

Just as the school year was starting this fall I had the pleasure of attending and speaking to the Lower Kuskokwim School District's Early Childhood Conference, Tumanka. With my oldest son Conrad venturing into the First Grade this year, the opportunity to be in a room filled with early childhood educators and parents was especially touching for me. We are fortunate to have so many adults committed to making sure our children get off to the right start on their education.

Last week I had the opportunity to spend some time with seven high school students from LKSD who had traveled to Juneau for the Alaska Association of Student Governments. As we toured the State Capitol and talked about government, I watched and listened to the students. Without knowing anything about their individual academic record I have a strong sense that we were among emerging leaders of a new generation. Something is going right in our schools for a lot of young people.

This week, as the Youth and Elders and Alaska Federation of Natives Conventions focus on education, I think it is important that we keep successes like these in mind. Sometimes it seems we've become a nation that lives by polls and is driven by statistics, to the point that we lose sight of our goals and become discouraged by data. The danger is that instead of setting our sights on the future and how we assure our education system is challenging and meaningful for all students we can get sidetracked into discussions about the achievement gap, how we got there, and who is responsible. Not that statistical information isn't important, but we need to keep perspective on how to use it to understand where we stand and what we need to work on.

What I am hoping from "education week" at AFN is that we in the Native community talk about education as a lifelong process, what constitutes a quality education, what's working now, and what we should change. I'm constantly hearing about good ideas—sometimes from educators, often from parents, from people working all sorts of jobs.

Not long ago I listened to national leaders talk about jobs in America. In the next 25 years, they said, we will see more technological change than the past 100 years. Just think—in the past 100 years we saw the development of cars, airplanes and spaceships; our lives became filled with refrigerators, televisions, and video games; we communicate with telephones, faxes, and cell phones, and personal computers; satellites enable us to keep on top of news around the globe twenty-four hours a day.

In the next 25 years my youngest son Van will not have turned 30, and I simply can't imagine his young adult world. What skills will he need? What do families and schools need to do to guide and prepare our children for a different world?

While government has seemingly placed a high value on the three R's in recent years by instituting tests and sanctions, as a parent and policy maker I am more interested in whether our children are entering schools with a sense of who they are and where they came from; whether students are being guided in the development of a good work ethic and positive attitudes and a desire to contribute; and whether our curriculum and teaching challenges each student to reach higher. I want to know that our students are being encouraged to learn how to learn so that when they face a world we won't recognize in the future, they have the ability to adapt and continue to work for a good quality of life for their family and community.