

Other Voices—

One of the most pressing issues: Rural education

One of the state's most pressing issues involving education continues to languish in legal and economic arguments: the Molly Hootch case, a plea by bush parents that secondary schools establish in rural villages for their children.

For the most part, high school students from rural Alaska — estimated to be about 3,000 youngsters — are required to leave their homes and be placed in boarding homes or dormitories to obtain classroom instruction. Otherwise, they must subscribe to correspondence courses to meet state educational standards.

The state clings to this system despite overwhelming documentation that it impedes the students' education and disrupts their family life and culture.

After all, would any of us in Anchorage tolerate a system that forces us to send our children away for nine months each year to attend high school? We think not.

The history of the case clearly shows it is far from over despite an Alaskan Supreme Court ruling last year which rejected one of the plaintiff's arguments. In that opinion, the court warned it wouldn't hesitate to intervene if students' rights and equal treatment were not forthcoming. And it endorsed a legislative solution for the pressing problem.

In a dissent by then Chief Justice Jay Rabinowitz, practical answers were supplied: the availability of elementary school facilities where secondary instruction could be supplied, and the use of programmed texts and television (via satellite) for instruction. Moreover, the operating costs for rural high schools undoubtedly would be comparable to the present per student cost of the boarding program since the student's family could bear living accommodation costs, according to Rabinowitz.

Further court tests are open to plaintiffs. Because of that, the state would like to settle the case swiftly. To do so the Hammond Administration has asked the legislature to authorize the sale of \$20 million in state general obligation bonds toward partial settlement in the Hootch case. The money would be used for construction of rural high schools.

Certainly, there is only expense, risk, and hardship if the case is languish.

The legal costs are obvious.

The risk is that the state could lose the case in court, and should that happen, the supreme court might intervene, putting the courts in the business of education. That is what has happened in Boston in the controversial busing issue. Finally there is the hardship: why should the state continue a system of education which is known to be harmful to a substantial group of citizens on the mere chance that it might prevail in court?

—The Anchorage Daily News