

Part 6 in a Series - JOM Educational Programs Not Frills - But Badly Needed

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Educational programs for Alaskan Native students are often attacked in the city school districts on the basis that they are racially discriminatory. Other attackers say that such programs are a "frill," and detract from basic education. Still others claim that schools ought not be involved in such programs, and they should belong only to Native organizations.

These arguments are not unique to Alaska, or to Fairbanks. They are so widespread that the U.S. Office of Civil Rights, Department of HEW, has made a determination that programs especially for Native Americans are indeed legal. OCR found that the basis for such programs was political rather than racial, and based their decision on a Supreme Court decision in 1974 (Morton vs. Mancari.) In other words, such programs are not in reverse discrimination against non-Native students.

So long as special educational needs exist unmet among the Alaskan Native students attending public schools, special programs to serve these needs cannot be considered a frill. Prior articles in this series have thoroughly established the fact that unmet needs do exist, and that these needs are very basic. Again, the Federal Government itself has recognized these needs in a study released April 18 by the Office of Civil Rights. This study quotes a 50% drop out rate among Native students before high school graduation. The need is very clear. Those who argue that special educational programs for Native students ought to be run by Native organizations only are the most convincing. They base their opinion on many valid ideas, among which is that Native parental influence on the educational program would be greater if offered by a Native organization. However, they miss a few very important points in favor of having a dual system of programs, some provided by Native organizations, and some by School Districts.

Basically, if a Native organization provides an educational program, the school district does not have to be involved or to cooperate. Such programs could be after school, or have time released from regular school hours for students to attend. This has many pitfalls. First, if a Native organization has total control of such educational programs, the School District may take a hands-off, "They're doing it, we don't have to," attitude toward the students involved. This would mean the schools are really less interested in providing the best possible education for each child. No one wants that to happen.

The question of when to have programs which are run exclusively by Native organizations is another problem. After school, many students are too tired, too busy, or have no transportation. Released time, since that is voluntary by the schools, leaves the program in the position of existing at the whim of the school district. Any time the school, or sometimes even a particular principal or teacher,

does not want a student to go to the special program, he does not get released in time to do it.

On the other hand, if School Districts are the only group having the ability to provide special educational programs for Native students, then Native people have much less influence on what those programs are. Native persons have not often been involved in the policy making process of the urban school districts. Not very many parents are willing to have the education of their children totally decided by someone else, without equal representation in that process.

The best combination, then seems to be a cooperative system

in which the programs for Native students do exist in the schools, but are also directly influenced by the Native parents and Native organizations. The present Indian Education Act and Johnson-O'Malley Act programs as seen in the Fairbanks area schools embodies this concept. Both programs share a parent board. The IEA program is administered by the School District. Fairbanks Native Association administers the JOM program, but cooperates with the School District to offer the program to district students at times and in ways compatible with the District's general school program.