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March 15, 2011

The Honorable Joe Thomas
Alaska Senate
State Capitol Room 514
Juneau AK, 99801

The Honorable Kevin Meyer
Alaska Senate
State Capitol Room 103
Juneau AK, 99801

Ref: SB 84, "An Act relating to funding for high school vocational education as a component of funding for public schools; increasing the base student allocation used in the public school funding formula; and providing for an effective date."

Dear Senators Meyer and Thomas:

The Juneau Economic Development Council (JEDC) applauds the Legislature's commitment to Alaska's K-12 public schools. JEDC is home to a statewide K-12 Science Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) initiative, working to increase student interest and competencies in STEM fields. With funding from the U.S. Department of Defense, the STEM program has directly benefited over 5,000 students, 323 teachers, in 23 school districts over the last four years.

We support the Senate Education Committee's proposal to increase the Base Student Allocation (BSA) within the Foundation formula and urge the Committee to increase the BSA to keep pace with inflation and meet those costs that are beyond a District's direct control – such as rising fuel oil prices. Erosion of schools' purchasing power is counter-productive, and highly unlikely to move schools faster towards the success we all hope for.

JEDC also supports attention to and increase in funding for vocational education, which we understand encompasses STEM courses as well as more traditional vocational education course options.

STEM skills reflect the changing job requirements in our increasingly global and technology-driven economy. These skills are required not only for professional sector jobs, but also, increasingly, infused in and required for mid-level occupations. The Alaska Department of Labor predicts that by 2018 there will be over 8,000 job openings in STEM-related jobs in Alaska (2,700 new STEM jobs and 5,400 more openings as workers retire). Jobs within health occupations add even more jobs to this total.

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These jobs require the ability to apply math and science skills in a real world context. Unfortunately, Alaska high school graduates are often ill prepared for the caliber of work required in colleges and technical schools to access these jobs. For example, of the Alaskan students taking the ACT test in 2010,

- Only 47% were prepared for college level math; and
- Only 31% met college-ready benchmarks in science.

In short, vocational education, including STEM programs that include a robust hands-on element and links to real world challenges, opportunities and jobs, are increasingly important to our state's economic health.

We encourage the Committee to expand funding for vocational education into the middle school grades. The middle school years are pivotal in shaping a young person's attitudes towards jobs, future possibilities and their place in the world. Through JEDC's STEM initiative it is clear that for many students, STEM projects such as FIRST robotics and SeaPerch underwater ROV "build" are often a student's first introduction to building, tinkering, designing, redesigning, and messing around with science, technology, engineering and mathematics. It is important there be more hands-on, vocational and STEM opportunities for students in the middle school years.

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration and ongoing work on behalf of the students of Alaska.

Sincerely,



Kurt Fredriksson
Board Chair



Brian Holst
Executive Director