

Village schools challenged

Language barriers, evolving culture test Russian students

By JENNI DILLON
Peninsula Clarion

Children bustle in and out of the small classroom, chattering to one another and working intently. Some sit at desks or spread out in the hallway, designing posters to illustrate research projects. A handful of kids line the back of the classroom, where they use computers to collect data and design PowerPoint presentations. A few others scatter about the room, quietly focusing on school work of their own.

In the middle of the cacophony, teacher Elaine Chalup juggles the needs of all her charges. One moment, she's peering over a student's shoulder to provide PowerPoint tips. The next, she's giving one of her students hints for keyword searches on the Internet. Every few seconds, she blurts out a word having nothing to do with computers or research: She's also in the middle of giving some kids a spelling quiz.

Such multitasking is a staple of Chalup's job teaching a fifth- and sixth-grade class at Voznesenka School.

"It makes the job more complicated," she said. "I'm still responsible for the fifth-grade curriculum and the sixth-grade curriculum. There's not enough time to do it all, so I try to combine what I can.

"Finessing that is always a challenge. I'm always looking for new ideas."

Chalup isn't alone. All the teachers at Voznesenka School

teach in multigrade classrooms.

One would never guess such busyness abounded in the school from an outside look. Nestled on the bluffs above the head of Kachemak Bay, the village is isolated and nearly silent. The engine of a pickup truck or four-wheeler breaks the peace, but outsiders rarely brave the 30-mile drive < the last several dirt and gravel, or ice < to the terminus of East End Road.

Voznesenka, the largest of three villages at the head of the bay, is home to about 300 people, most of whom have come to the remote village to live a quiet, secluded life dedicated to their Russian Orthodox religion.

Even at the ends of the earth, though, the small village schools are not immune to education laws and the No Child Left Behind Act.

With a little less than 140 students in kindergarten through 12th grade, Voznesenka School doesn't support a large staff. Just 10 certified teachers provide the best education possible for the village's children. Mostly, that means offering "the basics" of science, math, social studies and language arts. It's a scenario common at the Kenai Peninsula Borough School District's rural, K-12 schools.

But education at Voznesenka and its neighboring villages has an added twist: Chalup, who lives in Homer, teaches in English; most of her students speak Russian, which she knows only in pieces. That makes Russian language studies one of "the basics" in these schools.

Keeping the traditional language

Editor's note: This is the third 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:

Thursday - A look at across-the-water, Native schools

Friday - Looking to the future

is central to preserving culture, said Beth Graber, an English professor at Kenai Peninsula College's Kachemak Bay Campus in Homer. Graber completed her doctoral thesis on the impact of higher education on Old Believer women on the peninsula.

"If they lose the language, they lose the culture," she said.

She explained that Old Believers have spent hundreds of years searching for places to live out their traditional ways of life. The first settlers of the Kenai Peninsula villages came from Oregon in the late 1960s.

"There were six families in Woodburn who decided their kids were too exposed to worldly things," Graber said. "They came looking for land here."

Those six families settled in Nikolaevsk, a small village about 12 miles off the Sterling Highway between Homer and Soldotna. In the early 1980s, some of the residents began to feel that even Nikolaevsk was too worldly, and as a religious schism broke out in the church community, several families moved even further out,

founding the villages at the head of the bay: Voznesenka, Razdolna and Kachemak Selo.

While the residents of the Old Believer villages struggled to determine their own ways of life, though, they also were subject to the outside world's expectations.

"When they came to the United States in the 1960s, children by law had to be in school," Graber said. "Before that, they may not have had formal education. Within villages, they learned to read the Bible and to learn enough not to be taken advantage of."

The first generation of children in Alaska, however, received at least an eighth-grade education, Graber said, and now their children are going even further.

Still, the mixing of America's public school system with the Old Believer way of life remains a tenuous balance.

For its part, the school district works with the communities to find compromises, explained Voznesenka Principal Ray Hillman.

"We try to support the community's desires whenever we can. Sometimes we have to explain that education law requires this or that, but when possible, we do adapt. They do, too. We meet halfway."

One of the adaptations the district has made is to put the Russian village schools on an alternative school calendar. While schools in the larger towns operate on a schedule similar to that of schools in the Lower 48, the village schools run according to the Old Believers' religious calendar, which includes some several holidays of varying degrees.

Another significant concession is the teaching of Russian in the schools. While the schools are

limited in their staff members and course offerings, Russian classes are central to students' education, mostly because it is the language they speak at home.

"We graduate 100 percent of students in two languages," Hillman said. "That's quite an accomplishment."

Though occasionally challenging, Chalup said she believes such bilingual instruction should take place in all schools.

"I've always felt language is important," she said. "I speak French and some Spanish, along with English and a little Russian. Some days, we play with all four, blending them together."

In addition to its academic benefits, the bilingual education also is crucial to keeping the Russian students in school, though it's hardly the only factor.

"In the past, our kids have had to go to work to support their families, and the tendency has been to marry quite young," Hillman said.

"But we had two young ladies get married this year and they're still here, planning to graduate," he said.

Likewise, in nearby Razdolna, the small school this year has its first 12th-grader who is scheduled to graduate this month — a first in the school's 17-year history.

Such shifts in practice are indicative of a broader change in the community culture, he said.

"The demographics of the community are changing quite a bit," he said. "Since fishing has gone downhill, they've turned to other work. A lot of mothers are getting their GEDs and going to work. Because of that, they're encouraging their kids to stay in school more."

Graber agreed, adding that the gradual increase of formal schooling over the last two or three

generations likely has increased the value of education.

That's important to the school district at large in terms of state and national standards. Generally, schools in Old Believer communities have lagged in test scores and graduation rates.

The No Child Left Behind Act adds potential strain to that reputation: The third-graders at the Russian schools must pass their language tests in English for the school to make adequate yearly progress, or AYP, even though the students only just began speaking the language.

"(By third grade), they recognize the letters and symbols, but sometimes lose the meaning of a statement or entire paragraph," Hillman said.

However, he noted, while the third-grade test scores are below average, students have nearly caught up by middle school, and high school students tend to score above the average.

"I've always wondered, if you were to take an elementary school in Soldotna or Anchorage and expect students to learn Russian in three years, how would they do?"

Not surprisingly, neither Voznesenka nor Kachemak Selo schools made AYP last year. Razdolna's school did, but Superintendent Donna Peterson said it likely was more due to statistics than test scores: The school is so small its subgroups don't have enough students to count toward the analysis.

However, Hillman said Voznesenka is improving its graduation rate, and Graber noted she has had several students from the village in her college classes.

Likewise, in Nikolaevsk, the slightly less conservative and less

isolated of the Russian villages, student achievement is soaring. The demographics of the community have changed some, and most students in that village now come to school speaking English, rather than Russian. However, Russian programs still exist in the school, and maintaining culture remains a priority for village residents. At the same time, though, more students are postponing marriage, graduating high school and even venturing Outside for college.

Such cultural shifts are both positive and negative for the villages.

By staying in the small villages and preserving their lifestyles, students avoid the fads that trouble some kids in larger schools; they maintain closer family relationships and remain active in their church, Hillman said.

But, he said, “As changes come, they see more of a need to mix with the outside community to be able to sustain their own family life.”

Graber said the transition the village communities are going through are filled with paradoxes.

“They do want to preserve their culture, but they know it’s changing,” she said. “They’re trying

to change and learn more in order to stay the same.

“(The students who go on to higher education) find themselves straddling two cultures; one foot in and one foot out. How to balance it all is still a work in progress with the end result yet to be seen.”

One thing is certain, however. These communities have a lot to lose in their struggle to preserve their culture.

“They’ve moved around for over 400 years trying to find somewhere to be left alone,” Graber said. “They’re at the end of the road, literally. Where else are they going to go?”

Russian village facts

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