



POPULATION TRENDS CONFIRM NEED FOR DISTRICT'S CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE EDUCATION PLAN

The latest demographic data from the U.S. Census Bureau and Anchorage School District demonstrate the changes in the ethnicity of Anchorage's population and underscore the district's commitment to culturally responsive education.

While Anchorage's population is predominantly white with more than 70 percent of its 278,700 residents claiming that ethnicity, the percentage of white students in the Anchorage School District is significantly less. According to the district's Dec. 3 ethnicity report, 50 percent of its student population is white. African Americans are 5.5 percent of the city's population, but are 6 percent of the district's student membership.

Alaska Natives and American Indians make up 5.4 percent of the city's residents, but are 9 percent of the ASD student population. Nine percent of the municipality's population is Asian, Hawaii or Pacific Islander, while 12 percent of ASD students claimed those ethnicities. The same is true for other designations - Hispanic or Latino, multi-ethnic - the school district has higher percentages than the city.

The increasingly diverse population trend is also evident at the different educational levels within the district. According to the ethnicity report, 53 percent of elementary education students are non-white; 50 percent of students at the middle school are non-white, and 46 percent of high school students are non-white. Special services programs have the largest non-white percentage at 59 percent.

Several ASD schools have predominantly ethnic populations. In the ethnicity report, William Tyson Elementary School's student population is 93 percent non-white. Begich Middle School has a student population that is 69 percent non-white and East High School has the same percentage.

Though the ethnic makeup of the district's student membership is changing, the educators the students see every day are still predominantly white. Of the 2,847 classroom teachers in the district in October 2006, 2,554 were white. Of the 146 assistant and school principals employed by the district at that time, 121 were white.

As population trends continue, the district expects to make further strides in hiring employees of non-white ethnicities. Gains have been made for the past 10 years with the non-white employee percentage reaching to almost 19 percent in 2006.

But the generational representation of the older, predominantly white workforce teaching a younger, more ethnically diverse student population will continue. That is why Superintendent Carol Comeau's administration has implemented a long-range plan to incorporate and improve culturally responsive education in ASD.

"As professional educators, we serve the needs of our students. We are instituting professional development programs to heighten teachers' awareness of the impact of teacher attitude, background, culture and socio-economic status on teaching," Comeau said. "As educators we have to model skills like self and cultural awareness for the kids."

Other benchmarks in the district's Culturally Responsive Education Plan include helping students appreciate current and historical events from multiple perspectives, and accommodating multiple world views and values in daily instruction. More individualized approaches to curriculum, discipline, assessments and student engagement are also part of the plan.

"It all comes down to respect, and feeling valued. If we can respect the students and their cultural backgrounds, and concentrate on our common values, then we can expect their respect and trust in return." Comeau said. "That kind of combination is the essence of student success, both in terms of academic achievement and as future citizens."