

Foundation Grant Asked—

Center for Northern Education Proposed

Is there one group in Alaska which represents Alaska's native people in the field of education?

Which Native people? The Eskimos in the Yukon-Kuskokwim or the Tlingits and Haidas in Southeast? With the wide variety of regional cultures and education needs the question is more confusing than enlightening. Also, readers of the AFN and several regional organizations are presently preoccupied with the vitally important land claims fight.

For four days last week, two representatives of the Ford Foundation visited native leaders in Juneau, Anchorage and Fairbanks to obtain opinions on the proposed University of Alaska Center for Northern Education.

According to the UA funding proposal, the Center will be a central research and program design institute designed to assess native education needs and act as a resource center for developing programs in cross-cultural education.

One major aspect of the Center is their intention to involve the native people in every aspect of the policy making and work. To set up the center and support it through its initial years, the University of Alaska has asked for a \$654,000 grant from the Ford Foundation. Other funds will come from UA contracts with various agencies to perform cross-cultural educational research and program design.

Donald Sandberg and Ralph Bohrson spent four days in Alaska trying to evaluate the proposal last week. They searched for "native representatives", spoke with native leaders in Juneau, Anchorage and Fairbanks and conferred with education officials in the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the State Operated Schools.

According to Ralph Bohrson, Ford Foundation's education department has three major questions about the proposed center. First, he wants to know if such a center can effectively ask questions and be responsive to the issues Alaskan natives cite about cross-cultural education in the north.

Second, will anybody in policy making decisions in Alaska be responsive to suggestions from

the Center. Will it have influence?

Third, will there be other money available to maintain the center's operations.

Where the Ford Foundation people did not travel is to the villages, where communities are becoming newly aware of the possibilities for local control of education of their children.

In Alaska, the reactions to the center idea have been mixed. Most Native leaders know little about the Center and while the intention for native participation is present no mechanism has yet been designed.

One major question is whether the Institute will join the plethora of official agencies concerned with Alaskan natives, who are more aware of what is happening in their fellow agencies than among the people they supposedly "serve".

The questions a Center for Education could ask in Alaska could be painful - not only for Alaskan officialdom but for the native people themselves. Education budgets are still voted on in the legislature and legislators have not been notably informed in what is going on as far as education research and proposed solutions.

Where Ford Foundation has not gone to ask its questions, is into the villages where people expressing their concern over education. Political participation in the schools is a recent American phenomena-one which is just now faintly tingeing village politics.

Till now, there has been no means for village people to influence officialdom and evaluation trips which bypass the villages increase this political impotence.

According to Tundra Times editor Howard Rock, one of the native people the Foundation people questioned, the answers are in the regional organizations-where representatives are close enough to their people and culture to evaluate education needs.

Yet, like any agency, a Center for Northern Education can only be effective in the flesh - not on paper. A paper proposal is difficult to evaluate from any angle.

Yet, the Ford people who control the purse strings have nothing else on which to base their evaluation and a great deal hinges upon their decision - a solid economic base for a Center which can, if it works, be a vital coordinating center for native education in Alaska.