

Alaska State Legislature

Senator Shelley Hughes, Chair
Session: Capital Room 125
Juneau, AK 99801
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Senator John Coghill
Senator Cathy Giessel
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Senate Education Committee

Senate Bill 96 – Alaska Education Transformation Act

Sponsor Statement

Every Alaskan student matters and deserves a high quality education. SB 96 takes steps toward the transformation of our education system in Alaska to better meet the needs of our students in the 21st century, while bearing in mind the budget challenges our districts face. Alaska has had a large achievement gap for too many years, resulting in some of the lowest graduation rates and testing scores in the nation and putting our students in a poor position on a global basis. We can do better, and it is our obligation to do better. The goal of this bill is to create better schools in Alaska and improve academic outcomes for students. SB 96 provides tools to help districts improve classroom instruction and reduce administrative costs.

First, this bill will create the Alaska Virtual Education Consortium to allow districts to offer virtual education courses through an online database to students in other districts for a fee. The consortium will also conduct teacher training, professional development, and can require participating districts to adopt a shared calendar and bell schedule. Students will gain access to great teachers statewide and to a wider variety of course offerings as districts choose to participate.

SB 96 also expands the scope of cooperative grants under AS 14.14.115 to allow districts to work with businesses, nonprofit organizations, and state or local government agencies. Grants can be used to share facilities, nutrition services, student transportation, health insurance pooling, teacher training, and virtual education. Any savings realized by districts in this process may be carried forward for three years, and emphasis for these grants will be placed on rural school districts. In addition, the bill raises the operating fund balance cap from 10% to 25% for districts, allowing them to rollover even more savings into the future.

SB 96 will make additional changes to help schools redirect dollars formerly for administration to student instruction. These changes include limiting the school size adjustment to incentivize districts to operate schools at full capacity with a phased funding mechanism, consolidating administrative functions within the department, and allowing districts to give students class credit for physical, musical, artistic, and cultural activities outside of school.

Overall spending on education does not correlate with better academic results, but direct spending in the classroom does. This bill will help districts focus money on the classroom and reduce administrative and overhead costs to help make that priority possible.

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