

Program teaches 'real life' business

by **Steve Pilkington**

Tundra Times reporter

When the eighth graders at Tuluksak Junior High School launched their own Native corporation — which they named Bear Corp. — the teachers and administrators were not expecting such good results.

The success was not Bear Corp.

profits, said Brad Raphael, superintendent of the Yupiit School District, but something more important.

The number of books borrowed from the school library jumped from 50 to about 200 books a month, he said, and the students were more involved in the community and attended class more than before.

And in rural areas, where statistics

show the Alaska Native drop-out rate is sometimes as high as 70 percent, increased involvement in school means a lot.

Raphael said a program called Mini-Society was responsible for the new vigor in Tuluksak's junior high school.

"It was a fantastic program."

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• Students learn by conducting business

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Raphel said. "I believe it opened the eyes of the youngsters to the influence they could have on their community."

Mini-Society is a program developed by Dr. Marilyn Kourilsky, dean for teacher education at the University of California Los Angeles' Graduate School of Education. The program is growing throughout the United States and has been in Alaska the last four years.

The program teaches economics to kindergarten and elementary students by turning the classroom into a pint-sized marketplace.

The students learn about scarcity, opportunity cost, supply and demand by actually conducting business, Kourilsky said.

"You're doing something that is beyond just economics," she said, noting that the students enhance their mathematics, reading and creative skills along the way.

But Mini-Society has yet to catch on in rural elementary and junior high schools.

Even though Mini-Society has been

used in a few rural schools, the program is still mainly in schools in Anchorage and Fairbanks.

Last week, Kourilsky taught a class in Anchorage for grade school teachers interested in starting a Mini-Society program in their schools this year.

"This is experienced-based education. And you'll find that it really does work," she told the teachers.

The class was possible because of a \$4,000 grant from Arco Alaska Inc. A crash course in economics, the class shows teachers how to handle some problems which might develop in a Mini-Society.

For example, Kourilsky told of a young student named Janet, who spent all the money other students had deposited in her bank. Janet said she was confused about how a bank could ever make money.

In order to solve the problem, a banker from the community came to the class to tell how banks charge interest rates to earn profits, Kourilsky said.

The students earn currency by attending class, hiring out to others or



Dr. Marilyn Kourilsky

selling products or services, Kourilsky said.

But as in the real world, students like Janet often overspend their budgets, inflate the economy and bankrupt a remarkable number of businesses, she said.

"Failure, such as bankruptcy, is part of the lesson," she said. "The

amazing thing is how resilient the youngsters are."

Often, a student will lose a business one day and have a new one started the next, she said.

When something important or useful happens, the teacher "debriefs" the class so they all learn from one student's successes or mistakes.

In Tuluksak's Mini-Society, the eighth graders once found that Bear Corp. had run out of money and that there was no way for the members to be paid.

At first the students wanted to donate funds to the corporation so it could continue.

But when someone suggested taxation as a solution, the students then began learning when and why taxes are needed.

"These youngsters were involved enough with Mini-society to really understand basic mathematical concepts as well as become more informed on current events," Superintendent Raphel said.

But keeping the program going and

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photo by Steve Pilkington

• Mini-Society program

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expanding it is the major problem now.

Ben Barrera, vice-president of corporate relations for the National Bank of Alaska, visited the eighth grade class at Tuluksak last year. He said the program can be adapted and used at any school.

"But the program is not out in the rural areas enough," Barrera said.

Another problem is, teachers move around so much that training them is not practical, and turnover in rural areas is high, he said.

"The turnover is 35 to 50 percent in rural areas," Barrera said.

Anchorage elementary teacher Janet Nichols, who now helps Kourilsky instruct other teachers interested in the program, has taught a Mini-Society class for three years.

Nichols said she is amazed at how some of the students who were not interested in learning, suddenly develop an interest in a Mini-Society.

"If you've got them interested and they want to be there, that's half the battle. Especially in a lower economic area," she said.

The Alaska Council on Economic Education sponsors the Mini-Society program.

Stephen Jackstadt, a representative of the state council, said he hopes the program someday can afford to send trainers out to rural villages such as Tuluksak to support Mini-Society teachers and answer their questions.

If the program could reach many of Alaska's isolated areas, it would be a benefit for the students, he said.