



LOWER YUKON SCHOOL DISTRICT

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Edgar Hoelscher

Chairman

Dr. Rob Picou

Superintendent

March 28, 2017

I am writing this letter on behalf of the Regional School Board and all the staff, parents, and children of the Lower Yukon School District. I have read through the specifics of Senate Bill 96 and have the following response. There may be some elements of the proposed legislation that could lead to cost savings, but there are many aspects if not fully considered could lead to unintended consequences.

The Lower Yukon School District was already preparing for a \$1.3 million dollar structural deficit before any further reductions in state funding. This structural deficit is a result of the accumulated effects of flat funding and the rising cost of doing business in rural Alaska. Because we believe school funding should be responsive to the needs of our communities, we conducted a comprehensive staff survey to identify potential cost savings. We also conducted Collective Community Impact meetings in each of our ten communities to identify what is important in school services to our communities and the many ways the various entities within the communities and the school can work together to maintain and build upon effective educational services for students. As a result of our surveys and our community meetings, we made the following decisions:

- 1) We eliminated all instructional support from district office. We cut 6 of the 10 instructional support positions in district office.
- 2) We reduced all remaining district office contracts by 4%.
- 3) We eliminated counselors from our schools. In a region with one of the highest suicide rates in the state, we made the very difficult decision to eliminate 6 counseling positions.
- 4) We are in the process of reviewing all other classified and certified positions to identify further reductions.
- 5) We are also in communication with regional partners and other school districts to identify savings that may or may not be realized through collaboration.

The language regarding school size adjustment in SB 96 would result in approximately an additional \$1.4 million dollar reduction to LYSD. In addition to the language coming out of the Senate Finance Committee which would result in a 5% reduction or \$2 million dollars, this would potentially bring the structural deficit in LYSD to a combined total of approximately \$4.7 million dollars. Needless to say, a reduction of funding to this magnitude will have a devastating impact on the district's capacity to provide adequate and equitable educational services to children in quite possibly the most impoverished region of Alaska.

CHILDREN FIRST

Alakanuk Emmonak Hooper Bay Kotlik Marshall Mt. Village Pilot Station Russian Mission Scammon Bay Sheldon Point

In closing, there is nothing inherently transformative about virtual education. Providing increased streamed educational content from urban to rural Alaska without a sustained effort in staff development and increased broadband in a district with a 30% staff turnover and a trickle of 45 k/sec/student is not necessarily transformative. There may be transformational change that could result from increased access to a technology rich learning environment, but that conversation would have to begin with a sizeable investment in broadband access to rural communities in addition to a sizable investment in classroom devices. Furthermore, a myopic vision of virtual education and its capacity to transform education in Alaska fails to fully understand and value the importance of teachers as mentors to students in rural communities.

Please do not misunderstand the intent of this correspondence. The Regional School Board for the Lower Yukon School District is not oblivious to the state's fiscal crisis nor our fiduciary responsibility to reduce expenditures. Neither are we oblivious to the need for transformation in education for rural Alaska. An increased emphasis on career and technical education, a critical review of graduation requirements that allows districts to customize educational services based upon individual student need, and a rebirth of art and music responsive to the needs of indigenous communities would indeed transform education in rural Alaska. We are leaning into the challenge of reduced revenue and working with our regional partners to transform education in the Lower Yukon School District. We encourage the members of the Alaska State Legislature to give careful consideration to the unintended consequences of any legislation that may irreparably harm children. For too long, education has been done to Alaska Natives. The time has come to do education with Alaska Natives. Now that would be transformative.

Sincerely,

Rob Picou, Ph.D.
Superintendent
Lower Yukon School District