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SB 173 The Safe Schools Act

SB 173 “The Safe Schools Act” provides life-saving protection for students and faculty on school grounds during an active shooter incident as an augmentation to law enforcement response. Front-end preventive measures such as helping mentally troubled individuals and hardening the physical school environment with certain security measures are important in today’s world but neglecting the back end is no longer an option. Our schools must be prepared for when those measures don’t work, and a shooter is on school grounds. This is especially crucial in Alaska where long distances and severe weather can impact law enforcement response times. SB 173 is the stopgap.

Alaskan families, parents, students, and staff understand it is not a matter of whether we will have a shooter in one of our schools; it is a matter of when. Just last year, 346 shooting incidents occurred in schools in the US resulting in 248 victims either wounded or killed. In the past five years, 1073 students and staff were wounded or killed nationwide. Although the last tragedy in our state was in 1997 at Bethel High School, such incidents across our nation are clearly picking up pace and far less rare as time passes. The problem is real, and we cannot ignore it.

We have all watched with horror news reports of school shootings at Columbine, Sandy Hook, Parkland, Uvalde, Iowa, the list goes on. We’ve asked ourselves, what if there had been intervention to help that person, what if the school had been better prepared? But we’ve also asked ourselves, what if someone had been concealed carrying? And we’ve concluded: maybe fewer or no lives would have been lost; maybe the incident would not have occurred at all.

SB 173 provides that a well-trained individual will be on-site who can respond immediately to stop a shooter and save precious student and staff lives. Every second, every minute counts. When law enforcement response in Alaska can take from a few minutes to a few hours, or in inclement weather to remote communities, even longer, our children, our teachers and staff are sitting ducks. Our officers do their best to respond quickly but Alaska is a state of mammoth proportions. We need highly trained, responsible, stable individuals in our schools who can respond without delay.

SB 173 would require districts to assign the job duty of concealed carry to at least one qualified individual per school who meets the established criteria which include willingness to perform assigned duties, possession of a concealed carry permit, completion of a nationally recognized firearms training and other training required to meet district insurance policy standards, and meeting established physical and mental standards. The bill includes protection for district entities and persons from liability on the grounds of injury caused by the qualified person’s action or failure to act. SB 173 provides that districts will cover training fees for individuals as well as compensate training time for employees. Districts will annually provide response plans and available training dates to local law enforcement.

While Alaska law does not prevent superintendents and school boards from setting policy to allow concealed carry, none have done so. SB173 will help communities, school boards, and district administrators find an acceptable path forward that will lead to safer school campuses. By outlining the qualifications, training, and stringent standards to help ensure responsible actions in emergency situations, increasing engagement between districts and law enforcement, and assigning the concealed carry duty to trusted, stable, respected, and well-trained individuals, the legislation will give parents, community members and leaders the confidence to know that children and staff will be safer in our schools than they would be without the policy.

The Safe Schools Act is a proactive approach to protecting our students and faculty members. If we want to prevent the deaths of school children in Alaska, we must act. If we wait until after a tragic incident has occurred and lives have been lost, what a dreadful shame and inexcusable mistake that will be. The Safe Schools Act is a necessary step toward protecting this and future generations from reckless harm so our young Alaskans can focus on learning and make a positive difference in our communities.