

# GED EXAM FEES QUESTIONED

## **\$80 Exam Fee Charged Native Student Is Eyed**

By JACQUELINE GLASGOW  
Staff Writer

FAIRBANKS - The case of Nellie Tagarook, a boarding student from the Eskimo village of Wainwright has raised questions about the GED (General Equivalency Diploma) testing policies of the Fairbanks North Star Borough School District.

Nellie, who transferred from Lathrop High School to the smaller, more personal Career Extension Center in the District, has been intensively tutored by the staff at Careers towards passing General Equivalency tests given by the State Department of Education.

The GED test, once passed, entitles the applicant to a state diploma and is often the ticket to employment which requires a high school diploma.

According to Irene Cleworth, director of Careers, Nellie was "very special to us. We wanted her to have every chance."

Jerry Morang, counselor at Careers, called Nellie "a super-success story," but added that she is extremely "shy and withdrawn."

"It was the unanimous opinion of the teachers at Careers that if Nellie were to take the GED test under the normal conditions (in a room of fifteen to twenty-five strangers), she would have failed. Being shy and self-conscious, she winds up like a clock."

Until recently there was only one place in the entire Fairbanks Borough where the tests were administered: The Adult Education Division of the Fairbanks North Star Borough School

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District. The fee at that time was \$15 for the complete tests.

Now the fee is only \$5: The tests are given once a month by Corbell Taylor, official GED tester for the District and wife of Walker Taylor, Director of the Adult Education and Vocational Training Program.

At the first request from Careers to test Nellie Tagarook privately and not in a group, the answer was a flat no. It was not the policy of the District to administer individual tests.

Upon repeated urging by the Career Extension staff that an exception be made, Taylor referred Morang to Dr. Dayton Benjamin, Assistant Superintendent for the School District.

Benjamin authorized the test but then Taylor notified Careers there would be an \$80 charge. The \$80 fee, said Taylor, was based on the salary of the tester (Mrs. Taylor) to "oversee the tests which require ten hours of testing time, \$8 an hour for a total of ten hours.

Initially, it appeared that Nellie Tagarook would be unable to take the tests on which hinged her employment in June with the Forest Service Lab at the University of Alaska.

Then through the efforts of Careers and with the okay from Dr. Benjamin, funds were eventually found within the Careers budget.

Nellie Tagarook took her GED test and passed. Jerry Morang still asserts that the outcome could have been different if the test had not been done on an individual basis.

Irene Cleworth is equally sure that the one to one relationship of student and tester was all-important in this particular case.

"Mrs. Taylor was very sympathetic," she said, "and I'm sure this played a big part in Nellie's passing."

"We were asking for something special," Ms. Cleworth admitted. "The teachers had worked very hard to get her ready. If she can take the test privately, we thought, she won't get flustered."

Taylor defends the District's position. "I did not have the authority to authorize that test and lose money on it," he stated. "It cost us \$88."

"I signed the purchase order to have the school district pay for that test," said Benjamin. "I couldn't do that again. That was a very exceptional case."

"The idea for the GED program," he explained, "was to have it self-supporting. Initially,

the fee for the GED test in the District was \$15. Then we had some communication with a fellow over at Tanana Chiefs," said Benjamin, "indicating that the fee was too high for some of their people."

"We wrote the state and we examined our costs," he said, "and the fee was lowered to \$5, or \$1 for each section of the test."

The "fellow over at Tanana Chiefs" turned out to be John Bergamaschi, actually representing the Fairbanks Native Association. Bergamaschi said he had one or two conversations with Benjamin on the subject of GED fees but that no agreement was ever reached.

Then, to his surprise, he received a notice in the mail saying the fees had been lowered.

"Five dollars is better than fifteen," admitted Bergamaschi, "but what we'd like is to get it down to nothing."

In many cases people applying for a GED are financially disadvantaged. The test increases their chances of employment.

"I would authorize the individual tests for any person for any reason if the money was available," said Taylor, who administers the District's present program.

In many other states there is no charge whatsoever for GED tests. There are many districts in the state of Alaska that do not charge a fee.

"I have given many GED's in other parts of the state," said one teacher, "and there was no fee charged at all."

"At Lathrop," said Benjamin, "the high school people didn't want to release the counselors during the day, so it was decided to administer the GED tests at night through the Adult Education Department."

The Fairbanks Native Association is now sponsoring its own Adult Basic Education Program at 1500 Gillam Way under the directorship of Roy Corral.

Corral said Tuesday that his Program has no charge for the GED exam. "They are completely free," he said, "and to my knowledge the Fairbanks School District is the only one in the state that does charge."

Benjamin said he is not adverse to the idea of the new, native-run Adult Education Center being authorized to give GED tests along with the District.

As things stand now, however, there are no specific budget provisions in the School District

Program for another special case like Nellie Tagarook. Under present policy, the \$80 special fee would have to stand.

Dr. Judith Kleinfeld of the Institute of Social, Economic, and Government Research at the University of Alaska, has conducted extensive studies of how Native students adjust and react in the transition from small village schools to large urban high schools.

Dr. Kleinfeld's data indicates that they may very well be other instances where special tests of the kind allowed for Nellie Tagarook are needed.

"After all," she said, "equal education does not mean superficial equality but equal education in the sense that people should have the opportunity for demonstrating their abilities under conditions that make it possible to correctly evaluate those abilities."

"I have just completed a study," said Dr. Kleinfeld, "which will be published in the Journal of Social Psychology on the effect of a warm examiner in testing native students as opposed to an impersonal examiner. The results clearly show that when the examiner is warm, the native student received significantly higher scores."

Dr. Kleinfeld believes that special testing should be incorporated into the normal budget of a school district.

Individual testing is an expensive proposition. It could certainly not be applied, as Dr. Benjamin pointed out, to every case, nor is it needed in every case.

As to the problem of fees for GED's, Walker Taylor said, "I'd like to make the GED available to anyone who needs it without charging them for it. However, it takes personnel to handle it and personnel costs money."