

off the record

a weekly legislative
update from
Senator Kim Elton

Room 504, State Capitol, Juneau, AK 99801 ♦ 465-4947 ♦ 465-2108 FAX ♦ March 12, 1999

on the move

bills seeing action this week

SB 9, Retirement Benefits

(Wilken, R-Fairbanks) Allows support staff of Alaskan public schools to opt for the same retirement benefits as their certified counterparts. Passed out of Labor and Commerce, now on to HESS and then Finance. There is no opposition so far.

SB 46, Naming the Capital School Building

(Ward, R-Anchorage) Names the Capitol School Building the "Terry Miller Building" after the former Lt. Governor. Was read the first time and referred to the State Affairs Committee.

SB 24, Repeal of Regulations

(Donley, R-Anchorage) Proposes a constitutional amendment to allow the legislature to repeal regulations by legislative resolution. Held and heard in the Senate Finance committee, but did not move.

HB 5, Educational Vouchers

(Kohring, R-Wasilla) Could give lower-income parents about \$4000 in vouchers for the educational cost of each child; parents could use vouchers for homeschooling or private school tuition. It's on permanent hold, but HJR 6-- requesting a constitutional amendment to allow public education funds to go to individuals and private schools--is in HESS.



**capital
move pulse:**

no new action this week.

It came from Galena...

Rural cyberschools give Juneau School District a run for their money

Nearly 300 local students have voted with their feet and are taking elementary and high school classes from an Alaska public school district other than the Juneau School District. The majority are enrolled in the state's correspondence program but about a third (105 students) now are taking distance delivery courses from the Galena School District.

Tiny Galena is becoming the mouse that roared in state education circles. This town of 544 has more than 3,000 Alaska correspondence students. Now Galena (strategically located on the Yukon River between Koyukuk and Ruby) has apparently signed a five-year lease to open an office in Juneau at the old Tides Motel in the Lemon Creek area. They've hired a fellow from the state's correspondence school to serve parents of Juneau children enrolled in the Galena School District's distance delivery system.

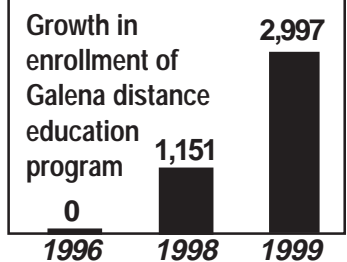
Other bush Alaska school districts also are jumping on the distance delivery bandwagon and serving students that live far outside their boundaries. Nenana City Schools has enrolled 14 Juneau students, 47 Fairbanks students, 39 Anchorage students, and 22 Kenai students. The Chugach, Copper River, and Delta/Greely school districts also serve students who live far outside their rural district boundaries.

The Department of Education has been monitoring the situation, reluctant to discourage a new kind of education choice. But they're getting ready to burp this infant industry of distance-delivered education--concerns run the gamut from basic constitutional issues to quality control:

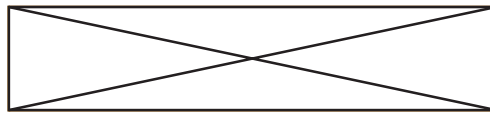
Is it constitutional? The Delta/Greely District which operates a "cyber" school is providing computer labs in some private schools so students can take public school courses. Since Delta/Greely gets state aid, does this violate the constitutional prohibition on state aid to private schools?

Is it a profit center? Attendance at correspondence and cyber schools has exploded in the last three years. No one knows yet whether the teacher-student ratio is appropriate or whether these operations are "cash cows" the districts use to fund their budgets.

(cont'd on p. 2)



Capitol Undercurrents



Pass the Buck

Rumors emanating from majority caucuses indicate municipal assistance/revenue sharing programs (now called 'Safe Communities') are on the cutting block. Last year, Juneau received \$1,179,200 through the program. If the rumors come true, next year Juneau could receive zip, putting more pressure on local property taxes.

An Old Fish Monger

It's sometimes tough to put our past behind us. That's why I was especially pleased to see that the Alaska Seafood Marketing Institute (my last posting before running for the legislature in 1994 was as executive director of ASMI) successfully worked with Denny's Restaurants and persuaded the huge chain to feature Alaska chum salmon with a special sauce as part of their Dinner Skillet meals in all 1,500 restaurants.

We Don't Need No Edication

Sen. Gary Wilken (R-Fairbanks) is dumping a thousand sheets of his stationery after noticing 'university' was misspelled in a tag line on his letterhead where he notes his senate district is the home of the University of Alaska.

Risky Business

Long-time Fairbanks journalist Fred Pratt (I worked with him in the mid-70s when I was an oil and gas reporter and city editor for the Fairbanks Daily News-Miner) noted in his weekly column that, at the same time Alaska oil companies are telling Alaska politicians how important it is we lower their taxes to stabilize our investment climate, they are showing a remarkable tolerance for risk elsewhere. He notes that earlier this month ARCO appealed to the U.S. government to drop the business embargo that prohibits them from doing oil deals in Iran. BP, he noted, is invested heavily in Russia where the stock market index dropped 85 percent last year and the Commonwealth of Independent States, Russia's coordinating body, hasn't met since October.

Twiddling Thumbs

A couple of weeks ago we reported that the number of House bills introduced during the first session of this legislature lagged far behind other initial sessions.

The senate secretary confirms the same trend in the senior body. In the first 40 days only 91 senate bills had been filed, about 20 fewer than the recent average. Perhaps more telling, only six bills have made it to the senate floor in the first 51 days, not exactly an exhausting pace. While the senate meets each weekday, average session length is about 30 minutes—enough time to pray, pledge allegiance, read across messages, pass citations, make announcements and accommodate the occasional speechifying under special orders.

(Galena, cont'd from p. 1)

Is it effective? Data is not yet available to show whether correspondence and cyber schools yield the same level of student achievement as regular schools. Are these real schools or diploma mills?

The concerns for Juneau are equally weighty. For every Juneau student who enrolls full-time in another Alaska school district instead of in Juneau, Juneau loses about \$4,000. We need to know: why are Juneau families shopping for education in other Alaska public school districts? Why aren't Juneau families using our own district's correspondence program? What can Juneau do to keep these students and the education dollars that follow them in Juneau? As parents begin to choose alternative school districts, what can we do to be more competitive?

One way or another...

or how to fund deferred maintenance

Capitol observers raised their eyebrows when they read HB 122, introduced by Rep. Jeannette James this month, which prohibits the state from owning office buildings and requires the sale of any building primarily used for office space. Observers stopped in their tracks when the bill zipped through State Affairs barely a week after it was first introduced, headed for its last stop in House Finance.

In Juneau, HB 122 would force the sale of seven buildings, including the State Office Building downtown. Requiring the state to rent space, rather than occupy buildings it owns, will substantially increase the cost of government.

Apparently, HB 122 is "option B" in James' plan to get the state to take care of deferred maintenance of state facilities. "Option A" is HB 112, creating a special fund into which "rents" for state office space would be paid by state agencies. The rents would then provide a pot of money for the operation and maintenance of state buildings. "Option A" also increases state costs, but is a reasonable way to handle facility state maintenance. One way or another, James appears determined to stop the shameful deterioration of state facilities.

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