

GOP School Funding Plan Fails Kids

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Opinion Piece By Representatives Harry Crawford, Les Gara, and Beth Kerttula

Public schools can help give all children, whether rich or poor, real opportunities in life. That's why the Legislature's annual education debate is so important. Small class sizes work. Overcrowded classes don't. The legislative debate, though couched in terms of money, is about what kind of hopes and dreams we're going to allow our next generation.

It would be a shame to look back at 2005 as the year Alaska, with record oil prices, cut school programs, cut the number of teachers in our classrooms, and decreased the educational opportunity we provide our children. That's what will happen unless the Legislature and Governor Murkowski change course.

It would be a shame to short-fund our schools when we're willing to provide Alaska's oil industry with over \$1 billion in unnecessary oil tax breaks. By foregoing our fair share for the oil Alaskans own in common, we're compromising our ability to give our children their fair share.

This year Alaska's oil companies are on pace to generate roughly \$5 billion in profits from North Slope oil. By next year outdated tax loopholes will almost completely exempt 1/4 of our North Slope oil from Alaska's Oil Production Tax. It's hard to ignore how much money we're giving away on that end when folks say we don't have the money to hire the teachers we need so we can provide children with a brighter future.

Alaska's school funding formula is discussed in terms of what we call a per-student funding amount. Right now there's a modest 4% difference between the competing education funding proposals in the Legislature. It's a small number that means the difference between increasing and decreasing educational achievement.

Democrats in the Legislature, along with the Anchorage, Juneau and other School Districts have called for a funding amount of \$5,120/student. According to school districts and educators, this proposal would let us reduce class sizes and improve schools in the districts that educate the majority of Alaska's children.

In contrast, House Republicans proposed an amount that's roughly 4% lower, at \$4,919/student. Governor Murkowski's proposed a similar amount. Those proposals, according to information from Alaska's school districts, will result in education reductions in most school districts, and in staff cuts and class size increases in Anchorage, much of rural Alaska and elsewhere.

It's easy to go too far in criticizing the latter proposals. School costs have increased greatly in the past 2 years. Alaska has under funded its teacher retirement systems, and it will cost roughly \$30 million/year just to meet these obligations. The Governor's and House Republican proposals add roughly \$62 - \$70 million in new school funds to address this retirement system shortfall and inflation since last year. It's hard to call that stingy.

So why do their proposals leave schools short?

In 2003 Governor Murkowski pushed significant educational cuts. The effects of those cuts, which we opposed, remain with us. Now schools are no longer reimbursed for all their pupil transportation costs, and state Community School funding has disappeared. Cutting school funding, when you need to add roughly \$30 million/year just to stay even with inflation, takes its toll. Last year's strong education budget was a step, but just a small one, in making up for funding that's lagged behind inflation for most of the past decade.

Long term under funding has caused the loss of roughly 70 teachers on the Kenai Peninsula, the loss of fine arts classes in the Southeast Island School District, and the loss of more than 25% of the Wrangell School District's staff. More than 30 children crowd classrooms in Juneau's middle and high schools. In rural communities soaring fuel prices have hits schools hard. Skyrocketing insurance rates have eaten away at school budgets.

We also need to address an even greater problem. According to a recent University of Alaska study, the state's funding formula has vastly under funded our rural school districts. That inequity cries for a solution.

Fixing these problems will cost money. But not fixing them will cost a generation of opportunity.