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ABSTRACT

Remarks of Alaska Native researcher and educator Paul Ongtooguk are presented. Alaska Natives have successfully educated themselves for thousands of years. Along with the promise of preparing students for the future, schools have promoted the idea that Native cultures should be stripped from the minds of children in order to prepare them for a future that will not include Alaska Native cultures. Alaska Natives as a group are in the lowest levels of performance on the benchmark and high school qualifying exams. Teachers wonder why parental support for their children's education is so low, yet they don't inform parents about the educational structure or what their children will be learning, and they are uncomfortable when Native parents want to help. High incarceration and suicide rates of Alaska Native young men, high percentages of non-Natives working in Native corporations, declining numbers of Alaska Native teachers--these are all signs of a disconnect between the educational system and the needs of Alaska Natives. There are many potential allies for solving the problems of Alaska Native education, but Alaska Natives themselves are going to have to take the lead in making changes. The successes that have occurred with Native corporations and the Native health care system are proof that change is possible. (TD)

Remarks of Mr. Paul Ongtooguk, Alaska Native Education Summit

November 30, 2001

Anchorage, AK

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REMARKS OF MR. PAUL ONGTOOGUK Alaska Native Education Summit 30 November 2001, Marriott Hotel, Anchorage, AK

Well, I had better know something about pedagogues, right? Here's what I know about them. Originally, they were Greek slaves who were charged with providing the education of the ruling class. That's what they were doing, and it always struck me that only in the western system could they come up with the idea of somebody who was enslaved to liberate the minds of others.
(Laughter)

I'm happy to be here. All of us, we're Alaska Natives. We've come from thousands of miles, representing hundreds of communities and a dozen cultures, to rededicate ourselves to the transformation of Alaska Native education. We have had success in the education of Alaska Natives for thousands of years. We have learned about the spiritual, social and physical world while in community houses and clan houses. We've learned from aunts and uncles, from cousins, from grandparents. We've learned from chiefs and whaling captains. We have learned how to live and grow as communities, in places where others would have perished - and often did so. I always think about how tough the Vikings were, their reputation is that they were so bad. They went to Greenland and folded. Think about it. Think about it, Minnesota, there might be a reason.
(Laughter)

We've lived in places with such efficiency and grace that later people who have come to our homelands have considered them to be empty of human beings; and they've called this a wilderness because they didn't see us in those places. They couldn't imagine that a people could live so well in a land that it would appear untouched by them. And we live with the dilemma of that to this day.

We have a challenge, and it's called schools. Alaska Natives have largely embraced the promises of school. The promise was, and has been, to prepare our young people to become contributing members of our communities, our state and our nation. But schools for Alaska Natives are like a meal laced with an unintended, poisonous effect. Along with the promise of preparing us for the future was this poisonous idea - and Byron's already referred to it - that our Native cultures, our ways of life, our languages, our traditions, our ideas, our understandings of the world, the very societies that were keys to living here for thousands of years should be stripped from the minds of our children in order to prepare them for a future that will not include Alaska Native cultures. We live with the consequences of this to the present day, and we see the after-effects reverberating through our communities.

Now, I need to emphasize - and we all need to emphasize - that we ask no one in this room to have a sense of guilt. None of us were a part of the policy that told us that, in order to become educated, we had to give up being Alaska Natives. That was a policy that was set in place about a hundred years ago, and it will end hopefully within our lifetimes. And as we are in this room, we need to acknowledge publicly and to accept the fact that that set of policies was a terrible dilemma. It was a poisonous idea that has tainted the promise of education for Alaska Natives. And we have to root it out, sort through it, and redirect the kind of education that our people are going to experience.

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What are we experiencing right now? What do we see? Well, there's good news and bad news. Statistically, we have some of the finest people in formal education that we have ever had in Alaska Native history. We have some amazing successes. We now have a fairly firm second generation Alaska Native college graduates. We're getting a second generation Alaska Native college graduates! On the test scores that the state of Alaska is using - the benchmark exams and the high school qualifying exam - we have some of the highest scoring individuals in the state. Good news. But the part that we are concerned about and that we're also going to try to deal with here is that - overall, overall - Alaska Natives as a group are in the lowest levels of performance on the benchmark and high school qualifying exams.

This is a circumstance that we could turn into an opportunity for finger pointing, and blaming, and defensive postures. You know, I'm a certified teacher. I've been in the teachers' lounge, and I've heard teachers say: Well, if only parents would be more supportive of education, then things would get better. And, as a Native parent, I used to think, well, how can I support something that I don't even get information about? I don't even have a clue about what you're trying to do. As a parent, I once tried to buy my daughter's textbooks for the next school year. Doesn't that seem like a good idea? If my daughter is going to be responsible for learning this, then as a parent, I should buy the textbooks ahead of time and become familiar with them, read them, and then I'll be ahead. It was easier to buy atomic data from Los Alamos than to find out what textbook my daughter was going to study next year. (Laughter) It was impossible, and I'm within the system. Now, what's wrong with that picture? It's something for us to consider.

When we, as teachers, are asking for parental support for the education of kids, we have to think about how informed are we allowing parents to be about the educational structure and about what their children are going to be learning? It's got to be far more visible than it is today. What goes on in those schoolrooms seems to be classified information at times. It's amazing. I remember people asking: why don't more parents show up at school meetings? And yet, I saw parents who were there. And I saw teachers who were very uncomfortable when I, a Native parent, wanted to sit in on my daughter's classroom and help. It just made them nervous. Something to think about.

Now, as to the overall status of Native people, we can look at any set of numbers you would care to see, good ones or bad ones. Here's a tough one: what happens if you're an Alaska Native male? We have, apparently, about as many Alaska Native males incarcerated as we have in universities. And for those who are incarcerated, the state is paying about five times as much to support their lifestyle as it is paying for those who are pursuing a college education. So, if your money is where your priorities are, there's something to consider in that.

We have a suicide rate for Alaska Native males that is about eight times the national average in the age category from 15 through 24. What does that say? Some people would look at that statistic and say, well, that's not about education - it's not an educational statistic. But I look at that, and I look at the lives of the people who are trapped in it. We are talking about young people who are going through life so ill-prepared for the future, whose opportunities are so narrow, whose sense of the future is so bleak, and whose circumstances are so overwhelming that death is preferable to the life that lies before them. Isn't that an educational issue? Something for us to consider.

I want this to be a conference in which we put down our guards. As an educator, I want to be candid about our shortcomings, about how we have failed. I have been involved in the education of Alaska Natives for over 20 years, and I personally accept a measure of responsibility that we just haven't done what we should have done, and we haven't done it as well as we ought to have done it. We've failed in so many ways. I look at schools that are little more than life-support systems for athletic teams, that have no academic life, that have little in the way of substantial preparation of our people to take on the challenges we face, and I have to admit that we are falling short.

Look at what we're talking about. We have Native corporations. Think of the transformation that's occurred in our time - well, at least in Byron's and mine. (Laughter) Think of the transformations.

If we had looked at Alaska Natives in 1950, would anybody have anticipated that Natives would own the most powerful state-chartered corporations in Alaska? Would anybody have predicted that, given the power structure, the political structure, the economic structure? Was that in the cards? Was that fate? We take these corporations for granted, but they were no accident. They were not inevitable. The successes that have occurred have come in spite of enormous odds. And yet, I look at those corporations, I look at their employees and staffs. Nine out of every ten people who are working in professional positions in at least one of the Native corporations that I've looked at are non-Natives. The highest paying positions in a Native corporation, and they're non-Natives.

Is that because there's a conspiracy among Native corporation people to keep highly qualified Alaska Natives out of those powerful jobs? No. We've got a disconnect between the educational system and the educational opportunities that are being created by our Native communities, and this conference is saying that we need to make those connections. What good will it do for us to have successful corporations if we don't have successful Alaska Natives to lead them? What good will it do? Look at our educational system. We actually have a decline in the number of Alaska Native teachers in this state - at the very time when we need more of them than ever, we're losing them.

So, what are we going to do about it? I'm at the university, and I can assure you with a high degree of confidence that the university is so fragmented that it would make continental drift seem fast before it will ever address the issues facing Alaska Native communities. It's just not going to happen that way, because the primary mission of this university is funding, parking lots for faculty and winning teams for the alumni. (Laughter) This university is for the rest of the state. It's not primarily focused on Alaska Native communities and the issues we're facing.

Look at our school board associations. Is their primary issue that of solving the problem of Alaska Native education? What about NEA Alaska? I've been a member. I've been a delegate. They're supportive. They're potential allies, along with the university and the school board associations. They're all potential allies. But, who's going to take the lead and say: No, Alaska Native education, that's the issue. That's what we care about. That's what matters. If we want to see - day in, day out - a difference in our children's education, we ourselves have to start making those changes.

So, how do we do it? Well, a part of it is that we must make some sacrifices in order to make a difference. My dad was Medivac-ed out of Kotzebue three days ago. I was with him most of last night, and he's coming around. He's a tough guy. And when I talked to him about whether I should stay with him or attend this education conference, he looked at me, grabbed onto to my arm, gave me that look that I'm very familiar with, and gestured toward downtown Anchorage. I think he was saying that there are some priorities to be made. There are some issues that we need to focus on, and there is plenty of work for all of us to do. The issue we have to consider is what are we going to do to ensure that the education we offer will allow our Alaska Native students to come out of our schools - our schools - knowing our history, our traditions, our successes, our challenges, and our opportunities. How will we ensure that they sense that they are a part of powerful societies that care for them - and that this matters?

And if anyone says that it can't happen because it hasn't happened in the past 30 years, then we have only to look at what many of the Native corporations have become in the last 30 years. It's uneven, the success of those corporations; but where they have been successful, they have been remarkable. And then look at the Native health care system. I remember when my dad's generation was just starting to take over the clinics and hospitals. Some people spoke loudly throughout the state, saying that if Alaska Natives took over their own health care delivery, it would be a travesty, and there would be illness, death and destruction everywhere. I heard it. My dad heard it. And now he's in ICU in a hospital that is administered by Alaska Natives, and he's getting some of the finest care he could get anywhere in the world. So, anyone who's a naysayer, who thinks that we can't take on the educational system and make it work for Alaska Natives isn't

looking at the same history that we all should know.

Thank you very much. (Applause)

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