

Villages gain voice in local school operations

When the Molly Hootch case was settled with the state in 1976, villagers found they could have schools and youngsters wouldn't have to travel to unfamiliar cities and unfamiliar educational programs for their education.

The settlement made school facilities available at home and 107 villages received either new schools or expanded programs for existing facilities. But with the new schools came the regional school districts which regulated programs and set curriculums often without consulting villagers who used the schools.

A section of the settlement called for villages to have a voice in planning and evaluation of the programs but it wasn't until early April that the State Board of Education voted to implement such a program. The vote came April 1 when the board voted 5-2 to adopt new regulations giving villagers a voice in

the operation of rural schools.

The vote came after Alaska Legal Services lawyers had threatened a suit charging state education officials with contempt of court for failing to enforce village involvement requirements of the Hootch settlement.

The new regulations set out several steps a school district must go through to make sure villagers are heard concerning the operation of schools.

The regulation says every year the school district must develop a plan for each school in its jurisdictions and must give parents, students and others interested a chance to take part in writing the plan.

Before the plan reaches its final form, there has to be at least one public meeting in the village to discuss it and copies of the plan must be available to anyone who wants one. School district employees are required to travel to the village to answer

questions and explain the plan and the school program.

The regulation also provides for people in the village to examine materials used in the school and suggest changes while the plan still is in its draft form. The plan consist of one-page forms for each course offered and includes the name of the teacher, how much time is allotted to it, topics to be covered, materials used and the value to the student. Once village comments have been received and incorporated, the plan for each school must be approved by the regional school board and filed with the state Department of Education by Nov. 1 of each year.

The regulation also calls on the regional school district to provide an evaluation of each school. The evaluations are to start with a survey of parents, students and teachers and other members of the community.

After soliciting comments from all concerned, the village school board does the evaluation, judging the school's performance in 20 categories. The village board's recommendations are then sent to the regional school board for review, but the regional board cannot change the village's evaluation. The evaluation is then sent to the state Department of Education.

The regional board doesn't have to follow the village's recommendations, however in its plan for the following year, the board must list each of the village's suggestions and show which ones are being followed and which aren't.

"In every village, folks can say what they want and don't want in their school," said Bruce C. Twomley, a Legal Services lawyer who worked on the case. "The regional board doesn't have to follow every village recommendation but the district has to say what it's doing and it

does have to pay attention to people in the village."

The regulation does allow the regional district to request a waiver meaning it would not have to follow the regulation. The waiver, however, can only be granted if the specific village agrees. To effect the waiver, the village must hold a public meeting on the subject and the board has to agree the regulations don't need to be used in the local school.

Twomley said some of the regional districts had fought implementation of the regulation and he expected some to request waivers of the villages within their districts. "We're advising people in most villages not to agree to any waiver," he said. "They'd be giving up a new legal right and there wouldn't seem to be any reason to do so." He said Legal Services attorneys would visit any village that agreed to a waiver to make sure the regulation is understood.