

Part Three of Four:

The Future of Alaska Native Languages :

Can Bilingual Education Maintain the Language ?

Editor's Note: The author of the article is Head of the Alaska Native Language Program at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks. The series shows his concern about the continuation or death of the Native languages.

By
MICHAEL KRAUSS

We must now look carefully at bilingual education in those communities where the children do speak the Native language. Here the term "bilingual education" means -- or is supposed truly to mean -- education in two languages, Native and English.

The communities involved are mainly certain Central Yupik villages, especially those in the Kuskokwim heartland and nearby, and the Siberian Yupik villages of Gambell and Savoonga on St. Lawrence Island; to a lesser extent also Venetie and Arctic Village for Kutchin Athabaskan, the Upper Kobuk villages and Wainwright for Inupiaq, and Atka for Aleut; and perhaps to some extent English Bay for Alutiiq (Sugpiaq), Nikolai for Upper Kuskokwim, and Live Village for Tanaina. How many of the schools of these communities, especially for Central and Siberian Yupik where Native is still truly the dominant language of the children, are there actually bilingual programs? Certainly not all. How many hours a day

do the children in the lower grades actually have instruction in Native language? How many of these children past the third grade have any instruction in the Native language at all? These are hard questions, and I believe the answers to them would be shocking.

For one thing, still the majority of children who speak Alaska Native languages are in Bureau of Indian Affairs schools. Of an estimated 4,000-4,500 children in Alaska who speak Native languages, an estimated 3,000-3,500 are in BIA schools. Therefore, by far the greatest number of Alaskan children who do speak Native language are not protected by the Alaska State Bilingual Education law. Since there has

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been a State law that all Alaskan schools which have 15 or more (now 8 or more) students whose primary language is other than English shall have a teacher fluent in that language. The BIA school system, however, is not subject to Alaska State laws. To whatever extent it complies with those laws, its compliance is essentially voluntary. The BIA, like any human institution, does not change quickly. There are still teachers, principals, and administrators in both BIA and regional schools, who are indif-

ferent or hostile toward Alaska Native languages, who are still very much a part of the old assimilationist tradition which for generations now has been punishing or discouraging Native children from speaking their ancestral language for generations.

Where bilingual programs are lacking for children who speak a Native language, the reason is sometimes given that the people themselves do not want the program, and "local control" should decide such questions. There are many wrong things that can contribute to such a

decision, however. Since use of their own language is school was denied to them, the parents may not be aware even of the possibility, or they may not have a clear idea of bilingual education, having heard only that the Native language is an obstacle to their children's progress, and that this would be regression "back to the blanket," especially if the option is still presented to them in this light. Eighty years of brainwashing have taken their toll. Generations have already been brainwashed with the notion that Native languages are inferior, disadvantageous to the children in their lives and careers; and with the rubbish that (because educators themselves speak only one language, English) it is unhealthy to overload one's brain with more than one language, or that it is impossible to speak two languages well. Even if that is the sincere belief of the educators (because most are not bilingual themselves) it is absolute nonsense. Learning to speak more than one language is normal, health, and advantageous.

Even if the parents want bilingual education, however, they may have elected a school board consisting of the "better educated" members of the community, who therefore represent more the educators' own assim-

ilationist views more than those of the "less acculturated" parents; and/or many members of the Board may be under the influence of a local administrator indifferent or hostile to bilingual education. Thus, under the name of "local control" children are denied the right the State Bilingual Education law was designed to protect, their right to a truly equal opportunity in education.

There are two crucially different ways of looking at bilingual education, one as a "transitional" program, the other as a "maintenance" program. Both programs begin by teaching in Native, including reading and writing, and introducing English as a second language, say one hour a day in the first year. This might grow to two hours of English the next year, and to three or four the next. The "maintenance" program is one in which English would never entirely replace the Native language in the curriculum, but where both would have a place side by side in the school, and in which the Native language would never occupy a smaller part of the day than, say, one hour up through all the upper grades. The Native language would thus be maintained in the school along with English, cultivated, developed, and honored.

In a "transitional" program, bilingual education is transitional, going from the Native language over to English in such a way that English totally replaces the Native language. The Native language is only used as a means of acquiring sufficient school ability and knowledge of English so that once enough English is learned, the Native language can be abandoned. The unfortunate fact is that almost everywhere the bilingual programs are transitional, not maintenance, both in their intent and practice. ESEA Title VII, which funds bilingual education as a special program, is expressly for these transitional purposes. Thus practically no elementary schools have any Native language past about the third grade. A few high schools have Native language programs as a kind of cultural enrichment. But by and large, even in those schools where the children's primary language is Native, Education goes on more in English, mostly in English, or even ex-

clusively in English.

Actually, it is not the exact clock-hours spent using one language or another which is the most important thing about a bilingual program, it is above all the attitude toward the languages which the program teaches. On the surface the maintenance and transitional types of program appear the same, at the beginning. However, the maintenance program honors and values the Native language and teaches that, of course the children should learn English as a second language because of its undeniable practical value, still the Native language is also of great value and should be maintained by the community, that the local language of the community, for the people to speak to each other, will continue to be Native. English they will learn as a second language, for communication with the rest of the world, but their own world continues to exist, and the potential of their own language for growth-and development is also to be realized—the best of both worlds.

Transitional bilingual education programs, on the other hand, implicitly but constantly teach the attitude that English is basically better than Native, that the Native language is of no value, that it has no future, and should be replaced by English, as the people assimilate into the "mainstream" of society, and lose their own identity—the modern "final solution" to the "Indian problem."

Where the purpose of a first-language bilingual program is still basically assimilationist, and not sincerely in the interest of the survival and development of Native language and culture, it should be no surprise that all too often Native-speaking bilingual teachers are not given adequate administrative and moral support, or adequate opportunity for getting the training they need, and lack good bilingual materials often even where such materials exist. Administrators can cause a bilingual program, even with sincere and courageous teachers, to wither and fail by not supporting it properly, thus "proving" their own belief that Native languages do not belong in education, or belong only temporarily until they can be replaced with English, and then dispensed with.

Moreover, the persons in authority, the administrators and certified teachers, are generally not bilingual, and are unable to speak the language of the children. There is no requirement that they should be able to do so. On the other hand, bilingual teachers are often prevented from achieving positions of authority by regulations prohibiting certified teachers from working as bilingual teachers. The bilingual teachers can only be subordinate aides, not the actual authority figure in the classroom. (The children certainly get the message.) If

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they become certified teachers, they are no longer qualified, or are "overqualified", for the position of bilingual teacher, and may then teach only in the conventional English-only way.

While the bilingual education that has developed in Alaska since 1970 is certainly a vast improvement over the unrelieved repression of Native languages before (1900-1970), we must not fool ourselves into thinking that in its present state bilingual education could yet effectively counteract the destructive influence on Native languages of the educational system as it still is. It is only a beginning. To the extent that teaching in Native languages is used in all schools where children speak the language, and at least to a significant extent, say one hour day, in all grades where the children speak the language, including the upper grades; to the extent that the teachers are well trained, well supported, and have adequate materials; to the extent that the Native language is cultivated and truly honored in the school; only then will the school system strengthen instead of weaken the status of Native languages in Alaska. As things are now, although the destruction in the schools may be slowed down somewhat, I believe the schools have by no means stopped undermining the future of Alaska Native languages even in those few areas where the children still speak the language. Thus, the danger is still very great that not just most but all the Alaska Native languages will die during the coming century.

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