



Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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It is good to be back in Alaska where I spent three of the most memorable and worthwhile years of my life: worthwhile because the experience of working for and with the native peoples of this State gave me new and deeper insight into the nature of cultural differences among American peoples; and memorable because, as you know, this land of the frozen tundra can warm your heart while almost freezing your marrow.

Alaska is a land where physical challenges give emphasis to the needs of the mind and spirit. Alaska is, therefore, a land where teachers belong, where teachers are needed, where teachers can and do bear profound influence on the lives of the young native people.

And so I feel honored to be amongst this dedicated assemblage of teachers serving the native peoples of Alaska, and I am deeply grateful to you for the devotion, the tenderness and the toughness you muster daily for your chosen work.

I also commend you for the focus this conference places upon the special educational needs of children whose backgrounds differ from the dominant culture of our country. This is a subject of concern to the Nation as a whole, because adjustment problems of the ethnically and culturally "different" are now affecting our social structure.

To the Bureau of Indian Affairs above all, it is important that we learn how to ease cultural transitions -- for all the people we serve are people at such a crossroads.

We are all here as individuals involved personally in the education of the Indian, Eskimo and Aleut children of Alaska. Let us, then make the very most of this time together by directing our attention to fundamental matters. Let us talk policies, programs and principles. Let us determine our direction. Let us make this conference a source of continuing inspiration even after the talking is done and we have returned to our posts to resume the daily patterns of our work.

But before we can discuss programs or principles, it is necessary that we are clear in our minds about matters of basic policy.

A fundamental policy of the Bureau of Indian Affairs for several years has been that of cooperation with State and local public school agencies to facilitate the transfer of Indian children to public schools.

Today about two-thirds of all Indian children are in public schools. From these figures it is quite evident that the policy is being pursued. However, we are confident that, in its pursuit, we are avoiding any precipitous actions that would result in lowering educational opportunity for Indian, Eskimo and Aleut children.

When school districts are ready, and when the native people involved are also ready, then the Bureau is ready to put the policy into effect. But there is no intention of reducing BIA's services before equivalent or better services are available.

The situation in Alaska is no different from our policy elsewhere.

I know the subject has been a matter of some speculation and apprehension among some village communities, particularly in the more remote areas.

The mutually agreed upon policy of the State of Alaska and the Bureau of Indian Affairs is outlined in the revised Governor's report entitled AN OVERALL EDUCATION PLAN FOR RURAL ALASKA, issued in 1966. As this report indicates, the Bureau of Indian Affairs operates in partnership with the State of Alaska.

It is recognized by both governmental levels that the responsibility for the education of native students rests with the State, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs continues to operate schools and education programs where the State cannot presently assume its full responsibility.

The State plan provides for the orderly transfer of Bureau schools to non-Federal operation under the principle of mutual readiness on the part of the community, the State and then We are currently operating about 80 schools in Alaska, including the two boarding schools, Wrangell Institute and Mt. Edgecumbe; and we have transferred educational responsibility in about 60 other places.

The Bureau's most conspicuous and unique service is to the native villages, widely scattered throughout wilderness areas.

The Federal Government is pledged to assuring these village people that services to them will continue without interruption and without reduction of standards. Indeed, it is our goal that we raise the quality of these schools to new levels, so that they will be proud showcases, both for BIA and for the State.

This brings me to the second point I wish to discuss -- the matter of what we mean by quality education and how it can be achieved and maintained even in the two-or three-teacher school, removed from the more usual cultural influences.

A big part of quality in education requires adequate financial resources, and the Congress has been increasingly liberal with appropriations for Indian education.

This has enabled us to build schools where none existed before, and to replace schools that were relics of a dismal past.

We have developed libraries of books and libraries of visual teaching aids.

We have raised the recruiting standards for teachers.

We have introduced new programs at all grade levels, but most particularly at the upper secondary and postsecondary levels, where arts and technologies are now being offered to our young people.

We have a nationwide net of adult vocational training and job placement services -- and, in Alaska, the proof is in the high wage employment of many skilled native technicians in military and other Government installations.

But lest it seem that I am saying all is well, let me hasten to add: All we have been doing is running fast to make up for long years of neglect. We are still losing the nationwide race to provide quality education and equality of opportunity for our children.

New avenues have opened up in the last year or two, and we can now plan more systematically for the kind of quality we seek.

For preschoolers, teen agers and elder citizens, the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 has made it possible to launch special education and training programs that are essential to the quality package.

The U.S. Office of Education, through its administration of many new Federal education aid laws, has made possible most of the experimentation, research, curriculum development, teacher training, and "hardware" and "software" purchases that we have needed for so long and are now commencing.

One of the big new efforts will be development of special materials and programs for teaching English as a second language to Indian, Eskimo and Aleut children. Techniques have been perfected to teach English to foreigners; it is equally important that we meet the special needs of our own youthful citizens of differing cultural backgrounds.

Another big effort will be the training of teachers who speak some of the native languages. Navajo is probably to be one of the prime targets of the huge Navajo-speaking population (about one-sixth of all native populations).

Other-in-service teacher training plans call for broadening of specialized institutes such as those financed under the National Defense Education Act of 1958; special pre-training for new teachers; and possibly a schedule of sabbaticals or similar leave periods to permit teachers to undertake further training at our expense.

Salaries, we know, are still not competitive with some public school systems, and the 12 month year is a handicap to our teachers and so we are negotiating now with the Civil Service Commission to try to make some adjustments.

Last, but not least, we have entered into the development of special curriculums to meet the unique needs of children facing the cultural transition in school. We will be relying increasingly upon the classroom teachers in our schools -- the men and women on the front lines -- to provide advice and assistance.

With regard to Alaska in particular, the same general plans apply. In some respects, there is already more evidence of new developments here than in most other parts of the country. We have built about 35 new schools in the past few years and have made improvements in many others. All schools are being equipped with the kinds of equipment and materials necessary for teachers to use their skills to best advantage.

The State of Alaska itself is already leading in training for teachers, through its program at the University in cooperation with the Ford Foundation; and is also a leader in developing teacher aide programs to provide trained local help to teachers in native communities. The BIA actively cooperates in both efforts.

All of these are signals that "quality education" is more than just a phrase. We are striving for an exemplary school system, one that can serve as a model in educating the culturally different and the economically deprived child.

But money can't buy it all the way. The single most important ingredient of quality education is teacher-

student-rapport. The classroom must be a physically comfortable place, but it should be more, too -- it should be a comforting place where conflicting cultures synthesize rather than polarize.

This reads to my third point: the importance of the classroom teacher in shaping the philosophical principles for our education program.

A school system is built of teachers. We are dependent upon you to help uncover the missing clue to success in bridging the culture gap so that our children will flourish, not wilt, in the halls of learning.

We ask you to be creative and innovative -- to be cognizant in all ways of the acute needs of children facing a cultural transition.

I would like to quote a man who has been one of the country's most forceful voices in focusing attention on the culture gap that is creating social havoc today. James Farmer, director of the Center for Community Action Education, recently told a national conference of State educators:

"A teacher can be effective in teaching the disadvantaged only when he believes they can be taught, and believes in them -- not in a romantic way, ascribing to all of them all of the virtues and none of the vices of man, but in the realistic sense that there is among them a reservoir of submerged intelligence, talent, and ability, the discovery of which is an exciting adventure, worthy of the best in any teacher."

And Congressman Henry Gonzalez of Texas, in an article published by the AFL-CIO FEDERATIONIST last August, comments on the educational needs of Spanish-speaking Americans, as follows:

"I do not believe that it is the place of the schools to force a choice of cultures on children or suppress their native heritage ••••• Great injury is done whenever this is attempted ••••• I believe the schools must make an effort to capitalize on the special talents and attributes of the Spanish-surnamed American. This will make his education meaningful and 'will do more than anything else to help him realize his full potential; His special educational problems need to be solved and his assets refined •••••"

The problems created by ethnic differences -- for Negroes, for Spanish-Americans or for Indians, Eskimos and Aleuts -- frequently converge in the classroom and in daily life. There is the common tendency of the "culturally different" to look backward into their heritage and to lean heavily upon it.

This is probably truest and deepest among Indians, Eskimos and Aleuts. They are bound by cultural restraints that are all too often interpreted as manifestations of intellectual limitations, when, in truth, they are instinctive attempts to preserve their own identities. They are too frequently forced to choose between the two cultures, and rarely assisted in melding the best of both.

The native groups in this country -- both in the lower Forty-Eight and in Alaska -- are rooted in a way of life that was fully responsive to nature. Their view of nature is a spiritual one. Their economic order, therefore, was traditionally one of subsistence, not accumulation -- and this attitude frequently carries over to the present day.

Along with these basic constraints, the concepts of time and work differ from those of the Euro-American. As a matter of fact, it is believed that no tribal language had a word which described the idea of time. Work was regarded as a necessary interruption to leisure, as contrasted with our view of leisure as a reward for work.

The puritan may recoil from such concepts, but there is no place for puritanism among those who are serving Indians, Eskimos and Aleuts.

This is not to say that the values of the dominant culture have no applicability to people of other cultures. They do have great applicability, and the better this is understood by the culturally different the sooner they will emerge into fuller participation in all aspects of American life.

Part of the task of the teacher in the small community school should therefore be to encourage parental involvement in school affairs. I myself am continually urging Indian parents to take an active interest in their school -not in a meddlesome way, but in an inquiring and helpful way. Parental attitudes, as you know, are often reflected in the students' attitudes toward education,

The teacher can help stimulate parental interest by giving due honor to the cultural influences of the child's home life; and by aiding the child to understand that the purpose of education is to help them relate what they learn at home to what they learn at school.

And so the task of the teacher becomes one of selectively mixing new and old ideas in rich proportions to sweeten the taste of transition.

This is your challenge, as teachers of the native children of Alaska. You must often proceed intuitively because there is little if any methodology upon which to draw.

But it is at least possible to draw upon the generic meaning of the word "education" - to lead each child by own special light to the threshold of intellectual and practical understanding of himself and the world around him.

The responsibility you have willingly assumed merits our profound respect. I salute you, the teacher of BIA, who are carrying the lamp of learning to the top of the world.

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<https://www.bia.gov/as-ia/opa/online-press-release/schooling-indian-and-eskimo-children-policies-programs-and>