazine form in 1980. In 1981, the magazine format was dropped, using newsprint instead. The paper became a feature in the *Northland News*, the *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner's* Bush edition in 1982. A year later, the managing editor Kent Sturgis brought it to the daily paper, saving

choice spots for positioning the popular feature.

"We wanted to have content for kids in the paper. Here comes Sue with *Hunik Zoo*," Sturgis said recently. "It was love at first sight."

Because of shrinking budgets, the *News-Miner* dropped the page by the late 1980s.

By then, the *Hunik Zoo* had become mostly the work of children, Leap said, with little editorial voice, and the paper was gaining popularity. Submissions poured in and the paper grew into an eight-page tabloid, which is mailed out or sent to the Fairbanks School District for distribution.

Today *Hunik Zoo* has a circulation of 10,000. In addition to the Interior, other villages and readers as far away as Hawaii also get the paper.

One former contributor, Deborah Deaton from Beaver, is a graduate in 1996 from the University of Alaska Fairbanks, where she was Journalism and Broadcast Student of the Year. Dave Brenner, an award-winning graphic artist for the *News-Miner*, also sent work to *Hunik Zoo* as a child. Bertina Ramay now works in payroll at TCC, but as a child she sent in doodles of the dog mushers she saw in her home village of Minto.

Future plans for the *Hunik Zoo* include a web page and perhaps radio or television pieces. In addition, the newspaper sponsors a yearly photo contest.

Diana Campbell has been the Hunik Zoo' editorial assistant for the past two years. Leap, meanwhile, also won first place awards from the Press Club in 1996 for best layout - nondailies.