

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE



REPRESENTATIVE GERAN TARR

House Bill 173

“School Climate and School Connectedness Improvement Act”

Sponsor Statement

Alaska’s approach to education must be updated to reflect our current understanding of the impact of early childhood adversity, toxic stress, childhood trauma, and cultural competency on children’s cognitive development. The School Climate and School Connectedness Improvement Act would compel the school districts in our state to submit plans for improving their schools’ climate and connectedness for their students, thereby shifting Alaska’s focus away from punitive discipline and towards trauma-engaged, culturally responsive, and restorative teaching practices.

This act would not simply place this requirement on districts to navigate alone; it would create a multi-disciplinary, diverse statewide School Climate and School Connectedness Committee, which would support and inform districts during the planning process.

This idea was not created from whole cloth – this policy recommendation has been the result of over 5 years of collaboration between hundreds of educators from Anchorage, Fairbanks, Juneau, Homer, Palmer, Sitka, Kenai, Valdez, Chevak, Wasilla, Bethel, Dillingham, St. Paul, and Utqiagvik.

Additionally, practitioners and educators across the globe have denounced zero-tolerance disciplinary practices such as out-of-school suspensions and expulsions, as removing students from the classroom simply makes it harder for those students to ever catch up academically to their peers. Research has shown that these policies lead to the “school to prison pipeline,” where students that have been suspended or expelled are more likely to end up in the juvenile justice system.

The recommended approach to classroom conflict is a set of strategies known as “restorative practices,” which the Schott Foundation defines as, “processes that proactively build healthy relationships and a sense of community to prevent and address conflict and wrongdoing.” In other words, when students have a conflict, rather than ejecting students from the classroom, restorative practitioners would seek to mend the relationships that were harmed.

In fact, the intent of HB 173 would assist the Department of Education and Early Development in achieving the goals listed in its 2025 strategic plan, which specifically states creating a “sustainable and positive school climates that are safe, supportive, and engaging for all students, staff, and communities” as one of its major goals.

In summation, the School Climate and School Connectedness Improvement Act would be a concerted effort to have our educators intentionally re-examine their existing educational practices and update them to include our modern understanding of childhood development and learning. Our children are our most precious resource, and we need to make sure that our schools are supportive environments where they can thrive, and which are led by Alaskans, for Alaskans.

I respectfully request your assistance in the passage of HB 173.