

KIVALINA

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April 1, 2002

Commissioner Shirley J. Holloway
Alaska Department of Education and Early Development
801 West 10th Street, Suite 200
Juneau, AK 99801-1894

Dear Commissioner Holloway:

As you are aware, the McQueen School Fact Finding Team conducted its investigation on March 16-19, 2002. During this time, team members examined numerous documents and interviewed a variety of individuals, both in Kivalina and the Kotzebue region. Throughout the site visit, all parties welcomed the team members and constructive conversations occurred. These extensive interactions allowed the team to gain a good understanding and appreciation for the events and issues that prompted the closure of the McQueen School.

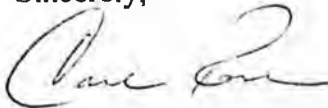
All team members are of the firm belief that competent outside facilitation is necessary to assist in creating an educational environment at McQueen School where children can achieve at high levels. The fundamental responsibility for improving the situation in Kivalina should remain within the Kotzebue region. There are resources and a variety of talented individuals and agency personnel that can lend support to help create a safe and wholesome environment where the children of McQueen School can flourish.

The findings of the team focused on two issues: 1. The circumstances that led to the closure of the McQueen School, and; 2. The concern, that students are not being given the opportunity to meet the State of Alaska Content and Performance Standards in a safe learning environment.

The team further references the NWABSD Board of Education as the sole entity with the responsibility and authority under Alaska law to incorporate the recommendations found in this report.

I would personally like to recognize the hard work and dedication of all the team members that participated in the fact-finding effort. The diversity of the team as well as the many talents represented allowed for a thorough investigation and the development of recommendations that will guide the effort to improve education for the children of the Kivalina community.

Sincerely,



Carl Rose
Team Leader

McQueen School:
A School in Crisis — A School at a Crossroad

A Report

From the

McQueen School Fact Finding Team

To

Shirley J. Holloway, Ph.D.
Commissioner of Education & Early Development

April 1, 2002

Introduction

The irony was too apparent to ignore as Mildred Sage, Kivalina octogenarian, wondered what had gone so wrong with the very school she had been instrumental in opening thirty years ago to force its closure due to a legacy of disheartening stories of student (and, at times, adult) misbehavior and alarmingly low student achievement.

McQueen School was the first village high school in the Northwest Arctic region — a groundbreaking institution that promised to serve as a model for other villages as they sought to educate their children. Unfortunately, due to recent events, McQueen School looks as if it may serve as another model for village schools - not as a beacon of student success, but as a troubling snapshot of what many have feared rural education has become.

Background

On February 27, 2002, CEO Charles Mason, Northwest Arctic Borough School District (NWABSD), felt compelled to close – indefinitely – the McQueen School, enrollment 135, because five (5) teachers had chosen to leave this small K-12 school prior to the conclusion of the school year. A great deal of speculation and confusion surrounded why Mr. Mason made this decision and why those teachers chose to leave their positions so abruptly. Contrary to what some may think, there is no single issue that triggered this controversy. Closing the school was merely a culmination of events that led one Regional Board member to ask, “How did we let it get to this point?”

Those teachers who left reported a variety of reasons for refusing to complete the school year at this traditional Inupiat whaling village located 81 miles northwest of Kotzebue. Most notably, departing teachers and Northwest Arctic Borough School District administrators indicated that these teachers’ frustrations resulted from a combination of challenges. Foremost, one-half of the teaching staff harbored fears for their personal safety. Departing teachers also mentioned other frustrations: (in no ranked order) divergent staff philosophies; challenges associated with establishing the educational climate (classroom discipline) necessary to hold students to even minimal academic expectations; frustration over classrooms full of students lacking basic literacy skills; poor student academic performance; overall angst caused by numerous instances of aggressive student acts towards teachers; angry parent confrontations occurring during which adults supported negative student behavior; and, finally, disappointment in being targeted by innuendoes levied against staff through unsubstantiated student allegations.

Ultimately, this group of five teachers said they feared for their well being, reinforced by their frustrations and fueled by teaching in a community that promised little hope of providing them with the requisite support to raise student achievement and improve student behavior, caused them to pack their belongings and leave Kivalina.

This same sense of frustration also emerged at the top levels of school governance. As stated by CEO Mason, "The Northwest Arctic Borough School Board (NWABSB) is not interested in 'putting a band-aid' (on this problem) or 'sweeping it under the rug.'" The Board wants positive change - and that takes time." With the support of CEO Mason and the Northwest Arctic Borough School Board, Commissioner of Education & Early Development Shirley Holloway commissioned a fact finding team, led by Carl Rose, Executive Director of the Association of Alaska School Boards. Commissioner Holloway asked the team to research the facts that contributed to the school's closure and to present those facts and recommendations in an objective report, in hopes that the McQueen School - its educators and community - could begin a process that ultimately would allow educators to focus on the needs of children.

Other members of the team were:

- Andy Greenstreet, Acting Regional Supervisor, Kotzebue, Alaska State Troopers
- Darlene S. Heckler, Teacher at Anchorage Baxter Elementary School and former rural Alaska educator
- Denise Morris, Alaska Native Justice Center (Ms. Morris participated in discussions reviewing the report before submitting it to Commissioner Holloway, but was not able to travel to Kivalina to meet on-site with the team)
- Jim Orr, Northern Regional Supervisor, Division of Juvenile Justice
- Ron Prewitt, Special Education Teacher at East Anchorage High School and former rural Alaska educator
- Hal Spackman, Director of Mt. Edgecumbe High School, Sitka.

Fact Finding Team Mission and Process

Fact Finding Team members were guided by the mission and process presented below:

Mission

Objectively and accurately research and report facts, using a variety of methods, to assist the Northwest Arctic Borough School District School Board, the Department of Education & Early Development, and the Kivalina community in understanding why the situation at the McQueen School became so desperate that CEO Mason and the NWABSB felt compelled to indefinitely close the school.

Process

The Fact Finding Team developed a process to complete this mission:

- Assemble in the NWABSD Central Office to develop an information gathering process
- Clearly define its mission
- Identify key components and concerned parties
- Design key questions that probed into issues surrounding the school closure
- Gather related data
- Schedule meetings with concerned entities and persons
- Interview identified entities through town meetings, personal interviews, and telephonic interviews
- Identify and evaluate available data
- Repeatedly assemble, report, and discuss information as discovered in the fact finding process

- Perform site visits at the McQueen School and Kiviana and Kotzebue communities
- Write a draft report
- Hold an exit meeting with CEO Mason and other NWABSD administrators
- Submit a report to Commissioner Holloway.

Conclusions

In the early part of the investigation, it became apparent to the team that the closing of the school was not the result of one event. Rather, the closure was the result of a long and complex chain of events in a dysfunctional school in a dysfunctional community that ultimately adversely affected student learning and teacher effectiveness.

When one evaluates a high performing school, certain characteristics are evident, as are a very different set of characteristics evident in low performing schools. McQueen School falls into the latter category of schools. Consequently, there was evidence to support CEO Mason's decision to temporarily close the McQueen School. Furthermore, he had support for his decision from members of the Northwest Arctic Borough School Board. As one educator associated with the controversy said, "Uncovering the challenges associated with the perceived lack of student success at the McQueen School is like "peeling back the layers of an onion. There are issues lying upon issues." However painful CEO Mason's decision was, it has presented the Northwest Arctic Borough School Board, the McQueen School staff, and the Kivalina community with an opportunity to turn things around.

Essentially, the Fact Finding Team determined that the issues surrounding the performance, or non-performance, of students at McQueen School could be categorized as follows:

1. Community issues

- There are disconcertingly low community expectations and common acceptance for sub-standard student achievement.
- There appears to be pervasive community tolerance of student misbehavior.
- There were reports of family dysfunction that inhibit the emotional and intellectual growth of children.
- After the school reopened, staff reported more student discipline problems—including threats against teachers—

similar to those that prompted CEO Mason to close McQueen School. Also, school staff reported that Kivalina community members continue to show a lack of willingness to accept responsibility for problems at the school. These incidents lead Fact Finding team members to believe that little has changed as a result of the school closure.

2. Instruction and curriculum issues

- Student achievement data suggest that standards-based instruction is not being effectively delivered.
- There are community concerns that the curriculum is not being presented in such a manner as to help students make connections to their own culture and daily lives.

3. Governance and leadership issues

- There is limited evidence that documents parent and community involvement —and resulting cooperation — in school programs and decision-making. The partnerships necessary to improve school programs, build rapport between educators, students and community, and develop broad support for understanding school policy are lacking. This lack of cooperation, partnering, and communication exists at local, district, and regional levels. There is no one entity to “blame” for this condition. All entities share the “blame,” even though many are quick to “point fingers.”
- Even though there is a district strategic plan that works to address school needs, it could be argued that the current plan is not moving quickly enough to address the problems of a school in crisis.
- There is little evidence that effective training for the McQueen Advisory School Board has taken place.

4. School discipline and safety issues

- There have been numerous, serious, documented incidents of aggressive student behavior towards staff this year.

Unfortunately, there have been on-going student discipline problems for far too many years prior to this year at the McQueen School. Unruly student behavior has been the rule rather than the exception in the Kivalina community.

- At times, negative student behavior has been rationalized, even supported, by parents.
- School staff, students, and parents promote different interpretations of discipline philosophy, purpose, and implementation of those discipline policies. There is no question that this difference in philosophies inhibits a healthy learning environment.
- The Fact Finding Team found no evidence documenting that students, parents, teachers, school administrators, and the Kivalina community have developed a school disciplinary and safety program as required by Alaska Statute 14.33.110, .120, and .130, entitled *Required School Disciplinary Safety Program*.

5. Professional development-staff training issues

- Logistical and other problems inhibit district efforts to provide effective, ongoing, on-site professional support for principal and teachers.
- There appears to be limited community assistance in helping new teachers transition into the community.
- There is a need to support assertive, effective staff evaluation with consequences for ineffective instruction.

Organizations Available To Assist with the McQueen School Challenges

- Elders Council
- NANA
- Northwest Arctic Borough
- Maniilaq
- Kivalina IRA Tribal Council
- City of Kivalina
- Health agencies
- Kotzebue Vocational Technical Center
- Kotzebue city government and agencies
- State of Alaska agencies, including the Department of Education & Early Development, the Department of Public Safety, and Department of Health & Social Services.

Local and regional educators and community members can develop a more comprehensive list of resources, including, but not limited to, Northwest Arctic Education Association, Alaska Intertribal Council, First Alaskans Institute, Alaska Federation of Natives, Cook Inlet Tribal Council and Cominco.

The Facts Discovered by the Team

- Numerous documented incidents substantiate a history of ongoing disruptive student behaviors – and to a degree, disruptive parent/community behaviors – at the McQueen School. This list includes, but is not limited to, verbal and physical assaults, vandalism, tardiness, and open defiance of staff. Law enforcement investigations have not resulted in any criminal charges being filed.
- A significant number of McQueen School teachers and the building principal often felt as if there was little or no parent support when they attempted to discipline students for school policy infractions.
- McQueen School student achievement results have consistently ranked among the lowest - if not the lowest - of all Northwest Arctic Borough School District school sites.
- NWABSD administration was in the process of exploring the following options to address the on-going problems at McQueen School before the last chain of serious student behavior prompted CEO Mason to close school operations: 1) hire on-site security; 2) remove problem students; 3) review school discipline standards; 4) close the school as a last resort.
- When CEO Mason became aware that a number of McQueen School teachers were concerned about their safety, during a February 27, 2002, teleconference, the CEO offered all teachers and the principal the following options; 1) stay at the school and work to improve the current situation; 2) seek voluntary assignment to another NWABSD school site; 3) resign from NWABSD. One-half the staff chose to be transferred. The remaining five (5) teachers did not express concerns for their safety and chose to remain in Kivalina and continue working at McQueen School.
- CEO Mason ordered the McQueen School closed after five (5) teachers chose to leave Kivalina because they believed their safety was compromised. CEO Mason believed that NWABSD

could not provide an effective level of basic instruction to students in a safe learning environment with a drastically reduced staff (Additional reference: One of the remaining teachers at McQueen School possesses only a State of Alaska emergency teaching certificate).

- CEO Mason personally made the decision to close the McQueen School during the above mentioned teleconference with the five (5) teachers and site principal upon his discovery that the teachers intended to leave Kivalina. The NWAB School Board did not mandate the McQueen School closure; rather, at a previous meeting the board discussed the problems at McQueen School and directed CEO Mason to investigate and report back to them. However, interviews with NWABSD board members suggest a strong majority of board members supported (and still support) CEO Mason's decision.
- Contrary to widely held Kivalina community opinion, CEO Mason did not order the school closed until after the five (5) teachers informed him that they were leaving the community.
- There were many comments by community members that CEO Mason and the NWABSB did not follow an appropriate process before closing the school.
- After accounts of student behavior became public, the NWABSD administration conducted its own fact-finding teleconference and on-site investigation into the incidents and accusations as they explored options to address the situation at McQueen School to present to the NWABSD School Board for its consideration. After the fact finding, CEO Mason closed McQueen School.
- Not all alleged threats and assaults made against McQueen School staff were turned over to the Alaska State Troopers for investigation.
- A vocal group of the Kivalina Advisory School Board and community members contend they were not made aware

there was a possibility that the NWABSB might close the McQueen School.

- Members of the Kivalina community made numerous accusations about what they termed was "harsh or overly assertive discipline" towards their students.
- There is no full-time on-site VPO or VPSO in Kivalina. The irregular and infrequent visits by law enforcement officials cannot substitute for the absence of a VPO or VPSO. McQueen School staff, district staff, and community members expressed strong support for the assignment of a full-time VPO to Kivalina, so law enforcement can be proactive, rather than reactive.
- McQueen School has a history of high teacher turnover.
- McQueen School did not field either a girls or boys basketball team because most students did not meet school eligibility requirements or school administration could not hire a coach who held required ASAA certification.
- The NWABSD administration has developed and is beginning initial implementation of a plan that addresses a number of safety and educational challenges at the McQueen School, including the design of a school calendar for the remainder of this school year. This plan includes strategies that promote staff and student safety. NWABSD administration also assigned a security officer to McQueen School to patrol the halls, be a visible presence, and educate students about the school discipline policy about reasonable expectations of student behavior. The security officer is also expected to develop rapport with students while increasing student awareness of the consequences for their misbehavior. In addition, NWABSD hired four (4) veteran Alaskan teachers to fill the roles of the departing teachers.
- The McQueen School re-opened on Monday, March 18, 2002, as planned with the four (4) new teachers.

- While the Fact Finding Team was on-site, the re-opening of McQueen School appeared to them to be orderly, well planned, and safe. However, within six (6) days, school staff reported continued incidents involving threatening or otherwise disruptive student behavior.
- Without exception, members and students of the Kivalina community have a strong desire for the McQueen School to remain in operation. As one community member remarked, "We found out the hard way...teachers are valuable."

The Issues Surrounding the Closure of McQueen School

- Above all else, the Fact Finding Team recognizes a great disparity between the Kivalina community's academic and behavioral expectations for its children and the expectations of a significant number of McQueen School and Northwest Arctic Borough School District staff and school board. Many parents and community members expressed surprisingly low levels of concern when informed about McQueen School's low student achievement test results. Both interesting and troubling is the fact that parents and community members expressed more concern and dissatisfaction with what they perceived were unrealistic discipline policies and excessively harsh enforcement of those policies, than they did about student achievement. This deep rooted cross-cultural challenge may best be summed up by a Kivalina student's comment to a Fact Finding Team member: "We don't understand white people; they don't understand us; they get threatened easily."
- Evidence suggests that the McQueen School Advisory School Board does not meet regularly and does not take an active role in guiding the school program. Without a functioning advisory board, Kivalina surrenders a critical conduit between the school and the community where advice and information can be exchanged between community members and the school and vice versa. The Fact Finding Team did not determine if this was a school leadership issue, a community issue, or both.
- Although student achievement data reveals that student achievement is low despite district efforts, the NWABSD has taken some measures to improve student achievement. The NWABSD has provided the McQueen School teaching staff with: 1) standardized curriculums, aligned to the Alaska State Content and Performance Standards, for reading and math; 2) one week of staff professional in-service as it relates to these

curriculums; 3) on-site specialists to help guide instructional efforts in these curriculums, and; 4) some on-site professional development visits by the NWABSD curriculum director. However, student achievement results indicate that NWABSD efforts to implement effective, standards based instruction has met with virtually no success at McQueen School.

- Members of the Kivalina community were convinced that most outside educators do not understand the Inupiat culture and, consequently, have difficulty interacting appropriately with students, parents, and community members. Team members believe this encourages students to interact negatively with the new teachers and principals.
- The Fact Finding Team heard many comments from both within and outside of the Kivalina community asserting that long-standing conflicts within factions of the Kivalina community hindered school efforts to promote cooperative initiatives that promised to improve the McQueen School program. Reportedly, the Kivalina community has traditionally resisted direction from "outside" entities. If these assertions are valid, then the NWABSD is faced with the challenge of finding ways to engage all parties to promote cooperation rather than resistance.
- Educators, parents, and community members expressed strong concern about the lack of direction in Kivalina youth's lives due to an abundance of free time and refusal by some parents to enforce reasonable curfew hours on their children. In particular, community members and students expressed great dissatisfaction with lack of activities for young adults. They felt as if the school could do more to provide these activities.
- The McQueen School Advisory School Board and Kivalina community members contend that they were not aware that there was a possibility that the CEO might close the McQueen School.

- There was a perception among some Kivalina community members and others throughout the Northwest Arctic region that Kivalina did not have equal influence on the Northwest Arctic Borough School Board.
- McQueen School's history of low student achievement may be similar to that of some other communities' schools in the NWABSD region. Data reveals that there are other sites with similar student test scores.
- The Kivalina school and community appear to struggle with options for those students who are expelled or suspended from school for disciplinary infractions. Consequently, expelled or suspended students often become a continued disruption to the educational process, teacher safety, and operation of a safe school.
- According to anecdotal statements by educators familiar with Kivalina, children in Kivalina appear to be healthy.
- Kivalina's remote location, distance from the central office in Kotzebue, and frequent inclement weather offer significant challenges in providing an education.
- A number of community and regional members suggested that the Kivalina Elders' Council has not been an active participant in offering guidance on school and community affairs.

The Assets Available to Address the McQueen School Problems

- There is strong community support for continued operation of the McQueen School.
- The McQueen School Advisory School Board has the potential to develop the capacity to support the school, offer appropriate oversight, and promote community involvement.
- The NWABSD has the ability and now the incentive to review the McQueen School philosophy/vision and implementation of local policy.
- The NWABSD has the ability to reassign, recruit and hire professional staff, or, generally, restructure McQueen School.
- Kivalina has a significant number of students who are not causing problems and can act as positive role models. Team members often heard that it was "the same 10% of the students who were acting up."
- There is potential to establish and improve lines of school-parent communication.
- Kivalina parents and students have the ability to assume responsibility for their own educational program.
- The McQueen Advisory School Board has the ability to resolve conflict at a local level.
- The Northwest Arctic Borough School Board has the duty to hold the McQueen School accountable for results through regular reporting of progress towards defined criteria.

Recommendations to the NWABSD School Board

The Northwest Arctic Borough School District should immediately appoint a broad based team of key community and regional leaders, parents, local school administration, teaching staff, NWABSB members, Kivalina Advisory Board members, and other appropriate people to begin addressing the problems facing the McQueen School. The team members must have the ability to influence others, the power to effect constructive change, and the willingness to initiate and follow through on improvement activities for the McQueen School. Each member of the team should be forthright and honest and have the best interests of students in mind. The team should represent the diverse interests of Kivalina. The team should accomplish two primary objectives:

- Address the immediate issues leading up to the closing of McQueen School. The team will help ensure that McQueen School continues operating in a safe and effective manner for the remainder of this school year and into the immediate future.
- Develop and implement a school improvement plan that promotes incremental and sustained school improvement. The district should enlist an outside expert to help lead this effort. This plan should address school and advisory board leadership; educational program and student achievement; staff training, recruitment, and retention; student and community involvement; and resources available to the school. The plan should clarify how students meet local, school district and state academic standards, establish clear goals and objectives, identify methods of assessment, set achievement standards, and define levels of school, teacher, and student accountability with timelines.

Summary

In general, members of the Fact Finding Team appreciated the openness and cooperation demonstrated by the majority of teachers, administrators, and community members during the team's visit to Kivalina and the Northwest Arctic Borough School District.

Ultimately, the closure of the McQueen School, which has heightened community, regional, and statewide awareness, presents Kivalina with a unique opportunity to face issues that have long been ignored. All concerned have an opportunity to do what is right for students.

The Fact Finding Team is concerned that if the Northwest Arctic Borough School District School Board does not immediately move forward with significant, systemic school improvement initiatives led by a united team of educators, parents and community members, the futures of McQueen School and its students will be in jeopardy.

State law recognizes the NWABSD School Board as the governing body of the district's schools. This means the NWABSD School Board has the authority and responsibility to make sure that students are learning in a safe, supportive environment.

Evidence clearly indicates that Kivalina's students are not currently presented with an opportunity to meet State of Alaska Content and Performance Standards in a safe, supportive environment due to a long list of reasons. This needs to change.

If the School Board does not act immediately and decisively, this Fact Finding Team recommends that the State of Alaska consider direct intervention in the operation of McQueen School.

Each team member firmly believes Kivalina *can* have an effective school where children are learning, teachers and students are

safe, and of which the community is deeply proud.

At this point, the future success of McQueen School depends more on the behavior of adults than on the behavior of children. The challenge is clear.

Respectfully submitted,

Members of the McQueen School Fact Finding Team

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Anchorage Daily News

'Threatening and assaultive' conduct closes school**KIVALINA: McQueen campus shut indefinitely; teachers leave, and troopers are investigating.**By Katie Pesznecker
Anchorage Daily News*(Published: March 1, 2002)*

The Kivalina village school has been closed indefinitely because the staff was exposed to "threatening and assaultive" behavior, the Northwest Arctic Borough School District said Thursday.

Charles Mason, chief executive officer of the district, announced Wednesday's abrupt closure in a prepared statement, saying, "The district has been unable to provide a safe and appropriate learning environment in Kivalina due to the threatening and assaultive conduct of a number of community residents toward members of the school staff."

He would not elaborate, citing confidentiality laws surrounding personnel matters and student records.

At least five of Kivalina's 11 teachers left town for new assignments in the district, according to school officials.

Closing a school for the safety of its staff is unprecedented in Alaska, said Harry Gamble, the state Department of Education and Early Development spokesman. Education Commissioner Shirley Holloway has requested that Mason and his staff develop a plan to reopen McQueen School "as soon as possible," Gamble said.

A public meeting is scheduled today in the village, on the Chukchi Sea coast about 80 miles northwest of Kotzebue.

"I don't think there's ever an acceptable excuse for threats and physical violence against school staff," said Rich Kronberg, NEA Alaska president, who learned about the closure Thursday. "Schools need to be sanctuaries where people can teach and others can learn, and if that's not happening, that is a major breakdown at the level of the school administration. It's absolutely unacceptable."

Greg Wilkinson, Alaska State Troopers spokesman, said trooper Andy Greenstreet arrived in Kivalina on Wednesday and is investigating an assault that allegedly occurred Feb. 22 and was reported to troopers this week. Wilkinson did not elaborate but said it was the third time in about a month that troopers received calls from the Kivalina school.

McQueen School, serving about 130 students from kindergarten through 12th grade, is in a massive district that spans 38,000 square miles, including Ambler, Buckland, Deering, Kiana, Kobuk, Kotzebue, Noatak, Noorvik, Selawik and Shungnak.

The timing of Wednesday's closure couldn't be worse. On Tuesday the students were to begin the three-day High School Graduation Qualifying Exam. Students, beginning with this year's sophomore class, must pass the test to graduate. The district plans to find a way to make that happen, Mason said.

Colleen Koenig, a lifelong Kivalina resident and administrator for the village council, said that tensions have been high concerning the school and that tougher discipline policies enforced by a new principal have rubbed many parents the wrong way. Koenig said she was shocked by Wednesday's announcement.

Most of the students are well-behaved, said Al Gyllenhammer, who taught at McQueen School last fall but moved to Washington state after suffering a minor stroke. A dominant minority of the students cause problems, he said. Attempts to discipline them were often thwarted by defiant parents, he said.

"Lighting fires under buildings, throwing rocks -- the kids would come to school when they wanted and would go home when they wanted," Gyllenhammer said. "They would spit chewing tobacco every place -- on the seats, the bleachers, the floors. It was different from anything I've ever seen."

Teachers on Thursday said upheaval has plagued the school for years. There have been four principals in four years. Half the teachers this year were new hires.

Many residents in the close-knit village heard about accusations of students harassing and assaulting teachers for the first time after the school's closure was announced Wednesday, Koenig said.

"Kivalina is a whaling community, and you have to live the life of a Christian in order to whale," Koenig said. "You have to have all the values the elders have been handing down for thousands of years. Our people are very strong spiritually. We have our problems, of course, but it's not the way it sounds."

Reporter Katie Pesznecker can be reached at kpesznecker@adn.com or 907-257-4589.

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Anchorage Daily News

Kivalina faces troubles

SCHOOL CLOSURE: Parents, students vent at town meeting.

By Katie Pesznecker
Anchorage Daily News

(Published: March 2, 2002)

Kivalina -- Some 200 parents, elders and students packed the McQueen School gym here Friday, a day after the Northwest Arctic Borough School District abruptly shut down classes, citing "threatening and assaultive behavior" against teachers.

Charles Mason, the district's chief executive officer, ordered the school closed Wednesday after complaints from teachers worried about their safety. Almost half the school's teaching staff left the village this week.

The closure is the second time in a little more than 20 years that Kivalina's school was shut down because of teacher harassment. In September 1979, a student was expelled and classes suspended temporarily after district officials said teachers had been subjected to stress and threats.

Friday's town meeting was a venue for people to vent and for village elders to offer cautious wisdom. Half of the village crammed shoulder-to-shoulder on metal bleachers. Nine school board members sat facing them. The meeting opened with an invocation in Inupiat from elder Caleb Adams.

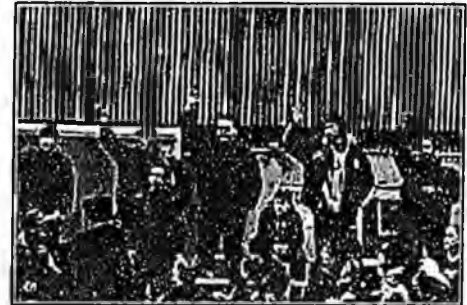
Mason then spoke for several minutes, in a tone that ranged from apologetic to scolding. He said "95 percent" of the students are wonderful but that a small minority is out of hand.

"We had a group of teachers who left yesterday because they were fearful for their safety," Mason said. "When people who work at a school are fearful for their safety, we've got a problem."

He detailed several years of disarray at the school, including a rash of suspensions and expulsions, low test scores, and complaints from school staff and past principals who felt threatened. Mason described acts of vandalism at teachers' homes and reported violence against pets owned by teachers.

"When I heard about kids up all night long, throwing rocks and ice at a teacher's house, that has got to change," Mason said. "When I find out a teacher or principal has a dead dog on their doorstep the next morning, that has got to change."

When five teachers decided to leave, Mason said, he had no choice but to close the school.



After villager Stan Hawley asked McQueen School's high school boys how many of them cared about their school, all six stood and raised their hands. When Hawley then asked how many had passing grades, fewer responded. (Photo by Marc Lester / Anchorage Daily News)



Jerry Nordon listens to the open microphone discussion among community and school board members Friday at the Kivalina town forum. (Photo by Marc Lester / Anchorage Daily News)

Young children who would normally have been in school scurried beneath and behind the bleachers as their parents took turns speaking. Some said the town meeting was overdue and should have happened before officials closed the school.

Other parents, including Millie Hawley and Jenny Swan, said the current staff hasn't made the school a place where parents feel welcome or valued.

"That's not how it's supposed to be," Swan said.

The most debated topic Friday was the school's discipline policy. Some parents resent this year's enforced discipline policy, which they say is too rigid. If teachers at McQueen treated students with more respect, they would be treated likewise, Eleanor Swan said.

Mason defended the policy Friday. It was actually drafted two years ago, and while last year's principal was ineffective, this year's new principal, Betty Wallace, is actually enforcing the rules, he said.

But Rose Hawley, 17, the daughter of Stan and Millie Hawley, said the strict rules make school seem like prison.

"It's like my mother said, we just have to watch every move we make," she said.

The high school senior said McQueen has problems, like any other school. She said she was sad and frustrated when she heard five teachers were leaving.

"They're just looking for an easy way out," Rose said. "There's troubles in the school, but they're not going to last forever."

Stan Hawley, Rose's father, looked to the students in the audience to take some responsibility.

"I'd like all the high school boys to stand up," he said. "I'm putting you on the spot."

Six teenage boys, seated on bleachers under a basketball hoop, stood and looked sheepish as the crowd warmly applauded them. Stan Hawley told the boys to raise their hands if they care about their school. They all raised a hand high.

Then Hawley asked the six boys to keep their hands up if they are passing their classes. Four put their hands down.

"If you really care about your school, you will pass," Hawley said. "It's not that hard to put out a little effort!"

Elder Lucy Adams appealed to the parents in a wavering but commanding voice.

"I've been crying inside, ever since the school was closed," she said. "It's time to control your children. Don't just holler into your CBs! The parents need to wake up."

Several people on Friday suggested that reinstating basketball or a wrestling program at the high school would give kids something to work for. They described Kivalina as a close-knit, caring community where children respect their elders and the whaling culture promotes high ideals and morals.

The village is at the tip of an eight-mile barrier reef between the Chukchi Sea and the mainland, about 80 air miles northwest of Kotzebue. This time of year, Kivalina's roughly 80 homes are awash in massive snowdrifts. Village residents say their store and the school really form the center of town.

When Rose Hawley asked Mason when school might reopen, he said he didn't know.

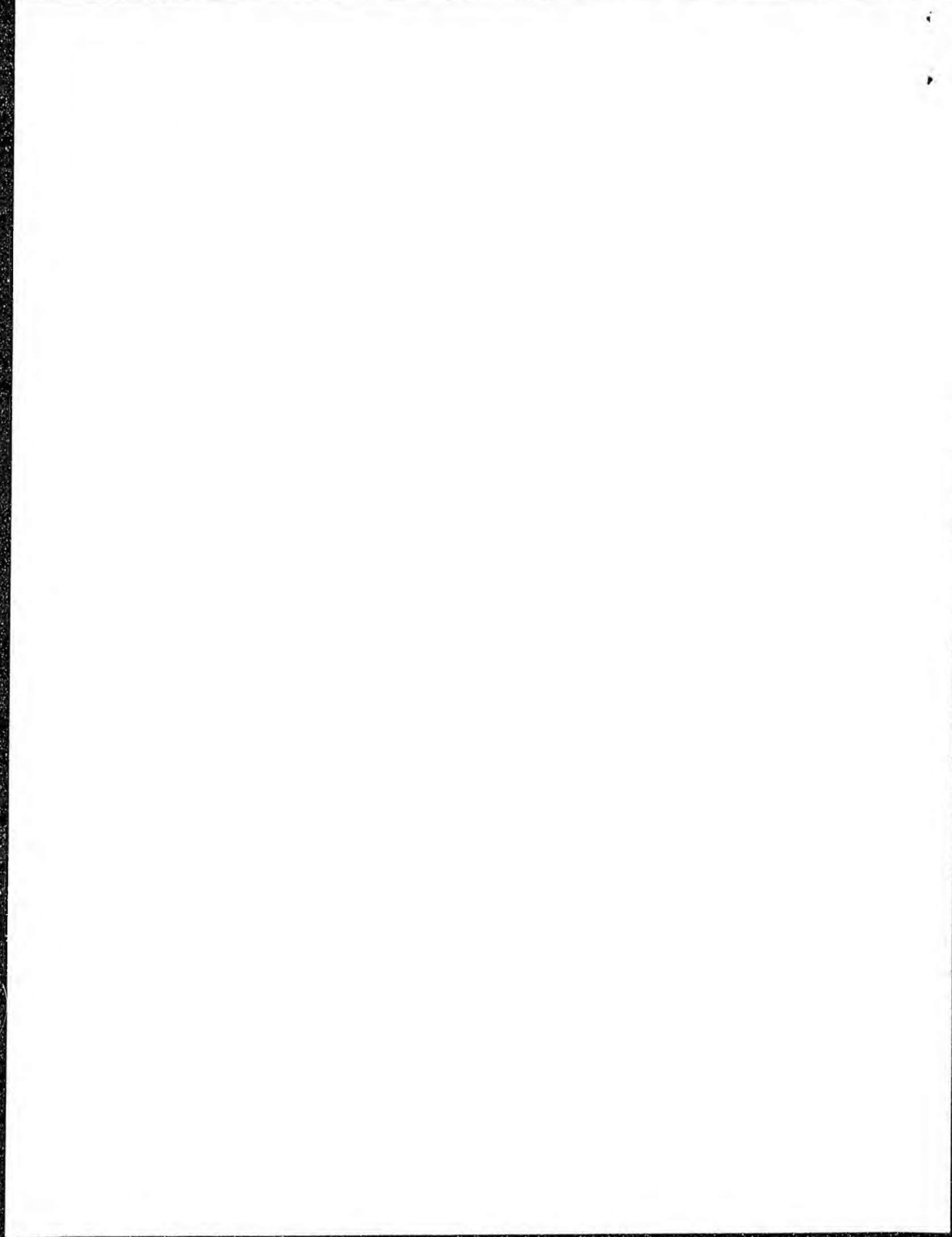
Mason said the district will figure out a way to give the Kivalina high school students the state-required High School Graduation Qualifying Exam this week.

"When I heard about the school closing, I started crying," Rose Hawley said. "I need to graduate. I need to go to college."

Reporter Katie Pesznecker can be reached at kpesznecker@adn.com or 907 257-4589.

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ADN Archives**Anchorage Daily News** [<--Back](#)© Copyright 1985-1999 - Anchorage Daily News. [Email this article](#)**Tuesday, March 05, 2002**

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Section: Nation

Edition: Final

Staff found growing anger at Kivalina

By Katie Pesznecker, Anchorage Daily News

Illustrated By Ron Engstrom

Kivalina's school remained indefinitely closed Monday as details emerged about what went wrong over the past several months in the small Inupiat village.

Education officials don't know when the roughly 135 students will return to classes, though some students will take state-required tests this week. The Northwest Arctic Borough School District abruptly closed McQueen School on Wednesday, citing "assaultive" behavior by parents and students against teachers.

Teaching in Bush schools is often tough. Living conditions can be squalid, the life lonely and the cost of living high. A palpable cultural tension between teachers and Native residents in some villages can lead to a pervasive harassment that some teachers accept as part of the job. These issues were exposed last week when Kivalina's school shut down and five teachers -- half the school's staff -- transferred.

"I don't think it's all a race thing," said Dewey Bodley, who taught math in Kivalina until last Wednesday. "Because the behaviors toward the Native substitutes and the Native aides were terrible. They (students) weren't respectful of them, the same way they were disrespectful of the white teachers."

Bodley and his wife, Pamela, also a teacher, transferred to new jobs last week. According to the district, the Bodleys and Mildred Dew took jobs at Napaaqtugmiut School in Noatak. ReNae Morgan went to Kotzebue, and Nada Zukas is employed at Shungnak School. Four Kivalina teachers were new this school year.

Bodley, 42, said tension in the northwest Alaska village of about 375 people grew worse after he and his wife arrived last summer.

"There was quite a level of anger," he said. "We were getting reports back from the village about how the new teachers were ruining the school, the new teachers should leave, that (the village) didn't want us."

One day last August, Dewey Bodley tried to leave his home but found the front door was chained shut. He had to climb out a window. Later that fall, he caught a seventh-grader with soda pop, which is not allowed at school. Bodley tried to send the student to the principal's office. "And he ignored me," Bodley said. "And right in front of the office with other teachers and secretaries standing there, he hit me."

Students and parents swore in his classroom, Bodley said. People banged on the side of his home late at night, despite a village curfew.

"Our front door has a lot of little dents in it where we found some BBs," Bodley said. "We had a dog. They may have been shooting at the dog."

A husky puppy belonging to Enoch Adams Jr. was found mutilated and hanging from the village water tower in late January, said Andy Greenstreet of Alaska State Troopers. Adams, a Kivalina native, teaches at the school. Delayed by weather, Greenstreet arrived in Kivalina, 80 air miles northwest of Kotzebue, on Feb. 5 to investigate the case. A relative of Adams' had the dog's frozen carcass at her home, he said.

"It's missing it's tail. That was cut off," Greenstreet said. "It's missing a foot. That was cut off. It looks like it had been kind of skinned and gutted. It had a green twine wrapped around its neck, and it was still on there when I got to it."

Village residents were reluctant to answer questions, but several teenagers were apparently involved, Greenstreet said. No charges have been filed. The case will likely be turned over to the Kotzebue office of the Division of Juvenile Justice, he said.

Kivalina has no village public safety officer.

Troopers were called to Kivalina again Feb. 22 for an assault related to the school, spokesman Greg Wilkinson said.

Bodley said he was involved in that assault. Neither he nor troopers would elaborate.

The incident prompted Bodley to travel to Kotzebue last Tuesday to testify at a School Board meeting about Kivalina's problems.

"We were more worried about some irate person coming into the school and some innocent person, possibly a kid, getting hurt," Bodley said.

The next day, district officials in Kotzebue held an after-school conference call with McQueen School staff members and principal Betty Wallace. Charles Mason, Northwest Arctic Borough Schools' chief executive officer, told them the school was closed, effective immediately. He gave teachers the option to transfer. Charles Tinker, Anna Hercha, Zoe Theoharis, Vera Sampson and Adams chose to stay.

The gym has reopened in the evenings. Mason said Monday that students from grades three, six and eight and some high schoolers will take state-required tests this week. But the school will not reopen until "a safe, secure and supportive education environment has been established."

Mason said a town meeting Friday attended by about 200 people was a positive step, and he hopes to schedule another meeting this week. He said Monday that he expects the village to develop "appropriate and specific actions and commitments" to reopen the school.

The problems within Kivalina are not as simple as whites vs. Natives, Mason said. Village residents "chased out" a principal last year who was Yup'ik, he said.

"There are two sets of values in education going on," Bodley said. "I don't know that the people in Kivalina had the same set of values considering the importance of education. I'd like to see good come out of this."

Reporter Katie Pesznecker can be reached at kpesznecker@adn.com or 907-257-4589.

ILLUSTRATION SHOWS: Detailed map of the Kivalina area.

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ADN Archives**Anchorage Daily News** | <--Back© Copyright 1985-1999 - Anchorage Daily News. [Email this article](#)**Thursday, March 07, 2002**

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Section: Metro

Edition: Final

Education head takes on Kivalina

By Katie Pesznecker, Anchorage Daily News

Illustrated By Ron Engstrom

Shirley Holloway, Alaska's education head, wrote to Northwest Arctic School District officials this week strongly urging them to reopen the school in Kivalina as soon as possible.

In a letter addressed to district chief executive officer Charles Mason, she expressed disappointment that "events have reached the point where it was necessary for you to close the McQueen School." And, she ordered Mason to "immediately begin by laying out a concrete plan" to "open the school as quickly as you can."

Mason closed the school indefinitely Feb. 27, citing "assaultive" behavior by parents and students against teachers.

Holloway, commissioner of the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development, said in an interview Wednesday that the reported harassment against Kivalina teachers isn't unique to that village. But it stands out, she said, because it reached a point where closing the school seemed necessary. The commissioner offered her help and suggested involving a third party to mediate.

Some of the 135 students in the northwest Alaska village are taking state-required tests this week, and the gym has reopened for use at night. But students have gone a week without classes.

The school could reopen next week, Mason said.

ReNae Morgan taught special education in Kivalina until last week when she transferred to Kotzebue, 80 air miles southeast. She is concerned bringing students back so soon won't help.

"They have to attack the problem and not just reopen that school," Morgan said. "If they don't fix the problems of those students, those children will never be educated. Something has got to be done."

Mike Dunleavy, district assistant superintendent, is in Kivalina this week working on a plan, along with Sandy Kowalski, a Kotzebue native and district grants director, and school board member Dorothy Brown.

"This is not going to be fixed overnight but I think a plan could be agreed upon by the community and school," Holloway said. "My priority is the school get open as soon as possible and when it opens, there's a commitment to make it a safe place for teachers and kids."

Mason said he knows of two people who could begin teaching there next week. Five of the 10 teachers at McQueen School transferred to new positions in Kotzebue, Noatak and Shungnak after last week's closure.

"We're just going to have to take it a day at a time, a meeting at a time," Mason said. "We may not have all the kids in school immediately because I don't have enough staff to do everything. But I'm optimistic we'll be there."

At a town meeting last Friday, Kivalina residents were shocked to find there hadn't been a discussion about conflicts before the school's closure.

"Everybody shares the blame for what happened," Holloway said. "Obviously, this is not something that happened overnight. It felt like it's been festering for a long time, and it finally blew."

Colleen Koenig, tribal administrator of the Kivalina village council, said closing the school could have been avoided had the district followed advisory school board policy.

Advisory school boards in villages are links to district school boards. These groups get first crack at resolving

school conflicts. The Kivalina advisory board wasn't brought in when it should have been, Koenig said. The advisory board and school board could have prevented a shutdown, she said.

"And now they're trying to leave it up to the village leadership to unscrew-up their mess," said Koenig, a lifelong resident.

Mason said the community must handle serious issues like kids breaking curfew to throw things at teacher's houses.

"I can't solve that for them from Kotzebue," he said. "What should the village do to keep that from happening?"

Morgan said the trouble seemed to be caused by a minority of the village's children and families.

"There are some wonderful children in Kivalina, and good parents," she said. "The problem is, they are the quiet majority. The kids won't speak out and the parents won't speak out, and the bullies ruin everything for them."

Morgan said Kivalina issues don't appear racially motivated.

"Some of the (Native) assistants and aids were brought to tears," she said. "From what I saw in Kivalina, we're not talking about a cultural behavior, we're talking about bad parenting that has taught children to disrespect anyone or anything that doesn't please them. That's what I saw."

Reporter Katie Pesznecker can be reached at kpesznecker@adn.com or 907 257-4589.

ILLUSTRATION SHOWS map of Kivalina.

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Anchorage Daily News

Kivalina school could reopen soon

PLAN: School district chief aims for March 18, if community gets on board.

By Dan Joling
The Associated Press

(Published: March 9, 2002)

The chief executive of the Northwest Arctic Borough School District says Kivalina's only school could reopen March 18 -- if school officials receive commitments from the villagers to back the school's discipline policy.

In a letter responding to Shirley Holloway, Alaska's top education official, Charles Mason said Kivalina's local advisory school board began meetings Thursday to explain, review and revise the existing school discipline plan.

Mason said the borough school board is adamant that local parents and students accept responsibilities that come with rights to attend school.

Board members don't want a temporary fix, he said.

"I don't want to apply a Band-Aid. I don't want to sweep it under the rug," Mason said. "I can send subs up there and get through the year, but I want to fix it."

Mason ordered McQueen School closed Feb. 27 after complaints by staff members of physical and verbal harassment by students and flouting of school rules. Mason said the district was unable to provide a safe and appropriate learning environment due to threatening and "assaultive" conduct by some community residents.

McQueen School serves children from kindergarten through high school in the village of roughly 377. The school has 11 certified teaching positions. Five teachers accepted transfers after the school closed.

Holloway expressed impatience with the ongoing closure and has written Mason twice this week about taking quick action to reopen the school. In the second letter, she told him Thursday she wanted a plan within a week for how Kivalina schoolchildren will finish the year.

"In our written and oral communications it does not appear that you are making sufficient progress toward developing a written plan or providing an educational program for all of the students in the McQueen School," said Holloway, commissioner of the Department Education and Early Development.

Only local school boards can close a school. However, the state can step in if a school is not open for 180 days as required by state law.

"Your school board has not revised the current school term," Holloway told Mason. "The Northwest Arctic School Board must take immediate action to revise the school calendar."

She said the revised calendar must reflect a full 180-day requirement.

Mason assured Holloway he was aware of state law. But he said his school board is adamant that local commitments must be forthcoming to support a safe school environment.

The current discipline plan, discussed with villagers Thursday night, covers such things as attendance, tardiness, fighting, weapons and tobacco.

"They got through two items in a four-hour meeting," he said.

Some villagers have complained that the discipline policy is too rigid. Meetings will continue next week.

Holloway said Friday that agreement on discipline is a key to the school reopening.

"It's one of the cornerstones of that happening," she said.

Holloway is appointing an independent committee to review the Kivalina school closure, with the blessing of Mason, borough Mayor Ross Schaeffer and school board president Sophie Ferguson.

Carl Rose, executive director of the Association of Alaska School Boards, will head the committee. Also serving will be Alaska State trooper Andy Greenstreet; Hal Spackman, director of Mount Edgecumbe High School in Sitka; Denise Morris, president of the Alaska Native Justice Center; Ron Prewitt, a teacher at East High School in Anchorage, who has a background in rural education; Helen Mehrkins, an Education Department staff member; and Jim Orr, a Department of Health and Social Services employee from Fairbanks.

The group will meet by audio conference Monday to decide how to proceed and when to visit Kivalina, located 80 air miles northwest of Kotzebue.

Mason said Kivalina students completed high school qualifying exams and benchmark testing this week. He hopes to count those days toward the 180-day state requirement.

By opening on March 18, and counting the testing days, the school year could be completed by May 24.

Mason said he has three teachers lined up who can be in the community by March 15.

"I'm working on a couple more," Mason said. "We'll make it."

He said lack of local law enforcement remains a stumbling block. The community has no village public safety officer.

"This will be a constant sticking point for teachers," he said. "Many do inquire about law enforcement at the time of interviews."

In the near term, public safety should improve. State trooper spokesman Greg Wilkinson said that starting Friday Kobuk village public safety officer Leslie "Otis" Rolls will spend a week in Kivalina and that a trooper from Kotzebue will make regular stops to the village starting this weekend.

"Our hope is that the presence of a VPSO in Kivalina will help ease tensions and aid the community in getting through this troubling time," said Maj. Doug Norris, trooper deputy commander.

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ADN Archives**Anchorage Daily News** [<--Back](#)© Copyright 1985-1999 - Anchorage Daily News. [Email this article](#)**Saturday, March 16, 2002**

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Section: Nation

Edition: Final

Newcomers descending on KivalinaBy Katie Peszi, *Anchor*, Anchorage Daily News

Illustrated By Ron Engstrom, Anchorage Daily News

A team of educators and law enforcement officials is scheduled to land in Kivalina today as the village school prepares to reopen Monday after a two-week closure.

McQueen School was shut down Feb. 27 by the school district because of "assaultive" behavior against teachers. That day, five of the school's 10 teachers transferred to other schools in the district.

The abrupt closure unveiled several years of mounting disarray and tension between students and staff. Since then, residents, teachers, and district and state education officials have held meetings about what needs to change.

Some things appear to be different. Students have signed a pledge to follow school rules, which had caused conflict before the closure. Staff members said the school's discipline policy was basic and necessary, but some parents and students called it unreasonable. The school also has hired a new security officer, and five new teachers are scheduled to arrive this weekend in Kivalina.

But the last two weeks have not allowed enough time to fix the problems that festered for years, said Charles Mason, head of the Northwest Arctic Borough School District.

"I had a principal threatened two years ago, a principal a year ago," he said. "We had teachers hit a year ago and again this year. And it's cumulative. Well, when you don't have the time, when you're pushed to open (the school), you open and take the measures you have to take and have to deal with the real reasons later."

Mason received two supportive but strongly worded letters from Shirley Holloway, commissioner of the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development, telling him to reopen the school "as quickly as you can."

Holloway put together a team to explore the root of Kivalina's problems and give recommendations for the school's short- and long-term success. The group is slated to stay through Monday, said trooper Andy Greenstreet, a team member.

It includes Carl Rose, Association of Alaska School Boards executive director; Jim Orr, of the Department of Health and Social Services; Hal Spackman, Mount Edgecumbe High School director; Denise Morris, of the Alaska Native Justice Center; Darlene Heckler, an elementary teacher from Selewick; Ron Prewitt, an East High School special education teacher; and Greenstreet.

Holloway plans to visit Kivalina, 80 air miles northwest of Kotzebue, when the review is complete.

"Even though they're opening Monday, we want to make sure they have the kind of support and oversight to sustain the school year," Holloway said. "And how are they going to open next year, and how are they going to open the year after that?"

Kivalina's problems in the recent past have ranged from low test scores to high teacher turnover to violence. People in Kivalina were shocked in January when a dog belonging to Enoch Adams Jr., a teacher and Inupiat from Kivalina, was found dead, mutilated and dangling from the village water tower.

Days before the closure, teacher Dewey Bodley told the school board that students hit him and cursed at him. On one occasion, Bodley said, he was trapped inside his home when someone chained the door shut.

"I don't think the Kivalina issue is an isolated issue," said Willy Kasayulie, a Yupik and former head of the Alaska Village Councils. Lack of law enforcement lends to unruliness in many villages, said Kasayulie, who lives in

Naguchik near Bethel.

"If this kind of situation had occurred on the road system, I think the law enforcement agencies would immediately deal with these issues," he said. "It's basically general lack of support by the law enforcement agencies in rural Alaska."

Of the 11 villages served by the Northwest Arctic Borough district, Kivalina, Kiana, Deering and Shungnak are without village public safety officers. Greenstreet said there is funding to give one of those villages a VPSO, but there are no candidates and the village must provide housing.

Last Saturday, troopers sent VPSO Sgt. Leslie "Otis" Rolls to Kivalina. He was scheduled to leave the village today. Rolls, who works in Kobuk and Shungnak, said his week in Kivalina was uneventful. People were respectful and kind, said Rolls, a Texan who has lived in Alaska for 13 years.

"They're just normal village kids," said Rolls, 52. "They get to go to the gym for a couple hours a night, you know, then the rest of the time they don't have nothing to do but run up and down the streets on a snowmachine or a four-wheeler."

Rolls got an earful on the problems with the school.

"Everybody has a different story, and it's best to not add any more wood to the fire," Rolls said. "Most people's kids can't do any wrong anyway, right?"

The long-term problems will take a long time to fix, Mason said. In the interim, retired Kotzebue policeman Larry Wallace will work as the school security officer starting Monday, Mason said. The advisory school board is reviewing the school's discipline policies.

Five new teachers should arrive in the village by Sunday. One is a retired teacher from Nenana. Two others, also retired, worked in the Copper River School District. The remaining two once taught on the North Slope.

Mason said the effect Holloway's team has depends on "how much time they take, what they see, how open folks are to them."

Kasayulie hopes the situation in Kivalina turns out for the best.

"Education is important to the cultural survival of any ethnic group," he said. "I hope they're able to solve the problem they're facing. It's not the school board, it's got to be a community effort."

ILLUSTRATION SHOWS: Map of Kivalina

Reporter Katie Pesznecker can be reached at kpesznecker@adn.com or 907 257-4589.
: *Kivalina's McQueen School was closed Feb. 27 by the School District.*

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Section: Metro

Edition: Final

LETTERS FROM THE PEOPLE**Parents behind Kivalina woes**

The problems in Kivalina are not unique to that village. When a teacher (Native or not) asks a child to change, they will resist, some will resent, a few will rebel. The teachers in rural Alaska can teach anywhere in the country, but they choose to teach here because they want Alaska's kids to have better lives. As long as selfish parents continue to want their children to remain in the same dysfunctional lifestyle they are in, the teachers will not be able to change it (but we will keep trying).

-- Jeff Ralston

Mekoryuk

Holloway misses the point: rural teachers won't stand for abuse

Alaska Commissioner of Education Shirley Holloway is missing the point, the turning point ("Education head takes on Kivalina," Mar. 7). Since the Molly Hootch case first placed schools in villages, the teacher salary is no longer enough to draw people to places where they are called obscenities in class, spit on, have their dogs stabbed, their snowmachine stolen -- would you take a job like that? Some villages will keep their schools, but more are going to lose them. That's the lesson.

-- Gordy Vernon

Kaktovik

Education head takes on Kivalina? That's not how it looks from here

I was so pleased to read the headline stating "Education head takes on Kivalina" (March 7). I interpreted it to mean that Ms. Holloway was going to actually visit Kivalina and see for herself what was happening there. I thought she'd meet with the student body of McQueen School, as well as with their parents and teachers to determine the width, breath and depth of the existing problems. Because a school closure is a very serious matter, I thought the commissioner was going to actively participate in identifying the problems and finding practical, workable solutions. And I thought: "Wow! Good for her!"

Then I read the article in its entirety. What a disappointment. How easy for her to urge others to reopen the school "as soon as possible" without being on site herself. Reopening the school without solving the problems is folly. From all indications, this is a complex situation with no clear-cut remedies. According to the article, Ms. Holloway offered her help and mentioned the possibility of mediation by third party. My reaction: Go for it! Education head takes on Kivalina? That's not how it looks from here. Not yet anyway.

-- Dolores Bowns

Eagle River

If paint ball shootings were hate crimes, what are Kivalina assaults?

Three white teenagers shoot paint balls at some homeless people downtown. Because some of those people are Native, the Alaska Federation of Natives labels it a hate crime.

Native members of the Kivalina community have threatened and assaulted the predominantly white teaching staff at their town school. The staff's houses have been vandalized and some of their pets have been mutilated.

If the AFN can label the paint ball attacks as a hate crime, why not the Kivalina attacks?

Obviously neither of these incidents are hate crimes, but the AFN chooses to label the first incident as one.

Who is the real victim here?

-- Christian Yelverton

Chugiak

Daily News angers Valley residents with Cottonwood Mall cracks

Well the Daily Rag has again outraged real Alaskans in the Valley. The Deweys of Wasilla really didn't take to well to the Rag's characterization of the Cottonwood Mall as a cesspool ("Daily News' characterizations of Cottonwood Creek Mall unfair," Mar. 3). I agree with the Deweys that I wish there was an alternative daily paper in Southcentral Alaska.

As a follow-up to the Rag's "Who's up/Who's down" (Mar. 3) where the editor suggested that a fertilizer factory was next in Wasilla, I would suggest that will not happen. Anchorage already has its own fertilizer factory -- it is known as the Daily Rag, and there just would not be room for two in Southcentral.

-- Thomas B. Wood

Eagle River

Ocean View needs crossing guard

The unmanned crosswalk in front of the Ocean View Elementary school is a hazard.

The school has a person manning the crosswalk inside the school parking lot but not the major roadway in front of the school. They just put up new crosswalk lights, and it still is not helping. The need for a crossing guard is great. The children of this school run down the sidewalk and right into the street without looking, or one will cross then others will just stand on the curb and you don't know if they are going to cross or just visit with each other. Please, parents, let the school district know how important your children are. Let them know your opinion on this matter.

-- Kathy Weeks

Anchorage

Vegas? Who cares? Lobbyists, politicians too cozy anywhere

I totally agree with Jerry Mackie ("Lawmakers scatter for annual legislative spring break," Mar. 8) in that there is no reason to make a big deal of lawmakers going to Las Vegas on a trip arranged and sponsored by lobbyists. By his own admission the same thing goes on in the Baranof Hotel and the Triangle Bar.

As my granddaddy always told me, when you pay for the services of a lady of the night, it makes no difference if you cavort with her in the back seat of your car or in your bedroom when your wife is gone; cavorting is cavorting.


Then they admit that the politicians and lobbyists are friends. This tells the voters that the politicians do not have an arm's length relationship with the people who are influencing their vote. Since they admit they are in bed together, what is the price of the cavorting?

Self-respect, honesty and integrity. Those are the keys to having politicians you can trust. As time goes on, it becomes more and more obvious that Alaskan politicians have none of these. And they wonder why we distrust them.

-- Phil Weber

Cooper Landing

Permanent Fund dividend cheats swindle millions from Alaska

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Anchorage Daily News

Problems at Kivalina school survive shutdown, reopening

TROUBLE: Destructive behavior has affected daily life for students, teachers.

By Katie Pesznecker
Anchorage Daily News

(Published: April 1, 2002)

Several education officials tied to the troubled Kivalina village school warned that nothing would change after its two-week closure.

By some accounts, nothing has.

"Last week the students seemed somewhat quiet for the first few days," principal Betty Wallace wrote Tuesday in a detailed memo to district officials and the Northwest Alaska village community. "But they have been normal since then."

At this point, "normal" means disarray at McQueen School. Wallace pointed to several such incidents since it reopened March 18: fights, children as young as 6 with tobacco, profanity flung at teachers and students and carved into school property, and one student telling a teacher, "I'll kill your dogs."

The list resonates with violence, vandalism and hostility that school officials say brewed for years and finally resulted in the Feb. 27 shutdown. Two memos obtained by the Daily News described ongoing dysfunction this school year.

The documents, written by Wallace, show the school's closure wasn't as abrupt as it might have seemed. Documents distributed throughout the village and to school and district officials last October and in January warned of out-of-control students and rock-bottom test scores.

Harassment of Bush teachers is not unheard of. In Selawik on March 18, a 15-year-old was arrested after he stole a teacher's snowmachine and then rammed the teacher, who was on a second machine. The two teachers at Karluk School on Kodiak Island resigned March 1, citing lack of support from parents that made disciplining the school's 10 students impossible.

But state education officials said Kivalina stands apart because trouble festered to a level so potentially dangerous that Northwest Arctic Bureau School District officials feared teachers were unsafe and closed the school.

It was also shut down in September 1979 because of teacher harassment.

Days after the school closed in February, about 200 of the village's 375 residents crowded into the gymnasium for a town meeting filled with frustration and tears. Some argued that school rules were too strict and criticized the staff. Several pleaded with parents to control their children. Others said the meeting should have taken place before any decision to close the school.

In light of the principal's previous warnings, the move seemed scripted.

"As you are well aware, McQueen School has been plagued with vandalism, both petty and serious," Wallace wrote in a memo to mayor Galen Swan issued Oct. 11. "We are also concerned that the

safety of children and adults are being jeopardized."

The memo was released after a Sept. 20 Kivalina advisory school board meeting, during which members discussed "attendance, student behavior and discipline" with school staff members and about 20 people in the community. The October memo details children regularly lighting fires beneath and around the school and teacher housing, destroying property and tormenting school staffers.

"We have also discovered small children dipping wooden sticks and rolled-up plastic tubes into the gas tanks of four-wheelers and setting the sticks and tubes on fire," Wallace wrote. "They say they like to see the flames whoosh up."

The chain-link fence surrounding the base of the school was regularly wrenched away so students could crawl beneath to light fires and smoke cigarettes, Wallace wrote.

"Once we found several toddlers crying under the school after some older children had bent the fence and lifted them over it," Wallace wrote. "The toddlers could not get out from under the school until we rescued them."

The destructive behavior routinely affected daily life for students, teachers and the village. The school's cable television wires were destroyed, and most students couldn't watch coverage of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. The gym doors were in constant disrepair from people kicking them and breaking the locks.

"The teachers at McQueen School are very concerned for the safety of the children, as well as the safety of the school, housing, and themselves," Wallace wrote. "As you can see, the problems are continuous, serious, needless and, for the most part, preventable."

Kivalina has no village public safety officer. Alaska state troopers in Kotzebue say there's money for a VPSO if the village produces a job candidate and housing.

Wallace wrote that October memo to show a pattern of unsafe behavior and to persuade the village to hire a juvenile security officer. The village chose not to act. Instead, the district hired an employee to patrol school facilities, not to police and protect students.

A second memo, released Jan. 17, announced that no McQueen students had passed the high school graduation qualifying exam and that most have failed other state-required tests. Wallace explained that the advisory school board had requested she share test results "since many of you do not realize the extremely low level at which your children have scored."

"We realize this will be a surprise to many of you," Wallace said in the memo. "But you must understand the seriousness of this matter, so that you can help your children study and learn."

Data in the memo showed no sixth-graders passed state tests in reading, writing and math. No eighth-graders passed the math portion. No third-graders passed writing. When compared with a national sample of student test scores, all Kivalina fourth- and seventh-graders tested in the bottom quartile on standardized math and language tests.

Yet the school's roughly 135 students all graduated to the next grade when last school year ended.

"Unfortunately, social promotion has been rampant for so many years at McQueen School, it will be a real challenge to stop it," Wallace wrote, referring to automatically moving students up a grade at the end of a school year. Some students had never turned in a single homework assignment, she said. She called the entire situation "totally unacceptable."

Requests to interview various village leaders were repeatedly turned down.

Wallace sent the tell-all memos to the village council, advisory school board, district school board and district headquarters in Kotzebue. She also left them on a table in the school lobby. .

Come late February, nothing had changed. Dewey Bodley, a McQueen teacher, testified about the school's deteriorating climate to the district board. Charles Mason, district chief executive officer, ordered the school indefinitely closed two days later. Five of the school's 10 teachers transferred.

The school reopened with five new teachers and a new school security guard, Larry Wallace. A retired Kotzebue police captain, he is not related to principal Betty Wallace. But his wife has cousins in Kivalina, and he has worked in the region for 25 years. After nearly two weeks in his new role, Larry Wallace is focused on learning names and keeping the peace.

"There's a discipline problem amongst the kids, I would say," Larry Wallace said. "Schools are intended to educate children, not rear them. There's the gap. They don't get disciplined at home. And there are some students who are sent here who aren't prepared to go to school."

He has dished out about a dozen disruptive-student notices to kids who have violated school rules. Offenses run the gamut, and some are just kids being kids, he said. A 6-year-old stole a can of chewing tobacco from his sister to tease his classmates with it, while one fight was one student hitting another across the face with a shirt.

Tuesday night, Larry Wallace chased three kids off the tin roof of his home.

"I don't know what curfew is in this area, but there's no one employed to enforce it," he said.

Other issues since the school's reopening are more grave, Larry Wallace said. Someone stole the hard drive from the school computer lab's network server. It's still missing. The theft means the school will be late issuing its third-quarter report cards and entering attendance data into the district's main system.

Last week, someone ripped a railing off an outdoor school staircase and used it to barricade the gym doors, trapping children inside and posing a fire risk, he said. And a middle school student "was heard to mutter to a teacher, I know where you live, and I'll kill your dogs," Larry Wallace said.

It's not a light threat. A dog belonging to a teacher was killed in late January. The crime horrified many people in the snow-cloaked Inupiat village, set at the tip of an eight-

mile barrier reef between the Chukchi Sea and the mainland, about 80 air miles northwest of Kotzebue. Troopers turned the case over to juvenile justice officials, and an investigation is ongoing.

The State Department of Education and Early Development has also gotten involved with Kivalina. Commissioner Shirley Holloway pushed for the school's speedy reopening.

Two weeks ago, she appointed Carl Rose, executive director of the Alaska Association of School Boards, to head a fact-finding team. The group visited the village to probe the school's situation.

That team's report will be released to the community today at a town meeting. Holloway plans to attend, along with Rose, Rep. Reggie Joule, district assistant superintendent Mike Dunleavy and trooper Andy Greenstreet.

The report is supposed to include where the school and its community should go from here.

"I don't think the two-week closure would have or was ever thought to fix this school," Larry Wallace said. "It took a long time to get this school into this situation it is in, and it's going to take a long time to dig it out. And I think the school district and the teachers and the community are going to have to work together for a long time to fix this."

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Anchorage Daily News

Kivalina team calls school, village dysfunctional

REPORT: Problem-finding panel's chore is like peeling back the layers of an onion.'

By Katie Pesznecker
Anchorage Daily News

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A team charged with decoding problems surrounding Kivalina's school said in a report released Monday that its chore was like "peeling back the layers of an onion."

The group's seven members -- educators, juvenile justice representatives and a state trooper -- were appointed by Shirley Holloway, Alaska's education head, to investigate what led to the closure of McQueen School. They spoke with parents, staff members, students and district officials before the school reopened March 18.

The report called the Feb. 27 shutdown "the result of a long and complex chain of events in a dysfunctional school in a dysfunctional community" and "little has changed as a result of the school closure."

Despite rampant finger-pointing, team members agreed that no group or individual is to blame for harassment and violence against teachers and students evident at the school. But the report said now there's a chance to turn things around: "At this point, the future success of McQueen School depends more on the behavior of adults than on the behavior of children."

The Kivalina community has low educational expectations coupled with a "pervasive community tolerance of student misbehavior" that is rationalized and supported by some parents, the report said. It cited poor test scores and "numerous, serious, documented incidents of aggressive student behavior toward staff this year."

Yet test scores are also a sign of ineffective teaching, the report said. And some people in Kivalina said there's a damaging gap between what's taught in the classroom and the daily life and culture of the tiny Inupiat Eskimo village, about 85 air miles northwest of Kotzebue. The five-member local advisory school board -- an intended link between the village and district headquarters in Kotzebue -- hasn't been trained properly, the report said. Advisory board members and village leaders told the team they were never told that closing the school was a possibility.

Some team members joined Holloway, commissioner of the Department of Education and Early Development, and Rep. Reggie Joule at the Kivalina town meeting Monday to discuss the report and possible solutions.

Recommendations include the Northwest Arctic Borough School District's forming a team of community and regional leaders and parents to develop a "school improvement plan," help improve student test scores, and student and community involvement.

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