

## **Equity in Education Funding**

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Imagine an Alaska in which all students have a fair crack at a good education. In that Alaska, kids from all across the state would be able to read, write, and compute, and they would use those skills to get good jobs after graduation.

Unfortunately, this is not our Alaska. The distribution of education funds in Alaska is unfair, and as a result rural kids do not have access to a good education. The good news is that the Legislature has a chance now to correct this inequity.

It's common sense that the cost of delivering education is higher in rural Alaska than in Anchorage or Fairbanks or Juneau. Almost everything that can be bought costs significantly more in rural areas than in urban areas. According to the University of Alaska's Food Cost Survey, a weekly grocery bill that costs \$105 in Anchorage costs \$187 in Bethel. Fuel costs are extraordinarily high in rural Alaska, and the state's subsidy for rural energy through the Power Cost Equalization program doesn't apply to schools. This means a big percentage of schools' budgets go to pay for energy costs. In the Northwest Arctic Borough School District, for example, annual fuel costs total \$900 out of the \$4576 they receive per pupil – a fifth of the total amount they get from the state for each student enrolled.

A fair distribution of education funding would correct for these increased costs. Yet for years, study after study has shown that rural schools are not getting their fair share of education funding. The Institute of Social and Economic Research (ISER) at the University of Alaska just completed a study, the "Alaska School District Cost Study Update," which makes one thing crystal clear: there is a big gap between the amount of funding rural school districts are receiving and the amount they need. This report can't be put on a shelf, ignored, or changed: it raises facts that need to be a part of the equation.

What's more, Alaska faces a critical achievement gap between Native and non-Native students. A new report by the Alaska Native Policy Center shows that thousands of Alaska's children – most of whom are in rural districts that don't receive a fair amount of education funding – are not receiving a quality education. Half of low-income and Native children regularly fail benchmark exams. Native students are twice as likely to drop out of school as are non-Native students. Our education system is failing Native kids.

Studies show that rural schools are underfunded. Studies show that many rural kids are not getting a good education. As legislators, it's our job to ask: is money really the solution to this achievement gap? We're convinced that the answer is yes.

Money helps districts to take the necessary steps to correct the achievement gap. In one Alaska school district, 65% of students can't read at the level they should. District officials decided intensive reading intervention, while drastic and – yes – expensive, was

necessary. The intervention took a 2<sup>nd</sup> grader from the 2<sup>nd</sup> percentile in reading comprehension to the 50<sup>th</sup>. An 11<sup>th</sup> grader went from a 4<sup>th</sup> grade level to a high school level. It's clear that reading is important, and it's clear that intensive reading intervention works – but it takes money. This is just one example of how money makes a difference.

Alaska's rural kids deserve a fair crack at a quality education. In order to give them this chance, school funding must reflect the actual cost of delivering education in different places around our state. The Legislature is currently considering House Bill 173, a bill to adjust funding so that rural school districts can get their fair share of education funding; we hope that our colleagues will move quickly to pass this bill.