

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE

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REPRESENTATIVE TIFFANY ZULKOSKY DISTRICT 38

HB 147 ver. B

Teacher recruitment and retention pose significant challenges to Alaska schools, but the issue is most pronounced in rural communities. Over time, this can be a contributing, systemic factor to success and achievement gaps experienced in Alaska classrooms.

HB 147 supports the goal of “growing our own” Alaska educators from eligible, rural communities, as well as retaining these high-quality educators in rural classrooms. The Teacher Education Loan (TEL) Program was created in 1986 to provide low-cost education loans for Alaska high school graduates pursuing careers in elementary or secondary education. Operated by the Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education (ACPE), the program mailed nomination forms to Alaska school districts on an annual basis, that would in turn nominate qualifying students enrolled in university education programs and demonstrating financial need. Upon graduation, if they met all other eligibility requirements, the newly certificated teachers could receive loan forgiveness if they worked as a teacher in an eligible rural Alaska community.

HB 147 proposes a narrow statutory definition correction that unintentionally disqualified rural Alaska communities from eligibility for loan forgiveness due to an arbitrary and outdated population ceiling. The updated definition in HB 147 mimics the definition of a “rural community” as already defined through the WWAMI Education program. This will serve to restore the intention of the TEL Program, including Alaska communities in rural locations that experience chronic teacher recruitment and retention challenges, but have a population that narrowly exceeds the outdated definition in statute. It will also correct unfortunate circumstances where individuals received teacher education loans with the understanding that they would be forgiven upon returning to, or remaining in their rural communities, only to find that their village no longer met the definition of “rural” in the program’s statute.

This bill also includes a retroactivity clause that would make all recipients of a teacher education loan after January 1, 2016, eligible for loan forgiveness. Again, this seeks to remedy for those teachers who received the loan, with the expectation that some or all of it would be forgiven upon returning to teach in a rural Alaska, instead found themselves responsible for paying back the entirety of the loan because the community they were teaching in no longer met the definition of “rural” in statute.

By narrowly fixing the definition related to the TEL Program, we can support the training of high-quality educators already adapted to the unique conditions of living and teaching in rural Alaska and restoring the intent of Alaska to expand the availability of locally grown teachers in the parts of Alaska that need them most.