

Hawaiian: back from brink

Imagine how aloha could spread if more children in Hawai'i were educated to be fully fluent in both Hawaiian and English.

An experiment to save the Hawaiian language, which many thought would fail, be irrelevant and might even be harmful, is now celebrating 20 years of growth.

Indeed today, the nonprofit 'Aha Pūnana Leo, which founded Hawaiian immersion, is the premiere model for indigenous language revitalization and education in the United States.

Hawai'i's economy is based on maintaining distinctiveness, a distinctiveness highlighted in such events as the Merrie Monarch Festival. Language brings depth and ethos to distinctiveness. It goes beyond our economy and to our very soul.

Watching the 40th Merrie Monarch this year, it will be hard to believe the struggles that the Hawaiian culture has endured. When the Merrie Monarch began, the Hawaiian language was still banned in schools — a ban that lasted 90 years. Damage from suppression of the language was dramatic.

Traditions of song composition, hula, oral literature and even understandings of relationships with the natural environment deteriorated drastically. The Hawaiian renaissance sought to bring traditions back to life. The kūpuna kept pointing out the need for the language. You can't have hula without the words.

Without fluent children speakers, a language dies. In 1983, the 'Aha Pūnana Leo board counted only 30

ISLAND VOICES

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children fluent in Hawaiian. Some were our own board members' children. We knew that the ban on schooling through Hawaiian could result in them losing the language. We wanted to re-establish a system of high-quality education through Hawaiian that would be based in Hawaiian thinking and culture, but would embrace the whole world and all people.

Many, including Hawaiians, doubted that such an educational system could be established. Hawaiian was then a language without schoolbooks, without trained teachers, without even the vocabulary to discuss contemporary topics. The 'Aha Pūnana Leo answer to this was: "We will make these things ourselves," and we got to work.

The 'Aha Pūnana Leo began with preschools and then moved into the public schools, adding a new grade every year. Following the spirit of the kūpuna, families were welcomed regardless of race or background.

Pūnana Leo preschools spread throughout the state. From these developed an integrated system of education from preschool to college.

The 'Aha Pūnana Leo established curriculum development offices, a lexicon committee, a telecommunications system and a video studio all using the Hawaiian language. These resources are provided free to public-school children.

Funding, always a problem, has come from parent tuition in the preschools, grants, donations and fund-raisers.

Detractors' claims that immersion students would not master English have been proven false. Hawaiian immersion schools have followed the pattern of similar schools in Europe. Children graduating from immersion schools speak, read and write English as well as, and often better than, their peers in schools taught through English. Indeed, the schools that focus most on Hawaiian have often done the best in English.

Consistent with European research on the cognitive advantages of high-level literacy in two languages, there are many examples of outstanding achievement among immersion students. Of the approximately 100 students who will have graduated from immersion programs by this year, over 80 percent have been accepted to college — two of them to Stanford.

There are many challenges to improving and expanding immersion education. But this year we celebrate that 30 Hawaiian-speaking children in 1983 have grown to some 2,000 today.

As you enjoy the Merrie Monarch, note how the growth of Hawaiian has strengthened hula. Imagine how aloha could spread if more children in Hawai'i were educated fully fluent in both Hawaiian and English.