

Alaska State Legislature

Senator Shelley Hughes, Chair
Session: Capital Room 125
Juneau, AK 99801
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Senator John Coghill
Senator Cathy Giessel
Senator Gary Stevens
Senator Tom Begich

Senate Education Committee

Date: April 10, 2017

To: Senator Anna MacKinnon, Co-Chair
Senator Lyman Hoffman, Co-Chair
Senate Finance Committee

From: Senator Shelley Hughes

Re: Response to Committee Questions from April 6, 2017

During the hearing for Senate Bill 96 in the Senate Finance Committee on April 6, 2017, committee members requested follow up on a few issues related to the bill. Please see the response to those questions below, and you may contact my staff Joshua Banks at 465-3743 if you have any further questions.

1. Will the feasibility study include the Marine Highway?

Previous versions of SB 96 defined “road” as a road that is open to the public and receives year-round maintenance to ensure that schools that cannot be accessed through reliable transportation will not be effected. However, communities connected by the Marine Highway that would permit daily commuting would potentially make it feasible to merge two schools within a school district. Including these schools in the analysis of SB 96 could help determine if merging schools within districts along the Marine Highway could be feasible.

2. How many schools will be effected by the school capacity feasibility study?

Within the state, 83 schools are below 70% capacity and within 25 miles by road from another school below 70% capacity in the same district. While there are over 200 schools that are below 70% capacity, the parameters set in Section 23 limit the number of schools to be analyzed by the Department of Education to 83. The school must be below 70% capacity, and within 25 miles by road of another school in the same district that is also below 70% capacity. The chart below includes information provided by the Department as to how many schools in each district will be included in this analysis.

District Name	Projected Percent Capacity
Alaska Gateway	2
Anchorage	19
Cordova City	2
Delta/Greely	2
Fairbanks North Star Borough	7
Galena City	3
Haines Borough	2
Juneau Borough	6
Kenai Peninsula Borough	12
Ketchikan Gateway Borough	2
Kodiak Island Borough	3
Matanuska-Susitna Borough	6
North Slope Borough	3
Petersburg Borough	2
Sitka	4
Valdez City	3
Wrangell Public Schools	2
Total Schools	80

3. Is there a daily walk-around required for buses?

Under 49 CFR 396.13, a driver of a commercial vehicle, including a school bus, must “be satisfied that the motor vehicle is in safe operating condition” before driving the vehicle¹. Furthermore, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) has interpreted this regulation to require school bus drivers to perform daily pre-trip inspections of their vehicles under Highway Safety Program Guideline No. 17: Pupil Transportation Safety². Specifically, Paragraph D.3. in Section IV of Guideline No. 17 states that a daily pre-trip inspection of the vehicle and safety equipment is required and that the driver must promptly report any problem that may affect the safety of the vehicle’s operation.

4. Can districts already collaborating get the grant?

You had also asked about if school districts that have entered into cooperative arrangements will be eligible for these grants. Based on the language in AS 14.14.115 and the changes that will be made to this section in SB 96, there is nothing that specifically disqualifies a district that has already entered into a cooperative arrangement from receiving a grant. The Department of Education and Early Development has the same interpretation of this statute and that districts currently collaborating can apply for and potentially be awarded a grant under this section.

5. How will school mergers effect funding for formula?

Depending on the school count of each of the schools being merged together and the total number of students in the schools, districts may see a reduction in funding from the foundation formula. The School Size Factor under AS 14.17.450 requires that a smaller multiplier be applied as a school becomes larger, under the assumption that larger schools can take advantage of economies of scale more easily smaller schools. It is our opinion that if two or more schools within a district were to merge, the reduction in costs from fewer administrative employees (principal, secretary, janitors, etc.) and overhead costs (heating, electricity, etc.) will offset any reduction in funding from the foundation formula.

6. What grants are available to fund capital expenditures relating to broadband access and virtual education?

According to GCI and the Alaska Association of School Business Officials (ALASBO), there are three categories of costs for districts to participate in virtual education courses. The first is video conferencing (VTC) equipment which most districts have in their schools which would allow them to have access to virtual education. Many rural communities have used Rural Utilities Services (RUS) grants to acquire the necessary infrastructure and so it is assumed that these grants can be used by any districts who will need to build infrastructure needed to participate in virtual education.

Another category includes laptops, laptop cameras, and software needed for students to participate in virtual education. GCI and ALASBO has indicated that this can be a relatively low cost for districts as schools will usually have only small groups of students participating in a virtual course at a time, and so the additional purchases should be minor.

The final category of virtual education related costs is training for staff and teachers, which for some districts could be significant. However, part of the virtual education consortium is to provide training for teachers before they begin teaching in a virtual setting. The fees paid by participating districts to the virtual education consortium will go towards the operating costs of the consortium.

In summary, at this point we are not aware of any grants, other than the RUS grant, available to fund the infrastructure and equipment required for virtual education courses. However, to our knowledge, these costs will either be minimal, or covered by the fee paid by school districts that participate in the virtual education consortium.

¹49 CFR 396.13 – Driver inspection, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/cfr/text/49/396.13>

²Highway Safety Program Guideline No. 17: Pupil Transportation Safety, <https://one.nhtsa.gov/nhtsa/whatsup/tea21/tea21programs/pages/PupilTransportation.htm>