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March 18, 2013

Honorable Lynn Gattis
State Capitol, Room 420
Juneau, AK 99801

Dear Representative Gattis,

I have attached my testimony of March 18, 2013 in support of HB 151. The Alaska Policy Forum believes that it is the right of all citizens, especially parents, to know how well their schools are performing. HB 151 does just that. This bill provides the basic information for parents to determine if they should enroll their child(ren) in a particular school. This grading system will encourage our public schools to do better, knowing that parents are watching.

We continually hear the argument “parents are not engaged in their child’s education”. If the State does not provide the basic information on how well a particular school is doing, then how are parents to know that their child may be in a failing school? We need to shine the light on the performance of our schools so that parents can make informed decisions regarding their child’s education.

My testimony consists of several personal stories that I gathered last summer in an economically poor neighborhood in Anchorage-Mt View. These stories are sad and at the same time heartwarming in that once parents knew that they had enrolled their child in a failing school they took action to get their children into a successful public school.

Unfortunately, for these parents and many others, if the State gets a waiver to NCLB, they will not be able to get their kids out of failing schools and into good public schools with free transportation. These children will be relegated to stay in their failing neighborhood school because the State will no longer require school districts to offer the public school option. This is extremely disappointing.

Thank you for your consideration on this important issue.

David Boyle
Executive Director
Alaska Policy Forum

1 Attachment
March 18, 2013 Testimony, House Education Cmte

TESTIMONY ON HB 151, BY ALASKA POLICY FORUM, MARCH 18, 2013

CHAIRWOMAN GATTIS AND COMMITTEE MEMBERS, I AM DAVID BOYLE AND I AM SPEAKING FOR THE ALASKA POLICY FORUM. THE ALASKA POLICY FORUM STRONGLY SUPPORTS HB 151.

TO ILLUSTRATE AND SHINE THE LIGHT ON THE ISSUE OF TRANSPARENCY AND THE DEFINITE LACK OF INFORMATION PROVIDED TO PARENTS BY SCHOOL DISTRICTS, I WOULD LIKE TO SHARE SOME PERSONAL STORIES THAT I EXPERIENCED LAST YEAR. THESE STORIES OCCURRED DURING THE LAST DAY OF FORMAL REGISTRATION IN THE ANCHORAGE SCHOOL DISTRICT.

I WANTED TO INFORM PARENTS OF THEIR RIGHTS ACCORDING TO BOTH FEDERAL AND STATE LAW, THAT THEY COULD GET THEIR KIDS OUT OF FAILING PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND GET THEM INTO SUCCESSFUL PUBLIC SCHOOLS. IN ADDITION, THE SCHOOL DISTRICT IS REQUIRED TO TRANSPORT THESE CHILDREN FREE TO THE SUCCESSFUL PUBLIC SCHOOL.

WHAT I DISCOVERED WAS EYE OPENING. I STOOD OUT FRONT OF 3 FAILING SCHOOLS IN THE POORER SIDE OF TOWN, MOUNTAIN VIEW TO BE EXACT. I HANDED OUT INFORMATION WHICH INCLUDED A LIST OF THOSE SCHOOLS THAT HAD FAILED NCLB FOR 3 YEARS OR MORE. THIS LIST INCLUDED 16 SCHOOLS IN THE DISTRICT. I ALSO INCLUDED AN ASD APPLICATION FORM TO TRANSFER A STUDENT TO A SUCCESSFUL PUBLIC SCHOOL. FINALLY, I HAD A FLYER WHICH DESCRIBED, IN EASILY UNDERSTOOD LANGUAGE, THE PARENTS' RIGHTS UNDER THE LAW.

I TALKED TO 21 PARENTS AND INFORMED THEM THAT THE SCHOOL THEY WERE ABOUT TO ENROLL THEIR CHILDREN IN HAD FAILED NCLB. OF THOSE 21, NONE, REPEAT NONE OF THEM KNEW THE STATUS OF THE SCHOOL. OF THOSE 21, 17 WERE GOING TO OPT OUT OF THE FAILING SCHOOL AND GET THEIR KIDS INTO A SUCCESSFUL PUBLIC SCHOOL.

ONE AFRICAN AMERICAN FATHER HAD JUST ENROLLED HIS SON IN A FAILING SCHOOL-CLARK MIDDLE SCHOOL-WHICH HAS FAILED NCLB FOR 9 YEARS WITH NO CHANGES AS REQUIRED UNDER NCLB. HE TOLD ME IT WAS A TERRIBLE SCHOOL. HE SAID ALL THEY DID WAS GIVE THE KIDS FREE STUFF. AND HE HAD JUST ENROLLED HIS SON. HE WAS ENTHUSED WHEN I TOLD HIM ABOUT HIS RIGHTS TO GET HIS SON TO A SUCCESSFUL PUBLIC SCHOOL.

THE NEXT DAY I RECEIVED A CALL FM AN ALASKAN NATIVE GRANDMOTHER WHO SCHOLDED ME SEVERAL TIMES BECAUSE I WAS NOT OUTSIDE THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL ON THE FIRST DAY OF REGISTRATION-THAT WAS THE DAY SHE HAD ENROLLED HER 2 GRANDDAUGHTERS IN A FAILING PUBLIC SCHOOL. SHE THOUGHT I WAS A SCHOOL DISTRICT EMPLOYEE PROVIDING INFORMATION. I TOLD HER I WAS NOT A DISTRICT EMPLOYEE, JUST A VOLUNTEER TRYING TO GET THE BEST EDUCATION FOR THE KIDS. I THEN TOOK A PACKAGE OF INFORMATION TO HER APARTMENT AND SHE THANKED ME PROFUSELY. YOU SEE, SHE HAD ALREADY LOST A GRANDDAUGHTER TO DRUGS AT EAST HIGH AND WAS DETERMINED TO GET THE BEST FOR HER

2 OTHER GRANDDAUGHTERS. I THANKED HER FOR BEING INVOLVED IN HER GRANDKIDS' EDUCATION.

LATER NEXT WEEK, I RECEIVED A CALL LATE AT NIGHT FROM A FATHER WHO SPOKE IN BROKEN ENGLISH. HE HAD TAKEN OFF WORK TO GET HIS 2 CHILDREN OUT OF A FAILING SCHOOL. UNFORTUNATELY, THE DISTRICT HAD LOST HIS PAPER WORK AND HIS KIDS WOULD HAVE TO REMAIN IN THE FAILING SCHOOL FOR A FEW DAYS. THE PRINCIPAL HAD EVEN TRIED TO PERSUADE THE FATHER TO KEEP HIS CHILDREN IN THE FAILING SCHOOL. I CONTACTED A SCHOOL BOARD MEMBER AND BY THE NEXT SCHOOL DAY BEGAN, THAT FATHER'S 2 KIDS WERE IN A SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL.

I COULD TELL YOU MORE PERSONAL STORIES BUT TIME LIMITS ME.

THE ASD MAILED OUT MORE THAN 8,600 LETTERS TO HOUSEHOLDS INFORMING PARENTS OF THEIR RIGHTS UNDER LAW TO GET THEIR CHILDREN OUT OF THE FAILING SCHOOLS AND ENROLL THEM IN A SUCCESSFUL PUBLIC SCHOOL. UNFORTUNATELY, MOST OF THESE LETTERS WERE RECEIVED AFTER THE FORMAL REGISTRATION WINDOW CLOSED. IF ONE ASSUMES ABOUT 1.5 STUDENTS PER HOUSEHOLD, THIS WOULD MEAN THAT ABOUT 12,000 STUDENTS WERE IN FAILING ASD SCHOOLS-ABOUT 25% OF THE TOTAL STUDENT ENROLLMENT. I HAVE TO ADD THAT IF THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND EARLY DEVELOPMENT GETS A WAIVER TO NCLB, SCHOOL DISTRICTS WILL NO LONGER HAVE TO OFFER A PUBLIC SCHOOL CHOICE AND FREE TRANSPORTATION. MANY CHILDREN, LIKE THOSE IN THESE STORIES, WILL BE TRAPPED IN FAILING SCHOOLS.

A PHYSICIAN FRIEND RECEIVED ONE OF THESE ASD LETTERS BECAUSE, UNBEKNOWNST TO HER, SHE HAD A CHILD IN A FAILING NEIGHBORHOOD PUBLIC SCHOOL. THE LETTER WAS WRITTEN IN SUCH A BUREAUCRATIC STYLE THAT EVEN SHE, A DOCTOR, WAS UNABLE TO UNDERSTAND IT.

WE BELIEVE THIS IS ABOUT POWER AND TRANSPARENCY. INFORMATION IS POWER AND BUREACRACIES KNOW THIS. PARENTS ARE THE CONSUMERS OF PUBLIC EDUCATION AND THEY SHOULD BE TOLD HOW WELL OR HOW POORLY THEIR SCHOOLS ARE DOING.

WOULD YOU EAT AT A RESTAURANT IF YOU KNEW IT HAD FAILED ITS HEALTH INSPECTION? OR WOULD YOU GO TO A RESTAURANT THAT HAD A GOOD HEALTH INSPECTION RATING? WELL, EDUCATION IS MUCH MORE IMPORTANT THAN RESTAURANTS.

WHEN YOU TRAVEL, YOU LOOK FOR LODGING. WOULD YOU STAY AT A ONE STAR HOTEL AT \$100 A NIGHT OR WOULD YOU STAY AT A FIVE STAR HOTEL AT THE SAME PRICE? THIS IS EXACTLY THE WAY IT IS IN ALASKA'S EDUCATION SYSTEM.

WE HAVE GREAT PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN ALASKA. SCHOOL DISTRICTS SHOULD BE PROUD AND TELL PARENTS HOW WELL THEIR SCHOOLS ARE DOING.

THE AK POLICY FORUM HAS COMPLETED REPORT CARDS ON THE ASD AND THE MATSU SCHOOL DISTRICTS. WE USED A SIMPLE METRIC: AVERAGE TOGETHER EACH SCHOOL'S SBA MATH AND READING SCORES AND ASSIGN A LETTER GRADE BASED ON THESE SCORES. THE MATSU ONLY HAS 2 D AND F SCHOOLS. THE ASD HAS 21 SCHOOLS THAT RECEIVE A D OR AN F. GO TO OUR WEBSITE AND SEE FOR YOURSELF.

SOME OF YOU LISTENED TO MR KEVIN CHAVOUS TESTIFY AT THE JOINT HOUSE/SENATE EDUCATION/JUDICIARY MEETING LAST MONTH. REMEMBER ONE OF HIS TRUISMS: YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW.

THE BOTTOM LINE: IF WE ARE GOING TO GRADE STUDENTS, WE SHOULD GRADE OURSELVES- OUR SCHOOLS. THANK YOU FOR THE OPPORTUNITY TO SPEAK ON THIS VERY IMPORTANT MATTER TO ALL PARENTS AND ALASKAN CHILDREN. PLEASE PASS OUT HB 151.