

Barrow Bilingual program

By LAEL MORGAN

While other Native language programs are getting bigger and flashier with more federal funding, the Barrow program is understaffed and only modestly equipped to take on one of the biggest assignments in the state.

Nine out of 10 parents polled in the area favor bilingual education with equal time for Inupiaq and English. Yet the North Slope Borough School District has only eight bilingual teachers to handle 700 youngsters and produce books and teaching materials for the entire Slope area.

At the year's beginning there were bilingual instruction in K through 12, but due to increased need to produce instructional materials, only grades seven through 12 are currently being taught in Inupiaq.

"One serious problem is that we're too dependent on federal 'maybe money'", explains Dave Baumgarther, who heads the program. "Here, where the language (Inupiaq) is spoken in 90 percent of the homes, this should be a permanent program".

Ironically, short funding comes at a time when Borough Mayor Ehen Hopson is calling for more local control of schools and hopes to make Inupiaq the first language of the borough.

"I would like to be able to require all persons employed by the North Slope Borough to work in both Inupiaq and English. But, our working language needs restoration and development," he recently wrote Elaine Ramos, vice president of Rural Education, University of Alaska. "I feel that, if we develop a strong, modern industrial language, our traditional vocabulary will be restored over time without special effort."

The bilingual teachers at North Slope work with the University of Alaska Language Center but because their situation is specialized, they prefer books of their own making. It is their hope to keep Inupiaq pure--as the oldtimers spoke it--and not lap into the modern version often spoken by today's youngsters.

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"Most of our children speak English affected by Inupiaq grammar and visa versa," explains Martha Aiken who started the bilingual-project with Alice Hopson and Marian Gamboa. "We began in 1971 with no books at all and had to make our own lesson plans."

To date they've published about 50 books-everything from the "Ten Legged Polar Bear" to "Making Clothing from Animal Skins" and "Old Hunting Equipment". There's even an Inupiaq Scrabble!

They hope to get more material from old people who speak the language correctly, but that takes time, money and personnel.

"The trouble is that Martha has been working here four or five years and each year she never knows whether there's going to be funding or not," worried Baumgarther.

Apparently the Borough School District does not have a gifted grant writer who can attract the federal bilingual money being used elsewhere in the state and the Borough budget is hard pressed to meet even the basics. Barrow teachers are paid more than any others in the United States and are currently negotiating another contract which, many fear, will be even less favorable to the Borough.

Considering what they've had to work with, the Barrow bilingual people have done well, indeed.

"I hear they're the best in the state," said school board president Jeslie Kaleak.

But the teachers, themselves, say they need help. There have been very few training sessions available to them and few have had formal teacher training. Also they have no room in which to teach and must dash from class to class packing their books.

"It's really sad to think they're having such a hard time funding us because I think this is the time to go full blast at it. The language is changing so much with our young people," laments teacher Emma Bodfish.

"Everything the school administration wants to do they find the money for it. But bilingual-no way."