

Youth issues must be a priority in Alaska

by Sen. John Binkley
for the Tundra Times

JUNEAU — During the past two years, the Governor's Interim Commission on Children and Youth mobilized resources and inspired a new level of energy among children's advocates.

In addition to creating changes and additions to existing programs which deal with young people, GICCY served as a springboard for new initiatives.

Two important issues which are now receiving special attention are youth alcohol and drug abuse and teen pregnancy. The focus on Alaska's teen-agers — especially those considered "at risk" — is of special concern to rural Alaska, since teens make up a large percentage of the Native population.

Governor's Task Force on Youth

This is a continuation of GICCY, made up of four state agency representatives and three public members. In addition, two youth advisory members — one urban and one rural — will soon be added.

The governor has asked the task force to take a hard look at youth substance abuse issues. In early December, the Youth Task Force will sponsor statewide teleconference hearings on Why Do Kids Use?

One teleconference will be for students only — with a toll free-number for rural students to call.

The task force plans to work with school principals and counselors to help get as many young people to participate as possible.

The task force needs to hear what teen-agers have to say about alcohol and drug abuse. You can write them at Governor's Task Force on Youth, Box A, Juneau 99811.

Children having children

"Three a Day: Children Having Children in Alaska," a report on teen pregnancy in Alaska, was recently released by the Alaska State Legislature's research arm.

This report details some alarming statistics: one in every eight female teen-agers in Alaska becomes pregnant; one in 17 has a baby. In 1985, Alaska had the second highest reported teen pregnancy rate among the 50 states. Among every 1,000 teen-age girls, four give birth in Japan, 51 give birth in the United States, 60 give birth in Alaska, and 110 give birth among

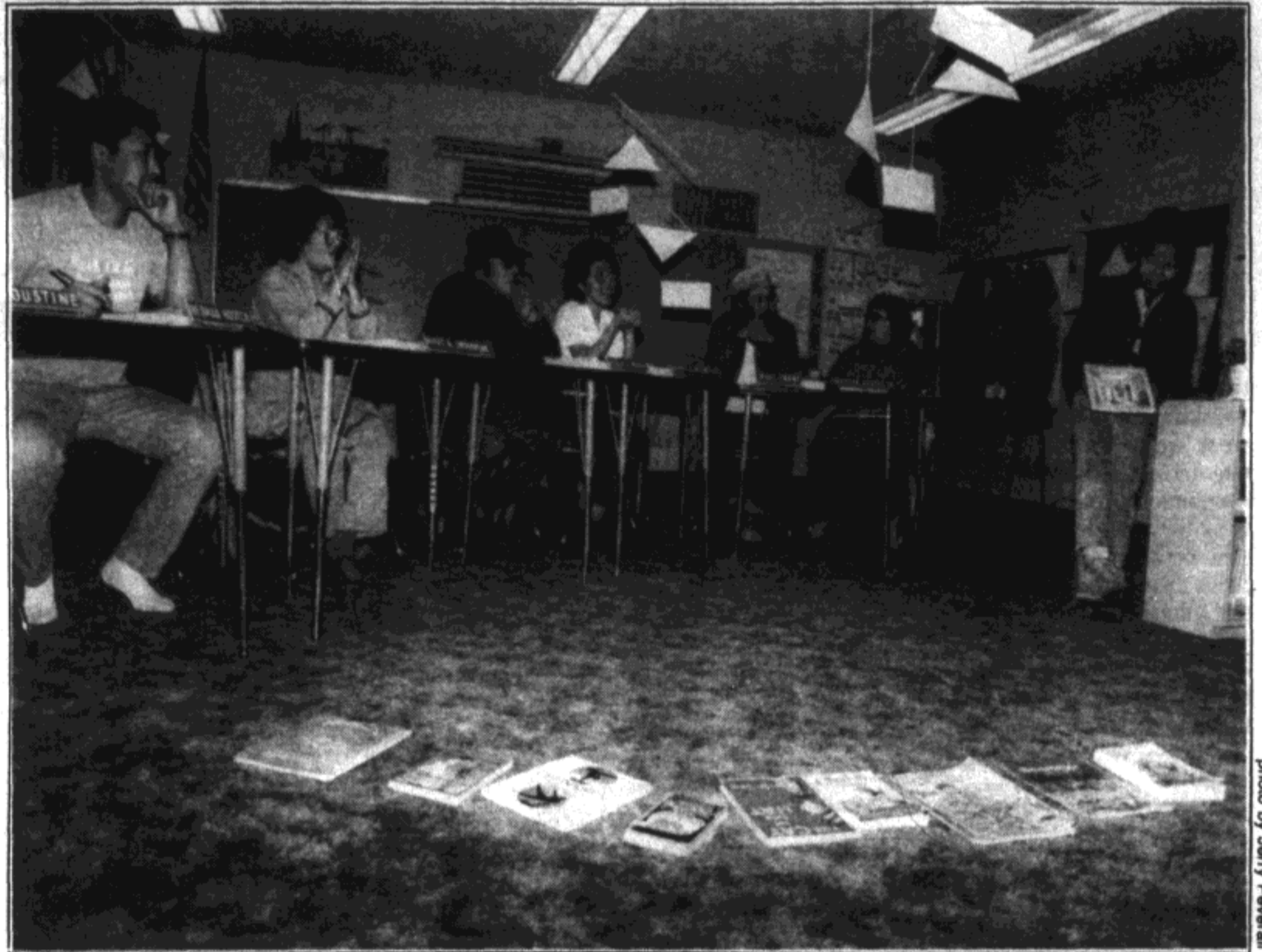


photo by Jerry Peverall

Working at the local level on education issues are members of Emmonak's Advisory School Board, from left, Mariann Immamak, Robert Moore, Angela Myomick, Paul Crane and Martha Agathluk. They are listening to sixth grader Phillip T. Andrews, part of a play on the joy of reading.

Alaska Natives.

Teen pregnancy is one of the major issues being discussed at these statewide forums. Because they often lack education and job skills, teen-age parents may require public assistance for a number of years — at a cost of more than \$51 million a year.

But those are just the basic costs — and don't include the costs of education and training, child care, or special counseling and other services.

All kinds of teen-agers get pregnant. However, the teen-age mother is much more likely than other mothers to be single, poor, isolated, depressed and a school dropout.

In fact, too-early pregnancy and parenting are directly linked to poverty, low academic achievement, unsatisfactory school experiences and a feeling of futility or hopelessness.

Teens from poor families who are failing in school don't believe pregnancy will close doors because they already believe that no doors are

open to them.

I think this quote from the Children's Defense Fund was especially eloquent:

If we want to reduce the rates of pregnancy and parenthood among these teens, we have to make their childhoods more cherished and their adulthoods more rewarding. They need to believe that, at age 15, they have several years of growing and learning and reaching ahead of them that they do not want to lose.

They need to believe that they will have much more to offer a child at age 25 than they have at 15. These are not things that we can tell our youths to believe. These are things that we have to show them.

We learned through GICCY that the problems facing young people are often rooted in many, overlapping causes. It follows that the solutions need to be rooted in many arenas, including the family, the community, the schools, and in other programs that work with young people.

School performance

The Joint Committee on School Performance — the work on the committee that I served on last year under the leadership of former Sen. Willie Hensley of Kotzebue — is continuing this year.

Our goal is to help schools succeed in helping all children learn.

We need to hear from young people themselves — those who are currently in school, those who have dropped out and those who have completed their school work and gone on to other things.

These are the ones who will either benefit from a good education, or pay the price of a poor one. They are the ones who will ultimately be held responsible for their educational background, so it's important that we hear from them.

Students can write to Rep. Eileen MacLean, D-Barrow, co-chair of the School Performance Committee, Sen. Al Adams, D-Kotzebue, or myself at Box V, Juneau 99811.