

# **Can Rural Schools Gain When State Takes Over ?**

The State Department of Education is steadily moving toward the takeover of the school system with the phaseout of the Bureau of Indian Affairs schools in the outlying areas of Alaska. When this process began some years ago, there was excitement. The prospect of the state taking control of the school system was generally acclaimed but since that time, the excitement has died down and in its place some doubts have developed.

Within the last five years, the quality of the BIA schools in the rural areas has actually improved, thanks to the efforts of Commissioner of Indian Affairs Robert L. Bennett when he was in office and while he was Area Director of the BIA for Alaska prior to moving up to become commissioner. Bennett promised when he took over as Area Director that he would work for better qualified teachers for the rural schools saying, "You know how government wheels turn—slowly—but this should become a fact in the years ahead."

It is questionable at this time whether the quality of teaching in rural areas achieved and improved by the BIA will be maintained when the state takes over the entire system. We are not saying that all the state schools are all that bad but there are persistent opinions that some state schools leave much to be desired. For one thing, the state pays its teachers less than the BIA pays its teachers. And, too, the state system will be subject to political influences. Since large population centers, such as Fairbanks and Anchorage, have proportionately more legislative representatives in the state government, there is a chance they will get the cream while the dregs go to the outlying areas.

Arbitrary methods are also becoming apparent in the process of the state takeover of the schools. The villagers in which the schools will be taken over are not being given a chance to express their dislike or preference in the process. In the event a BIA school is enjoying a better quality schooling which could be lost with the state takeover, the villagers are not being asked whether they should, or wished, to retain the BIA system until such time the state can offer a like or better quality schooling methods.

The method smacks of being undemocratic in the country that practices democracy. This could result in retrogression from the improved status the BIA has attained in the last few years. We think there is room for the state to improve its system in the rural areas before it takes control. One way would be to pay the state teachers in amounts comparable to that the BIA is paying its teachers. If better qualified teachers are needed, this should be done. While doing so, it should also explore the much used man-wife teacher teams because, sometimes, the wife or the husband is not qualified as a teacher. Per-

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haps he or she can work on other matters instead of teaching school.

We believe it is highly imperative that we alert the native people and their leaders to look closely on the phaseout process of the BIA schools to that of state operation. We hope we are not too overly alarmed about the situation but we believe an orderly switchover of the schooling facilities without retrogression should be the order of the day.