

Legislators Responded to Education Needs

By Senator John Cowdery

As teachers and students prepare for the start of a new school year they will have many more resources to learn and grow with because Alaska's 60 lawmakers made education funding a top priority this year.

A renewed focus on education funding the past two years has brought together legislators, teachers, parents, students, administrators and the Murkowski administration. We didn't always agree on how to get the job done, but we worked towards achieving the same goal, raising Alaska's public school system to the next level.

School districts, especially in rural areas, needed help. Imagine a child trying to study in a classroom with a crumbling roof and a scanty heating system when it's 40 degrees below zero outside. I think you get the picture.

This year the legislature tackled the problem head on. The fiscal year '06 capital budget, we funded 48 of the 71 schools on the state Department of Education and Early Development's deferred maintenance list. Almost all of the 48 schools are located in rural areas that waited years to get state funding.

The Legislature also renewed the 70/30-school bond debt reimbursement program. That program makes municipalities eligible to receive 70 percent state reimbursement on voter approved school bonds. Without it, taxpayers in urban regions would shoulder the enormous cost of school construction and maintenance with property and sales taxes.

I've heard complaints' saying this year's capital budget was another example of pork barrel government spending. The truth is the capital budget was on par with previous budgets.

The difference this time was that due to a reduction in federal funding, lawmakers were forced to use a greater percentage of state general fund revenues to make up for the loss of federal dollars. If we didn't, we would have to slash school construction spending when there was plenty of cash on hand to pay for it.

Using the temporary oil price windfall for school construction was a wise decision because every child, regardless of where they live or their parents' income level, deserves to have a safe, clean school facility.

Building schools is only half the job. School districts are struggling with inflation, soaring fuel costs, higher employee salaries and the constantly growing liability to the public employee and teacher retirement systems.

Every community in the state asked us to help and we listened. Last year we increased education funding by 82 million dollars, or \$4,576 per student. This year we increased it another 70 million

dollars to \$4,919 per student. Overall, K-12 education funding increased 23 percent over the last three budget cycles.

That's an unprecedented increase in school funding, and I believe it demonstrates the commitment lawmakers have to the school system.

School districts have understandably worried each spring how amount money the Legislature will hand out each year. This session, the lawmakers created the K-12 Education Account to start forward-funding education. That's a tremendous commitment to Alaska's education system.

Money isn't the answer to every problem in our schools. The exit exam law passed by the Legislature several years ago requires high school seniors to pass a basic skills test before receiving a regular high school diploma. The exit exam brings accountability to the schools and assures post-secondary educational institutions and employers that Alaska's high school graduates are adequately prepared.

Just because the session is over doesn't mean lawmakers have stopped doing their homework on education. This interim, a bipartisan committee is reviewing the state's school district cost factor formula, the formula that allocates additional funding to rural schools not connected to the road system. The committee will make recommendations to the entire Legislature and the administration next January.

Education funding should never be a partisan issue. I urge Alaskans to look past the hype and look at what's been accomplished in two short years. If they do, I believe they will agree with me that our education system is moving in the right direction.

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