



## AEC TVEP Reauthorization – House Finance FY21-FY26

To the Honorable Representatives of House Finance - Representatives Foster, Johnston, Ortiz, Josephson, Knopp, LeBon, Wool, Tilton, Merrick, Sullivan-Leonard, and Carpenter:

My name is Mike Swanson, and I am the recently appointed Executive Director of Amundsen Educational Center in Soldotna. My purpose in writing to you is to share the important and unique role that AEC serves in workforce development in Alaska, and why House Finance should include AEC as you look to reauthorize another 5 years of TVEP funding. AEC may not be the largest institution, but its impact on its students is huge. I hope you will forgive the length of this narrative, but I believe it's a story worth telling.

### AEC Brief History

At a 1995 meeting of Unalakleet's Covenant High School alumni in Scammon Bay, former students were lamenting the 1985 closure of Covenant High School and realized that many of the healthiest and most stable families in Western Alaska were graduates of Covenant High School. Alumni were troubled over by high unemployment rates and an increase in drug, alcohol and child abuse, domestic violence, and especially suicide. It was against this backdrop that Covenant High School alum, and now Alaska State Senator, Donny Olson suggested the idea of a vocational school modeled after Covenant High School. Before entering the Legislature, Senator Olson was a major contributor to AEC and served on our Board for many years.

Rev. Maynard Londborg, who founded Covenant High School in 1954 and was a delegate to the Alaska Constitutional Convention began working on developing the plan for AEC and recruiting the staff who would start the school. AEC's initial incorporation and 501c3 came in 1996 and AEC enrolled its first students in 2001. Londborg, in retirement himself, brought Dr. Delmar Corrick in to develop AEC's curriculum and be the director of the school for the first couple of years. Corrick had incredible insights into indigenous postsecondary education from time spent at universities teaching on Indian reservations in Minnesota and Washington and was able to work closely with the Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education to get our institutional authorization.

Amundsen Educational Center is named after missionary bush pilot, H. Roald Amundsen, who was named after the famous explorer. Amundsen first came up to Alaska in 1936, and spent many years in Nome, Unalakleet and eventually Soldotna as a pastor, teacher, pilot and was even the "marriage commissioner at-large" for all of Western Alaska toward the end of the territorial days. Roald continued to serve at AEC as an instructor from 2001 - 2005.

I assisted with the development of AEC first in Fairbanks from 1999 – 2001 where we ran the pilot program for AEC with UAF students living and working out of a house together fabricating a fiberglass composite boat. In September of 2001, I relocated to Soldotna to be the first Dean of

Students at AEC and help get the Residential Construction Program going. We started with 48 acres of undeveloped land and our students cleared trees, designed and built the part of campus we affectionately now refer to as “Amundsen Village.” Dr. Corrick’s research and experience taught us that Native students are more successful in institutions that do not feel like institutions. For that reason, our students live in cabins that they built rather than dormitories. We have snow-machines on campus and our students can walk around, catch rabbits and spruce hens, and even pick berries. We have harvested many road kill moose and caribou and our students bring other subsistence foods with them. The biggest difference between our campus and home is that they can walk down the road and find Fred Meyer and Taco Bell a couple miles away.

I served AEC from 2001 to 2005 when I went to work for the University of Alaska in Dillingham and then Mat-Su from 2009 to 2019. I return to AEC after 14 years with UA, and have learned many things that will help lead AEC into the future, having served in program development, administration, staff leadership and student service roles while studying toward a MA in Rural Development from UAF.

### AEC Successes

The way that AEC works is that we recruit mostly Alaska Native and students from Rural Alaska. Despite our attempts to create a campus environment that feels like their village, it benefits many students to travel away from home to work on building their lives and employability skills alongside their actual job skills that we teach. As I like to say when recruiting, “There are several places you can go to learn how to build a house. AEC is the only one I know where you can build your life at the same time.” Students gain perspective and learn how to function on the road system, as well as off of it. To my knowledge, every graduate of our Residential Construction program has returned to rural Alaska, either to their own village or sometimes to larger hub communities. AEC graduates work as contractors in places like Nome, Unalakleet, Shaktoolik, and Kongiganak, and at places like Red Dog Mine.

AEC students in Residential Construction get over 1200 training hours during a school year. Students build new campus buildings as we need them, but have spent most of their time for the last 15 years building houses in Kenai and Soldotna. Each year the students complete a house from start to finish and learning every functional area in between from dirt work to finish carpentry. Through our Building Hope Construction, LLC subsidiary, AEC students have built over 15 homes valued at over \$3.5 million in the local area. Our contractor grade homes are as good, or better, than most others in the local market.

AEC students also learn essential soft skills like time management, so they are able to be on time and ready to work each and every day. They learn financial literacy and household math. Students plan meals and develop cooking and chore rotations. Some learn to drive. Our students this spring completed peer training in suicide prevention with the local Kenaitze tribe. Wherever our students go next, we try to help equip them to be better community members, better partners and better parents. Our motto with Building Hope Construction is “Building Homes. Building Lives. Building Hope.”

As I understand it, AEC was approached due to our success rates by the people with the State and encouraged to apply to be TVEP recipients. When I was called to be the Executive Director in July, my first task was to put together our TVEP budget. I wondered the same as some of you. How do we justify 2% of the TVEP budget when we are such a small organization? We have a fairly fixed number of

students that we can effectively teach how to build a house together. We have a program that we know works, so how do we make it available to a larger number of students?

My second task was to hire a new construction instructor after our instructor who we have had for the last 12 years resigned in June. I am pleased to report that our building project is going better than ever. Within the next few weeks, we will complete a 2400 square foot home that we began in September, ahead of schedule and under budget. We will then begin work on next year's projects by completing the dirt work and foundations for next year so that our students in September will start with framing, eliminating the risk of losing time and money to an early winter.

### Program and Site Expansion

Our goal is to strategically increase enrollment without sacrificing quality or drifting from our mission.

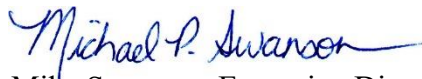
- AEC is currently piloting a Construction Internship – a continuation of our Advanced Residential Construction Certificate. One of our graduates from last year has been working as our Construction Assistant all year, learning to be a foreman and potentially a contractor eventually. His assistance to our first and second year students was invaluable and he is now being exposed to the contractor end of building projects – estimating costs, ordering and transporting materials, and working with subcontractors. We look to continue to have Construction Assistants, but also to place our graduates as interns with an AEC approved contractor to continue to develop their construction skills.
- AEC has partnered with Covenant Youth of Alaska (CYAK), the same organization that ran the original AEC pilot program in Fairbanks, to deliver Automotive and Autobody training at CYAK's Aarigaa House in Anchorage. We have a couple of students working in this pilot program currently. The Aarigaa House serves Alaska Native and Rural Alaska young adults and is within walking distance of the UAA Anchorage Campus.
- Through a partnership with AVSTEM, AEC is planning to start offering Aviation classes in Soldotna in the Fall of 2021. There has been some discussion of also developing a program for the FAA Drone License, which is an emerging high-demand job area that can change the logistics of getting goods and people in and out of Rural Alaska. Meeting an important TVEP goal, our Aviation classes will be available to up to 40 dual-credit high school students.
- AEC is working with CYAK and Knik Tribe on a plan to build an Aarigaa House in the Mat-Su Valley focused on Residential Construction and Residential Remodeling. As the Mat-Su is currently the only growing area of the State, it makes sense to have a cohort of students here.
- AEC is working with contractors on what we are calling our "AEC Mobile" Program. Not every student is able to leave their home to come to Soldotna for training for a year or more. The AEC Mobile program will work with AEC graduates who are contractors and other qualified local contractors to deliver AEC curriculum and complete building projects in other parts of the state. Currently AEC has students and an instructor to pilot the AEC Mobile Program in Unalakleet.

- AEC is hoping to develop articulated tech-prep agreements within the University of Alaska so that hours earned at AEC can be used to earn UA credits in areas like Construction Trades Technology, Aviation and Automotive. This will give AEC students a major head start if they choose to continue their postsecondary education within the University.

There are so many exciting things happening at Amundsen Educational Center. Our future appears to be very bright. TVEP funding for AEC is integral, not only to our current operations, but to the many opportunities that we are developing. We want our unique way of training workers and leaders to continue and be available in more areas of the Greatland. We want to be remain part of the solution to un- and underemployment both in rural Alaska and on the road system. We want to be good stewards of the piece of Unemployment Taxes that is appropriated to AEC. We want to continue to grow and develop Alaskans for Alaska jobs. We can only do that if you keep AEC allocated under AS 23.15.835.

Thank you for serving our State and making the tough decisions that will shape Alaska's trajectory for years to come. Thank you for your time and consideration of our request. Please contact me if you have any questions.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Michael P. Swanson". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

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Attachments