

Alaska Rural Systemic Initiative gets underway

by Dorothy Larson

An exciting and innovative joint cooperative effort between the Alaska Federation of Natives, the University of Alaska Fairbanks and the National Science Foundation has been awarded and is up and running. The project is funded through the NSF Division of Educational Systemic Reform with first year funding at \$2.1 million. An annual plan must be submitted for approval and funding for each of the next four years.

There are many questions about the Alaska Rural Systemic Initiative (ARSI). There are new acronyms to learn which we hope over the next five years will become familiar to students, parents, school boards, educators and many others in rural areas and across the state. We hope this project will impact the students first in a very positive way.

Just what does this educational reform initiative mean to Alaska Native students living in rural Alaska? How will changes be initiated? Who will be involved? How will we measure change? These are just a few questions; more will be raised as we move ahead.

In 1992-93, NSF funded two Alaska Native Science Colloquia, jointly sponsored by AFN and UAF, as a result of several meetings attended by educators and administrators from public schools and universities, students, parents, community members, scientists, Native organization

representatives, elders, the State Department of Education and others. Over 30 recommendations concerning science and math education resulted from the Colloquia.

NSF then provided funding for a developmental award to AFN and UAF to develop a plan to implement educational systemic changes in rural Alaska with the assistance and expertise of many of the same participants at the Colloquia and others. This group became the catalyst for the Alaska Native/ Rural Education Consortium (AN/REC) which will advise and play an integral part in the implementation plan which we now call ARSI.

ARSI is one of four funded by NSF in the United States. There are state systemic initiatives and urban systemic initiatives. The four rural systemic initiatives are charged with implementing plans for science, math and technology improvement in rural areas. Three of the initiatives will have a Native American focus; the fourth is in the Appalachian area. Though there are other NSF-funded projects in the state, this is the only systemic initiative. Other systemic initiatives are funded through the U.S. Dept. of Education in which many school districts are currently involved -- Goals 2000.

The objectives of ARSI are:

- to increase the presence of Alaska Native people -- their knowledge and perspectives in all areas of science and education in rural Alaska;
- to integrate Native ways of know-

ing and teaching compatible with the needs which can build a foundation for all learning;

- to develop curriculum models responsive to the cultural makeup of communities which are consistent with science education standards at the state and national levels;

- to document indigenous knowledge systems in the cultural regions to serve as a basis on which culturally appropriate practices can be built;

- to create more appropriate learning environments for the integration of Alaska Native Elders and traditional knowledge as resources for all educational programs;

- to demonstrate the everyday uses of science in village life;

- to improve the quality and increase the quantity of Alaska Native students pursuing careers in science and related fields;

- to develop an infrastructure to make more effective use of technology to expand learning opportunities in rural Alaska;

- to increase Alaska Native parental involvement in all aspects of their children's education;

- to strengthen Alaska Native self-identity and to recognize the contributions of Native people;

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- to improve Alaska Native students academic performance in science and
- to integrate the above objectives into the fabric of rural education on a self-sustaining basis without NSF/RSI support after the year 2000.

These objectives are lengthy and very ambitious. However, in order to initiate change, there must be community involvement in the process. These objectives were based on recommendations of many local, regional and statewide community meetings over the years and a review of many reports such as the Alaska White House Conference on Indian Education, the Alaska Native Commission Report, and others.

There are six major initiatives: Native Ways of Knowing and Teaching, Indig-

enous Science Knowledge Base, Elders and Cultural Camps, Culturally Aligned Curriculum Adaptations, Village Science Applications and Careers, and the Education Technology Infrastructure. They will be implemented in stages in the five cultural regions over the five year period: Inupiaq, Athabaskan, Aleut, Southeast and Yup'ik.

AFN is an advocacy organization that has not been involved in programs per se for many years. With the support and encouragement of the AFN Board of Directors, the administration and UAF, the developmental and implementation phases were successfully awarded to AFN receiving the highest ratings by reviewers.

Regional coordinators are hired in each of the five regions. We are entering into memorandums of agreement with school

districts, the State of Alaska DOE, rural campuses, cultural organizations and others for the first year of the implementation plan.

The project has three co-directors: Dorothy M. Larson, who is the executive vice president of AFN; Dr. Oscar Kawagley of the Interior Campus at UAF; and Dr. Ray Barnhardt of UAF.

Larson will be responsible for the overall administration of the project serving as a link between AN/REC and AFN. Larson is a recent UAF graduate with many years involvement in educational initiatives -- as a school board member, advisory member of many university boards and committees, involved in Native affairs at local, regional, state and federal levels and in many different arenas other than education.

Kawagley will be responsible for coordinating the three regional initiatives under the Alaska Native Knowledge Network in the cultural regions and will serve as the link to Elders and other cultural resources essential to the success of the project. He is a key resource person for the project -- many of the principles and concepts come from his book: *A Yupiaq World View, Pathways to Ecology and Spirit*.

Barnhardt was instrumental in the ARSI's project development leading up to its implementation. He has lived in Alaska for over 25 years and his work at the university has focused on rural and Native education.

Dorothy Larson is co-director of the Alaska Rural Systemic Initiative and executive vice-president of the Alaska Federation of Natives.