

# REAA's problems are not over, says CNER report

BY MARGIE BAUMAN

**FAIRBANKS**—Rural Alaska school districts contained within the Unorganized Borough have come a long way since they assumed local control on July 1, 1976, but their problems aren't over yet.

School boards, administrators and faculty have their own views of how the new system of local control has worked to date and their comments are the subject of a lengthy report on rural education published recently by the University of Alaska's Center for Northern Educational Research (CNER).

The report is entitled "New School Districts in Rural Alaska: A Report on the REAAs After One Year," and it was compiled by Dr. Kathryn A. Hecht and Ronald K. Inouye for the educational research center. For anyone who wants to examine the history of rural education in Alaska, legislation which allowed more local control in education and the opinions of those who became part of this new system, the report offers nearly 250 pages of documented materials and commentary on the 21 Regional Educational Attendance Areas (REAAs).

"It must be stressed that this report is limited in scope and, consequently, it raises as many questions as it may answer," wrote Hecht. "It will be successful if it furthers interest and dialogue. Hopefully, it also will serve as a source of data upon which to design future studies."

## A Most Positive Development

Whatever the drawbacks of introducing local control of education to most of rural Alaska, Professor Emeritus Dr. Frank Darnell of CNER feels that some significant gains have been made to date.

Darnell was the director of CNER for seven years prior to his retirement in early 1978 and he concluded, in this report, that the new educational attendance areas were "one of the most positive developments in Alaska rural education to date."

"Trends only now taking form reveal genuine shifts in authority, redistribution of power, and division of labor."

"Because the nature of REAAs, be it political, educa-

tional or organizational, is not entirely clear, and the history of rural education reveals an evolutionary process, they will probably not become permanent arrangements and should be regarded as transitory," Darnell said. In short, while a final system for local education in rural Alaska does not yet exist, the REAAs come much closer than most previous systems to reaching that goal, he said.

"Whether constitutionally proper or improper, transitory or permanent, REAAs have advanced the trend toward local decision making and self-determination by rural residents more than any single event in the history of Alaskan education. The extent to which these trends will persist remains unknown," Darnell said.

"Finally, whether REAAs are structured well enough and whether they are implemented well enough so that the much-sought-after improvements in education will eventually grow out of them has become today's most important question," he said.

## Many Opinions

Using a variety of methods to collect information, from questionnaires to seminars, Hecht and Inouye sought to include in the report many opinions on what the new local control program was all about. Many of the quoted opinions were not attributed, purposely, because CNER staff felt responses would be more open with a promise to NOT quote individuals.

But there were educators like Sylvia Carlsson of the State Department of Education, Juneau, who participated in a seminar of the direction of this report and were quoted at length because a transcript of most of the seminar is included in the report.

Speaking from the Native viewpoint, said Carlsson, a veteran of the land claims movement, "it was easier to achieve a settlement with a legislative route as opposed to the courts or any other means;

"This gave, I think, Native people confidence in working in the whole political arena as opposed to working with the systems that exist. I think it's going to be interesting in the future to see whether or not that changes. Right now many people have confidence in being able to influence change through the political arena," she said.

Carlsson added that she "viewed the local control issue as one thing—the access to the political system in order to influence the quality of education. That to me is the essence of local control," she said.

## Teacher Perspective

One of several problems the issue of local control raises for some teachers is that of individual civil rights. "Why are teachers leaving REAAs in such large numbers?" asked James Alter, a former teacher now with the National Education Association/Alaska, in Anchorage.

Alter answered his own question, in part, in a lengthy section on teachers' perspectives on the changeover. He felt that one reason for the high turnover rate was that what teachers thought would be the situation under the new school districts simply did not materialize.

Alter also said he found teachers characterized by the REAA school boards as "members of a self-serving, irresponsible profession. Board members have been told over the last two years by a variety of statewide organizations and educational administrators that teachers were the blight of rural Alaska education. A common ruse was to characterize teachers as the REAA 'rip-off' artists. Their salaries were said to be exorbitantly high and skyrocketing," Alter said.

In fact, he argued, their salaries were, on the whole, lower than those of teachers in other districts and rose no faster than the cost of living. It was school superintendents who had skyrocketing salaries, higher than their non-REAA counterparts. Yet the teachers, not the superintendents, were the school board's scapegoats, Alter said.

## Better Rapport

If there were a lot of folks unhappy with the new school districts, there were also people like June Nelson, of Kotzebue, president of the Northwest Arctic REAA, who were pleased with the changeover.

"On the whole, people know there sure is a better rapport and relationship...they can come in and talk about programs, what they want their kids to learn," said Nelson, who has six children of her own.

"Funding has been the biggest problem, not in the

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amount of the lump sum we receive, but just that so many little things have happened to cut into it," she said. One big expense has been negotiations with the U.S. Office of Civil Rights in connection with her district's alleged noncompliance with federal bilingual guidelines.

"To inherit a bag of worms, something like that, has not been pleasant," she said. (The federal agency's action was initiated against the old State Operated Schools System and carried over to the new districts. Nelson's district plans on instituting its own innovative bilingual program in September, nonetheless)

What's the answer to problems posed by Alter, Nelson and their associates? The report does not draw many conclusions, but it does offer the most concentrated collection of information to date for anyone trying to find answers.