

Schools must stress Native languages

by Rep. Eileen P. MacLean
for the Tundra Times

JUNEAU — One of my highest priorities in the Legislature is education and improving the quality of education our children are receiving in the school and at home.

**Inupiat Paitot
People's Heritage**

OPINION

It is important that we as elected officials help to find solutions to identified problems. One recurring issue that has yet to be resolved has to do with Native language teachers and teacher certification.

The importance of providing Native language classes in rural Alaska is evident. For the traditions of our Alaskan Eskimos, Aleuts and Indians to live on, there must be programs developed to promote and teach language and culture.

Studies have shown that performance improves when language and culture programs are provided to bi-cultural students and that students who participate in such programs are better able to assimilate information and to adapt to a society in which they must live and survive in both cultures.

Native language programs, however, are not given the same priority and do not receive as much attention as other formalized education programs. Part of the reason may have to do with the existing process for teacher certification.

Native language teachers are currently classified as "recognized experts" by the state, not "certified teachers." This has created an inequity in the system whereby two instructors may teach side by side and perform essentially the same quality of work but are treated differently.

Anyone who teaches for a number of years should be able to participate in a retirement system. However, under existing law, Native language teachers are not eligible to participate in the state retirement system.

Many wonderful opportunities to develop Native language programs have been foregone, and the experience of many knowledgeable individuals as Native language instructors has been lost partly due to the inequitable system for certifying Native language instructors.

House Bill 203 would help to resolve some of the problems by clearly defining "teacher" and the process for issuing teacher certificates. It would authorize the Department of Education to issue teacher certificates for Native language and other specialized instructors based on regulations established by the State Board of Education.

In this bill, the definition of "teacher" would be expanded to include new categories of instructors for language and culture, vocational education, as well as ROTC. These instructors teach specific courses on subjects based on experience, skills and expertise not necessarily obtained in a university setting.

Another category of instructor who would be included in the definition under this bill are school counselors, nurses or psychologists who teach short, continuous courses in the school relating to health, suicide intervention/prevention, substance abuse and teen-age pregnancy.

Separate teacher certificates would

be provided for the new special categories. However, to maintain and preserve the integrity of the four-year degree programs for teachers the State Board of Education would continue to use a separate and distinct classification for those baccalaureate programs.

It is important to understand that this bill would not take away local control from school districts. Salaries would continue to be determined by the school district, and even deciding whether to have these kinds of teachers would be the option of the school district.

This is not a tenure bill. HB 203 will only address retirement benefits and does not include special certificates in the teacher tenure system. Also, traditional four-year programs for teachers seeking Class A certificates would not be changed.

The purpose of this bill is to recognize and provide a comparable teaching certificate to individuals who demonstrate competency in specialized areas and to enable them to participate in a retirement system.

For the last few years, the inequity of the teacher certification process has

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been a recurring concern. It is an issue that will not be resolved until a definitive and standardized process for certification of teachers is developed. We are working closely with the

Department of Education, Attorney General's Office, school boards and teacher organizations to work out concerns on this issue. Your comments and support are welcome.

