

Sidney Huntington Speech at AFN - Elder Youth Convention  
October 17, 2005

It is an honor to be invited to speak to you today on a subject that I have been committed to for most of my life - education - I was not privileged to get a formal education; so what I have to offer you is what I have personally learned and experienced about education and related values in my life which now spans over 90 years. We all have something to learn from one another - so I share what I've learned in the hopes that it will benefit our children - I in no way mean to boast, but all I have to offer is what I experienced and know - lessons I have learned. My formal classroom education ended when I was 12 years old; the latter part of the third grade. I left school to learn to live off the land; a choice made because my Father thought it was best. In December 1928, just barely a teenager; I went to check my traps it was -58 below and I got caught in a fast temperature change. I went too far and barely made it back home; by then it was -78 below. As I got older, this lesson stayed with me. I promised myself that I would do everything I could to improve education for kids living in the bush. I did not want them to suffer like I did just to survive. Since then, a lot has happened.

My parents' generation, whose average life expectancy then was about 60 years, gave all they had just to survive under unbelievably harsh conditions. They had little in the way of equipment and suffered hard times including periods of famine - something, thankfully, we do not know today. Those that survived generally maintained their spirit in a good and healthy way and they taught their offspring - by example - to survive - they were taught to take the largest of game animals with hand crafted spears. There was no room for mistakes - their lives and the lives of others depended on their skill. That type of education is basically gone because we - the parents - have neglected our responsibility to follow through. I have learned that parents are the main teachers through out the lives of each and every child -- without parent's involvement we can't get very far.

The first force behind my drive to improve education opportunities

came from my personal experience of suffering to survive in the harsh conditions. It was that that motivated me to join my community of Huslia to start the first school board on the Koyukuk River. I am indebted to the Reverend Patterson Keller who was our big support to get going. It was a challenge because it was not taken on very kindly by the Administration then - "actually having Indians give them direction."

This brings me to my second reason to continue my commitment to education. Students coming out of bush schools in rural Alaska were being classified as substandard students; high school graduates had to take an extra one to two years to bring them up to college entry level. That personally galled me to no end because I experienced something similar. I was turned down for jobs because I didn't have a diploma; I lost jobs because I didn't have a diploma. I made a personal commitment to the administration, the school board and our children to change that picture - come hell or high water. It's been some of both - but some 30 years later we are seeing some of the benefits of our efforts.

I want to share with you what we have done to change the face of education in our village. I moved to Galena in 1963 and I continued on the School Board for 20 some years. I was a part of a group that started the fight to become an independent school district - so we could have local control of education. Not something that was looked at too kindly by some administration. It wasn't looked on too kindly by some locals as well because we were going to have to pay for local control of our education by paying a City Sales Tax. I want to take this opportunity to thank my friend, Marshall Lind, for his encouragement and expertise, without which our fight would have been near impossible. In 1973, we took our first step to improve education in our village. I've been told that I'm part of the cutting edge of education - starting new trends and paving new educational roads - education that I was not privileged to get. I've also been accused of taking risks and chances in the midst of public criticism - I've been under the microscope and I'm here to tell you that it paid off.

Today we are still standing strong in our efforts to improve education;

with the help of dedicated parents and qualified certified teachers. Now 30 years after we fought for local control of our education, we are and have changed the educational picture in rural Alaska. We now have three schools - the original school with about 180 students, the Boarding school, Galena Interior Learning Academy, now 8 years old, with 80 students, and a home-school program with 3,400 students. This was at no time an easy or straight road - what have we learned? It is parents who have the authority - they can dictate where the school cannot. It's the parents we need to talk with and to listen to. They know their kids better than any school ever will. Parents and elders - our students and the schools need you to be involved to make it work. We learned that we have to work together and in partnerships with others. We partnered with Suzuki, General Motors, Frontier Airlines and the University of Alaska to bring vocational programs and opportunities in the areas of aviation, culinary arts, computer technology, cosmetology, auto mechanics, carpentry as well as small engine repair and welding.

We learned that we have to reach out and help others. The Air Force Base closed which provided the facility for an opportunity to start the boarding school to provide an opportunity for other students who want an education but who want to remain in the bush. This year we have students from 43 different towns and villages. A major part of their education is learning to live and work together. Coming from many different places, they learn to understand and appreciate all cultures. It hasn't been easy but it is encouraging and now, 8 years later, we feel justified and proud of our efforts.

In education, we are faced with major challenges today.

We have to remember this - "Growing up during these modern days you have to be strong, be courageous. I often tell others that I would not want to grow up in this age. The choices you are faced with are frightening. I don't know that I could handle it. You have to have courage to stand strong against the forces that could destroy your life - namely, drugs, violence and alcohol abuse. We all know that it's all around and a temptation. All I can say is to be strong - be courageous. The choice you make not only affects your life and ability to pursue your dreams but they affect the lives of others - your loved ones. Just

like the youngster of my age that had to learn hunting skills for his survival and the survival of his family - you have to learn the skills that are required today and you will learn that from your parents, your elders and in school.

Having said that, making bad choices, mistakes, failing at times is a part of life -- it's a part of growing up. We all have histories that we are not totally proud of. No road is perfectly paved or straight.

When you take that wrong turn, forgive yourself.

Pick up - go on and don't quit. Like I said earlier, I've been under the micro scope - criticized and put down, many times by my own people - But it's been worth it to get up keep going.

There are more and more bush schools with declining enrollments and with declining resources, they are being forced to cut back and in some cases close down. This year in Galena we have students from six villages that had to close their high schools - Let me say again - six villages had to already close their high schools and this is only the beginning. What are we going to do to insure all youngsters an educational opportunity?

I believe that there is a place for boarding schools - not only do they provide opportunity but they provide choice for students and parents. This needs to be part of a plan to service native students and their families. Many still want to be in the village but they also know the value of a formal education - how are we going to meet that?

We have learned that one program does not fit all students. Flexibility and adaptation to what the student needs is paramount. I would like to take this opportunity to commend Eleanor Laughlin and the people behind the new Effie Kokrine Charter School here in Fairbanks for taking the risks to be just that - flexible and adaptable to the student needs. There cannot be a mold that all schools will fit into because of the nature of their location, culture and the availability of resources.

We all hear about lack of funding for education. I remember when I first worked for wages - I worked by first two days to pay my school tax and I was glad to do so. Why not re-consider that. We all have to contribute. In Galena we're paying a sales tax to help out. It may not be much but it's something.

Life has changed so much over my past ninety years. It's like living in a different world. I remember the physical challenges of just trying to survive. You didn't pass anyone in need - you stopped to help.

Today, life is different but the challenges remain. We have to stop to help one another - we have to make commitments to work together to provide quality education to all students. We all know that with out a good education we are not going to get very far today. In the early days, our ancestors worked together to teach necessary survival skills - there was no waiting for governments or others to help them or to do for them what was their responsibility -- it's the same concept that we have to apply today.

I look back over the years and see the dramatic change in the lives of the Alaskan Natives. Some are good, others not so good. I say again, that government handouts have destroyed some of our best.

I'm proud of the good strong Indians who were outstanding providers and leaders. One of the best that comes to mind is my friend, the late Morris Thompson. It's important that we help our Native leaders as well as students, our future native leaders - let's all step up and get behind them - support them - help them.

Education in Galena has come a long way from a simple beginning in 1973 when we fought to be independent. It took courage and hard work to meet our desired goal. I am grateful and proud to have a been a part of this now, successful school district whose motto has become "We do whatever it takes."

There is no such thing as "I can't". Try and you will succeed. Some of the most outstanding students and leaders come out of the bush schools today.

No one can tell me that we, Native people, don't have what it takes. Our kids prove that we do - lets not let them down - they are doing their

part - parents and elders, lets do our part.

I made some commitments early in my life and have continually worked to hopefully improve education for our kids - I want to close by acknowledging someone that has stood by me for 63 years, giving encouragement, understanding and commitment - my wife, Angela. Without her, I would never have had the strength to keep fighting the good fight and I want to publicly say thank you for being a great wife to me.

Again, thank you for this opportunity. I apologize for not being able to communicate - at this age - my hearing is about all gone. So if you talk with me, please don't be offended if I don't hear you. Thank you and God bless you all.