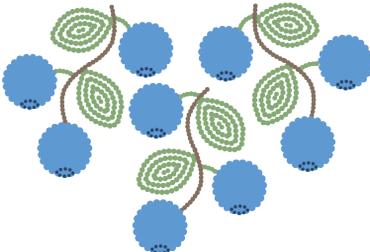




# Alaska Native Language Literacy Guidebook

An Introduction







## *Nakon' tnestnak – The fire is going out. (Ahtna)*

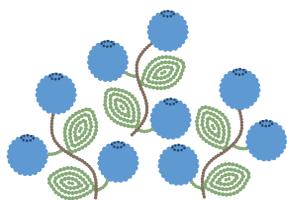
“Now today, we have been thrown together, put into this predicament. We need to support each other. The fire is going out everywhere in Alaska.”

**Markle Pete, Ahtna Dene (2009)**

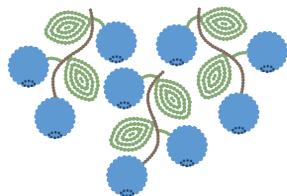
(Ahtna metaphor: The Elders are passing away)

Cited in Kari & Tuttle (2018)





# **Alaska Native Language Literacy Guidebook**



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*“The single most valuable skill I learned at the Eklutna school was how to read. Reading opened a new world for me and enabled me to educate myself in any subject.”*

**Sydney Huntington**

Galena Elder, trapper, miner, fisherman, business owner, State Board of Game member, and community advocate (1993, p. 63)

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These words resonate deeply with me, as does the vivid imagery of Huntington’s adventures along the Koyukuk River, marked by heartfelt experiences of trauma and awe-inspiring encounters in the Alaskan wilderness. While my background may not fully contextualize the book, I hold great admiration for its portrayal of individual empowerment amidst the dynamic changes of the early 1900s. The significance of exposure to both Alaska Native and Western perspectives remains paramount for today’s Alaska Native children.

The essence of this endeavor lies in embracing the “and.” As will be illustrated in the *Alaska Native Language Literacy Guidebook*, the integration of the Science of Reading and the cultivation of Alaska Native language literacy skills are essential facets of learning in Alaska. The *Alaska Native Language Literacy Guidebook* will highlight the application of the Science of Reading to non-English languages, with a particular emphasis on enhancing the literacy skills of Alaska Native students.

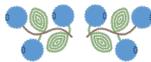
The guidebook is grounded in the global research of the Science of Reading, encompassing both alphabetic and non-alphabetic languages. It emphasizes the critical importance of both language and decoding development, noting that students across languages must establish the association between sounds and corresponding letters.

Moving forward with this vital endeavor, we plan to collaborate closely with Alaska Native language experts and reading specialists, ensuring that it accurately and respectfully represents Alaska Native languages. I am honored to be a small part of the preservation and knowledge growth of Alaska Indigenous languages for all educators.

**Dr. Deena Bishop**

Commissioner

Alaska Department of Education and Early Development



# Acknowledgment

Generations of Alaska Native peoples continue to caretake this place we all call home. To ensure the fire does not go out, we must join together to care for the languages throughout Alaska. The *Alaska Native Language Literacy Guidebook* recognizes the need to support all Alaska Native languages. However, Alaska is a big state, and there is room for all students' languages to be used in our schools throughout Alaska. This resource focuses on Alaska Native languages but also strives to equip educators with the considerations necessary to account for the multilingual learning environment that makes Alaska so unique.

As Elder Alaska Native speakers walk on, the urgency for future generations of Alaska people to hear, speak, and think in Alaska Native languages continues to grow. Alaska Native languages reflect place. The lands, waters, animals, plants, and sky for each region of our state are reflected in the beautifully distinctive Alaska Native languages. Our people have been here since time immemorial. The intelligence and knowledge developed through thousands of years of connection to Alaska are inherently embedded in our languages.

Alaska Native languages are in a state of emergency. Many of our languages are going to sleep because of the historical federal policy known as the Termination Era, a policy designed to eradicate our Alaska Native people, languages, cultures, and societies. Today, new policy approaches embrace the Self-Determination Era. Alaska Native people are not the only ones to be

affected by the impacts of the Termination Era. The scars run deep, and as we work to reawaken Alaska Native languages, we must handle the work with care.

Currently, one in three students in Alaska public schools is Alaska Native/American Indian. Forty percent of all English Language Learners in Alaska are speakers of Alaska Native languages. We need our current generation of schoolchildren to be multilingual. We need them to maintain their connection with the language of their people and the generations that came before them as they also acquire proficiency in English.

Reawakening Alaska Native languages is hard work that impacts everyone in Alaska. The work can seem daunting and insurmountable. Our Elders often talk about protecting our languages by letting them sleep. They prepared for the day when it would be time to awaken them. Their hard work, resilience, and commitment to future generations guide us all in this work. Approaching the work gently with good thoughts will ensure the languages come back in a good way that will honor our ancestors. The teachings of our Elders remind us that our language comes from this place, from the land. The land will help you remember.

**Joel Isaak**

Dena'ina Łiq'a Yes sh'izhi (My Dena'ina name is Łiq'a Yes)

Deputy Commissioner

Alaska Department of Education and Early Development



The *Alaska Native Language Literacy Guidebook* is being created to provide educators with a tool to help them connect with students and learn more about the unique features of Alaska Native languages. However, while discussing the impacts of reading and writing instruction on Alaska Native people, we had to talk about the history of Alaska Native education, a traumatic experience for many.

Personally, the section on the impacts of reading and writing education touched me. My family members had gone through boarding school, and it had a profound effect on me. It is important to acknowledge the historical trauma and address it so that we can heal as a people. This aspect of history is not known to many people living in Alaska, and it is time to acknowledge and learn from it.

I would like to take this time to acknowledge the Elders who came before us and recognize all the work that has been created in order for us to move forward. Our Elders have gone through a lot for us to be here today. This guidebook captures some of the history that we can learn from. While it is important to move forward with the revitalization of our languages, we need to address existing barriers and discuss, acknowledge, and heal from the past. The *Alaska Native Language Literacy Guidebook* will be a resource for all learners.

**Kari Shaginoff, Ahtna/Paiute**

Ts'qalts'ema Dek'isen (Dena'ina), "Butterfly Woman"

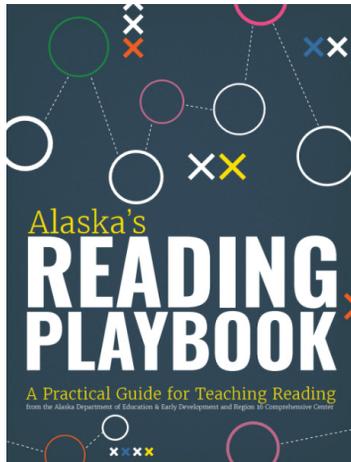
Alaska Native Language Literacy Specialist

Alaska Department of Education and Early Development



# Foreword

The *Alaska Native Language Literacy Guidebook* is being developed in partnership with the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development and Region 16 Comprehensive Center. This work requires addressing many historical, graphic events and hearing upsetting accounts of how children were physically tortured. Along with facing these traumas, we also had the opportunity to see how joy is possible for the next generation when healing takes place.



Below are brief notes from the contributors of this project. We hope that by sharing our experience in drafting this document, the reader will feel supported in their own journey to help strengthen Alaska Native languages.

Working on the introduction to the *Alaska Native Language Literacy Guidebook* has been an honor. We want to thank Joel Isaak and Kari Shaginoff for generously sharing their expertise as well as their hope. Over a period of several months, they shared the beauty of their Alaska Native languages and gently steered us through some difficult discussions on Alaska Native history.

The enormity of both telling and listening to shared Indigenous lived experiences carries a weight that is powerful beyond words. This process took months

because this type of work requires time for both the teller and the listener to process and reflect. As Joel encouraged us, we encourage you to take time to sit with the telling and give it space as you read and reflect. At times, we were shocked, horrified, embarrassed by our lack of knowledge, and in awe of the strength and spirit of Alaska Natives. Joel and Kari painted a picture of community, family, and, above all, tenacity to hold on to the extraordinary culture of the 229 Alaska Tribes.

We kept coming back to one quote: “Nakon' tnestnak (The fire is going out)” (Markle Pete, Ahtna Dene, 2009, as cited in Kari & Tuttle, 2018) as we tried to add voice and urgency to the work of Alaska Native language teachers in maintaining cultural traditions and language. It is our sincerest hope this introduction can serve as a catalyst for all of us to continue dialogue and action to keep the fire burning.

The rich culture and language Alaska Natives bring to their school communities is an asset that provides multiple linguistic repertoires that students can draw upon as learners. Studies have shown that literacy development is enhanced through multicultural instruction. We need our students to be bilingual, if not multilingual. The English-only model has not worked for all, has not resulted in higher levels of student achievement, and has caused harm to Native communities and families.

Let's use all of the resources available: Elders, Alaska Native linguists, teachers of Alaska Native languages, the Science of Reading, neuroscience, learning theory, and the growing body of research on how best to

approach the teaching of multilingualism to ensure the fire continues to burn for the generations to come.

**Marybeth Flachbart**  
**Amy Jo Meiners**  
**Rosie Santana**





## *Dedication*

This work is dedicated to the students of Alaska, as well as those who are working hard to ensure a brighter future for all students, families, and communities. Through this work, we honor those who have come before, are with us today, and our future ancestors.

## **Thank You**

Quyanaq, Taikuu, Quyaana, Iliganamik,  
Igamsiqanaghalek, Amken, Quyana, Qaġasakuq,  
Chin'an, Chiqinik, Dogedinh, Baasee', Mahsi', Tsinęę,  
Mahsi', Tsin'aen, Awa'ahdah, Gunalchéesh, Háv'aa,  
T'oyaxsut 'nüün, Way Dankoo.



# Landscape

## Why an Alaska Native Language Literacy Guidebook?

Reading is an important life skill that students must master for success in school. When learning language as babies, we learn to listen before we learn to speak, and then we learn to read and write. All three skills are combined to facilitate learning, but students most often use reading as they progress through higher grades in school. This progression is often phrased as “learn to read, then read to learn.”

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*“It takes one generation to lose a language and three generations to gain it back.”*

**Keiki Kawai'ae'a**

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The initial spark for developing this resource came from two questions: 1.) Is it possible to teach reading literacy in Alaska Native languages? and 2.) What does it look like to learn to read in an Alaska Native language? The *Alaska Native Language Literacy Guidebook* answers these two questions by demonstrating through context, technical considerations, examples, and by focusing on what Alaska Native languages need to become more widely used in the classroom.

The *Alaska Native Language Literacy Guidebook* is designed to parallel *Alaska's Reading Playbook: A*

*Practical Guide to Teaching Reading*. In 2022, the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development, along with the Region 16 Comprehensive Center, created *Alaska's Reading Playbook*. *Alaska's Reading Playbook* is a resource designed by and for Alaskan educators based on the Science of Reading.

In Alaska, we define the Science of Reading as an ongoing field of study encompassing the last fifty years of reading research. Until now, this body of research has not considered Alaska Native languages as part of the Science of Reading. The *Alaska Native Language Literacy Guidebook* demonstrates that it is possible for Alaska Native language study to be incorporated into the Science of Reading.

Each section of *Alaska's Reading Playbook* begins with an overview of the research related to each of the Science of Reading's "Big 5" components: phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. The research and strategies included in *Alaska's Reading Playbook* pertain to reading in English — a great first step, but not the whole journey.

Our challenge now is to expand the Science of Reading field to include evidence related to Alaska Native languages. Alaska Native students were not represented in any of the large-scale studies that formed the basis of the National Reading Panel (2000). We invite our Alaska Native language teachers and communities to join us in conducting actionable research for our children and in our schools. The *Alaska Native Language Literacy Guidebook* is a call to bring us together for this important work.

Access to Alaska Native language learning is limited due to Native communities' isolated learning environments. Further, Alaska Native language communities have long been excluded from academic studies in the field of reading.

To address these two gaps, the *Alaska Native Language Literacy Guidebook* will be designed to:

1. Provide English reading instructors considerations for teaching reading in Alaska's multilingual landscape
2. Exemplify approaches to teaching reading literacy in Alaska Native languages
3. Serve as a guide for Alaska Native language workers to build upon as they grow the field of Alaska Native language reading instruction

Some educators may be hesitant to apply the Science of Reading to non-English languages. However, the Science of Reading is based on global research on literacy instruction in both alphabetic and non-alphabetic languages (The Reading League, n.d.). While alphabetic languages rely more on phonetic decoding and non-alphabetic languages rely more on symbol recognition, both processes require students to comprehend meaning. It isn't a matter of **either** language comprehension or word recognition; it is a matter of "**both/and.**"

Common insights have emerged across learning contexts in varying languages. For example, students must establish the association between sounds and the corresponding letters, regardless of the language (The

Reading League, n.d.). Our students need to acquire vocabulary and learn the appropriate sound-to-symbol relationships across multiple languages.

The *Alaska Native Language Literacy Guidebook* represents this moment in time, and we anticipate that its future iterations will grow as the field of Alaska Native language literacy blossoms.

## Overview

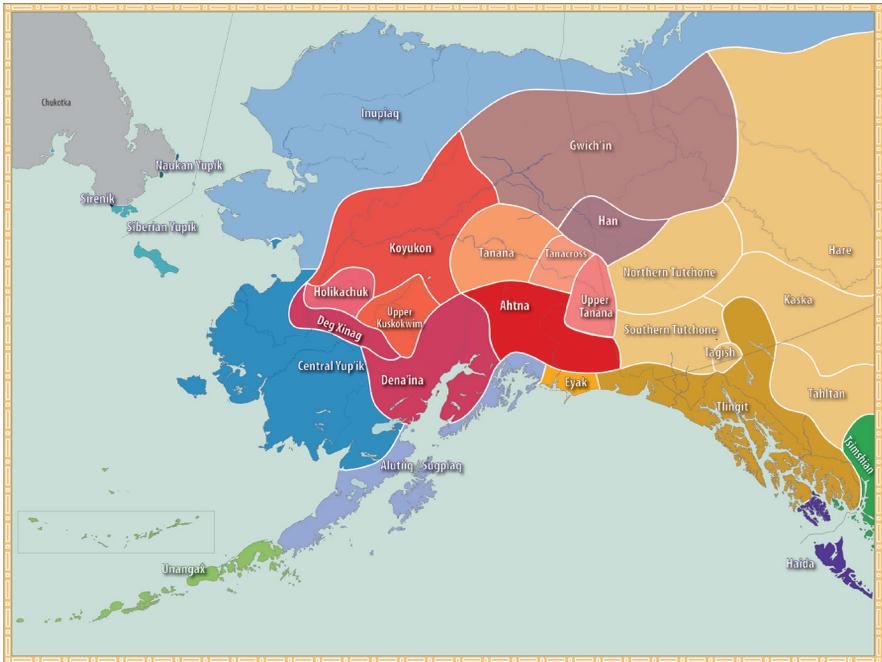
There are seven sections proposed for the *Alaska Native Language Literacy Guidebook*. This first section contextualizes and historicizes how Alaska Native languages engage with reading as an academic field. The following five sections will address considerations for how the Science of Reading can expand to include Alaska Native languages and approaches to teaching reading literacy in and for Alaska Native languages.

This Landscape section will include components on Alaska Native language connections, the impacts of reading and writing on Alaska Native languages, the benefits of reading and writing in Alaska Native languages, the linguistic distinctions of Alaska Native languages, and considerations for sustainability.

We need to create and promote linguistic and culturally accurate teaching strategies, curricula, scopes, and sequences developed specifically for our Alaska Native languages. The *Alaska Native Language Literacy Guidebook* is an invitation for educators to come together and build capacity for Alaska Native language literacy throughout our state.

# Alaska Native Language Connections

Alaska Native languages are inherently connected to place. Think of Alaska Native languages as relational. Alaska Native languages are influenced by neighboring languages and geographic landscapes. Looking at a map, it is easy to see how the topography of Alaska aligns with various language families and dialect variations.



The Alaska Native Language Center

Looking at language maps, you might think that the borders represent rigid boundaries between languages. This is not the case. The language borders in Alaska are zones of transition, not rigid lines. Mountains, lake systems, and river drainages are all reflected in

how Alaska Native languages form and continue to evolve.

Currently, there are 21 official Alaska languages as recognized in Alaska’s *Official Languages* law (44.12.310). Twenty of the official languages are Alaska Native languages:

Indigenous Language Name	Statutory Language Title
Atna Kenaega'	Ahtna
Yugtun	Central Yup'ik
Deg Xinag	Deg Hit'an
Dena'ina Qenaga	Dena'ina
dAXunhyuuga'	Eyak
Dinjii Zhuh K'yaa	Gwich'in
Xaad Kíl	Haida
Hät gołan	Hän
Doogh Qinag	Holikachuk
Iñupiatun	Iñupiaq
Denaakk'e	Koyukon
Menhti Kenaga	Lower Tanana
Yupigestun	Siberian Yupik
Sugcestun	Sugpiaq/Alutiiq
Nee'aandĕg	Tanacross
Lingít Yoo X'atángi	Tlingit
Sm'álg yax	Tsimshian
Unangam Tunuu	Unangaxᄀ
Dinak'i	Upper Kuskokwim
Nee'aandèegn'	Upper Tanana

# Impacts of Monolingual Reading and Writing

Note: The following section may trigger a strong response. The intent of this section is to provide context for why we must handle the topic of reading instruction and Alaska Native languages with care. Some tools that may help in processing the difficult topics in this section include: taking time to go for a walk outside, drinking tea, singing or drumming, journaling, grounding yourself in nature, and breathing exercises.

In providing this important context, we do not intend to guilt or chastise any group of people. By providing a history of the impacts of monolingual reading and writing, we hope that this section will help grow an understanding of how language removal and forced assimilation came to be among Alaska Native communities. We've concluded this section by offering approaches to fostering healing through language revitalization and preservation.

In the last century, literacy, especially English-only approaches to literacy instruction, has been fraught with conflict and, to a large extent, tragedy. Many families, community members, and Elders can recount the horrific experiences created in the name of education. While experiences with monolingual literacy instruction across our state differ in severity, the effects from this period in time impact everyone — Alaska Natives and non-Natives alike. To move forward, we need to look back and reflect upon the generational trauma experienced by so many in our communities.

We must recognize key historical events to begin the healing process. The first key event is the passage of the Comity Agreement. Sheldon Jackson, a Presbyterian minister, missionary, and political leader,

met with secretaries from the Baptist, Episcopalian, Catholic, Protestant, and Methodist churches in New York City to formulate the “Comity Plan” or “Comity Agreement,” in which Protestant churches split Alaska into regions that each sect would focus on missionizing.

Through the forced removal of Alaska Native cultures and languages, the Comity Agreement resulted in the dissolution of communities in the name of converting Indigenous Alaskans to Christianity.

Following the Comity Agreement, the Boarding School Era saw the federal, territorial, and state governments establish a boarding school system to formalize education intended to “Christianize,” “civilize,” assimilate, and eliminate the Alaska Native way of life. During this time, Alaska Native children were kidnapped and conscripted to attend boarding schools or boarding homes. Families still tell stories of children being hidden by their communities to prevent them from being forced to attend boarding schools.

The boarding schools established a strict English-only model. To force children to speak only in English, boarding school officials deprived children who spoke in their Native languages of not just privileges but necessities such as food.

The trauma that Native children endured in boarding schools is not just a relic of history. While the Federal Boarding School Era began nearly 150 years ago, the Bureau of Indian Affairs operated boarding schools based on this model until 1986.

Due to the disturbing and sensitive content provided in primary historical accounts of Federal boarding schools, we have included them as an appendix. Our intent is to respectfully describe the trauma that Alaska Native students experienced. However, we do not want to unduly traumatize the reader. The quotes in the appendix describe, in detail, the strategy and actions that Christian missionaries authorized by the U.S. government carried out as they treated students as prisoners. Some of the strategies that authorities used on Alaska Native students served as a model to spread across the lower 48 states in other Federal boarding schools and were later adopted by the military during the First and Second World Wars.

## Alaska Native Education Timeline

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- 1784** First Russian settlement in Kodiak, establishing the Alaska–Church School

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- 1867** The Alaska Comity Agreement established

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- 1878** Sheldon Jackson College, initially named Sitka Industrial and Training School, becomes the first U.S. boarding school

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- 1879** The United States Indian Industrial School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania opens

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- 1888** Education matters delegated to the Bureau of Education

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- 1905** Nelson Act establishes segregated school system for Native and non–Native children

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- 1917** Federal boarding schools White Mountain Industrial School and Eklutna Vocational School open

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- 1932** Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) opens and operates Wrangell Institute Elementary, a federal boarding school

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<b>1947</b>	Mount Edgecombe boarding school begins sending students out of state
<b>1952</b>	Johnson–O’Malley Act transfers first school from federal to state jurisdiction
<b>1959</b>	Alaska statehood approved by Congress
<b>1972</b>	The Indian Education Act amends the Johnson–O’Malley Act, providing additional resources to Native students and schools
<b>1975</b>	Indian Self–Determination and Education Assistance Act passed by Congress
<b>1976</b>	Molly Hootch and Anna Tobeluk sue the state of Alaska for failure to provide high schools in Native villages
<b>1990</b>	Native American Languages Act approved, protecting Native Americans’ rights to preserve Native languages
<b>2014</b>	Alaska Native languages become the co–official languages of the state of Alaska

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This context demonstrates why the topic of reading education conjures painful memories and serves as an emblem of language loss and forced assimilation among Native communities. There is a direct connection between the atrocities committed throughout history and the educational outcomes present in Alaska today, including outcomes around reading. This section strives to build an understanding of what may appear as Native communities’ reluctance to embrace education, particularly literacy. These events created a deep–seated resentment and hostility toward English–only learning, especially in reading.

## Wellness-Driven Outcomes

The impacts of the Federal Boarding School Era are felt by both the individual and community. By identifying the negative impacts of Alaska Native language and culture removal, we can begin to envision wellness-driven and trauma-informed approaches that create improved outcomes for Alaska Native students. This chart articulates some of the impact of language and cultural loss and a suggested wellness-driven approach:

Impact of Language and Culture Loss	Wellness-Driven Approach
Loss of identity	Learning about Tribal history, culture, and language
Low self-esteem	Engaging in activities that bring joy
No sense of safety	Surrounding oneself with people that support identity development
Lack of institutional trust	Educating others in your own, unique way
Difficulty forming healthy relationships	Finding support among those who model healthy behavior
Loss of parental power	Strengthening familial connections
Near-destruction of extended family system	Identifying “aunties” and “uncles” in the community, accepting what you cannot change

Impact of Language and Culture Loss	Wellness-Driven Approach
Loss of sense of community	Seeking out other language learners, even in other areas
Loss of language	Speaking to and educating others in your language to build a language community
Loss of Tribal traditions and ceremonies	Living the values of your Tribe, sharing with your family now
Weakened Nation structure	Joining with others who share your goals and supporting those in the Tribal positions
Depleted enrollment numbers	Practicing gratitude for those still with us

Individuals  
 Families  
 Tribal Communities  
 Tribal Nations

Adapted from White Hawk, n.d.

## The Benefits of Being Multilingual

The belief that learning more than one language was detrimental to a child’s development has been historically used to support assimilationist approaches to education. Neuroscience research has consistently demonstrated that this belief is false. Learning at least two languages results in a wide variety of **neurological and academic benefits**. Beyond the obvious social benefits of being able to communicate across generations and language communities, there are cognitive differences between monolingual and multilingual individuals.

Neuroscientists have found that bilingual students outperform their monolingual peers in academic areas such as metacognitive awareness (or the ability to think about the way you think), problem-solving, flexible thinking (or the ability to quickly and efficiently switch between different modes of thought), and attention span (Morales et al., 2013). Studies have also shown that bilingual students have a significant advantage when completing tasks that demand executive function (or the ability to problem-solve, make decisions, and focus one's attention) (Morales et al., 2013).

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*“The roots of the term education imply drawing out children’s potential, making them MORE than they were; however, when children come to school fluent in their primary language, and they leave school essentially monolingual in English, then our schools have negated the meaning of the term education, because they have made children LESS than they were.”*

**Mary Ashworth**

As cited by Cummins, 1986

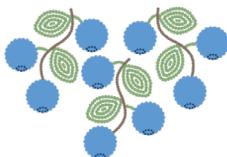
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Some scientists hypothesize these advantages are due to bilingual children’s need to process in two languages, which requires the brain to have a higher memory capacity than processing in just one language (Morales et al., 2013). Learning a new language also

requires learning different phonologies (sounds), syntaxes (grammar), and semantics (meaning). Multilingual students have greater working memory (the ability to hold onto information and apply it in new situations), which results in an enhanced ability to recall facts, directions, and figures (Cockcroft et al., 2017).

The continued emphasis on English-only, monolingualistic approaches to literacy ignores the many benefits of multilingualism. Alaska Native language teachers are in a position to change that mindset. However, encouraging multilingualism is relatively new in the field of educational research. We need to both look at the research on multilingualism and conduct our own research to ensure students are literate in at least two languages. Further, most of the research related to bilingual and biliterate education in the United States was conducted on native Spanish speakers.

As we develop our *Alaska Native Language Literacy Guidebook*, we will examine the body of research for lessons learned. We will also look to our own experts, such as Elders and Alaska Native linguists, to ensure we gain insight from both Western and Indigenous approaches to education research.





Please take heart in this work in progress as we come together to support Alaskan students' literacy skills. This resource is provided as a first-draft introduction to the *Alaska Native Language Literacy Guidebook* and is a preview of our work to come.

In the coming months, we will gather with Alaska Native language workers and reading specialists to review and refine the full guidebook. This collaboration is critical to ensuring Alaska Native languages are appropriately and respectfully represented in this work.

We look forward to workshopping this content during the Alaska Native Language Summit and the Alaska Science of Reading breakout sessions.

We invite you to provide feedback and ask questions using the QR code below.



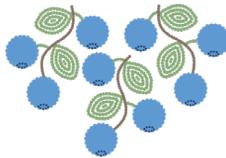
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# Appendix

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*“...it is cheaper on the single ground of dollars and cents, it is cheaper to convert the Indian than it is to shoot him.”*

**Reverend Alexander Sutherland**  
Canadian Methodist clergyman  
(Jackson, 1875–84, pp. 9–10)

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*“He [Captain Henry Glass, senior naval officer in charge of Native affairs in Alaska] then caused a label to be made of tin for each child, which was tied around the neck of the child, with his or her number and the number of the house on it, so that if a child was found on the street during school hours the Indian policeman was under orders to take the numbers on the labels and report them, or the teacher each day would report that such numbers from such houses were absent that day.”*

**Sheldon Jackson**  
Presbyterian minister and Comity Plan administrator  
(Jackson, 1886, p. 21)

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## DEED Office of Tribal Affairs



The contents of this guidebook were developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. However, the contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the U.S. Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal government. This work has been created in partnership with the Region 16 Comprehensive Center.

