

A word from the president

Alaska must improve education options

By: Margie Brown, CIRI president and CEO

Gov. Sean Parnell recently asked me to offer suggestions about education reform in Alaska. My views are shaped by my family's own experiences with Alaska's education system. This generational view begins with my grandfather, Adams Hollis Twitchell.

My grandfather was mostly a self-educated man with a mind inclined to natural science and a hunger for life-long learning. His life in western Alaska would come to include owning and operating sternwheelers, trading posts and reindeer herds. And it would include raising a family and providing his children with opportunities for formal education.

Educating children in remote, rural Alaska then was much different than today. For grandfather's children, including my father, Ben Twitchell, formal schooling began at the mission at Holy Cross. After receiving encouragement from his Jesuit teachers, my father traveled alone to Fairbanks from the small community of Flat to attend high school and, upon graduation, the Agricultural College and School of Mines (now UAF).

Traveling away from home for schooling was the only realistic option at the time. Much more recently, the decision in the Molly Hootch lawsuit and the resulting Tobeluk consent decree changed schooling options dramatically. Coming providentially at the same time as wealth poured into state coffers from Prudhoe Bay royalties, these legal actions led to the state opening 105 secondary schools in rural Alaska, providing children throughout the state with an option to attend high school in their own communities, including, for the first time, in rural Alaska.

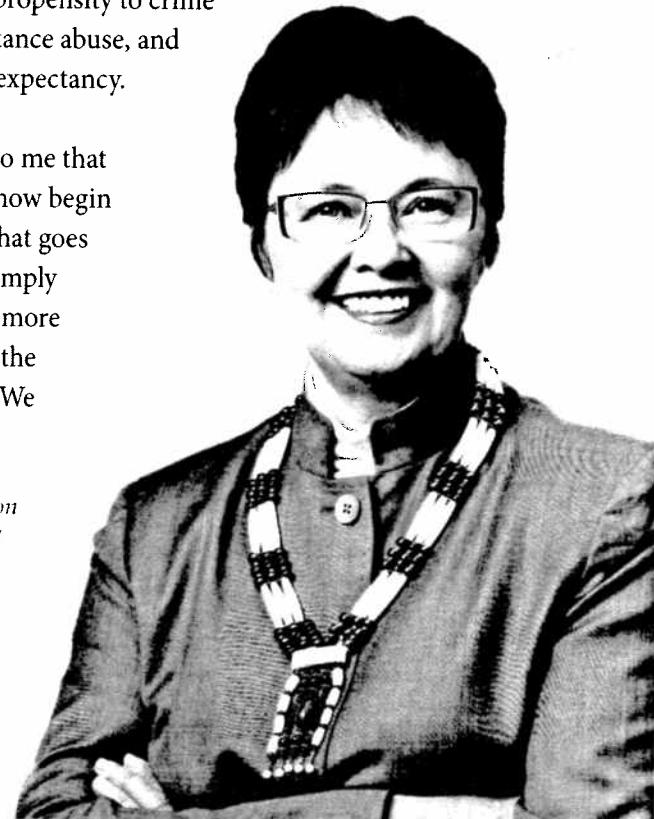
While the 1972 Molly Hootch decision was a landmark, the world has changed dramatically in the last 39 years. I believe it is now time to reassess the impacts of that decision.

Clearly there were excellent outcomes from the Molly Hootch lawsuit and Tobeluk consent decree. Parents of grade school children no longer faced the prospect of moving their entire family from home villages so that their children could attend grade school - the very decision my parents made when they decided they must move our family from the village of Takotna.

However, we must honestly assess the performance of today's high school students in small village schools. Ignoring the shortcomings of rural education threatens to leave a generation of high school students undereducated and unprepared for college or trade school. And in today's increasingly competitive world, undereducation places these students at a severe disadvantage. Why? Because we know that educational attainment directly correlates with virtually every quality of life measurement, including employment, income, propensity to crime and substance abuse, and even life expectancy.

It seems to me that we must now begin a dialog that goes beyond simply throwing more dollars at the problem. We need to

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consider systemic change. I believe that establishing residential high schools in Alaska's regional centers should be a key component of this dialog because it has been shown that higher student densities enable economies of scale that provide more and better education programs and services for fewer dollars.

I acknowledge that there is fear in the Alaska Native community about regional residential schools. We still have a generation of Alaska Natives who were uprooted to boarding schools. In keeping with the appalling policies of the federal government at the time, these schools made a concerted effort to separate children from their Alaska Native culture, the result of which was, not surprisingly, harmful.

But our culture, nation and world have evolved dramatically since 1972. In today's more culturally sensitized world, we can create residential regional high schools where enhancement, not destruction, of Alaska Native culture is promoted; where high academic standards are expected and pursued; where academic offerings are supplemented with a full and robust array of extracurricular school opportunities;

and where students are highly functioning, resilient and prepared to take on life's challenges.

I urge Gov. Parnell and his administration to work with the Alaska Native community to begin a dialog that will lead to systemic change and improvement of our state's rural education system. And I urge Alaska Native leaders to join me in engaging in this dialog with open minds and hearts. We must all make education a statewide priority and act to implement systemic changes that will close Alaska's academic performance gaps before it is too late.

We owe it to our children to act, not from fear, but from our vision of what can be.

Margie Brown is president and chief executive officer of CIRI and is Yup'ik from the Interior village of Takotna, Alaska. She graduated from Oakridge High School in Oakridge, OR and earned a Bachelor of Science in Biology from the University of Oregon and a Master of Business Administration from the University of Colorado.



Margie Brown's father, Ben Twitchell, (backrow, third person from the left and wearing a bow tie) in a 1929-1930 Agricultural College and School of Mines student body portrait.

Photo: Otto Geist Collection, Elmer E. Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks

