

February 19, 2023

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Magy Helle, and I have been an advisory teacher at Mat-Su Central School for the last ten years and an educator in Alaska for the last 25 years. My current position at Mat-Su Central School is advising high school students; this includes helping students plan for life beyond high school. An important part of post high school planning with students is talking about the Alaska Performance Scholarship and encouraging students to pursue that opportunity. I am so grateful that students have access to this scholarship to help fund continuing education without competing against other students for that benefit. With the rising costs of education nationwide, this continues to be a valuable resource for students.

While the Alaska Performance Scholarship is an incredible tool for students, there have been challenges over the years that either keep students from qualifying or from using the scholarship. I am writing to identify some of these challenges and to urge you to make this scholarship more accessible to a wider range of students by making changes to this program. Now, more than ever, Alaska needs to work harder to support our students and to provide opportunities for them to finish their education, start careers, and raise their families in Alaska.

First, one of the biggest hurdles students face with qualifying for APS is the ACT/SAT test score requirement in order to use the award at a college or university. While the ACT and SAT assess important skills that students should learn in high school, the scope of skills measured is actually quite small. These tests are said to be a predictor of how well a student will perform in college, but in actuality, the SAT only measures about 18% of what is deemed necessary to succeed in college according to technical studies done by the Educational Testing Service and College Board. While it's understandable that the APS requires some measurement to predict future success, standardized tests may not be the best option. For example, many high school students who are already taking college classes with great success don't always score high enough on the SAT or ACT to qualify for APS. This year, I have 17 students on my caseload taking college courses and all have earned As and Bs in those courses, yet none of them are scoring high enough on the SAT or ACT to qualify for level 1 of APS. Many will receive level 3 scholarships, and some will not qualify at all even though they already have a proven track record of college success. Six of my seniors have earned more than 20 college credits, and one will earn her associate degree by high school graduation with a college GPAs above 3.5. The fact that the SAT failed to accurately predict these students' success leads me to believe that these are not isolated cases.

Additionally, current high school students lived through the COVID pandemic and have experienced learning loss; while this is probably more evident in elementary students, the learning loss in content areas like math are certainly noticeable at the high school level as well. Students are still catching up and are struggling, now more than ever, with testing that may not cover what they have actually learned in high school due to gaps caused by school closures, clunky online learning, and drastic changes to their educational routines and learning environments. Other barriers continue in Alaska this year such as the bus driver shortages and strikes which put disadvantaged students even further behind if parents are unable to adjust to the changing schedules and transportation challenges.

Another aspect to consider is the fact that the SAT and ACT are timed assessments; therefore, students aren't just assessed on their knowledge and skill levels but rather on their ability to answer questions

quickly. One of the biggest laments that I hear from students after they test is, “I was doing so well, but I only made it through half of the questions!” The timed nature of these tests rewards students who are fast processors. Students who are ELL, students who have other learning challenges like ADD, or students who are just slower processors don’t tend to perform well on timed assessments even though they may have mastered the assessed skills. Scoring high on a timed assessment is not an indication of a student’s ability to learn, work hard, persevere, and apply themselves to a variety of tasks that are required in college, trade school, or other endeavors. Many students who have proven themselves through added course rigor and GPA standards in high school are denied the scholarship because they fail to score high enough on a test that is a one-day event in their high school career.

Finally, the APS test score requirement is not in line with what is happening nationwide as “more than 1,800 four-year colleges have announced plans to go test-optional or test-blind for fall 2023” according to the National Center for Fair and Open Testing. The bottom line is that a three-hour test on a Saturday morning does not measure the most important aspects of what makes a student successful beyond high school. Let’s allow a student’s high school transcript and GPA speak to their academic accomplishments and drop the score requirements on the SAT and ACT tests to qualify for APS.

Second, once students qualify for APS, there are numerous challenges with using the award. For example, students who pursue programs through trade schools can only access one year of their APS award. In order for a trade school student to capture all of their APS award, they would need to complete three or four trade school programs which is unrealistic. Students can obtain certifications or licenses in welding, auto mechanics, cosmetology, private pilot, and so many other fields in under a year and enter their chosen career field highly trained. Like college, these programs are incredibly expensive, and the cost is prohibitive to most students without financial support. The financial cost of many trade school programs is equivalent to two years or more of college; therefore, students who receive APS for trade school should have access to more than one year of their award, if not all, to apply to their program of study.

Likewise, more college-bound students are interested in pursuing an Associates Degree or a certification program through the university system rather than a Bachelor’s Degree so that they can enter the work force sooner. Students overall are anxious about acquiring educational debt and being strapped financially when they are starting their careers and families. Allowing students to access their full APS award to meet their educational goals and expenses in less than four years will help Alaska students get the training they need to stay in Alaska and to fill labor shortages in the local job markets. Conversely, some students need a longer time-frame to complete their educational pursuits. Family commitments, jobs, and other life circumstances may hinder a student from attending a program full-time or even from meeting part-time requirements to use the award. Giving these students a longer time frame to use their award or lowering minimum credit requirements per year or semester will give them needed resources to continue their educational pursuits. Overall, allowing students to apply the full APS award they earned towards their certification or degree program at their own pace will keep more students in those programs and will likely increase completion rates.

Last, the goal of the APS is to retain Alaskan students, but some students have no choice but to pursue education outside of Alaska due to lack of opportunity in our state. For example, UAF and UAS are currently the only routes for Alaska students to pursue a degree in secondary education. Students who live in Anchorage or the valley typically view UAF like they would an out-of-state college since they would incur dorm costs. And, faced with the option of an even harsher winter than they are accustomed to or pursuing a program out of state, most choose the latter. Additionally, other programs of study may be limited or not offered at all in Alaska. This year, I have seniors who are pursuing cinematography

and mortuary science, both of which are not offered in Alaska. Additionally, many of my high school students who are taking college classes this year have seen cancelled classes due to lack of enrollment, so even courses and programs that are offered in state don't always remain viable. Furthermore, many students are weighing the idea of attending community colleges out of state which tend to be even cheaper than in-state tuition at local colleges in Alaska. One student is pursuing dental hygiene, and she found this to be more cost effective to pursue out of state. In all of these scenarios, students who have qualified for APS will leave their awards untouched if they pursue their education outside of Alaska. I have very few students this year who plan to remain outside of Alaska even if they complete their education elsewhere. Most plan to return to pursue careers and to raise their families here. Overall, if students qualify for APS, they should be allowed to use this award at any college or trade school that supports their educational goals.

In closing, APS is an incredible resource for students, but changing eligibility rules and usage parameters will allow more Alaskans to qualify and pursue higher education and training. I previously submitted an email that detailed stories about some of my graduating seniors this year which I will include again below. My hope is that you will see the complexities that many students face in seeking and funding post-high school education and consider adjusting the APS to support these very deserving students.

Thank you for considering the information presented,

Magy Helle, Advisory Teacher
Mat-Su Central School, MSBSD

Student Examples:

T. – T is on track for APS but will not finish the qualifications as her area of study is not offered in Alaska. She wants to pursue mortuary science, so she will have to do that out of state. She currently plans to attend a community college in Oregon.

M. – M. is on track for APS and meets qualifications. She might end up using the award, but she currently plans to pursue a degree in secondary education which is not currently offered at UAA. She is pursuing plans for a college out of state.

A. - She started taking college courses last year to pursue the Vet Assisting certification through Mat-Su College. She meets the course and GPA requirements for APS but did not score high enough on the SAT or ACT. The SAT or ACT are currently required in order to qualify and use APS for certification programs that are offered through the universities. English is her second language, so the timed tests are a challenge; she works incredibly hard, has a full-time job, and has been successful in her college classes last year and this year. We made the decision to have her return as a 5th year senior this year to complete the 20-credit Vet Assisting program. She has secured a job/internship with a local vet for her practicum which is the final step to earning her certification.

M. - She has been taking college courses since her sophomore year in high school and consistently earns As and Bs in these courses. She took a full load of college courses this year in an effort to get ahead and save money as she has not scored high enough on the SAT or ACT to secure the APS. She has high test anxiety and does not perform well under timed situations. She plans to pursue her bachelor's degree but will likely not qualify for APS even with her proven track record of being successful in college

already. She plans to pursue a degree in psychology, occupational therapy, or counseling; these are all areas that are in great demand in Alaska.

A. - She started taking college courses her junior year and has consistently earned As in these classes. She has high anxiety and has not scored high enough yet on the SAT or ACT. She will attempt the test one more time, but she is not confident that she will earn a high enough score to qualify for APS. She plans to pursue radiologic technology after fulfilling a year-long mission with Torchbearers overseas.

N. - On track for APS but decided not to take SAT or ACT as she plans to pursue a program for dental hygiene out of state. The program where she gained acceptance does not require these tests.

G. - He is on-track to qualify but decided not to take any of the tests as he plans to start his own business after graduation. The scholarship doesn't support endeavors outside of trade school or college.

I. - She is on-track to qualify but decided not to take any of the tests as she plans to pursue a real estate license after high school. The scholarship does not support her goals.

K. - She is on-track to qualify but may not score high enough on the spring SAT to use the scholarship for college. She has been a FIT (families in transition) kid since her freshman year. She has been on her own since she was 15, and she is now a 5th year senior. She works a full-time job as an administrative assistant for a large non-profit corporation and maintains high grades in her high school courses. We are hoping she will qualify for other scholarships and grant funds with her FIT designation.

L. - She is on-track to qualify but may not score high enough on the SAT to use the scholarship for college. English is a second language, and she takes longer to process information. She has successfully completed a college course and works a full-time job as an office manager. She plans to pursue a degree in the medical field and stay in Alaska.

S - She will earn her associate degree by high school graduation and has maintained a GPA above 3.5 in her college classes. She scored high enough on the SAT to qualify for Level 2. She is retesting to try to qualify for Level 1 but may not reach that before graduation. She plans to pursue her bachelor's degree in state.

Braeden Garrett

From: Lisa Parker [REDACTED]
Sent: Tuesday, April 4, 2023 9:10 AM
To: Rep. Justin Ruffridge
Subject: HB 148

As a former member of the University of Alaska Board of Regents I write to share my support for House Bill 148 which will increase the funding for the Alaska Performance Scholarship and remove the SAT requirements to receive the scholarship. Currently only University of Alaska Fairbanks requires SAT scores to be submitted as part of the admission process. By increasing the scholarship and removing the submission of SAT scores the enrollment will continue to increase throughout the University system.

Thank you for introducing this legislation and please feel free to share my thoughts with the other members of the House Education Committee.

[REDACTED]

James Sexton

From: Liliana Walton [REDACTED]
Sent: Tuesday, April 4, 2023 6:32 PM
To: House Education
Subject: HB 148 testimony

Dear House Education Committee Members -

I am emailing to express my support of House Bill 148 to remove the SAT or ACT score requirement to earn the APS. I am a student with a disorder called dysphasia. I have always had to work very hard to achieve the best academically for myself. Students around me without any education issues have never had to work as hard as I do to earn my 3.8 GPA. This year I am a senior and I'm in a dual enrollment program, so I'm taking full-time classes at UAA right now. Last semester, I earned a 3.8 GPA. So if anyone was going to say that SAT or ACT test act as a predictor of how I, or anyone with a disability will do in college, then this just proves them wrong. It's not fair that these standardized tests are set up so that I do not receive accommodations per my IEP. I need time to process language and neither the SAT or the ACT will give that to me. But does that mean I am not going to do well in college; well, of course not! I want to go to college in Alaska. I want to earn a degree so I can become a teacher. Students like me that don't earn an APS have no incentive to stay in Alaska for education when we can go to the lower 48 for a scholarship to somewhere else. Please give me a reason to stay in Alaska by passing HB 148.

Thank you so much for your time.

Liliana Walton
Anchorage, AK

James Sexton

From: Robyn Taylor [REDACTED]
Sent: Tuesday, April 4, 2023 5:36 PM
To: House Education
Subject: HB 148

Respected House Education Committee Members,

I write in support of HB 148 and the immense value it adds to education opportunities for students at the post-secondary level. The increase in funding levels of support may serve as a "game changer" for students as they make post-secondary decisions. Additionally, by allowing 8 years for the use of funds and adding the CTE component many students will now have the ability to make better-informed decisions as to their next steps, rather than feeling rushed to then find their career direction was not the right fit.

I do have concerns with the requirement to notify of eligibility status 18 months in advance, so I wonder if I am not fully understanding the intent. My observation, at least in my building, is that those conversations are constantly occurring. I'm not sure I see the impact of notification 18 months in advance specifically as I have students' GAIN eligibility in the last 18 months and have also observed the opposite. My worry is that if we notify a student that they are eligible in the middle of their junior year they may infer that now the rest of the grades are not as important because they have already "got the APS".

Thank you again for all of the hard work each of you is doing down in Juneau day in and day out!

Kindest regards,
Robyn Taylor

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James Sexton

From: Brint Walton <brintwalton@gmail.com>
Sent: Tuesday, April 4, 2023 5:07 PM
To: House Education
Subject: HB 148 bill support

Dear House Education Committee Members -

I am emailing to express my support of House Bill 148. My two oldest children both earned the Alaska Performance Scholarship, which they used by going to UAA, and they have both decided to stay in Alaska as a result.

However, my youngest daughter, who suffers from a language disorder, cannot earn a "passing" score on the ACT or the SAT due to her language disorder. This is wrong. She has a 3.8 GPA and works her butt off to keep that GPA. This year, as a senior in high school, she is taking full-time college classes at UAA to earn dual credit and she is still maintaining her 3.8 GPA. She has taken 4 years of science and math and proved that she can be successful in college, yet with the current requirements, she cannot earn the APS.

With my two oldest, I found that the draw of the APS kept them in Alaska as college students and now as a librarian and a teacher in Anchorage. But for my youngest, this likely won't be the case. My children have proven that Alaska-based scholarships push students to take tougher classes and push them to earn a higher GPA. The payoff is that they stay in Alaska.

Please pass HB 148 so we can get more scholarships to Alaskan students who deserve it, Alaska students who will likely stay in Alaska after earning their degree. Thank you for your support of this bill.

Brint Walton
Anchorage, Alaska

James Sexton

From: Janel Walton [REDACTED]
Sent: Tuesday, April 4, 2023 4:51 PM
To: House Education
Cc: Senate Education
Subject: House Bill 148

Dear House Education Committee Members -

I just learned about House Bill 148 put forth by Rep. Justin Ruffridge of the House Education Committee. In addition to increasing the value of the Alaska Performance Scholarship, which I wholeheartedly support due to rising education costs, the portion of the bill which really got my attention was the part about removing the SAT or ACT test score requirement. These standardized test scores are overly burdensome and unnecessary for our students who work the hardest and are the most discriminated against when it comes to taking a standardized test like the SAT: students working with disabilities and on an Individual Education Plan (IEP), students who are English Language Learners (ELL), and students off the main road system who have to jump through hoops to even find a testing location.

The use of standardized testing to predict college success has been antiquated for some time. As an educator, I can tell you that Alaska is leaving behind a huge population of future workers and future Alaskans who will never be able to achieve "passing" SAT/ACT scores in order to earn the APS, which has been shown time and again as a way to encourage students to stay in Alaska to study and also then encourages them to stay in Alaska to work. This is something we desperately need in a time of diminishing workforce in important areas like nursing, education, mental health, etc.

When I was a student at UAA, I would tutor students in writing. Often, these students were ELL or were working with language disorders like dyslexia, but they were some of the hardest-working people you will ever meet. I had a Ph.D. chemical engineering student from Korea who spent weeks working with me to fix his Ph.D. thesis to eliminate his English issues like verb tense and word choices. He was tireless in his efforts, yet, if he was a high school student today, due to his ELL issues, he would not be able to earn a high enough score on the APS to be able to get the scholarship. Alaska could have lost this brilliant student just because of his SAT or ACT score.

As an honors and Advanced Placement (AP) teacher of English at Bartlett High School in Anchorage, I had the most diverse group of students who worked hard to challenge themselves, earning A's in all their honors classes, yet, they could never pass the AP exam or the SAT/ACT because they spoke Hmong, Spanish, Tagalog, etc at home. This was the same issue for students working with Asperger's, ADHD, language disorders, etc. Though they worked hard and were willing to challenge themselves to prepare for college, they couldn't pass the standardized testing requirement. I had the honor of seeing so many of them go to UAA and UAF nonetheless to earn degrees in nursing, engineering, teaching, and mental health counseling, all jobs that Alaska desperately needs. Many of these students graduated *cum laude* or higher. These are students who learned a very long time ago that they would always have to work harder than their peers, and they were willing to do so to achieve their future dreams.

When I was an English teacher at Alaska Middle College School (AMCS), I had an opportunity to work with students who were in high school but going to college to earn dual credit. Despite being ELL or having an IEP, these students were earning well in excess of the required 3.5 GPA because they were hard workers, determined to fight for their success. They proved that standardized testing like SAT or ACT are not good determiners of college success. And, despite doing everything necessary, and even going so far as to take college classes as high school students, they still would never earn the Alaska Performance

Scholarship. Ironically, it was not unusual to see these students earn the UA Scholars Award for the top 10% of high school graduates, yet then not earn the APS.

It is not just the ELL students who are unfairly having to reach an unreachable bar. I had an AMCS student who was visually impaired and needed everything in 18-point font or higher yet she still needed to hold paper approximately 6" from her eyes to see it. She had a degenerative disease. When she was ready to take the SAT, College Board required her to take the test with no accommodations, even with a doctor's note, to prove that she couldn't pass the SAT without help. It should come as no surprise that she earned a 600 on the test. Even after proving that she was visually impaired, the SAT's only fix was to give her the SAT in Braille, which she didn't know because she had just begun to lose her sight 3 years prior. Sadly, she did not earn an APS despite having a 4.0 GPA as a high school student taking full-time college classes. I watched the same thing happen to a wheelchair-bound student with MS when College Board refused to extend her testing time. This is wrong and it doesn't create an environment to keep brilliant Alaskan students in Alaska.

SAT and ACT scores are keeping students from pursuing post-secondary educational opportunities in Alaska at a time when Alaska needs more workers, more nurses, educators, and mental health therapists. These high-stakes standardized testing are not a fair assessment of their capability and they act as a gate-keeper for the most underprivileged students in Alaska.

I strongly support the removal of the use of standardized testing to determine if students should earn the APS. Please pass HB 148.

Thank you so much for your consideration. And thank you for putting forth this bill.

Janel Walton
Anchorage, Alaska