



# Anchorage School District

## Education Center

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April 22, 2021

Alaska State Legislature  
Alaska State Capitol  
120 4<sup>th</sup> Street, Room 3  
Juneau, Alaska 99801-1182

Dear Members of the 32nd Alaska Legislature:

I am writing as superintendent of the Anchorage School District (ASD) to express support for House Bill 19 pertaining to limited teacher certificates for language immersion programs.

ASD has a longstanding history with dual language immersion programs. Our first program was Japanese, beginning in 1989. Since then, we have added two Spanish programs and we are home to the nation's very first Russian immersion program. We also have a K-8 German immersion charter school with a continuation strand at Service High School.

The aforementioned programs all serve K-12 students. Five years ago, we launched a Mandarin Chinese immersion program (currently K-4), with plans to expand each year until it is also a K-12 program. In 2018, we launched a Yup'ik immersion program using a federal grant from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Indian Education. This is the first indigenous language immersion program in an urban setting in our nation. Finally, we opened a French immersion program in 2019 with plans to expand annually.

I provide this background to illustrate my district's commitment to language programs, all of which have stemmed from community interest and grassroots efforts over the years. In addition to our immersion programs, ASD offers language classes at its middle and high schools. We offer Level I through Advanced Placement in Chinese, French, German, Japanese, Russian, and Spanish, as well as Level I-IV in American Sign Language. Approximately 8,000 ASD students are enrolled in second language coursework, with roughly 2,500 students in our dual language immersion programs.

With multiple language programs in place, our ability to hire fully qualified teachers with the high level of language proficiency needed to teach in an immersion program is an ongoing challenge. Very rarely do we have a pool of candidates—teachers with native or near-native language proficiency who are eligible to be certificated under existing regulations from which to draw, and we find ourselves constantly recruiting to fill these “hard to fill” vacancies.

ASD has taken advantage of DEED's “program enrollment” option, which requires candidates to enroll in a teacher education program while they are teaching full-time. This has not been easy on our teachers who are doing so. We also recognize that DEED has recently developed a Type W limited certificate. However, it still requires a teacher preparation program.

*Educating All Students for Success in Life*

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**Superintendent** Dr. Deena Bishop

I am not suggesting that we support applicants who have not completed a teacher education program; however, sometimes it is impossible to find certificated candidates who have the language proficiency needed for the position *and* who have also completed a teacher preparation program. It is worth noting that these candidates are highly educated individuals, many of whom hold advanced degrees from their home countries, including engineers, doctors, lawyers, and accountants. We have also found that some of our candidates have teaching degrees and/or teaching experience in their home country, but since their teacher education programs do not necessarily align with a traditional teacher education program in the US, they struggle with obtaining a teacher certificate through DEED.

ASD is supportive of the flexibility that HB 19 offers with respect to sharing with the State Board of Education our experience and challenges with operating immersion programs. We support HB 19 and the creation of a one-year limited certificate for "instruction in a language other than English." ASD welcomes the opportunity to provide input on the certificate as the State Board develops the regulations. ASD foresees using limited certificates in rare circumstances.

HB 19 provides the flexibility needed to ensure that ASD has native or near-native speakers of our given immersion languages in the classroom. This option will be helpful as we continue to provide the highest quality language immersion education possible, ensuring that hired individuals have the content knowledge and subject area expertise required to teach in their assigned area.

Thank you for allowing me to comment in support of HB 19. Please let me know if you have questions.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Deena M. Bishop', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Deena M. Bishop, Ed.D.  
Superintendent