



Native Village of Kotzebue | P.O. Box 296 | 600 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue | (907) 442-3467 | [www.kotzebueira.org](http://www.kotzebueira.org)

**For Immediate Release:**

Contact: Christina Hensley, 907-442-3467  
Executive Director, Native Village of Kotzebue

**Nikaitchuat Iḷisaḡviat School Receives \$1.7 Million Grant**

**Kotzebue, Alaska – March 8, 2024 –** The Native Village of Kotzebue Nikaitchuat Iḷisaḡviat Iḷupiaq Language Immersion School and Early Learning Center is the recipient of two significant grants that will be allocated toward the construction of a permanent facility in Kotzebue. NANA Regional Corporation is awarding \$971,855 in grant monies with \$71,855 to be set aside for technology upgrades at the new facility, and the Northwest Arctic Borough is awarding \$750,000.

Both granting entities seek to help build local capacity and promote self sufficiency through sustainable and thriving regional village communities. The combined grants will support an anticipated grand opening for the school in Spring 2026.

Nikaitchuat Iḷisaḡviat serves children ages 3 through 8 years-of-age. Its mission is to instill the knowledge of Iḷupiaq identity, dignity, and respect, while cultivating a love of lifelong learning. Nikaitchuat Iḷisaḡviat is the only Iḷupiaq immersion school in the State of Alaska and the United States. The school is vitally important to help educate young Alaskan students about their heritage language.

“As a child, my classmates and I learned from Aana Agnik how to cut up a caribou,” says Manuyak Marysue Beck, who is now a teacher at the school.

“She passed the heart to each student and later that day we ate heart and tongue soup. Experiencing that entire process is one of my fondest memories. Now I have the opportunity to pass on these life lessons that I learned as a child and when I hear a student use an Iḷupiaq word or phrase unprompted in conversation it is a wonderful feeling.”

— More —

As part of the grant application process, the tribally operated immersion school enlisted the aid of current students to emphasize the positive cultural impact on the community. Letters of support included handprints of students with their Iñupiaq name. Students also worked together to choose Iñupiaq songs they performed in front of the review committees.

In 1994, the Kotzebue Vital Team, composed of more than 50 grassroots volunteers and elders, came together with a common goal of keeping the Iñupiaq language and culture alive. In 1998, with an enthusiastic staff and a group of willing parents determined to give their children the gift of their native language, Nikaitchuat Iļisaġviat opened its doors with three teachers and 20 students.

“As a community, we determined that the place for sharing our Iñupiaq values and teaching love and respect for others, especially our Elders as the core of our community culture, needed to begin with the youngest of our People,” says school founder Tarruq Peter Schaeffer.

Today, Nikaitchuat Iļisaġviat has served more than 130 families. Annually, they average more than 300 parent volunteer hours, 75 community volunteer hours, and 75 elder volunteer hours, each seeking to instill within local youth and the community the importance of revitalizing and preserving the region’s identity and culture. While there is a heavy emphasis on learning the sounds, pronunciations, and unique rhythms of the Iñupiaq language, the school also offers traditional activities that are taught in accordance with the subsistence cycles of the local Iñupiaq culture. In addition to learning to speak Iñupiaq, students also learn about fishing, harvesting, and more.

“Once a week we bring the class to the Elder Care to sing for the elders, says Ikaaġ Jaime Schaeffer, Nikaitchuat Iļisaġviat Director.

“When they finish, they sit down and listen to the Elders sing, tell stories, and visit with one another. It is an important time to share and be together that everyone looks forward to each week.”

The school's curriculum is community based, reflecting on what goes on in the community and welcoming all children and ethnicities.

“Our charter goes much deeper than learning the language - we teach through action

— More —

the relationship that the Iñupiat people have always had with the land to instill a sense of pride in our heritage,” says Christina Hensley, Executive Director, Native Village of Kotzebue

“This depth of our immersive curriculum would simply not be possible without the participation of our community and elders, as well as sponsors such as NANA Regional Corporation and the Northwest Arctic Borough,” adds Hensley.

###