

# Villages face school planning challenge

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Angoon, Kalskag, Sand Point and the Lower Yukon school district represent very different

geographical areas and ethnic groups. Yet the four have one major thing in common: an approach to building successful educational program. Aiding the

four in that effort is Jim Elliott, member of the Facilities Planning Office in the Department of Education.

The passage of the 1976 rural schools construction bond has focused attention on the development of sound educational specifications in the districts receiving bond monies. Elliott's role is to aid districts in that planning.

"My major responsibility is helping communities to identify programs so that they can build buildings to house the programs," said Elliott.

In the past, Elliott explained, many rural schools were built without adequate planning and particularly without meaningful participation by local people. The result was often buildings unsuitable for local needs.

"There was overbuilding of some specialized spaces with no provision of others," said Facilities Coordinator Chris Roust, "and brand new buildings that did not provide spaces usable for high priority community programs. Unless the community is involved in the program planning process, the buildings can be largely under or over built as soon as they are completed."

"What I try to do is to work with a community to help define what it is they want their kids to learn," said Elliott. "I can't do it without the help of the teachers, parents and interested school board people like Matthew Fred (of Angoon). These are the people doing the job. I just ask a few questions from time to time."

One of the few questions Elliott poses to communities is "What is the purpose of a school?" Acting as a catalyst, Elliott then gets down in writing what is is that the local community wants. The identification of local needs is followed by a statement of educational philosophy.

"That in itself is a real chore. Most educational philosophy statements are very nebulous—the real challenge comes in wording them so that all people can understand," said Elliott. "Words like 'learning modalities' simply can not be understood by lay people without a reference point." He added that the statement should not contain "any fifty cent words."

The initial identification of needs can be done by a survey, but Elliott stressed that the more open and active the involvement of the local people, the stronger the program will be.

"Program planning can be the catalyst to bring about the participation of people, not just professionals, but also community people in education," said Elliott.

The four communities with which he has worked share some educational goals but Elliott emphasized that there are also "great differences."

"There are certainly similarities: reading, writing, basic citizenship, preparing students for jobs and careers are concerns everywhere. But Angoon and the Lower Yukon put the highest value on the land and its value in preserving Native identity, traditions and lifestyle while Sand Point stressed the economic aspect of fisheries."

Elliott stressed that he doesn't have any answers as to what is best for a particular community: "what I do is simply try to help them discover their goals themselves." The identification of needs and the writing of the statement of philosophy and goals are followed by development of program goals for each of the subject areas. Then the next step is definition of courses, including content and textbooks, that are going to be needed for students to master the program goals and the general philosophical goals.

"No one group, teachers, administrators, parents or students, has a monopoly on the process. Each has a part to play. A major role obviously belongs to the parents, especially when they're deciding what they expect the school to do. And teachers and administrators usually focus on how to do it," Elliott said.

Roust emphasized that the community participation in the planning process often solves another problem, that of the community attitude toward the facility. "In the past, too often

school houses have been planned by agencies outside the community. Such schools often are referred to as the 'state school' and are not considered part of the community.

"The schools that are planned by the community almost always are pointed to with pride, handled with tender love and care and are referred to as 'our school.' The community is much happier with the school and it's a good bet that it will be better treated with much less vandalism and will last longer if the community has been involved throughout the planning process," he said.

A mechanism for ensuring that everybody plays a part in programming process is the establishment of a program planning, review and modification committee. Its members include students, parents, teachers and administrators. Elliott suggest that the committee review school programs at least quarterly and audit what's happening. "The question they have to ask is 'Are they accomplishing their goals?'"

"It's a time consuming process," said Elliott. And the process necessarily involves the use of available expertise through the Talent Bank. Elliott explained, "I'm a generalist. I have to depend on the people I get from the Talent Bank, people like Rich Lee in marine science; Verdell Jackson, Lonnie Sanford and Barbara Bremmer in vocational; Diane Carpenter in Language arts; and Judy Weinberg in physical education. They've been involved in rural education for years."

"The kinds of opportunities that small high schools present are often times not looked at as opportunities, but limitations. I've seen enough of these small schools with committed teachers to know that the kids are not going to suffer by attending a small school," said Elliott.