

Remarks by Karen Parr

Niilo Koponen Memorial Jan. 5 , 2014

Niilo was a real pioneer in education. He was so ahead of his time that many of his superiors and colleagues didn't understand him at all. Or, of course, agree with him. Now, 45 years later, he is being vindicated on several fronts.

Long before most of us realized that the development of a child in the first five years was critical to future success, Niilo helped establish the first Head Start programs in Fairbanks and in bush villages, and served as the first director here. Now, early childhood education is a powerful movement. Well-run preschools have over the years have been proven to yield dramatic improvements in children's success in school and beyond.

He also thought that schools had no business paddling children (they're not our kids!) and that less violent discipline was more effective. This is now the principle in our schools; the drilled wooden paddles of the 60's are in museums, or used for firewood.

Niilo believed that children should be taught how to think, rather than what to think. The classroom should provide discussion of ideas, not only rote memorizing. Today, critical thinking is a goal of every modern classroom.

No one can estimate the full impact of the federal grants Niilo succeeded in getting for the school district. Someone in Central Office could have known the dollar total. But each one was aimed at improving the minds and lives of children, and he was very good at designing those programs and winning the competitions. Certainly some of the fresh ideas took root in our teachers. Who can calculate the benefits to the schoolchildren?

One year I needed to find an internship as part of my administrative certification. Niilo agreed to supervise me in his federal grants office. He coached me through a successful application for a demonstration program to improve teacher preparation, and then its administration when we got the award. That nine months I got to know Niilo, at least some of Niilo. His thinking was so abstract and so complex that often I could not follow him. But he was always very patient, very unassuming, and extremely kind. I am grateful for his hard work and deep insights, and I really miss him.