

Making Alaska More Competitive



by preparing citizens for college and career

**Prepared for the Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education
by**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Alaska consistently ranks at the bottom in educational performance indicators. Our “student pipeline” is the leakiest in the U.S: For every 50 ninth graders, 31 graduate from high school; 14 go to college; nine return for their sophomore year; and only three receive a degree within six years.

This leaky pipeline produces Alaska citizens who, in large numbers, are foregoing the collective and individual rewards of postsecondary education:

- 1. Public Benefits:** greater workforce productivity and flexibility, decreased demand for government financial assistance programs, increased tax revenue, reduced crime rates, and increased community service and civic participation.
- 2. Private Benefits:** high wage and benefit jobs, less unemployment, higher savings levels, improved health and life expectancy, and improved quality of life for families.

The Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education (ACPE) has partnered with the National College Access Network (NCAN) to survey the postsecondary access and success climate in Alaska. The major findings of this research are that 1) a college-going culture does not exist, and 2) the link between Alaska’s workforce needs and postsecondary education is not widely known.

This report offers five recommendations as a comprehensive strategy to address these findings:

1: Develop Strategies that Create a Statewide College-Going Culture.

Address the root cause for low educational achievement by providing the support counselors, teachers, and family members need to encourage students to see themselves as “college material” and prepare for college accordingly.

2: Establish a K-16 Partnership Environment among Postsecondary, K-12, Business, and Community groups.

Hold high schools and postsecondary institutions jointly accountable for a seamless alignment of high school standards with college/workplace expectations—starting in kindergarten and continuing through postsecondary education credentials.

3: Establish a Peer Mentoring Program to Enhance College Access.

Assist low-income, first generation, and underrepresented students to enroll and succeed in postsecondary education through a program new to Alaska, but with proven national success.

4: Build on AlaskAdvantage Programs to Increase Awareness of Postsecondary Opportunities.

Ensure widespread comprehension that higher education is not only attainable but essential by expanding these established and successful age-specific early awareness programs statewide.

5: Request the Governor to Focus Cabinet-level Attention on the Issue of Access to Postsecondary Education for Alaskans.

Leverage the existing Postsecondary Education Access Advisory Team to develop and present to the Governor specific plans to expand access to higher education for Alaskans.

This investment can, and will, reap significant rewards for individual Alaskans and the state’s overall economic and social health. Each recommendation is eminently doable and affordable. The cost of doing nothing far exceeds the relatively modest cost of implementing these recommendations.



Introduction

**If an unfriendly power
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A quarter of a century ago, a prominent report titled *A Nation at Risk*, written by the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983), lamented that the educational foundations of the society were being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens the very future of the nation with regard to its unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technology innovation. In promoting a learning society, the Commission noted the following: "At the heart of such a society is the commitment to a set of values and to a system of education that affords all members the opportunity to stretch their minds to full capacity." In many ways, this report could have been written about Alaska today. Paraphrasing the admonishment from the report, if an unfriendly power had attempted to impose on Alaska the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of aggression.

This report provides compelling evidence that expanding access to postsecondary education, both collegiate and vocational, is key to a strong future for Alaska citizens. With pending gasline development and attraction of new investment from industry, Alaska is at the dawn of a new era of economic growth. However, without the education and training that prepares Alaska citizens for critical career fields, Alaska will miss the opportunity to maximize related benefits.

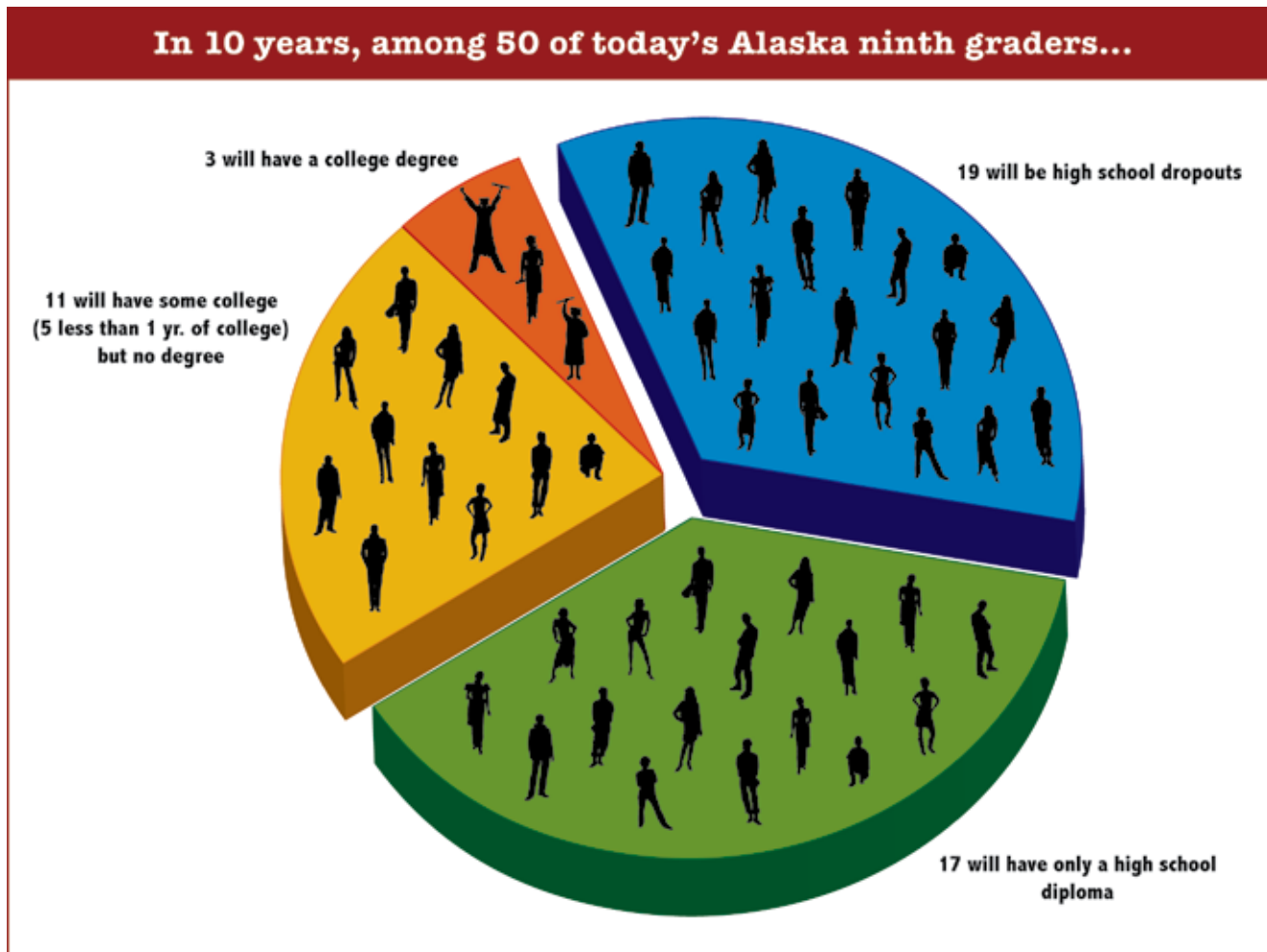
How Well is Alaska Educating its Citizens?

One way to understand how well Alaska is educating its citizens is to compare it with the other forty-nine states. What state in the entire United States ranks eighth from the bottom in the number of ninth graders graduating four years later? The answer is Alaska, with a high school graduation rate of only 62.5 percent in 2004. What state ranks third from the bottom among all the 50 states regarding the chance of ninth graders attending college? The answer is Alaska. A little over one-quarter (28.1 percent) of fall first-time college freshmen in Alaska enrolled anywhere in the U.S. in 2002 were ninth graders four years earlier. What state ranks fourth from the bottom regarding high school seniors going directly to college? Alaska. A little over 40 percent (44.9) of Alaska high school seniors attended college anywhere in the U.S. in the following fall semester. According to the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (2006), what state ranks last in first-time college freshmen returning for their second year? Alaska. Alaska ranks last in the number of freshmen receiving a bachelor's degree within 150 percent of the normal program length. In 2005, only one Alaska student in five (20.3 percent) achieved a bachelor's degree within six years. As shown by Figure 1, the student pipeline in Alaska looks like this: For every 50 ninth graders, 31 will graduate from high school, 14 will go to college, nine will still be enrolled in their sophomore year, and three will graduate from college within six years (NCES, 2004).

In 2005, Alaska was dead last (5 percent) in the ratio of degrees and credentials awarded to the number of students enrolled. In 2004, Alaska ranked third from the bottom in the percentage (7.2 percent) of the population, 18 to 64 years old, enrolled in college. Finally, according to the National Report Card on Higher Education, when compared internationally, Alaska does not fare well in the proportion of students who complete certificates or degrees. With only nine out of 100 students in 2004 completing certificates or degrees, Alaska lags behind such countries such as Mexico, the Czech Republic, and Turkey (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2006).

The evidence is crystal clear that the state of Alaska needs to improve its performance in educating its youth. As the well-educated baby boomer generation begins to retire, the young population that will replace it does not appear prepared educationally to maintain or enhance the state's economic position. College and career preparation is the fulcrum that will tip this emerging cohort of Alaska youth toward becoming part of the solution or part of the problem. Alaska's underperformance in educating its citizens can be expected to restrict the state's access to a competitive workforce, limit its ability to attract business and industry investment, and weaken its economy over time.

Figure 1



Why Do We Care?

What difference does it make that Alaskans are consistently at the low end of the scale with regard to educational indicators? Does it really matter? Perhaps the following can shed some light. The Institute for Higher Education Policy surveyed the extensive literature and compiled benefits of postsecondary education (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 1998 and 2005). More recently, the College Board provided detailed evidence of the public and private benefits of continuing education beyond high school (Baum and Ma, 2007). The following is a summary of their impressive findings, including some Alaska-specific data.

Public Economic Benefits

Public economic benefits are those benefits for which there can be broad economic, fiscal, or labor market effects. In general, these benefits result in the overall improvement of the economy as a result of citizens' participation in postsecondary education.

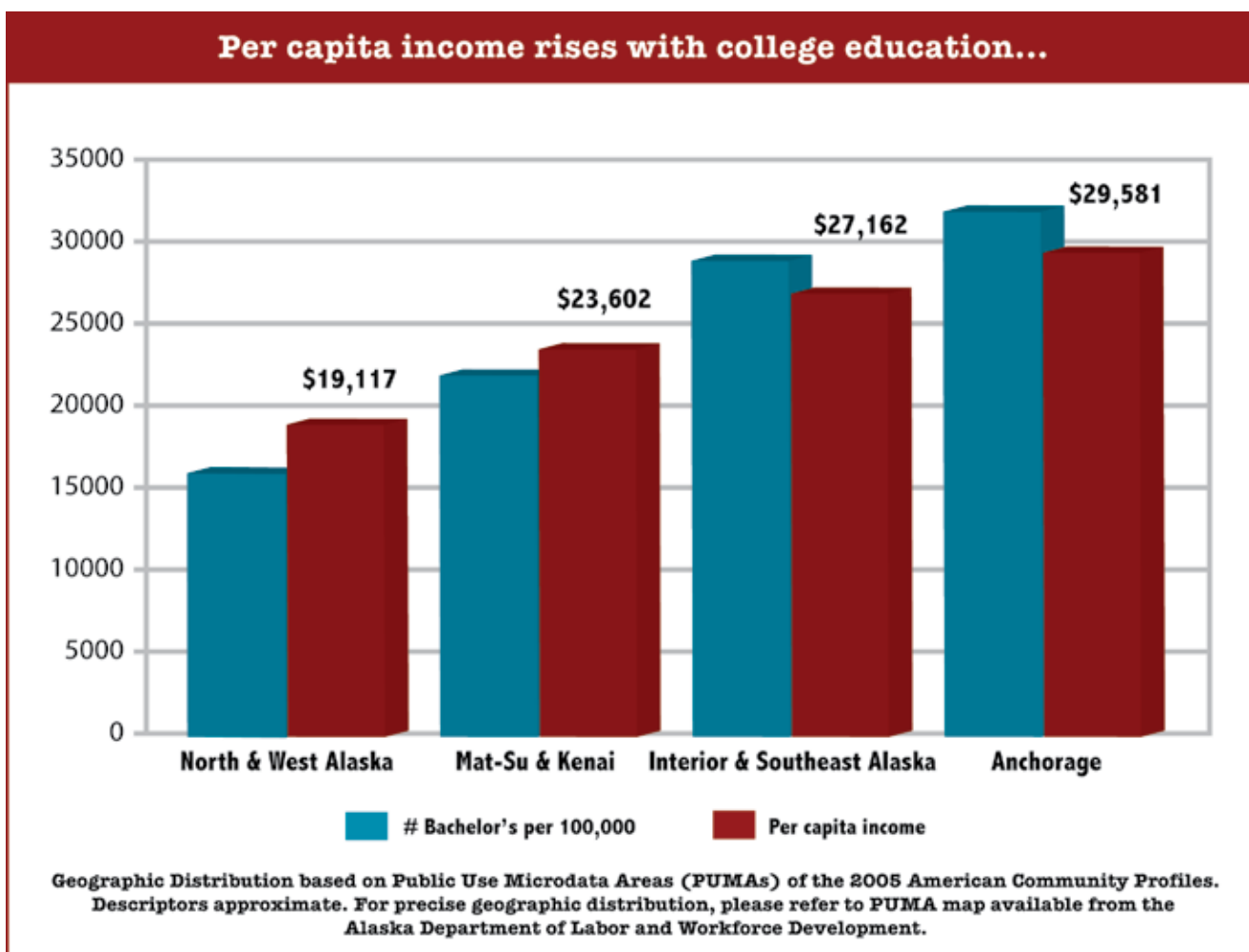
- **Greater Productivity.** Worker productivity is typically measured as output per worker or per hour worked. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, rising levels of educational attainment were responsible for about 14 percent of the growth in output per hour worked in the private sector. In fact, several studies have estimated that increases in educational attainment have offset what otherwise would have been a serious decline in the growth in U.S. productivity (Decker, et al. 1997).
- **Increased Workforce Flexibility.** Postsecondary education contributes to increased workforce flexibility by educating individuals in foundational skills—critical thinking, writing, interpersonal communication—that are essential to the state's ability to retain its competitive edge in a global economy. Workforce flexibility is particularly critical to business and industry, which is continually trying to adapt to a rapidly changing economic environment.

- **Decreased Burden on Governmental Financial Support.** Those who have attended postsecondary education require government assistance programs at substantially lower rates than high school graduates. In 2005, 19 percent of high school graduates, 15 percent of those with some college but no degree, 12 percent of those with an associate degree, and six percent of bachelor's degree recipients lived in households that participated in Medicaid. Eight percent of high school graduates, six percent of those with some college, five percent of those awarded an associate degree, and only one percent of bachelor's degree recipients lived in households in the National School Lunch Program. Also, six percent of high school graduates, five percent of those with some college but no degree, four percent of those with an associate degree, and only one percent of those with a bachelor's degree lived in households that received food stamps.

In Alaska, 5.3 percent of those without a high school diploma relied on some form of public assistance—compared to a 2.1 percent national average for those at the same educational level, as did 3.5 percent with a high school diploma—compared to a 0.9 percent national average for that educational level. These are the second highest and highest rates in the nation for reliance on public assistance for those educational levels.

- **Increased Tax Revenues.** Citizens with higher education levels generally contribute more to the tax base as a result of their higher earnings. In 2005, the typical college graduate working full-time paid 134 percent more in federal income taxes and almost 80 percent more in total federal, state, and local taxes than the typical high school graduate. Those who hold professional degrees paid almost \$19,000 more in total taxes in 2005 than high school graduates.

Figure 2



- **Economic Benefits to Others.** Workers with lower education levels earn more if others in the same metropolitan area are more educated. Controlling for other factors, a one percentage point increase in the proportion of the population holding a college degree leads to a 1.9 percent increase in the wages of workers without a high school diploma and a 1.6 percent increase in the wages of high school graduates. Further, a one percentage point in the proportion of the population holding a four-year college degree leads to an increase of about 1.2 percent in the wages of workers with some college and an increase of 0.6 percent in the wages of college graduates. As illustrated in Figure 2, data from the 2005 American Community Service Profiles demonstrates how the per capita income of geographic regions rises with the number of bachelor's degree holders in that region (Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development).

Private Economic Benefits

Private economic benefits are those benefits that have economic, fiscal, or labor market effects on the citizens who have participated in postsecondary education.

- **Higher Salaries and Benefits.** In both lifetime and average annual income terms, individuals earn more as a result of their higher levels of education. In 2005, for example, the typical full-time worker in the United States with a four-year college degree earned \$50,900, 62 percent more than the \$31,500 earned by the typical full-time worker with only a high school diploma. Those with master's degrees earned almost twice as much, and those with professional degrees earned over three times as much per year as high school graduates. Median earnings with some college but no degree were 18 percent higher than those for high school graduates, and adults with associate degrees earned 29 percent more than high school graduates. In Alaska, a bachelor's degree will result in an average salary 47 percent higher than a high school diploma alone.

Focusing upon lifetime earnings, the typical bachelor's degree recipient can expect to earn about 61 percent more over a forty year working life than the typical high school graduate earns over the same period. Compared to those without a high school diploma, a bachelor's degree recipient can expect to earn well over 100 percent more over a lifetime. Also, those individuals who have attended college receive better fringe benefits, including vacation time and health care.

- **Employment.** Citizens who have gone to college are employed at higher rates and with greater consistency than those who have not attended college. This gap between unemployment rates occurs between those with differential educational attainment regardless of whether the economy is booming or having a downturn. Compared nationally, Alaska has the 2nd highest rate of non-employed persons without high school diplomas, at 17.3 percent, and the highest rate of non-employed persons with a high school diploma, at 12.4 percent. On the other hand, Alaskans with bachelor's and advanced degrees had rates of non-employment below the national average for those educational levels.
- **Higher Savings Levels.** Those with bachelor's degrees or more have higher value interest-earning assets, home equity, and financial assets. College-educated citizens contribute at higher rates to retirement plans, mutual funds, and other savings devices. Also, among full-time workers ages 25 and older, 69 percent of four-year college graduates were offered pension plans by their employers in 2005. Employer-provided pension plans were available to 66 percent of associate degree recipients, 59 percent of some college with some college but no degree, 53 percent of high school graduates, and only 32 percent of those who didn't finish high school.
- **Improved Working Conditions.** The working conditions of persons who have gone to college have been found to be substantially better than those of individuals who did not attend college. College educated citizens tend to work more in white-collar jobs, in office buildings or other facilities with controlled environment conditions and with conveniences—ranging from computers, to on-site child care, to consistent work hours—that improve the quality of their lives.

Public Social Benefits

Public social benefits accrue to groups of people, or to society broadly, that are not directly related to economic, fiscal, or labor market benefits.

- **Reduced Crime Rates.** Incarceration rates in state prisons in 1993 show there were 1,829 prisoners with one to three years of high school per 100,000 population, compared to 290 prisoners per 100,000 for those who graduated from high school and 122 per 100,000 for those with at least some college. Alaska's incarceration rates mirror the national figures with approximately 1,900 prisoners with less than a high school diploma per 100,000 population, compared to about 120 per 100,000 for those who graduated from high school and around 30 prisoners per 100,000 for those with at least some college (Harlow, C.W. 2003).
- **Community Service.** Higher levels of education are associated with higher levels of participation in volunteer activities. In 2006, about 27 percent of adults volunteered through an organization. Among college graduates, the volunteer rate was 43 percent—over twice the 19 percent for high school graduates. Also, among those who volunteered, the median number of volunteer hours increased with educational attainment.
- **Increased Quality of Civic Life.** Regardless of age group, adults with higher levels of education are more likely to vote than those with less education. For example, in the 2004 presidential election, 76 percent of U.S. citizens who were college graduates between ages 25 and 44 reported voting, compared to 49 percent of high school graduates. Among older citizens between ages 45 to 64, 83 percent of college graduates reported voting compared to 63 percent of high school graduates. In Alaska, 61 percent of those 25 years and older with a high school diploma vote, compared to 82 percent of those with a bachelor's degree.
- **Attitudes.** Adults with higher levels of education are more likely than others to be open to differing opinions. In 2004, 79 percent of adults with advanced degrees and 73 percent of individuals with bachelor's degrees believed it was very important (6 or 7 on a scale ranging from 1 to 7) to try to understand the reasoning behind the opinions of others. This compares to 67 percent of associate degree holders, 64 percent of high school graduates, and 59 percent of adults who did not complete high school.

Private Social Benefits

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- **Improved Health and Life Expectancy.** Within every age group, the percentage of adults perceiving themselves as very healthy increases with higher levels of education. For example, 68 percent of four-year college graduates between ages 55 and 64 reported being in excellent or very good health in 2005, compared to 53 percent of associate degree recipients, 51 percent of those with some college but no degree, 44 percent of high school graduates, and 28 percent of those who did not complete high school. Surveys by the Public Health Service indicate that those with a college education exercise or play sports at higher rates than non-college participants. Also, 14 percent of those with a bachelor's degree smoke cigarettes, compared to 23 percent of those with some college, 30 percent of high school graduates, and 37 percent of those with less than a high school diploma. Finally, life expectancies are higher for those who have attended college than for those who have not. In Alaska, less than half without a high school diploma report being in good, very good, or excellent health, compared to 95 percent of those with a bachelor's degree.
- **Improved Quality of Life for Offspring.** Children whose parents have attended college have a considerably higher quality of life. Evidence of these improved life conditions is ample. Children of college-educated parents are more likely to graduate from high school and continue on to postsecondary education. They are more likely to have higher cognitive development. Daughters of college-educated mothers are substantially less likely to become unmarried teen parents. The children of college graduates are more than three times as likely as the children of high school graduates to participate in scouting and arts-related after-school activities.

- **Better Consumer Decision-making.** Citizens with higher education levels have increased capacity to make informed decisions as consumers. For instance, individuals make better decisions about how to choose a physician appropriate to their medical needs, financial resources, and geographic location.

Although these benefits of increasing educational attainment are listed in a catalog fashion, it is important to understand that the combination of benefits can be described as a “cascade” of both private and public benefits. Kramer (1993) illustrates this cascade of benefits in discussing literacy. The presence of literate people in society creates advantages for others as well. People can rely on the literacy of others in designing production processes and reaching markets with advertising. Therefore, general literacy becomes a public benefit. More to the point, benefits of participating in postsecondary education can be public and private, or a combination of the two. Any single benefit, public or private, could also lead to further public and private benefits—the cascade of benefits that result from education.

A Word About Cultural Barriers to Education

If education is so beneficial and the lack thereof is so costly, why does not everyone pursue it? The levels of educational attainment and academic aspirations are often dependent on income, health, socioeconomic status, parental educational history, and geographic location. A combination of all these factors influences an individual’s perception of the value and accessibility of college and career education and can become an obstruction to education, the so-called “cultural barrier.”

A culture is a society’s or an organization’s underlying values, beliefs, and meanings that are deeply held and enduring. Cultural barriers reflect the family history, attitudes and values of an individual’s social environment. Cultural barriers exist because of the lack of role models, absence of values and attitudes that demonstrate the importance of attending a postsecondary educational institution, or a perceived lack of the social knowledge and skills required for continuing education by the student. Students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds have lower educational aspirations, persistence in college, and educational attainment than their peers from high SES backgrounds prior to and during college (Walpole, 2003). These differences begin at a young age, are cumulative, result from many forces, and are shaped by SES differences such as parental interaction styles and expectations, school structure, school experiences and expectations, college costs, and financial aid availability. Parental expectations and definitions of success are particularly important for pursuing or continuing college and career preparation. These expectations vary with SES. Low SES parents are more likely to view a high school diploma as the norm for their children than high SES parents, to whom a bachelor’s or advanced degree is considered the norm (Walpole, 2003).

In states such as Alaska, where the level of educational attainment is relatively low, academic aspirations and the value ascribed to college and career preparation will be relatively low. Education beyond high school is not a priority and not a part of the culture overall. A major challenge facing policy makers in Alaska is to break down the cultural barriers to college and career education by changing deeply entrenched beliefs and perceptions.

Considerable research has been performed on cultural barriers. Patricia McDonough (October 2007) notes that key determinates to college attendance are (1) having college plans at least by 7th grade, (2) attending a college-focused high school, and (3) having families who expect their children to go to college. Several strategies have been suggested to decrease cultural barriers to education. They include:

- ✓ Lowering financial barriers to college affordability;
- ✓ Ensuring sound academic preparation for postsecondary education;
- ✓ Encouraging counselors to advise students for college and focus schools on their college preparatory mission;
- ✓ Increasing the quality and quantity of college entrance and financial aid information; and
- ✓ Engaging families as college preparation partners, preferably early in the educational process.

A major challenge facing policy makers in Alaska is to break down the cultural barriers to college and career education by changing deeply entrenched beliefs and perceptions.

What is Alaska Doing to Enhance Access to Postsecondary Education?

Does Alaska have the infrastructure capacity in place to address the issue of access to and success in postsecondary education at the statewide level? The answer is an unequivocal yes. Many dedicated and knowledgeable citizens throughout the state in high schools, universities, business, communities, and state government are working to enhance the educational process. As will be discussed later, many of these people are volunteering their time to serve on an advisory group that is focused on promoting college and career education for all of Alaska's citizens. In addition, Alaska has an existing state agency, the Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education (ACPE), dedicated to promoting, supporting, and providing access to education beyond high school for Alaskans.

Established in 1974 by the Legislature, ACPE has a long history of helping students realize their postsecondary education goals. Particularly in 2002, the Legislature took significant steps to addressing higher education access issues by authorizing the Commission and the Alaska Student Loan Corporation (ASLC) to put into place the AlaskAdvantage Programs, which comprise a suite of outreach and educational financial aid products and services designed to increase access to the benefits of postsecondary education. Specific areas of focus include (1) early awareness programs for children, teens, and parents, (2) tailored outreach programs throughout the state, (3) programs in support of adult learners and Alaska's workforce, (4) financial aid programs, (5) promotion and support of Alaska postsecondary education institutions, and (6) postsecondary education consumer protection.

The Commission partnered with the National College Access Network (NCAN), a nationally recognized organization committed to improving access to and success in postsecondary education for first-generation, underrepresented and low-income students. NCAN actively supports state and local non-profit college access programs that provide counseling, advice, and financial assistance designed to increase the number of students who pursue college and career education beyond high school. NCAN also shares best practices among the network, provides leadership and technical assistance, helps communities create new college access programs, and advocates for public policy in support of the students the organization serves.

To determine the postsecondary access and success climate in Alaska, ACPE and NCAN, through a process called "gap analysis," gathered information through NCAN's toolkit surveys and one-on-one structured interviews with seventeen of Alaska's prominent education stakeholders. The selected interviewees were not only recognized as leaders or experts in their field, but represented the five major sectors: postsecondary institutions, secondary schools, community organizations, state government, and the business community. In addition to conducting their interviews, ACPE has brought these stakeholders together to form an Alaskan Postsecondary Education Access Advisory Team, which is serving as the gap analysis project workgroup as well as consultants to other postsecondary education access programs across the state.

The survey portion of the gap analysis was designed to help identify postsecondary access activities or programs in four types of institutions: (1) high schools, (2) postsecondary education institutions, (3) business-education partnerships, and (4) community-based organizations. The surveys were not intended to measure the breadth and depth of all programs, but to provide an overview of what programs and services are provided to whom and to create an inventory of providers offering postsecondary access services. Postsecondary access refers to all educational programs beyond high school, including apprenticeship and certificate programs, vocational and trade schools, and two- and four-year colleges and universities.

The following is a summary of the observations gleaned from the structured interviews (Swedlow and McFadden, 2007).

Quality of Secondary Schools: Rating the academic quality of secondary schools in Alaska on a scale of 1 to 10 (with 1 being poor and 10 being excellent), the interview respondents noted that the urban schools are doing a much better job with an average of 6.6, primarily because they have more resources. Rural schools were rated much lower at 5 because of the immense challenges they face. Home schooling was rated very effective at 7.5.

Quality of Preparation for Postsecondary Education: Chugach School District was cited as heading reform in developing a standards-based system, along with the Anchorage School

District in using technology to encourage overall learning. Other areas that are receiving attention include (1) small learning communities, (2) accountability of No Child Left Behind, and (3) curriculum improvement, especially in math and science. Aligning the objectives of education reform with a strong dedication to a college-going culture may be the best prescription for improving high school graduation rates, postsecondary participation rates, and narrowing achievement gaps.

Barriers to Postsecondary Education: The barriers to participation in postsecondary education cited by interviewees were consistent with other communities throughout the nation, though Alaska is faced with additional challenges because of its large numbers of remote or sparsely populated communities. The largest barriers to postsecondary education access and success cited by respondents were social and cultural issues, lack of awareness of available financial resources and the fact that many students are not prepared academically. It was critically noted that education beyond high school is not a priority and not part of the culture overall.

Education beyond high school is not a priority and not part of the culture overall.

Tracking Students Beyond High School: All of the structured interview participants agreed that tracking students beyond high school is very difficult to do. In general, respondents noted that rural students tend to stay in their communities and urban students pursue military careers or continue working the job they held during high school. In addition, underserved students who do go to college do not often persist.

Cause of Low Educational Aspirations Among Alaska Natives: Several issues were cited related to low educational aspirations among Alaska Natives. Among them, strong family and community ties were prominent and related circumstances—including fear of the children leaving the community completely and the rejection of students upon their return to the communities. Lack of information regarding postsecondary opportunities contributed to low educational aspirations along with the cyclical impact of poverty. For example, students who have experienced a life exposed to alcohol, drugs, violence or suicide may repeat the pattern in their adult lives. Lack of employment opportunities was another cause cited as extending the poverty cycle.

Availability of Higher Education: Interviewees provided a wide range of answers to this topic. Responses ranged from “very affordable” to “it’s expensive and there is no financial aid.” There seemed to be limited awareness of ACPE’s AlaskAdvantage Education Grant Program, though all respondents referred to the Alaska Scholars Program as a source of aid. There appears to be some concern and lack of information about the cost of postsecondary education and the financial aid options available to students in Alaska.

Business Involvement in Higher Education: The respondents noted that the business community is generally very interested and supportive of higher education. However, the level of support depends on how the leadership within a specific company values higher education. Several interviewees stated that the Native Corporations provide scholarships for the Alaska Native populations.

College Access Service Providers: Structured interview participants identified several organizations that provide college access services. They included:

- ✓ Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education (AlaskAdvantage Programs)
- ✓ GEAR UP Statewide Grant Program
- ✓ TRIO Programs (Talent Search, etc.)
- ✓ Native Corporations (CIRI, Chugach AK Corp.)
- ✓ Junior Achievement
- ✓ Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development
- ✓ Tribal Government (Native Village-Kotzebue)
- ✓ Nine Star Enterprises

In addition to the structured interviews, the surveys provided information that helped to shed additional light on the efforts to increase access and success in postsecondary education. The following is a summary of the results.

Business-Education Partnership Survey: Of the eleven respondents to the survey, 82 percent reported active partnerships with several school districts in their area. The primary focus of the partnerships appears to be with high schools, with a concentration on students in 9th through 11th grades. Almost half of the businesses reported partnerships specifically with high school seniors. The activities for these partnerships varied from donations for school events, to the provision of college scholarships, to employees serving as guest speakers. The business community in general favors the provision of funding for services such as the awarding of scholarships and donations of supplies to schools. To a lesser extent, businesses participate in career days and job shadowing activities. Finally, the organizations that responded to the survey indicated that most of their partnerships occur with the general student population rather than the students with the greatest need.

Community-Based Organization Survey: It is important to note that the overwhelming majority of community-based organizations were tribal. Over two-thirds of the community-based organization respondents indicated that they participated in “outreach activities for students and families in the community/state.” When asked to specify programs that focus on college access, programs dedicated to providing information about postsecondary education opportunities and a variety of individual programs focused on providing financial assistance to students received considerable attention, with lesser focus on tutoring and mentoring services for middle and/or high school students.

Community-based organizations in Alaska provide most of their services to high school seniors. Their focus appears to be on low-income and first-generation college-going students with significant attention to the Alaska Native population. Community-based organizations also appear to specifically target students with the greatest need.

Postsecondary Survey: Of the twelve respondents to the postsecondary survey, ten noted that they provide college access outreach activities for Alaska’s students and their families. Four indicated serving students across the state, rather than focusing on one or more specific communities. Most of the services are pre-college and university-based programs and may serve as a recruiting tool for a specific institution or program as opposed to college access and success tools. A little more time is spent with high school seniors than with underclassmen. It is unclear whether this time with seniors is spent encouraging higher education in general or advocating for enrollment at a specific institution. However, a strong career exploration component was emphasized. Scholarship support services, financial aid nights, college visits, and academic enrichment activities were also frequent activities for close to half of the respondents. A majority of the postsecondary respondents indicated serving the general population with an emphasis on the Native American population.

High School Survey: All of the high school survey respondents, most of which came from Anchorage School District, reported that college access services were available to their students. The services are spread among local college campus-based programs (especially with the University of Alaska Anchorage), to some school district programs (Career Resource Rooms and Advisors), and several national programs (especially TRIO-related programs). It was unclear from the survey data as to the breadth and depth of the program offerings, or the impact of offerings on student college participation rates. Information campaigns and college financial aid were activities that were provided by most high schools, in addition to tutoring, mentoring, college selection, application assistance, and career exploration. Services appear to be provided to all populations, with Alaska Native populations receiving the most attention. Ninety percent of the respondents indicated that another person besides the guidance counselor was a key resource person for college access services. Since the Anchorage School District dominated the responses, it could have an advantage over school districts in other communities where guidance counselors are expected to provide college access services in addition to their other responsibilities like scheduling of classes and handling disciplinary problems.

These observations can be summarized by the following major findings:

- A college-going culture needs to be developed and increased throughout the state to transform secondary schools and to reform their orientation and budget toward the goal of preparing Alaska students to access and benefit from postsecondary education opportunities.

- The benefits of college and career education need to be made widely known, with special emphasis on the relationship between Alaska's workforce/economic needs and access to postsecondary education for Alaskan citizens. Postsecondary education access efforts and academic preparation need to work hand-in-hand to ensure that every student has opportunities.
- The true cost of education is not being conveyed effectively. Students need considerable help to understand the cost of college and career education as well as the cost of being uneducated.
- There is significant business sector involvement in Alaska that could be better integrated so students and parents know what is taking place in workplace development and what work opportunities will be available to students. Information should begin to be available as early as the elementary school years.

What Needs to be Done?

This paper has provided compelling evidence that Alaska needs to improve its performance in educating its populace. Without a change in the status quo, the state is limited in its ability to attract and diversify business and promote economic development, in addition to competing both nationally and internationally. In short, the competitive global market along with the information, service, and technology-based economy propels a growing need for postsecondary-educated citizens. Six out of every ten jobs in the economy depend on highly trained workers with the advanced skills that are available with postsecondary education. The state simply cannot stand by and let this situation continue.

The NCAN/ACPE survey results have shown that a variety of activities are being utilized by businesses, community organizations, high schools and colleges to enhance access and success in postsecondary education. Yet, it is apparent that more needs to be done if the state is serious about encouraging more of its citizens to pursue education beyond high school. Existing programs could be both more effective and cost-efficient if integrated at a statewide level. The cost of doing nothing is much greater than the relatively modest cost of the following recommendations, which are presented here for policy makers to consider.

Without a change in the status quo, the state is limited in its ability to attract and diversify business and promote economic development.

Recommendation 1:

Develop Strategies that Create a Statewide College-Going Culture.

As noted earlier in this paper, academic aspirations and the value ascribed to college and career education are relatively low in the state. Thus, as a foundation for all of the recommendations, this one attempts to address what could be called a root cause for low educational achievement. There are several strategies that build a culture that emphasizes pursuing postsecondary education (McDonough, October 2007). It is important to note that the following principles are interrelated and tend to reinforce each other.

- **College Talk:** There is clear ongoing communication within the high school that encourages students to develop a college-going identity. Some indicators of this include newsletter, newspapers, and posters; a college club for middle school students, and an essay contest based on college application questions.
- **Clear Expectations:** Explicit goals of college preparation should be defined and communicated clearly, consistently, and in a variety of ways by families and school personnel. Students can be encouraged to develop four-year plans. Parents can be encouraged to support their children's postsecondary education goals and given the informational resources necessary to do so.
- **Information and Resources:** Students must have access to up-to-date comprehensive postsecondary information and schools must build college knowledge infrastructure. This information could include college-related materials, PSAT/SAT/ACT materials, college catalogs, financial aid materials, and college choice guides. Also, workshops on test

preparation, financial planning, and high school coursework planning can be offered on a systematic basis.

- **Comprehensive Counseling:** All counselors should be college counselors and all student interactions with counselors should be postsecondary education advising opportunities. Counselors should distribute college and career preparation information to all students, faculty, and staff.
- **Testing and Curriculum:** Students should be informed about necessary tests. They should be given the opportunity to prepare for these tests and testing fees should be taken into account. The PSAT should be given on a school day to all 10th graders, with fees waived for needy students. College preparatory classes should be readily available.
- **Faculty Involvement:** Faculty should be active, informed partners with counselors, students, and families. Professional development opportunities should be available to the faculty. Some activities could include classroom decorations and “college corners,” postsecondary education discussions during class time, and mathematics teachers working with PSAT-takers.
- **Family Involvement:** It is imperative that family members have opportunities to gain postsecondary education knowledge and understand their role. Parents should be supported to communicate the belief that, with the right preparation and planning, their children can and should be “college material.” College fairs for students and their families should be scheduled along with evening and weekend parent workshops to learn about college preparation and financial planning.
- **College Partnerships:** Having active links between K-12 schools and local colleges and universities that can lead to field trips, college fairs, and academic enrichment programs is vital. Students at all grade levels can visit college campuses. Also tutoring programs and pen pal programs with college students can enhance these partnerships.
- **Articulation:** Students should have a seamless experience from kindergarten to high school graduation, with ongoing communication among all schools. Students should hear a consistent message at all grade levels; as early as kindergarten, students should see themselves as college material.

Recommendation 2:

Establish a K-16 Partnership Environment among Leadership from Postsecondary Education, K-12, Business and Community-based Organizations.

The purpose of a K-16 partnership environment is to create a seamless web for students from kindergarten to the completion of the bachelor’s degree or other postsecondary education credentials. As discussed earlier, in Alaska, the pipeline of students moving through the educational system is leaking badly. Twenty-two other states have recognized that they have a similar problem and have established K-16 partnerships to proactively address the problem. Four fundamental strategies are being used in many of these states that show great promise (Achieve, Inc. 2007).

- **Align high school standards with real-world expectations:** Aligning high school standards with college and work place expectations can be accomplished only with the dedicated involvement of postsecondary and business communities. In collaboration with K-12 educators, postsecondary education systems must clearly define the skills that high school graduates need to succeed in credit-bearing non-remedial courses. Likewise, business leaders must articulate the skills that graduates need to be successful and advance in their careers. Once the expectations at the end of high school are aligned with the expectations of the postsecondary community and employers, the state can then “back-map” their standards from the end of high school through the lower grades to ensure that their K-12 standards are vertically aligned. The goal is to have a system of standards that reflects a steady progression of knowledge and skills culminating in college and work readiness.

Alaska has already identified and invested the resources to develop a good foundation for this initiative. Alaska’s Work Ready/College Ready Program is a statewide project designed to ensure that all Alaska students and job-seekers have the basic, or transitional skills

required by all post-secondary education and virtually all careers. The program provides the means for students and job-seekers to document their skills by earning a “Career Readiness Certificate,” which is recognized nationwide. Administered by the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development (EED) in cooperation with the Alaska Department of Labor & Workforce Development (DOLWD), the program utilizes WorkKeys assessments—a product of ACT, Inc. Students are able to participate in web-based, individualized, self-paced training available from any computer with Internet access, which is specifically targeted to the skills measured by WorkKeys.

- **Require all students to take a rigorous college and work-ready curriculum:** Whether high school students go directly into postsecondary education or the workforce after graduation, they need a common core of knowledge and skills, especially in English and mathematics. High school students need to take four years of challenging mathematics—at least through Algebra II or its equivalent—and four years of rigorous English aligned with college and work-ready standards. States implementing this requirement are met with the challenge of unprepared students. One strategy to address this issue is to set a rigorous high school curriculum as the “default” diploma option. With the default option, students automatically enroll in the college- and work-ready curriculum but may “opt out” of their requirements only if their parents first sign a waiver. In contrast, students in states without a default rigorous high school curriculum are at risk of unwittingly “opting out” of access to postsecondary education simply as a result of course choices made as early as 9th grade, without understanding the potentially life-long consequences of those choices.

As Alaska raises course requirements, safeguards will need to be put in place to ensure that courses taught in high schools through the state are consistently rigorous and aligned with the state standards. There are at least two approaches to ensuring consistent course content and rigor. One approach is to develop end-of-course testing to measure whether students have mastered the essential knowledge and skills in core courses. Another approach is to produce course-level standards, model curricula or other instructional materials for schools to guide classroom instruction.

- **Align high school and postsecondary assessments:** Assessments need to be rigorous enough to measure college and work readiness. However, most high school tests, particularly those used for graduation, measure those knowledge cores and skills that students learn early in high school. Without sufficient emphasis on the advanced high school content that students will need to be successful in college and the work-place, state assessments fall short of measuring readiness for postsecondary pursuits. Thus, Alaska needs to go beyond its existing tests. A component of the high school assessment system can be added that measures the more advanced skills valued by postsecondary education institutions and the business community.

The experience of other states can be instructive as a number of strategies are emerging with regard to assessment. The most widely pursued strategy is end-of-course tests. Other states are considering modifying their existing high school tests to make them better measures of post-high school readiness. Also, a number of states are incorporating the ACT or SAT into their assessment systems and requiring all students to take those exams.

- **Hold high schools and postsecondary education institutions accountable for student success:** High schools are tasked to prepare all students for college, careers, and citizenship. Yet, preparedness is barely a factor in high school accountability systems. Usually, accountability models are driven by attendance, graduation rates, and performance on high school assessments that often are not reflective of college and work readiness. In addition to more robust high school assessments, a longitudinal data system with the capacity to track student progress from high school through postsecondary education is required. This capacity will allow the state to trace a student’s postsecondary success or failure back to his or her high school experience and use that data to inform and improve the experience for the next class of students. In essence, an effective longitudinal data system would enable policymakers to compare high-school course taking, grades and assessment results with college course-taking patterns, success in first-year college courses and persistence and completion rates.

The Alaska Department of Education and Early Development (EED) has begun to address the issue of developing a single authoritative data structure for education data in Alaska. In November 2005, EED was awarded a grant by the U.S. Department of Education to implement a statewide longitudinal data system. The initiative is comprised of three distinct phases of a larger seven phase project dubbed the Unity Project. Upon completion of these three phases, it will provide accurate, timely, and accessible student-level data to all stakeholders.

It is important to note that any longitudinal system must be cognizant of the federal Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) to protect student privacy. Although FERPA safeguards student privacy, it by no means prohibits states from building a robust K-16 longitudinal data system and using it to improve teaching and learning in high schools.

Recommendation 3:

Establish a Peer Mentoring Program to Enhance College Access.

In recent years, one issue has resonated loud and clear: ensuring access to low-income, first generation, and underrepresented students is a bigger job than high school guidance counselors or financial aid administrators can do alone. Thus, mentoring programs have gained immense popularity as a means of assisting these types of students to enroll and succeed in postsecondary. Mentoring is defined as a sustained relationship between a youth and adult. Through continued involvement, the adult offers support, guidance, and assistance as the younger person faces new challenges. Mentoring programs are established to match a suitable adult or older youth—the mentor—with a younger person. Research on college programs indicates the single most important feature of those that are purported to be successful with individual students is a close, caring relationship with a knowledgeable adult who monitors the student's progress (Pathways to College Network, 2007).

In addition to early exposure, a consistent message that college is possible is necessary throughout the entire secondary education experience.

There are several benefits to mentoring. Students in mentoring programs are more likely to attend and graduate from college. They are less likely to skip classes and they tend to have a better attitude toward school and teachers. They are less likely to experiment with drugs and alcohol and less likely to be violent or arrested. Also students in mentoring programs maintain better relationships with parents, teachers, and peers. A key similarity in all successful mentoring programs is a strong relationship between the mentor and the student being mentored. A good example of a mentoring program is GEAR UP, which is a federal program designed to increase the number of low-income students attending and succeeding in college. Students enter the program in middle school and are followed through high school. The program focuses on academics and postsecondary preparation. Another example is the National College Advising Corps, which places recent college graduates into high schools as near-peer guides to college resources and information. It is believed that high school students can relate better to these college graduates because of their relative young age and because they recently successfully completed the college processes themselves.

Recommendation 4:

Build on the AlaskAdvantage Programs to Increase Awareness of Postsecondary Education Opportunities.

Since 2002, the Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education, funded by the Alaska Student Loan Corporation (ASLC) has administered AlaskAdvantage Programs, which are outreach and educational financial aid products and services designed to increase access to college and career education. Among the areas of focus are early awareness programs for children, teens, and parents. This strategy includes actual classroom curriculum components integrated with hands-on learning activities. After five years of experience delivering the AlaskAdvantage Programs, early awareness initiatives appear to have the most promise. In addition to early exposure, a consistent message that college is possible is necessary throughout the entire secondary education experience.

Three programs, which are consistent with strategies for creating a college-going culture found in the first recommendation, are recommended to be expanded. The first, *I Know I Can*, is a

story book specifically designed for 2nd and 3rd grade students to begin career exploration and see its connection to postsecondary education. Through this motivational story line, children learn that college is possible. A pilot *I Know I Can* program is currently being offered by a partnership between ACPE and the University of Alaska.

The second program is designed for upper elementary and/or early middle school students, and creates an awareness of higher education while also instilling the idea that going to college is an attainable goal. Called *I'm Going to College*, a twelve session curriculum along with a visit to a local college campus promotes early encouragement of postsecondary education and serves to involve parents, counselors, and teachers. Feedback from this initiative has been very positive.

The third program offers individual assistance to those who come into the "Success Center" located in one administrative location. Usually those who need assistance the most are less apt to visit the center and the program would be more effective if offered in several venues. In conjunction with the mentoring program outlined in Recommendation 3, the services offered by a success center should be available in schools throughout the state.

Recommendation 5:

Request the Governor to Focus Cabinet-Level Attention on the Issue of Access to Postsecondary Education for Alaskans by Creating a Statewide Governor's K-16 Advisory Council.

The ACPE Postsecondary Education Access Advisory Team already exists and has been very effective in guiding the development of these recommendations. Leveraging this existing body with an initial charge to develop plans for the implementation of these recommendations for presentation to the Governor would be an effective way to expand statewide benefit from the advisory body, without adding any demand on state financial resources.

As noted earlier in this report, the Advisory Team, coordinated through ACPE, is comprised of a group of diverse Alaskan citizens with considerable knowledge and experience in all aspects of education. In addition to exhibiting dedication to the education of the citizens of the state of Alaska, they contain those talents, understandings, and skills needed to address the myriad issues outlined in this report. They also represent all five segments of society related to education: high schools, postsecondary education institutions, business and industry, community-based organizations, and state government. To maximize efficiency, the charge to the body should be specifically limited in time to that period necessary to identify where linkages exist and where they need to be built or reinforced, and to develop a strategic plan for the governor's consideration. ACPE leadership of the advisory body ensures a statewide focus, informed by resources already located within or available to the Commission, and also provides for advisory body mission-centered activities to be funded through the Alaska Student Loan Corporation, without cost to the state's General Fund.

These five recommendations represent a comprehensive strategy for attacking the conundrum of enhancing the educational aspirations of Alaskans and, at the same time, providing the wherewithal to achieve those goals. To a large degree, the recommendations are interrelated and tend to reinforce each other. Each is eminently doable and can be achieved at a modest cost to the state. This investment can, and will, reap significant rewards to not only individual Alaska citizens but to the state's economic and social health. And there is no better time to move ahead than right now!

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