

## Senate Education Committee The need for a BSA Increase - Testimony

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Good afternoon madam chair and members of the Senate Education Committee. My name is Lon Garrison, and I serve as the Executive Director of the Association of Alaska School Boards. We are a nonprofit association serving 52 of Alaska's 54 school districts. Thank you for this opportunity to speak to you today about the necessity and moral responsibility of sufficiently funding Alaska's public education system.

AASB's Board of Directors has adopted three legislative priorities for this year. They are:

- Sufficient, sustainable, and predictable education funding
- Retention and recruitment of teachers, administrators, and staff
- Student wellness and safety

Today my testimony will focus primarily on the issue of sufficient education funding, which is a critical factor affecting the retention and recruitment of staff as well as the safety and wellness of students.

The state of Alaska has always statutorily fulfilled its responsibility to *Article 7, Section 1* of Alaska's Constitution, requiring the funding of a system of public education. However, for over a decade, it has not sufficiently invested the resources necessary to ensure every student can receive an excellent education every day. ***The AASB membership has resolved that an increase to the Base Student Allocation should not be less than \$860.***

This past November, the AASB Delegate Assembly unanimously approved the amendment to **RESOLUTION #2.2 URGING EARLY, ADEQUATE, EQUITABLE, AND PREDICTABLE FUNDING OF PUBLIC EDUCATION** by specifying this increase to the BSA. An increase of \$860 was put forward by the Anchorage School Board as a result of the Anchorage School District's analysis early last fall of the difference between the current FY23 BSA of \$5,930 and an estimated inflation-adjusted value of \$6,820, using the CPI-Urban Alaska rate, compounded over the past six years. The most recent increase to the BSA occurred six years ago, in 2017.

A further comparison of the BSA to inflation over the past ten years (2012 to 2022) shows the BSA has only increased by \$250 or a total of 4.29% percent. Meanwhile, based on the CPI-Urban Alaska values, the cumulative inflation for that same period is 24.6%. Thus, the underfunding of Alaska's public education through the BSA has been a chronic issue. Several times, additional funding outside the BSA has been provided, which is helpful and appreciated. These one-time discretionary funds have not led to the stability and predictability of a statutory increase in the BSA.



AASB strongly advocates that the BSA should statutorily be connected to an inflation-proofing formula. Our resolution **2.50 INFLATION-PROOFED BASE STUDENT ALLOCATION (BSA) INVESTMENTS** speaks to this issue.

Appended to my written testimony is a list of several long-standing resolutions the AASB membership has approved supporting education funding.

So, what does this mean for school boards which, by statute, are required to establish, approve and implement balanced budgets each year? It has meant having to make hard decisions that reduce staffing, eliminate programs, curtail extracurricular activities and diminish many of the supports that affect the conditions for learning for each student.

Locally elected school boards have been delegated the authority to implement a system of public education required by the Alaska Constitution. School board members are tasked with governing their districts and allocating funds to execute an educational plan for all public school students. It is a highly complex task. In Alaska, school boards have no taxing authority. They, therefore, must rely solely on revenue from the state, the federal government, and in organized areas, at least a minimum local contribution to fund education.

Each year, school board members and education advocates appeal for education funding to provide an excellent education for every student every day.

A myriad of operational costs, including utilities, supplies, transportation, fuel, maintenance, freight, food, instructional materials, and other services necessary for operating a school system, have all increased dramatically. As these operational costs have increased, resources to employ the staff needed to run schools and deliver educational support and instruction have been reduced. As a result, the opportunities for all students to succeed diminish, and we see declines in many indicators of student achievement.

Over the past year, I have heard from school board members and superintendents across the state about the tremendous strain their budgets face. Of particular note are the incredibly inflated fuel costs, especially for districts with schools located away from the road system. According to the US Energy Information Administration report of March 2022, the summer heating fuel costs for unsubsidized rural Alaska communities were 26% high than the Winter 2021 average. Heating fuel prices were reported in many locations well over \$7 per gallon. This means the cost of heating school buildings and transporting goods, staff or students significantly impacts the amount of funding available to hire or retain teachers and other support personnel to do the job that must be done.

For example, during discussions last spring, one superintendent of a remote rural district noted that, generally, for every \$100 of materials purchased, they must allocate nearly \$200 in freight charges.

The highly uncertain nature of the annual legislative appropriation for education funding as part of the state's general fund budget, and the potential executive vetoes, continually creates uncertainty that makes it difficult to sustain a maintenance of effort in an effective and efficient manner. Time and again, school boards and superintendents must make hard choices that may result in the reduction of staff or the elimination of programs and services, which often negatively impact student achievement.



Locally elected school boards have been delegated the authority to implement a system of public education on behalf of the state of Alaska. In order to do that, they rely upon state, local and federal governments for revenue. School boards implement the local control model that has served Alaska well, but they depend on your support. AASB strongly encourages your support of increasing the BSA by not less than \$860 as a way of further supporting Alaska's public school system and Alaska's future through the education of its young people.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

Lon Garrison,  
Executive Director, AASB