

Department of Education & Early Development
Office of the Commissioner

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February 10, 2012

The Honorable Bert Stedman
Co-Chair Finance Committee
Alaska State Senate
Capitol, Room 516
Juneau, AK 99801

Dear Co-Chair Stedman:

The following represents the Parnell administration's response to certain proposals to modify the Alaska Performance Scholarship's structure through HB104, a bill currently in Senate Finance.

Context

The Alaska Performance Scholarship (APS) is intended to be "an invitation to excellence" with the goal of encouraging students, schools, and parents to set their standards high so that more of Alaska's young people are fully prepared to be successful in their postsecondary education, whether at a college, university or in career training. The eligibility criteria for APS are aligned to standards that reduce the need for remediation after high school. APS also rewards students for academic achievement beyond the minimum required for high school graduation. As importantly, it challenges schools which have not previously done so to step up and offer what Alaska's students need and deserve to better meet the challenges of their future and the workforce in which they will be a part.

Proposal: Create a Statutory District Waiver of Curricular Requirements

The Administration rejects the proposal that a loophole is needed in state law that would accommodate school districts which elect not to add or make available to their students, through a growing menu of options, the course content required for APS eligibility. In order to have the desired outcome of increasing opportunities and likelihood for students striving to be prepared for postsecondary education, a uniformly high set of standards for program offerings needs to be sustained.

However, it is reasonable to conclude that it may take some districts longer than others to incorporate the necessary components into their schools' course offerings. Anticipating that process, the State Board of Education and Early Development created a student-centered safety net by regulation: 4 AAC 43.035 Grace Period for Curriculum Requirements. This regulation

provides that safety net to students by allowing the commissioner to grant otherwise eligible students a grace period to satisfy a gap in curricular requirements. The grace period grants students one extra year after graduation to complete the curriculum requirements of 4 AAC 43.030. Moreover, during the grace period the student, if enrolled in a participating institution, may apply for and receive the scholarship while potentially working on both high school and college credits simultaneously.

The current regulation sunsets after the 2012 school year but, should school districts require a longer period of time to make available the necessary course, could be extended for an appropriate period of time. With foresight, this will allow districts a definitive time period in which to assist their students in accessing the necessary courses.

Proposal: Create a Statutory Waiver of Rigorous Curriculum and High School Graduation

For reasons related to the previous discussion, the Administration objects to any proposal that would substantially dilute APS' fundamental components. The vision and purpose of the APS is to incent students to take and master academic content which prepares them to advance to postsecondary education with a much greater likelihood that they will not need to spend time and resources on the remedial course work which, data show, more often than not leads to an educational dead end. The first year of data preliminarily confirms that goal, through APS' existing structure, can be achieved with only 27% of APS recipients needing remedial courses compared to 64% of non-APS recipients.

During the first several years of scholarship implementation, APS requirements will increase in rigor and preparation above and beyond minimum graduation requirements. Incorporation of a General Equivalency Diploma (GED) alternative would purport to offer students an even less rigorous standard than high school graduation. There would be an anticipated effect that students receiving a GED may actually require more remediation than a student with a diploma and significantly more than current APS qualifiers.

Marketing the concept to our young people that a GED route to the APS is viable is not only contrary to the stated purpose of the scholarship, but is directly opposed to the goal of incentivizing students to: stay in school, take challenging courses, and prepare to succeed after high school. Additionally, the offering of a supposed GED pathway, would immediately be recognized as a "bait and switch" option when GED recipients attempted to achieve the necessary scores on required college entrance exams and overwhelmingly failed to achieve the minimums needed for APS eligibility. It is imperative that we deal honestly with teenagers weighing the impacts of their decisions to drop out or stay in their secondary education program.

APS, as it currently exists, says to set your goals high and work hard and you will be recognized and rewarded. The GED route says that you don't even have to graduate and you *could* still be rewarded. These messages are contradictory and not supported by data on the postsecondary outcomes for GED recipients.

From a policy perspective it is instructive to note that the branches of U.S. military service have become extremely restrictive in terms of accepting GED recipients as enlistees. This policy shift was based upon years of research on military enlistees which resulted in data that showed GED recipients had service attrition rates of twice those with a high school diploma or some college credit. Furthermore, studies on the impact of making GEDs available to

teenagers suggest that the mere fact the GED appears to be an “equivalent” credential may increase the high school dropout rates. The Administration is staunchly opposed to any modification of APS that would further mislead our young people into perceiving the GED track to be, in any way, comparable and leading to the same rewards as the rigorous standards associated with Alaska’s scholarship.

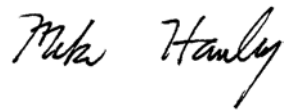
Proposal: Create Two APS Funding Priority Tiers Based on the Number of Students in a District

The Administration supports the structure of the existing statutes and as clarified in HB104 that requires, in the event of a funding shortfall, APS-eligible students would receive scholarship amounts on a pro rata basis. We do not believe that it is sound public policy to reserve any portion of scholarship funds based upon the school district size from which students graduated. Governor Parnell seeks to fully fund all eligible students because they have, in equal measure, satisfied the eligibility requirements—inclusive of students from small districts.

Using district size as a distinguishing factor fails to recognize more influential factors relative to APS-eligibility such as socio-economic status and race/ethnicity. Under the district-size amendment, assuming a shortfall in funding, based on the statistics today, most beneficiaries would not be rural kids. Those prioritized beneficiaries would be students from small cities with a higher proportions of educated parents such as Unalaska, Skagway, Wrangell, and Petersburg. Notwithstanding the public policy issue, there very well may be equal protection concerns if the outcome is discrimination in favor of small districts’ graduates. Again, this would not be a policy the Administration would advance or support.

Thank you for the opportunity to offer these comments. If you or the committee members have additional questions or would like additional information, please contact me at 465-2802 or Diane Barrans at 465-6740.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mike Hanley". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Mike Hanley
Commissioner