

# Bethel Area Bilingual Program Rated Success by Administrator

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BETHEL—S. William Benton, Education Program Administrator for the Bureau of Indian Affairs, began his interview with a question.

"What does the Tundra Times have against BIA?"

We haven't run an anti-BIA article for at least a week, we told him. In fact, June 2, we carried a complimentary article

on Wally Craig, Fairbanks director.

"I'm sick and tired of defending policy that was in 15 years ago and is no longer true," Benton snorted. "The Bureau is doing some innovative things."

One of them is the bilingual education program, which is why the interview was requested. Benton was in on the innovation and he's been teaching in the Bush long enough so that he

should know what he's talking about.

"I'd say the program is a tremendous success. The kids are responding unbelievably. One of our chief problems is people bothering us ... wanting to visit the classes. We have to beat them off with a stick!"

The aim of the program is to instruct beginners using their native Eskimo in villages where English is seldom spoken.

"It's not a language revival program," Benton is quick to note. "It's developed to help children cope with their school work. Stop to think what you're asking of a child in an Eskimo village.

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# Bilingual...

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"You're asking him to learn a language at the same time to learn subjects in that language. I used to think that teaching English as a second language was the answer—that's my field. But now I think it's just part of the answer."

Under the new program, kindergarten classes are taught in Eskimo with the exception of English instruction one hour a day. That hour is broken into three 20-minute periods to fit the children's attention span.

Over 30 villages showed interest in the program. From these Akiachak Nunapitchuk and Napakiak were chosen for experimental classes. Two Eskimo women from each were trained as teachers and an English teacher was assigned to each school.

Benton admits he was skeptical about starting so soon, but the results have been surprisingly good. Although it is still considered an experimental program enough solid information has been acquired to write a teaching manual for next year.

As for evaluating the bilingual education—stacking Benton's kindergarten against an all-English school—he thinks it's too early.

"We want to avoid comparisons. It's extremely difficult to measure the group if you don't go through three or four years. But it looks so darned good it amazes me."

And you don't have to take just his word for it. Morris Thompson, head of BIA for the state, reports the program will be expanded to Quinhagak, Kipnuk, Tuntutuliak and Kasigluk next fall.