

## **Democrats work for solutions to education funding crisis**

by Sen. Bettye Davis, Sen. Gretchen Guess and Rep. Mary Kapsner

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Alaska's schools are facing what some districts say are the worst budget cuts ever. Hundreds of teachers will lose their jobs. Some schools may close the doors. Class sizes are growing. Inflation and higher overhead costs combined with a shrinking state budget are turning out to be a recipe for devastation in schools across the state. Major problems exist but here is the good news -- funding solutions also exist.

Clearly identifying the problems helps us craft responsible solutions. Problem one, the state's per-student funding formula has not and does not keep up with the cost of inflation. A recent legislative research study confirmed what schools have known all along: Classroom funding measured in inflation-adjusted dollars has fallen significantly. Problem two, districts are dealing with mandatory increases to fixed overhead, the most significant being the mandated employer contribution to teacher retirement. Problem three, districts are not given enough funding to comply with state and federal mandates, the most pressing of which is the No Child Left Behind act. These are three of many factors contributing to the funding crisis, so what is the solution? In response to this crisis and over 10 years of inadequate education funding, the Democrats (through Sen. Gretchen Guess' Senate Bill 11 and Reps. Les Gara and Mary Kapsner's House Bill 477) have introduced a three-phase process as a first step for education funding now and in the future. Phase one is an increase to the foundation formula this year of \$87 million to ensure districts do not have to cut services this year. Phase two is a two-percent annual increase in education funding for the next five years for the purposes of class size reduction and compliance with No Child Left Behind. The third phase is inflation-proofing education funding for the future, so we are not in this position again.

Overhead costs, inflation, and a lack of funding for state and federal mandates are hurting classrooms and ultimately short changing our students. This comprehensive funding plan put forth by Democrats is designed to solve the immediate crisis, prevent its reoccurrence in the future, and enable our schools to meet the mandates we request of them. We need more than a finger in the dam; we need a plan for the integrity of the system for years to come. A one-time appropriation for education will not solve this problem nor will continued inadequate funding.

Alaska's children are our primary resource to be developed; they are our future and deserve top-quality education, not closed schools and crowded classrooms. The Democrats continue to work in every way possible to make sure they get it, now and in the future.

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