

Editorial



Guest editorial

Early childhood program concerns

by Esther Combs

Executive Director, Cook Inlet Tribal Council

We are all aware of the increasing concerns being expressed by Alaska Native parents, the leadership and educators on the quality of education for our children and opportunities for their access into these systems.

And once there, what are their chances of acquiring basic knowledge and staying within the system to graduation?

Of particular concern to a growing segment of the Native community is the accessibility of pre-schoolers into quality Native programs like Headstart. The importance of early childhood learning was emphasized in the recent Alaska Federation of Natives' Call to Action report, which stated: "Unless learning deficits that become apparent by ages 5 or 6 can be remedied in timely fashion, Native children beginning school with learning deficits may well be permanently barred from realizing their potential."

Recent statistics show that the birth rate is high for Native families so we can expect increased numbers for pre-school programs and we would also expect an expansion in federal and state funds.

Unfortunately, in the latter case that doesn't appear to be happening. In fact, when we inquired into the availability of guidelines for making application for Headstart funds, a federal Headstart official in Washington, D.C., stated, "a program for Alaska Natives is racially discriminatory in the same way that a program for Blacks (only) would be in Mississippi."

For a moment it seemed as if we were back in the '60s before passage of the Civil Rights Act.

It has become obvious to us that there are many federal bureaucrats who know little or nothing about federal entitlement programs for Alaska Natives and American Indians and know less about their particular applicability to Alaska Natives.

One solution to this situation would be creation of an Indian desk in the Department of Health and Human Services in Washington, D.C. This has worked well at other levels, such as the Department of Labor and the existing Division of Indian and Native American Programs.

There are many Alaska grantees for HHS programs (Homeless, JOBS, Again and Low Income Home Energy) who could benefit from placement of an Indian desk.

We would urge interested persons to use the *Tundra Times* as a forum for expression of their concerns about early childhood programs for our Native children.

