



PHOTO BY BILL HESS

Helena Ivan gets help from her teacher, Joanne Kurz, as Stephanie Ivan concentrates on her own studies. Both are students in the Akiak IRA school.

Akiak: a Tale of two schools

By BILL HESS

Tundra Times Staff

Inside a small school building in Akiak, the student body of 12 has gathered for a day of academic work. For a tiny rural village, this is not unusual. The teacher, Joanne Kurz, is kept busy moving from one student to another, taking the time to explain one problem to one and then a totally different one to another. Considering that each of these students are working at different grade levels and are wrestling with questions of varying difficulties, this is not unusual.

What is unusual is that the school is one of two in Akiak, a village on the Lower Kuskokwim with less than 200 residents, and it is run not by the State of Alaska or the Bureau of Indian Affairs, but by the Indian Reorganization Act

village tribal council of Akiak. It is a statement by the council on Native sovereignty and self-determination.

Martin Ivan was the project director of the tribal council of Akiak before he became president of the Alaska Village Council Presidents about three months ago. He recalls the efforts by the village to set up and run its own school as a long struggle, and a hard one.

"The old Bureau of Indian Affairs school was built in 1930," Ivan explains. "Over the years, the people asked for a new school from the BIA." The old one had proved deficient and would in fact eventually be closed because it was not up to code. Ivan says the BIA assured villagers a new school would be built.

The years rolled by and

soon it was the mid-1970's. No school had been built. Public Law 93-638, the Indian Self-Determination Act, was passed by the United States Congress. "The council realized with the self-determination act, we had the possibility of running our own school," recalls Ivan. "We submitted a contract application to the BIA, who then sat on it for several years." The village government did not abandon its efforts, but kept pushing for the school.

Finally, the BIA area office in Juneau sent a representative to Akiak to tell them that not only would the BIA facility be closed down, but they could forget about contracting their own school.

"We were able to convert this messenger to the idea that

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All IRA - run grade school is goal in Akiak

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the BIA is supposed to be an advocate for Native people!" Ivan remembers. The representative returned to Juneau, carrying with him that message. Further, the Akiak council prepared to file suit if the BIA would not act as their advocate, and help them get the contract to run their own

school.

In the meantime, following the closure of the BIA school, a Rural Education Attendance Area school opened in the area under the jurisdiction of the Lower Kuskokwim School District. It would serve students from kindergarten through high school.

Finally, in 1980, Akiak re-

ceived its contract and opened up its own school. It would be run and controlled by the IRA council. "This gives the parents the opportunity to decide what kind of education their children are going to receive," Ivan claims.

"When I went to school, we were punished if we spoke our own language. Now the

curriculum is drawn out of the village culture and environment. The state requirements are met: math, reading, spelling, and the students make reports describing their projects. But all these requirements are drawn out of our own environment and culture; not by having the students try to guess what a stop sign in New York or California looks like."

Students are tutored in Yupic, not punished for speaking it.

Martin notes that even now, there are education officials in the BIA and state school systems who do not look kindly on the IRA school, and would like to see it shut down. The funding contract currently in operation with the BIA runs through 1982. The bureau is attempting to close down its own schools throughout the state, and Ivan does not know what will happen when the contract expires. "Maybe they'll try to phase us out," he says.

Whatever, Ivan promises that the village will seek ways to keep the school running. "Someday, I would like to see all the elementary students in Akiak attending the IRA school," he says.

Currently, besides the dozen who do, another 20 attend the REAA school. Officials at both facilities claim there is a good feeling between the schools, with no real hostilities.

"The other school has been really cooperative," says Kurz, who rotates teaching shifts on one salary with Eric Madsen. "We use their gym two days

a week. We share ideas and frustrations. The kids play back and forth. It's nice that people have a choice where to send their children."

"I feel that it's been to the betterment of the kids to some extent," agrees Carlton Kuhns, the 25-year-old principal of the REAA school. Kuhns notes that the facility which he oversees is already filled to capacity, and admits it could put a strain on their capabilities if they had to absorb the dozen students from the IRA school. There are plans to enlarge the current structure, and this situation could change in the future.

Ivan stresses that one advantage he sees in the IRA operating its own school is that the council has the opportunity to interview potential teachers. "Some foreign body that we never see does not make the decision, and then send in teachers who do not know what they are getting into," he explains.

Twelve-year-old Helena Ivan is pleased with her IRA school, and particularly enjoys the books there. "My favorite books are the Little House books, by Laura Ingalls Wilder," she claims. "The library is by our front door. I like it because the books in it are good ones."

Ivan is determined that Helena's school will remain open. "We felt the way the BIA taught us, they failed," he explains. "We like the opportunity to do it on our own. We know. We have experienced living in a two language system."