



Alaska State Legislature

Sen. Johnny Ellis

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No Child Left Behind

Ellis calls for major changes

JUNEAU – Senate Minority Leader Johnny Ellis, D-Anchorage, today called on Congress to rewrite the federal No Child Left Behind Act to better fit Alaska conditions and to fully fund the act's mandates.

"Our school districts are facing immense challenges as it is. Now is not the time to make unrealistic federal demands and then expect states to pick up the tab," said Ellis. "The act is a grossly underfunded federal mandate."

Ellis introduced Senate Joint Resolution 30 to express Alaska's frustration with federal mandates that neither recognize individual state efforts to improve education nor provide the funding necessary for states to meet the demands of the law. The resolution stops short of calling for Alaska to opt out of the law, a step that would mean losing federal education money. According to Ellis, Alaska should work to make the law more flexible.

"Alaskans are confused. Our congressional delegation tells us that the federal government can be more accommodating under the act, but the Secretary of Education, Rod Paige, insists otherwise. The solution is to amend the law," declared Ellis.

One of the most troublesome provisions of the act for Alaska is the requirement that teachers in every subject be highly qualified. Under the federal definition, many excellent teachers would be prevented from teaching subjects they understand fully. For instance, an advanced degree in economics or physics would not qualify a teacher to teach basic mathematics under this law. This would be a serious problem in small schools where a single person typically teaches all sciences and math.

Schools are also required to demonstrate adequate yearly progress as defined by the act, not just for the majority of students, but for each subgroup defined in the act. Each year of failure to meet this goal brings increasingly harsh sanctions that would significantly drive up costs for school districts.

Alaska is not alone in speaking out about problems with the No Child Left Behind Act. States as diverse as Hawaii, Virginia and Utah have seen legislative efforts protesting the burdens placed on them by the act. Some states are even considering opting out of federal oversight altogether. While such a drastic step would mean losing federal education grants and perhaps other monies, these states calculate that the cost of complying with the act far outweighs the federal dollars they receive.

"We should encourage the Bush administration to do the right thing: put sufficient money in the budget and amend the No Child Left Behind Act so we can actually improve schools," said Ellis. "With strong presidential leadership and urging from the states, I'm sure Congress would go along."

SJR 30 has been referred to the State Affairs and Health, Education and Social Services Committees. Johnny Ellis is the Alaska Senate Minority Leader and represents Downtown and Midtown Anchorage in the legislature.

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