

Huge Problems—

Kivalina High School

By LAEL MORGAN

KIVALINA — The entire high school at Kivalina decided to grant an interview to the Tundra Times.

"What is it you need for your school?" was the first question.

"PENCILS, PAPER, MATH BOOKS, ENGLISH BOOKS, BILINGUAL BOOKS, ANOTHER TEACHER, A MULTIPURPOSE ROOM!" the students answered in a ringing chorus.

"That's pretty basic stuff."

"Yes, we've got problems!"

"We've just got to work a little harder or our high school could just die away," noted Oscar Swan, bilingual teacher, who sat in on the session.

For three years there's been a high school at Kivalina. Currently it has 20 students (six from Noatak boarding with Kivalina families), but money to

(Continued on page 6)



VILLAGE OF KIVALINA — Part of the village of Kivalina is shown as some of the school children are playing at recess time. There, the tiny high school of 20 students is having a hard time trying to keep the High School going.

Woes of Wee H.S.

(Continued from Page 1)

run the school has not been forthcoming.

"Last fall we got a message to order everything we needed," recalls Brian Paust, high school teacher. "I told them, (State Operated Schools) it was going to be high but they said, 'No problem.'"

"I spent about 1,000 hours alone on the library section of the order. The kids were involved in it and the villagers helped. We had a lot of very special material and some mundane things like desks.

"Well, we never got a reply. Just silence. We have no idea what the status of the order is, but we've sure had some of the most interesting conversations with State Operated Schools. Things like, 'Is this conversation being bugged?'"

"At this point no one will talk to us there but the secretaries."

"We've got a library going through the good hearts of people outside. Started with 60 books. Fourteen boxes more came in this week," added Paust's wife, Marjorie, who teaches at the grammar school.

"We've bought some things — like ditto paper — from our own pocket and wouldn't you know, they shipped it air freight so it's really worth its weight in gold."

The Kivalina High School was born in contention. In 1969 the daughters of three Kivalina families were sent to the Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding school at Mt. Edgecumbe but quickly dropped out because they were homesick and found it impossible to study in foreign surroundings.

They were good students, however, and wanted a high school education.

"My girls tried correspondence through mail for a year but it was hard to study," recounts Mildred Swan, mother of three Edgecumbe grads and two drop-out students. "The teacher here was not helping them. He told them to go down on a certain day and bring their homework but many times before that day they ran into problems and needed help they couldn't get."

Finally, with the help of Christopher Cooke (then with Legal Services), Mrs. Swan, with other Kivalina families, sued State Operated Schools, demanding a high school education for her children at home.

In July of 1972 Cooke sent Mrs. Swan a copy of the state education code (Sec. 4AAC06-020) repealed and reenacted to read,

"Every child of school age shall have the right to a secondary education in his community of residence . . ."

In a letter accompanying the law, Cooke wrote, "At least now there can be no question that every child in Alaska has the right to an education through high school in the place where he lives."

The state was slow to inform villagers and principal teacher Mel Bouns, however.

"The following fall, the Thursday before school was to start on Monday, a woman got off the plane and said, 'I'm your new high school teacher,'" Bouns recalls. "It was the first notice I'd had. We started with four teachers and two classrooms (for a combined high school and grammar school).

Last year they added a 10th grade. We had five teachers and three classrooms and double-shifted. Then this year, two weeks after school started, I got a call from the attorney general's office saying, 'You're going to have an eleventh grade.' I didn't tell him I'd already started one."

Currently Kivalina has only four teachers and classroom space is limited.

"We got another portable last fall and we call it The Barn. Something's wrong with the furnace and we have a problem with headaches. Carbon monoxide."

The major problem, though, is still supplies for the high school students. Their parents are helping and Bouns, like Paust, has dipped into his own pocket.

"It seems like if they give us the authority to have a program, they ought to give us something to make it work," he muses.

"This year I told the kids, 'If you want a high school, you're going to have to work for it. Write some letters! I gave them a list of 13 names from the governor on down. Didn't proof-read their letters. The kids even bought their own stationery and stamps.'"

The high school student body, ably lead by Lucille Sage who was one of the three original students to drop out of Edgecumbe, is strong and feisty and has blitzed the state with letters.

Response has been interesting.

Gov. William Egan wrote, "I certainly believe that students should have the equipment and supplies necessary for learning to afford an equitable education regardless of where they attend high school in Alaska," and he added he would check with State Operated Schools.

Marshall Lind, commissioner of education, wrote "The material orders that you sent through the Superintendent Ron Hohman are completely outside the scope of the Department of Education's authority or responsibility. The department does not provide supplies or get involved with actual school operation." Lind also suggested using more "community resources."

And John Schaeffer Jr., executive director of NANA, Kivalina's regional Native organization, apparently thought the students were asking him for money.

"He wrote us a nasty letter saying NANA didn't have any money for that sort of thing," Bouns reported. "Then later we heard he said, 'If I get one more letter from a Kivalina student I'm going down there and straighten them out.' Well, one of my students just asked if he could write that ONE MORE LETTER."

No one in Kivalina is sure what happened to their original suit but it is thought the state settled out of court. As Sam Barr, school board chairman, puts it cryptically, "They say O.K. to everything but they never give us any money. They must think us Eskimos are rich."

They're decidedly not rich, but they are mad. And Barr says they are considering another lawsuit if State Operated Schools will not support the Kivalina High School.