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QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ON "A HANDBOOK FOR BILINGUAL/BICULTURAL
EDUCATION PROGRAMS IN ALASKA"

Alaska Legal Services has been acting as the lawyer for people in different villages who want to have bilingual/bicultural programs in their schools. In representing people in the villages, we helped to bring about the handbook, and we believe the handbook should be adopted by the Department of Education. In order to answer some of the questions that people have been asking about the handbook, we have prepared this information sheet.

WHO WROTE THE HANDBOOK?

The first draft of the handbook was written by a group of people working under a grant through the Alaska Native Foundation. Much of the writing for the first draft was done by Gary Holthaus, who has been involved in bilingual education issues in Alaska for many years and who helped write the state's first bilingual education law. He worked with a group of educators, including officials of some of the REAAs. After the first draft was written, there were many meetings to make changes in it, attended by people from the Department of Education, the Office for Civil Rights, the Alaska Native Foundation, and Alaska Legal Services. The handbook that has now been published by the Department of Education was agreed to by people from all of these groups as the best plan for bilingual/bicultural education in the state.

WHAT DOES THE HANDBOOK SAY ABOUT LOCAL CONTROL?

Local control is a very important part of the handbook. The handbook makes sure that people in each community are given a chance to take part in developing the bilingual/bicultural program in that community. For example, the local bilingual committee (which can be either the Community School Committee or another elected body) has a role in recruiting and recommending staff for the bilingual program, reviewing all materials, and helping to plan the program. The handbook requires that each district give the entire community, and especially the local bilingual committee, time and information to review and discuss the bilingual/bicultural program. The handbook also provides for local control in another sense. Each school district has a lot to say about the bilingual/bicultural programs that will be offered. For example, Chapter IX of the Handbook describes three "instructional models" that a district may want to use in providing programs. But the handbook goes on to say that any district may, with the approval of the Department of Education and working with the local community, use other instructional programs different from those described in the handbook. (See page 60.) Thus, in the end it is up to each district to decide what kind of programs to use, so long as these programs guarantee equal educational opportunities.

WHAT IS IN THE HANDBOOK?

The handbook is 217 pages long and contains a lot of ideas and information. It describes the needs of Native children for bilingual/bicultural programs, what the law says about language programs, and ideas for starting these programs. If the handbook is adopted by the State Board of Education as a regulation, some of the things in it would be required of each district. These requirements are summarized on pages 39 and 40, and are spelled out in "Compliance Checklists" that begin on pages 46, 55, 75, 90, and 109.

WHAT WOULD THE HANDBOOK REQUIRE?

The handbook requires each school district in the state to have a language program for children who aren't getting an equal education because they speak a language other than English or because a language barrier gets in the way of their learning in school. The handbook says each program must have:

1. Community involvement. People in each community must be given a chance to take part in planning the program, putting together materials, hiring staff, and seeing whether the program works.
2. Language assessment. This means the district must find out which children need a language program and what is the best way to teach each child. The handbook provides a series of tests and checklists to make sure that every child who has a right to a language program is given one.
3. Instruction. The handbook sets out three "models" which a district may use, but also says that a district may try any other kind of program, if approved by the Department, which promises to give children equal educational opportunity. Since people in the community must be involved in planning the program, no community will be forced to have a program it doesn't want.
4. Materials development. The handbook makes sure that each program has enough materials, and also requires that local people, teachers, and linguists be given the chance to work together to develop materials that are good for children.
5. Staff. The handbook requires hiring of bilingual staff recommended by people in the community. It also requires that when bilingual teachers from the community are teaching more than one regular class period per day, they must be paid wages that are on a scale with other teachers. The district must have training programs, and must help bilingual staff from the community to continue their professional education and get a regular teaching certificate.
6. Effective management. The handbook has some ideas for seeing that programs are run well.
7. Evaluation. The handbook suggests several ways of finding out how the program is working, so that changes can be made if necessary.

WHO WILL PAY FOR ALL OF THIS?

The state. One part of an agreement that the Department of Education has been working on with the Office of Civil Rights is that the Department will go to the legislature to ask that the state pay the entire cost of programs under the handbook through the Public School Foundation Program. This means that the entire cost of the bilingual/ bicultural programs in the handbook would be paid each year by the state and no money for these programs would have to come out of other things that the district is doing. The Federal government is insisting that the state promise to do this so that children who need language programs have a guarantee that there will be enough money. Many people in Alaska who have been working for years to get bilingual programs have been saying that this way of funding would be best.

WAS THIS HANDBOOK FORCED ON THE STATE BY THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT?

No. It was written by Alaskans, and follows what many Alaskans have been saying for years is needed if the state really wants to have good bilingual/bicultural programs in the schools. The handbook probably would not have come about, or at least come about so fast, without prodding by one Federal agency, the Office for Civil Rights (OCR). OCR has been trying to enforce a Federal law which says that the state and local districts, including the REAAs, cannot discriminate, and that if they do, Federal funds to them must be cut off. OCR's enforcement made the writing of the handbook a very urgent matter. If the handbook is now adopted by the state, Federal funds will not be cut off, because OCR agrees that the handbook will make sure that there is no discrimination.

WHY DOES ALASKA LEGAL SERVICES SUPPORT THE HANDBOOK?

We support the handbook because we represent people in the villages who have asked us to help them get bilingual/bicultural programs. The handbook will do that for them. It will also make sure that people in the villages have a say about the kinds of programs their children get, and put an end to lower salaries for bilingual teachers in the villages. Finally, the handbook, together with promises the Department has made on funding, will make sure that there is enough money to provide good programs with good materials, under true local control. We think our clients in the villages are entitled to that.

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