

Villages get choice of school district

by Patti Harper
for the Tundra Times

On June 30th, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, which has educated Natives in Alaska, is getting out of the education business.

Five of the last ten villages with BIA schools in Alaska will have the option of joining existing Rural Education Attendance Area

district. The village has operated a complete Kindergarten through 12th grade program under contract with the Bureau of Indian Affairs for five years. Tatum said they're all set to switch to the state system, but they are pushing for fast action by the state so everything will be ready for classes on August 19th.

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school districts or forming new ones, if a bill passed by the legislature is signed by Governor Bill Sheffield. Supporters of the measure expect him to sign it.

In it, Akiachak, Akiak, Tuluksak and Chefornak are given the option of joining the Lower Kuskokwim District or forming a new one together, and Chevak is allowed to join the Lower Yukon School District or set up its own REAA.

"We already have our own school district" said Alex Tatum, Superintendent/Principal of Chevak's Kashunamiut school

The Governor has 20 days to decide whether to sign the bill. If he does, the community must then petition for an election to decide whether they will create a new REAA. Lieutenant Governor McAlpine then has a period of time in which to set up an election. Tatum said they want all that accomplished in June or July so they can start receiving state funds.

The job of getting set up by fall will be even tougher for the other villages, if they opt for a new district. BIA contract schools in those villages cover Kindergarten

through 8th grade only. The Lower Kuskokwim School District has operated the high schools in those villages. This adds complexity to the transition process.

"We'll assist in every way we can to see that these schools have a smooth transition" said Robert Nick, chairman of the LKSD board. "it's not an easy task establishing an REAA."

The LKSD board unanimously supported giving the villages the option to form their own districts. The board also supported a bill which allows second class cities to go directly to home rule without going through first class status—a bill pushed by Bethelites interested in gaining local control over city schools. Nick thinks LKSD might benefit if Bethel and the 5 BIA villages opt out of the state's largest REAA. "By reducing size, it will probably enable the district to operate a lot smoother," he said.

Although the bill allowing new REAAs passed fairly easily when it got to the House and Senate floors, it took a lot of effort to get it there. Some legislators thought new, small REAAs would have high administrative costs, leaving less money for education. Staff members for co-sponsor John Sackett of Ruby say that concern is the reason the four Kuskokwim

area villages are not allowed to form separate REAAs (though if only one of the four villages votes to form a new district, they will be allowed to do so). Mark Earnest said the question isn't answered about what the administrative costs will be. But, he said, the Kashunamiut school district seems to operate with less money than similar schools in the Lower Yukon School District. And, Earnest pointed out that if the new REAAs are formed, they will not be the smallest school districts in the state. He said there are a number of city school

office said he doesn't think that will happen, because not all villages have a history of administering schools, and the state budget picture probably couldn't handle the addition of more REAAs.

"A lot of people had a hard time conceiving of what we were talking about," said Alex Tatum. Everyone would understand the concern for local control if Palmer were suddenly told they'd be part of the Anchorage school district, he said. "whether it's several thousand (students) or just several hundred, the issue is still

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districts with fewer students than Chevak's 185. And Chevak schools have only one administrator, while many small city school districts have several.

Another objection raised to the legislation was that it might open the floodgates for villages around to state to demand their own district. Max Gifford of Sackett's

the same."

"By having local control, the parents in the community become part of the schools and educational process. If we have something we need to talk about we can get everybody together in 2 hours and talk about it," said Tatum.