**UAF-led effort hopes to boost local teacher recruiting in rural Alaska**

By Jeff Richardson

A partnership led by the University of Alaska Fairbanks is trying to address one of rural Alaska’s enduring challenges — finding homegrown teachers to work in village schools.

The SILKAT project — Sustaining Indigenous and Local Knowledge, Arts and Teaching — just completed its first year of implementation. During much of the next decade UAF, the Bering Strait School District and Kawerak, a regional social-service organization, hope to create a template for schools that want to train local teachers and improve the use of culture and art in classrooms.

Of more than 200 teachers in the Bering Strait School District, just six are Alaska Natives. Amy Vinlove, an assistant professor at the UAF School of Education, said most of rural Alaska has similar numbers. Hiring more Alaska Native teachers is expected to reduce high turnover rates at Bush schools.

That is a key goal of the program. The effort is funded with a renewable grant from the Margaret A. Cargill Foundation that could eventually become a $5 million, nine-year effort.

“It’s not just trying to get the job done quickly,” Vinlove said. “It recognizes that anything you’re going to do that’s substantial is going to take a long time.”

The project began three years ago, when UAF was approached by the Minnesota-based MAC Foundation to apply for a grant to improve arts- and culture-based teaching in Alaska. The foundation urged education leaders at UAF to focus on teacher quality rather than curriculum changes.

UAF, along with partners at Kawerak and the Bering Strait School District, thought the project sounded like an opportunity to boost the number of homegrown teachers in the region.

The grant partners sent surveys to hundreds of aides in the district to gauge their interest in becoming teachers. Eight aides were selected from those responses, representing SILKAT’s first cohort in a multi-year effort. The program, which just completed its first year of implementation, is building a structure for supporting prospective teachers in the district’s 15 communities.

It’s hoped that not only will local teachers be more likely to stay, but that the program will allow Bering Strait educators to better incorporate the region’s values into the classroom.

“Culturally and artistically, there’s so much going on there,” Vinlove said. “We wanted to make that a more foundational part of the education process.”

UAF is paying for the students’ tuition, fees and books for education courses, while also providing focused advising. Students are guided to distance-delivered courses with instructors who understand the context of teaching in rural Alaska, and provided with a designated “coach” to help troubleshoot instructional and technological challenges.

UAF also plans to offer intensive courses in sites like Nome and Unalakleet, where SILKAT students can meet face-to-face and take a class together. Education students studying at UAF’s Fairbanks campus will visit Bering Strait schools to get a taste of life in a remote village.

Some of those efforts have been tried before in rural Alaska, while other techniques are new. But Vinlove said educators are particularly excited about the process because it could span nearly a decade — enough time to tinker with its components and figure out what pieces are most effective.

“This kind of work is really messy,” she said. “It’s not linear at all, and it’s very complicated, but it’s what I want to be doing.”

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Cutlines:

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*Evan Sterling photo*
Shaktoolik teacher Stacey Paniptchuk, pictured with her baby, Stefan, is part of a UAF partnership working to train more homegrown teachers in the Bering Strait School District.

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*Evan Sterling photo*
High School students in Brevig Mission work to make their own ulus in Randall “Bidoo” Jones’ bilingual/bicultural class. UAF, the Bering Strait School District and the regional nonprofit Kawerak are working to train more local teachers in the region.