

Running Down Status Native Education Like Patchwork Quilt

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In attempting to run down the current status of Native education in Alaska, the problems encountered were so widespread, so diffuse, so complex, the task resembled that of putting together a patchwork quilt — with-

out a pattern. The result somewhat resembles what is commonly known as a "crazy quilt".

There is no dearth of well-intentioned, idealistically based, multi-funded, promising programs initiated. If anything, there are too many programs, often working at cross purposes.

What appears to be needed is a central organizing force to correlate all efforts and avoid costly, wasteful duplication. In other words, fewer dollars spent administratively and more dollars spent directly on the individual student.

Granted that no one in any of the programs would argue against such a move, how in reality is it to be accomplished? Utopian ideas have rarely seen much longevity in the history

of education.

What is far more predictable is that out of all the various proposals, schemes, political issues, and genuinely enlightened educational programs now in existence, a kind of compromise solution toward better Native education will go forward.

What is clearly evident is that it will indeed go forward and that the motivating force behind this movement must come from Native leaders.

This is not to say that the State of Alaska cannot be the central educating agency, bearing the overall burden of funding. Alaska's Native children are very much citizens of this young and vigorous state of ours and very important citizens at that.

As such, they have a right

to the finest education that the state can provide: the newest materials, the best teachers, and most excellent schools.

At the same time, they are also inheritors of a much older culture, of wisdom and arts, of music and dances, and of legends and games that pre-date the white man's entrance into the Alaska scene.

It would be a great loss if they were asked to merely exchange the one culture for another, for the white man's culture.

How much richer to retain the one while adding the other, to achieve a symbiosis of cultures, an overlapping and interweaving, forming an ever richer pattern of choices.

This the State of Alaska school system cannot provide on its own, for the State of Alaska is not the aboriginal source of this cultural material.

The source is the entire Native community, from the smallest village with its unique traditions to the powerful and new regional corporations.

These Native corporations have as awesome a responsibility to the Native young people as does the State of Alaska. Most of the leaders of the Native movement are themselves young men who are not too far removed from their own struggle for education.

With the much-awaited settlement of the land claims, the

Alaskan Native for the first time in a long, long epic has the potential to shape his own history. That one of the first concerns is to be education is not at all surprising.

What shape and in what direction Native education will go at this point is difficult to predict. Experimental programs, by their very nature, must be allowed to expand, contract, and flow. In their newness lies their full potential.

There must be an ever-productive exchange of ideas between the various agencies involved in education, an exchange without competitiveness, an exchange whose sole goal is the best possible education for every Native child.