

HB 339 Support

To the House Finance Committee-

I am an Alaskan. I attended schools in the Anchorage School District and graduated in the top 10% of my class from Service High School in 2002. While in college I began my love for and interest in education by volunteering and acquiring jobs in schools. I have been employed as a tutor, a mentor, an ELL teaching assistant, a coach, and a Mathematics and Spanish teacher. I have a degree in Mathematics and Spanish and a master's in teaching (which I earned at UAA). I have been a certified mathematics teacher in the Anchorage School District for 10 years and have worked at Dimond High School for all those years. As a stakeholder in our educational system I can tell you that we need to stop flat funding and we need to begin forward funding education. Our communities rely on education, even more in recent years, as a central support for their children's lives and futures. When students have high-quality education and genuine connections to their schools and communities we will see improvements in other sectors of our communities, including crime and general buy-in from students to stay and be employed in our state and become innovators in our state's future.

Class size. Why does it matter? There is plenty of research that has been conducted to look at the correlation between class size and student achievement. Much like any study related to education the burden of trying to isolate one factor to see its impact on student success is very difficult. Most research suggests that there is a connection between class size and student success, but properly structured classes and programs, and well-trained teachers is also important. We should always take these studies with a grain of salt and seek out experts in our immediate schools and communities to see what is contributing to OUR students' success. I have had a class as small as 12 students and a class as large as 34 students. I can tell you with one hundred percent certainty that even with all the other factors contributing to my students' education that the class I had of 12 students versus the class I had of 34 received a much better education from me. Not from any deficiency on my part or that the students in the class of 34 had more individual issues than the class of 12, but only from the sheer fact that I am one person.

The Anchorage School District adopted the concept of Social Emotional Learning or SEL several years ago and has since then implemented many programs in schools and integrated concepts into trainings for educators. One of the key concepts of SEL is for teachers to connect with their students on an individual level to get them engaged in learning. I whole heartedly believe that students are more engaged when they feel connected not only to their teachers and classes, but also to their entire school and communities. When you speak with people about their experiences with education, typically they remember the teachers and classes that they connected with the most or on the other end of the spectrum the teachers and classes that they felt most disconnected or isolated from. It is impossible for me to connect with 34 students as well as I can connect with 12. It is also impossible to give individual attention and intervention to 34 students as well as I can with 12. I have been working as hard as I can for the last ten years to educate all my students no matter how many there are in my classroom. I am not asking for a classroom of 12 students but being told that I might have 40 in even one of my classes is beyond comprehension. Asking anyone to do the job of a public-school teacher with little to no support from our state and community is disheartening.

Please understand that education is not where you should be making cuts. We need to attract high quality educators to our state and encourage students to want to stay in Alaska and become high quality educators. I moved back to Alaska after I graduated from college because I felt I could connect better with our population of students more than someone who was not from our state. I also felt like I had received a high-quality education when I was in school from high quality teachers and wanted to raise my future family here. I was fortunate because the teachers I had growing up were fighting to get jobs in the Anchorage School District and you truly had to be a high-quality teacher to get a position. The district offered better comparable pay and a much better retirement and benefits package. I am a Tier 3 teacher, and therefore I am part of the defined contribution generation of teachers in our state. I tell people "I have to work until I die" because I do not collect social security (Alaska is the only state where teachers do not) and I have no guarantee of any benefit or insurance when I decide to stop teaching. We are not offering pay and benefits that would attract high quality teachers to our state. In fact, with flat funding and the cuts from the last few years we are seeing more and more teachers retiring and leaving. We can't fill hard to fill positions like special education and are instead filling these positions with first year teachers who are not qualified in special education and asking them to learn on the job. I remember being a first-year teacher and can't imagine being required to learn the multitude of legal and specialized processes that are required for a special education position. These teachers then burn out from lack of support and exhaustion and then either quit teaching all together or move to another state with better support, pay, and benefits.

Students and schools need consistency. When districts are forced to displace teachers due to lack of funding people think "oh that's not bad because that person still has a job." The problem with this thought is that this process is still destructive to not only the teacher's life, but also to the schools and the students in them. If teachers are switching schools they leave behind the knowledge and connections they have made at their previous schools with administrators, staff, and students. Even though students may not have the same teacher again, it is important for students to have that consistent adult in their school and life. Familiarity is very comforting and can lead to much better connections. Also, teachers do not just teach, they coach, they sponsor clubs and activities, they attend sporting events, plays, and concerts. They are active members of their school communities and take pride in their school. When they are told to leave, they must basically forget that pride and begin the process all over again somewhere else. Except this time, they may not be as likely to invest in those activities because they will be afraid that they will lose those connections all over again. Therefore, forward funding is so critical so that we don't need to do this constant moving around of teachers and staff when districts are denied the funding they need.

Schools need more counselors. Teachers are not the only ones effected by these cuts and flat funding. Counselors are also being displaced and cut. They are being asked just like teachers to take on more and do more with less. Putting additional students on a counselor's caseload and adding to their job duties is preventing them from connecting with individual students and making sure that they are having success in schools. I rely on counselors almost daily to help check in with students and parents, to help arrange and attend parent/student meetings, and to make sure students are on track to graduate. We also discuss scheduling and testing, and possible accommodations and modifications that might help a student's learning. They are a huge support for educators and students and we need to help strengthen their presence in our schools.

Overall, flat funding and not forward funding education in our state is diminishing the educational outcomes that our students are capable of and deserve to have. I would love it if more of our political leaders would ask OUR state's experts, the actual educators in our schools what we need to provide high quality education to students. I'm hoping that you will read this and contact and seek out this information from those educators in your communities much like Representative Jason Grenn has done in my district. He organized and attended a meeting with educational stakeholders in his community so that he can know and understand what is needed. The he can make the best legislative decisions for his district. I truly hope that other representatives will do the same before making decisions about things that they are not experts on. I appreciate the time our representatives and senators commit to our communities and our state and hope that they are making decisions based on what is best for our students and communities. I am more than happy to speak with or even have representatives visit me in my school if they would like to discuss further why flat funding is a poor choice for our schools and why forward funding education is so important. I fully support HB 339, HB 83, and HB 287 and hope that you will too.

Thank you-

Julia Wigren

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Dear Members of the House Finance Committee,

I am writing to urge you to increase the Student Base Allocation for our students. I am writing to advocate for my own children and the students that I teach. I am their voice. They do not see the sacrifices that their teachers make for them everyday to make sure that they are receiving an outstanding education, despite cuts to our local budget and the flat funding that we have received from the State of Alaska over the last four years. Our district will and is already seeing a significant reduction in staff, both certified and classified because of it. This will be the reason why a student learns to read at their development level or not, and is left behind. Our class sizes are going to increase significantly. The overall climate of our profession will suffer because the message that the state is sending to this very important workforce is, 'you do not matter,' 'Alaska's children do not matter.' This makes me very sad. I chose to make my home in Alaska and raise my children here. My children matter and so do the children in my classroom. Do the right thing and fund HB 339.

Sincerely,

Kathy Simpler

Kodiak

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Dear House Finance Committee,

Thank you for your diligence in creating a sustainable budget for Alaska. I am writing to ask that you consider new forms of revenue, especially an income tax, so that all Alaskans are paying their fair share. Alaska cannot afford another downgrading from Standards and Poors. We need a sustainable future and that begins in our public schools.

I am asking that you support forward public education funding. I am also asking that you consider restoring funding to public education that truly supports meeting the Alaska Education Challenge.

Students have been suffering with over six years of under funded education. Schools are falling apart, staffing is cut to deplorable levels, and basic infrastructure needs are not being met. We are watching a mass exodus of teachers leaving Alaska because we cannot sustain a positive working environment, retirement, or health care benefits that compete with the cost of living and work environment in other states. I haven't even begun to talk about class sizes and course offerings. Our full time art teacher has been cut and also the art teacher in our neighboring high school too. I think you've likely read and heard enough testimony about class sizes and course offerings already.

Let me tell you my story. I have been a teacher for 15 years. I was told last week that my program is being cut. I am displaced from my teaching position and have to interview for a new job because of budget cuts. What is my position? I'm responsible for maintaining all technology equipment and infrastructure in a school of 100 staff and 1500 students while providing professional development to staff, and teaching classes on innovative tech tools that impact learning. Yes, that is indeed two person's jobs. In the past, this position was filled by a full time IT support and a full time certified edtech teacher. Now that I am doing both jobs, the cuts are so bad that they are cutting the whole position entirely, looking to replace the position with an non-certified hourly-pay worker.

My position is not the first to face cuts. Last year one of our professional certified counselors was replaced by a non-certified staff funded by a grant. In addition we lost our only career resource counselor and have a non-certified community volunteer who temporarily runs our career center (where high school students to apply for college and scholarships). Currently one of our counselors is retiring but being replaced by non-certified non-professional "academic scheduler" because admin can pay them less. Students cannot visit this type of staff member for real counseling, just schedule changes.

In addition it has become nearly impossible to recruit nurses to work in the schools now with lower pay and benefits. Full time certificated Registered Nurse positions are being filled by Nurse's Aides.

Pretty soon we won't have real certified professionals working in schools anymore. The Nurses are cutting down to non-certified staff, the counselors too, and now the Education Technology gurus like myself.

We cut corners, we make things work, we are resourceful. But please consider what flat funding is doing to the institution of education in Alaska.

At this rate, are we sustaining the deconstruction of public schools?

I want to thank those who are standing up for education in Alaska. You know that great schools are what attract new citizens to a community. Great schools are what hold a community together. Great schools are what grow and develop the working professionals of tomorrow. Please don't short-change the future of Alaska. Stop kicking the can down the road. We need you to do the right thing: support forward funding and restore dignity to public education.

Sincerely,

Marnie Hartill

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Anchorage AK 99507

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As a retired Alaska educator, I've been following the current bills. With the national movement to be more fiscally responsive to educational needs, Alaska should be proactive, not reactive.

Cynthia Murati

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Dear Honorable House Finance Committee members,

As you know prices constantly increase. Year after year of flat funding has taken its toll on our schools.

Our children are facing increasing class sizes and loss of programs. Please do what you can to increase funding for our schools.

Thank you,

Bill Vedders  
504 Ash Ave  
Kenai, AK 99611  
283-3472

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Flat funding again? Really? Why do you not believe that Alaskan students are important? Every year we educators are expected to do more with less. Cuts to teachers and support positions, larger class sizes, more classes to teach, more subjects to teach which means more planning, less pay, less retirement. How do you think we are going to be able to keep current teachers and get young teachers to teach future students? I am glad that I am the end of my teaching career and that my own kids are finished with school in Alaska. They were able to be educated when education was funded and they all have good careers and are happily married. I may have some grandkids someday going through our Alaskan school system so I am worried about the future. Be brave, figure it out, make us pay taxes, use the Permanent Fund, (That's why it's there.....it's a rainy day!), do something. Maybe we will vote for you again, if you do your job.

Laura Karchere  
SPED teacher  
Central Middle School

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Why do we have to work so hard to do the right thing by funding education early and increasing the BSA up to match inflation from 4 years of flat funding? Our children deserves the best education possible just like we had. I am frustrated with this notion that education is not the most important funding our government can be doing. Please do the right thing to continue what our forefathers understood to preserve our democracy by providing quality education free to our greatest asset.

Sincerely,

John Sanborn  
347 Porcupine Ct. Unit 13  
Soldotna, AK 99669

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As a parent and an educator, I strongly support HB329. I urge you to support us as well. Funding education is one of the most important things we can do for our future.

Thank you,  
Melissa Roovers