

Dear Representative Thompson,

March 25, 2016

I am reaching out to you today about a bill that has serious implications for districts and the State of Alaska. HB 102, an act providing for funding for residential treatment centers, is scheduled to come before House Finance on April 2. The Anchorage School District has consistently expressed concerns about HB 102 because we understand that the impacts of this bill go far beyond our district.

ASD believes that this bill is not premised upon a need of students; but rather, upon a desire of certain private treatment centers to take over educational services at public expense. Districts will not maintain control over the quality of education delivered by the Residential Psychiatric Treatment Center. However, the home district will retain the responsibility for accountability under IDEA, including IEPs – a highly litigious area.

A fundamental flaw of HB 102, is that it abrogates the local control of school boards to determine the need for educational programs and circumvents school board authority and discretion in approving contracts. A district like ASD that has been effectively serving residentially-placed students for decades must cede its right to do so upon a simple demand by a private provider that is accompanied by a compliant contract. No demonstration of actual need for that provider to provide the educational services, or demonstration of benefit to students in doing so, is required.

The Anchorage School District enjoys strong partnerships with Providence Hospital, Alaska Psychiatric Institute, Alaska Child and Family, Volunteers of America and Office of Children Services to name a few. Through cooperative engagement with clinical care providers, we have continued to increase our educational services and supports for our children with the most complex mental health and behavioral needs.

Anchorage School District is providing a supportive educational program for students with acute challenges at North Star Behavioral Health System Anchorage location. ASD disagrees with the premise that a treatment center is able to provide more effective educational services to a student than a school district can provide. School districts are in the best position to provide high quality public educational services. For decades, ASD has met the general education and special education needs of Alaskan students in need of residential psychiatric treatment and intends to continue doing so.

I urge the House Finance Committee to examine written comments and prior testimony from other Alaska districts that have expressed similar concerns with this legislation. Mandatory contracting requirements imposed on school boards do not represent a good investment of Alaska's education dollars, especially where private residential treatment centers are not proven to provide more effective educational services.

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