

New Commissioner wants more local control

By Ceceile Kay Richter
Tundra Times

Alaska's school districts should be able to set their own high school graduation requirements in the opinion of incoming State Commissioner of Education Harold Reynolds, Jr.

"With local control in mind,

the best thing the state can do is set guidelines for graduation," said Reynolds, who assumed his new state post on May 9.

Reynolds, the former Commissioner of Educational and Cultural Services for the State of Maine, replaced Marshall Lind as Alaska's Commissioner

of Education. Lind has held the post since 1971.

At a press conference Reynolds said he thought the transfer of Bureau of Indian Affairs schools to the State "obviously" offered an incredible opportunity to the State. One of his first responsibilities could be the takeover of the Mt. Edgecumbe boarding school if the governor and legislature follow through on the recommendations of the Alaska Board of Education.

Reynolds also said he felt strongly about supporting bilingual education. In Maine, however, he had been pressured toward monolingual education, Reynolds said.

As Maine's education chief, Reynolds was involved in a trial in U.S. District Court in

February concerning the extent to which the state can set basic educational requirements to be followed by private denominational schools. Reynolds' role in this suit has been criticized by Alaska's Moral Majority.

Reynolds said the issue is whether the primary purpose of a church-run school is education, in which case the state does have an overriding interest, or whether the primary purpose is religion. If the primary purpose is religion, as the schools claim, the state's role would be limited under the Constitutional separation of church and state.

The case will likely go to the Supreme Court which is how it should be resolved, he said.

Reynolds said this was not a personal issue that he carries around with him. "I don't know the situation here, but if you've got a good working relationship and it seems to be serving children well, you let it be," he said.

He did indicate that he would be inclined to oppose a bill, such as that introduced by Alaska legislator Milo Fritz (R-Anchorage) that would prevent any interference by state educators in private schools except for academic testing in the eighth grade.

"I can't imagine more of an intrusion than competency testing," Reynolds said. "I am not impressed by competency testing," he continued.

Reynolds said that when you have competency testing students are taught so they can pass the test. Education is not measured by how well a student does on multiple choice tests, Reynolds declared.

Reynolds, 57, was Superintendent of Schools in Portland, Maine from 1974 before assuming his most recent position with the State of Maine in 1979. Prior to that he was Superintendent of Schools in Cape Elizabeth, Maine for five years.

Reynolds was Chair of the Vermont State Board of Education from 1962-1968 during which time he was publisher of the Times-Reporter Corp. and for two years was a Vermont State Senator. He has experience as an English and social studies teacher and has been a reporter and foreign correspondent for Time and Life magazines.

He was in the infantry during World War II and earned a Purple Heart and three battle stars in the European Theater.

The State of Maine is about 23rd in its effort for education but is about 47th or 48th among the states in wealth, Reynolds said. He said that Maine pays for half the costs of public primary and secondary education, that property taxes pay for about 43 percent of the costs of education, and federal dollars make up the difference.

In contrast, during fiscal 1982 in Alaska, 80 percent of the costs of public primary and secondary education were borne by the state, 17 percent by localities, and 3 percent by the federal government, according to audited figures recently released by the Department of Education.

The state contributed 95.5 percent of the costs in the 21 rural school districts and 75.6 percent in the 32 city and borough school districts.

Perhaps the most striking contrast is physical size. Maine is 39th among the states in land area while Vermont is 43rd. Alaska is 1st. Alaska is 61 times larger than Vermont and 18 times larger than Maine.

Like Alaska, Maine's major industries are forest products and fish processing