

Bill would increase Native teacher loans

By Linda Lord-Jenkins

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A bill aimed at encouraging more Native rural students to become teachers and return to teach in their villages was introduced during the first week of the Alaska Legislature by 28 state representatives.

The bill as written would provide scholarship loans of up to \$10,000 per student per year with a total forgiven payback if the loan recipient teaches in his or her village for five years.

If the student teaches less than five years, he would pay back a larger portion of the loan on a percentage basis.

Introduced by Anchorage Rep. Joe Hayes who is Speaker of the House of Representatives and rumored to be eyeing a bid at the governor's race in 1986, it is co-sponsored by Reps. Vern Hurlbert, Al Adams, Mitch Abood, Ramona Barnes, Charlie Bussel, Betty Cato, John Cowdery, Mike Davis, Jack Fuller, Walt Furnace, Ben Grussendorf,

Adelheid Herrmann, Niilo Koponen, John Lindauer, John Liska, Hugh Malone, Mike Miller, John Ringstad, Richard Shultz, Mike Szmanski, Rick Uehling, Jerry Ward, Fred Zharoff, Milo Fritz, Bob Bettisworth and Jack McBride.

According to the language of the bill, the Legislature finds that there is "a wide and unacceptable disparity between the ethnic distribution of teachers and the ethnic distribution of students in the state public schools. Particularly in rural areas many schools have virtually no Native teachers and no non-Native students."

The bill said that leads to: a weakness of the ability of teachers to foster a sense of ethnic traditions and cultures in the students; students being forced to exist in entirely separate situations — in the traditional atmosphere of the Native home and the modern atmosphere of the classroom; few Na-

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Native teacher fund envisioned

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tive students among the state's ethnic minorities return to the rural schools which continues the ethnic imbalance.

A high turnover of as much as 40 percent of teachers in rural education attendance areas in the state.

The bill states that current programs such as the X-CED program at the University of Alaska has failed to rectify the problem.

The loan program would appropriate money to be loaned to high school graduates or students within six months of graduation from a state public high school who have sufficient credits to be admitted to an accredited college. Those students also must be enrolled in or show intent to enroll in a university program which aims at a teaching degree for elementary or secondary school. The student also must meet criteria established by the local school board.

If the student is awarded the scholarship and completes his education and returns to the village, a percentage of his loan will be "forgiven" by the state at a rate of 15 percent each year for the first three years of teaching; 25 percent of the total loan for the fourth year completed and the final 30 percent for the fifth year.

The bill is given good change for success on the House side of the legislature because it is supported by the House Majority coalition of urban Republicans and Bush Democrats and because Hayes, the powerful House Speaker, is backing it. It isn't often that a bill sponsored by the Speaker is defeated.

On the Senate side, it is given fair chance for passage by Sen.

Frank Ferguson, D-Kotzebue, who said that it will probably pass in a refined form after some things are ironed out.

One possible problem the bill may have is surviving a legal challenge on the basis that it discriminates in favor of one specific ethnic group. The bill directs that the scholarships be awarded on a level proportionate to the percentage of ethnic representation.

Therefore, if 80 percent of the students are Native, 80 percent of the scholarship money must go to Native students.

Recent laws directing money at a specific group, such as the Longevity Bonus program which gives money to Alaska residents older than 65 years who have lived in the state since statehood has been ruled unconstitutional on the grounds that it discriminates against a person who moved to the state after statehood.

Tony Vaska of Bethel, who is a member of the Bush Caucus but not a member of the House Majority, said he thinks it will not survive a constitutionality test.

Hayes said he has had the Legislature's lawyers review the bill and they found it all right. He said the state attorney general has yet to review the bill.

Veteran observers of the Legislature found the key sponsor of the bill — Hayes — to be of particular interest because of his urban background. One commented that "if there ever was any doubt that Hayes is running for governor, this kills it."

Hayes responds to such skepticism by saying "I suppose it would look (like he is trying to gain a rural support) but I just

know the problems of rural people. I fly a lot and get out into the villages more than other urban legislators. I also have worked with the Bush Caucus for the past two years and I know of their concerns."

He said that Hurlbert was instrumental in pushing the bill and is second sponsor on the document.

Gov. Bill Sheffield had no comment on the bill other than to point out that programs do exist in the state to draw rural students into teaching.

And as for Hayes drawing a gubernatorial constituency, Sheffield said, "I told him, I'll out-campaign him 125 to one and I have more staying power."