

NORTH SLOPE BOROUGH SCHOOL DISTRICT

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Committee on Indian Affairs

On

*In Our Way: Expanding the Success of
Native Language & Culture Based
Education*

May 26, 2011

Written Testimony of

**JANA HARCHAREK, Director of Iñupiaq
Education
North Slope Borough School District**



Chairman Akaka, and distinguished members of the committee, quyanaq, for the opportunity to provide comments. My name is Pausauraq Jana Harcharek. I am the Director of Iñupiaq Education at the North Slope Borough School District. I have lived in Barrow, Alaska all of my life, save for when I had to leave home to attend high school. I have devoted my entire professional life to language and cultural preservation and perpetuation.

The North Slope Borough School District is comprised of eleven public schools situated in eight communities spread across 88,000 square miles. Our district serves 1,816 students from preschool and kindergarten through grade 12.

Founding North Slope Borough Mayor Eben Hopson was an astute man who knew that we had an unprecedented opportunity to direct our own destiny. In 1975, he said, "Today, we have control over our educational system." He wanted an assessment of whether or not our school system was truly becoming an Inupiat school system, reflecting Inupiat educational philosophies, or, if, in fact, we were only theoretically exercising "political control" over an educational system that continues to transmit white urban culture.

36 years later our School Board continues to strive for the realization of Mayor Hopson's vision for education. The mission of the district as defined by the board is that, "Learning in our schools is rooted in the values, history and language of the Iñupiat." Our board wants our students prepared to excel as productive citizens of the world, able to integrate Iñupiaq knowledge and values with Western ways.

Five years ago the North Slope Borough School District finally decided that it was time to go to the people. It was time to forego the abysmal philosophical underpinnings of the district to impose a system created in white urban America for white urban children on Iñupiaq children because it was failing.

It was time for change. It was time to begin building the bridge of trust between school and community. So the district went to the people and the people spoke. The people said loudly and clearly that they want their children's schools to reflect who they are. They said their children no longer should have to leave their identities outside when they walk into their schools. They should know their history and who their leaders are. They should see Iñupiaq art forms in their buildings. They should learn to think like Iñupiat because they are Iñupiat.

Two years ago the district formed a committee called "Iliññaḡnikun Apqusiqtit." They are the "people who break the trail for learning." It is through their efforts that the Iñupiaq Learning Framework was born. This framework, adopted by the board last summer, is now the foundation upon which Iñupiaq culture and language based academic curricula and assessment processes are being developed. The Iñupiaq Learning Framework is based on the premise that "as a people we have the strength and determination to effectuate change in our schools to make the education system meaningful and culturally responsive resulting in greater academic success for our students." We believe that "it is our birthright to have equal opportunity to understand and practice *iñua* – our philosophies, history, language and interconnectedness with all living things. We firmly believe that today, more than ever, our ancestral knowledge is critical to our contemporary and future survival in the Arctic."

Typically, the educational delivery system is disjointed, disconnected and fragmented. This is not the way most, if not all, indigenous people think. The primary tenet of the Iñupiaq Learning Framework is that "through a holistic and interdependent approach to education, guided by and deeply rooted in *iñua*, we foster the development of spiritual, social, cultural, environmental, emotional, physical and economic connections leading to well-grounded, well-educated, community oriented individuals able to maneuver effectively in a modern world."

Atypically, the North Slope Borough School District recently embarked on a process of integrating core content areas into Iñupiaq language and cultural knowledge. Rather than attempting the all too often guaranteed-failed way of integrating culture and language into content areas, the district is taking the innovative approach of arriving at an integrated system by articulating a coherent preschool through high school curriculum by aligning the State of Alaska Content and Performance Standards and any pertinent national content standards to the standards delineated in the Iñupiaq Learning Framework. No longer are we trying to fit culture and language into already defined textbooks suited for urban areas. We have tried and tried again and what we have found is that that does not work. You cannot fit a square peg into a round hole and that is what we had unsuccessfully been trying to do for some time.

The prospects for increasing achievement attainment as a result are very promising. The goal is for all North Slope students to reach their intellectual potential and achieve academic success through the integration of Iñupiaq

knowledge into the core content areas of reading, writing, mathematics and science. The district is actively mapping it's curriculum and aligning it with the Alaska State Content and Performance Standards adapting a nationally recognized curriculum development methodology referred to as Understanding by Design. The process includes the engagement of our communities – Elders, parents, leaders, business and government partners, teachers and students. We all know that students perform better academically when parents are involved.

As we move forward with this work we feel it is imperative that we recognize experts who are learned in Iñupiaq ways of knowing and have expertise in Iñupiaq ways of doing things. They are absolutely fundamental to this process and we must find ways of honoring their knowledge and the contribution they make towards anchoring our students in who they are.

98 percent of our teachers are not of Iñupiaq descent. They are from the “lower 48” and do not bring with them an understanding of life in the Arctic. Moving forward, we must provide our teachers with opportunities to learn about the Iñupiaq Learning Framework. By clearly defining the interconnected elements of the framework and providing the necessary training we can ensure that our educators feel comfortable with making the connections. As we implement the Iñupiaq Learning Framework, the district must simultaneously train teachers to serve the unique educational needs of our people. We anticipate that meeting these needs will have the long-term effect of increasing the number of local teachers and having the added effect of increasing teacher retention – two key pieces for success.

The development of Iñupiaq language and culture based curriculum written from the perspective of the Iñupiat will have long-term positive outcomes for increased academic performance and local teacher hire and retention – this is supported by research. Through community ownership of education and investment in new educational practices now, we increase the relevance and viability of the teaching profession from the perspective of our students. When our students see themselves honored in the classroom with curriculum that is written from their perspective, they will see that teaching is an honorable profession.

The investment we make now is projected to increase the number of local, permanent residents teaching in our classrooms, improve the quality of instruction delivered and drastically reduce the amount of time and financial resources allocated each year to recruit and train new teachers.

By no means is will this be accomplished quickly. We are in it for the long haul. Our curriculum mapping and alignment timeline is projected out for five years. We will begin year two with the onset of the new school year. The district has developed an initial series of culture based units that were used in classrooms this last school year and will continue to be used. The reaction on the part of our children is amazing. There is a fourth grade integrated unit titled, “Time and

Ptarmigan” that includes a chapter book that children read as they progress in the unit. When teachers were piloting the unit they reported that they had to use it as a reward for completing other tasks because children loved it so much. Imagine children not wanting to put a school text down.

Seems Mayor Hopson had figured out what needed to be done to make our schools more effective decades before the mainstream did.