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Main Image:
Stony River Students [2]

STONY RIVER -- Boarding schools left a bad taste in the mouths of many Alaska Natives, but a modern version of the old idea may help prevent small schools like Stony River's from dying while boosting skills so villagers can take local jobs that have long been the domain of educated outsiders.

Finding support for the idea may not be easy. The pre-1970s boarding school era that produced the first wave of Alaska Native leaders separated families for months or years at a time. Sometimes children died when they were away.

Critics have called the schools factories that tried stamping away culture and language. Students took beatings for speaking their language. Some were sexually abused.

Kinder, gentler boarding schools

Though some Alaskans will surely protest the creation of new boarding schools, a kinder, gentler version of the old system is already happening today. Sometimes older students in small schools, including two from Stony River, are finishing high school in larger communities. Hundreds of other students attend state-supported boarding schools in Galena and Nenana in the Interior or Sitka in Southeast, where they're excelling, said Jerry Covey, a former Education commissioner and rural superintendent who's calling for regional boarding schools.

Those who stay behind in a small school may not get much of an education. A huge divide exists between the mostly Native schools in the Bush and the mostly non-Native schools in urban areas, Covey notes in the report, "Saving Alaska's Small Off-The-Road-System Schools."

At Bush school districts, at least 50 percent of students routinely drop out. Urban schools generally see about a 30 percent drop out -- or less.

The consent decree that stemmed from the famed Molly Hootch case in the 1970s led to an explosion of school construction in villages and brought the boarding school era to an end. But the state's promise of a quality rural education was never realized, said Covey, who recently presented his report to the Legislature.

Kookesh not a fan

This new version of the boarding school could differ from the old one in a number of ways, Covey said. For one, high school students wouldn't travel hundreds of miles from home, but to such hub communities as Bethel, Dillingham or Nome.

Perhaps the boarding school for upper Kuskokwim could be based in Aniak, where Stony River's two oldest high school students have already moved. And the small elementary school back home could remain open with a single teacher, providing a site where the high school students could spend part of the school year taking courses digitally.

With bigger numbers, the regional schools could attract top teachers and provide classes not offered in small schools, such as foreign languages, arts and advanced math and science classes.

Sen. Albert Kookesh, Senate chairman of the Bush Caucus, said he's open to hearing more about the idea, but he's generally not a fan of more boarding schools. Originally from Angoon and a student at Wrangell Institute Boarding School in the 1960s, Kookesh remembers elementary and junior high students crying themselves to sleep because they were homesick.

Rep. Reggie Joule, who attended boarding school in Copper Valley, is House chairman of the Bush Caucus. He believes it's time to develop a new educational model that doesn't fail rural students. Cultural assimilation was the goal of the past. That wouldn't happen today, he said.

"Here we are 40 and 50 years later, and we understand the value of our cultural differences and the richness and diversity of our people, and we understand the importance of our family. So from that context, regional schools in regional hub areas would work better. They wouldn't take children as far away from home, the family would be easily accessible and yet students would have discipline, supervision and more courses," he said.

Joule said regional boarding schools could allow students to stay in their region after graduation, learning skills that lead to good jobs. At the moment, many institutions, such as boroughs or school districts, import workers to fill top positions requiring degrees. "It's not like we don't have the availability of jobs, but a lack of qualified people to take the jobs that are there," he said.

Field trip an eye-opener

As small schools go, the Gusty Michael school in Stony River might be one of the luckier ones. Their lead teacher, Debi Rubera, arrived in the village from Oregon with years of experience. It didn't take her long to figure out the kids had no plans for jobs or college. Turns out, they didn't have a connection to the outside world. Some had never left the village,

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and there aren't many jobs in Stony River to serve as examples. No police, no nurses, no stores.

Rubera started thinking about making a mega-field trip to Anchorage or beyond, so her students could learn about educational options outside the village. Kids raised money by selling pizzas. With her help, they turned a supply closet in the gym into the village's only grocery store. In the end, they started planning a trip to Santa Barbara, Calif.

They improved their math by budgeting money and calculating distances. They read up on animals they'd see in zoos. They even learned about coins -- many of them had little experience with them because there's not much currency in the village.

Part I: Stony River among rural schools struggling to survive [3]

Part II: In Rural Alaska, villages fight extinction once schools close [4]

Part III: Regional boarding schools an answer for Bush education? [5]

When grades improved before and after that trip, Rubera started planning a second big excursion to Washington, D.C., an effort that's now on the fast-track because the school might close because of insufficient enrollment.

Still need $18,000

At the school in late March, on a sunny, cold day, Rubera and the kids were launching new fundraising efforts. They spent some time making bearded bookmarks to sell on Facebook [6]. They started raffling off a wooden toboggan to residents in Stony River and neighboring villages. The sled is for hauling cargo behind snowmachines.

With two months before they planned to leave in late May, they'd collected $20,000, about $8,000 of it through store sales and the rest largely through donations of lodging.

At that point, the students were still more than $18,000 from their goal, but it was time to start planning. Standing at a lectern, Rubera led the kids on a web tour of sites, such as the national zoo, the national aquarium and the White House.

The teacher, who's invested thousands of her own dollars to make the trips happen, said she didn't know where the rest of the donations would come from. If she has to, she'll pick up the tab for all their meals, and they can cut back on sight-seeing.

"I've watched these kids blossom," said Rubera. "We're not going to stop here."

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