

Schools Harmed when State Cuts Funds, Ignores Inflation

By Representative Les Gara

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In recent months the Anchorage School District has made clear that if we continue to let classroom funding fall behind inflation, we will make it harder for Alaska's children to reach their fullest potential. We should always demand that our schools operate efficiently. But we should also recognize when funding cuts and losses to inflation jeopardize our ability to create opportunity for Alaska's next generation. School districts around the state advise us that the current state funding trend will likely force increased class sizes. Forcing fewer teachers to spend less time with individual students isn't good education policy.

According to the Department of Education and Early Development, last session state funding for our schools fell from \$738 million to \$729 million. On top of that, assuming a 2.5% inflation rate, school funding fell behind inflation costs by another \$17 million this year.

This coming session I hope legislators will work together to reverse a trend that has seen state Kindergarten – 12th Grade state funding for teachers, supplies and equipment fall too far behind inflation. So that community members may offer a strong voice on our education policy this session, I'll briefly discuss where we are, and where I think we should go.

Last legislative session House Democrats offered a plan, joined by some of our Republican colleagues, to inflation proof classroom funding. It would have added about 3.5% to the prior year's classroom funding budget to make up for losses to inflation dating back to 1998, the year we last substantially re-wrote the state's funding rules. That effort fell a few votes short. The plan is also contained in a bill I've filed, HB 220. With another year's passage of time by the 2004 session, classroom funding will have fallen more than 5% behind inflation costs dating back to 1998.

Last year's school budget contained parts I felt were responsible. Roughly \$30 million in classroom funds were transferred from classroom grants into our "Foundation Formula" program, which arguably distributes classroom money among school districts in a more responsible way than the separate grant programs did.

Unfortunately some have mentioned this transfer in a way that mistakenly suggests it provided a classroom funding increase. It didn't. That's because with the transfer, roughly \$30 million in classroom grant funding was eliminated, effectively negating the increase to the Foundation Formula portion of school funding.

Then there were the cuts. Governor Murkowski and those majority legislators who voted with him along party lines eliminated: 1) all state funding for community schools; 2) roughly \$2 million in funding given to school districts to help pay the increased costs of educating wards of the state; and, 3) roughly \$4 million in funding for early kindergarten. Additionally, under the current school funding law \$4 million in state funding was reduced because of requirements that school districts increase their local match payments. Finally, the law that formerly reimbursed school districts for their actual busing and transportation costs was re-written. It now grants schools roughly \$4 - \$5 million less than the expense they incur to bus their students.

While state classroom funding was cut last year (and federal funding has remained flat), this Legislature and Governor can be credited for implementing the public vote on the November, 2002 school construction bond package. The voter-approved bonds will help address a backlog of school construction needs around the state. Though it would be wrong for us to take too much credit for this package, as Alaska voters passed it, and it was placed on the ballot by the 2002 Legislature and then-Governor Knowles, these bonds made for a strong construction budget.

Regardless of your views on education, all of us in the Legislature need to hear from the public, through letters, e-mails and calls. Also, this will be the first year seniors must pass the High School Qualifying Exam to graduate. Public input on the exam, and its ramifications, would be valuable to your legislators.

We can teach mediocrity or we can teach excellence. Since statehood we've strived to provide children with strong schools that create opportunity for all, regardless of race, income, advantage or disadvantage. It's a tradition worth continuing.