

ACT TO EXPAND EDUCATIONAL OPTIONS FOR STUDENTS IN RURAL ALASKA BY COOK INLET TRIBAL COUNCIL

Hundreds of small remote rural high schools off the road system are too small to efficiently deliver programs students need to prepare for work, training, or college. Residential programs are a fact of life and a great option for many Alaskan students.

School districts have developed a diverse array of partnerships and programs to meet the needs of these students. Some districts have developed successful traditional residential programs that welcome students from across Alaska. Other districts have developed innovative district-wide programs that utilize a variable length school year to keep students connected and involved in their home communities, families and schools. Meeting the needs of all Alaskans is a complex challenge. Meeting the challenge requires diverse and creative solutions.

Unfortunately, AS 14.16.200, the statute authorizing residential educational programs, as currently written is too specific to support creative solutions. We urge your support for changes to AS 14.16.200 to provide a more flexible framework for residential education in Alaska. In addition, all districts have found the stipend levels currently authorized, to be insufficient. Specifically, we ask you to amend AS 14.16.200 to:

- Allow school districts delivering district-wide residential programs to be eligible for student stipend funding.
- Allow eligible programs to utilize a variable length school year to enable students to split the school year between in a residential program in an urban area or a district hub and their village school. This change will allow students to access an exemplary education **and** maintain their connections to their families, homes and communities.
- Support local partnerships between school districts and community organizations to provide supportive residential experiences for students.
- Increase the amount of the boarding stipend.

BACKGROUND:

Alaska has over 100 small remote rural high schools that are mostly off-the-road-system and spread throughout the state. With some exceptions, small remote rural high schools are the lowest performing high schools in Alaska. Because of their size and limited capacity, these schools are unable to efficiently deliver the programs students need to prepare for work, training, or college.

- A sampling of school-district graduation rates shows that urban and on-the-road-system high schools graduate roughly 75% of their students while small remote rural schools graduate about 55% of their students.

Unfortunately, students in these schools have few options. Unlike urban students, they can't simply change schools. They are in the only school for miles.

- Lack of educational opportunity is the largest single factor impacting the success of students in small remote rural high schools.

DISTRICT-WIDE PROGRAMS:

Traditional residential schools—statewide programs on the typical August to June school year, work exceptionally well for many students. The programs are thriving in Alaska, and deserve strong continued support. However, not all parents want to send their children away for nine months, and not all students want to go. They shouldn't have to.

District-wide programs, often called Residential Learning Centers (RLC) provide high school students in remote rural schools with new options. District-wide programs are cost effective, balance educational access with a youth's need to be connected to family, community and culture, and are proven to work. District-wide residential programs:

- Deliver variable-length programs ranging from two weeks to a semester.
- Keep students enrolled in their village school and education dollars stay in the school district, and the students graduate from their village schools.
- Are local programs developed with input from students, parents, employers, and cultural leaders.
- Chugach School District, Lower Kuskokwim School District, and Nome and Bering Strait School Districts are currently running district-wide residential programs. Their programs are resulting in higher graduation and success rates for their students, with graduation rates as high as 100% in some of these programs.

Providing access to high quality educational experiences to all Alaskan students is a huge challenge. Meeting the challenge will now and in future will require creativity and flexibility. District-wide educational programs are a creative and local solution to the challenge. However, while traditional residential programs are eligible for the state boarding stipend, the statute (AS 14.16.200) lacks the flexibility to provide the same support for these promising programs.

