

'Grieving' Native villages add to students' struggle

By JENNI DILLON
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Schooling in the Native village of Nanwalek has changed quite a bit since Pauline Demas started school.

Though she grew up speaking her Native language, Sugt'stun, her teacher in primary school spoke only English and came from outside Alaska.

"We could not understand much about each other," she said. "Reading didn't make sense because the language was different.

"Teachers would explain things using textbooks, but that's not our style in the village; we need to hear and feel and do it in order to understand things."

With school a struggle, Demas quit at age 16 and moved to New York City, where she worked with Youth Corps helping neighborhood teachers.

Eventually, however, she decided to obtain her GED. Later, she returned to Alaska, where she earned a bachelor's degree in education from the University of Alaska Anchorage in 1997.

"I thought I'd go get my certification to teach because we were struggling with reading," she said. "I decided I'm going to do everything I can to find out what is causing us not to get ahead."

Now the kindergarten through second-grade teacher at the school in Nanwalek, Demas said times have certainly changed.

"They're English speakers now; English is their first language," she said of her young students. "Now, people in the village are working

with the school. It makes it easier."

In a bright classroom with windows overlooking the beach and the inland slough for which the village is named, Demas works to educate about 17 students of varying skill levels.

"Some need more attention than the others, and they all need attention at the same time," she said.

It's a challenge, but also a job she enjoys.

"Nothing matters really except seeing the kids moving," she said.

Still, life in the village -- and at its school -- isn't perfect. Like the Old Believer villages on the other side of Kachemak Bay, the Native villages in the Kenai Peninsula Borough are in a time of transition.

Part of that transition is the melding of Outside and village lifestyles.

Sally Ash, who runs an immersion preschool in the village's original language, said the community still is coming to grips with the changes it's undergone.

"When the first Westerners came to teach at the school, we left everything. We left our kids to the school to take care of for seven hours a day," she said.

Consequently, some of the village's traditional ways began to get lost.

"We're grieving (that loss) and we don't know how to do it right," she said, explaining what she sees as the root of social problems in the village.

"They're symptoms of a powerless feeling. So we fix it by smiling a lot, drinking a

Editor's note: This is the fourth story in a five-part series examining the federal No Child Left Behind Act and its impact on the Kenai Peninsula Borough School District's smallest and most unique schools. Look for the rest of the series throughout the week:

Friday - Looking to the future

lot, smoking dope a lot. We're becoming spiritless with no meaning of life."

Ash, along with a couple of other women in the village, decided last year to try to turn that around. They founded an immersion preschool, where young children can learn the old language -- Sugt'stun -- as well as basic skills and values.

"We realized our kids were slowly becoming kids who didn't know. They only wanted to play basketball or listen to rap music," she said. "The outside influences are strong, and we were helping it. It's OK to learn English, but we must know who we are or we'll go around without a soul, lost."

In its second year, the preschool serves less than 10 children in the village, mimicking a Head Start program but in Sugt'stun. The preservation of the Native language doesn't stop there, though.

Students in "the big school," as the official public school is called by villagers, also receive at least 50 minutes of instruction in their traditional language each day.

Demas said that preservation of culture is important.

"Kids are taught the right ways. They listen to teachers because

they're taking them to the right places, to something higher. They learn to respect their elders and listen to them," she said.

School staff members who come from outside the village agreed.

"There's a very positive relationship between the school and village," said Ginnie Glenn, who teaches the third- through fifth-grade class in Nanwalek. "We all work together to offer things for the community, whether in the school or the village. And the school respects the village custom and religion."

Like the Old Believer communities on the peninsula, the Native communities retain a commitment to the Russian Orthodox religion, and the Native schools also operate on a modified calendar to accommodate religious holidays.

Still, Ash said she would like to see more cooperation between the village and the school. She said she'd like to see the school's bilingual program expand so students leave school fluent in English and Sugt'stun, like students at the Russian schools learn both English and Russian. After all, she said, people with Russian -- or many other backgrounds -- can return to their ancestral country to relearn their heritage. Native Alaskans have no such option.

"Alaska culture is unique," she said. "We don't have nowhere to go. If we lose it, it's gone. The only places we can go to are the university and museums."

Ash said she also wishes the school authorities would let villagers provide traditional foods for the school meal program. And, she said, she'd like to see more help in getting Native and bilingual teachers certified to work in the

schools.

"How much more would the community work with the school if, instead of just coming in and changing things, they would work with the people, trust in them and believe in them?" Ash wondered, noting that she believes the village residents also have to make an effort to cooperate.

"We do have to be proactive. Instead of crying that our language and culture has been taken away, we have to rise up and say we're going to help the community, the people."

Specifically, she said there needs to be more emphasis on biology and the environment -- topics of special value in a community that relies on subsistence.

"The school needs to prepare kids for things like that, where we live and how we use the land," she said. "If we're going to make money off it, we need to be aware."

Down at "the big school," Principal Maurice Glenn said he believes educators are doing the best job possible to prepare students for the future.

For example, he said, in the eight cumulative years he has worked at the school, student test scores have shot up in unprecedented increases. (Though a graph of the improvement hangs on Glenn's office wall, specific numbers are not published because of the small student population and potential confidentiality breaches.)

Of the three predominantly Native schools in the district, Nanwalek and Tebughna in Tyonek did not make adequate yearly progress, or AYP, last year. Port Graham, a Native village near Nanwalek, did meet AYP, though the school's test scores remain low.

Glenn said he believes

improvement will continue.

"With the staff that I have, I feel we can improve students," he said. "We might not be (at grade level) yet, but we'll get caught up."

Still, he said, the school, and others like it in the district, is facing some significant challenges, as well.

The biggest problem village schools face is turnover, he said. Glenn said Nanwalek has been an exception to that rule for the last few years. Both he and his wife have worked a total of eight years at the school, from 1990-94 and 1998-2004. The Glens, however, submitted their resignation for the coming year earlier this spring. Other staff members also have been consistent figures at the school.

"I feel the continuity in education helps the Bush schools," he said, explaining that when teachers change from year to year, students are left with gaps in the education. "It's difficult to maintain a good educational program."

Likewise, he said he believes the No Child Left Behind Act is putting strain on his school.

"To have a certified teacher teaching all courses, we're going to have to be looking at alternate programs," he said. "This year, math and science classes are taught online through the Connections (home-school) program."

While this solution is one that has been hailed by district and even federal leaders, Glenn said he's not sure it really serves students well.

"For some students, distance education is going to be OK. For other students, they'll be dropping out of school because they're hands-on learners. You lose that aspect (with distance delivery)."

Several Nanwalek students agreed.

"It's been confusing the whole

school year because it's online," said ninth-grader Kadeon Evans, who's taking physical science and math via the Internet.

In fact, Kadeon said he sometimes wonders if he would get a better education elsewhere.

"I guess it'd be better in Soldotna," he said. "My sister went there and said she learned more. It was better there."

However, he pointed out, he sees definite benefits to his school.

"I don't get lost here," he said.

Glenn said, challenges aside, he believes Nanwalek students do get a quality education at the school.

"If kids work, I feel they can get just as good of an education here as on the road system," he said. "They may not have the same opportunities, but if they work, they can do that."

Ash said she's sure the educational program is fine for what it is, but she thinks education as a whole should be more.

"They're trying to do one-size-fits-all and it doesn't work. It doesn't work in Nanwalek," she said. "Needs are not met because it's one way or nothing, it seems like.

The government says, 'Our way.'

"The education they're getting is

good, but it's like a conveyor belt: 'Learn all this and get out.'"

Demas, however, said the school is doing better to make connections with kids than when she was in school.

"To me, everything is rewarding. I did my student teaching somewhere else and we could not even touch the kids," she said.

"Here, we know each other; it's like a big family.

"It's almost like a gift to me each day."

Voznesenka

Location: End of East End Road, 30-plus miles outside Homer.

Population: About 300 (census numbers unavailable)

School size: 136 students, kindergarten through 12th grade

Language: Russian, English

Religion: Russian Orthodox

Heritage: Russian

Razdolna

Location: Nine miles off end of East End Road outside Homer.

Population: About 100 (census numbers unavailable)

School size: 36 students, kindergarten through 12th grade

Language: Russian, English

Religion: Russian Orthodox

Heritage: Russian

Kachemak Selo

Location: End of East End Road, 30-plus miles outside Homer

Population: About 180 (census numbers unavailable)

School size: 80 students, kindergarten through 12th grade

Language: Russian, English

Religion: Russian Orthodox

Heritage: Russian

Nikolaevsk

Location: Ten miles down North Fork Road outside Anchor Point

Population: About 350

School size: 89 students, kindergarten through 12th grade

Language: English, Russian

Religion: Russian Orthodox

Heritage: Russian