

Children need a strong language base

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I have proposed to the State Board of Education a statewide Native language policy that could have enormous impact on the way Alaska Native children are taught in school, and hence on the future of Native society as a whole.

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OPINION

The policy proposes several ideas:

- In Native communities where the Native language is the language spoken in the home, the school should teach the children in the Native language until children develop a strong enough knowledge base to begin learning in the language of the school, English.

- In communities where there are large populations of Native children who speak English at home, the school should offer Alaska Native language courses in the school whenever a sufficient number of parents and community members so request.

These proposals are meeting with general acceptance among people who have knowledge about the way children learn generally and about the way minorities learn in schools operated by majority cultures.

The reasons why I have proposed this policy are well founded in research. But first let me discuss some of the reasons why Alaska needs to adopt this policy.

First, missionaries, as well as the U.S. and Alaska government schools prohibited Alaska Natives from speaking their own languages and practicing their own culture in school. As a result, a great deal of Native language and culture have been lost.

Although progress has been made in our schools in recent years — Natives are no longer punished in school for

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speaking their Native tongues — academic achievement among Alaska Native students on the average remains low.

A recent urban school district study shows that more than 60 percent of Alaska Native children who enter high school as freshmen do not graduate from high school. There is reason to believe this is true in all or most of our urban schools.

Although the high school drop-out rate is relatively low in rural and village schools, the achievement levels are disappointingly low, some among the lowest in the United States.

Twenty of Alaska's 54 school districts have average scores on national assessment tests of less than the 22nd percentile. That means that 78 percent of children across the nation score higher on the tests and 21 percent score lower. And Alaska's 20 lowest performing school districts have a student body of 87 percent Alaska Natives.

Admittedly, achievement test scores do not tell the whole story of a child's achievement, but they do measure some important factors dealing with a child's proficiency in language and math. These low scores do not tell a very good story. In fact, the test scores are so low, something drastic needs to be done.

Let me say some things now about what researchers are finding out about language proficiency. The development of a strong language base at an early age is the single most important element for academic success and to

gain the ability to learn.

If children do not gain a suitable language base they will fail. They will fail in school. They will fail as workers. They will most likely fail to reach their full potential socially, culturally, emotionally and intellectually.

The importance of using the home Native language as the first language of instruction in school is becoming more clearly understood. If we teach these students at school in their own Native language until they develop the ability to think conceptually and analytically, then they can develop the base to learn the more complicated abstract ideas presented in later school years.

We need to teach children in their home language for about the first four years of school before we can introduce English as a second language. When they begin to learn English formally the children will already have developed a sufficient language base in the home language to have the skills on which to build success in school.

The Native Language Policy asks for schools to be sensitive of the student's home situation. If the student's home language is other than English, then it is appropriate for the school to provide first instruction in the home language, introduce English as a second language and continue to develop the student's abilities in both languages.

If the Native student's home language is English, again it is the responsibility of the school to be sen-

sitive of the student's home situation — the culture of the student.

Schools do not need to instruct these children in their Native language to develop a solid language base upon which to build later success in school. Instead, schools need to offer opportunities for these students to learn their Native languages in school.

Research shows that minorities do much better in school when their own language and culture are incorporated into the school program.

On the other hand, an equal amount of research shows that minority students who are disempowered or disabled by their school experiences do not perform well in school. This is because learning their heritage, language and culture gives them a sense of identity, self-worth, pride and positive self-esteem.

I think Alaska's high drop-out rate for Native high school students in our urban schools shows the need for schools to make this change.

How can this policy be implemented into the classroom? It's not going to be easy. It's going to take:

- Imagination on the part of the state to pass laws and regulations to allow speakers of Native languages to become certified teachers and teacher aides.

- A willingness of communities to understand the issues addressed by the Native Language Policy and a commitment to place the proper political pressure on their schools to make the needed changes.

- Cooperation on the part of schools to be responsive to the Native cultures they serve.

Until Alaska takes steps to make sure its schools recognize and respect Native languages and cultures and to properly instruct our Native children in ways that demonstrate that understanding and respect, we will not produce adequate numbers of Native children who will become integral and productive members of society, whether that society is in the village, in an urban Alaska community or Outside.