

Education Committee works to increase Native opportunities

The AFN Education Committee continues to work with University of Alaska officials in attempting to increase the educational opportunities for Native Alaskan students.

The education committee met in Juneau February 5 to review the actions of the University of Alaska in response to the Rural Education Task Force Report. The report, released last April, was prepared at the request of the Alaska Legislature. The task force was made up of two AFN members, the university president and members of the UA board of regents and individuals from five different regions of Alaska.

The report contained many recommendations; among them were: develop a comprehensive plan for postsecondary education services for rural/Native Alaskans, involve AFN and other representatives of the rural/Alaska Native constituent groups in the planning process and such a plan should include locally delivered courses, external degree

programs, short-term and long-term education/training needs of the community/region, localized curriculum and counseling.

The report also noted that special funding is needed for a pilot project that addresses counseling services, teacher training with an emphasis on multi-grade, multi-cultural teacher education as well as career advancement opportunities for teacher aides.

University officials, at the February 5 meeting, made commitments to implement some of the task force recommendations. Implementation of those recommendations is expected to be outlined in the university's six-year plan, the latest draft of which is expected to be available February 14. Public comment can be made on the six-year plan through an audio conference April 2-4.

The UA Board of Regents is expected to discuss the plan in a workshop in March and at their regularly scheduled board meeting April 24-25 in Nome.

One concern of AFN education committee members is that declining state revenues will cause the university to contract its services into the urban areas and cut back services in rural areas. If such cutbacks occur that would be detrimental to the education committee's goal of increasing educational opportunities for Alaska Natives.

In another area the AFN education committee strongly supports the development of a rural Alaska teacher training program. The program is designed to encourage and enable rural Alaskans to become certified rural school teachers.

According to the proposal, Alaska cannot afford to wait any longer to develop solutions to the rural school problems of alcohol and drug abuse and high suicide rates among the students. The high level of teacher turnover rates and value conflicts between community members and educators are also symptoms of the problems of rural schools.

"These problems will not be solved until rural schools are staffed by people who are familiar, on a first-hand basis with the key issues that affect rural students," the proposal states. "The challenge presented by rural schools will be met when rural people are systematically integrated to teach in and administer schools in their own communities.

The AFN education committee plans to work closely with state Department of Education and University of Alaska officials in an effort to successfully implement this program.