

District looks ahead

Federal education rep praises peninsula schools

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From accessibility issues to language barriers, no one can deny the Kenai Peninsula Borough School District faces some challenges as it tries to comply with the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

Nonetheless, Superintendent Donna Peterson has said the district is interested in moving forward to deal with the hardships rather than getting hung up on the problems.

Last week, a representative from the U.S. Department of Education visited schools in the district and said that positive attitude is exactly what she found -- and what's helping peninsula schools succeed.

"People (here) are more interested in finding a solution than in finding justification why it can't happen," said Donna Foxley, who serves as Education Secretary Rod Paige's regional representative for Alaska, Idaho, Oregon and Washington.

Foxley was on the peninsula to get a glimpse of life and education in Alaska to take back to the federal government.

"I wanted to get where I can get a microcosm of the dynamics of Alaska, to help me paint a picture of what makes Alaska Alaska," Foxley said. "I can get the 'Reader's Digest' condensed version of Alaska on the Kenai Peninsula."

Though a proponent of the No Child Left Behind Act, Foxley acknowledged that the federal government can't always know

what will work in every part of the country.

That's where she comes in. "We are out and listening," she said. "Tell us your story, tell us what you think. Show us solutions of how a little flexibility will help."

For example, she said concerns about the transportation aspect of NCLB -- mandating that districts provide students at low-performing schools transportation to attend other schools -- were deemed valid in Alaska.

"We've already got that covered in Alaska. If it's not viable -- and obviously in areas it's not -- districts can step up and do supplemental services instead.

"It's been addressed because it became apparent that (Alaska) is unlike a lot of areas and we recognized that was absolutely an area we needed to have flexibility on. But it took knowledge and experience to recognize."

At the same time, however, Foxley said elements of the law cannot be pushed aside just because they are difficult.

"Change is hard, but mostly it's hard for grownups," she said.

For example, she said, children will be expected to master the English language even if it's not their primary language.

"It is a challenge, and there are going to be issues to address," she said.

"We want to respect the culture, but English is absolutely necessary for young people to learn. And we know the earlier they start, the better. That doesn't mean they have to turn their back on their native

Editor's note: This is the last story in a five-part series examining the federal No Child Left Behind Act and its impact on the Kenai Peninsula Borough School District's smallest and most unique schools.

language. That's not what we're asking."

However, she said, "Our kids need to be able to read; it's the foundation for continuing lifelong learning."

Alaska is not the only part of the country facing issues with bilingual children.

"We have to remember a lot of our LEP (low-English proficiency) kids have parents who came here for the opportunities this country has to offer," Foxley said.

"We have to make sure the American dream they're here for they have access to."

The challenges to meeting the requirements of NCLB are indeed a reality, she said. But she also believes Alaska, and the Kenai Peninsula specifically, are up to the task.

"Good things are happening here," she said after two days touring the peninsula's schools. "I saw pieces of the puzzle coming together to complete the picture for kids."

From Spring Creek Correctional Center's high school program for young felons to Voznesenka School's bilingual Russian program to Sears Elementary School's heavy parent involvement, Foxley said the picture she got was one of dedication to the successful education of children.

“Each place was different but meeting the needs of kids,” she said. “Your numbers prove it out, in student achievement and closing educational gaps.

“Something’s working here, and we need to see why.”

Foxley attributed part of the success to the district’s teachers: “Everywhere we went, in every class, kids were engaged, paying attention, interacting with teachers,” she said. “There was a natural learning environment ... and kids were excited about learning.

“It’s like when kids enter kindergarten, they’re excited ... and kindergarten teachers have that quality (of excitement). It’s almost like time hasn’t drilled that out.”

She also credited the school district’s community partnerships for some successes, noting the efforts of local churches to provide breakfast programs, the commitment of area senior citizens to volunteer work and the involvement of parents in schools.

One of the central reasons Foxley noted for the district’s successes, though, was the attitude with which teachers and administrators approach education.

“What we sometimes hear is, ‘We’re in Alaska, we can’t deliver (education) because it’s so far away,’” she said. “What I hear here is, ‘This is it, now let’s find a solution.’

“People by and large are interested in finding solutions to

challenges rather than turning away, because to turn away is to turn away from children.

“What I heard here was that you’re not looking for a way out of educating children, you’re looking for ways to succeed.”

She said she believes the district is a model for how to approach the challenges of the law and hopes Alaska as a whole can be, as well.

“If anybody has the potential to make it all come together, it’s Alaska,” she said.

“You have an opportunity to show what can be done even when you can’t cross the road because of a flood or when there’s an avalanche. ... You can just say, ‘We’re not surprised; we’re Alaskans, we’re prepared.’”

Voznesenka

Location: End of East End Road, 30-plus miles outside Homer.

Population: About 300 (census numbers unavailable)

School size: 136 students, kindergarten through 12th grade

Language: Russian, English

Religion: Russian Orthodox

Heritage: Russian

Razdolna

Location: Nine miles off end of East End Road outside Homer.

Population: About 100 (census numbers unavailable)

School size: 36 students, kindergarten through 12th grade

Language: Russian, English

Religion: Russian Orthodox

Heritage: Russian

Kachemak Selo

Location: End of East End Road, 30-plus miles outside Homer

Population: About 180 (census numbers unavailable)

School size: 80 students, kindergarten through 12th grade

Language: Russian, English

Religion: Russian Orthodox

Heritage: Russian

Nikolaevsk

Location: Ten miles down North Fork Road outside Anchor Point

Population: About 350

School size: 89 students, kindergarten through 12th grade

Language: English, Russian

Religion: Russian Orthodox

Heritage: Russian