

# Parent comfortable with policy

by Louise Donhauser

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Anchorage's Native parents say they are more comfortable with the school district's attendance and discipline policy after school board members accepted a proposed in-house and in-district suspension for students.

But one parent said she feared the program might be doomed because a counseling budget to guide students is small.

Joann Thorp, chairperson of the Attendance and Discipline Native Review Committee, said the school board decided to allocate \$211,380 for suspension programs.

The money will be spent on three programs and staff salaries. A student intervention program will be developed at Dimond Mears High School. An in-district suspension program will be developed for students who are suspended because of drug or alcohol related problems.

An in-school suspension program will be developed for students who are suspended for non-substance abuse reasons. The programs will be staffed by teachers except for the drug program which may be staffed by contract counselors who already work in the drug counseling field.

Thorp said, "It's almost budgeted for failure because of the low budget for contract counseling. It may not be enough."

When the district does develop an in-district suspension program for alcohol and drug abusers who choose to stay in school, Thorp said the Native community has to have input about the selected school.

She said, "My major concern is the school. . . . If we can have a good site and get a lot of kids it may be successful." She said Native input and commitment will be needed in selecting the school site. Speaking of the school district she added, "They need to commit funds to support these types of programs."

Secondary School Supervisor Bill Mell said East and West high schools have the largest Native enrollment with approximately 120 Native students in each high school. District wide Native students comprise about eight percent of the enrollment of nearly 18,000 students.

At a previous school board meeting Native education groups protested the district's policy because it didn't include in-house or in-district suspension. Native parents also felt the district didn't address why the highest

dropout rate is among Native students.

Mell felt the suspension programs would not benefit Native students because, Natives have a high absentee rate overall, but Natives aren't being suspended. The programs are targeted only for suspended students.

Mell said, "Suspension isn't the problem. They have a problem with attendance."

Thorp said, "We want to know why our students aren't in school." Later in the interview she said, "In-house suspension will probably help non-Native students more." Last year Native students enrolled in the Anchorage School District missed an average of 16 days per semester but this year that figure has dropped to 10 days per semester.

Thorp said the district hasn't

made a decision on whether or not the program will be mandatory. She said, "Should it be mandatory in order for them (students) to regain their right to attend school?" She added that the process of deciding on an optional or mandatory program would have to be debated.

Thorp said most of Anchorage's Native education community is satisfied with the policy plan if the right school is selected.

"We, as a community, feel the policy is positive. At the beginning there wasn't an option. The next problem we face is procedure."

Final approval of the Attendance and Discipline Policy may not take place until later this summer but the school board will consider the policy at a June meeting.