

REAA school board presidents and superintendents meet for first time

School board presidents and school superintendents from Alaska's 21 new rural school districts met for the first time in Juneau, June 22-24 to discuss the unique educational goals and problems they share in common.

The meeting was a landmark event in the history of education in Alaska. The State Legislature last year

transferred control of education in Alaska's vast rural areas from a centralized State Operated School System to newly-formed local school boards.

Local school facilities and administrative offices are being established in the new districts,

and schools in the new rural districts will be offering programs in secondary education.

The change is also stepping up the transfer of Bureau of Indian Affairs day schools to the new school districts, with six BIA schools joining the new districts this summer.

Representatives from the new districts were briefed on their new powers and responsibilities by Commissioner of Education Marshall Lind and members of the Department of Education staff.

"One year ago, people said it couldn't be done," Lind said in his opening remarks. "Twenty-one districts can't be created in that period of time. Nor can state operated schools effectively phase out their operations in one year. Well, I think that we have demonstrated that these things can be done.

"The Alaska Unorganized Borough School District has done a tremendous job in phasing out their operation and you people have done a tremendous job in a short period of time in establishing new school districts.

"This whole effort, the enthusiasm and cooperation and the willingness of people to devote their time to do something better for youngsters is just excellent."

Lind told the board presidents and administrators the State Department of Education will try to give the local boards as much latitude as possible in their operation.

"We don't want to run your business, we want to do everything we can to stay out of it," the commissioner said. "Every so often it will appear that we are infringing upon your business. Sometime we have to do that. It's the individual right the student involved, we're going to be working for the individual right of that student.

"Our track record as far as interfering in the operations of school districts I think can only be based on what we have done with the other cities and

REAA presidents and superintendents meet . . .

(Continued from Page 1)

boroughs. We're going to consider the new school districts just like cities and boroughs to the extent that the law will allow. It's your operation. We're here to help," Lind said.

Speaking on behalf of the State Board of Education, Thelma Langdon, from Anchorage, said, "The members of our board are as enthusiastic about the second phase of this new era in education as they have been about the first phase that began with passage of Senate Bill 35 (calling for establishment of the

new districts) in June of 1975.

"This year has been filled with many new happenings in education across the state: the setting of the regional boundaries, the creating of 21 new school districts, the election of the board members to operate these new districts, training sessions to assist the new board members who will assume the responsibility, teacher contract negotiations in one of the regions, and next week (July 1) the official takeover by all new boards of the operations of their schools.

"This is truly an exciting time to be involved in the education process in Alaska, especially in the unorganized borough," she said.

Langdon spoke in support of the new local school committees established under the new law to assist the school boards in their decision-making process.

"These local school committees have and will be most helpful if they are given a meaningful role to play," she said.

Lind complimented the Department of Community and Regional Affairs and its commissioner, Lee McAnerney, for their assistance in setting up the new rural district boundaries.

"I was amazed at the speed and efficiency with which the department was able to assist all the hearings and determination of the boundaries," Lind said.

Bill Overstreet, executive secretary of the Association of Alaska School Boards, noted that establishing local self-determination was a fitting way to celebrate the Bicentennial in Alaska.

"I can't imagine anything that is really more appropriate by way of a Bicentennial celebration than the very concept of bringing in self-government in education," Overstreet said.

He urged the board members to exercise their new authority, power and responsibility to operate public schools in their respective areas "in a manner consistent with local needs and desires."

"You have broad latitude to do as you see fit," Overstreet told the group, "but you also have basic limitations. The first thing you need to realize is that now that you are established as the boss, the constitution protects your employees.

They have the right of free speech, they have the right to second guess you, and you simply have to learn to live with that. Your authority as boss is not without limits even in retaining a staff. . . You've got an awful lot of authority, but along with the authority you've been granted are obligations, and one of them is that you must bargain with employees."

Overstreet also urged the school board presidents to make full use of the community school committees.

"They can be a liability if you don't," he said. "I would urge you to set up some procedures whereby you can give them responsibilities and call on them to fulfill those responsibilities."

Ernie Polly, coordinator of the Department of Education's Planning and Research and moderator of the conference, re-emphasized the grass roots theme of the conference.

"I think that the theme has been established that schools are like government in that they are designed for the people," Polley said. "There is a chain of communication to maintain to make sure the schools are responsive to the people.

"It's a symbol that is incredibly important and quite frankly it hasn't even been established yet. The community school committees are at the very base of the grass roots definition. If

the community school committees do not inform or reach joint positions with the local boards and the State Board, that means the State Board of Education will make decisions that result in a hit or miss operation. Ms. Langdon's invitation for you to maintain this chain is not simply a matter of courtesy. It's an absolute necessity for accurate operation of the state government in terms of being responsive."