Ya Ne Dah Ah School in Chickaloon, Alaska

Teaching a sense of identity

The Ya Ne Dah Ah School, an Ahtna Athabaskan (Dené) Tribal school, lies on the traditional Tribal lands of the Naa-dlin Na’ Kayax (Chickaloon Nation Village), between the communities of Palmer and Sutton in Southcentral Alaska. Since its founding in 1992, the school became the heart of the Tribe and served as a catalyst for cultural revitalization.

Ahtna Dené Clan Grandmother Katherine Wade was the school’s founder and the last known fluent speaker of the Tóókt’óó Dialect. Through her work with prisoners at a nearby correctional facility, the Clan Grandmother realized that the release site of the prisoners was largely because of the disconnect they had with their cultural identity. In her own words, “they didn’t know who they were.” She started the school out of her home in the summer to help her people rediscover their identity, embrace their traditional Ahtna ways, and ultimately end the unhealthy cycle.

The Ya Ne Dah Ah School’s Traditional Response curriculum was the first of its kind to teach the Ahtna Athabaskan language and culture parallel with established western academic standards. The curriculum provides students with an education that instills respect for all human dignity and diversity, creates an environment that validates the culture and history of all ethnic groups, sets high expectations for academic success for every student, and encourages students and parents to actively participate in the learning process.

Today the Ya Ne Dah Ah School provides an alternative to public and private education while offering Ahtna Athabaskan language and culture as its connections. This school teaches 15 to 20 students per year in kindergarten through 12th grade. Teachers come from the local community and may be Native or non-Native.

In addition to private funding and grants, the Chickaloon Village Traditional Council supports the school financially. In 2003, the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development awarded the school “Honoree” status to acknowledge the Ya Ne Dah Ah School as the first Tribal-owned and operated school in Alaska, established with no federal or state funding. Together with the Chickaloon Village Traditional Council, the Ya Ne Dah Ah School strives to ensure that the Ahtna language is preserved, spoken daily more often, and taught to future generations.

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