



*Virginia Thomas, named National Indian Education Association Mother of the Year, straightens a braid for Inupiat Eskimo Luanna Penatal, who was selected to lead in the women at the NIEA Pow Wow at the Sullivan Arena last week.*

# Cavazo calls for changes

by Holly F. Hallam  
Tundra Times reporter

The secretary of the U.S. Department of Education called for changes in education — including involving the entire community in the education process — last week at the 21st Annual National Indian Education Association Conference held in Anchorage.

The national conference was held to

promote American Indian/Alaska Native Education.

This year, NIEA brought Lauro Cavazo, secretary of the U.S. Department of Education, as the featured speaker.

Cavazo said there needs to be a change in the way youth are being educated. But he said change isn't as simple as spending more money.

"We need a commitment to set national goals, and we need to communicate through each state," Cavazo said.

He said this communication should also be shared by parents. Parents should interact with teachers and other

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school faculty. And Cavazo said ultimately the entire community should get involved and help set goals for schools.

Then the goals should be measured to see what progress has been made, he said.

William Demmert, commissioner of education for Alaska, said in an interview after Cavazo's talk that although students from Alaska generally do very well on national standardized tests there is a high drop-out rate among high school students in rural Alaska.

"There are a lot of reasons for that. Some of them are very complicated and unique to Alaska," Demmert said.

"Most of the problems are in the high schools. This is where we need to take the time and make a change," Demmert said.

William Coats, Anchorage School District superintendent, said in an interview that Native students in Anchorage drop out of school less and do better academically than in rural Alaska.

There is no known reason why, according to an Anchorage School District spokesman. He said it is something that has simply been observed — students in urban schools have a lower drop-out rate.

Overall, Coats said the Anchorage School District is on a solid course. The improvements Anchorage schools need are minor, he added.

"We're trying to fine tune and make minor changes," Coats said.

But he said that another area of improvement is the need to increase parental interaction with schools and to make class sizes smaller.

Demmert said unlike Anchorage schools, parent interaction is lacking in rural Alaska. He said this is because of a major shortfall in family structure. And family structure is only part of the overall problem which is adding to the high rural student drop-out rate, he said.

Demmert said in many parts of Alaska the family structure needs to be developed before parent intervention can work.

Luanne Pelagio, chairperson for the Alaska Native Education Committee, which sponsored this year's NIEA conference, said nearly 1,700 people attended the conference. Next year the conference will be held in San Diego, Calif.

Pelagio said NIEA brought people together in the state of Alaska. She said it's a sharing program where people can talk about problems, work on solutions, present resolutions and bring issues to a national scope.