

## **Federal Hearing: “BEST-Building Educational Success Together”**

**Purpose:** To determine the efficacy of efforts being made to improve the educational outcomes of Alaska Native and American Indian students, to problem-solve what challenges remain, and to explore the role of the federal government in helping to build on our successes.

**Date:** October 19, 2012

**Time:** 4:00-5:30 PM

**Location:** Dena’ina Center

I am pleased to be here today to discuss the urban education experience, and how school districts and Native organizations can become more synergistic partners in encouraging academic success for our students. My name is Doreen Brown, and I am the Director for the Anchorage School District’s (ASD) Indian Education Program, which is the largest Title VII grantee in the nation. Today in Anchorage there are over 8,700 Alaska Native/American Indian (AN/AI) students enrolled in the Districts’ 110 schools. Our topic of discussion here today is critical, because in order to meet the cultural, social, and academic needs of these students, our Native organizations must work together.

There are four questions I wish to address today:

- 1) Why is there an increase of Native students in the ASD?
- 2) What are the challenges that face them?
- 3) What we are doing to assist students, families and staff as they work to encourage the success of our students?
- 4) How are our Native organizations working together to help our students achieve this success?

### **Why is there an increase of Native students in ASD?**

There has been a significant increase of Native students in the ASD over the past ten years, as determined by the number of completed 506 eligibility forms on file at our office, and also by self-reported ethnicity codes. The number of Indian Education eligible students with completed 506 forms in the 2005-2006 school year stood at 5,758. Today that number is 7,737. Based on self-reported ethnicity codes, we have potentially another thousand students who may be eligible for our services.

There are numerous reasons for this increase, including population growth, increased transience and employment mobility, and continuing urbanization.

### **What are the challenges?**

*Educational*

One of the greatest challenges facing Alaska Native/American Indian people is a significant disparity in educational achievement. Below is a snapshot of the data from the Anchorage School District's 2010-2011 Profile of Performance:

- Grades 4-10 Reading: Percentage of proficient students Alaska Native/American Indian (AN/AI) **53.18%**
- Grades 4-10 Writing: Percentage of proficient students AN/AI **46.01%**
- Grades 4-10 Mathematics: Percentage of proficient students AN/AI **43.56%**
- Grades 4-10 Science: Percentage of proficient students AN/AI **40.31%**
- Grades 7-12 Annual Dropout Rate of AN/AI students **8.47%**
- 4-Year Cohort Graduation Rate of AN/AI students **50.88%**

### *Social*

Many rural students are enrolling in Anchorage schools that are larger than their home community. They and their families need assistance in acclimating to our school system. This assistance could include: school profile, physical tour of school, introduction and explanation of school personnel, school bus operation and schedules, school resources, input from family about student's educational history, and setting up social supports within the school and community.

### *Culture*

Many AN/AI students in an urban environment such as Anchorage lack opportunities to connect with their heritage, language and culture that may be more readily available in rural settings. Research has identified several components of Cultural Based Education that are critical to improving Native student performance. In recent literature reviews of these studies, Demmert and Towner (2003) and Kana'iaupuni (2007) defined Cultural Based Education as having these critical elements:

- 1) Recognition and use of Native languages;
- 2) Pedagogy using traditional cultural characteristics and adult-child interactions;
- 3) Teaching strategies that align with traditional culture and ways of knowing and learning;
- 4) Curriculum based on traditional culture and Native spirituality;
- 5) Strong Native family and community participation in education and the planning and operation of school activities;
- 6) Knowledge and use of the community's political and social mores;
- 7) Meaningful and relevant learning through culturally grounded content and assessment; and
- 8) Use of data from various methods to insure student progress in culturally responsible ways.

## **What we are doing to assist students, families and staff?**

### *Indian Education Program*

The Anchorage School District's Indian Education Program is crucial to meeting the cultural and academic needs of Native students that schools do not otherwise address. Our program staff works hard to improve academic outcomes for Native students, while encompassing social-emotional learning, and building connections to heritage, culture and language. They also perform other critical tasks, such as researching the educational history of new-to-District students, addressing individual needs of the student, creating a plan of support, locating resources for the student and family, finding or assisting with Indigenous language translations (over 270 Yup'ik and 60 Inupiaq students enrolled in the ASD's English Language Learners Program in 2011), making personal connections, and conducting culturally responsive professional development at each school site. Funding is limited, therefore our resources are limited as well. In 2010-2011, the Indian Education Program provided direct supplemental services to 3,378 AN/AI students.

### *Alaska Native Education Program (ANEP)*

Alaska Native Education Program funds provide critical resources for the creative solutions needed to address the issues facing our Alaska Native and American Indian students. We currently have two successful projects through this funding source. The first, Project Puqigtut (Cup'ik word for "Smart People"), is a groundbreaking high school success program, launched in 2008 for 21<sup>st</sup> century Alaska Native and American Indian students. Students can earn core credits through culturally responsive online coursework, either to get ahead, or get back on track in order to graduate. Project Puqigtut incorporates cultural role models and Native ways of knowing into a 21<sup>st</sup> century learning model. It can operate outside of the school day, so that it has the unique ability to meet students where they are—at school, at home, at a shelter – and prevents them from falling through the cracks. Project partners include Cook Inlet Tribal Council, Job Corps, King Career Center, the University of Alaska, Anchorage. Project "P" has brought over 300 high-risk students closer to graduation and has quite literally made it possible for them to complete high school.

Our second program funded by ANEP is Project Ki'l (Ki'l is Dena'ina Athabascan for "boy"). This highly innovative project was launched in 2007, and serves over 500 Alaska Native boys between the ages of 3 and 10 each year. Native boys are one of our highest risk and most vulnerable student groups, and among the most likely to experience academic failure and/or drop out. Project Ki'l reaches these boys and their families early in the boys' development. It seeks to demonstrate that culturally responsive education results in higher academic outcomes, and brings in fathers and

other male role models to foster high self-esteem and success. This model helps parents, educators, and community supporters such as Cook Inlet Head Start, the Alaska Native Heritage Center, University of Alaska, Anchorage, and Cook Inlet Tribal Council meet the unique and pressing needs of Native boys—all as partners in their education. Project Ki'l reaffirms the boys' identity by celebrating, sharing, and embracing their heritage and traditions.

### **How are organizations working together?**

During the spring of 2010, the ASD was tasked with the difficult task of making budget cuts. One of the proposed cuts was to two positions that primarily served AN/AI high school students. One of the ASD School Board members, Jeannie Mackie, performed several site visits to learn more about the services these two positions supported. In addition to learning about these services, she made connections between other agencies and ASD departments that also offered support to students and families. Mrs. Mackie found that there are many services for Native students and families from numerous organizations, she then requested that a study be conducted that reviewed and consolidated the services, the McDowell study was completed in February 2011. The STRIVE School Board initiative was borne out of these connections.

STRIVE creates a framework for building what is called a Cradle to Community infrastructure. It is a way for the community to organize itself around a shared vision and identify the things that get results for children. STRIVE improves and augments these efforts over time, targeting the investment of the community's resources in different directions to increase their impact.

It is imperative that we collaborate on a fundamental level, and look at each other as allies with whom we can work together to address and dispel the disparity that exists in educational achievement in our District.

### References

Demmert, W. G., Jr., & Towner, J. C. (2003). A review of the research literature on the influences of culturally based education on the academic performance of Native American students [Final paper]. Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. Available at <http://educationnorthwest.org/resource/561>  
Abstract: One of the major tasks facing Native American communities (American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians) is to create lifelong learning opportunities that allow all the members to improve their quality of life, and to meet their tribal responsibilities through meaningful contributions to the local, national, and world communities in which they live and interact. The greatest educational challenge for many is to build learning environments that allow each of their young children to obtain an education that "creates good people that are

knowledgeable and wise." The formal reports cited in this review of the literature present the position that knowing, understanding, and appreciating one's cultural base are necessary starting points for initiating a young child's formal education. The theory is that it sets the stage for what occurs in a youngster's later life. The task of this report is to review the research literature to determine whether there is a direct relationship between a culturally based education curriculum and improved academic performance among Native American students.

Kana'iaupuni, S. M. (2007). A brief overview of culture-based education and annotated bibliography (Culture- Based Education Brief Series). Honolulu: Kamehameha Schools, Research & Evaluation. Available at <http://www.ksbe.edu/spi/cbe.php>