

## Alaska boarding schools rebound

**By Cathy Brown**

*The Associated Press*

JUNEAU, Alaska — Leaving her hometown of Eagle two years ago to attend boarding school in Nenana opened a new world for Afton Brinkman.

She got to pick and choose classes, play basketball and volleyball, learn about applying for scholarships. The things most high-school kids take for granted weren't available at her local high school, which has 10 students.

"It's pretty much improved my life for the better all around," said Brinkman, who testified before an Alaska state legislative committee a few weeks before she graduated this spring. "I've had so many more opportunities."

Once spurned by rural parents, who hated sending their children hundreds of miles from home for a high-school education, boarding schools are making a comeback in Alaska.

As that happens, pressure is growing on the state to provide more money for the regional schools. And some are questioning whether the trend toward what some call regional learning centers is a good one.

About 520 students attended boarding schools full time in Alaska this year. That's about 240 more than were enrolled a decade ago.

In 1994, the only boarding school in Alaska was Mount Edgecumbe in Sitka in southeast Alaska. Now, full-time residential schooling is offered in Bethel in western Alaska and in Galena and Nenana in the interior.

### A question of choice

Gov. Frank Murkowski wants to expand Mount Edgecumbe to serve about 60 more students, said Eddy Jeans, manager of school finance at the Department of Education and Early Development.

"I think it's just people are looking at their options," Jeans said.

Many communities have fewer than 100 students, Jeans said. At that size, a school district can't offer many courses and can't hire expert teachers for all subjects.





John and Sharon Agwiak of Mountain Village decided daughter Arielle could better prepare for college in Nenana than at her 57-student hometown high school.

"It's just the idea of getting her exposed to other things like ... the arts, taking band — and getting her exposed to being away from home and somewhat of city life," John Agwiak said.

But unlike Mount Edgecumbe, the newer boarding schools sprang up without any commitment from the state to pay the extra cost of feeding and housing students.



Gov. Frank Murkowski

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In Nenana, at least, that's becoming a serious problem.

Superintendent Ken Eggleston said the Nenana Student Living Center will have to slash enrollment and raise student fees next year because a funding bill it hoped for didn't pass the Legislature.

State Rep. John Coghill, R-North Pole, had proposed a pilot program to give the new schools a \$472-a-student stipend, plus reimbursement for one round trip a year between the student's home and the school. That would have cost the state about \$1 million a year.

The bill died in committee. Sen. Gary Wilken, R-Fairbanks, said cost and plus policy questions were the stumbling blocks.

The state has no clear policy on boarding schools' role in the state educational system, Wilken said, and senators didn't want to set a precedent of giving money to any community that wanted to start a residential school.

Most boarding schools in Alaska closed after settlement of the Molly Hootch rural-education lawsuit in the 1970s led to construction of high schools in most villages. Many of the residential schools of that era had a reputation for alcohol abuse, violence and attempted suicides.

School officials said the new programs are different and they're emerging because this time, they represent a choice.

"It's not anything like what the boarding schools used to be," said Ralph Lindquist, dean of students at the Nenana school. "I think we're giving a lot of kids and parents an alternative to something they're not satisfied with."

Lindquist said students are typically two to three years behind academically when they arrive at Nenana, but they usually catch up within a semester or two.

Because the school is bigger, it can hire specialist teachers for each subject rather than having one or two people teach everything, as might be the case in a small village school, he said.

Also, it's easier to enforce attendance because students are living in a dormitory. If they miss class more than 12 times, they lose credits. The district offers Saturday school if they need to catch up.

"What we have found is, number one, if we have high expectations and, number two, if we equip them for success, we get good results," Lindquist said.

At Project Education Residential School in Galena, Principal Harry White said students making C's or below are required to see a tutor, which the school provides.

The Galena school just completed its seventh year of operating in buildings at a closed Air Force base.

The Nenana dormitory — built with a U.S. Department of Agriculture loan — has been operating for three years. Students attend classes with the Nenana city students.

The Bethel Area Boarding School is attended mostly by students within the Lower Kuskokwim School District who have dropped out or are at risk of dropping out. This was its fifth year of operation.

Nome Public Schools and the Bering Strait School District cooperate on a residential program in Nome that's ending its first year. Students do not stay in the dorm in Nome for a full school year. They come in from villages for a few weeks at a time for special courses.

While boarding schools of the past were criticized for undermining Alaska Native culture, Lindquist said the Nenana

school celebrates that culture with classes in Athabascan language and Native arts and literature.

Nearly 90 percent of the students are Alaska Native, and "grandparent" mentors provide Native role models for them, he said.

### **Criticism, claims of unfairness**

But not everyone is happy about the trend in boarding schools.

Christopher Simon, superintendent of the Yukon-Koyukuk School District, worries the schools rob children of important years with their parents, years when they should be learning skills for their future, such as how to parent teenagers.

The Nenana, Galena and Mount Edgecumbe programs draw 15 to 20 students a year from his district, Simon said.

"They tend to take the best students because of their entry requirements, and whoever's not stays at the site with us," Simon said.

The three schools can be selective in their admissions because they receive at least twice as many applications as they can accept.

Lindquist, in Nenana, acknowledged that the school tries to choose those most likely to succeed.

"It doesn't serve anybody's purpose to have somebody come here and fail," Lindquist said.

It's also critical when students are living together to weed out potentially violent behavior, he added.

At Galena, Superintendent Jim Smith said the school does not screen for scholastic aptitude but does turn away students with lots of behavioral problems.

Simon, of the Yukon-Koyukuk district, doesn't object to Mount Edgecumbe, a state-run school that for years has had a reputation for producing Alaska Native leaders.

But he sees the newcomer Nenana and Galena schools as programs started to spur their local economies to the detriment of surrounding villages.

The officials who run the Nenana and Galena schools, though, see Mount Edgecumbe as having an unfair financial advantage.

Mount Edgecumbe is run by the state and receives about \$14,200 a student to operate. That pays for room, board and schooling.

The newer schools generally receive no more state funding for their out-of-town students than for those who live in town with their parents.

That means the school in Nenana receives about \$7,000 a student and in Galena about \$10,000 a student, according to Jeans in the Department of Education.

But the schools say their costs are more than double that when room and board are counted.

Galena has filled that gap partly through grants and through fees generated from a separate program the district operates that provides correspondence schooling to students at Pacific Rim military bases, Smith said.

Nenana in the past used city reserve funds and this past year got a \$500,000 state grant to pay for room and board, Eggleston said. This coming year, Nenana has been allocated \$200,000 more from the state.

If the new schools close, the options for the mostly rural students who attend them will narrow, which Eggleston contends is not a good thing.

"The bottom line is parents really want the best for their kids, and they see that choice outside of their villages sometimes," Eggleston said.

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