

off the record

a weekly legislative
update from
Senator Kim Elton

Room 504, State Capitol, Juneau, AK 99801 ♦ 465-4947 ♦ 465-2108 FAX ♦ Feb. 26, 1999

on the move

bills seeing action this week

SB 27, Parents' access to school records and driver license records

(Leman, R-Anchorage) Gives parents access to their child's driving records from DMV, and allows parents to view their child's school records. Passed Senate HESS, on to Senate Finance.

HB 64, Supplemental Appropriations for Y2K

The House waved through \$14.6 million in supplemental appropriations, mostly from the Constitutional Budget Reserve, for the Y2K computer glitch Monday. The bill was sent to Senate Finance where senators chipped away several pieces, including about \$1 million for UA's Y2K fix. Expected on the Senate floor sometime next week.

SJR 2, Rights of Prisoners

(Donley, R-Anchorage) Constitutional amendment which limits the rights of prisoners in Alaska to those provided under the U.S. Constitution. A similar bill passed out of the legislature last session but was removed from the ballot; a Supreme Court decision said it was too sweeping in scope. Legislators are still waiting for a written opinion from the court to specifically address problem areas. Passed out of Senate Finance, expected on Senate floor soon.

SB 83, Supplemental Appropriation for Disaster Aid

Governor Knowles' request for \$12.6 million in general funds to supplement \$2.4 million in federal disaster funds. The monies will be disbursed to those impacted by Southeast Alaska's October '98 rainstorms, the Endicott Mountain floods, and the fisheries disaster in Western Alaska. Southeast gets \$2.73 million of the total, available in small grants to qualified applicants. Still in Senate Finance.

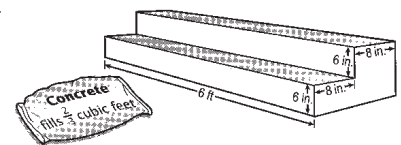
Exit exams: will we pass?

EDUCATORS AND SCHOOL OFFICIALS are getting nervous as the date approaches for the first trial of Alaska's new exit exam for high school seniors. Sometime in the next few weeks, students in Juneau and other communities will take a practice exam designed to test the questions. The new exit exam is the result of legislation passed last year which makes a high school diploma contingent on passing competency tests in four academic areas.

The edginess of Alaska educators is understandable in light of the disastrous results other states are reporting as they prepare to implement their own exit exams. Twenty-nine states have linked high school diplomas to exit exam results in an effort to raise performance standards in public schools, but they're finding the going rough. The most disturbing results come from Virginia where students took a trial round of competency tests last spring. Under a new Virginia law, both students and teachers are under the gun to perform: students must pass the tests in order to earn a diploma; and at least 70% of a school's students must pass the exams in order for a school to retain its accreditation.

Unfortunately, it's turning out to be harder than anyone thought. Ninety-seven percent of Virginia's schools failed the trial test last spring, which means that over 30% of students in most Virginia schools failed the exams and would have been denied a diploma. Such disastrous results can't be attributed to poverty or underfunded inner-city schools. In wealthy Fairfax

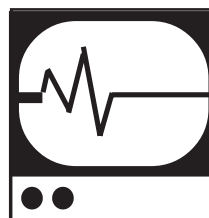
(cont'd on p. 2)



2 How many bags of concrete mix will be needed to build this set of stairs?

- ✓ A 9 bags
- B 6 bags
- C 4 bags
- D 13 bags

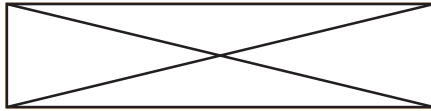
A sample question from the Dept. of Education's 1999 pilot exam.



**capital
move
pulse:**

no new action this week.

Capitol Undercurrents



First out of the box

Cost cutters are expressing cautious optimism that a new net zero contract with the state's public safety employees may set the stage for other net zero contracts with 11 other public employee unions this year. While the PSEA contract is net zero, it does provide for possible re-openers in the second and third year.

Clean your plate and the table

Gov. Knowles' chief of staff signaled that the executive branch is eyeing rural school district consolidation at a breakfast meeting with school board folks from around the state Wednesday. The way we know it was a signal is that the chief of staff took his speech to the podium but left on the table a note from the governor's special assistant on education issues. The gist of the note was to soft-pedal the consolidation issue and float it more as a trial balloon. Rural school districts told legislators last week that consolidation initiated at the local level is 'good' but consolidation mandated by the state is 'bad'.

Brains vs. brawn

Speaking to legislators Thursday, two of the academic titans of Alaska economics noted that job growth involving 'manipulation of ideas' (read telecommunications, health, finance) is surpassing job growth in the 'brawn' category (read resource extraction sector). Scott Goldsmith and David Reaume note the 'infrastructure' needed for the idea jobs is not highways and ports but vital university and educational systems and lifestyle amenities that make Alaska communities attractive to the players in the emerging idea industries.

Time out of mind

Rep. Vic Kohring has introduced legislation that sheds Alaska of the daylight savings time mantle. I have a tough enough time dealing with a 3 a.m. sunrise—it's hard to imagine sunup at 2.

What's happening?

It's like the legislature is convening in the den of a hibernating bear—we're afraid to speak too loud or move around too much for fear of waking a ravenous animal. The sleeping bear is, of course, the prospect of raising taxes and/or fooling with PFDs to deal with the budget gap.

Our own metabolism rate isn't much higher than that of a hibernating bear. In just over a month, only 109 bills have been introduced in the House—barely two-thirds of those usually introduced by this point in the session.

Quote of the week

From Daniel Boorstein: "The great obstacle to discovering the shape of the earth, the continents, and the ocean was not ignorance, but the illusion of knowledge."

(exit exams, cont'd from p. 1)

County, Virginia, schools performed almost as poorly. Despite the fact that Fairfax students score well above average on the SAT and other national achievement tests, 94% of the county's 208 schools failed.

Alaska's education officials are understandably nervous about the test they are designing. It's difficult to create questions which aren't biased toward the dominant culture and language. Given the differences in geography, culture and size between Alaska communities, the difficulty of creating a test fair to all is even greater.

Teachers worry that they'll be blamed for students who fail, and administrators worry about a parental backlash if a significant number of students don't qualify for a diploma. Parents undoubtedly will be upset if Alaska's failure rate is 30% or above. In a legislative budget hearing last week, as DOE officials described the progress Alaska is making on the test, one parent in the audience asked in a loud whisper when the new requirements kick in—nervous that his own teen might not pass the test.

Alaska's challenge is to create an exam which truly tests the skills and knowledge we want our graduating students to possess without throwing our entire educational system into shock. That's why the trial testing makes everyone so nervous. Other states are finding they need to invest in tutors and additional teachers to increase student performance and help students pass. If Alaska's results are as disappointing as some other states', that may be one of the most salutary effects of the Alaska experience with exit exams—an avalanche of angry parents demanding more investment in Alaska's schools. Such an avalanche could finally force the legislature to stem the erosion of state dollars to local schools.

Contact Us

Office:
907.465.4947
907.465.2108 FAX
Rm. 504
State Capitol
Juneau, AK 99801

Senator Kim Elton
Senator_Kim_Elton@legis.state.ak.us

Staff:
Dianne Lindback
Dianne_Lindback@legis.state.ak.us

Angie Schmitz
Angie_Schmitz@legis.state.ak.us

Irena Ristic (Intern)
Irena_Ristic@legis.state.ak.us