

Anchorage Native drop-out rate hits 18.3%

by Kathy Davey
for the Tundra Times

The 1986-87 Anchorage School District High School drop-out percentages show once again that the numbers are disproportionately high in the Alaska Native/American Indian group.

Of the Alaska Native/American Indian students who began senior high school last year, 18.3 percent dropped out. Although the rate has been higher in the past — 21.1 percent in 1985-86 and 19.5 percent in 1984-85 — the current figure towers over that of other

groups of students.

According to the ASD's July 29 report, 5.6 percent of Asian/Pacific Islanders, 9.1 percent of blacks, 11.1 percent of Hispanics and 7.2 percent of caucasians dropped out of high school in 1986-87.

But a positive change in the statistics seems probable. The statistics have already shifted downward, and the new superintendent says he wants to focus new programs on the problem.

Superintendent Dr. William Coats said working toward remedying the high drop-out rate is a high priority of his. He said he is learning more about

the nature and the extent of the problem.

"We have to do more," he said.

Coats said there are cultural, academic and social programs available for students in all grades, but they are a "patchwork approach" and they operate in "near isolation." They are not clearly coordinated and some may have overlapping focuses, he said.

Coats said the youngsters are pulled out of regular classes for some of the special programs and the disruption may be counter productive.

"Coordination and consolidation"

is Coats' plan for making the system more effective.

Why is this particular group of young people affected in such dramatic proportions?

Coats said there is a gap between the Native culture and what he terms the "school culture." He said the rules, expectations and social structures within the public school system are at odds with the expectations coming from the Native culture. To counteract this, he said he wants to strive for better school-to-home and school-to-

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• JOM aids students

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community relations.

Lydia Hays, head of the Cook Inlet Region Inc. Foundation, said the drop-out rate has been a problem because rural students coming in to Anchorage often have difficulty fitting in.

"This is not an isolated problem," she said. "It's nationwide."

A 1986 publication from the Institute for Educational Leadership Inc. stated that, "Nationally, one of four students do not graduate. In inner cities, the average is twice as high."

The report identified some of the situations that would make a student especially prone to dropping out.

"School-related problems, stressful home situations and economic necessities may play a part," it said.

Although the Anchorage total drop-out level was 9.1 percent, some of the same problems afflicting students at the national level influence the Anchorage community as well. Hays said cultural transition, limited income and alcohol and drugs might be factors.

David ThunderEagle, past manager of the Cook Inlet Tribal Council's Johnson O'Malley Program, said there are comparatively few non-Natives who have to adjust to moving from a village of 100 people to a relatively huge metropolis of 250,000.

The JOM program is headed by 15 parents and three student representatives who have been selected to the National Education Committee's advisory board. Parents qualified to vote and be elected must have a child who is at least one quarter Alaska Native or American Indian. Of the 18 ad-

visory board members, five are elected each year.

ThunderEagle said JOM started by providing tutors which took students out of regular class periods. He said now, however, high school students can sign up for the programs and receive credits applicable toward graduation.

JOM provides counseling, career guidance, summer school programs and traditional educational programs. ThunderEagle said there are learning centers in all Anchorage high schools.

In addition to the teacher-to-student atmosphere, ThunderEagle said the JOM program gives students the opportunity of sharing a community spirit and a cultural cohesion with other Native and Indian students.

Marian Paulsen, a teacher and tutor for JOM, said that often students can do the school work but "feel kind of lost in the crowd." Not asking questions in class or avoiding the situation by skipping the class are the result.

Paulsen said many students are not withdrawn, just quiet. They don't ask questions in class.

Paulsen said she works one-on-one with students, answering their questions, listening to what they say and giving assistance.

"I let them know their education is very important," she said.

Paulsen said her first priority is to communicate with the students on an individual level, that an education is their personal responsibility and their personal possession.

As a result, Paulsen said the students have responded positively. "They have better self-esteem. They are more open and confident. They ask questions."