

**STUDY OF
WILLIAM E. BELTZ SCHOOL
NOME, ALASKA
BY
ALASKA STATE COMMISSION FOR HUMAN RIGHTS
520 MACKAY BUILDING, 338 DENALI STREET
ANCHORAGE, ALASKA 99501**

State of Alaska
Office of the Governor
Commission for Human Rights
520 Mackay Building
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December 11, 1969

The Honorable Keith H. Miller
Governor of Alaska
Dr. Clifford Hartman
Commissioner, Department of Education
Dr. Walter Soboleff
Chairman, Alaska Board of Education
Honorable Members of the State legislature

Ladies and Gentlemen:

In October 1969, Mr. James Harper, Director of Regional Schools for the State of Alaska, requested the State Commission for Human Rights to do a study of the William E. Beltz School in Nome. The request arose out of the concern which Mr. Harper and the Commission shared over the suspension of a number of students for drinking offenses. However, both the Commission and Mr. Harper felt that a comprehensive survey of the operation of the school should be made, since the successful education of our Native youngsters is of vital importance to the State, and since a knowledge of the successes and failures of Beltz could be applied to other regional schools as they open throughout the State.

Mr. Robert Willard of the Commission staff, and Mrs. Lisa Rudd, Commissioner, went to Nome on Monday, October 27. Mr. Willard remained there through October 31 and Mrs. Rudd stayed through November 3. Mr. Willard stayed at a hotel in Nome. Mrs. Rudd lived in the girls' dormitory at Beltz for four days and then moved to a hotel in town. During their stay they made an effort to become a part of the life of the school, holding formal and informal talks with students, faculty, and staff; attending meetings with the same groups; attending classes; going on field trips with the students; eating meals in the school cafeteria; meeting with the Beltz Advisory School Board, made up of representatives of the various villages which send students to Beltz; and discussing the overall operation of the school with the administration.

They also talked to a number of townspeople in Nome who have observed the operation of the school and studied school records and reports by former teachers.

The conclusions in this report, then, are based on a wide variety of experiences and discussions which admittedly took place during a short period of time. We hope that the Commission's conclusions and recommendations will be helpful in stimulating further interest in and concern for the operation of the Beltz School.

We thank Mr. Harper for inviting the Commission to the school. We also thank, in particular, Mr. Clifford Myers, Superintendent of the school; Mr. Dennis Corrington, Principal; Mrs. Linda Elanna, Dormitory Director; and the Beltz Advisory School Board for their friendly cooperation during the Commission's study of Beltz.

Respectfully submitted,
/S/
Ernest W. Griffin, Chairman
Willard L. Bowman, Executive Director

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Encl.

The William E. Beltz School

The William E. Beltz School is a boarding high school just outside of Nome, Alaska, for youngsters from the villages of Northwest Alaska. This means that almost 100% of the students are Eskimos. (The only exception the Commission is aware of is the son of a faculty member.) It was built in 1966 by the State of Alaska, using funds from the State, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the City of Nome. The school offers a combined academic and vocational curriculum. Vocation-oriented classes include dressmaking, tailoring, library science, cabinetmaking, carpentry, shorthand, typing, metalworking, and auto mechanics. Academic subjects include mathematics, biology, chemistry, English, history, government, art, and economics.

The school is located 3-1/2 miles from Nome and is accessible by road. Transportation to Nome is provided by a single school bus, which the school shares with the Nome schools. There are no other vehicles directly assigned to Beltz.

The school consists of an academic building, a dining hall and administration building, a dormitory built for 76 boys and 76 girls (175 students were enrolled in August, 1969), a faculty apartment building, and a service building. The dormitory has separate wings for the boys and the girls, connected by common lounges and recreation rooms. All buildings except the apartment building are of a single story. There is a tunnel connecting the dormitory, dining hall, and academic buildings.

There is no gymnasium at the school. The students use the gym at the Nome High School, but this presents problems of scheduling and transportation. We understand that a contract has been let for the construction of a gym at Beltz in 1970. It is badly needed.

The school has a faculty of 14 and a staff of 25. It is administered by a Superintendent (who is also the Superintendent of the Nome schools), a Principal, and a Dormitory Director. At the time the Commission was at Beltz, the school had neither a regular recreation director nor a guidance counselor resident in the dormitory. A succession of people who work for the Department of Education in other parts of the State were filling in at the recreation directors job, though none stayed longer than a month. We understand that both positions are funded and that efforts are being made to fill them. It is vital that they be filled soon.

The school is operated by the State of Alaska Department of Education's Division of State-Operated Schools. The State Board of Education functions as the school board for the school. In September, 1968, a Beltz Advisory School Board was formed, made up of a representative from each of the villages which sends students to Beltz. It meets at least once a year and its seven-member executive committee meets more often. A real effort is made to keep the Advisory Board up to date with what is happening at the school; and, aside from their contribution of thoughts on the school's operation, the board members provide an expression of village and parental interest which helps the students make the transition to school life. Although the Advisory Board has no formal powers or duties, the Beltz administration has given it considerable latitude in determining social and dormitory policies, but only on an issue-by-issue basis.

It should be noted that, unlike most American students, the Natives of Alaska can choose among a number of high schools. Any of the students now at Beltz could have gone to one of the BIA schools open to Native youngsters (Chilocco in Oklahoma, Chemawa in Oregon, or Mt. Edgecumbe at Sitka), or to a high school in an Alaskan town through the State's Boarding Home Program. One of the big attractions of Beltz is that it is closer to home than any of these other schools.

The school is named for the late William E. Beltz, an Eskimo who was the first President of the Alaska State Senate.

General Statement

Guidelines for both the academic and dormitory functions of the Beltz School must be drawn up without delay.

It is apparent that no decisions as to the underlying philosophy and purpose of the school have ever been made. At least no member of the present administration at Beltz was able to provide the Commission with policy statements on any aspects of the school operation, with the exception of the policy on drinking offenses at the school, which was developed just before our study was undertaken.

Beltz was originally conceived as a vocational school. It now combines academic and vocational curricula, and neither is satisfactory. Some direction must be given to the schooling offered to the students at Beltz and creative thought put into how to make their education useful and meaningful.

The dormitory operation flounders between a horror of too much regimentation and the realization that some controls have to be exercised over a group of teenagers living together. Again, we were unable to discover that any policies have been developed for what surely is a unique social experiment.

The relationship between the school and various public agencies with which it sometimes "does business" should also be defined. Again, this social function of the school is unique. It is a public dormitory that is also a home. As such, it deserves a unique relationship with, for instance, the Nome police force. As soon as guidelines for the operation of the school are worked out, the administration should work with the public agencies in Nome with which it is likely to share concern over the well-being of the students to develop either formal or informal understandings on how cases are to be handled.

The State of Alaska is going to have to spend more money at the Beltz School.

Money is needed not only to upgrade the present operations of the school (pay increases, equipment, etc.) but also for innovative programs, particularly in the academic field. Although no follow-up on former students has been done, both faculty and administration at Beltz told the Commission that they do not consider the school a success, either vocationally or academically. It will not become one without the expenditure of a great deal more money. Everyone says that education, particularly of our Native youngsters, is the most important challenge facing the State. Are we willing to spend the money to meet the challenge?

In every facet of the school's operation, there must be more awareness and appreciation of the Eskimo culture.

Faculty and staff must make a real effort not only to understand the Eskimo culture and the difficulties which the students face as they lose contact with it, but they must also devise new techniques and programs to make the transition easier.

Efforts should also be made to allow the students to retain valuable aspects of their culture, both the "window dressings" (sled dogs, Native foods, etc.) and the underlying attitudes which make the Eskimos unique and strong.

Specific Recommendations

ACADEMIC

The quality of the teaching at Beltz must be improved.

A high turnover rate in the faculty, the fact that teachers are sometimes required to teach courses for which they have no training, and a total lack of training and materials in cross-cultural education all combine to create a poor academic situation. On the whole, the teachers do not think creatively or positively about educating Eskimo youngsters. One is told and one observes that they are more committed to a contract than they are to the students.

The Commission has four suggestions for improving the quality of the faculty at Beltz:

First, the State must be much more thorough and perceptive in its recruitment of teachers. A nationwide VISTA- or Peace Corps-type advertising campaign, outlining both the difficulties and the satisfactions of teaching at Beltz, would probably help to find teachers who are seeking an unusual challenge. It is the Commission's feeling, however, that the Department of Education will find many of its best Beltz teachers within Alaska; and certainly an effort should be made to find Eskimo or Indian teachers. A recruiting trip by the superintendent or principal at Nome is essential so that he can personally appraise the applicants. Beltz is a small, fairly intense and isolated community. The choice of who is to be part of it should be in the hands of the superintendent or principal on the scene.

Second, training, materials and curricula in cross-cultural education must be developed and made available to the entire faculty at Beltz. As far as we could determine, the Department of Education has not addressed itself to the question of cross-cultural education on the high school level. How can we hope to run a high school for Eskimos without making this effort?

Faculty orientation to the Eskimo culture should include a stay of several weeks in an Eskimo village, summer courses on the Eskimo culture with Eskimos included as instructors (possibly at the University of Alaska), and a pre-school conference with the Advisory School Board for both faculty and staff.

Third, prospective teachers in Alaska universities should be encouraged to do their practice teaching at Beltz if they have shown an interest in teaching the Natives of Alaska.

Fourth, a review of the faculty salary scale is in order. The challenge of teaching at Beltz, the high cost of supplies in Nome, and the isolation of the school all indicate that a high rate of pay is essential.

The academic work done by the students at Beltz must be brought up to normal high school standards.

Students who come to Beltz are ninth graders in name only. Among the faculty whom the Commission consulted, estimates of the actual grade level of entering students ran as low as the second grade, with most students falling in the 5th-7th grade range. At present, teachers simply lower their standards and expectations and plunge ahead with their high school textbooks. Although no follow-up studies have been made on Beltz graduates, it is known that only two or three Beltz graduates have gone on to college, and none of them has stayed in college for longer than a year.

It seems to have been decided that the present generation of Alaska Natives is not worth our best efforts or capable of learning. The feeling that such a decision has been made is reinforced by the present plans to issue a "Certificate of Attendance" to students who have "done time" at Beltz, but do not qualify for a high school diploma. (At present every student who finishes the 12th grade gets a diploma.) The decision is also reflected in the plan to lower the credit requirements for graduation from 18-1/2 to 16.

This decision needs to be rescinded. We should recognize that massive remedial education is needed by virtually every student who comes to Beltz. It is obvious that such remedial education cannot be offered within the present academic framework at Beltz. To bring the students at Beltz up to normal high school standards and give them any hope of vocational or academic success in the future will take a restructuring of at least the first year curriculum, the special skills of a dedicated group of remedial teachers, and the expenditure of a considerable amount of money by the State of Alaska.

One plan for bringing the work of Beltz students up to normal high school standards would be to bring students who finish the 8th grade in their villages to Beltz for a full year of remedial work in communications and academic skills before entering the ninth grade. The hope would be that even the slowest of these students would be ready for true ninth grade work at the end of his remedial year, and the most advanced of the students will have had a chance to do exploratory work in various subjects to help them determine a direction for their future education.

Such a program would require virtually a separate faculty to teach entering students at Beltz and a very high teacher-student ratio in that faculty. It would also add a year to the school life of the student. But if we are not willing to make these commitments, or commitments similar to them for some other broad remedial program, it will be true that we have decided that the present generation of Alaska Natives is not worth our best efforts or capable of learning.

If a massive remedial education program is not instituted at Beltz, consideration should be given to turning the school into a vocational high school (the use for which it was originally intended). Since academic training is available to students from Northwest Alaska in BIA high schools and the State Boarding Home Program, Beltz could be devoted to vocational training without denying an academic education to those who wish it.

It is clear that Beltz must move in one direction or the other. The present lack of both good academic training and marketable vocational training must not be allowed to continue. (These questions should certainly be in the minds of the committee planning the consolidation of the public school with Beltz.)

More time should be scheduled for study outside of class periods.

The students at Beltz have a great deal of free time; yet very few, if any, use their free time for study despite the fact that almost all of them are far behind their supposed grade level. The State should take advantage of the fact that it is in charge of the students 24 hours a day to provide more regularly scheduled periods when study is expected of the students. At present the students are in class or working at jobs during each of the six class periods during the day, giving no opportunity for study during the school day. The only formal opportunity for independent study which the students now

have is a two-hour "quiet hour" two evenings a week. However, sometimes recreational activities impinge on the "quiet hour."

The use of after-school hours for study periods would go against the generally prevailing philosophy at Beltz at present: that the dormitory is an extension of the home rather than of the school. However, the Commission feels that an hour when quiet is required and study is expected should be part of the daily schedule at Beltz. Possibly some students could study in the academic building while others remain in their rooms for study.

(This suggestion arises primarily from the lack of a daily study period at the school. It ties in, however, with the Commission's feeling that the students at Beltz have more free time than they know how to deal with, which we shall discuss further in our observations on the dormitory operation.)

Units on drugs, smoking, alcoholism, sex education, and personal hygiene should be a part of the curriculum at Beltz.

The students come from villages where knowledge of these subjects is rudimentary. Beltz may be the only chance that many of them will ever have to learn about them. At present the students seem to be getting smatterings of some of these subjects, but the Commission gathered that there is no policy that they should be offered on a regular and continuing basis. There should be such a policy and it should be implemented.

(On the subject of drugs, we were told both that drugs are not in use at the school and that marijuana is available to and freely used by the students at the dorm. It is the Commission's opinion that a unit on drugs should be offered whether or not drugs are in use at the school. Each student will probably have to make a decision on drugs sometime during his life, and should have the knowledge of drugs to make an intelligent one.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs, the State Boarding Home Program, and the Administration at Beltz should develop cooperative methods for placing each student from Northwest Alaska where his educational ambitions would best be nurtured.

The admissions system at Beltz is haphazard. At present the only criterion for admission is geographical, and the applicants are not screened at all. At present there are two retarded students at Beltz, not capable of doing any work at the high school level (as it exists at Beltz). A rudimentary screening of the applicants would have detected these two students, and they then could have been sent to a facility which could serve them.

As Beltz assumes a direction and the other systems of education available to the youngsters of Northwest Alaska become more defined, they should definitely cooperate in the placement of students, bearing in mind educational requirements and social adjustment.

SOCIAL

After school hours should be more structured, with more recreational activities available, and a daily study hour instituted.

The students have more free time than they know how to deal with. The Commission's observations led to this conclusion, but it was confirmed in conversations with the students themselves. There are very few planned extracurricular activities between the end of the school day at 4:00 p.m. and "lights out" at 10:30. Since there is only one physical education period during the school day (which means that each student attends physical education once a week), it is our feeling that physical exercise should be high on the list of available after-school recreation, for both boys and girls. It will be easier when the gym is built, but it should not wait for that.

At present the school is being served by a succession of recreation directors, none of whom stays longer than a month. Although the directors whom the Commission observed and talked to are doing a wonderful job of "filling in," every effort should be made to find a permanent recreation director. In fact, there should be two permanent recreation directors, if for no other reason than to provide the boys and the girls the opportunity of taking part in different activities at the same hour.

Trips to Nome should be less frequent, more supervised, and shorter.

The students are allowed to go to Nome four times a week: for a movie on Tuesday nights, a 2-hour trip on Wednesday afternoons, a 4-hour trip on Saturday afternoons, and a 2-hour trip on Sunday mornings. They are required to sign out when they leave the school and sign in upon their return, but with the exception of the movie trip they are chaperoned and unsupervised. The Sunday morning trip is ostensibly so that the students can attend church, although not all use it for this purpose. (We were told, also, that students find it easy to escape the supervision of the chaperone on the movie trips.)

If the students get into trouble it is usually in Nome, or as a result of a trip to Nome (liquor is brought back to the school, for instance). It is the Commission's opinion that a 2-hour shopping trip once a week, plus the movie and church trips should be sufficient for the needs of the students and provide them with far fewer opportunities for trouble. An adult should go on these trips and should make sure, as unobtrusively as possible, that all students are on the bus before it begins the return trip to Beltz.

This suggestion is predicated on planning many more recreational opportunities for the students at the school, as we have already outlined.

The dormitory attendants should be Eskimos who are well paid and trained in whatever philosophy and procedures are developed for running the dorm.

There is an attendant on duty in both the boys' and girls' dormitories at all times. At present some of the attendants are white and some are Eskimo. Their duties include assisting with recreation programs, mediating student conflicts, maintaining general order, enforcing time scheduling, and lay counseling of students who come to them with problems.

If there is recognition of the need for language and cultural ties between the students and the dormitory staff, it is quite possible that there will be no need for a resident guidance counselor (non-academic). The dormitory attendants should be carefully chosen for their ability to relate to the students and then be given training either on the job or through a dormitory attendants' course. We understand that such a course had been scheduled by the State Department of Labor, but that it has now been cancelled. It should be reinstated as there is at present no training available for dormitory attendants in Alaska.

The dorm attendants' salaries seem low to the Commission.

Student initiative and responsibility should be encouraged in the use and care of dorm facilities.

The public rooms of the dorm are uninviting and often in disarray. There are no pictures on the walls, curtains at the windows, or rugs on the floors. The furniture is broken and scarred with cigarette burns. The recreation room has only one operable pool table. (Two other tables and a shuffleboard table, all out of order, are pushed to the side of the room.) The Commission was told by a former Beltz student that the condition of the public rooms "shocked" her when she visited the school recently. She told us that when she was at the school the rooms were much more comfortable, with pictures on the walls, a supply of games, etc,

The Commission feels that whether or not the rooms are rehabilitated should be left entirely up to the students. We understand that it is difficult to motivate the students to enter into projects like this, and it is quite possible that the rooms will remain in their present disheveled state. However, if it is made clear to the students that the money, materials and advice are available to them when they want to do the job, we believe they will eventually express an interest in brightening the rooms.

Whether or not the rooms are rehabilitated, it is the Commission's opinion that rules for the use of public facilities in the dorm should be developed by the students themselves.

Extracurricular activities should be heavily slanted towards reinforcing pride in the Eskimo culture.

There is at present a real effort to enlist Native speakers on a regular basis. However, no funds are available to bring the speakers to the school and pay their expenses; so the school is forced to rely on whoever comes their way. There should be a fund to bring prominent Native speakers to the school at least once a month.

The students really seem to miss Eskimo food while they are at Beltz. They are like American residents of Japan who yearn for a hamburger when all that is available is raw fish. Would it be possible to make Eskimo food available in the school cafeteria about once a month? Aside from its benefit to the students, the purchase of the food would provide some cash income to the villages.

The Commission would like to see Beltz able to enter teams in the various sled dog team and snow machine races which are held throughout the State. The development and training of such teams is a natural for Beltz's climate and terrain, and there aren't many other outdoor recreational activities which are possible in the winter at Beltz. The teams could be a source of tremendous pride to the students as they travel all over the State representing the school.

Exhibitions of work by Eskimo artists should be planned, either in conjunction with the Native speakers program or independently.

These are just a few suggestions for keeping the students aware and proud of their heritage. There are surely many other methods which can be utilized also.

ADMINISTRATION

The relationship between the administration and the Office of Regional Schools in Juneau needs to be more clearly defined.

As we have pointed out, the first step must be that the Department of Education establishes what kind of school Beltz is to be and defines the programs which must be instituted to make it that kind of school. Once this direction is established, careful thought must be given to how much authority should be given to the administration of the school and how much should be retained by the Department in Juneau.

It is the Commission's feeling that the administration feels hamstrung by the necessity of clearing changes in the day-to-day operation of the school with Juneau. While we did not study this matter in depth, it is clear that the relationship is uneasy and needs further defining. Bearing in mind the isolation of Beltz, the time consumed and possibilities for confusion in communications with Juneau, we would favor a large degree of autonomy for the administration at Beltz.

The chairman of the Beltz Advisory School Board should be given a seat on the State Board of Education.

The State School Board is the policy-making body for the Beltz School and at least one of its members should be someone who has first-hand knowledge of the school and is more than intellectually interested in its success.

The advantages are twofold. The Chairman would take to the State Board a parental and cultural understanding of the difficulties and successes of Eskimo students. In return, he would bring back to the Advisory School Board an expanded knowledge of Statewide educational concerns and possible programs.

As mentioned in the general statement, the school should reach understandings, either formal or informal, with the various public agencies with which it shares concern over the behavior of students.

The agencies involved would include the Nome City Police, the Alaska State Troopers, the District Attorney's Office, the Alaska Court System in Nome, and the Division of Corrections in the Department of Health and Welfare.

The school should probably assume the role of a parent in any student's dealings with law enforcement agencies. However, there are differences between what the school can do for a student and what a parent can do. There might also be differences in how a policeman should treat a Beltz student, as opposed to a student from town who is living at home. Certainly most of the offenders from Beltz will be juveniles, and, as such, deserve a continuing concern on the part of both enforcement agencies and the school.

Communications should be established and agreements made between the agencies and the school before they are called upon to deal with any specific cases. The agreements can be either formal or informal, but should be based on a knowledge of each others' responsibility and authority and an overriding concern for the welfare of the student.

The Commission cannot condone the present policy of calling the police when a student is found drunk at the school.

We hesitate to speak against a policy endorsed by the Advisory School Board, but the Commission is convinced that this policy doesn't do anyone any good. In relieving the school of a temporarily unpleasant situation, it immerses both the school and the student in a far less desirable situation of far longer duration. The student is booked, jailed, and sentenced,

which causes psychological damage and creates a criminal record which will stay with him for life because the school cannot be bothered with finding ways to deal with the occasional student who gets violently drunk. This student is going to be kicked out of school for being drunk. Does he need further punishment? We are frankly appalled at this policy and protest it vehemently.

The school administration also needs to do some serious thinking as to whether or not more serious crimes should be reported to the police, or whether there should be different policies for crimes committed on the school grounds and those off the school grounds. Without making a judgment as to which way the school should go, we can state that the present lack of policy leads to utter confusion when a case arises, with resultant harm to both school and students.

(As our suggestions for less frequent, shorter, and more closely supervised trips to Nome are implemented and more recreational activities are made available to the students at the school, we anticipate that there will be fewer cases of student drunkenness.)

The procedures for suspension of students and staff should be clearly established, made known to the students and staff, and adhered to.

At the time of the Commission's study, the Beltz administration was following neither the procedure for suspension of students outlined on pp. 26 and 27 of the By Laws for the State Board of Education as the Operating School Board for School District #1 nor the procedures for suspension of staff outlined in the State Personnel Rules. Through trial and error, the administration seems to be coming to the point where it will soon have instituted all the procedures outlined in the By Laws and Rules; but a lot of harm has been done, and one wonders why the rules have not been followed from the first.

The administration should also be aware of the lack of communications skills on the part of Eskimo staff and students. Special care should be taken to explain all suspensions and the procedures for appeal in nonbureaucratic and simple language. Neither the suspended student nor the suspended staff member to whom the Commission talked really knew what had happened to her -- just that she was no longer wanted at the school. (One even used the word "extended" to describe what had happened to her.)

In Conclusion

There are a number of people, both in the Department of Education and on the Beltz campus, who really care about the education of Eskimo youngsters. However, they are struggling with the academic and social problems at Beltz without policy or training for the unique job of running a boarding school for Eskimo youngsters.

If Beltz is to give a true high school education (either vocational or academic), it can't be like any other school; but the ways and degrees in which it should be different have not yet been established. The Commission hopes that its recommendations and comments will stimulate creative thought about the operation of the school.

The wonderful thing about Beltz is the students. One comes away from Beltz hoping they will make it -- make it through the white man's school system without becoming less Eskimo, make it through college (many of the students we talked to want to go to college), or into a good job. Some of them will make it, but many won't. The Human Rights Commission would like to see the operation of Beltz planned and directed in such a way that most of its students are able to make their way in any world of their choosing.