

Qualifications: where do teacher aides fit?

From Our Anchorage Bureau

Who is most qualified to teach in rural schools: teachers with college degrees, or Native Alaskans who may lack formal training but have more understanding of what their people want in the way of education?

Educators, Natives and other interested parties will be in the middle of three days of discussions on the issue of teacher certification as this issue of the Tundra Times comes off the press.

The talks are sponsored by the Department of Education, which is responsible for certifying Alaskan primary and secondary teachers. The main requirement for certifying Alaskan teachers is that they have completed a teacher training program approved by the Teacher Education Certification Advisory Board (TECAB).

The purpose of the conference is to discuss possible changes in regulations for certifying teachers.

Led by rural school boards and the Alaska Federation of Natives, rural residents are indicating they want more say in the hiring of their teachers. They want to make certain that teachers have some appreciation and respect for the local or regional culture, as well as the needs of the area residents.

Bill Overstreet, of the Association of Alaskan School Boards, said last week that certification procedures have been used to exclude racial minorities from various professions.

"My own hope is they will recognize that certification is used to exclude people from a profession for no good reason," he said.

Overstreet said his goal was to keep the procedures from becoming more restrictive and possibly make them more open to people who have expertise but little or no college training. He said this would not prevent rural Alaskans from hiring poor teachers sympathetic to their needs, but he concluded, "I'd put more faith in the judgement of local boards."

Although expressing sympathy for Native people who

feel more comfortable with Native teachers, Bob Van Houte, Alaskan representative for the National Education Association NEA-Alaska, said his group believes in a certain amount of standards should be met before teachers are certified.

Van Houte acknowledged there has been some "real animosity" between Native parents and white teachers, creating a desire on the part of local people to have more say in selecting teachers. However, he added he feels most Native people would agree there must be minimum standards for teachers.

Book Cooksey, also of NEA-Alaska, said teachers want to be certified by people in the teaching profession. Van Houte and Cooksey said they do not want to exclude Natives teachers through the certification process but emphasized the need to adequately train Native people for the profession. Both criticized the University of Alaska for failing to do this.

The Alaska Federation of Natives, realizing that such an issue can't be solved overnight, is urging that a task force with equal representation from all

interested parties be set up to study certification. A spokesman for the group said there are widespread fears that NEA wants to control the certification of teachers only to benefit teachers. NEA represents teachers in labor negotiations.

The federation is also pushing a procedure to certify paraprofessional instructors. This would protect positions held by bilingual teachers who might

lose their jobs under more stringent guidelines.

It is not certain how, or even if, the Department of Education will choose to amend its certification regulations. Although conference participants last week did not indicate hard line positions on the issue, one member of the state Board of Education seemed to read between the lines, commenting, "I'm sure it may be hot."