

ADEQUACY AND EQUITY: PREREQUISITES TO EXCELLENCE IN RURAL EDUCATION

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Introduction

When it was suggested by my friend and colleague Murray Lake that I might address this group I accepted with both pleasant anticipation and apprehension. Pleasant anticipation because of the opportunity to once again be among Australians concerned with improved rural education and the intellectual stimulation conferences such as this engender. Apprehension because I have been absent from Australia for ten years and thus may not be adequately familiar with recent developments; the politics of education have no doubt changed and new organisational schemes and programs have been put into place.

But we all know that favourable change in education is slow in all countries, that issues once thought resolved reappear, and that improvements to schooling, especially rural schooling, are aggravating slow to materialise. In America "a nation at risk" has become the call for action at all levels of education in all settings, urban and rural. But the United States is not the only "national at risk". In the words of Jerry Kopp, past president of Phi Delta Kappa and current director of the PDK's Educators Promoting International Co-operation project:

The roots of the world's educational problems are amazingly similar, despite the diverse histories, cultures and social forces that have shaped the various nations. Yet the reasons these problems have surfaced today are quite different and have led to some very different attempts at resolution. There is much to be learned through the sharing of research and practical experience among the world's educators the acceptance of other nations' professional practices, even though they may differ radically from our own, is an essential attitude as well seek mutual solutions to complex problems (Kopp, 1992: 347).

Accordingly, and in keeping with Kopp's notion, I am in Australia to learn about these problems as perceived by you, but, also, if what I have learned about recent attempts at rural school improvement, primarily in Alaska, can be of value in Australia, I would like to share that knowledge.

It can be shown historically that interest in rural schools is cyclical, that is, we go through periods during which it is hard to arouse concern for the problems of rural education; at other times there are intense bursts of attention to the subject. It is encouraging to note that we are now in a period of heightened interest. This can be seen in the many promising conferences, research and program initiatives, and publications on rural education found world wide. This conference and a major conference on rural education sponsored by the American Association of School Administrators opening this coming Sunday in Massachusetts serve as good examples of this point. Recent efforts in Australia, such as the Commonwealth's renewed concern for education in rural areas as evidenced in three recent reports, A Fair Go: The Federal Government's Strategy for Rural Education and Training; A Fair Chance for All: Education that's Within Everyone's

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Reach; and *Toward a National Strategy for Rural Australians*, stand out as statements of interest in rural education.

In the United States, the Regional Educational Research Laboratories are noted for their work in rural school improvements. In particular the Regional Rural Technical Assistance Centres under the direction of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory; the work done on co-operative learning in rural schools done at the Regional Laboratory for Educational Improvement of the Northeast and Islands; and the Community Development Program of the Mid-Continent Regional Educational Laboratory come to mind.

Also in the U.S., the work of the Federal Department of Education's Indian Nations at Risk Task Force, which may be of special interest to those of you working among the Aboriginal population, is indicative of the scope of work in rural areas in the U.S. and illustrates the sense of importance given to special populations in rural areas. This group's final report, *Indian Nations at Risk: An Educational Strategy for Action* has recently been released. And the Ford Foundation continues to show an interest in rural education; for example they currently support the Multicultural Education in Rural Schools Project at Kansas State University.

In Canada, work on rural school improvements done at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education is familiar to many of you. Closely related to OISE's efforts and notable among current Canadian projects, is the promising Ontario Contact North Network. As reported in OISE's Small Schools Network Newsletter,

Contact North is a communications network used by colleges, universities and secondary schools in Northern Ontario to reach students who would not otherwise have access to a full range of educational opportunities. The network, which started in 1987 as an Ontario government pilot project in 27 northern communities, has now grown to serve more than 75 Ontario communities with close to 5000 course registrations in the 1989-1990 academic year (Newsletter, Small Schools Network, OISE, Vol. 5, Issue 1, 1990, p. 5) ...

Last year alone this project enjoyed a budget in excess of \$4,000,000.

It is also interesting to follow rural school developments in Britain in the wake of the Education Reform Act of 1988. According to W.R. Chandler, a head teacher in rural England, many rural schools are "weathering the storm" but

[They] are finding the totality and speed of implementation of the National curriculum [a major segment of the Act] daunting as in two and three room schools there are so many curricular areas to be planned, re-examined and evaluated (Chandler, 1991: 9).

However, David Keast, who works with the Small Schools Network of the University of Exeter, has pointed out that:

It has been asserted by some who should know better that small schools will not be able to provide the breadth of curriculum which will meet National Curriculum requirements ... Before the Education Reform Act perceived royal assent many people had written off small schools ... Previously assumptions have been founded on the view that if its too much for one small school then it's impossible for all small

schools. Here we take the view that if it is possible in one small school it's possible in many small schools (Keast, 1990: 11).

However, this argument does not respond to the criticism of those who see the National curriculum, which is rigid and uniform, to be anathema to the need for flexibility in rural schools and a contradiction of Robert Johnson's thesis that "the rural school is a special environment and thus rural and small schools should set out to exploit their environment ... ". The character of rural schools in Britain in light of the new act will remain contentious for some time to come.

Every bit as indicative of popular interest in rural schooling are recent publications. Three major new books that I have run into cover the field in an expansive way. They are:

Contemporary Issues in American Distance Education, edited by Michael Morre, Director of the American Centre for the Study Distance Education, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, Pennsylvania. At 440 pages this book covers a wide array of topics. As described by its publisher:

Distance education in America is characterise by an enormous variety of institutions, programs, media and pedagogical methods. This book attempts to draw together an overall picture of rapid growth and achievements in the field of American distance education and problems and issues that confront it. At 446 pages this book covers a multitude of topics (Pergamon Press, 1992 Catalogue, p. 16).

The second book worth your attention (although at US\$58.00 a copy) is *Rural Education: Issues and Practice* by Alan J. DeYoung. Published by Garland Press, this book makes the point that although "[t]he problems of rural schools have historically been overshadowed by those of urban schools, changing attitudes, demographics, and technology have turned the attention of educators and policy makers to the nonurban schools" (Garland Publishing, *New and Recent Books in Education*, p. 7).

And the third new book, *Education in the Rural American Community: A Lifelong Process*, draws on the expertise of some of the foremost leaders in rural education to present a practical framework for understanding lifelong education and how various formal and nonformal educational organisations in the rural community enhance this process. This book, edited by Michael Galbraith of Temple University, is published by Krieger Publishing Company.

These are only samples of three new major works; I have not attempted to develop an exhaustive bibliography. No doubt there are others that you can point to. And of course I have not even tried to examine ERIC-CRESS, where thousands of articles and documents on rural education are gathered yearly. The reason for mentioning these works and citing examples of rural schooling developments in other countries is not an effort to bring everyone up to date on the latest in the literature and recent innovations, a formidable task; instead it is to stress the point that interest in rural schooling is indeed in the ascendancy.

With so much interest in rural schooling world wide I am hard pressed to address anything new that you probably have not already come upon. nevertheless this must be attempted. As I understand the purposes of this conference you are to identify areas for rural school improvement and development and the means to achieve equality of opportunity in rural Australia. It is to this end that I have attempted to prepare my remarks.

The Issues

Equality of opportunity as the by-word for school improvement movements came into the literature over ninety years ago and into prominence about thirty years ago. It is a concept that continues to drive the pursuit for excellence among most people working to improve schooling, not just in rural areas, but throughout the entire educational establishment in much of the world. But despite over a quarter century of effort, the promise of equality of opportunity goes unfulfilled in many population groups. It goes unfulfilled because of our continued inability to achieve adequacy and equity in provisions for schooling. Moreover, it has been shown through numerous studies that many of the populations most at risk of not receiving equitable considerations and adequate programs are those living in rural areas.

The principle of equity in rural schooling, derived from the doctrine of fairness and impartiality, requires that deliberations about appropriation of funds, allocation of decision making authority, and provision for well qualified teachers be considered in terms of a fair allotment of the material and intellectual wealth of the state as a whole. Moreover, and most importantly, it is axiomatic that the level of equality found in any system determines the level of equality of opportunity to learn among the children of the entire polity. This concept most assuredly applies to rural children and children of indigenous ancestry.

Likewise, excellence in rural schooling is also dependent on adequacy, adequacy in decision making authority, and adequacy in intellectual and material resources. Unfortunately, as is the case of the equitable distribution of these intrinsic components of schools, adequacy remains elusive. Unlike equity, however, which is more easily recognised because of customarily accepted notions of fairness, adequacy is more difficult to define. It is subject to interpretation, based on the observer's sense of values and political inclination. What is adequate for one is inadequate to another. Quantities seen as excessive to some are meagre to others.

Regardless of how we perceive the extent of adequacy there is general agreement that provisions for schools in rural areas are often lacking. In this predicament it is essential to acknowledge that rural teachers and rural residents are almost certain to be among those who have the most reliable feel for what is needed -- the essential requirements for good schooling -- in their communities. Therefore, because of their uniquely qualified views as well as their vested interests, it becomes incumbent on rural residents to become the interpreters of need, protagonists for adequacy to meet these needs, and catalysts that prompt the changes required in policy to assure that these needs are met.

This notion is well established in the literature as far back as there have been formal school systems. Even the New South Wales Public Schools Act of 1866 provided for government financed incentives for locally inspired and specialised curricula appropriate to rural communities (Turney, Sinclair, and Cairns, 1980: 10). One of the most succinct statements in favour of rural resident participation in school policy making was postulated by R. Freeman Butts in 1955, in his classic treatise on the condition of schooling in this country, *Assumptions Underlying Australian Education*. After an extensive examination of Australian schools, Butts asserted that

"... education is more vital and healthy when it is kept close to the needs of the people and when they feel they have a genuine stake in educational institutions of their own making and for which they have a large measure of responsibility." (Butts, 1955: 4)

It is not just coincidental that this position has been arrived at many times since. For example, the Commonwealth Government's report, Education of Isolated School Children twenty years later stressed local citizen involvement, as well as equality of opportunity. Likewise, in the mid 1970's, one of Dr R.T. Fitzgerald's conclusions in the Whitlam Government's Report from the Commission of Inquiry into Poverty in Australia was that the inadequate relationship between isolated schools and local populations created a major obstacle to improved schooling practices. As a consequence of this observation, Fitzgerald proposed that 'effective communication should be actively encouraged between the school, the home and community.' (Fitzgerald, 1976: 67-69).

And typical of many papers in the same vane in the 1980s, Don McLean, at the time Assistant Regional Director of Education in Victoria wrote:

A community involved education is one that means involvement, through active negotiation in the process of learning, through sharing the teacher's power to define what shall be taught, participating in deciding strategies to be used and having the confidence to challenge a system that fails to allow that sort of 'engagement' (McLean, 1982: 59).

Most recently, Joseph Murphy, in his new book *Restructuring Schools: Capturing and Assessing the Phenomena*, published in 1991 by Columbia University, made the same point when he wrote that:

The backbone of the political science position on decentralisation is "the proposition that the closer government is to people the more likely it is to be responsive to their demands and interests" (Campbell, N.D., p. 2). Interwoven in this grass roots notion of responsiveness are issues of democracy, constituent influence and control over organisational decisions, ownership of public institutions, trust, and organisational accountability. Proponents of devolution believe that decentralised units increase knowledge about, access to, and participation in governance; make organisations easier to change; and prevent undue consolidation of power at geographically distant locations and hierarchically remote levels (Murphy, 1991, pp 1-2).

Postulates of this type notwithstanding, there remains, according to Nash, "a central and persistent theme in the tension between the demands for education in locally relevant knowledge and in nationally relevant knowledge" (Roy Nash, *Schooling in Rural Societies*, 1980, p. 20). And closely related to this notion is the problem of state local relationships theorised and aptly described by Thomas James of Brown University in last year's *Review of Research in Education*.. Developing school programs that reflect the relationship between state authority and local educational needs is, according to James:

... marked by contradictory pressures to emphasise, on the one hand, the legitimacy of dispersed and self-initiated processes of change in the smallest units of educational systems -- [local] communities, the school site, classroom practice, even individual students.

But on the other hand, there is equally strong pressure to recognise ... an accelerating tilt toward ... more commanding policy controls, and generally a more political involvement of state governments in school affairs (James, 1991: 173).

Although James is writing about a situation in the American system of education, a more convoluted system is found in many countries, the dichotomy between those with state

level responsibility and those who must provide schooling at the local level is a perennial problem world wide. And we may add that when authority is conceded downward generally it is done so in a quantity that is inversely proportional to the distance that separates the top in the line of command from the bottom. In other words, the greater the distance the school is from the seat of policy making, either physical or organisational, the less likely it is that local policy positions will prevail. Accordingly, problems due to unequal levels of authority have the potential to be more acute in rural schools than elsewhere.

In the face of this problem, what can be done to remove obstacles to adequacy and equity, to equality of opportunity and ultimately to excellence in rural schooling? Answers fall into two categories, the programmatic domain and the political. The programmatic dimension, the category most familiar to many people working in school improvement movements, comes first to mind. We can all point to innovative and successful programs in the past. But how many of these have become normalised, institutionalised daily fare? Not many.

Since there appear to have been many good ideas and programs set forth over the years, why are the results of schooling less than satisfactory for so many today? Most likely it is because far too often policy making bodies are isolated from the benefits of grass roots insight, lack sensitivity to rural needs, and are unfamiliar with the day to day problems of rural schools. However, there are a few notable exceptions to the isolation and intransigence characteristically found in many central policy making bodies. But where there are exceptions, more often than not, they came about because of political initiatives at the local level. Accordingly, it is the second category, the politics of rural school improvement that I want to dwell on for the rest of my time.

During the past two years, while working with the Alaska State Legislature as their advisor on school improvement measures, I became involved, in the world of policy making at the state level. The success of this effort has led me to become convinced that political processes are as crucial to school improvement as are theoretical and programmatic developments academic and the education profession have long laboured over and advocated. This is not to even remotely suggest that the details of school operations, curriculum content and classroom practices should be legislated. Far from it. The fewer written rules regarding school governance and instructional content at any level, so much the better. Nor do I suggest that we can do without theoretical and programmatic development.

But it is possible to promulgate policies at the state level that provide the means by which the creativeness of rural residents and teachers can be encouraged and then set free to be more innovative. Moreover, a better balance between local community needs and the legitimate concerns and responsibilities of the state as a whole can be achieved through shared policy making authority. In short, rational political activities, especially if they originate at the grass roots level, will enable the good ideas and programs that have emerged, faded and re-emerged over the years to become the institutional norms and routine standards by which rural schools should be constituted.

To justify this contention, I would like to describe my recent experience with the Alaska legislature and how that body is attempting to establish a more constructive relationship between its statewide authority on the one hand and the educational needs of local community residents on the other.

Putting aside their obvious differences, Alaska is, in several ways, much like Australia. The physical environment of their rural schools is composed of an interrelated combination of dramatic extremes. Great distances separate small, isolated communities. Climatic and physical characteristics of the land are often harsh and unforgiving. There are great geographic, economic, historical, and cultural differences among rural places in both countries. And many individuals in both countries share a strong sense of independence and oft-time contrariness. Furthermore, the indigenous minorities of both Alaska and Australia have had frustrating, indeterminate relationships with the dominant non-Aboriginal population.

Although the majority of the population of both Alaska and Australia live in urban areas, there are many rural folk scattered widely in numerous small communities in both places. In Alaska there are approximately 200 villages but their residents account for only 20% of the population. The other 80% live in no more than six urban places, one of which, Anchorage, has close to half the population of the state. Obviously, the vast majority of places are small by anyone's standards.

Based on the last census, approximately one in seven Alaskans is functionally illiterate in English. An estimated 30% of freshmen entering Alaska's high schools do not graduate. Twenty of Alaska's 54 school districts, all rural, scored on average below the 22nd percentile in either reading, mathematics, or language arts at the 4th, 6th, or 8th grade on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. The average percent of students living in poverty in rural communities is 56% as opposed to a statewide average of 21.8% (Alaska Department of Education, 1989). Approximately one third of Alaska's school age population fits one of the various definitions of "students at risk". It was into this predicament that I was invited by the state legislature to assist in their efforts to improve schooling through legislation.

To make what might become too long a story, let it suffice to say that in light of this situation it was a strong grass roots initiative that compelled the legislature to create a special, bipartisan joint Senate-House committee on school performance to seek ways to ameliorate the state's inadequate schooling record. Through its enabling legislation, it became the responsibility of the Committee to identify problem areas and to propose alternative means that might lead to improved school performance as well as to recommend measures that would adjust the balance in local-state authority.

This the Committee did, but not before a great many people had been heard from, especially residents of small, isolated and economically depressed communities. For almost two years, through a series of meetings, hearings and especially informal gatherings with generally disenfranchised local residents and students -- those most affected by the decline in school performance -- the committee listened to complaints, concerns and recommendations.

Recognising the need for the legislature to avoid specific involvement in daily school operations, it was first decided that subjects selected for possible legislation should relate only to broad policy considerations and be of such a level of importance that they dealt with only root causes of schooling problems. With these criteria in mind and drawing on material collected from two years of grass roots input it was concluded that shortcomings in school performance could be attributed to the following deficiencies: *

1. The need for schools to be more strictly accountable to the communities in which they are located.

Accordingly, an act was passed that declared the purposes of education as required at the state level, including a list of outcomes of schooling that identifies the needs of society at both the state and local levels. But most notable in the act is a provision that require the participation of parents and teachers in school planning. In essence the act responds to the oft repeated position of many who testified at the community level that there is a need to empower parents, teachers, and principals to make programmatic decisions in a more substantial way than in the past. Furthermore, the state now requires that communities plan programs that encourage accommodation of needs peculiar to each particular community resulting from its unique cultural and economic circumstances. And as a means to monitor these requirements, each school must prepare an annual report card to the public on the progress it has made complying with the requirements.

2. The need for an unencumbered, extraordinary source of money to carry out exceptional approaches to school innovations.

To meet this need, the legislature established a competitive grant program, called the Fund for the Improvement of School Performance, to encourage schools, in partnership with the communities they serve, to plan and carry out changes that will enable them to become more effective places of learning. Two categories of grants were recommended. Community school advisory boards were empowered to apply directly for grants while a second fund would be reserved for teachers and principals. (Note the similarity of this act with the New South Wales Education Act of 1866.)

3. The need to assist on better co-ordinate health social service, and educational agencies as a means to remove barriers to learning among disadvantaged youth.

Through its hearings and deliberation the Committee recognised that not all causes of inadequate school performance can be attributed to problems in the school system. Thus, it concluded that there may be no root cause of inadequate school performance greater than environmental and social handicaps, especially those that are the result of chronic poverty. This conclusion gave rise to legislation that established a permanent inter-agency co-ordinating committee that is required to identify the most critical social and health barriers to learning, establish plans to overcome them, be responsible for their implementation and report annually to the legislature.

* The following discussion of needs as found by the Alaska Legislature's Joint Senate-House Committee on School Performance is adapted from, *New Directives in School Performance: The Legislature as Advocate and Guarantor*, prepared by Frank Darnell, Consultant to the Committee, 1991.

4. The need to strengthen readiness to learn among pre-school children.

Enhanced early childhood education as the primary means to meet this need was consistent with testimony from every corner of the state, urban and rural. The Committee found that among fundamental causes that deny children the means or insufficient early childhood and parenting education programs in small, isolated communities, especially where poverty is high. In keeping with this finding, appropriations for early childhood were increased substantially and a special committee constituted to develop a plan for a stateside program of early childhood education that would enable all children in need of this type of schooling to be included.

5. The need for a redesigned system of school governance and finance.

Because of school district boundaries of unequal size and population distribution it was found the devolution of decision making authority was badly skewed at the expense of many rural schools. Moreover, much evidence was found that showed funds for rural schools to be extremely unequally distributed; in some cases a disparity factor of six separated rich schools from poor. Jonathan Kozol's 'Savage Inequalities' were found as vexing in rural Alaska as well as American inner cities. This need gave rise to a recommendation that a special study be carried out that would develop a school governance and finance system that would assure an equitable and adequate distribution of state funds for school purposes, and provide equitable decision making authority among all communities of the state, regardless of size. Work required to comply with this recommendation remains incomplete.

6. The need to strengthen professional development in the teaching profession.

The Committee concluded that no matter how well-thought out and executed and equitably financed and organisationally well structured system may be, it will fail to result in improved school performance if it lacks teachers who are well-educated, motivated, and respected. "The ultimate innovator in schools is the teacher and significant changes will not occur unless teachers are directly involved in the planning and development of the desired changes" (Meade, 1979). It is the extent of teacher efficacy, the capacity to produce the desired effects, that will determine the success of the outcomes sought at higher policy making levels. These notions gave rise to this need, as did the following statistics.

During 1990, teachers shortages, primarily in rural schools where there is an annual teacher turnover rate of 30%, have made it necessary to recruit teachers who do not have the background to succeed under the demanding conditions found in many rural communities. Of the classroom vacancies that had to be filled in 1989-1990, fewer than 20% were filled with graduates of teacher training programs in Alaska and out of the Alaska graduates, only a few had received rural specific training.

Accordingly, recommendations of the Committee concerning professional development called for

all teachers to have at least a B.A. or B.S. degree in a subject matter discipline as a prerequisite for admission to a professional teacher education program,

specialised teacher training programs of the University of Alaska that prepare teachers for assignments in rural schools must become the norm rather than the exception,

establishment of a tiered system of teacher and administrator certification that distinguishes between competencies necessary to teach in rural communities and traditional, urban schools.

7. **The need to better understand processes of schooling, such as why some pupils succeed where others do not, why some programs of instruction work well while others do not, and how information about successful programs can be disseminated more effectively.**

The committee agreed with the position of Willis Hawley, as stated in a recent article in the *Educational Researcher*, that "the process of [school] improvement starts with the identification of possible alternatives for improving education-related policies and practices and careful research to discover the relative effectiveness and efficiency of these alternatives" (Hawley, 1990). It can be said that the current capabilities of educational research units in Alaska are inadequate to meet this purpose. Because policy makers in state agencies and school units will continue to require information that can enable them to judge better the validity of the requirements and claims of those who are attempting to reform public education the Committee concluded more and better research must be initiated with the financial support of the legislature.

At this point you may say these seven needs and the means to meet them are not necessarily new or revolutionary; which is of course true enough -- if we are talking only within the education community. What makes them unique is their origin and their implementation. They were declared to be needs by the highest policy making body of the state after prompting by grass roots community activists, teachers, and in a few instances, students. Most of them have been positively acted on through legislation and are now being implemented.

Although I have stressed positive developments in Alaska to make a point, a new law in the state of Washington may be an even better example of the type of progressive legislation that has the potential to release the creativity and common sense of rural teachers and residents while not meddling in the day to day operation of schools. In April of this year, the governor of Washington signed an education reform bill that allows local schools to throw out state regulations and transform school programs along local needs. The law simply says that local schools can do anything that is not expressly forbidden by state law. Previously, schools could do only the things that were explicitly authorised in state statutes (Oregonian, April 2, 1992, Section C, page 1). Possibilities for locally initiated school development derived from the extraordinary simplicity of the concept embodied in the law are almost without limit. Because of their distance from the centres of authority, rural schools more than urban need the freedom to be flexible -- in the words of Robert Johnson, "to dare to be different". This law not only permits this, it encourages it.

Ask yourself, how could such a law empower you to be more creative and innovative? How could you better utilise local resources? What could you do to improve schools that you now can not do? On the other hand, by returning to the problem of the dichotomy of competing state and local interests posed by James and Nash, it must also be asked, how far can a law that deregulates local schools and

communities go before it compromises the responsibility of the state to protect the needs of society as a whole?

Having raised these questions of a speculative nature, I would like to leave them dangling, to be applied to your own circumstances, for your later consideration. Left that way, they prompt me to conclude my remarks.

Conclusion

The broad based composition of participants at this conference is a good sign. It serves as an excellent example of the crucial mixture of effort necessary to foster rural school improvement. The diverse interests and backgrounds of a cross-section of those in attendance add a significant scope to the proceedings, a range not always found at university campus gatherings. This feature should be especially appealing to those of you who are or would be political activists. As an academic myself, and a member of the faculty of the University of Alaska for the past twenty-seven years, I do not want to disparage my academic colleges. But academic discourse, informed program development, and enlightened teacher training, regardless of how brilliant these efforts may be, while necessary, are not sufficient to bring out the changes required to improve rural schooling. These efforts must be coupled with political action inspired by the intuitive perceptions and practical understanding possessed by those who live in and understand the nuances of the local culture. It is this combined effort of academe and rural community acting in concert that can then be turned into plans and programs that can be brought to bear on the final arbiters of educational policy, those who control the political process. To do otherwise we are apt to see a repeat of the past twenty-five years; many good ideas speaking to equity and adequacy frustrated for want of the essential momentum or resources required to see them realised in the classroom on a sustained basis.

In the book *Rural Education: In Pursuit of Excellence*, published by the University of Western Australia Press in 1982, I was unduly optimistic when I concluded that the attainment of equality of opportunity was at hand, that the next movement must be toward improved quality in schools. But if we have not achieved equality of opportunity to the extent desired, we do understand the process of getting there better. In that book I cited Kjell Eide, a specialist in rural education in Norway, who had written, "Equality is rarely given to any group, it is achieved through the stirring of the group itself". (Eide, 1979, p.12). In 1992, I would append this statement with the thought, that stirring must be through political process in forceful and well defined terms.

Lawrence Cremin, in his final book shortly before his death in 1991, stressed the inevitability of politics in schooling this way:

Education has always served political functions insofar as it affects, or at least is believed and intended to affect, the future character of the community and the state. Recall [Aristotle's] argument: it is impossible to talk about education apart from some conception of the good life; people will inevitably differ in their conceptions of the good life, and hence they will inevitably disagree on matters of education; therefore the discussion of education falls squarely within the domain of politics (Cremin, 1990, p. 85).

It can be added, if education serves political functions, so too can education be served by political processes. Although many internal forces within central systems combine to

maintain the status quo, they can be moved by popular dissatisfaction and political pressure.

Finally, the innovations we seek to normalise today will become the programs in need of reform tomorrow. In the preface to the book, *Rural Education: In Pursuit of Excellence*, I wrote: "Pursuits in education should be never ending, always heading in yet other and potentially more promising directions" (Darnell in Darnell and Simpson, 1981). That assumption is as valid today as a decade ago and will remain so a decade and more from now. Eventually, new and still better ideas yet to be set forth will become the next generations standards.

During the late autumn of 1990, I, along with a few legislators who had seldom been out of the city, were in the Yupik Eskimo village of Tununik on a small island on the edge of the Bering Sea. Villages along the Bering Sea must be seen to understand their isolation, their poverty, and bleakness. Cold winds, heavy seas crashing onto barren beaches, treeless tundra for as far as can be seen, and populated by people of an ancient culture still not fully understood by those outside of it typify these places. Tununik residents were assembled in the local school at our request to tell those of us who had come from the state capital fifteen hundred miles away their views on schooling. One elderly man may have said it for all villagers there and elsewhere, when, speaking through an interpreter, he asked the ultimate question, "I have lived in this village all my life and never sent to school. I speak only my native language. Why is it that the kids who graduate from high school do not know any more than I do?"

His question suggests the imperatives of our time and this conference.

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