

Murkowski announces likely 1-year reprieve for Edgumbe

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The agreement isn't set in stone but indications are that Mount Edgumbe boarding school in Sitka will remain open for one more year.

An aide to U.S. Sen. Frank Murkowski told the Alaska Federation of Natives annual convention last week that Murkowski had been meeting with representatives of the Department of the Interior which controls the budget for the school, and Murkowski announced prospects for keeping the school open "look promising."

The tentative agreement only covers the coming school year, however.

This reprieve marks the last of several last-minute "saves" for the school which has been scheduled to close for several years.

Edgumbe provides a secondary education to about 400 Native students per year and has graduated 3,900 students since opening in 1947. Many of those graduates have come to be the leaders and workers in many of the Native regional and non-profit corporations.

A meeting of Mt. Edgumbe graduates was held during the first day of the AFN convention and although many graduates were kept away by scheduling conflicts, several well-known graduates attended.

They included State Rep. Al Adams of Kotzebue who also serves as president of the Kotzebue village corporation; Morris Thompson, now executive vice-president of Doyon Ltd., the Native Regional Corporation for the Interior, and a past president of AFN; and Cliff Black, a former AFN vice president who now is the Alaska area delegate to the National Congress of American Indians.

At that meeting a young student at the school told the alumni: "You had a chance to attend Mt. Edgumbe. How would you feel if this was happening to you?"

The student, Eleanor Weedman, told the alumni "It's hard for me to tell you how deeply we feel about the school. . . I feel no other alternative is as good as Mt. Edgumbe."

She told the group that many of the students have written numerous letters to the congressional delegation and state leaders seeking support in their attempts to keep the school open but they have received little help from persons

other than Murkowski.

U.S. Sen. Ted Stevens who spoke to the AFN convention late Friday, said after the speech that he was aware of the apparent reprieve but he feels the school should be closed.

Stevens has maintained that the school is too expensive to operate and that the state is now capable of assuming responsibility for the education of all students no matter how remote their village may be.

Citing the Mollie Hootch law which requires that if a student in a village wishes to get an education in his village, the state has to provide it,

Stevens said there are now alternatives for Edgumbe.

Cliff Black told the group prior to Stevens' statement to the press that "We pretty much demanded that Mt. Edgumbe close by demanding schools in all the villages."

Praises were sincere for the school among the alumni at the meeting. One woman from Anchorage said her son was failing miserably in Anchorage High School. "He said getting out of that school was like getting out of prison. The Anchorage school district doesn't address Native students as well as Edgumbe does. When he went to Edgumbe he was

doing well in school."

Another person said "At home we don't have enough books. The teachers can't relate. There is no competition academically or in sports. At Edgumbe, they bring out the competition and desire to do well in school. I know exactly what they are saying about the schools out there. The attitude among village teachers is why get up in the morning. They don't care about the students."

Another man said when he was of school age he was skipping school, causing trouble when his aunt said, "Get off the street. Go to Mt. Edgumbe. I'm here to support

the school 100 percent."

Mt. Edgumbe opened in 1947 in a large facility that had been a military installation which was used during World War II. The buildings now are outmoded and in need of repair. Also, if the state were to assume control of the facility, as one person suggested at the alumni meeting, massive renovations would have to be completed to bring the school up to state fire code.

Alaska Gov. Jay Hammond wrote a letter to Secretary of the Interior James Watt three weeks ago, mentioning the costs.