

Everyone Accountable for Improving Public Education

by Senator Georgianna Lincoln

Alaskans have high expectations of their public schools, teachers and students. As a result, some politicians have discovered that calls for “higher standards” and “increased accountability” play well in the news. Unfortunately, politicians’ enthusiasm for *high* standards does not always motivate them to provide a *high* level of investment in our schools.

High standards mean we are all involved in improving our state public education system. High standards mean we *all*, including politicians, are held accountable for ensuring our students reach their intellectual, social and personal potential.

We ask our schools to teach critical thinking skills as well as practical vocational skills; Our teachers must guide our children through a maze of new tests; provide citizenship education; foster an appreciation for music and the arts; train safe drivers and fight the dangers of drugs and alcohol; teach tolerance; deliver counseling and nursing services; supply meals; maintain competitive sports teams and educate our children about the importance of sportsmanship. Most importantly, we’ve asked our schools to close the achievement gap.

In short, we are asking our schools to perform better under greater pressure, while providing more services for more children of increasingly diverse backgrounds. We’re asking them to do so without adequate state resources and without an essential number of teachers.

Reaching high standards means investing in our schools and addressing the teacher shortage. High standards mean fulfilling a *constitutional* obligation to maintain, and I would argue, strengthen, our state’s public schools.

In its Year Two Report to the Governor, released October 2001, the Education Funding Task Force found that “Adequate state funding has not been provided so that schools are able to maintain an appropriate level of education services.”

According to the Department of Education, from 1990-2000, inflation increased 30%, but the public school funding program was only increased 5% during this period of time.

To compound the problem, our teacher salaries are no longer competitive. Alaska now struggles with a disturbing teacher shortage throughout the state, and bush and rural communities often have greater difficulty attracting and retaining teachers. This is troubling, as teachers, along with parents, are the most important factor in achievement.

For the 1999-2000 school year - 1,065 new teachers were hired in Alaska. On the first day of school 88 new teaching positions were still unfilled, and some remained unfilled for up to two months. Out of the 1,065 hires, only 176 were University of Alaska graduates. The story was similar this year. In Anchorage alone, on the first day of school

50 teaching positions were vacant. According to The Alaska Teacher Placement Service, on any given week throughout the school year there are 35-50 vacancies.

We not only have a constitutional obligation, but also a moral obligation, to fulfill our promise of a high-quality education to our children. Setting high standards is good, but simply mandating more tests, ranking our schools and requiring greater accountability will not ensure our children receive a high-quality education, nor will it close the achievement gap.

And, one of the most important promises of higher standards is that they *will* help close the achievement gap.

Researchers are finding that a complex combination of school, community and home factors contribute to the achievement gap: from poverty, to attending schools with fewer resources and fewer teachers, to less experienced or qualified teachers.

This underscores the importance of a comprehensive and sustained solution. A solution that includes:

- Sustainable and equitable funding for Alaska's public schools.
- Continuous and equitable funding for public school facilities.
- Adequate funding for Head-Start programs across the state.
- Creative incentives to attract and retain quality teachers.
- Support for University of Alaska teaching degree programs.
- Support for University of Alaska programs seeking to train greater numbers of Alaska Natives for classroom careers (23% of our student population is Alaska Native, and only 5% of our teachers are).

Again and again Alaskans have demonstrated their desire to hold our public schools to high standards. Setting the standards is only half the battle. Implementation requires a close look at the resources necessary to produce authentic achievement. As we struggle to resolve our state's fiscal future, we must not balance the budget on the backs of our children. I urge all Alaskans to hold their elected leaders accountable to the constitutional and moral charge of supporting our public schools and our children whose future depends on them.