

Make students work harder: Native panel

By Linda Lord-Jenkins

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Teachers of rural Alaskan students have set up those students for failure in higher learning by not forcing them to study as hard or learn as much as non-Native students, according to a panel of Native leaders involved in education.

Speaking to a statewide symposium on Alaska Schools and Public Policy, the speakers told rural teachers to get tough on their students in order to prepare them for life as it is.

William G. Demmert, acting dean of the University of Alaska, Juneau School of Education and Liberal Arts outlined the change in education of the young from the days of his Tlingit ancestors to the present.

In the days before Western missionaries, the child's maternal aunties and uncles would train the young in a family setting. All was geared at helping the "student" survive in a subsistence world.

But, as missionaries, then the Bureau of Indian Affairs, then the state, took over the education of the young, the school system has become external instead of part of the community, said Demmert. That problem is slowly reversing itself to a community-oriented school system, but there is still much to do, said Demmert.

"If there are values important to Natives, then Natives must play an integral role in what the schools do to insure that cultural values are reflected in schools," he said.

"In order for schools to be successful, they must be recognized as part of the community they serve. They must be compatible with the needs of the community and their curriculum must be relevant to the contemporary needs of the community."

Demmert pointed out, however, that parents must bear much responsibility to provide the environment for their child to learn, must present the child with a wide variety of experiences and ideas to help choose, and must encourage the child.

Willie Hensley, a newly ap-

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Please, please, teach our children

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pointed member of the Alaska Board of Regents, director of NANA Regional Corp., and Chairman of the United Bank of Alaska, told the group that western education has led to the disintegration of the Inupiat culture.

"It began early when we were taught skills that were useless because there was nowhere to apply those skills . . . Our forefathers thought that if they committed themselves to a new way of life, then living would be better . . . but it was a life without meaning."

Hensley said that in order for the education system to be successful, it must recognize that "our people have as much right to a place in the sun as everyone else."

But, Hensley said too, that the education system is only one part of society that has to change. Other changes must come also from the political, religious and economic systems. "We have to meld these together to make this work."

Hensley ended with a familiar theme of the Inupiat Iitqusiat, Spirit Committee, that education cannot succeed if the people it seeks to teach have no sense of themselves. "No amount of education can help if the students are rootless as human beings."

Sam Kito, a member of the State Board of Education, former member of the Board of

Regents, past chairman of the Alaska Federation of Natives, and a lobbyist, was harder on the teachers for their part in teaching.

Kito first told the teachers that "The problem of doing it right the first time is you never know the true difficulty of the task."

"When I look at the menu in grade school, I see that nowhere do the classes have what happened before the Europeans came here. There wasn't a program outlining the history of this area before Captain Cook came to Alaska. The past of Natives before Europeans must be taught, he said.

Kito said that the trend in education in the past few years has been toward fewer requirements in favor of a broader range of elective classes. As a result, students are able to leave school as juniors with little knowledge.

"When we say, put in more math, history, we hear that costs too much."

Kito said that he prefers that students who are handling their education easily be given more difficult and challenging studies in order to stretch their learning capabilities. "Don't make it easier on them."

Kito also seemed to lean away from massive bilingual education classes in the school system when he said, "The best place for bilingual education to be taught is in the

home. We had a program at (University of) Fairbanks and we made a hell of a lot of experts in bilingual education but didn't teach many kids.

He also stressed the need of a good solid home base for education. "The ability to teach isn't always earned with a piece of paper. The best teacher in the Arctic is an Inupiat mother . . . parents have to become involved in the education process."

The importance of parents was sounded again when Kito said teachers should pay attention to what parents are saying — or not saying — about their children's education. He said many would find that Native parents aren't satisfied with the quality of their child's education "because the children they thought were educated are being turned back by colleges"

Patricia Kwachka, who works with the UAF Alaska Native Program, said Native students are ill-prepared to handle college for a number of reasons.

"Students are arriving at the university with very low test scores which makes it difficult for them to succeed. They have very poor study habits which makes it difficult for them once they are here.

"They have an inflated view of their own abilities caused by teachers who accept less than the students' best. They should be made to be accountable when they don't do what they are supposed to do," said Kwachka.

She said many students also don't really know why they are attending the university. Some attend because of peer pressure or pressure from parents or relatives. They must know their own reasons before succeeding and they often need counseling to do that, she said.

She suggested college preparatory classes for college-bound students as one way to help students achieve.

John Schaeffer, president of the NANA Regional Corp., said he agrees that Native students aren't being asked to achieve all that they can, but he said that isn't all the students' fault.

"If we go back far enough when the children are born, they all have the same potential. But the greatest barrier to face already exists.

That barrier is that "We look at ourselves as being not equipped to learn as well as other people. And teachers think that way when they come here.

"Our children are not any dumber than any other chil-

dren. It's only us who believe that."

Schaeffer said he didn't realize that children were being treated as inferior in education and allowed to get by with less until his children went to the university for schooling.

"They all graduated with honors and they have to take remedial education in college."

Schaeffer said he doesn't accept the assertion that rural students suffer problems because of the inadequacy of the rural school system. "That's a cop-out. Look at the history of the one-room schoolhouse in the Lower 48 and how far it got us. I don't think there is any reason we can't do that today. Our teachers have had a better education and are more skilled than before."

What is needed is teacher and parent motivation. "Are you willing to do a good job? It's hard to be self-motivated, especially in a system that teaches you to be concerned first about pay, vacation, insurance pension. We need to look at those things and say they are important but not that important."

Schaeffer also acknowledged the difficulty of that task and the difficulty of being the "mean teacher" and not passing students who don't make

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the grade.

"I know it is hard to put your foot down and not pass students when the parents, other teachers, and the administration are all over you.

"But you are supposed to be running the classroom. You set the standards."

He ended by saying, "We're just starting to understand how difficult it has been to teach our children. Given time, you may get more help from the community, but in the meantime, don't wait for us. Please, please educate our children."