

Indian education programs needed to cut culture shock

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A question often asked by non-Natives is whether it is really a valid idea to have special educational programs for Native students. After all, they argue, doesn't equal educational opportunity mean the same program for every child?

Of course, if these questioners used the same argument against special programs for vocational education, gifted children, or physically or mentally handicapped students, they

would seem absurd. The argument is equally inapplicable against programs for special needs of Native students.

Then, the question is are the cultural, academic and social needs of Native children in reality different from those of the majority population? The answer is yes!

A study of the Fairbanks North Star Borough School District by the Seattle Office of the Human Rights Commission, released in April, stated that the drop-out rate of Alaskan Native Students locally is 50%.

Other points in the same study indicate that special needs must indeed exist.

Family background is considered by educators to be a large influence on success in school, no matter what that background may be. Research again supports that Native pupils may have different needs because of their family backgrounds.

In April the FNSB School District reported an enrollment totaling 11,687, of which the JOM program reported 987 to be one-fourth or more Native American. This means the population of students eligible for both JOM and IEA programs totals slightly under 10% of the FNSB School District student body. In addition, JOM program has identified approximately 300 eligible preschool children. Of these, on 31 are enrolled in HEADSTART Program. About 10 more are enrolled in private preschool programs.

A review of census figures of 1970, 1950, as well as more recent population reports, shows a large-scale movement of Alaskan Native people from the rural areas to the major cities.

A parallel can be drawn between this situation and the conditions existing at the time of the Merriam Report (1928) which brought about the Johnson-O'Malley Act. Then, Native American students were moving from Federally operated

and funded BIA schools to off-reservation public schools, which had neither monies to support the extra students, nor special programs designed to meet their needs. Now, Alaskan Native students are moving from rural areas in which the Alaska State Foundation Fund provides more complete funding for them, and where schools are operated totally to meet their needs (with the assistance of various Federal programs.) They are moving into urban areas where less of the basic funding comes from State support and

more from local taxpayers, and where programs have been tailored to needs of a far different type of student.

An interesting aspect of educational program design in urban areas is the power of the local school boards to control what is taught in the schools. Traditionally these school boards have not included Alaskan Native People. Even in the State Operated (Unorganized Borough) Schools, Native People have not had position which vastly influenced what actually happened in

(Continued on page 4)

Indian Ed

Programs . . .

(Cont. from pg. 3)

the local school curriculae. A study sponsored by Congress on Federal Programs designed for Alaska Natives, commonly called the 2(c) Report: Federal Programs Alaska Natives, said in discussing both JOM and IEA programs that, "Special Education programs are needed in Alaska because the Standard Western-oriented school program in operation in the state was designed without direction from the Native Community. This resulted in a school situation which did not take into consideration the cultural, academic and social needs of Native students."