

Parent control helped improve Tanacross school grades

By Mellie Terwilliger

Tanacross

The selection of the Tanacross Village elementary school to be studied for its exceptional record of scholastic achievement by Native students raises memories.

I was on the Tok Advisory School Board (ASB) when the Tanacross parents geared themselves up to "do something" about their kids' low level of achievement. As one parent put it in later meetings in Tanacross, "we were sending 22 children to Tok School every day on the bus and they were practically all getting D's and F's."

"Either the system does not know how to teach our children what they need to learn or our kids are too dumb to learn. We don't think they are."

Their first effort came to

the ASB in the form of a request to use Indian Education money to hire a teacher to tutor our children in the Community Hall week nights and Saturdays. They also spoke of "the way our children feel about the school and some of the teachers."

This proposal was received with sympathy by some ASB members and displeasure by others. The latter felt the school and individuals were being maligned.

These were adamant about not letting the request go in without removing all references to the children's feelings.

The Indian Education Committee was told to meet and delete and return with a sanitized version. This unusual request for stringent tutoring could hold no hint of any insufficiencies other than in the children themselves. Then it

would be passed and sent on the Rural Education Attendance Area Board for their review.

Tanacross had just finished an unbelievable two-year battle to retrieve from the system (through S.O.S. schools and R.E.A.A.) an historic village bell brought to the village by early missionaries.

It had tolled for weddings, school, fires, and the sound of that bell ringing out over the river was dear to every person in Tanacross.

It had been taken to Tok from the old school at Tanacross when it was shut down and the village moved to the south side of the river.

Previously, high school students had gone to Tok school, hereafter elementary likewise went by bus. The village had been forced to go through the most ridiculous measures including asking the Episcopal Bishop to look for a Bill of Sale or something about the bell in the Episcopal archives.

The statements of village officers that they really did own the bell were not accepted by the school boards. The old school in the old village had a room where the village was allowed to store its records and some items for safe keeping.

A request from a village officer for a copy of the inventory of the school hopefully taken when it was closed out never had a response.

The village, which had brought their tutoring proposal with great hope and determination, saw themselves again starting down a two-year long path within the system. They formed an Indian "Parents' Committee and asked the Of-

fice of Civil Rights (OCR) to help their children get a good education.

O.C.R. sent some people out on a preliminary investigation. They talked to villagers, teachers, board members, district employees and community members and recommended that action be taken.

Due to a heavy backlog the official investigation was scheduled for the next October. (It is not impossible that OCR hoped that the prospect of an investigation would generate a local resolution of the problems before October).

The story was picked up by the Associated Press and carried all over the United States. R.E.A.A. now had an undisputable problem. The Superintendent and some members thought the only fair course for everyone was to conduct their own investigation, correct any practices that needed changing, lay to rest rumors, and vindicate the system.

If they could satisfy the Tanacross I.P.C. the charges would be dropped and faith in the system renewed. They felt that was what local control was all about. There were also five other Indian villages in the boundaries of the school district who were watching events.

A majority of the R.E.A.A. was opposed to investigating the school: one reason given was that it would upset the children. Mukluk Telegraph being what it is every man, woman and child had heard about the OCR visit already.

Some Tok people were sympathetic, some felt threatened, some were astonished and some scornful.

There were heated R.E.A.A. workshops.

The Indian Parents' Committee was independent. The R.E.A.A. could not summon, control or dismiss them. The I.P.C. could meet, discuss, give interviews, refuse comment, choose a spokesperson. The story attracted great attention from the media. Tanana Chiefs came out to help. So did Legal Services. The State Division of Education sent out a group to talk to people.

At last the T.P.C. could see they were getting nowhere so they asked the school district to build them a school in the village.

Some observers were shaken up at the idea of building a new school 10 miles from the Tok School with its gym, library, stage, shop, hockey rink, etc. and not meeting the problems raised, especially massive scholastic failure, and why they have it and why it was accepted. In fairness, there was no mechanism in the system to alert board members at any level to such a heartbreaking state of affairs.

On reflection realization sunk in. Tanacross had been an established community long before World War II came with the Alaska Highway and Pipeline. They had had a school, church, post office and trading post for decades.

The building of the Alcan brought government agencies — highway, health, wildlife, public safety, customs, and with Statehood a whole lot more.

Tok (600 to 700) grew to be larger than Tanacross (117) and the village had lost its identity. So they rose up to control their own destiny.

The two groups met — the R.E.A.A. and their lawyer on one side and Tanacross and their lawyer on the other. Tanacross said, "You will build us a school in Tanacross — we will hire the principal teacher — we will send our children to school in the Tanacross Community Hall until the new school is built. We will, for now, drop our complaints filed with the Office of Civil Rights. We will run our school."

Senator John Sackett and Rep. Pappy Moss (our two members in the State Legislature) were instrumental in getting the money in the budget for the new school.

A principal teacher was hired who had taught some of the parents — who had stood up for the Parents' Committee when they were under stress — who had consistently said, "Of course, you can learn," who had high standards of scholastic achievement and lots of self confidence.

Two years later the John Sackett School's test scores were 20 to 30 percent higher than any school in the District, and they had a letter of commendation from the R.E.A.A. and have been selected for study by the State Division of Education.