

Parents seek better absentee policy

By Louise Donhauser

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Native students in Alaska's largest city aren't going to school according to various Native education groups. To address the problem the Native education groups requested that the district find out why the students didn't attend and the groups also requested that the district find alternatives to suspending Native students.

At a recent school district meeting the Johnson O'Malley and Indian Education Native Advisory Committees and the Cook Inlet Native Association along with the Anchorage Native Education Coalition presented a resolution protesting the district's Attendance and Discipline Policy because it didn't specifically address the reason Native students had a high absentee rate.

According to the district's proposed policy, which still has to be approved by the board, a student who is absent for 10 days or more is suspended. Another section proposes that the student not be allowed on school premises while on suspension.

Joan Thorp, chairperson of the Attendance and Discipline Native Review Committee, said if a student is suspended they should be allowed to stay in school.

"In-house suspension should be one of the alternatives," Thorp told the school board. She also recommended that a task force be formed to identify problem students before the students dropped out.

Anchorage Native Education Coalition Vice-Chairperson Bert Campbell also supported the idea of a keeping a student who is on suspension in school.

"The old policies and procedures meant you were sent home. Today students can't go home to parents," Campbell said.

He added that many students couldn't go home to parents because most of the Anchorage parents worked.

"Since the average age is young, Anchorage has a large group of people age 20-34 compared to the national percentage. In 1980 this group was nearly equal in proportion of males to females, setting a new trend for Anchorage. In other words, the city has a large population in the child-bearing age group and early job entry group. One could expect a high employment rate for both men and women and reasonably high birth rate."

In his letter Campbell added, "This age/sex pattern of Alaska along with the current economic growth seems to lead to high labor force participation for

both. As was stated previously, over half of the women in Alaska with children at home are also in the labor force."

Thorp and Campbell felt the attendance and discipline policy has to adequately meet Native needs before it was passed.

Campbell said, "We feel that student absentee reasons must be looked at. What is the cause of that? We feel very uncomfortable with the Attendance and Discipline Policy."

At a January discipline policy planning seminar Anchorage's Native community and other policy-making members

addressed the following issues.

- * Attendance policies should be designed to keep students in school and not be punitive.

- * Provide in-house suspension as an alternative.

- * Disproportionate number of minority students experience attendance problems.

- * Need for consistency and different type of discipline as perceived by various ethnic groups.

- * Need for better communication with parents when student is absent.

In its final form, many of the issues brought up by the Native community were not

included in the Attendance and Discipline Policy.

In their letter to the school board the Native groups said;

"The Attendance and Discipline Policy Planning Seminar did not address these issues adequately nor determine the underlying reasons for non-attendance."

"Unitedly we are gravely concerned about the solutions to suspensions to be determined and request in-house suspension to be one of the alternatives. We also request the Anchorage School District take into consideration the cultural and ethnic

diffences when determining alternatives to suspension. We are not seeking special treatment but we consider this to be a very serious problem. The seminar's action and recommendation are only procedural and do not address the underlying reasons for non-attendance."

Other organizations contributing to the policy were; Alaska Youth Advocates, Alaska Council on Prevention of Alcohol and Drug Abuse, Inc., the Alaska Black Caucus. Other representatives included juvenile organizations and justice organizations.