

Juneau preschoolers ask legislators to ‘have a heart’ for kids this session

February 13, 2023 by Katie Anastas, KTOO

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Juneau preschoolers prepare to hand out Valentine's Day cards to legislators on Feb. 13, 2023. (Photo by Katie Anastas/KTOO)

Preschoolers, parents and advocates delivered Valentine's Day cards to Alaska state legislators Monday, asking them to “have a heart” for kids as they make budget decisions this session.

Nikki Love, community engagement coordinator for the Association for the Education of Young Children, pulled a red wagon full of cards through the front doors of the Capitol.

“We have an over 20 year tradition of bringing valentines to our state lawmakers,” she said. “We make personal visits to as many as we can in their offices, and then greet them on their way into the committee room and ask them to please prioritize children when they’re making policy.”



Juneau preschoolers walked the halls of the Capitol building on Feb. 13, 2023, to hand out Valentine’s Day cards to legislators. (Katie Anastas/KTOO)

Love says it feels especially urgent this year, as school districts across the state call for more education funding, and childcare workers in Juneau push for higher wages.

“We have to make these jobs worthwhile to people,” she said.

The cards featured photos of the kids at school, with construction paper hearts and handwriter signatures. The group walked into legislators’ offices to drop them off.

For five-and-a-half-year-old Aven McKenry, the cards were also a chance to practice cursive.

“I love cursive,” she said. “It’s pretty fun because I get to write in different shapes of the letters.”

Her mom, Sadie McKenry, hadn’t been to the Capitol since high school. She said even if these kids are too young to understand the importance of school funding, visiting the Capitol is valuable.

“I think it’s really important that kids understand how the government works so they can better use their voice,” she said.



Soldotna Rep. Justin Ruffridge reads a Valentine's Day card before walking onto the House floor on Monday, Feb. 13, 2023. (Katie Anastas/KTOO)

Gov. Mike Dunleavy wasn't available, but the group dropped the biggest card in the wagon off at his office. It included a collage of photos of the students and was signed by each one of them. Inside was a request to increase the state's funding per student by at least \$1,000.

Fairbanks Sen. Scott Kawasaki said the kids made a strong impression.

"Just seeing their bright eyes at 10 in the morning is a real treat," he said. "We're going to be talking about early education, funding K-12, all the way to the university, and it's a big deal that they're here today."

Monday's schedule included committee meetings on childcare and the public education workforce.

The kids handed out the rest of their cards as legislators walked onto the House floor. Parent Liam Thier said he hoped the visit put a face to the policy decisions lawmakers are considering this year.

"You get to see who it's benefiting," he said. "It's a reminder that this is the future."



A school bus full of preschoolers, their parents, caregivers and advocates pulled up to the Capitol building on Monday to hand out Valentine's Day cards to state legislators on Feb. 13, 2023. (Katie Anastas/KTOO)
