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INFORMATION ITEM

REPORT ON ALASKAN EDUCATIONAL TOUR - SEPTEMBER 8-12, 1986

The visit to the Alaskan educational system can be divided into three sectors:

TABLED DOCUMENT NO. 27-86 (a)
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- a) Meetings with State Education Officials
- b) School Visits
- c) Meetings with University Educators and Researchers

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a) The State Department of Education Officials

Marshall Lind, Commissioner of Education and most of his senior officials spent a full day meeting with the Canadian delegation. Lind provided a thorough overview of developments in Alaskan education. The officials provided more detail on specific program concerns. The evolution of Alaskan education has generally followed the same pattern as we have experienced in northern Canada. Initially, schools were operated by the Federal Bureau of Indian Affairs, they were then turned over to the State Department of Education. Although the larger cities in Alaska which had a tax base have had independent school boards operating their schools for a number of years, it was not until the earlier 70's that Regional Educational Attendance Areas were created to provide a system of local governance for schools in settlements without a significant tax base. Some of the REAAs have now been incorporated as rural school districts. I am not clear on the exact difference between the REAAs and rural school districts but, generally, it did seem that the rural school districts are a step further toward full independence experienced by city school districts. A significant difference between the process for devolution of education to regional education authorities from the state level taken on by the Alaskan State, Department of Education and the process currently underway for the Northwest Territories, is that the Alaskans decided that creation of REAA boards of education would happen, then proceeded

to make it happen within little more than a one year period. Prior to that time the experience by education district boards was simply as advisory committees.

A typical REAA or rural school district is that in the Northwest Arctic. This district encompasses 12 communities. The largest community, Kotzebue is made up of approximately 2,500 people. The smallest community has approximately 100 residents. In each of the communities, an advisory board of education is elected to advise on local matters. A board of education, made up of representatives of each community, is established to look after the education affairs of the total district.

Alaska's process of moving very quickly into locally controlled educational districts is one which to a large degree was permitted by the abundance of funding caused by oil development activities. Yet even without the generous funding available, the somewhat rapid process of devolution could have been successful. Commissioner Lind does admit that there have been some horror stories in terms of control of education, but generally feels that the rapid evolution was successful. In Canada, we may have been too cautious in the past in attempting to provide thorough training for all potential divisional boards of education before moving to establish these. Given the level of experience in local government in each of our communities, it certainly seems that we should seriously consider speeding up the process of establishing divisional boards.

A second major observation at the meeting with State officials in Juneau is the level of decentralization of curriculum. The Alaska State Department of Education provides only a very brief set of curriculum guidelines and regulations. It is up to each school district to then determine the specific goals and directions that their schools will take. At the elementary school level very little is given in terms of guidelines and basically no curriculum directives exist whatsoever. At the high school level (grades 10 to 12) the only direction

from the state is in the form of basic units of credit which are required for senior matriculation. In light of the difficulties and great expense we face in attempting to develop and implement a standardized curriculum across the Northwest Territories, it would be worthwhile for us to seriously consider the possibility of turning over much more curriculum control to divisional boards and regions. The Alaskan experience has been that all districts have essentially the same goals in mind and do end up with very similar curriculum guides for their staff. The main disadvantages of decentralized curriculum control is that one might find that teachers do exert an inordinate amount of influence in determining curriculum content. Theoretically this is a decision by the board, but in practice it is the teaching staff who have all of the information and who will be most instrumental in determining what will be taught. A second observation is that some of the small school districts seem to rely almost exclusively on commercial textbooks as curriculum guides. This is not necessarily bad, but on the other hand can be less applicable to particular students' needs than would be a truly district developed curriculum. Although I would like to consider this issue a bit further at this time, I recommend that we move toward more decentralized curricular responsibility. This is particularly true in areas such as native language programming where we find that program needs vary greatly from region to region.

b) School Districts

Two days were spent in the Northwest Arctic School District. Visits were made to the Kotzebue elementary and high schools, Buckland school; and Kiana elementary and high school. As well, an evening was spent at the Northwest Arctic School District office and at the Kotzebue vocational education centre. The Minister's Executive Assistant spent one morning at the District's Alternative Learning Centre, from which two itinerant teachers serve children in bush camps.

Following a court decision in 1976, the Alaska State Department of Education policy is that any community which wishes to have a high

school, may do so. The result is many small rural high schools throughout the state. These vary in size from very tiny to average and large schools. Buckland school has a total enrolment of approximately 70 students. Seventeen of these are in grades 7 to 12, approximately 50 are in grades from pre-kindergarten to 6. Kiana elementary school enrolls 67 students and 42 are enrolled in the high school (grades 7-12). Kotzebue elementary school has an enrolment of approximately 290, and approximately 230 at the high school level including grades 7 to 12.

In addition to the schools visited in Northwest Arctic School District, Nulato school in the Yukon/Koyukuk School's District was also visited. Nulato school enrolls children from kindergarten through grade 12. Total enrolment is 108.

The most noticeable characteristic of the schools visited is that they are almost 100 percent successful in terms of student retention. Attending school is the standard. Absences are very rare. On the morning of the visit to Nulato school, only two students out of 108 were absent. A second characteristic noted is the high level of community support for education and particularly academic education. Parents without exception seem to have come to the conclusion that the best education for their children is an academic education. Cultural education or language instruction tends to be only a small part of the curricula. It would seem that if there is an expectation that language will be retained, it is assumed that that would be the responsibility primarily of parents or agencies other than the school. Particularly in the Northwest Arctic School District, the majority of communities have determined that a local rural high school is the preferable route. Only one community, Kobuk, with a total pre-kindergarten to grade 7 enrolment of 12 students, has chosen to not have a high school. On the other hand, in the Yukon/Koyukuk School District, only four out of ten communities have high schools. Part of the reason would seem to be that the Yukon/Koyukuk School District with ten communities has a total district enrolment of only 440 students. Most

importantly, the decision on whether or not a local high school will be operated in the community is a community decision, but if they go this route they do so without additional funding beyond that they would normally get for a school of that size.

In the Northwest Arctic School District all community schools with the exception of Kobuk, which only had one teacher on staff, enjoyed the benefits of a fulltime principal and fulltime secretary. The principals tended to work very much as community development officers and administrators, rather than taking on responsibilities in the classroom. This approach to education seems to have benefitted the community in that it frees the principal to immediately pursue pressing tasks, such as dealing with rare cases of delinquency and also gives him time to do long-range planning for education in the community. As well, time for public relations cannot be discounted. While most of the schools in the Yukon/Koyukuk School District did not have full-time principals, they did have principals who spent much more time on administrative and community matters than is the case in the Northwest Territories.

After visiting a few schools in Alaska, one certainly has the impression that our schools in the Northwest Territories are understaffed in both principal time and secretarial services. If we are to make any drastic improvements in student attendance and achievement, it will be necessary for us to consider increasing the principal's administrative time in all schools with more than three or so teachers on staff. As well, an important point is that although the principals are employed by the district board they are certainly seen as employees of the local community represented by the local advisory board. It is strongly recommended that we take action immediately to increase the level of principal administration time in all schools, except the very small, by no later than September 1987. Further, it is recommended that principals be recognized as managers, rather than teachers, and that they be in effect hired by the local community LEA. It is possible for them to maintain their status as government employees, yet be selected and directed at the community or regional level.

The classrooms visited indicated an average level of interest and involvement by students that one would expect from any school. The teaching staff were generally enthusiastic about their work and displayed the same interest and positiveness about their work as was very obvious from the brief discussions we had with school principals and superintendents. The commitment to education and generally to community improvement showed by all staff was remarkable. One would expect that district responsibility for curriculum development would mean much greater workloads by all teachers and this might cause them to feel overworked. If that was the case, it was not obvious. It was enlightening to notice, as well, that in spite of 15% cutbacks in education during the past few months, all staff have maintained a strong commitment to their jobs.

School districts, having been given a lot of autonomy with regard to curriculum, have tended to rely much more heavily on standardized testing than we do in the Northwest Territories. The academic focus of the schools tends to make this a reasonable route to go in ensuring that students in the small schools are achieving at a normal rate.

Interestingly, the school districts generally do not provide housing for their teachers. Even in the smaller communities teachers are expected to find their own housing unless some Bureau of Indian Affairs housing is still available. This means that many teachers must live in less than average housing, some of which might not have water or sewage. Staff seem to accept this simply as being the way it is. I doubt that if we were to move in this direction it would be considered to be at all tolerable.

In summary, community ownership for the schools is very high, principals with full time administrative and community responsibilities are able to do many things our principals can only dream of doing, and students

and parents accept school as being part of life and the place where children naturally go each day. Attendance level of less than 85% are totally unheard of and unbelievable. There is really no reason why we cannot move quickly in implementing a system with greater principal and secretarial time in the schools as well as more opportunity for districts and regions to take on responsibility for curriculum content and direction.

3. University Visit

On the afternoons of Thursday and Friday, September 11 & 12, we met with Judith Kleinfeld and David Haegstrom, authors of *Alaska's Small Rural High Schools: Are They Working?*. These individuals essentially were able to confirm many of the observations which we had already made during our visit to the schools. Two points which are noteworthy which Judith Kleinfeld pointed out is that much of the success of the rural high schools is dependent on the effectiveness of the staff in each school. This really isn't any different than is a situation in Canadian education. This high level of success of Alaska's schools though, seems to have set up a situation in which teacher turnover is much lower than we experience in Canada. There is no doubt that much of this stability is due to teacher satisfaction with their jobs. Dr. Haegstrom outlined the principal networking system he has organized at Fairbanks University. This network allows principals who participate to get together two or three times each year and to communicate with each other on a more regular basis through audio conferences. Dr. Haegstrom is very interested in extending the network to include Northwest Territories principals. It is his observation, and we certainly agree, that there is more in common between the Alaskan school system and the Northwest Territories system than there is with southern counterparts. It is intended that contact will be made with Dr. Haegstrom shortly. He may be able to participate most effectively in our principal certification program. Judith Kleinfeld's second point after listening to the description of Canadian education in

the Northwest Territories is that there may be an ideological difference between our communities and those in Alaska. For example, the communities in Alaska have very much accepted the concept of academic education and the fact young people when they graduate from school will likely have to take jobs outside of their home community. In the case of our communities, many parents are still very ambivalent about whether they wish their children to continue on in education and leave the north, or even leave their home for jobs elsewhere in the north. Many still believe that it is possible to have a system which provides both academic and cultural education. As a goal and objective in education this concept is certainly one which we do not intend to easily sacrifice.

On Friday, September 12, we were able to meet with Dr. Michael Krause and the staff from the Alaska Native Language Program. Dr. Krause has a great deal of interest in the native language situation in Canada. His opinion is that we have a much stronger chance of maintaining native languages as part of the culture and part of the school system than is the case in Alaska. Alaska has a much longer history of education and contact with non-native people than is our situation. In Alaska most languages are essentially at the point where they will not survive. In all cases observed, native languages, where taught; were taught as a second language to the children. It is our understanding that basically the only communities in Alaska which have retained the native language as a first language are those in the north slope area. It will be a monumental task to maintain those languages. As well, it is clear that if we are to maintain aboriginal languages in the Northwest Territories it is necessary that we become more effective than has been the case in the past. This will mean greater expenditures of money in the language area and more efficient ways of training staff to teach and support the native language programs. It was clearly the message from the Canadian delegation to the Alaskans and also from the Alaskans to the Canadians that to do anything but continue to do as much as we can to maintain native languages in our schools would be folly.

In conclusion, the Alaskan tour was extremely beneficial. Some of the things which we have talked about, such as decentralized curriculum, moving more quickly toward establishment of divisional boards, development of the role of the principal as school manager and educational leader, and greater opportunity for the local community to determine the direction of their educational programs, are goals that we must continue to strive toward. Certainly, the issue of maintenance and, in some cases, revitalization of native languages is one which we must move quickly on. Even five or ten more years without effective school programs and teacher training may result in language retention being less possible than we expect.

Capital Facilities

The following briefly represents the conclusions drawn by the Public Works and Highways' representatives on the tour. Purely technical observations are not included herein.

Department of Public Works and Highways wanted to determine:

- a) If the Alaskans had developed any technical solutions to northern design and construction problems that could be transferred to the N.W.T. capital program, and;
- b) the impact that the devolution to independent school boards has had on the design and construction and the operations and maintenance of capital school facilities.

Very few instances were seen of material use or system designs that have been developed which are of any value in our capital program. There is no evidence of standardization or of building upon prior experience. In other words, each school represents unique approaches to building problems which are common to all communities but there is no attempt to maximize on effective and proven solutions. We saw little evidence of consideration being given to Life Cycle Cost

in that low capital cost (initial cost) systems and materials with high operating and maintenance costs are the rule rather than the exception. From the cost data given, it is clear that schools in the N.W.T. are constructed at significantly lower costs than in Alaska.

This situation, no doubt, exists because the State exercises no control, nor has it established any criteria over space utilization or other standards of design and construction. Local districts receive very little guidance or assistance from the State in planning its facilities, as the State has no department equivalent to Public Works and Highways, which has responsibility for design, construction, and operation of schools. The local districts, therefore, rely heavily on a large variety of outside consultants. It is evident that with little, if any, experience in dealing with consultants and no established guiding criteria, some monumental and extravagant facilities have been built. Examples can be seen in Barrow where between 70 - 80 million dollars was spent on a high school for 250 students and in Little Diomedede where 4.2 million was spent on a school that will serve 14 to 20 students.

It should also be pointed out that no effort is made to design to favour local labour skills or to require the contractor to use local businesses or services. There is no preference policy and, in fact, State law prohibits preferential treatment. In the N.W.T., our experience has allowed us to develop solutions to very complex building problems which allow adaptation to local conditions of material, labour, and contractors. Maximization of local involvement on capital projects is often achieved at additional expense to the GNWT and at extra effort and expertise to maintain control. Smaller autonomous boards do not have the broader base of financial and human resources to implement special provisions and, therefore, may not give the same priority to ensuring local involvement.

The operation and maintenance of all school facilities is the responsibility of the local school districts and thus falls upon the school principal. There is very little support from the district should

the operational problems be beyond the principals technical capability. There were no formal or consistent preventative maintenance programs in place in any of the schools visited; except as initiated by the custodian who was usually the janitor. Since maintenance budgets are a part of each schools total operating budget, there is only incidental similarities from school to school. Their general approach is to emphasize minimum current costs without concern for the long term. The local districts are hampered in their ability to resolve individual maintenance problems because there has been no uniform approach to the design of building systems and no coordinated operations and maintenance planning as occurs in the N.W.T.

Our impression was that the school superintendents, principals, and teachers are saddled with responsibilities related to design, construction, and school O&M which are beyond their capabilities and which consume a great deal of their time which would more effectively be spent in program delivery. The quality of design and construction and of the O&M of schools has obviously suffered. We can only assume that the quality of program delivery would be enhanced if these program specialists had more time to devote to that area.

It is our conclusion that the devolution of responsibilities for capital facilities design, construction, and operations and maintenance to inexperienced local school boards has had a very negative impact on the quality of these activities and that the state of the art in school facilities in Alaska is generally behind that of the N.W.T. It confirms our belief that because we operate in a very extreme environment and with few fully developed northern resources, such as consultants and contractors able to effectively deal with the specialized nature of building problems, that the GNWT should retain control over capital facilities until such time as local boards have fully developed their program delivery capabilities and then acquire expertise in capital asset management.

We also conclude that the current direction by the Department of Education (NWT) to standardize school spatial programs, allowing

standardization of school design, is an appropriate and cost effective direction to take.

Minister
Department of Education

Minister
Department of Public Works
& Highways

