

Alaska state board supports rural schools

Young, inexperienced, learning, aspiring, succeeding, sometimes failing, but trying to improve.

That is more appropriate description of the small high schools springing up across rural Alaska than the "doomed-to-failure if something-isn't-done-quick" stories trumpeted in the press media as a result of a recent University of Alaska report, State Board of Education members say.

They also add that state government should continue con-

structing small rural high schools in compliance with the well known Hootch Consent Decree, a class action lawsuit that claimed rural children, predominately natives, were discriminated against because they had to leave their families and villages to attend high school.

Despite this legal settlement, the very concept of small rural schools has drawn fire from an elected Anchorage official seeking signatures to a petition that would foreclose further construction of rural high schools

of fewer than 250 students and allow only one high school to operate in each Regional Education Attendance Area (REAA). The alternative would be something akin to the boarding home program that already has failed resoundingly in Alaska.

"They're going to make it work one way or the other," said board member June Nelson, referring to small high school programs and the communities that have made major gains in the local control of their schools since the 1976 startup of the REAAs, the school districts that supplanted the State Operated Schools in the vast rural Unorganized Borough, SB 35, the legislation that created the 21 REAAs, stipulated that a board of education be elected at each school site to advise the regional boards on how to best run their local schools.

"In several districts, the pro-

grams are succeeding," Nelson, Alaska Eskimo and lifelong resident of Kotzebue said. Local control, she said, "is what they want. They want their kids to go to school at home...The regional boarding home program was a disaster."

Jan Hohman, a State Board of Education member from Nome, said of the small high schools, "I think basically they are succeeding," but added that it is now time for the REAAs to explore alternative methods of program delivery, such as exposing students to short-term courses in schools that have different kinds of educational facilities and opportunities. "The REAAs are in a position to begin to be creative and to provide these alternatives."

State Board of Education President Thelma Langdon offers other ideas for program improvement. They include the need for school districts to offer inservice training to teachers to help them to better deliver small high school programs. "It's a matter of people working hard."

Both Langdon and Hohman also oppose the boarding home concept. "If we revert (to boarding homes)," Langdon said, "the whole individual rights issue is there again." Said Hoh-

man about the boarding homes: "We've tried...it failed miserably."

The boarding home program was the product of a system of dual education in Alaska which began in the early 1900s with U.S. Congressional recognition of one system for the education of whites within incorporated towns, and another system for the education of Alaska natives. The education of white secondary children was assumed by territorial and municipal governments, but the education of native secondary students was limited to the boarding programs operated by the U.S. Department of Interior.

Segregated schools were established in a number of towns where white populations were predominant. Later, Congress established and gave local control of independent schools to whites in incorporated towns. The boarding home program began first by sending the brightest native secondary children out of state to Indian vocational schools, an idea abandoned because of adverse health and social factors for students.

In 1925 the federal government established three boarding schools for natives in Alaska, (See ALASKA, Page Seven)

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and in 1947 started Mt. Edgecumbe in Sitka. Rural students then were given the opportunity of staying at home, foregoing a high school education, or attending Mt. Edgecumbe or an out-of-state boarding school for Indians.

In the mid-1960s the state itself opened a number of regional boarding schools but before the Hootch case was initiated, changed that approach to providing rural secondary education in favor of building small rural high schools.

It was because of the remnants of the dual education system that the Hootch case was brought about. And it was the Hootch Consent Decree that mandated small secondary schools be provided in 126 rural communities.

It was an expensive commitment because of high construction costs in rural Alaska. Costs range from \$85 per square foot in Southeastern to \$250 per square foot in more remote areas. Costs have ranged from a few thousand dollars for re-

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modeling existing buildings to more than \$2 million to erect a complete new school. But most have run between \$800,000 to \$1.4 million.

Seventy of the Hootch schools are new structures, while 30 are alterations or renovations to existing facilities.

So far, the state has committed approximately \$120 million for the building of the so-called Hootch schools. At the same time, it has committed another \$70 million for building schools in established city and borough school districts. (The \$70 million was allocated to construct elementary as well as high schools, and the \$120 million was largely earmarked for secondary schools. However, in almost every case elementary students will share at least parts of the rural secondary facilities.)

Of the 126 communities designated to receive a high school, 30 already have been built and currently are operating. Another

70 are in some stages of construction, from design to final touches.

Eighteen communities either have opted not to offer a high school program, one of the alternatives offered to communities in regulations required by the consent decree, or to transport their children to a nearby school. It was determined that eight of the 126 communities do not warrant a secondary program due to extremely small enrollments or other space that could be used for classrooms in their communities.

If the petition that Anchorage assemblyman Don Smith is circulating were to become policy, Alaska's dual education system could make a dramatic comeback if it got by the courts. This is because the petition calls for the abolition of all secondary

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schools except one in each REAA. This apparently means a return to the boarding home program in the REAAs, the same boarding home program that has already failed.

Furthermore, Smith's suggestion that high schools of fewer than 250 students be shut down would leave only two existing REAA high schools in operation, one at Bethel and the other at Kotzebue. If Smith's idea were expanded to city and borough schools in an attempt to ward off a dual system, clearly 45 existing high schools of fewer than 250 students would be deemed inadequate or superfluous to the state's needs.

Smith also made reference to

the high costs of operating rural high schools.

"While Mr. Smith's reference is valid, he fails to point out that the state program for financial support of education receives an annual federal subsidy of more than \$17 million, directly attributable to children who live in the rural areas of the state," said Commissioner of Education Marshall Lind, an active participant of Alaska education for the past 18 years. Lind said the federal monies, which comprise about 25 percent of monies that are spent by rural schools, more than offset the high operating costs.

The success of the small high schools and the REAAs are intertwined, Lind said. And Nelson predicts that it will take two

to five years to smooth out problem areas.

As even the recently published and controversial University of Alaska Center for Cross-Cultural Studies report titled *Small High School Programs for Rural Alaska* put it: "With

a shortsighted view, the growing pains of the REAAs may be seen as further confounding sound small high school development. With a longer range view, however, it may be that the newness and growing pains being experienced in the REAAs will

provide the conditions which allow for the development of effective, manageable, and responsive alternative ways of accomplishing secondary education for village students."

"It is workable," Nelson assures.