

Senate Finance Committee Testimony

4/9/14

Lon Garrison, President – Sitka School Board

My name is Lon Garrison and I am currently serving as the President of the Sitka School Board. I am writing to you today regarding CSHB278, education funding and the various amendments that are attached to the bill.

This bill does improve education funding by adding funds to the Base Student Allocation for a period of three years but unfortunately for Sitka it does not make up for our entire budget deficit. For the Sitka School District, we have calculated that we would need a BSA increase of nearly \$500 for FY2015 just to meet all of our current expenditures without having to use any of our reserves or reduction in staff and/or programs. The current proposal in this bill would provide for a \$185 BSA increase plus an additional \$120 per student increase outside the BSA for a total per student increase of ~\$305. This would leave the Sitka School District \$195 short of the \$500 mark. As a result, our district will be forced to either use reserves or reduce programs to balance our budget. Of major concern to us, is our future need for nearly \$2 million to address curriculum, instructional materials and professional development to align to the new Alaska State Standards. We will need most if not all of our reserves to accomplish this if we receive no additional fiscal help from the state for this unfunded mandate.

There are several other sections within the bill that are of concern to the Sitka School District. I will list and address each of those:

Section 9 – Appeal process for Charter School authorization – We are not in favor of this amendment and would advocate that sole authorization authority remains with the local district. We believe this to be a local control issue. We do support charter schools, although we currently have none in Sitka, but do embrace the idea of both full support and accountability by local school boards for charter schools. The Board of Education is not a true governing board and it is our concern that neither the Board nor the Department of Education is prepared to act in such a capacity.

Section 23 & 24 – Teacher Tenure – The Sitka School board favors the notion to increase the time for teachers to obtain tenure but acknowledges that this can be a detractor for many rural districts that struggle to retain teachers.

Section 8 – ASPI Rating system – The Sitka School district opposes the replacement of the “star” system with letter grades A through F. We feel this is a regressive and punitive rating system that does not promote the notion for positive improvement. The Sitka School District uses standards based grading that provides parents and the public with more information about the proficiencies of our students. We believe that ASPI should use the same approach. It is our belief that many small rural schools and alternative schools will be inappropriately harmed and labelled by the use of letter grades.

Section 15 – Common Core Standards implementation expense – The Sitka school board stands in opposition to this amendment and believes this to be entirely a politically motivated issue that in fact has no basis. Many districts across the state have looked at both the new Alaska State Standards and the Common Core Standards and found them to be very closely aligned. After significant work by staff and the board, we have adopted the Common Core Standards for math and language arts primarily due to the fact that so much more in the way of instructional materials and professional development and other support resources are available for their implementation. Significant work and expense has already taken place for us to prepare to meet the anticipated full implementation of new standards by 2015 as prescribed by DEED and the conditions set forth in the NCLB waiver that Alaska received. This is a prime example of state and political overreach for issue concerning local control and local preference. We support the new standards and welcome the opportunity to both raise the bar and improve curriculum and instruction so that our students have the opportunity to be globally competitive.

Section 47 – Statewide Salary Schedule – The Sitka School Board opposes the idea of a state-wide salary schedule as a further infringement on local control. We are not convinced that the Department of administration would be any more successful in contract negotiations that would result in any cost savings to either the local districts or the state. In fact, we believe this will grievously affect the good working relationship many of us currently enjoy with our local certified and classified staff and it precludes the option for local boards to negotiated contracts that best fit local needs. Furthermore, the additional direct cost to the state to administer and negotiate such contracts carries with it the potential for state-wide work stoppages that might affect all schools when it otherwise may have been a local issue. We feel we risk losing the autonomy to do what we see in our own best interest to those larger districts that may face completely different issues and circumstances. We stand opposed to this proposal.

Thank you for your consideration of these thoughts regarding CSHB278.