

Senator Dunleavy and members of the committee,

We firmly believe that education is the civil rights issue of our time and that every child, including children with mental illness deserve an equal opportunity to succeed in school. State and federal law is clear - that no matter where children live, ALL children are entitled to a free and appropriate public education that is comparable, equitable and adequate. For the past six years, my colleagues and I have dedicated ourselves to bring awareness of how some of the State's most vulnerable children have been receiving substandard educational services while seeking in some cases life-saving mental health treatment. In addition to bringing awareness, we continue to put forth solutions that will dramatically improve the educational services for a class of children who so desperately need a voice.

In order to give you a broader understanding of why we believe SB 103 is a needed solution and to address ASD written testimony, I would like to share with you some of the most recent events since last April and our efforts to work collaboratively with the Anchorage School District (ASD).

In April of 2015, representatives from North Star and ASD began meeting to discuss program needs, best practices, measurable outcomes, service delivery and ways to work more collaboratively with one another. The first two meetings were attended by the Commissioner of Education who helped set the framework for future discussions. Meeting participants from ASD included several high level district administrators and Mr. Jerry Koetje who was appointed Acting Principal of Special Schools in July. Sadly and unexpectedly, Mr. Koetje passed away in December. Mr. Koetje was a lifelong educator who helped hundreds if not thousands of children throughout his tenure and he hit the ground running upon coming to North Star. Mr. Koetje will be dearly missed by so many and we truly appreciated all of his efforts while working for the children at North Star.

The spirit of the meetings between ASD and North Star has been very collegial with a strong focus on program enhancement, accountability and communication. Both organizations recognize that communication and collaboration is critical to addressing issues and the overall success of the program. As of January, 2016 there have been over twenty meetings between the two organizations.

In all meetings North Star has asked if ASD could bring the District's plan for addressing the following areas:

1. A Communication Plan that will outline strategies for strengthening the collaboration and information sharing between ASD, North Star, parents, students, resident school districts and other stakeholders
2. The 2015-2016 Staffing Plan including teacher certification areas
3. The Curriculum Model including a Master Schedule reflecting the amount of time for direct instruction and on-line instruction
4. The Administrative Supervision Plan with a schedule for providing on-site management and communication with families, treatment team, resident school districts and students
5. Policies and Procedures for admissions, Individualized Education Plans (IEP) and transitions
6. A list of Outcome Measures that will be tracked to be shared with stakeholders through the School Improvement Plan (SIP)

## 7. A program Budget including allocations for materials, resources and equipment

All of these areas are usually considered standard operating items that all schools should have in place and served a good starting point for ASD and North Star to evaluate the current operating system and steer our future conversations. Recognizing that the school's Master Schedule, Staffing Plan and Curriculum Model needed intense focus and would require the District to assign additional resources, North Star knew it was critical to get further clarification on how the district was going to address each of these areas last April. Throughout our discussions heading into the late spring and early summer, we never received concrete information to the requests just mentioned. We strongly believed that without the above items in place, it was going to be very challenging to start the new school year and the students' education was going to be compromised.

As the 2015-2016 school year evolved, it was important to us to recognize where progress was being made. We have been very complimentary and grateful to ASD for areas that have been improved upon. However, with that said and although well intended, ASD's most recent efforts have not been proactively implemented without constant prodding and follow up from North Star. I would like to take this opportunity to share with you some of the areas of progress emerging from the collaboration to date:

- ASD hired an Acting Principal separate from the Whaley Center to oversee the District's Special Schools.
- The Transition Counselor position was filled as of September 11<sup>th</sup>. As you may recall, we learned about this position being allocated to North Star last year through a FOIA request but the allocated position previously never served the students of North Star
- Four new teachers hired, two new teacher assistants hired
- A new Individualized Learning Plan (ILP) was authored by ASD to set the course of each patient's educational experience
- 95 new laptop computers were ordered and the internet bandwidth was increased to accommodate the on-line learning platform
- Instructional hours were increased through the expanded Master Schedule

Throughout the first semester, we also shared with ASD our continued list of ongoing concerns that should have been addressed prior to the school year beginning and still need immediate attention:

- Establishing the level of onsite services provided by the Acting Principal assigned to all Special Purpose Schools and the access for parents, students, teachers and stakeholders
- Student course schedules listing the actual courses students are registered in
- Full student registration to the on-line APEX course system
- Completion of each student's ILP
- Further technology assessment and plan
- Identification of Outcome Measures
- Curriculum assessment and plan
- Streamlining of Enrollment Process
- Intake, Course Registration and Transition Policies and Procedures
- AIMS Web Testing

The goal has always been and will continue to be to serve every student with excellence as the standard; education is a universal right and a student's education should never be compromised. Although progress has been made in some areas, many students did not receive an appropriate, comparable and adequate educational experience the first semester. In fact, it was disheartening that this class of children did not have the resources they should have in a timely manner.

Specifically, from the onset North Star described the lack of technology that was not available to students in order to participate in the District's Apex On-line Learning Program. During the Education Subcommittee's tour of North Star on September 16, 2015, they heard first hand from a District IT representative that the infrastructure was inadequate and there were less than 20 functioning computers. By this time, one month of school had already passed and not only did students not have access, they didn't have course schedules nor were any of the Individualized Learning Plans (ILPs) completed. In the spirit of collaboration, both organizations continued to move forward in hopes that the situation would be rectified immediately.

The problem grew worse over the next two months and on November 6, 2015, North Star reported to ASD its frustration that the promised computers were still not delivered, bandwidth was not increased and students still did not have access to the on-line APEX system that they were supposed to be taking classes in. When questioned, the Acting Principal stated that the District had "tabled the plan". Sensing North Star's shock and disappointment, ASD delivered 60 computers that same afternoon and commissioned the IT Department to begin upgrading the bandwidth in order to allow students to participate in their classes on-line.

Sadly, this class of children did not receive appropriate, equitable and adequate educational services the first semester. North Star respectfully raised concerns regarding students not having course schedules and that their transcripts were not reviewed nor aligned to their previous placement. Furthermore, North Star sought help in understanding why only 5 ILPs were completed to date and the District's procedure to move all special education IEPs to a "consultative" model. These concerns and Priority Needs were shared in full transparency with ASD's Board Chairman, the Commissioner of Education and ASD Administration

After reviewing the course of events the past several years, it appears to be a logical next step is to allow a three year pilot project for RPTCs to become an Educational Service Provider. This proposal was presented to the Commissioner of Education for his review and input. Under this legislation, a participating RPTC would be required to comply with over eighteen accountability standards including a comprehensive financial audit. The RPTC would also be required to report back to the Legislature its Outcome Measures each school year and we think this will dramatically improve services to children and increase academic accountability.

In closing, we would appreciate your support and respectfully ask for the passage of SB 103.  
Sincerely,

Mike Lyons, Vice President Specialty Education UHS  
Evelyn Alsup, Educational Director North Star Behavioral Health