

March 11, 2013

The Honorable John Coghill
Alaska State Senate
State Capitol Room 119
Juneau AK, 99801

Dear Senator Coghill:

School districts have developed a diverse array of partnerships and programs to meet the needs of Alaskan students across the state, whose academic achievement gaps place Alaska at the bottom of the graduation rates nationwide. 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. Like the delegates of the Alaska Federation of Natives, CITC supports 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 woefully insufficient. Specifically, CITC supports SB 47, amending 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 Alaska Native and non-profit organizations to provide supportive residential experiences for students.
- Increase the amount of the boarding stipend.

AFN's resolution in support of these principals is attached to this letter. We appreciate your introduction of SB 47, and these needed changes to AS 14.16.200.

Cook Inlet Tribal Council's residential project:

Through the current stipends, the State is already supporting innovative education models, youth housing, boarding schools and various foster care models. CITC has launched the Dena'ina Academy, which is a residential educational program that provides a public/private partnership model that may also be replicated throughout the state.

Dena'ina Academy is a partnership between CITC and the Anchorage School district. In this partnership, CITC will provide the room, board and residential program components, while Anchorage School District will continue to provide the academic and other extracurricular programs to the students. The infrastructure offered by the ASD and the partnership with CITC provide a strong foundation for the success of the residential program in support of the academic success of the students.

Dena'ina Academy is designed as a culture-based leadership program to provide room and board, social and academic supports for the students. The students will live, study and play in a cohort. Live-in advisors, elders, tutors and mentors will ensure an environment that promotes and supports holistic student development, including positive identity development, academic competence, confidence, cultural and community connection and expectations for community service, and Alaska Native cultural activities, sport and music.

Fundamental Benefits of Funding Dena'ina Academy Operations

- The high school drop-out rate leads to disproportionate consumption of State resources. Dena'ina Academy graduates will become contributors to the state economy.
- Dena'ina Academy operational funding need not be added to the State's overall funding. By creatively combining and realigning various funding sources, such as those from boarding home and boarding school, foster care, low-income housing, Chafee, transitional housing and homeless, it would make sustainability for the project a reality.
- Tribal and non-profit funding sources leverage state funds to create effective public/private partnerships.
- Given the statewide education issues that Anchorage faces in responding to rural education gaps, Dena'ina Academy offers an effective and cost-efficient solution.

The proposed changes to AS 14.16.200 contained in SB 47 will allow existing programs to expand and increase the number of programs offering creative solutions to Alaska's educational challenges, such as Dena'ina Academy and those currently under design in Kotzebue and Barrow. SB 47 will enable communities to offer more opportunity to students and contribute to closing the achievement gap. We strongly support SB 47.

Thank you for your leadership and attention to this important educational component that will provide real outcomes for our youth.

Sincerely,



Gloria O'Neill
President/CEO