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District must forge ties with Native families

COMPASS: *Other points of view*

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More than 400 new Alaska Native children have enrolled in Anchorage schools during the past few months. Even before this recent influx of rural students, the relationship between the Alaska Native students, their families and the schools was often strained.

The Alaska Native Organizing Ministry of AFACT (Anchorage Faith & Action -- Congregations Together) commends recent efforts by School Superintendent Carol Comeau, Mayor Mark Begich and Cook Inlet Tribal Council President Gloria O'Neill calling attention to the influx of rural families, particularly Alaska Natives, into our urban areas.

Ms. O'Neill noted that the Anchorage schools are larger than many Alaska Native villages from which the residents are migrating. As the number of migrating families increases, so too will the need for services to help acclimate these families.

Alaska Native students have historically had the highest dropout rate and lowest graduation rate of all ethnicities in the Anchorage School District. The latest Anchorage School District Profile of Performance reports a decline in the dropout rate district-wide for all groups except Alaska Native/American Indian and students with disabilities. This past school year, 9.18 percent of Alaska Native students dropped out of school, accounting for 18 percent of the total number of dropouts.

In 2005 and again in 2008, Alaska Native leaders in AFACT asked the School District to focus on two things that could well improve Alaska Native student success: outreach to Alaska Native families and cross-cultural communication training for all school staff.

During months of research leading up to our meeting with the superintendent, we found a vast disconnect between how the School District sees itself and how Alaska Native parents see the schools. Put simply, schools are not seen as welcoming by many Alaska Native families. This has been a multigenerational experience, compounded by nearly 100 years of oftentimes negative relationships with various territorial, federal and local schools in rural and urban areas.

Educators insist that a student is more likely to be successful when his or her parents are actively engaged with the school. Bridging this apparent divide can begin with teachers reaching out to families.

AFACT has proposed that outreach begin with teachers building relationships with families by visiting them in their homes or outside of the school. We recognize that teachers should receive compensation for the time spent invested in building bridges between the school and the family.

This isn't a new idea. Parent/teacher home visits have been very successful in school districts throughout the United States. For example, the Parent/Teacher Home Visit Project began in the Sacramento School District in 1998 to address low student achievement and a cycle of blame that had developed between parents and school personnel. Since that time, the project has taken its training to school districts around the country and received the 2007 California Teachers Association State Gold Award. The executive director of the California Teachers Association has said that the Parent/Teacher Home Visit Project "is one of the best in the nation."

Throwing money at and conducting studies about the dramatic influx of rural people into the city will offer only short-term solutions. Relationships between the School District and Alaska Native families clearly need to be strengthened. Relationships require time, patience and effort. However, in the final analysis, building relationships must be a priority at every level in the community to ensure the successful transition for migrating rural families.

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