

# **Anchorage schools biased**

**by Paul Tony**

**Special to the *Tundra Times*.**

---

Anchorage is sometimes referred to as Alaska's largest village. Over 10 percent of the student population in the Anchorage School District is Alaska Native. Coming from virtually every region of the state and from an equally diverse number of ethnic backgrounds, what diversity do Anchorage's Alaska Native residents find in the schools where they are required by law to send their children? Only 2 percent of the teachers in Anchorage are Alaska Native; 5 out of 120 school administrators are Native and three of the administrators are Alaska Native principals (about five percent of the total), according to the Anchorage School District, Personnel Office. The 1994 Statewide

Educator Supply & Demand Report for Alaska, put out by the University of Alaska, Fairbanks, Alaska Teacher Placement office states that "Alaska's demand for educators is, and will remain, high." The report places the number of Alaska Natives hired into teaching positions statewide at just 6 percent.

Following is a profile of an Alaska Native educator who teaches in the state's largest high school in the state's largest city. June Degnan grew up in Unalakleet attending the elementary school in this northwest Inupiat village before attending Mt. Edgecumbe High School. She completed a double major in psychology and education at Nova University in Fort Lauderdale, Florida before beginning work on a graduate degree in Public Administration at

*Page 10, please*

# *Analysis and Commentary~* Anchorage schools biased . . .

*Continued from Page 1*

Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton, Florida. She received her Alaska teacher's certification in 1982 and began applying for teaching positions at the Frank A. Degnan High School in Unalakleet, ironically, the school named after her father. The reason it is ironic is that despite repeated applications, Degnan was never hired, a result which she chalks up to racism. She began applying to the Anchorage School District in 1989 and was finally hired in 1991. June feels that ASD's hiring practices are discriminatory and cites instances of out of state recruiting and hiring of teachers who don't have Alaska certification, but get it after they've been

hired. She says it is a "good old boy system" and that hiring is based on who you know.

Degnan has been teaching History at Service-Hanshew High School, the largest high school in Anchorage. Service-Hanshew is located on the affluent hillside of south Anchorage; a staunchly conservative neighborhood which has voted against police protection and suffered voter backlash in school bond voter issues. Degnan is the school's only Alaska Native teacher and says that the climate is characterized by an icy silence in the halls: her student's don't speak to her outside of the classroom. She describes herself as assertive, however, and says that she cares about the kids.

She sees kids who are having trouble stemming from divorce, kids on their way to drugs, and kids coming off of drugs, and she reaches out to them.

Not even skinheads in her class fazed her as she says she "can get along with anyone." That doesn't mean that she's not outspoken; in fact she says that she is willing to be outspoken, the issues are important and need to be heard she contends. Teachers are dealing with kids with guns, drug and psychological problems and "inclusion" of special education kids mixed into the classes. While Degnan has training in special education, many teachers do not and that concerns her. She sees many of the problems

which kids bring to school as family problems which the families are not dealing with and asks the question, "Are we really concerned with education, or are we babysitting?"

The subject which Degnan teaches, History, is a required course which she says is often overcrowded. Overcrowding in the classroom is something which Degnan just can't accept. She feels that Alaska has the money, but sees the teachers and students catering to the administration and says it should be the other way around. Degnan feels that the ideal class size is 15-20 students, but the reality is more like 29 to as many as 38 students in a class. The message that is sent to the student, she contends, is that the school doesn't care

about them.

Degnan says the Anchorage School District's attitude towards Alaska Natives is "unsupportive." She relates about how difficult it was to get leave to attend a poetry reading which she was invited to read her poetry at in Paris, France. Degnan who is published by the Sorbonne University in Paris, found leave difficult to get, and recognition of her accomplishment non-existent. She says that while the district has celebration of women in history and Blacks in history, there is no celebration of Alaska Native achievements. Degnan voices a concern for more than just Native students; she states that she is "concerned with the quality of education for all students."