

Edgecumbe Students Say Standards Low

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By GERALD E. BOWKETT

"I could feel the difference right after I got back here last year there was a lot less discipline and many of the new ninth graders were only sixth grade-level students."

These comments came from William Anderson of Kodiak, president of the Mount Edgecumbe high school senior class which graduated here last Friday and a winner of a national high school award for excellence.

Anderson and several other students from the native school carried their grievances to the education committee of the Alaska Native Brotherhood's Sitka camp last month, and the committee now is proposing that the state assume the educational responsibility at the school, which is operated by The Federal Bureau of

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MT. EDGECUMBE—This is part of the Mt. Japonski Island near the City of Sitka. Edgecumbe High School facilities on

Mt. Edgecumbe Students Complain

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Indian Affairs (BIA). Said Anderson of his appearance before the committee:

"Those of us graduating can't be hurt by it but we had to do it because we are concerned about the school."

The committee subsequently talked with Edgecumbe Superintendent Kenneth Crites and personnel from the regional BIA office at Juneau.

From these discussions members drew several conclusions they feel are valid: Admission standards have been lowered; Crites' concept of allowing each student to achieve at his own level results in minimal educational achievement and the student's having a difficult time competing with graduates of other schools after he leaves Edgecumbe.

Above all, the ANB education committee is concerned over the fact that Edgecumbe is in effect a segregated school and thus does not prepare its students for a place in modern society.

The committee would like to see it made a regional high school and become an integral part of the Sitka area school system. Members had no complaint with the teaching staff at Edgecumbe but feel BIA education policies are unsuited to the times.

The state did not get off. If students entering Edgecumbe are not able to learn at the ninth grade level, the state is partly to blame because many of them come from state-operated rural schools, said committee member Ray Nielsen, a teacher at Edgecumbe.

In a separate interview, Crites, a BIA employee for 30 years, defended the educational program and replied to some of the other charges leveled at his administration.

To enter Mt. Edgecumbe High School, students must have completed the eighth grade, as in any other school system, the superintendent said.

They are accepted on a first come, first served basis, with students from communities where there are no high schools or those who have been taken away from their parents for one reason or another given first priority.

If there is room, students unable to take courses they want in their own communities are admitted. Both State and BIA participate in the screening of applicants, said Crites.

"Emotionally disturbed students who can't adjust to group living are screened out and that's about the extent of the process," he said. "We don't have authority to turn anybody down we're a

public school."

Anderson had said that advanced physical education, calculus, chemistry and physics had been dropped from the Edgecumbe curriculum, but Crites said this is only partially true, "we won't be offering advanced physical education but we will teach physics and calculus on the basis of need," he said.

"If next year there are boys and girls capable of taking physics, we'll offer it. We just use common sense. We don't have time, money or personnel to throw around just for prestige, just to keep people from complaining."

These courses aren't required to graduate from Edgecumbe, he added. Crites described the program of education at the school as based on a "five phase, appropriate placement" concept.

A first phase student is one who needs special assistance, "who lacks foundation and can't understand new concepts" and a fifth phase student is one "we have doing things which are above and beyond the rest of the students," he said. "In a traditional school system you just go in and teach algebra and students pass or fail. Here it's different. No student here need feel a failure because he isn't. He just hasn't gotten as far as he should yet."

"The entire responsibility for learning is on the student and the responsibility for making it possible for students to learn is placed on the teachers. Under 'appropriate placement' teachers must be acutely aware of the student's needs and work at that level."

"You could see why a lazy teacher wouldn't like this. They have to be on their toes and plan ahead to help each student."

For the first time this year, Crites said, the school is giving "certificates of accomplishment" to students who do not graduate.

These certificates indicate the amount of credit a student earned at the school.

"Maybe he earned only four credits out of the required 18 in four years," said the superintendent. "This certificate would show this."

He added: "We don't fail students here we don't take that approach. We feel they just haven't learned enough."

In the case of Anderson and Ruth Ferguson of Kotzebue, president of the girls dormitory council both fifth phase students carrying only a light academic load in their final year Crites arranged for them to take some courses at nearby Sheldon Jackson Junior College, "to

see if they were college material."

While appreciative of this opportunity, both students found the experience eye-opening and stimulating.

"Over there (at Sheldon Jackson, operated by the Presbyterian Church) you're just another student," said Anderson. "Here they treat us like natives. At Sheldon Jackson it's up to us to do the assignments. It's a real challenge. Here they keep reminding us."

"You just memorize the answers here and you get an 'A'," said Ruth. "Over there it's different. If you don't do your work it's your tough luck."

Both students plan to go on to college. Anderson to Central Washington State College at Ellensburg and Ruth to the University of Alaska.

If she cannot get in there she will apply at Sheldon Jackson. Speaking of Edgecumbe in general, Anderson said there is a lack of discipline which is a serious threat to the school.

"There must be a limit to what you can do," he said. "Students aren't going to learn if they don't have discipline. There has been quite a bit of drinking and stealing, and students convicted of crimes are allowed to remain in school."

Anderson and high praise for the vocational training offered at Edgecumbe but felt some students taking this training were not properly placed.

"Some real smart students who should be preparing for college are taking vocational courses," he said.

Crites took issue with the contention that the recent graduating class was undereducated, said it had averaged 12.4 on a standard California achievement test, just three-tenths of one percent below the national average.

"I'm not ashamed of that," he said. The superintendent conceded boys convicted of crimes have been readmitted to Edgecumbe but said this happens in other schools.

As for drinking, he said there is less at Edgecumbe than anywhere else he has worked. On the subject of segregation, Crites said, "if there is room we can take anybody but the law says an Indian can't be displaced by a non-Indian."

He indicated he favors an integrated school system and hopes for closer cooperation in the future with Sitka High School. "We haven't been able to get Sitka High to exchange students but we hope to next year," he said.

(To be continued)