

The Village High Schools--

Could Breakthrough Turn Into Setback for Native Education?

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For the first time, high schools have opened their doors in several small villages, and more of these schools are being planned. The hope is that village high schools will end the psychological disasters caused by secondary education away from home.

Once served by such schools, Native students will no longer be forced against their will to leave home for high school—an event which often causes anguish both to students and their families.

With village schools, students who would otherwise drop out of school because their families need help at home can finish

their education.

Also, those students who wish to live in the village as adults can receive their diploma without developing the split cultural identity of many students who now leave home for high school and then find when they return that they are dissatisfied with the village but happy nowhere else.

There is a danger, however, that village high schools could set back Native education unless Natives demand more than just a high school in every village.

The possibility exists that such village schools might not be able to furnish the background needed by those village students who desire to go to college or to become professionals.

This is an especially important consideration in view of the increasing need for Native pro-

fessionals to staff the regional and village corporations created by the Land Claims Act and to take over programs managed by white professionals.

Thus, while getting a high school into every village should be the first priority in rural secondary school planning, village high schools are only part of the answer to the problem of rural secondary education.

The answer is to offer different kinds of high school programs fitted to the needs of students with different interests, abilities and goals. Village students need not only choices but also the experience necessary to make good choices.

Village high schools must provide broadening educational experiences that will equip students to make informed choices

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about the kinds of futures they desire.

In short, while village high schools could solve some important educational problems in Alaska, they could also create some new and equally serious problems.

First, there is a danger, and this danger has materialized in some places, that a village high school program will be nothing more than supervised correspondence study or an inferior curriculum with a fad label like "self-directed learning."

Second, even the best village high school, since it may have only 8 to 40 students, will not be able to offer in the village the range of courses or career programs available to students in larger schools.

Such a village high school might not adequately prepare students for college or many types of careers.

The goal of a high school program in each village and the goal of a high school education that adequately prepares students for college and careers need not be incompatible.

Achieving both goals, however, would require two educational policies which are not being actively sought at the present time. The first policy would allow village students to choose the type of high school that meets their individual needs — small village school, middle size town school, or large urban school.

The second policy would not limit a village high school provide the broadening experiences students need to make good choices about their educational or vocational futures.

Rural students need a choice or high schools because they, like students everywhere, have different aptitudes and desires. Some village students, for example, have no desire to leave home and have academic problems that would make it very difficult for them to succeed in an urban school.

To place such students in high schools away from home is not only an educational absurdity; it may well be a psychological catastrophe.

The irony is that these students will receive no better education in an urban school than they could have received at home. In the urban school, these students are placed in an elementary reading program supplemented by art, physical education, and typing classes.

The same kind of program could have been provided at much less expense in the village. Yet, these students may suffer emotional problems and may get into serious trouble as a result of separation from their home and family.

There is, however, another group of village students who are eager to experience new places and possibilities; they will not remain at home even when they have the chance, and their achievement levels are as high as

those of urban students.

Such students often blossom in urban schools. Once the newness of the experience has worn off, they take advantage of the available courses and activities and frequently become competent, confident young adults.

In short, any monolithic secondary school program for rural Alaska — whether it calls for a high school in every village or for every student to attend school away from home — will fail to fill the needs of certain groups of students.

Rural students should be able throughout their high school years to choose the village high school or a school away from home that is more appropriate to their curriculum needs.

Such a policy would require only that present possibilities remain open as village high schools are built. Yet, educational agencies are considering cutting off rural students' options to go elsewhere when high schools are placed in villages.

Not only do village students need choices but also they need the broad educational experiences necessary to make informed choices. The second policy need in rural secondary education is to provide village high school programs which are not limited to the village but expand students' ideas about their own possibilities and the futures open to them.

There are many ways to do this while students are based in the village. Village schools could include, for example, study on a university campus, foreign travel, or work internship programs.

To provide such experiences in a village school requires no more money than is being spent now. Much of the money presently spent on rural secondary schools in Alaska is not spent on education but rather on the living expenses for students away from home.

It costs about \$4,000 per student yearly, for example, to to operate a rural dormitory and about another \$2,000 for the academic program.

If the \$6,000 per student were used instead for a village high school program, the program could easily include foreign travel and other high quality educational experiences.

In sum, Native people need to demand not only a high school in every village but also secondary school policies that give rural students the opportunity to choose the program that best meets their needs and the experiences necessary to make these choices.

Without such policies, village high schools could prove to be the educational "breakthrough" that sets back Native education for years to come.

With such policies, village high schools could powerfully increase the number of Native students who are both successful and at ease in the lifestyles that they themselves choose.