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Ya Ne Dah Ah School Chickaloon Village (Chickaloon, Alaska)

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Dedicated to providing community youth with the skills necessary for functioning in a modern world while maintaining Native knowledge and practices, the Ya Ne Dah Ah School is Alaska's only tribally owned and operated full-time primary school and day care facility. Located in a two-room schoolhouse and supported entirely by private donations and tribal funding, the School's twenty students are taught – and excel in – the conventional topics of science, math, English, and social studies. In addition, the students learn Ahtna Athabascan history, language, music, and art – topics and skills that the Village of Chickaloon values and that community members help the School to teach.

While many of Alaska's 227 federally recognized tribes confront challenges related to isolation and distance from sustainable economic activity, Chickaloon Village's challenges stem from its proximity to mainstream society. An Ahtna Athabascan Indian community in the Matanuska Valley of Alaska, Chickaloon Village and its 250 tribal members are only sixty miles northeast of Anchorage, and thus, they have been under particularly intense pressures of acculturation. Once the stewards of vast landholdings, they have become a minority in their own homeland. There are not many Native speakers left, many cultural practices have become endangered, and worse, some have been lost. Chickaloon youth have been beset with problems characteristic of urban areas. And unlike what is found throughout much of Indian Country, where a growing number of tribes are exercising their sovereignty to successfully overcome chronic socioeconomic problems, Native leaders in Alaska face the unwelcome reality that Alaskan borough, city, and state governments possess jurisdiction over education and other essential tribal government functions. For example, although the Alaska State Legislature receives federal funding for Indian education, most monies are funneled into the state system.

The education of Native youth in the Alaskan public school system has long been a topic of deep concern to tribal leaders and Native parents at Chickaloon and elsewhere. Such concern is warranted: Native students in Alaska's public schools suffer from much lower rates of educational attainment drop out at much higher rates than their non-Native peers at both the state and national levels. Indeed, there is a long-standing distrust among Natives of "conventional" classroom methods and even of the public schools' educational intentions themselves – distrust that is fueled by the fact that most Alaskan public schools lack Native-relevant curricula despite large Native student populations.

Concerned about the quality of education that their students were receiving in the public school system, coupled with a desire to curb the decline of Ahtna Athabascan cultural

practices, the Chickaloon Village decided to take matters into their own hands in 1992. In a path-breaking exercise of sovereignty, the Village established the Ya Ne Dah Ah, or “Ancient Teachings,” School – the first and only full-time, year-round, tribally owned and operated day care and elementary school in Alaska. Founded and staffed by tribal members who had seen the positive impact of tribally run schools in other Native communities outside of Alaska, the Ya Ne Dah Ah School acknowledges the crisis in Alaskan indigenous education and confronts it at a local level. The School provides its students with an education that integrates Athabascan heritage and mainstream education. In particular, its curriculum effectively melds traditional teachings with modern non-Native subjects, creating a learning environment in which Native students can identify with and feel connected to their culture and community while learning to understand and function productively in the non-Native world. Like many other tribal schools, Ya Ne Dah Ah is committed to providing students with an education that instills respect for human dignity, diversity, and self-determination.

The Ya Ne Dah Ah School educates the majority of elementary school-aged children in Chickaloon Village. Currently, twenty children attend Ya Ne Dah Ah, most of whom are tribal members, though several students are tribal government employees’ children and other non-tribal community members. This year, the children attending the Ya Ne Dah Ah School are between the ages of one and twelve and in grades six and below. The School is growing with the children, so next year it also will offer a seventh grade curriculum. Ultimately, the Chickaloon Village government hopes to expand the Ya Ne Dah Ah School’s facilities and student population, creating a multicultural education system that will serve all Village members from birth through adulthood (adult-education courses and even a tribal college have been discussed). The School’s past success speaks highly of its capacity to realize these dreams. Ten years ago, the School began with a part-time, volunteer teacher; today, it employs a full-time, certified teacher.

These expansions of the Chickaloon Village school’s budget, student population, services, and academic activities stand in stark contrast to neighboring public schools. Indeed, many Natives are returning to the area so that their children can attend the Ya Ne Dah Ah School, and now, the very existence of a waiting list is a telling measure of the School’s success. The students’ academic records are another important draw. Unlike most other schools that serve Alaska Native populations, Ya Ne Dah Ah students remain in school—dropouts are not a problem. Furthermore, they score higher on standardized tests than their national counterparts. The Chickaloon Village School Board keeps a close eye on these results. It reviews the Ya Ne Dah Ah School’s progress on an annual basis, charts individual students’ achievements according to federally and state approved assessment methods, and communicates findings to parents and to the Tribal Council in regular progress reports.

The Ya Ne Dah Ah School’s success is the result of several distinctive factors. First, it is an essential government function that is integrated into Chickaloon Village and local Ahtna Athabascan life. An Alaska Daily News article reported that, “Nothing the tribe does is as important as running its school. Polls of tribe members place education and cultural preservation as the top priority.” While parental participation is nearly 100 percent—parents volunteer to help with School events, provide all School transportation needs, and even teach in the School—other adult community members contribute to facility maintenance and education efforts as well. The School has inspired an admirable commitment among its faculty. The cultural teacher and day care teacher are returning to the local university to receive more formal education training. Tribal offices are also actively involved in the School’s curriculum. For instance, Chickaloon’s Health Department provides health education; its Community Oriented Policing Services program offers safety classes; and the Department of the Environment teaches map making and assists with science classes. In

addition to the support of parents, community members, and the tribal council, the Ya Ne Dah Ah School depends upon the support of surrounding schools and other Native villages. Area public schools provide services such as access to a swimming pool and library on a weekly basis. Members of other Athabascan villages, such as Arctic Village and Copper Center, visit regularly and even teach the Chickaloon children traditional songs and dances of the Athabascan people.

In the absence of federal and state support, this extensive community involvement has been crucial to the School's survival. Indeed, a second factor in the Ya Ne Dah Ah School's success has been its ability to accomplish so much with so few financial resources. Ya Ne Dah Ah School's \$150,000 annual budget – none of which comes from state or federal sources because the Village is unwilling to rescind aspects of its sovereignty – does not afford the School many amenities that non-Native schools enjoy. The School operates in a donated two-room schoolhouse without running water; its day care facility is housed in a small separate building. The School relies on private sources of funding by working closely with private foundations and CIRI (the Native regional corporation), ultimately gaining 98 percent of its annual budget from these sources. The Tribe supplies the remaining 2 percent of funding through bake sales, pow-wow proceeds, and individual donations. In other words, private contributions, volunteer labor, and an education board that manages to do a great deal with scarce funds have made it possible for the Ya Ne Dah Ah School to function on a shoestring budget.

A third factor in the Ya Ne Dah Ah School's success has been its determination to promote Athabascan culture in its curriculum. As noted, "Ya Ne Dah Ah" means "Ancient Teachings," and the School has become a center for the maintenance and dissemination of Athabascan cultural practices. Although there are fewer than fifty fluent Ahtna Athabascan speakers in the world and most of them are over fifty years old, the students in the Ya Ne Dah Ah School are now learning the language. They study Ahtna Athabascan not just in "language" classes, but also through their work in math, culture, social studies, and art. The Ya Ne Dah Ah School also is piloting culturally specific units such as Songs & Dance, Potlatches, Fish Traps & Wheels, Birch Bark Basket Making, and Yenida'a Stories, all of which feature reading materials, hands-on activities, and multimedia videos. And there is evidence that these investments are paying off. The first graduate of the Ya Ne Dah Ah School is now the instructor of the Ya Ne Dah Ah School youth dance and drum group as well as an Ahtna language teacher; one of the only young people in all of Alaska to speak the traditional Ahtna language, he is a source of pride for the entire Nation. Last year, Ya Ne Dah Ah School students welcomed tribal leaders from across the US to a three-day environmental health conference in Anchorage with an hour-long performance of traditional drumming and dancing. Further, the culturally relevant teachings of the Ya Ne Dah Ah School are giving rise to responsible and informed tribal citizens whose respect for Ahtna Athabascan traditions and culture are enabling them to create even more effective and appropriate Village governance.

A final demonstration of the Ya Ne Dah Ah School's success is its ability to merge cultural teachings with mainstream curriculum and to share that learning. Relying on both traditional and contemporary methods of teaching, the Ya Ne Dah Ah staff offer instruction in the Ahtna Athabascan language, respect for the environment, traditional values, ethics, Athabascan cultural practices, math, social studies, science, and language arts. Not surprisingly, the Ya Ne Dah Ah School has become a catalyst for curriculum development. The Chickaloon Village's Department of Education supports a Curriculum Development Project that creates high-tech, multi-media Ahtna Athabascan cultural heritage curricula found nowhere else in Alaska. These curricular units are fully integrated into the Ya Ne Dah Ah School and have recently been integrated into the neighboring Matanuska-Susitna Borough School District that

serves over five thousand students. These units are targeted for statewide and national distribution in the next two years.

The Ya Ne Dah Ah School exemplifies a commitment to perpetuating Native sovereignty in an environment sometimes unsympathetic to that stance. By reclaiming its own educational process and successfully merging cultural and modern curricula, the School has exceeded state and national standards while reinvigorating the traditional life of the Village. With its solid academic foundation, its substantial local support, its partnerships with private foundations, and its evidence of success, the Ya Ne Dah Ah School serves as a model for Indian nations.

Lessons:

- Indian nations and Native villages that are deeply committed to self-determination are persistent in their efforts to overcome political, financial, and institutional obstacles to self-governance. A “can-do” attitude is a prerequisite for tribal success.
- Tribal schools can combine traditional teachings and Native culture with mainstream curriculum by involving elders and other community leaders in students’ education, teaching math and science through “real life” applications, and offering Native language, music, art, and history classes. The pursuit of culturally sensitive teaching need not inhibit a school’s ability to produce students who excel by standard measures of academic achievement.
- Schools that encourage parents, family members, and community leaders to become involved in their children’s education help ensure student success. Community involvement also gives schools access to a broader range of resources and teaching tools.

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