

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE

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EDUCATION COMMITTEE



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SENATOR Tom Begich
SENATE DISTRICT J

MEMORANDUM

TO: Members of the Senate Finance Sub-Committee on the Department of Education & Early Development
FROM: Senator Tom Begich
DATE: March 13, 2017
RE: Proposed cuts to Alaska's Education Budget

I wanted to thank you for an opportunity to make some brief comments on the pending budget recommendations to the full Senate Finance Committee, and add these thoughts to the record.

First, I would like to thank the Chair for his consideration of an idea proposed by our office that would improve the rate of return on the Public Schools Trust Fund. This is an overdue idea – however these additional funds might be used to support education – and I am glad to see his and the Chair of our Education policy committee support the approach. I think this is a needed, albeit small, component of how we address our long term fiscal needs.

Second, while I may not be supportive of the approach to meet Mt. Edgecumbe School's budget, I am pleased that through the recommend action of the Chair we are showing support for this important program.

Finally, however, I must disagree with the elimination of our support for our ongoing Pre K grants. There are many reasons for this, but the primary one is that Pre K and our early education approaches are having a significant impact in our schools, and virtually all national data that has been presented to us underscores not only the key outcome of Pre K to prepare students for school, but that this preparation – when properly presented in a quality Pre K program such as that provided through our Pre K grants – has benefits throughout a child's life in school. Further, as James Heckman in his land mark work in education has identified:

"Short term costs are more than offset by immediate and long-term benefits through reduction in the need for special education and remediation, better health outcomes, reduced need for social services, lower criminal justice costs and increased self-sufficiency and productivity among families," (from [*Invest in early childhood development: Reduce deficits, strengthen the economy*](#), James J. Heckman).

As has been noted in testimony in the other body: *"In one study, the estimated return on investment was \$7 for every dollar invested in public preschool. Other studies showed a 7-13% per year return on investment. And the College Board, which represents 6,000 of the world's*

leading educational institutions, lists pre-K for all three and four-year olds first among its ten recommendations for increasing college enrollment.” (House Finance Committee testimony on DEED Operating Budget provided by Coalition for Education Equity, March 2017).

All of this underscores the success of those exposed to quality pre K in later life. The ramifications are substantial. In Alaska the importance of these Pre K outcomes for our students – particularly in those areas where students are approaching K-12 as second language learners – cannot be more important. Where we provide Pre-K our students are doing better.

In our discussions of Pre K, I often bring up the *Moore* litigation which, as you all know, I was involved in in my prior capacity as an advisor to the Citizens for the Educational Advancement of Alaska’s Children (now the Coalition for Education Equity). I think it is important to understand what the Court determined in *Moore* as differentiated from the *Moore* Settlement.

In *Moore* Judge Gleason recognized in a series of rulings over a two-year time frame that Alaska students had a constitutional right to an education that ensures “*...each child in this state is accorded a meaningful opportunity to achieve proficiency in reading, writing, math, and science – the four subjects encompassed within the State’s performance standards.*” By 2009 Judge Gleason found “strong and persuasive evidence” that the Department’s interventions in Alaska’s chronically low performing schools and districts had ignored both known causes of poor educational performance and known educational solutions to these problems. In particular, for this discussion, the Judge found that “[t]he State’s interventions had not given adequate consideration of pre-Kindergarten and other intensive early learning initiatives designed to address the unique educational challenges faced by students in Alaska’s chronically underperforming schools districts.”

This and other findings led to the state and the plaintiffs engaging in and finally reaching the *Moore* Settlement in January 2011. The *Moore* Settlement was time-limited and again underscored the belief by all parties that the Department of Education and Early Development, with adequate time and some resources, could show it was meeting the constitutional standard of education as established by the Court. Those funds do in fact run out this year and there is no further obligation under the settlement to provide further support. However, none of that changes the finding by the Court that, essentially, if we have “*known educational solutions*” to our educational deficiencies, we are constitutionally obligated to provide them.

Much has changed since that settlement. In particular, the Department – as our own Performance Review in late 2016 has indicated – can no longer provide its basic support capacity, but, instead, has become a “*compliance*” organization. This shifting of DEED’s capacity – mainly due to increasing reductions in the Department’s operating budget – does not relieve us of our constitutional obligation to ensure youth are provided an education. If anything, it poses a real risk that we may be sued again because, as the Gleason court found, we know what makes up a quality education and we are simply not providing it.

That same performance review explicitly warned about the adverse impacts of further cutting the DEED budget and added that cuts to Pre K and early childhood development were: “*...deemed to put at risk the success of the department in fulfilling its mission. The review team recommends*

that these not be included among proposed budget reductions.” (Performance Review of the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development, August 2016, P. 206)

So, while it is true that the Moore Settlement is nearly complete, it is not true that eliminating Pre K somehow alleviates the state of its constitutional burden to provide for the education of its citizens or is in the best interests of Alaskans. Consequently, I respectfully ask that the amendment to remove Pre K funding be withdrawn. Neither the evidence nor the Constitution support this amendment.