

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

March 9, 2022

8:03 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Harriet Drummond, Co-Chair
Representative Andi Story, Co-Chair
Representative Tiffany Zulkosky
Representative Grier Hopkins
Representative Mike Prax
Representative Mike Cronk
Representative Ronald Gillham

MEMBERS ABSENT

All members present

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

PRESENTATION: TEACHING READING THROUGH CULTURE

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

JOEL ISAAK, Tribal Liaison Project Coordinator
Alaska Department of Education & Early Development
Kenai, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented on teaching reading through culture and demonstrated the Dena'ina language.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[8:03:44 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HARRIET DRUMMOND called the House Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 8:03 a.m. Representatives Story, Cronk, Gillham, Prax (via teleconference), Zulkosky, and Drummond were present at the call to order. Representative Hopkins arrived as the meeting was in progress.

PRESENTATION: Teaching Reading Through Culture

8:04:37 AM

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND announced that the only order of business would be a presentation on teaching reading through culture.

8:05:14 AM

JOEL ISAAK, Tribal Liaison Project Coordinator, Alaska Department of Education & Early Development (DEED), presented on teaching reading through culture and demonstrated the Dena'ina language [hardcopy included in the committee packet]. He stated that languages in Alaska are highly partnered; words are large and act like sentences in English. Indigenous models tend to start with things combined, and then the pieces are parsed out, whereas English is taught in small pieces strung together.

8:09:10 AM

MR. ISAAK pointed out the rubric, or evaluation tool, shown on slide 2, which uses phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, comprehensions, and cultural lens. He sang a song intended for pre-K children, shown on slide 3, titled "Ch'anik'na ił ch'etnesh; We Care for the Children." He explained that the song is welcoming and demonstrates the intent of the instructor. He pointed out that the Dena'ina is translated into English on the slide. He noted that the word "naq'deltani" is not translated. It is a frequently used word, which can mean connection to the earth, spirit, or love. He sang along with the three songs on slide 4, titled "Dena'ina Vowel Warm Up Song," "Dena'ina Deep Vowel Song," and "Dena'ina for Winter Vowel Song."

8:18:10 AM

MR. ISAAK described the songs on slide 5 and said they were developed at the Alaska Native Language Revitalization Institute in Fairbanks. He pointed out that the song titled, "Ahtna Dena'ina Consonant Song" features both Ahtna and Dena'ina languages. He explained that their alphabets are very similar, sharing about 40 percent of their words. This is an example of how two Native languages can help to support each other. He compared the song to the English alphabet song, which helps students learn the alphabetical order. He continued that the Ahtna and Dena'ina languages have existed in written form since the 1970s. The first topical dictionary for Dena'ina had been

created in 2007, and a verb stem dictionary is currently in development. He added that the first anthropological documentation of Dena'ina had been around 1910.

[8:24:26 AM](#)

MR. ISAAK said that about half of Alaska Native languages have similar methods of scaffolded-cultural teaching through song, text-based components, and cultural teaching. He stated that through parents and grandmothers the community has aided the commitment of tribal organizations to continue language work. He added that there has been some funding from the state and federal governments.

[8:31:39 AM](#)

MR. ISAAK showed the Dena'ina Quenaga sounds on slide 6. He emphasized the letters which are different than the English alphabet, including a glottal stop and others. Mr. Isaak read a short traditional Dena'ina story, titled "When the Animals Divided into the Pairs." He explained that there are human and nonhuman pronouns, except for dogs. Moving to slide 7 and slide 8, using a spruce tree metaphor, he described the questions which need to be asked in order to compile the pieces in verb usage. He explained that because Dena'ina language uses heavy prefixation, the words are "built" from right to left, or root to needle using the spruce metaphor. He added that reading the language occurs from left to right, as in English.

[8:47:56 AM](#)

MR. ISAAK continued to slide 10 and explained that a "classifier" does not have a grammatical English equivalent, but it is necessary. He also described the four inner subject pronouns, which include two forms of the word "you." He said that the Dena'ina language is descriptive, with time being related differently than other languages, and the only equivalent verb tense in English is the future tense. He stated that the imperfective tense describes something that has started but has not stopped yet or is ongoing. He continued that the perfective tense describes something which has started and ended, the future tense describes something which is intended to happen but has yet to occur, and the optative relates a desire for the verb to take place.

[8:51:25 AM](#)

MR. ISAAK stated that the Dena'ina language does not have gendered pronouns. Continuing with the spruce tree analogy, he described outer subject and object pronouns. He went on to describe the Dena'ina morphology verb index on slide 13, with each of the colored prefix positions corresponding to the spruce tree analogy. He stated that flash cards are used for students who are new to the Dena'ina language. He proceeded to the final slide and explained how the diagrammed verbs can be made into flashcards. The flashcards help students learn to spell, speak, and learn the different elements of speech. He advised that teaching using cultural skills involves inquiry, paying attention, and learning to listen, which are examples of learning goals that transcend all learning environments.

[9:05:17 AM](#)

MR. ISAAK, in response to a question from the committee, stated that, in his experience, language learning efforts are accomplished at a local level. He explained that there is not direct state funding, but school districts with state funding may choose to partner with Native corporations to fund Native language program development. Currently, tribes are not necessarily in the position to direct funding to support the program development without the compacting element; however, there are school boards in some districts which have worked to develop programs, but those cases have specific circumstances. For example, the Inupiaq Learning Framework is a "flagship model" with strong community advocacy, which was used to push the school board to invest in this Native language framework.

[9:17:07 AM](#)

MR. ISAAK, in response to a question from the committee, referred to a document he provided, called "Teaching Reading Through Culture" [hard copy included in the committee packet]. He stated that the historical trauma Alaska Native peoples have gone through and continue to experience is tied to boarding-school trauma during the "federal termination policy era." He urged the committee to provide the space for Indigenous people and Alaska Native language workers to bring Alaska Native reading forward in a way which promotes language. He expressed the opinion that the historical way English was taught was through torture. He argued that the education system was used to eradicate languages; however, it can also be used to bring them back. To do this, it must be done with Indigenous people leading the way, bringing tribal voices to the table in a dedicated place within DEED, local school boards, and

classrooms. He expressed the opinion that bringing Alaska Native expertise into every layer of government in education will make a significant difference. Concerning assessment, he said, there will be many steps with multiple assessment tools, including a bilingual component.

[9:40:46 AM](#)

MR. ISAAC said that Alaska is linguistically diverse and should meet the educational needs for Alaska Native languages and other non-English language students in the state. He suggested that a dedicated body could work with DEED, focusing on reading, culture, teaching tools, and professional development. He offered the opinion that this is critical for success in literacy. With an anchor in Alaska Native languages, he argued that tribes could serve as more than just tribal members. He added that a multilingual approach has the potential to benefit everyone. He noted that by teaching the principles of language early, picking up another language happens quickly. He expressed the expectation that Native children would excel because they will feel that they belong in the education system. Also, this will give them the skillset to go into any subject and to progress in disciplinary literacy. He invited future questions and stated that by supporting all languages in Alaska, the state can hope to see more student success, especially in underperforming districts.

[9:55:42 AM](#)

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Education Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 9:55 a.m.