

Native parents demand accountability

Schools: Meeting lays bare problems that students from villages encounter.

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Native families move from villages to Anchorage and get lost in the big-city school system.

Their children are the most likely to fail tests and drop out.

There are few Native faces on school staff. They feel shut out and invisible.

About 300 people, mostly Natives associated with local churches, showed up at a raw, emotional meeting this week to talk about how school life should be better for their children.

“We send our children through your door and we expect them to be educated, and we expect them to be protected,” said David Parker, whose son is Native. “And in that respect, you have failed.”

Superintendent Carol Comeau agreed on the spot to make one elementary school and one middle school more Native-friendly by specially training staff and trying new tactics to connect with Native families. Upon her OK, the crowd of about 300 people burst into applause, one joyous moment during an otherwise heavy and sometimes sorrowful night.

“I had been warned there’s a lot of anger and a lot of pain and I thought that was so right on,” Comeau said afterward. “It’s obvious that many, many of the speakers had horrible educational experiences...and I’ve know that intuitively. But I’ve never been in a meeting with that many Alaska Native people with such pain in their hearts. It was gut-wrenching. My stomach was just churning because I felt so bad. I still feel bad.”

Some, in their turn at the microphone, shouted with outrage. Most spoke in more measured tones, but still delivering a grim message about the life of Native children inside city schools.

From the time they start kindergarten, Native students get lumped with students who aren’t expected to do well, said Maxine Schubert, who has two children attending Anchorage schools.

“It becomes a cycle,” Schubert said. “By the time our young men reach high school, their self esteem is really low.”

The meeting was the culmination of months of research by members of the Alaska Native Lutheran Church, said Ron Brown, a leader in the effort. The church is a member of Anchorage Faith and Action Congregations Together, or AFACT, a group of 11 Anchorage congregations that formed in 2003 to tackle social issues.

Volunteers from Native Lutheran scoured district data and also visited more than 100 Native families that have children in Anchorage schools. On those visits, church members told them stories of racism, unemployment, alcohol abuse and sickness, said the Rev. Karen Sonray of the Alaska Native Lutheran Church.

“But the pain we heard again and again was the pain from worrying about their children and grandchildren and their future,” Sonray said. “We decided to do something about it.”

Church members pulled together startling but long-standing statistics:

- Natives make up 12 percent of students in seventh through 12th grade but account for nearly 30 percent of high school drop-outs.
- Of the Native freshmen at East High School in 2000, only 44 percent graduated in 2004. At West, only 31 percent graduated, and at Bartlett, just 23 percent of Native students who started in 2000 got diplomas in 2004.
- At Clark, the middle school with most Native students, 54 percent of Native students failed state-required math tests, 53 percent faltered on reading tests, and 42 percent on writing, according to test scores from the 2003-04 school year.

The report also found the vast disconnect between how the district sees its mission and how Natives see the district.

Example: District officials told church researchers that “Schools can make a difference when the school can make a connection with the family.”

Families told researchers: “Schools are not welcoming for Alaska Natives.”

School officials said: “I would ideally like to see more parent participation in the schools.” Native parents said, “I feel invisible in the school.”

Parents also said, “By junior high, our kids don’t feel included in the school. Sometimes it’s easier to send them to Mt. Edgecumbe or back to the village,” and “I’ve paid property taxes and support for ASD for 30 years, but how do we make the system accountable to our children?”

The meeting was supposed to last until 8 p.m., but Comeau stayed until 9:30 p.m. so each person who wanted to talk got a chance.

“It was a wake-up call, absolutely,” Comeau said. “It was something I absolutely needed to hear. It was very uncomfortable to hear. I think you can’t explain a meeting like that. It was a beginning.”

Patty Jacobus and Ron Brown gave the summary – a quick-paced rapid-fire delivery of numbers and snippets from interviews.

For most congregation members, it was the first exposure to the full range of bad news about city schools and Native children. Many gasped or grumbled in response.

The report focused on data from schools with large Native populations, including North Star, Muldoon and Mountain View elementary schools, and Clark Middle School.

Jacobus described the people they talked to – teachers, principals, assistant principals, and the ones they didn't, including at least one principal who failed to return calls over a two-week period.

That sent a grumble through the crowd.

The first congregation member to speak, an elderly woman, told the crowd that many Native children in Anchorage were raised in villages. “But here in Anchorage it's a big city. We're all created equal by God, but we were raised differently...So the children who come from the villages cannot compete with the city children and have problems.”

Comeau pointed out improvements in Native education: Test scores last year improved slightly. Of those Native seniors who'd earned all their credits, 93 percent passed an exit exam, required for graduation.

“I know we have made progress, but we are nowhere near where we need to be,” Comeau said. “We have got to do better.”

The pilot project that Comeau has approved is still in its early concept phases. But what the church group has asked for is intensive cross-cultural training for all staff at the pilot schools – not just teachers. They want the focus on the “cultural and communication techniques of Alaska Natives.”

The proposal also calls for outreach to make Native parents feel more welcome.

The first step, Comeau said, is to meet with key staff and pick the schools for a pilot effort. Next up, she wants to meet with people from the churches to get started designing the program.

“It's a different approach to a particular problem and that's a good,” Brown said. “It's definitely a good start.”