

Regionalism in Indian Community Control

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A PRINCIPAL recommendation of the National Study of American Indian Education was that Indians should exercise increased decision-making power over Indian education.¹ Indian control of Indian children's education has been advocated and experimented with for some time, most notably in the case of the highly publicized Rough Rock Demonstration School.² While considerable controversy has recently erupted over the desirability of certain aspects of Rough Rock, this school is generally celebrated as the example of what an Indian school board can accomplish.³

Yet, as Havinghurst points out, sometimes Indian school boards succeed in improving the education of Indian students but sometimes they do not.⁴ Rather than merely urging for increased Indian control of education, social scientists could more usefully address the critical empirical question: What are the conditions under which Indian school boards succeed in improving Indian education and what are the conditions under which they do not?

This case study of control by a Native school board in an Alaskan Aleut village is the chronicle of a failure.⁵ Exploring the reasons for the failure do suggest, however, certain conditions which may be necessary for effective Indian control. This article suggests that a regional rather than local definition of community may increase the success of Indian school boards in improving the educational situation.

First, regional community control may increase the decision-making power of Indians in those communities comprised of whites as well as Indians by reducing the ability of a few whites to apply economic sanctions to every school board member. Second, regional control may take better advantage of available Indian skills since it enables the school board to draw upon the talents of the educated young, who tend to migrate from small villages to regional centers. Third, regional control may enable a group of small villages to pool their economic, technical, and political resources to improve their educational situation.

Local Control of the Schools in Iliaka

Iliaka⁶ is a coastal fishing village in the Aleutian Islands.⁷ In 1967, the resident population was 246. Of these, 201 were Aleut and the remainder were white. The school district consists of an elementary school and a high school which employs five teachers.

Local control of the schools in Iliaka was not the result of a deliberate educational policy to share decision-making powers with the Aleut community but was rather an unintended consequence of other events. In 1941, white businessmen in Iliaka, for reasons of self-interest, engineered the incorporation of the village as a first class city. Under state law, such municipal organizations automatically become independent school districts. As long as the district meets state standards for accreditation, sanitation, and teachers' qualifications, it is otherwise free of outside regulation and supervision. The local school board has the power to select its curriculum, textbooks and instructional materials and to hire and fire teachers. State standards do limit certain options of the school board. For example, the school district could not select members of the community who are not accredited teachers as school staff. However, the powers of the Iliaka school board are generally considered the essence of community control and are, of course, the equivalent of the powers of the school board in white Alaskan communities.

The School Board in Iliaka

The Iliaka School District is governed by an elected, five-member board. In 1967, all members were Aleut and the board was highly representative of the diverse economic strata and the diverse traditional and western cultural orientations in the Aleut community.

The school board president, Maria Nickson, was the business manager, aunt, and spokesman for Peter Paytof, owner of the larger of two general stores in the community. Most Aleuts were dependent on Peter Paytof for credit, and about 10 Aleuts depended on him for jobs.

Many Aleuts resented Maria Nickson and Peter Paytof for their manipulation of credit and their conspicuous western orientation. As one remarked of Maria Nickson: "Why didn't she stay in Seattle instead of bringing her fancy clothes and manners here? She acts more white than Aleut."

The community trusted two of the other board members and generally referred educational problems to them. Anna Livingston, the president of the Russian Orthodox church sisterhood, was traditionally-oriented and a recognized community leader. Bill Milovodof, son of the late chief, was the most important and trusted leader in

several organizations, serving on the city council and electric cooperative board as well as the school board.

The other two members, Shirley Deniken and Hugh Orchadin, came from families in which employment was irregular and drinking and family problems were severe.

The Educational Situation in Iliaka

What were the educational results of control by an all-Aleut school board? The educational situation in Iliaka appears to be neither better nor worse than that of similar Aleut villages without local school control. More than 60% of the 1966 Aleut student body had failed one or more grades, and slightly more than 50% of high school-age students had dropped out of school.

The Aleut school board had not improved the standard curriculum or established bicultural instruction. Student interest in school was consistently low. Indeed, an Aleut student norm encouraging resistance to the school and defiance of the teacher was nearly universally observed. Students gleefully recounted the times when one of their group threw a wastebasket at the teacher, spit gum in the teacher's face, and punched a teacher in the belly.

Nor had the Aleut school board hired teachers and administrators who were effective with Aleut students, respectful of parents, and responsive to the desires of the Aleut community. Aleuts considered the teachers inadequate and blamed the poor educational situation primarily upon their low academic expectations. As one former high school student phrased it: "They never taught us to value education. They brainwashed us into believing we're not capable. They never expected us to study, and I never cracked a book."

Aleut parents frequently complained about teachers' intrusions into their personal affairs and derogation of Aleut family life. One mother was infuriated when her son's third grade teacher asked what he ate for breakfast and how often he bathed. Another mother was embarrassed and angry when her daughter's teacher sent a note home telling the parents to buy the girl new socks and boots. "She doesn't understand the cost of keeping eight kids in clothes. Besides, what business is it of hers? She is supposed to teach, not tell me how to raise my kids."

The teachers in Iliaka resisted changing those school practices that offended the Aleut community. For example, the teachers' use of severe punishments engendered profound resentment since the Aleut approach to child rearing has always been permissive and indulgent. "My toes froze and I thought I was going to die from the cold," said a seventh grade student sent home in the middle of the day for punishment. "I had to walk four miles through a terrible

snow storm even though she (the teacher) knew my father picked me up on bad days." One teacher induced his students to sign confessions of their Halloween pranks and then turned the confessions over to a state trooper. Teachers commonly used corporal punishment as well, a bitterly resented method of discipline and one that was a frequent agenda item at board meetings.

Parents protested such practices to the school board, but the board merely passed these protests to the principal. The principal, convinced that the basic problem lay not in the school system but in the Aleut family, usually ignored the Native school board.

Barriers to Effective Community Control in Iliaka

Why did the Aleut school board fail to select a curriculum that would interest Aleut students and keep them in school? Why did it fail to dismiss incompetent and offensive teachers? And why did it not hire a principal and teachers who might be more responsive to the desires of the Aleut community?

Lack of educational expertise or the skills to acquire outside help was a major barrier. Most Aleuts do not know the meaning of the term "curriculum," let alone how to go about developing a different one. The educated and ambitious youth tend to migrate from this community where only unskilled jobs are available and thus deprive it of needed leadership and technical skills. In contrast to community control at demonstration schools such as Rough Rock, the Iliaka school board was not surrounded by professional educators eager to provide technical aid.

While lack of expertise might prevent major educational reform, the Aleut school board might be expected to use their powers to make some limited improvements. Why, for example, did not the school board direct teachers to stop using the corporal punishment so offensive to the community?

The school board's failure to initiate such change may reflect the members' convictions that, despite their legal powers, they can do nothing when whites in the community oppose the change. In contrast to community control at Rough Rock, a boarding school that involves parents from a number of communities, community control in Iliaka involves a single community. Consequently, school issues and educational decision-making structures cannot be isolated from community issues and decision-making structures. In Iliaka, despite the school board's legal powers, it is the whites and the few westernized Aleut businessmen who control the credit and jobs on which the majority of Aleuts depend. Thus, on school or other issues where the interests of this power elite conflict with those of the Aleut majority, the elite can exercise power through the manipulation of jobs and credit. The school board's decision to dismiss a teacher of

the Aleut majority regarded as superior and to retain one generally considered incompetent illustrates the actual powerlessness of the Aleut majority despite an all-Aleut school board's political structure.

Dorothy Peshen, the white school principal, married to a local Aleut, worked tirelessly for the school and community. She could be found in the school room nearly every evening until midnight — preparing lessons, writing up minutes for the city council, or organizing school records. She worked without extra pay, even during the summer months, and volunteered for any vacant post such as welfare fee agent, medical aid, or Neighborhood Youth Corps supervisor. Her beneficent activities were not confined to formal organizations. Convinced her job as educator included reforming the Aleuts, she exhorted parents and reproached children. Few community members objected to Dorothy Peshen's qualifications as a third and fourth grade teacher, though most considered her grossly incompetent to handle high school-age students, and nearly all protested her reform efforts.

Tom Tred was hired as the new school principal and high school teacher when the Iliaka high school was reactivated in 1966. After 20 years of teaching in an Indian community, Tom Tred and his family moved to Iliaka. Fascinated with this small village in the wilderness, the Treds decided to remain permanently. Yet, they recognized that successful integration into the community required time to learn Aleut customs and values. Thus, Tom proposed postponing the assumption of the school principal position for one year, and asked Dorothy Peshen to retain it. This represented the only agreement between the two teachers.

Thereafter, conflict was incessant. Dorothy Peshen disapproved of Tom's modern innovations such as an enlarged and diversified school library, modern math, and classes in drama and foreign language. Perhaps she also resented the widespread interest and involvement Tom's students displayed.

Tom failed to respect Dorothy Peshen's directives to secure her approval for plays to be performed by the students and for books to be introduced in the library. He also failed to follow her orders to return to the teaching of "old-fashioned" math. Thereupon, Dorothy Peshen charged Tom with stubbornness and insubordination and subjected him to increasingly frequent classroom surveillance. A battle ensued with each protagonist attracting a body of supporters. The majority, both white and Aleut, supported Tom Tred, but several powerful members of the white and westernized Aleut business community backed Dorothy Peshen. Ultimately, Dorothy Peshen posed her resignation against Tom Tred's dismissal, and the school board was forced to act.

Two of the school board members, Maria Nickson and Anna Livingston, were openly divided on this issue. Anna supported Tom Tred because he offered a high quality education without attacking Aleut customs and because he inspired enthusiasm in his students. Maria Nickson supported Dorothy Peshen because she shared the school principal's view on the necessity of reforming Aleuts. More significantly, Peter Paytof, whose business she managed, was one of the largest local taxpayers. Peter and Maria were keenly interested in local economies, especially in the school, which is one of the city's largest expenditures. Dorothy Peshen represented such an economy. She not only "teaches and preaches" but also performed organizational tasks at no additional cost to the community.

Four school board members attended the night of the decision, and the vote was tied two to two. No one was certain who voted with Maria Nickson for Tom Tred's dismissal. The conjecture in the Aleut community, however, was that the second vote was bought, either with liquor or the threat of a credit cut-off.

To break the tie, Maria Nickson went in search of the missing school board member, Shirley Deniken, whom she found at home drinking with a friend, Betty Dolmatof. After repeatedly unsuccessful attempts to convince Shirley Deniken to attend the meeting, Maria Nickson dragged her, undeterred by the accompanying pummeling administered by Betty Dolmatof. The final vote was three to two in favor of dismissing Tom Tred.

While other issues may have influenced the decision,⁸ members of the community generally believed that the school board member who represented the white and westernized Aleut community power elite, which controls jobs and credit, "persuaded" the others on the board to dismiss the competent teacher. The power elite in Iliaka is over-represented on the city council and its advisory arm, the city planning commission. Consequently, Aleuts perceive the council as the ultimate source of any type of decision-making power even when a representative native school board exists. A typical Aleut conclusion about the teacher dismissal was, "The school board is under the political thumb of the council. It does whatever the council tells it." In sum, Aleuts interpreted this outcome as further corroboration of their fundamental powerlessness despite the political structures and legal powers of Aleut control over education.

Conditions for Effective Indian Community Control

Control by an all-Aleut school board in Iliaka did not improve the education of Aleut students in large part because the school board lacked the expertise to introduce educational reforms and because the school board was powerless when opposed by a minority of whites and westernized Aleut businessmen who could exercise

severe economic sanctions. In demonstration schools such as Rough Rock, where community control has been more successful, educational expertise was available through consultants and sympathetic school staff. In addition, members of the school board came from a larger area than a single village so all school board members could not be under the thrall of the same local economic interests.

This case study suggests that a regional rather than village definition of community in the formation of school boards in Indian areas may increase the effectiveness of Indian control. In Alaska, these regions could be composed of several small villages with similar linguistic and cultural backgrounds and the larger community which serves as the regional center.

Regional school boards could strengthen the powers of self-determination of a group of small villages for several reasons. First, educated and ambitious Natives tend to migrate from small villages to the regional center so their leadership and administrative skills would not be lost. Second, regional control would enable a group of villages to pool their economic, technical, and political resources in a unified attack on common educational problems. For example, a region of villages could more likely bear the expense of an educational consultant and curriculum development services than an individual community. The regional board also could better promote the educational interests of the single villages in dealing with the state bureaucracy and legislature. Third, regional school boards composed of members from different villages would not be as subject to excessive influence from minority interests in a single community through their use of economic sanctions.

Regionalism in Indian community control has its advantages, notably the danger that educational decision-making will become too far removed from individual village parents, who will not become involved in school affairs. It will also be complicated to select a regional school board and allocate its powers in such a manner that larger communities cannot overwhelm smaller ones by their greater population and hence larger representation. The question of the optimal size of the political unit is, of course, a long debated one. In too large a political unit, individuals cease to have much influence and competing minorities, which nullify each other, can also nullify any beneficial action. In too small a political unit, a very similar majority can exercise tyrannical power over a minority or a powerful minority can easily apply sanctions to defeat majority will. In such areas as Alaska with many small, isolated, and predominantly Native villages, regionalism in community control seems the compromise most likely to result in both Native decision-making and improved education.

References

1. Robert J. Havinghurst and Estelle Fuchs, *The Education of Indian Children and Youth: Summary Report and Recommendations of the Nation Study of American Indian Education*. Series IV. No. 6, Minneapolis: Training Center for Community Programs, Center for Urban and Regional Affairs, University of Minnesota, 1970.
2. Estelle Fuchs, "Innovation at Rough Rock; Learning to be Navaho-American," *Saturday Review*, September 16, 1967.
3. See *School Review*, 1970, 79 (1) for a series of articles debating Dr. Donald Erickson's findings concerning Rough Rock. Of special interest may be the following: M. L. Wax, "Cophers of Gadflies Indian School Boards," pp. 57-59; J. Muskrat, "Need for Cultural Empathy," pp. 72-75; D. Erickson, "Custer Did Die for Our Sins," pp. 76-94.
4. Robert J. Havinghurst, "Reply to Book Reviews of *The Education of Indian Children and Youth*, *Human Organization*," 1971, 30 (2), pp. 219-220.
5. This is an analysis based on Dr. Dorothy Jones' "A Study of Social and Economic Problems in - - - - , an Aleut Village," Doctoral Dissertation, University of California, Berkely, 1969. Also published on microfilm, Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms. See also Dorothy Jones' "Aleut Acculturation: A Double Bind Adaptation" (forthcoming, journal unknown). I am grateful to Dr. Jones for her permission to use these data in this way.
6. All names have been changed to protect identities.
7. Aleuts inhabit the Aleutian and Pribilof Islands and the western portion of the Alaska Peninsula. They have a common origin with Eskimos. The two groups are thought to have diverged about 4,500 years ago. See William S. Laughlin, "Human Migration and Permanent Occupation in the Bering Sea Area," in David M. Hopkins (Ed.), *The Bering Land Bridge*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1967, pp. 409-450.
8. The division between insiders and outsiders in a small village is marked and Dorothy Peshen had been a resident in the community for a much longer period of time than Tom Tred. Moreover, in a Native village where whites are generally regarded as intruders, a white married to a Native such as Dorothy Peshen might be supported over a member of an all-white family such as Tom Tred.

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