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Faith groups urge Palin to reconsider stimulus funds

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Despite volcanic ash that prevented the commissioner of Alaska's Department of Education and Early Development from flying to the event from Juneau, more than 100 people gathered at St. Anthony Church in Anchorage on March 29 to address native education issues.

Foremost on their minds were the proposed federal stimulus funds, and Gov. Sarah Palin's suggestion that she might refuse to accept a portion of the federal money slated for education.

Nearly 20 people testified. Many of those identified themselves as Alaskan Natives with roots in places as diverse as Chevak, Bethel, Shismaref and Wales. Some were professional educators, other parents. Some were interested community members like Catholic Social Services Executive Director Susan Bomalaski.

All had a common theme — to urge Gov. Palin to accept the education stimulus money in order to assist Native Alaskan students struggling with the educational system throughout the state.

Carol Beecher, Gov. Palin's scheduler, filled in for Commissioner Larry LeDoux and rural affairs adviser John Moller, both unable to attend due to the Anchorage airport closure.

Susie Delgado, an Inupiaq Eskimo, gave the opening remarks on behalf of the Alaska Catholic and Lutheran Native Organizing Ministry, which sponsored the forum as part of Anchorage Faith and Action Congregations Together, a faith-based community organizing group to which several local Catholic parishes belong.

Delgado explained the "grim statistics" on Alaska Native drop-out rates — more than 30 percent and worse than other minority groups. She said, "we have worked hard and have proposed ways to better serve our students. But often we're told about the budgetary problems."

Lutheran Bishop Michael Keyes, who serves on a city committee that addresses gang related issues, asked Beecher to "please take this back to the governor. This issue (of funding) is directly tied to issues down the road, like gang activity and incarceration."

Sister of Charity Donna Kramer, of Catholic Native Ministry, presented the results of a research project on Native education.

Since 2005, when more than 300 people met with Anchorage School Superintendent Carol Comeau to address the unique problems facing Native students, very little progress has been made in boosting proficiency scores or slowing the drop-out rate.

"The educational system isn't working for our students," Sister Kramer said.

A pilot project at Williwaw Elementary School in Anchorage involving home visitation showed promise and has proved successful in California, Sister Kramer said. It would be cost effective to implement this program through teacher training in other schools, she added.

A telling moment occurred during the meeting when Delgado asked anyone who had a child experiencing difficulty in school to stand. Several people did. When she asked those with young relatives imperiled in the public schools to stand, many more did. By the time she asked anyone who knew of a Native student struggling with education, most of the crowd was standing.

Beecher said she would relay the group's comments to LeDoux, Moller and Gov. Palin.