

April 4, 2016

I am a teacher for the Anchorage School District, in classes housed at North Star Behavioral Health on the Acute Care Adolescent Boys Unit. This is my second year teaching in this program, a job I requested.

Prior to this assignment, I taught at Whaley School for four years, at Wendler for one in an Affective Education Program and in the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Program for eight years. This past Saturday I used air miles to fly to Juneau to give testimony during the Finance Committee meeting. Although that was canceled, I was able to visit offices and meet many gracious senators, representatives and staff. Today, I am writing to you as a very concerned teacher, and Alaskan, in support of one of our most vulnerable populations. These are my concerns:

- **North Star Behavioral Health has not and does not provide transition plans to the school district.** This puts the students who leave at risk for failure, or worse. Teachers before me, myself for the past two years and the three principals I have worked for, have tried to work with North Star regarding this issue. This morning, three students were not in class, with no notice. They had discharged. I asked again for them to send discharge plans to our counselor and principal so that we may notify the receiving schools.
- **The Anchorage School District was asked to purchase more computers and did so, yet is being criticized for using online programs to educate students.** At the acute care facility, and the residential psychiatric treatment centers (RPTCs), students participate in class projects, individual work and group Social Emotional Learning and Affective Education activities, as well as online learning. North Star wanted the computers and ASD got them, and now is criticizing, saying there is too much online use. Historically and presently, we have provided a diverse education that is designed to support students for whom **the priority is to gain good mental health.** They just didn't want us to use their computers.
- **North Star would like to extend the school day.** Students are not admitted to North Star because they are failing school. Doing poorly in school certainly may result from traumatizing behaviors and experiences, but that does not get them an admission to acute care or RPTCs. While I firmly believe that education must exist in acute care, therapy must take priority and must be the bulk of the day. These kids are in crisis. In residential care, of course it must be a longer day due to the length of stay, and it always has been, but 4 to 5 hours is enough. Therapy is what will keep them from returning, not more Social Studies.
- **Classroom space is a problem.** There is one classroom on the second floor of the acute care building. We have three classes. When the first class is in there, students are often in the hallways are yelling, banging on walls, and

fighting. Students who refuse school or are on unit restriction walk in and out and continually disrupt. The second class is taught in the solarium. When North Star schedules a new staff orientation or community activity, we must move to the cafeteria and share it with the third class. The third class is taught in the cafeteria daily. Staff and other students walk in and out, as well as visitors in the building. We stop at lunch and go to the computer lab, which seats 14. Numbers are low now and it's fine. When numbers were up, we have had up to 18 boys in a small room that is lined with tables and computers.

- **North Star is chronically understaffed.** I and my teaching colleagues are often left alone or with one staff when there are over 10 students in the room. We have written up several incidents wherein students assaulted one another or instigated to near contact and there was no or limited North Star staff in the room. A couple of teachers have been assaulted.
- **The Anchorage School District has been providing a “quality, equitable education” to acute care and RTPCs for a long time.** Every teacher working today transferred in from neighborhood schools. The quality of lessons and assignments are the same. It is very upsetting to read, in a formal legislative bill, that my colleagues and I are not giving the best that can be given to Alaska's children.
- **During the two teacher/teacher assistant orientations I have attended, the North Star facilitator told us to hold back and not develop relationships with students.** The reasoning was that students need to develop relationships with North Star Mental Health Technicians and therapists. This is understandable to a point, but how can we teach, all day, without showing care or developing rapport with students... a teaching relationship?

There are several other points to be made but your time is valuable and the end of the session is near. The system is NOT broken.  
Please vote no on HB 102.

Yours truly,  
Joan