

Anchorage must remember Native students in classrooms

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Tundra Times

Until the Anchorage School District recognizes and changes the fact that it teaches a school program which only meets the need of the dominant white culture; it will continue to have a high number of Alaska Native students drop out, the school board was told last week.

That message came from James Patlan, chairman of the

Cook Inlet Native Association Johnson O'Malley Program who said that unless the school board "takes consideration of why and where we come from this study will never work."

In a first-time-ever invitation from the School Board to the Anchorage Native community, the board and representatives of most Native organizations in the borough discussed a report on the study of high Native drop-out rate

among Natives.

Patlan told the group that teachers should be more sensitive to the cultural differences and needs of Native students but he doesn't believe they can be until they receive extensive training in the cultures.

He said that any teacher who wants to work in the school system should be required to take cross-cultural education programs.

Native students coming to

Anchorage schools from the Bush "may not know about a quasar but are able to go out and survive in 60 degrees below zero. That's important," said Patlan.

Joann Thorpe, a nurse and a member of the Anchorage Educational Coalition and vice-chairman of the Native Political Action Committee, told the board that "those in academia must recognize that before you are a student you are

a Native. We want to retain that."

She questioned the school district's willingness to teach French or German as a foreign language but not teach any of the Alaska Native dialects.

Lydia Hayes, speaking for the Cook Inlet Region, Inc., urged the board to establish a school orientation program for students and teachers, to offer

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career orientation programs for a broad spectrum of careers, and to make sure that each teacher in the district has a good knowledge of Alaska Native culture and history.

Hayes, who taught in several villages, said she has taught the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act as a course in college and found a "startling lack of knowledge" on the whole subject. She says one of her teacher-students thought Alaska history began with the gold rush.

Most of the speakers spoke highly of the extra education programs such as JOM and Indian Education Program offerings but all said that isn't enough and shouldn't be the only Indian training program in school.

Toni Jones, a mother of five and a trained school counselor who now works in the University of Alaska Chancellor's office, spoke of two personal experiences of a breakdown of the school system counselors' duties.

Ms. Jones said one counselor failed to take any action on her son's request to take two special classes in addition to his regular studies. Jones found out too late that the boy could take both classes but because the counselor didn't act, he only took one.

The other experience was the failure of a counselor to help a graduate find out about financial aid for college after several conferences about the aid for college. Jones said she spent 30 minutes with the girl and solved her problems

even though that was not her area of counseling.

The board and the public also saw a video-taped program on a retreat held for 20 Anchorage Native students who discussed some problems they had in school.

The board will hold a seminar with high school principals and teachers in August to discuss the study recommendations.

The study was prepared during the last year by the School District Community Relations Department based on interviews with 29 students who left school before graduating.

More interviews were desired but few of the drop-outs could be found.

The study made 11 recommendations on how to change the school educational classes and other services to make school more interesting to Native students.

The recommendations were:

- * Give more information to new students on how to cope with classes. Such information should include help on how to take notes, what kind of attendance is required, use of the

library, and study skills, a "buddy system" where an older student would take another younger student "under his wing" to show him how things are done, should also be started.

One criticism in this recommendation was that students coming to Anchorage from a village school often arrive without their past school records and are placed in class

before anyone knows if the student can understand what that class has to offer.

If a student can't understand the course, he is more likely to drop out, the study said.

- * Allow students to earn some credits for whatever classwork they do rather than throwing out an entire semester of work because a student leaves early in the spring to go fishing with his parents.

Students who leave early now have no other way to finish their school. An entire semester credit is lost if a student misses a few days or weeks.

- * Give more and better training for actual work skills such as mechanics or secretarial work. With that training, a student who drops out may have work skills to get a job but if he has received no such training and drops out, he is more likely to not find work or find very low-paying work.

- * Provide classes which have a relationship to Alaska Natives such as a history of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act or Native culture.

The recommendation also said such classes should not be scheduled to conflict with classes that are required for graduation which has been the case in the past.

- * Offer Native sports and games as a regular part of gym class. Such an offering would enable Native students to participate in an activity that means something to them and will show non-Natives the difficulty of some of the sports.

- * Teach teachers how to teach Native students who learn better from participating and from watching and not listening to lectures.

- * Make students aware of the benefits that they can gain from counselors at school. Counselors should give students an update on their credit status each year. The study found that many Native students didn't know how many and what types of classroom credits they needed to grad-

uate.

- * Improve the attendance requirements to inform parents about rules on student attendance so that they are aware of their child's status in school. Many parents found that their children got in trouble for missing school even with a doctor's verification of the absence.

The study suggested that the school should follow up patterns of skipping class.