

Native Education

A Cause to Rally 'Round

By Dennis Demmert

Editor's Note: This week marks the first appearance of a column by Dennis Demmert which will focus on matters relating to Alaska Native education. Demmert is Director of Native Studies at the University of Alaska-Fairbanks. The column will be featured twice monthly in the Tundra Times.

One of the great side-benefits of the land rights fight was the statewide Native unity that it created. Never before in history had all Alaska Native people joined together for a common cause, but the land claims effort required unity, and for the first time we stood united—and together, we won! Simply learning how to work together may prove to be as useful as the actual winning of the settlement act. With unity we gained the power to shape our own destinies.

The settlement act is five years old this month. The Native coalition created for the land rights has never been dismantled, but neither has it been fully brought to bear on the many issues and problems still facing the Native community. The Native leadership has had their hands full with trying to make the settlement act work for the benefit of Native people. In the meantime, critical issues which are shaping the lives of Native people require intensive action.

Item: The land rights settlement act requires administrative and technical skills still not adequately developed in the Native community. Many important jobs in the regional Native corporations and their subsidiaries are, by necessity, filled by non-Natives. Sixty-one per cent of NANA Development Corporation's staff, for example is non-Native. The manpower study by Judy Kleinfeld and Karen Kahout under-estimated the need but still indicated immense educational need.

Item: The state-operated school system was dissolved on June 30, 1976, and village residents now exercise local control over their schools. For many newly-elected board members it is a new experience, and an important one which requires new skills. Village residents are responsible now for the quality of education in their schools, but they must still use an educational system which is not entirely aware of village needs.

Item: Native students are entering high school and college in greater numbers than ever before. More are succeeding, but still the drop-out rate is higher and the achievement rate is lower than for other Alaskans. Teacher testimony to the Governor's Commission on Cross-Cultural Education (1970) indicates that many certified teachers feel inadequately prepared to meet Native educational need. Education, as provided to Native people, has not served us well and the failure is not entirely a Native failure.

Item: Alaska's population is one of the fastest growing in the nation. As resources are being developed, many things that Native people value, from subsistence living to cultural retention are in jeopardy.

The one issue that is common to the items listed above is education. The need for development of Native education is so immense that no segment of the population can alone address the needs. The challenge to the Native community is to revive the unity that served us so well in the land claims effort and rally around Native education as an overriding need.

As with the land rights settlement, we would probably find that the positive development of Native education would serve not only Native people, but would benefit the entire Alaskan community. We must remember, however, that no one will bring about the needed improvement and development in Native education unless Native people demand quality education and keep up the pressure until we have the education we need and want.