

The cost of education is high :

Both students and teachers pay price

Editor's Note: The author is spending the year in Shungnak as a recipient of the prestigious Alicia Patterson Foundation fellowship, reporting on Subsistence living in a Changing Eskimo Village. The article is appearing the first time in any publication and used by permission of the Foundation.

By Jim Magdanze

(SHUNGNAC)—George White molds the lives of thousands of people. Millions of dollars flow across his desk. Mention of his name is sure to draw opinion, while his own opinions are sought by many. A public servant, his salary exceeds the governor's or the U.S. Senators'. He is one of the most powerful men in this part of Alaska. His business is not oil. His business is children, Eskimo children.

George White is superintendent of Northwest Arctic School District headquartered in Kotzebue, Alaska, serving 1,550 students in grades K-12 with 130 teachers and 227 aides, cooks, custodians, principals and administrators in 11 small villages scattered across 36,000 square miles of roadless Alaskan wilderness.

for Native Americans, in which the district abounds.

Yet with all these resources, the district loses 30 to 40 percent of its teachers every year. And this year, one-third of the Shungnak High School students left their new school (with their parents' blessings) to go to Mt. Edgecumbe boarding school 1,000 miles away near Sitka, Alaska.

The education of Alaska Natives was once a low budget, low priority, almost forgotten affair. Now education is the biggest state government operation in terms of dollars, \$352 million this year. It is on education, in fact, that much of Alaska's oil-related wealth is spent. Accordingly, the activities of rural high schools increasingly are debated all over Alaska. Are the new schools working? Are we spending too much?

One hundred years ago, this region of Alaska was uncharted wilderness. The first sizable settlement of Kobuk River people wasn't visited by westerners until 1883, although coastal Eskimos had been trading with whalers for some time before that. The people were seminomadic, living in large win-

Are the new schools working —

Or are we spending too much ?

It is an unusual operation. It spends over \$6,000 annually per student, three times the national average of \$1,800. It pays first year teachers \$20,033 for a nine-month contract, half again the U.S. average for all teachers (but less than some rural Alaskan districts). In Shungnak Alaska, a village of 200, it built a \$2.7 million school for 75 students. Similar schools are under construction or complete in almost all eleven villages. Northwest Arctic attracts state and federal grants for many purposes, especially those grants targeted

ter villages, then scattering in summer across land to hunt, and along the river to fish. The first school in the Shungnak region was established by the Friends Church 75 years ago. Later the Bureau of Indian Affairs opened schools and the settlement process began.

"My parents stay up river year round sometimes," Shungnak elder Wilson Tickett remembers. "Good hunting ground up there, trapping. That's why they never come down here. Good wood up there, too. Sometimes my parents

(See DOG SLED, Page Four)

● Should they learn algebra or dog sled making?

(Continued from Page One)

sent me down to stay with somebody to go to school, three months, sometimes, in winter.

"Until my kids old enough to go to school, we stay year round at Mauneluk (River) mouth. We move down here when Michael was eight years old." Wilson now has grandchildren in school. His family has long since settled in the village, as have his children's families, and the village was born.

Yet the school was never of the village. It was created by outsiders, controlled by outsiders and staffed by outsiders. It is a settlement pattern distinctly different from the rest of the country, where schools were locally conceived, financed and controlled. "Sometimes teachers stay one year, two years, three or four years. Some teachers, they never stay very long. I don't know why. Some teachers, they don't want to go away. But their time is up," Wilson remembers.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs regularly rotated its teachers, discouraging community participation. "When we were in school, we divided into two groups. When somebody talk Eskimo in the other group, we have to mark them. They have to stay after school, write about 25 times, 50 times, 75 times,

100 times. I will not talk Eskimo in school. I will not talk Eskimo in school." "The schools' mission was acculturation, which in most instances meant the imposition of western culture on Eskimo civilization. Students who wanted to continue their education beyond the eighth grade were sent to boarding schools with other Native students.

By the seventies, Native leaders were dissatisfied. Students who went outside to school often had trouble readjusting to village life. They missed growing through their adolescent years surrounded by family and never learned vital subsistence skills. Students who chose to stay at home forfeited their chances for higher education. There had to be a better way.

In 1972, a Yupik girl from Emmonak, Alaska, joined in a class action suit against the state, alleging it was not providing her with an adequate secondary education. In 1976, the state signed a consent decree, agreeing to provide high schools in any of 126 villages that requested them. Twentyone Rural Educational Attendance Areas were created, of which Northwest Arctic was one. It attracted as superintendent the former head of all state operated

schools, George White.

As it turns out, the challenges of creating and running those bush high schools have been terrific. Typical villages of several hundred people are reachable only by bush plane. Everything is frightfully expensive, from fuel oil to mimeo paper. The Eskimo culture—hunting and trapping and fishing and gathering—is very much alive here.

Many young people plan to live in the village the rest of their lives. Should they learn algebra or dog sled building in the tenth grade? Can five teachers handle the entire curriculum from seventh grade to twelfth? Are they offering enough depth and diversity to prepare students for college?

weren't doing anything." The praise was for involving communities in curriculum planning. "We need to get local people into the system as administrators, teachers. Until we do that, all these other things will have a basic limitation to them.

Decisions are made by people who have only distant perceptions of the village. There is a shortage of teachers for rural schools, especially for Alaska trained teachers. Eighty-five percent of all teachers in the state are issued a certificate based on training outside of Alaska. One percent are Native Alaskans. Most of the people are transients. They don't develop sophisticated, well-run programs. Inevitably, you have to

'They have to stay after school,

write 100 times 'I will not speak Eskimo.'

Questions like these brought educator Ray Barnhardt to nine different villages to study bush high schools. Barnhardt, director of the Center for Cross Cultural Studies at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks, recently released the results of his study in a widely quoted report. "We became concerned with the attention given to the tangible facilities (buildings), while very little concern was given to the programs in those facilities. What was happening was that they were taking the high school model from down here and transporting it to the village," he said later.

The report concluded: "Many small high schools are doomed to failure, along with a generation of young people whose education will be sorely needed during the next decade...Small high schools can be developed into effective institutions, but not without a careful rethinking of their basic functions and design."

Barnhardt's key concern, he related in an interview, was the continuing lack of local involvement and control. "We identified Northwest Arctic School District as one of the few districts trying to do something. Most district

start over every year. Things never grow; they go in perpetual circles."

Northwest Arctic is a good example. Its 130 certified teachers include only two Eskimos. Most of the district's teachers are transients; 30 to 40 percent leave their villages despite high salaries.

"It's the teachers who have to be stabilized," say Guy Stringham, the new principal of Shungnak school and a longtime Alaskan. "Teachers from the lower 48 can't survive in this environment. We're foolish if we think they can. By and large, 99 percent of the people who come up here aren't going to make the adjustment."

Village life is untenable to many. The climate is extreme, with temperatures as low as 50 degrees below zero. Teacher housing can consist of one room, a wood stove, no running water, an electric hot plate and an outhouse out back. Teachers accustomed to a cosmopolitan university town find themselves in a totally isolated village and a vastly different culture.

"We are unique," Stringham says of Shungnak's staff. The

(See LEARNING, Page 14)

● Learning pattern for Natives is not the same

(Continued from Page Four)

teachers live in Native housing, mostly log cabins, and enjoy it. One is married to an Eskimo. Half the staff returned last year and all expect to stay next year. They are liked and respected by the village. It is an unusual and positive situation. Northwest Arctic assigned one of its most promising principals to the school and agreed to offer two half-time contracts to a husband-wife team to encourage them to stay.

How else does the district encourage teachers to stay? Primarily with generous salaries and benefits (which at Alaska prices don't go as far as one expects). First-year teachers complain they are hired not knowing what rigors await them. Others feel the district ignores them once they are in the villages. George White usually visits Shungnak only once a year, for an afternoon. And a few teachers find the district actively discouraging them from remaining in their village.

Peter McManus has lived on the upper Kobuk River for seven years, first in Shungnak and now in Ambler, where he has developed a free-form teaching style he feels is suited to the Eskimo culture.

The learning pattern of the Eskimo kid is not the same as the white kid," McManus said. "The Eskimo parent never asks a kid what he learned at school today. It isn't a question and answer session. The learning is watching. He observes and then goes and does it."

One time, McManus asked an Eskimo elder to come teach sled building. The elder came and simply set about building a sled. "He didn't get excited about the kid over these drilling holes in the saw horse," McManus recalls. "But the kid who is ready to be stanchions gets some pointers. When they're ready to learn, they'll learn. He was teaching them in the only way he knew." McManus learned from the elder's example.

Last year, a new principal came to Ambler, straight from the lower 48. He was Floyd Ellis, a

veteran small school administrator. Seventeen days later, the math/science teacher resigned. By February, two first-year teachers had been "non-retained," which is a very nice way of saying, "You're fired." And Ellis couldn't fire tenured McManus without cause, recommended to be transferred to another village in the district.

Ellis declined comment, saying, "I have to handle these affairs privately." One of the non-retained teachers claimed Ellis threatened to black ball him if he didn't resign. "That was strictly in confidence," Ellis responded. "I was trying to get him to see the light."

McManus fought the district over the transfer. A professional arbitrator from Anchorage heard both sides and decided McManus would return to Ambler this year. "What really saved me," McManus said, "was the letter Ellis wrote to me, telling me I wasn't respectful. Defending other teachers was how I could get into trouble."

George White declined comment, saying, "We could get sued."

But personnel director John L. Rogers explained, "Peter had been in Ambler for a number of years and was getting involved in local activities. Being in a village for an extended amount of time, teaching abilities show a decline. We felt it was time for a change. I the principal's opinion, Pete was not performing in the class room as he thought he should and as he expected he should."

Ray Barnhardt commented, "When someone gets too chummy with the community, they get transferred. A favorite tactic is to move them into central office," which is what Northwest Arctic did in this case, except it was Ellis who got transferred. The disturbing thing for McManus and other teachers is that a newcomer like Ellis who understands nothing about Eskimo culture can disrupt staff and community overnight.

"I have great power," Shungnak principal Guy Stringham said.

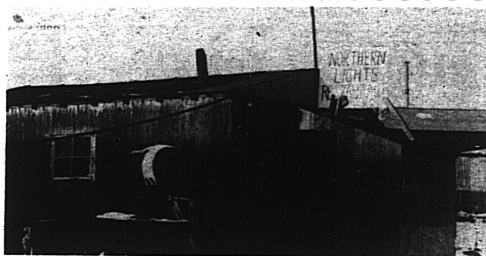
"I can make or break programs," which is exactly what he was doing after three months in the village and a few local school board meetings. Faced with declining enrollment, he closed a school operated community cafe.

The cafe was the brainchild of last year's principal and home economics teacher, both of whom left. Serving hamburgers, ice cream, baked goods and soft drinks, the cafe attracted crowds of villagers when it opened after school. The sponsoring teacher donated innumerable hours to keep the operation going. His students were learning to make change quickly, work as a team, keep things clean and take orders.

"How many kids can actually work in a cafe in Shungnak (which has no cafes). The question is, can you do more by putting kids into other skills, carpentry, metal work, lapidary..." Whether he was wrong to close the cafe or the former staff was wrong to open one isn't the point.

"Year after year," Stringham said, "a new person comes in and changes the whole impact, the whole program, the whole world." Stringham, even seeing the problem, feels he has to reorder the program to his own priorities. He's planning to stay for three, perhaps five years. What then?

The cafe isn't the only example. Shungnak school owns a complete



The Shungnak student run cafe, similar to this one pictured above in Selawik, was closed by its principal, who said, "I can make or break programs." (Tundra Times Photo)

When Stringham discovered that a temporary health permit had expired, he closed the cafe. Then he delayed applying for a permanent permit, while the community heard promises of "next week," or "next month." The permit never was applied for, and the cafe died. Thirteen thousand dollars in brand new equipment—ice cream maker, refrigerator, deep fat fryers and freezer—all sit idle. The sponsoring teachers is frustrated, but resigned to the situation.

"After we get the cafe built, what then?" Stringham asked.

set of grow lights for a hydroponic greenhouse. After the maintenance supervisor pointed out it cost \$300 a month to light a couple dozen tomatoes, the greenhouse was scrapped. Apparently a potter passed through one time, for there are two electric potter's wheels and a large electric kiln in storage. The new shop teacher found a perfectly good table saw in a jumble in a storage shed and restored it to service, shaking his head in wonder.

If continuity of staff and pro-

(See GRASS, Page 16)