

Sealaska Heritage Institute

Alaska Native Language Programs

January 2012

Alaska Natives are comprised of seven linguistic groups including the Inupiat, Yup'ik, Aleut, Athabascan, Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian. Each has or had its own indigenous language. But today, no group is producing new speakers with Native as their first language. Many have language revitalization efforts in which students learn many nouns, some verbs, some greetings and introductions. None are producing fluent or even proficient speakers. Most programs are for beginners and a few are for intermediate learners. Very few programs are for advanced learners. Many communities have singing and dancing groups where individuals learn songs in their Native language and may or may not know the meaning of the words they are singing. At this time, many young Native individuals have expressed great interest in learning their language. Native language acquisition formerly occurred in the homes. Because of many factors, parents today do not know their Native language and are unable to teach the language to their children. The challenge of teaching Native languages has largely been left to schools and community organizations. This paper provides a brief summary of programs offered around the state. Not all regions responded to the request from Sealaska Heritage Institute (SHI) for information about their language programs. We received responses from seven regions. The Arctic Slope and Aleutian Pribiloff provided SHI the most detailed information. Other language revitalization programs may exist in Alaska of which we are not aware.

From Barrow to Metlakatla, community organizations and school districts are offering language programs. In the Arctic Slope, the schools teach the four dialects of Iñupiaq throughout the 12 schools in the district. The Iñupiaq Education program has created VIVA (Visual Iñupiaq Vocabulary Acquisition) online language units. Each unit contains its own assessment and scoring—students' keep track of their own progress. Once a unit is completed, the students practice their verbal pronunciation with a fluent speaker—the district employs fourteen fluent Iñupiaq speakers. This program is noteworthy for several reasons: sequential units based on the Greymorning method, scoring contained within each unit; emphasis on hearing the language tied with images rather than words and pronunciation work with fluent speakers. Classes are

held 3-5 times per week in the elementary school and are available as electives in the middle and high schools. Production of the VIVA units requires a full-time curriculum developer. The units are recorded in four Iñupiaq dialects. The North Slope Borough School District (NSBSD) is also working with cultural units and developing a math program based on the traditional Iñupiaq number system.

Nome is adapting its language program based on the NSBSD materials. They are receiving training from the curriculum developer on how to create their own programs using 'flash'. This region has a web-based vocabulary development game. They are recording fluent speakers of the different Iñupiaq dialects. Their record demonstrates the benefits of sharing resources, materials and staff knowledge to maximize the language revitalization efforts in our state.

In the northwest Arctic, 14% of residents are fluent in Iñupiaq. Of these speakers, 92% are over the age of 65.¹ Despite the disheartening statistics, communities are taking action to ensure the language survives. NANA Regional Corporation entered into a unique partnership with Rosetta Stone to produce an interactive computer learning program as part of the Rosetta Stone Endangered Language Program. Software for the two predominant dialects in the region was made available to the head of household for each family of shareholders and is available for sale. An additional effort to perpetuate the language in the region is the immersion school in Kotzebue, Nikaitchuat Ilisagviat. For 13 years, approximately 20 students age 3 through first grade have been learning all subjects solely in Iñupiatun. The Nikaitchuat staff hope to someday offer more grades at the school. The University of Alaska Fairbanks Chukchi Campus based in Kotzebue, offers an Iñupiaq A.A.S. degree and certificate program. Classes are available online so students in the villages are able to participate. Finally, the Aqqaluk Trust is a non-profit organization with the mission: "Empowering the Iñupiat people through language, culture and education." The Aqqaluk Trust coordinates the regional Iñupiaq Language Commission and conducts Camp Sivunniigvik each summer, at which children from across the region spend one week sessions on the banks of the Kobuk River enveloped in Iñupiaq traditions, values and the Iñupiaq language.

Bethel has operated an immersion school for more than 17 years. They have produced many materials including Big Books in their Yup'ik language.

¹ Survey of Residents of the Northwest Arctic Borough conducted by the Aqqaluk Trust and the Native Village of Kotzebue in 2005.

Other regions are also making use of technology. The Kodiak area has produced an online audio dictionary and electronic Aluutiq flashcards. They also have a Stories and Lost Words project and are in a consortium with Port Lions and the Aluuttig Museum. The Chugach Region has produced many posters, videos and books. They teach Aluutiq at Spirit Camp each summer.

The Aleutian Pribilof Islands region is the only one of the six regions who reported that Native language still spoken in the home although we suspect this is also the case in Yup'ik villages. The village of Atka reports that Unangam Tunuu (Aleut) is still spoken in one-fourth of the homes. They report that there are 124 fluent speakers still living representing 3.5% of the enrolled tribal members. Two of the 12 schools in the region offer language and culture classes in the curriculum. Ten schools offer limited exposure to language and culture. In Atka, where $\frac{1}{4}$ of the homes still speak Unangam Tunuu (Aleut), a fluent speaker teaches language classes one hour/day. In St. Paul, a certified teacher is also a fluent Unangam Tunuu speaker. She teaches one language class, five days per week. There is an active singing and drumming group. Youth and elders collaborate to write lyrics for new songs. At community gatherings elders speak Unangam Tunuu. Three culture camps are held during the summer months. The region is seeking \$1,000,000 to create a Rosetta Stone product for Unangam Tunuu. The corporation board of directors has committed themselves to one hour of language lessons during each of the three annual meetings.

Southeast Alaska has many and varied programs. Throughout the region, "language learners," who are teachers and who are yet learning their Native language, teach with few exceptions all language classes in some cases in collaboration with fluent speakers. Yakutat has federal funding to write children's stories in Tlingit and develop learning materials for the stories. Local students and artists illustrate the stories. The core language staff work with fluent speakers on a weekly basis. Classes are taught outside the school system. Klukwan classes are taught in the school while in Haines, language classes are taught in the local museum. In Juneau, the Goldbelt Heritage Foundation is developing curriculum and working with teachers and fluent speakers to develop lessons using the Tlingit Verb Index. The region-wide entity, Sealaska Heritage Institute, produces curriculum and provides teacher training on a region-wide basis. SHI is concentrating on the Developmental Language Process (DLP) and has produced curriculum materials for academic content areas (math, science, social studies and literature), as well as Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian DLP units. SHI has also published Tlingit, Haida and

Tsimshian dictionaries and has highly popular interactive language programs on its website. SHI sponsors summer basketball camps in which Native language instruction is integrated into basketball training. Both Goldbelt Heritage and SHI sponsor summer camps for youth. The camps feature language classes but are not conducted in the language. Other communities in Southeast have Tlingit language classes in the schools (Hoonah, Sitka and Kake). Wrangell and Ketchikan have programs after school.

In addition to offering classes, Ketchikan Indian Community has devoted time and grant money to improve advanced learner skills. One Haida, Tsimshian and Tlingit advanced learner is teamed with fluent speakers. They spend a significant amount of their week with the fluent speakers. The goal is to increase the learners' skills to proficiency. This is the only program in the state with that stated goal although others may be doing the same work.

University of Alaska Southeast has offered Tlingit classes at beginners and intermediate levels, as well as studies of oral literature and narratives. UAS also offers mentor-apprentice classes. The University of Alaska Anchorage and Fairbanks also offer Native language classes.

In summary, a significant effort is being expended in the state to revitalize Native languages. The programs focus on using technology to teach vocabulary. Most regions are recording fluent speakers. Some regions are sharing resources and adapting materials for their own dialects. None of the regions reported stability in their Native language. Fluent speakers are passing on with no new speakers replacing them. Hundreds of learners of all ages are learning nouns, verbs, greetings and introductions. Few progress to proficiency.

The major expressed needs are:

- Programs to support teacher language learners to work with fluent speakers to increase their own language proficiency. Mentor apprentice programs appear to be very effective.
- Programs to recruit more language learners into the teaching of the language.
- Stable funding for these programs so that teacher/learners know they can count on their program continuing.
- Curriculum development at all levels and ongoing, teacher training workshops.