

Education is key to Native Empowerment

by Steve Kakaruk

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Native empowerment through higher education is a topic that is well understood by veteran educators. Educators want to satisfy 'Indigenous' needs in rural Alaskan education. Certain points are missing in its structure and support from Alaska's present education system.

William Demmert, Education Director, Dean of the University of Alaska in Juneau said, "when higher education doesn't meet aboriginal needs, that community looks to other alternatives to satisfy them."

Demmert talked to about 100 people at the Alaska Federation of Natives convention in a workshop entitled, 'Native Empowerment: The Role of Higher Education.' A six-year study shows that aboriginal people can adapt to a modern society without losing cultural identity.

The Danish Government

established a 'home rule' education plan. It benefits Native Greenlanders with the opportunity to teach themselves without losing culture identity. Funds from the government helped establish education programs for teachers.

Demmert added, "lack of support and influence plagues Native education in the educational system all over the United States."

Rural Alaska Native educators seek input statewide for students in the universities. Their efforts are without a homecoming. Lack of communications have kept the Native educators without a voice in the university system. Rural educational needs in the universities have been expressed as a high priority among the rural residents in Alaska.

A Rural Education Task Force established in the early '70s for rural Alaskans received recognition around the time of passage of

the land claims. This task force voiced the concern that the education system needed attention where Alaska Natives were concerned.

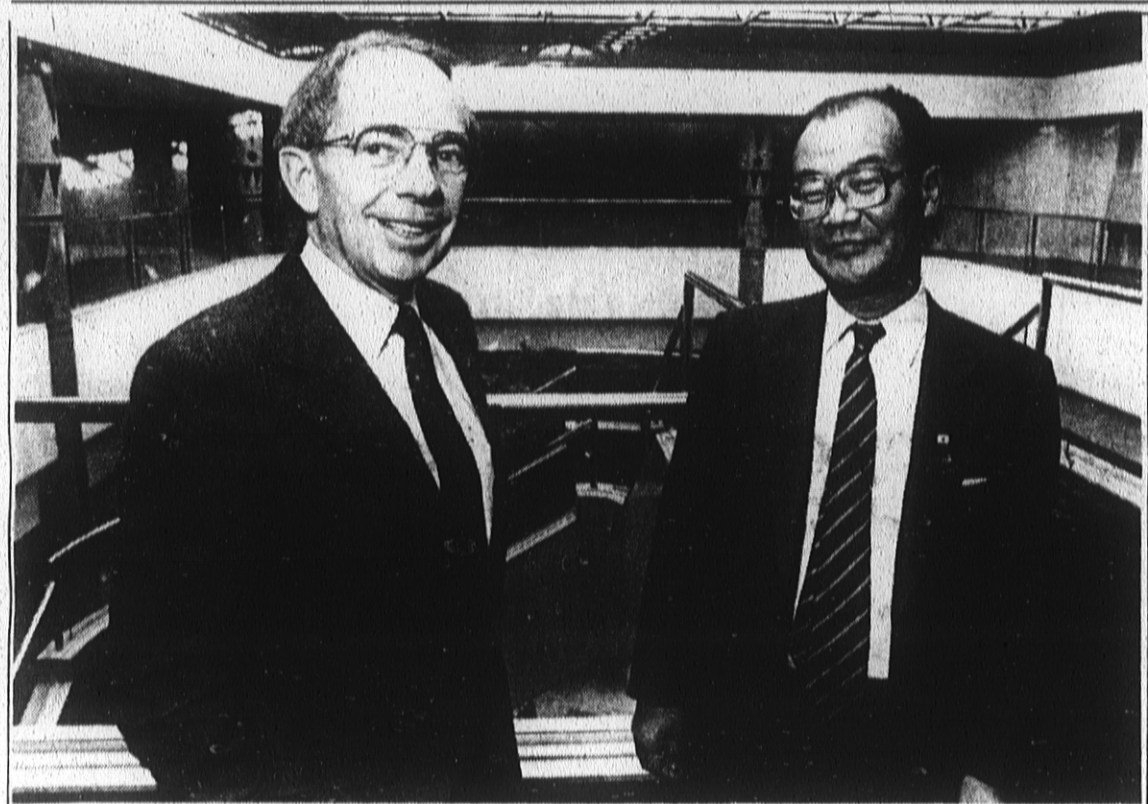
And attention it received. With growth, rural schools awakened. Reva Wulf, Education Coordinator for the Tanana Chiefs Conference, clarified rural educational needs. Wulf outlined a dozen or more recommendations with over 100 responses to each.

A need for local delivery of education was most requested. The next most requested are: local involvement (by Natives), localized curriculum characterized by regions and cultures, better communication, vocational and technical programs, rural student services, stronger 'backbone' education in high schools, stronger academics in high school related to college, and the quality of training or excellence in education.

Adelheid Hermann, Represent-



State Rep. Adelheid Hermann told listeners that universities are not doing enough for Native students. photo by Steve Kakaruk



Anchorage—Gov. Bill Sheffield (left) talks with Yuji Ikuta, Assistant General Manager of Mitsubishi Corporation's lumber division, during a meeting in Anchorage last weekend.

Ikuta is part of an 11-member Japanese Timber Trade Delegation representing some of the top timber importing companies in Japan, that met with Sheffield, Alaska State Forester Jonn Surgeon, Commissioners Esther Wunnicke and Loren Lounsbury, and other state officials here Sunday.

The group met with timber industry representatives and toured companies in Southeast Alaska before coming to Anchorage. In addition, the group will make its first trip to Interior Alaskan forests this week, before returning to Tokyo Oct. 30.

tative for District 26 commented, "the education system is a government of its own in the system." Hermann added that the education system is not accepting responsibility. "I do not see the University of Alaska working cooperatively."

David Thomas, University of Waikato, New Zealand, has been with the Maori people. The Maori's education program is based on language. Ten percent of the three million people in New Zealand are Maori.

Thomas said, "The Maori have a facility split by groups: those who are bilingual, and those qualified (among the Maori), to teach. The customs, etiquette and language, the most important

tools for education are all ran and taught by the Maori Elders."

Thomas added that the importance of Native education begins when the social distances and alienation is felt in the system. He added, "A system based on one's own history, point of departure, and requirements to take on own culture and education are all related to the language."

All together there are 18 colleges for Native Americans on reservations, 3 BIA funded colleges in the U.S. and 2 BIA funded colleges in Canada.