



A-CHILL

A collaborative project across the schools & communities of Alaska Gateway and Yukon Koyukuk School Districts

Niina Baum

The Alaska Care and Husbandry Instruction for Lifelong Living (A-CHILL) program is a four-year Indian Education Demonstration project that brings together Alaska Gateway and Yukon-Koyukuk School Districts and their communities.

While attending the ISDRA Conference in Alaska, we were fortunate enough to have been able to hear from the late George Attla's partner and A-CHILL Musher Coordinator Kathy Turco and the late George Attla's daughter Amanda Attla, on the impact the A-CHILL program is having on children in middle and high school. This project builds and expands on the Frank Attla Youth & Sled Dog Care-Mushing Program, which has been piloted in Huslia for multiple years.

“George’s goal in starting and running the Frank Attla Youth & Sled Care-Mushing Program (FAYSDP) in close collaboration with the community of Huslia, was to encourage the development of pride in youth by their learning from dedicated and experienced mentors/dog-mushers and Elders. School teachers working closely with these community culture experts offer a unique, culturally rich, and meaningful learning opportunities for youth. The foundation of the program was the youth’s hands-on work with sled dogs at local kennels as part of a curriculum teaching both animal science and culture. A yard of sled dogs offer a positive and enriching emotional experience to any individual without human judgment. The immediate ‘acceptance’ that happy and healthy sled dogs offer by their behavior, helps youth feel ‘up’ and to feel good about themselves. George Attla strongly believed that dogs are the key to helping youth become and remain eager learners and grounded in a healthy mind, body, and emotion. For three years in Huslia, George and I witnessed daily that the FAYSDP supported an increase in youth leadership,

literacy and numeracy skills and also a decrease in youth disciplinary behavior problems, all of which enhanced well being, academic success, and reaching goals including future careers,” stated Kathy Turco.

FAYSDP really laid the groundwork for A-CHILL to become a reality. “George’s vision for the FAYSDP was that it would expand to help more rural communities be an integral part of their children’s formal education. For the last two years the Alaska- Care and Husbandry Instruction for Lifelong Living (A-CHILL) Project modeled after the FAYSD, has been working hard to champion student academic and career development by revitalizing sled dog tradition and community pride through curriculum designed and taught by both school teachers and local culture experts. A-CHILL continues to grow each year with an increase in local culture experts teaching important life skills, development of science and culture place-base curriculum, teacher professional development, and visiting instructor classes. Results have included positive student well being and academic achievement,” continued Kathy Turco.

The purpose of the program is to engage students in various subjects through learning with sled dogs. The classes being offered currently for high school students are: Alaska veterinary technology, veterinary science 100, Alaska culture and dog mushing, local history documentary. Classes being offered for middle school students are: animal science, Alaska culture and dog mushing, and local history documentary. Classes are conducted both in the classroom and outside at various kennels.

The program has five goals it has set out to achieve through this method of education.

1. Increase community collaborative efforts that promote college, career readiness of Alaska Native Students

2. Increase College Enrollment
3. Increase graduation Rates
4. Improve Student's Career and Technical Skills related to Animal Husbandry and Veterinary Sciences
5. Improve Teacher Cultural Heritage Knowledge

Together, the schools and their local community members will collaboratively engage students in grades 6-12 to be inspired and learn valuable knowledge and skills related to the sciences, math, language arts, and college and career readiness through sled dogs.

When asked about the future of the A-CHILL program, Kathy Turco stated, "George's vision involved community ownership of the program, that is, each village works with their school to craft what they believe is best for their children. Community engagement is what can facilitate the long-term sustainability of the project vision with or without funding. School staff and administration may change but the families and their deep sled dog culture hold on. A-CHILL strives to keep developing ways to marry grassroots community education methods with required academic standards in curriculum to establish a strong bond and working collaboration that allows children to feel secure and confident through any change. A-CHILL aims to encourage and support each school to reach its desired potential and as a whole, that it inspires by offering a working adaptable model for school districts throughout Alaska and beyond.

It is the hope that other schools in other states will also use this model within their curriculum. The A-CHILL website (www.achill.life) has a lot of information on how to implement the program successfully. 🐾





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