

Create alternative school to support culture

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Cross-country skiing allows me time to ruminate on ideas and often even to find solutions to problems that are important to me.

Yesterday, as I was skiing along the ice-strewn fringes of the Bering Sea, I began to ponder the educational system we have in contemporary Alaskan villages. And it seemed powerfully evident that there was a need for an alternative to what we presently have.

What we have is a patchwork of institutional settings which only further serve to deteriorate the many still diversely rich cultural ways of life presently existent in Alaska today.

This melange, referred to as the R.E.A.A. system, is a geopolitical arrangement that allows amalgamations of villages to qualify for state and federal funding to everything from hot lunches and Native culture to the three R's and the transient teachers who instruct them.

And, in spite of more emphasis on local control, which the R.E.A.A.'s do allow, Alaskan village cultural lifeways continue to crumble.

This, I believe, is primarily because the professionals who are in control of the daily operation of the schools are non-Natives, and the structures they create to educate Native children are therefore fundamentally representative of their non-Native origins.

The result then is a white-washed educational program with courses that emphasize conformity to the American mainstream style of life — that is, to become a good businessman or bureaucrat or heavy equipment operator or someone's secretary is the only way to go.

Conversely, while the student is in school, a stigma quickly becomes attached to

the subsistence hunting and fishing and trapping lifestyle of his parents and grandparents. Slowly, insidiously, some of the world's most healthful and self-reliant ways of life begin to die. What a shame!

So, I see the need for an alternative in Alaska Native education. Certainly, we can continue with our R.E.A.A.'s and B.I.A.'s and our increasing local control within those public schooling contexts.

But let us proceed one step further. Let us begin to establish an independent Alaska Native school system — one which should have as its primary goal the preservation of Native languages and of foundational cultural forms such as values which define our basic identity as human beings and as members of a particular cultural family.

This school would concentrate on the first 13 years of formal education but could also include two additional years of the counterpart of junior college; and it would be located in a rural area.

It could be culture specific in its enrollment (for example, Athapaskan, Tlingit, or Inuit), or it could be general.

Not only would its purpose be to preserve and strengthen the opportunity to learn the historical truths about contemporary socio-political-economic relationships, especially those of American Natives and other minorities with the dominant society, including governments and multinational corporations.

Its goal would not be to produce cynics but rather citizens who know who they are and understand how they became that way. It would inculcate an Alaska Native pride and spirit in all of its students which I do not see enough of in graduates of village public schools.

This new breed of alternative school would include a

curriculum that must be a more realistic compromise between Alaska Native lifeways and those of the outside Western world. Basically, its course work would incorporate the following:

- * Language development in both the Native tongue and in English (as a second language);

- * Basic academic skills taught in the Native tongue and/or English;

- * Social studies knowledge and skills, including local cultural history with a special focus on the peculiar historical relationship between American and Alaskan Natives and the state and federal governments.

There would also be an emphasis on those contemporary issues (including their history) impinging on the lives of Native peoples both in Alaska and in the continental U.S., Canada and the world.

Example of these might include the problematical aspects of land claims, subsistence, local government (including Coastal Zone Management),

the Special Status relationship of American Native peoples, and energy exploitation of Native lands by multinational corporations.

- * Survival skills, including both urban and rural components.

The urban part of the curriculum would train the students in how to deal with an unfamiliar institution to their advantage whether it be a college for an advanced education or a branch of government for a wind energy grant. The rural component would make certain that students knew how to deal with the rigors of the natural environment in a way that was sanctioned by their cultural roots.

Since the school would at first be only lightly funded, there would have to be a limited student enrollment. This would necessitate a selection process which could be performed by local village school committees.

Teachers would be culled from the ranks of those Native and non-Native professionals who have both the expertise

needed to facilitate students' learning in this sort of school setting as well as the preferred cultural and language background which would provide them with the motivation, commitment and sensitivity required in the education of Alaska Native children.

I usually go skiing in the late afternoon so I can watch the sun sink into the Bering. I often wonder over the analogy of the setting sun with the possible demise of Alaska Native cultures and languages.

I believe that as Alaskans and as Americans we are poorer for what cultural destruction there has already been. I only hope that we can stop in time and take stock of the bitter consequences that will occur if we allow our rich Alaskan Native cultural sun to set completely. We do not have to let this happen, and one approach to a vigorous survival of what remains could be an Alaska Native alternative school.