

NEW PLAN FOR BUSH SCHOOLS

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A helicopter hovered over an Alaskan rural village and dangled a school building off the ground from steel cables. Up to that moment, no one was quite sure where the building would be placed. The villagers, indeed, may not have been sure the building was ever going to be a real building, and least of all, that they would have the right to say where they wanted it in their village.

The building IS real, the incident is real, the people are real, and the problem is real. Education in rural Alaska is very

much up in the air.

A joint meeting on education was held August 21 and 22 on the University of Alaska campus. The meeting combined participants from the Center For Northern Educational Research, Dr. Frank Darnell, director; and the Alaska Legislature's Interim Committee on Prehigher Education, Lowell Thomas, Jr., chairman.

Starting point for the discussion was Senate Bill 122 and and House Bill 192 which failed to pass in the last session and which sought to decentralize the State Operated School System and create regional service areas

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PRESENT SCHOOLS OF QUESTIONABLE VALUE — Dennis Demmert, of the Center for Northern Educational Research Advisory Board summarizes the immediate problems of the Alaskan rural school system. Listening are Bill Vaudrin, State Human Rights Commissioner, Dr. Frank Darnell, Director of CENR, and Byron Mallott, Commissioner of Community and Regional Affairs.

— Photo by JACKIE GLASGOW BUTLER

Plan For Bush Schools . . .

"Education As Presented By White Teachers Is Of Questionable Value"

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in the unorganized borough.

Although both bills failed to pass, Lowell's committee was created to explore the alternatives in the interim and make new recommendations to the upcoming Legislature. As research facility, CNER provided a forum where educators, legislators, native leaders, state agency heads, teachers, school administrators, and other interested parties could discuss the options before Alaskans for re-vamping the State Operated School System.

The University's new president addressed the group on the first day. Dr. Hiatt compared Alaska to "a developing country."

"We cannot rely on patterns laid down in other places," he said. "The crux of the matter is how to get the best education into all areas of the state."

Dennis Demmert of CNER's Advisory Council gave a brief summary of the unique situation in Alaska — sparse population in the rural areas, immense distances, economic conditions, and the cultural diversity of the unorganized borough.

"Add to that fact that white

American education as presented by white teachers is of questionable value to rural Alaska, and it must be admitted there are special problems in the delivery of educational services to rural Alaska."

The participants discussed nine options that were outlined for restructuring the state's unorganized borough in order to achieve local control.

Den mert defined local control in Alaska as the right to select curricula, develop policy, budget funds, and hire and fire personnel. These rights are now granted to organized boroughs and first class cities, but are not realized in the vast area of the unorganized borough.

Byron Mallot, director of the Office of Community and Regional Affairs, outlined the requirements for organizing rural communities into either boroughs or incorporated cities. He cited Galena as a community which decided to incorporate as a first class city in order to gain control of its school system.

Mallot's department is developing a base study of current Alaska statutes as they relate

Alaska statutes as they relate to local government and the educational transition.

"There is the problem of a sufficient tax base," Mallot pointed out, "and the problem of rural people looking at borough misfunction in Anchorage and Fairbanks."

John Shively, executive director of the Alaska Federation of Native, Inc., commented on the option of native regional corporations assuming the burden for educational services in the rural areas.

"Natives are not going to set up their own educational system," said Shively. "That's still the state's responsibility. Regional Corporations are NOT set up under the Alaska Native Land Claims Settlement Act. They have no more responsibility to pick up social services than General Motors or Hinkle Enterprises."

Marshall Lind, Commissioner of Education for the entire state of Alaska, gave a wide view of the total picture in the state, not only in the unorganized borough but in the organized as well. His department is concerned with "a total delivery system for the state."

Lind commented briefly on the case of Molly Hootch vs. the State of Alaska now pending before the courts, in which a rural Alaskan child with others is alleging that the state has not fulfilled its responsibilities in providing secondary education to Alaskan rural school children.

It would be impossible, said Lind, to construct secondary schools in all of the communities. "We realize that existing monies will be insufficient."

"We are having to round up youngsters in excess of one thousand and say, you're going here and you're going there. And until this year, we couldn't even tell where they were going."

The boarding home and boarding school program in the state is presently under fire from all directions.

Jeannie Chance, state legislator, recommended a cottage-type program where individual villages would purchase a home in urban areas. Students would

then live in a village-oriented environment with native house parents and visitors from the village could visit from time to time, providing another link with the house community.

Approximately 53 Bureau of Indian Affairs schools scattered throughout the state deliver education to 5000 of the state's 80,000 students. Several speakers emphasized that these BIA schools could not be overlooked when planning a new structure for the state's educational system. If local control is to be achieved for SOS schools, how is it to be achieved for BIA schools?

An agreement formalized in May of 1963 stated: "It is the mutual goal of the state and federal government to establish for all people in the state of Alaska a single system of public and secondary education."

Senator Thomas requested that all the interested agencies and organizations prepare position papers early enough to be of use to his committee in drafting new legislation.

The next meeting sponsored by CNER, slated for September or October, will provide a forum for native regional and association representatives to examine the same proposed options from a client perspective.

"Local control," said Byron Mallot, "implies that options be available to local people." Mallot introduced the idea of "combinations of options" as one of the undiscovered options and recommended against a single mandatory solution for the entire state.

The school building still dangles in the air over rural Alaska.

Bill Vaudrin, new head of the Alaska Commission for Human Rights, said it was not surprising the people were unconcerned about where it should be placed.

"More often than not, the state has touched down with the building only to take off again."

Thus, with heavy doubt hanging over their heads, Alaskans begin another fateful school year, Fall, 1973.