

# Native student program gets middling grade

MEETING: Parents and researchers say more needs to be done.

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Anchorage Daily News

Published: February 5, 2008

An effort to combat below-par Alaska Native student performance in the Anchorage School District has improved scores somewhat, but the district remains largely unfocused on how to decrease dropout rates and increase proficiency scores, according to a report released by the University of Alaska's Institute of Social and Economic Research.

The report, concerning the district's Alaska Native Pilot Project, was made public at a Monday-night meeting of a few hundred mostly Native parents. It spurred more of the same, sometimes tearful, sentiment that started the project in 2005, including accusations that the district has done too little to help Native children and in some cases has failed them.

"Our children don't come into the classroom empty vessels," Shirley Tuzroyluke, president of the Alaska Native Education Association, told Superintendent Carol Comeau. "Culture and academic achievement are not separate; they go hand in hand."

The problems facing Native students -- low test scores and high dropout rates -- are the result of a lack of understanding of Native cultures and unwelcome atmospheres in school, according to the Anchorage Faith and Action -- Congregations Together, the church association that held the meeting.

The pilot program at Romig Middle School and Willow Crest Elementary School focused on training district personnel in Native cultures and communication styles and finding better ways to reach out to families of Native students.

According to the ISER numbers, Native students' graduation rates and performance on standardized tests have improved but are still significantly worse than those of their white counterparts.

The poor test results, which are not unique to Anchorage, are the result of many factors, including families' socioeconomic status, said Diane Hirshberg, co-author of the ISER report.

"I think there are a lot of people with a lot of good ideas and a lot of good intentions, but it needs to get a districtwide push," Hirshberg said. "It really was kind of testing the waters. Right now, it's still a school-by-school and a principal-by-principal effort."

As a part of the pilot program, the homes of 50 percent of the Native students at Willow Crest were visited by a teacher, while fewer than 4 percent at Romig were. Parents whose homes were visited generally reported positive experiences to ISER; however, only about 30 percent responded, despite persistent efforts to contact them, Hirshberg said.

"I will not ever say we're perfect, but I think we've come a great long way," Comeau told the crowd. "We're doing better, but we need you all to work with us."

Comeau promised to revisit the issue in two months.

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