

Population Jump Causing Education Crisis in Alaska

(Editor's note: This is the third article in a series, based on current literature in the field and interviews with University of Alaska President William R. Wood, about the complex problems facing higher education in the United States today, and their implications for Alaska's future.)

Unless you care about the future of your children, don't read this.

Unless you care about the future of Alaska, don't read this.

Unless you are willing to face the truth about a crisis in the making, don't read this.

In 1980 at least 8,000 young men and women will be knocking on the doors of higher education in Alaska. At least 2,000 of these students will be turned away unless immediate action is taken to plan for the future of education in Alaska. Both of these figures could be much higher. This is the problem facing Alaska educators today. It is particularly critical for Alaskan parents.

Alaska has the youngest population of the fifty states. On July 1, 1964, youth under 18 years of age accounted for 43% of Alaska's population. While the state's population increased by 10.7% from 1960 to 1964 the number of children under 18 years of age increased by 21.5%.

Disconcerting to Alaska educators is the "under five" group. On July 1, 1963 15.1 percent of Alaska's citizens were in this "fuel for school" age bracket. The education of Alaska's youth also will be seriously affected by such statistics as these:

1. Alaska ranks number one in the nation in the number of births per thousand population.

2. Alaska ranks seventh in the United States in population increase, showing a 9-8 percent rise between 1960 and 1963.

3. Alaska ranks second in the nation in the percentage of change in public elementary and secondary school enrollment from 1954 to 1964 showing an increase of 113.6 percent.

4. Alaska ranks first in the nation in the percentage of increase in the number of high school graduates from 1954 to 1964 showing an increase of 235.9 percent.

At the same time Alaska is fortunate in ranking second in the United States in the median of school years completed by persons 25 and older. This education coupled with the youth, the pioneering spirit and the enthusiasm for our frontier state indicates a brilliant future for Alaska — but only if we do not deny Alaska's most valuable resource, her youth, the opportunity for an education beyond high school.

This is not merely a problem of the future; the youth who will be entering college in 1980 are here today—the 15.1% of Alaska citizens under five years old. In the other states this is now an urgent problem.

For years administrators of public colleges and universities have warned that the college population would soon explode, that competition for faculty was pushing up salaries, that teaching equipment such as microscopes and computers is becoming more complex and costly, that huge sums of money were needed for buildings and operations.

In the 1964-65 school year this country's colleges and universities were drowned by the first wave of war babies which hit the nation's campuses. Last fall the number of freshmen studying toward a college degree leaped by 17% over 1963.

The second wave will be bigger, and it is only the beginning of the greatest crisis ever to face higher

education. New enrollments soar, and more and more students stay in college longer for graduate studies.

Parents who think their sons and daughters can always go to a state university if turned down by schools of their first choice are in for a shock. Every year both private and public universities are raising entrance requirements and becoming more selective. Every year tens of thousands of qualified students are turned away.

"Because their warnings of impending crisis were largely ignored educators say, money alone cannot solve the public-college shortage in years just ahead." (February 1, 1965, "U.S. News and World Report")

Alaska faces such a crisis, but has the benefit of the time and pre-planning to avert it. The Board of Regents of Alaska's system of public higher education, the University of Alaska, had the foresight more than a decade ago to plan for the impending population explosion and need for technological education.

Alaska's own enrollment crisis is now in the middle stages of development.

Alaska's high school graduates in the spring of 1964 numbered 2,024, with 876 from Anchorage, 224 from Fairbanks, and 310 from the larger communities in Southeast Alaska. Alaska's high schools now have 2,582 seniors who expect to graduate this spring. 1,088 of these are from the Anchorage area.

The Anchorage area alone, according to Anchorage Borough School District Superintendent Dr. Don M. Dafeo, presently has a total enrollment of 19,034 with 11,609 in grades 1 through 6, 3,746 in grades 7 through 9 and 3,679 in grades 10 through 12. Dr. Dafeo conservatively estimates a total enrollment of 30,900 by 1970-71 with 7,071 in grades 10 through 12.

Alaska is on the threshold of major population growth. Anchorage, as the center of the State from the standpoint of communications, transportation, and potential industrialization, seems destined to become Alaska's metropolis—perhaps the only true metropolis in the State.

Anchorage will have a population of 225,800 by 1980, a conservative estimate based on an average annual increase of 5%. ("1980 Anchorage, Alaska Metropolitan Area General Plan"—Wilsey, Ham & Blair)

Through expansion of its existing Anchorage Community College technician level education, military on-base programs and specialized upper division programs, the University of Alaska can meet the present and growing public educational needs which are its responsibility.

The University of Alaska's entire entire community college system and its main campus are tailor-made to grow with the surge of new students. Through foresight and action of Alaska's citizens, the State can avoid a crippling crisis in higher education.