

Certification

By Dennis Demmert

Are certificated teachers qualified to teach in Alaskan schools? Don't laugh. The question is serious. It is serious because the answer is, "No. Not necessarily."

To teach in Alaska, a person must have a teaching certificate issued by the Alaska Department of Education. The usual requirements for a certificate are a bachelor's degree, a letter of recommendation from an "approved" teacher education program, and thirty dollars. Programs are "approved" because they have met certain requirements established by the National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification. Alaska subscribes to a nationwide procedure which leads to teacher certification.

A recent report by the Study Commission on Undergraduate Education and the Education of Teachers says that the whole process which leads to teacher certification does little or nothing to ensure that we have qualified teachers in our schools. The study, called Teacher Education in the United States: The Responsibility Gap, is well documented and researched. It is useful for understanding some of the problems with certification.

We all know good teachers. But if the study is correct, good teachers must result from good recruiting, good luck or some reason not clear - not from certification. The teacher certification process has not served us well. It is time for us to critically examine the whole certification issue.

The Alaska Department of Education is sponsoring a conference on teacher certification in Anchorage, probably at the Westward Hotel - on February 15, 16, and 17. If that conference intends to seriously examine the shortcomings of our present certification process, two important issues must be thrashed out.

First: we must identify the qualifications a teacher must have in order to teach effectively in our Alaskan schools (the report mentioned earlier says that a particular weakness of the current process is that local and regional needs are neither recognized nor provided for.) We must then require that all our teachers fulfill these requirements for effective Alaskan teaching at the earliest possible date. We must also provide reasonable ways for teachers to gain those qualifications.

Second: we must establish realistic procedures by which paraprofessionals - teachers' aides - can refine their teaching skills and earn the professional certification and status that so many of them are capable of achieving. Many teacher's aides have rich potential to serve their fellow Alaskans as teachers, but so long as the current restrictive certification requirements continue, they are on a dead end street.

There are, indeed, many other important questions to be raised. Nothing should be permitted, however, to prevent dealing with certification as a measure of qualification and with certification as an achievable goal. Resolution of these two issues is long overdue.

Ultimately, our State Board of Education must decide whether we continue to use irrelevant teacher certification procedures as they exist, whether we make minor changes, or whether we make the extensive revision our students and our fellow Alaskans deserve.