

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE

January 27, 2025

8:00 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Rebecca Himschoot, Co-Chair
Representative Andi Story, Co-Chair
Representative Maxine Dibert
Representative Ted Eischeid
Representative Jubilee Underwood
Representative Rebecca Schwanke
Representative Bill Elam

MEMBERS ABSENT

All members present

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

HOUSE BILL NO. 69

"An Act relating to education funding; and providing for an effective date."

- HEARD & HELD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: HB 69

SHORT TITLE: EDUCATION FUNDING: INCREASE BSA

SPONSOR(s): REPRESENTATIVE(s) HIMSCHOOT

01/24/25	(H)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
01/24/25	(H)	EDC, FIN
01/27/25	(H)	EDC AT 8:00 AM DAVIS 106

WITNESS REGISTER

CLAIRE FORDYCE, Staff

Representative Rebecca Himschoot
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: On behalf of Representative Himschoot,
prime sponsor, read the sectional analysis to HB 69.

JENNA WRIGHT, President & CEO
Anchorage Economic Development Corporation
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Gave invited testimony in support of HB 69.

ANDY DEGRAW, Chief Financial Officer
Fairbanks NorthStar Borough School District
Fairbanks, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: On behalf of Representative Rebecca
Himschoot, gave a PowerPoint presentation in support of HB 69.

NILS ANDREASSON, Executive Director
Alaska Municipal League
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Gave invited testimony in support of HB 69.

BENJAMIN MALLOT, President
Alaska Federation of Natives
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Gave invited testimony in support of HB 69.

MADELINE AGUILLARD, Superintendent
Kuspuk School District
Aniak, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: On behalf of Representative Himschoot, gave
a PowerPoint presentation in support of HB 69.

KATHERINE TATSUDA, Member
Ketchikan School Board
Ketchikan, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Gave invited testimony in support of HB 69.

STEVE ROWE, Parent
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Gave invited testimony in support of HB 69.

ADRIENNE MICHEL, Parent
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Gave invited testimony in support of HB 69.

AMIEE VILLARREAL, Parent
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Gave invited testimony in support of HB 69.

STACEY DIXSON, Parent
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Gave invited testimony in support of HB 69.

CLAYTON HOLLAND, Superintendent
Kenai Peninsula Borough School District
Kenai, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: On behalf of Representative Himschoot, gave a PowerPoint presentation in support of HB 69.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[8:00:45 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR ANDI STORY called the House Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 8:00 a.m. Representatives Elam, Dibert, Schwanke, Eischeid, Himschoot, Underwood, and Story were present at the call to order.

HB 69-EDUCATION FUNDING: INCREASE BSA

[8:01:47 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY announced that the only order of business would be HOUSE BILL NO. 69, "An Act relating to education funding; and providing for an effective date."

[8:03:19 AM](#)

CLAIRE FORDYCE, Staff, Representative Rebecca Himschoot, Alaska State Legislature, read the sectional analysis [included in

committee file] which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

Section 1: Amends AS 14.17.470, by adding new subsections (b), (c), (d), and (e) applying inflation proofing:

(b) On July 1, 2025, Increase the base student allocation of June 30, 2025, by the average inflation adjustment of CY21-CY23, and then add \$1000.

(c) On July 1, 2026, Increase the base student allocation of June 30, 2026, by the average inflation adjustment of CY22-CY24, and then add \$404.

(d) On July 1, 2027, Increase the base student allocation of June 30, 2027 by the average inflation adjustment of CY23-CY25, and then add \$404.

(e) On July 1, 2028, and on July 1 of each year, Increase the base student allocation in effect June 30 of the previous fiscal year the average percent of increase of the first three of the preceding four calendar years using the Alaska CPI. Section 2: Sets an effective date of July 1, 2025.

[8:06:36 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HIMSHOOT, as prime sponsor, gave a PowerPoint presentation on HB 69 [hard copy included in the committee file]. She began the presentation on slides 3 and 4, titled "Evolving Demands on Education," which compared the differences between a historic and a current classroom setting. She continued to slides 5 and 6, which displayed a table that outlined the historic statutory base student allocation (BSA) funding increases since Fiscal Year 2010 (FY 10). She moved through slides 7-9, which highlighted the comparatively higher operating costs of both rural and urban public school districts in Alaska. She skipped to slide 11, which emphasized Alaska's public school funding that has been exacerbated by a historically flat-funded BSA. She moved through slides 12-13, which displayed graphs that further illustrated funding shortages for public schools in Alaska. She continued through slides 14-15, which highlighted the effect that inflation has on Alaska's public school system and explained how one-time funding

increases don't always directly benefit a classroom. She concluded the presentation on slide 16, which emphasized the Alaska State Constitution's obligation to create and maintain a public school system.

[8:16:17 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE UNDERWOOD asked the bill sponsor if she would invite testifiers from the Mat-Su School District and shared her understanding that certain school districts have improved their student outcomes despite a flat-funded BSA.

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT clarified that the Matanuska-Susitna ("Mat-Su") School District superintendent was invited to testify but wasn't available. She said that there was a study commissioned by the Alaska State Legislature in 2015 that compared the difference between funding and student outcomes and said that the current formulaic multipliers aren't sufficient in addressing specific district needs.

[8:19:58 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE UNDERWOOD asked if the method of inflationary-adjusted funding proposed under HB 69 would be tied to the consumer price index (CPI).

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT confirmed that is correct.

[8:21:11 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SCHWANKE outlined various funding sources that Alaska's public schools have received beside the BSA and asked how they could find ways to utilize further funding sources outside of the BSA.

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT said that she would follow up with specific numbers and explained that in FY 12-15, 19-20, and 23-25 there were funds received outside of the BSA. She highlighted the gap in funding during FY 16-18, FY 21, and FY 22 as years where the flat-funded BSA was more impactful on a school's total fiscal profile. She emphasized that federal funding received during

the COVID-19 pandemic allowed districts to "put aside" the need for a larger BSA.

[8:24:28 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE EISCHEID shared his understanding that the cost of public education has historically outpaced inflation.

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT replied that she was unable to say whether or not the cost of public education has outpaced inflation.

REPRESENTATIVE EISCHEID retorted that he was sure that the cost of public education has outpaced inflation and asked Co-Chair Himschoot if she could share anecdotal evidence of a flat-funded BSA's impact to children.

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT echoed Representative Eischeid's remarks and added that the cost on student learning is immeasurable.

[8:29:39 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY announced that the committee would hear invited testimony on HB 69.

[8:30:45 AM](#)

JENNA WRIGHT, President & CEO, Anchorage Economic Development Corporation, gave invited testimony on HB 69. She said that the most critical issue that Anchorage and Alaska as a whole is facing is a workforce shortage. She said that Alaska must invest in its students in order to set them up for a future in Alaska, not somewhere else in the world. She emphasized that Alaska's poorer funded schools are having an impact on its ability to grow economically.

[8:35:16 AM](#)

ANDY DEGRAW, Chief Financial Officer, Fairbanks NorthStar Borough School District, on behalf of Representative Rebecca Himschoot, gave a PowerPoint presentation in support of HB 69 [hard copy included in the committee file]. He began his

presentation on slide 2, which displayed a "pencil chart" that highlighted the difference in impact between BSA funding and one-time funding increases. He continued to slide 3, which emphasized the Fairbanks North Star Borough School District's (FNSBD's) budget deficits that have occurred as a result of a flat-funded BSA. He moved to slide 4, which highlighted the inflationary pressures that have grown on the Alaska's public education funding since 2017. He concluded his presentation on slide 5, which displayed a graph that emphasized the growing cost of public school's transportation systems, like school busses and resource student services.

[8:41:51 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SCHWANKE asked Mr. DeGraw what steps the FNSBD is taking to keep students in its public schools and asked if it would be preferential for the Alaska State Legislature to return to subsidizing public school transportation.

MR. DEGRAW acknowledged that a couple thousand students have dropped their enrollment in the FNSBD and shared his belief that the biggest reason for a lower enrollment is the overall issue of outmigration in Alaska. He said that the FNSBD has established career & technical education (CTE) classes and expanded coursework to attract more students. He added that it would be preferential for the Alaska State Legislature to return to its public school transportation reimbursement policy.

[8:47:43 AM](#)

NILS ANDREASSON, Executive Director, Alaska Municipal League, gave invited testimony in support of HB 69. He began his testimony by explaining that the cost of public education has grown exponentially since 2013. He gave a series of examples of different expenditures that have grown in cost in the previous decade and explained that Alaska's workers often make 8 percent less than a counterpart of theirs that might work in the private sector. He said that the cycle of ultimatums that are created by a flat-funded BSA are not sustainable for communities and cause long-term harm to Alaska as a state. He said that underfunded schools "undermine the very fabric of our

communities" and emphasized that the state needs to make a greater capital investment in its public school system.

[8:55:32 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SCHWANKE asked what other state public service should be cut to allow the cost of HB 69.

MR. ANDREASSON deferred his answer to the Alaska Municipal League's fiscal policy recommendations.

[8:57:25 AM](#)

BENJAMIN MALLOT, President, Alaska Federation of Natives, gave invited testimony in support of HB 69. He began his testimony by pointing out the theme of the 2024 Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN) convention that was largely focused on the need for the state to focus its finances toward its public education system. He highlighted a series of resolutions in support of public education and an increased BSA that the AFN has passed in the previous years. He said that the result of a flat-funded BSA is a more inequitable public education environment that causes harm to its communities and negatively affects student opportunities and outcomes.

[9:02:57 AM](#)

MADELINE AGUILLARD, Superintendent, Kuspuk School District, on behalf of Co-Chair Himschoot, gave a PowerPoint presentation in support of HB 69 [hard copy included in the committee file]. She began her presentation on slide 8, which highlighted the extreme cost of public education in the Kuspuk School District. She continued to slide 9, which emphasized the various personnel cuts that have occurred since 2023. She said that academic programs have been extremely reduced and explained that the Kuspuk School District has no arts programs, no health curricula, and limited sports and cultural programs due to the surging cost of public education and a flat-funded BSA. She concluded the presentation on slide 10, which highlighted where specific budget cuts have been made and explained the impact of each individual item of the Kuspuk School District's recent

budget cuts. She said that her school district is faced with "impossible choices" when they are met with a deficit or need for a budget cut.

[9:08:17 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE EISCHEID asked what would happen to the Kuspuk School District if the Alaska State Legislature were to continue with a flat-funded BSA.

MS. AGUILLARD replied that she foresaw the eventual closures of public schools, which might eventually lead to total community outmigration events in many different communities in her school district.

[9:10:23 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE UNDERWOOD asked if any policy reforms with regard to energy and resources could help to lower costs of public education.

MS. AGUILLARD said that a change in utilities and energy policy could help lower the cost of education in the region.

[9:11:49 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SCHWANKE asked if the Kuspuk School District could be benefitted by putting its project needs on the capital improvement list.

MS. AGUILLARD replied that her district "absolutely" does apply to the capital improvement list and acknowledged that the Kuspuk School District would be benefitted by it.

[9:15:17 AM](#)

KATHERINE TATSUDA, Member, Ketchikan School Board, gave invited testimony in support of HB 69. She began her testimony by explaining her relation to education and her family history in Ketchikan. She said that 35 percent of the student population in the Ketchikan Gateway Borough (KGB) have experienced food

insecurity in the last thirty days and emphasized that 10 percent of students in the KGB are considered homeless. She explained a series of budget cuts that are being made as a result of a flat-funded BSA and said that the KGB School District is now facing decisions that are beyond simple personnel cuts and "deeply impactful" to the community. She said that schools in the KGB are becoming divisive and emphasized that families are seriously considering leaving Ketchikan to find somewhere with better public education opportunities for their children.

[9:22:21 AM](#)

STEVE ROWE, Parent, gave invited testimony in support of HB 69. He began his testimony by explaining his professional background and emphasizing that a lot of people are choosing to go elsewhere than Alaska due to its insufficient public education system. He opined that it might be "virtually impossible" to sufficiently staff certain sectors of work in the coming years due to Alaska's continued outmigration crisis and added that funding public education is the first place to start in its mitigation. He emphasized that education is a sector that must be funded and never sacrificed in the name of other policy decisions. He shared an anecdote of his daughter's experience in finding that all of the programs she wanted to participate in were cut and emphasized that while he has the means to help her participate in programs like that, other families don't. He shared that he purchased 67 computers for students in the Anchorage School District (ASD) but stressed that financial relief of Alaska's public schools cannot come from charity.

[9:29:30 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SCHWANKE asked what kind of workforce development opportunities Mr. Rowe believed that the ASD was doing well and asked what instruction could be improved upon.

MR. ROWE opined that the ASD is doing a good job of bringing career providers and union workers into schools.

[9:33:00 AM](#)

ADRIENNE MICHEL, Parent, gave invited testimony in support of HB 69. She read from a prepared testimony [included in the committee file], which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

Good morning, and thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak to you all today. My name is Adrienne Michel and I am a 3rd generation Alaskan, a mother of three and currently the PTA fundraising chair for Bear Valley Elementary in Anchorage Alaska. I am speaking to you today representing our PTA board and addressing the current lack of education funding that is affecting our school and schools across the state.

As many of you know, districts across the state have been struggling with how to make the education needs of our students work within the tight budget constraints we are currently presented with. Since 2011 the Base Student Allocation has increased around 5%, whereas inflation has increased by 39%, we are asking schools to do the same or more with less. Much, much less.

Over the last 14 years, the easy cuts have been taken. There are no frills, there are no extras. Across the state School Boards are grappling with how to make it work year after year as Band-Aid one time funding becomes the crutch they lean on. You can't hire teachers & support staff with one time funding, you can't plan maintenance improvements with one time funding, you can only cover the current holes and cross your fingers the funding comes through again next year when we are having this exact same conversation.

Each year districts across the state are looking at their budgets and trying to figure out how to make it work. The headlines will tell you how that is going: "Fairbanks proposes 5 school closures" "Anchorage

proposes 7 school closures" "MatSu faces \$22m deficit" both Juneau and Kodiak have had to make the decision to combine schools in their areas. In some cases, yes, buildings are not full and a closure is justified. But in many cases this is a last ditch effort to make the money work.

Families have already felt the weight of these decisions. Class sizes have increased leading to less and less educational focus for students on both the high and low end of academics. The opportunity to have additional support staff have gone away, IEP's and 504's become harder to implement, enrichment opportunities and afterschool programs have dwindled, and building maintenance is put off regularly unless it can be passed through a bond measure. And now, each year regardless of test scores, staff retention, and student outcomes they face the threat of school closure. Instead of focusing on the educational results that these schools offer they are being looked at in terms of maintenance costs, ease of moving students to different schools, and probable cost savings. Parents, teachers, and students spend their time and energy trying to find a way out of what feels like an inevitable doom.

When I volunteered for this PTA position two years ago I felt like it was an opportunity to help support my children's school. I stepped into the position of PTA fundraising chair having no clue how much our PTA does to help fill the gaps left by insufficient funding. I began this position thinking we would be putting on community building activities, bringing in a few treats for teachers, and adding some fun things to the school here and there.

The reality of the situation is that our PTA funds almost any additional need the school has. A snow tractor to make sure people can safely get from the parking lot to the building, functioning blinds so when our students practice ALICE drills their teachers

can actually close them, updated technologies so classrooms are equipped with current tools, ice melt (we just picked up 10 more bags this weekend), pallet jacks, books for the library, enrichment opportunities, desks and chairs for the classrooms, printers, ink, projector bulbs, a refrigerator with an ice maker for the nurses office, the list goes on and on. I want to stress that our school as a community has the means and ability to step and do these things, but the consistent ask (especially as all of our lives have also been impacted by inflation) is not sustainable long term. There are many schools in our district and across the state that simply can not do this, and therefore, they go without.

Although this has become somewhat of a part time job, I am immensely grateful that we live in an area where parents are willing and able to step up and help fund the things our school needs. However, we as a PTA can only cover the small gaps. The big gaps, the gaps that have been left by years of not adjusting the BSA we can not fund. We can not fund additional teachers, we can not fund support staff, we can not fund a school psychologist or counselor, we can't fund major building repairs. There are limits to what we as a group can do and the burn out of constantly putting out fires caused by lack of funding or budget shortfall is real. The amount of energy that has been funneled into rallying against school closures & advocating for a BSA increase when the need seems so very clear, only takes away from what we as a group can do to support our students and teachers.

There has been a lot of talk recently about investment in our state. Investment in oil, gas, infrastructure. Just as we want companies and people to invest in Alaska, we must invest in our children. We have an opportunity to educate the next generation of Alaskans into well paying jobs, creating sustainable careers and growth right here. We not only need engineers, pilots, geologists, and doctors. We need electricians,

pipefitters, surveyors, carpenters, and all positions in between. With the ability to read, do math, and think critically.

HB0069 looks to close the gaps left by years of flat funding and would give our schools and children the opportunity to move forward in a way that doesn't leave us grasping for more each year when budgeting conversations happen. Last year the legislature came heartbreakingly close to funding real change for our schools and our children. Please make this a priority for all of you this year.

Thank you

[9:39:19 AM](#)

AMIEE VILLARREAL, Parent, gave invited testimony in support of HB 69. She read from a prepared testimony [included in the committee file], which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

Hello, my name is Aimee Villarreal and I am a geologist in the Alaska oil & gas industry. I was relocated here 7 years ago and fell in love with this beautiful state. Some oil workers rotate through the state on a 3-5 year timeline but many, like myself, choose to stay permanently and raise our families here. I had to change oil companies to secure keeping my family here permanently to avoid a rotation out of state. But recently I have been questioning that decision because Alaska is making it harder and harder to choose to stay and raise my family here. The lack of adequate school funding is unacceptable. Getting a rotation to Alaska used to be highly coveted but that is no longer the case and instead these companies struggle to find employees willing to relocate to Alaska. The once highly sought-after Alaskan rotation is no more because employees that have lived here passionately share their woes about the Alaskan school system, the lack of childcare, and the threat of

school closures that they endured when living here. This has resulted in challenges in recruiting and retention of quality oil workers in Alaska and is what I would like to talk to you about today:

Good Schools are Essential for Alaska's Oil and Gas Industry

As families in the oil and gas industry, and as parents, we see first-hand how important schools are for our resource development and jobs. Alaska's oil production is projected to increase 162,000 barrels per day over the next decade—the question is, will the state provide stable school funding so families like ours can stay in Alaska?

Many of my coworkers are born-and-raised Alaskans, and others, like myself, relocated to Anchorage from other states based on work in resource industries. We all love this beautiful state and want it to be the kind of prosperous place that our children will want to stay and raise their families too.

We cannot understate how important local schools are for our families' decisions to stay in Alaska long term.

And the oil industry is NOT unique. There are numerous industries beyond oil & gas such as health care, military, and air travel that provide highly skilled jobs, which require strong education and training, and rely heavily on working families willing to relocate from the Lower 48 to Anchorage. If you look at growth projections for these industries, you will see the true growth potential of our city and our state.

For example, data from Alaska's Department of Revenue projects a 25% increase in Alaskan North Slope oil production (479,000 up to 641,100 barrels per day by 2034). This is due to several recent oil discoveries

and new oilfield developments on the North Slope, including Pikka which is the oilfield I work with, which will bring an influx of revenue and population growth to Anchorage. Capitalizing on these resource opportunities requires a strong school system—both so we can retain the families of highly-skilled workers who already live here and attract workers who can choose where they want to live.

One very important factor determining whether or not families will choose to move to and stay in Alaska for these jobs is the presence of a high quality public school system. Good schools mean families like ours can remain in Alaska and mean our employers can recruit and retain workers for the many other highly skilled, highly-paid jobs our industry is creating. If we fail to invest in schools, we will continue to see a tragic out-migration of families who can choose where they live. When highly skilled workers leave, either our employers can't develop the resources from which all Alaskans benefit, or those jobs go to Lower 48 residents who fly up for shift work.

Our Alaska Constitution directs the legislature to develop our resources for the maximum public benefit. That means we need to support resource development and think about maximizing job opportunities for Alaskans. Good schools mean economic growth today and opportunity for our children tomorrow. Good schools, like good fiscal policy and a pro-growth regulatory climate, are essential for our industry.

I want to thank all of you who campaigned on supporting schools. I urge you to pass a bill updating the Base Student Allocation (BSA) and indexing it to inflation and to do so soon to ensure school districts can make informed budgetary decisions as they craft their budgets in late February. We love Alaska and are committed to developing the oil resources that fund core services like education.

Let's invest in good schools so our industry and all of Alaska can continue to grow.

-Thank you for your time and the opportunity to be here today.

9:45:21 AM

STACEY DIXSON, Parent, gave invited testimony in support of HB 69. She read from a prepared testimony [included in the committee file], which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

Advocating for Increased BSA Funding to Support Gifted Learners

Good morning, Madam Chair and members of the Committee,

My name is Stacey Dixson, and I am the parent of two boys in the highly gifted program at Roger's Park Elementary School in Anchorage. I am here today in support of HB 69 and urge members of this committee to support a predictable increase to the BSA so that districts across Alaska can adequately support the learning needs of ALL children.

For years, Alaska has failed to fund education at a pace that - at a minimum - matched the rising cost of living and working in this state. And for years, districts and schools have been asked to streamline budgets, operate more efficiently, tighten their belts, make hard decisions, have big feelings, and become more accountable for funds that have been allocated.

Year after year, we parents watch in horror as class sizes increase, enrichment opportunities are removed, bus routes get longer, maintenance is deferred, specialized programs are cut, beloved teachers burn out and walk away, and neighborhood schools are put on the chopping block for closure.

And every year, more and more families - like my own - are forced to consider whether it still makes sense to live in a state where public education is not a priority.

Like so many other families who have considered relocating to Alaska, our first priority was finding a viable school fit for our two elementary-aged boys, both of whom are twice exceptional. On paper, ASD's language immersion programs, open optional schools, weekly IGNITE pull outs, and the Highly Gifted (HG) program at Rogers Park seemed fantastic. Unfortunately, the reality of what we have experienced is far different.

Securing a spot in one of the language immersion charter schools or open optional programs proved impossible for our oldest son who was entering the lottery at a higher grade, rather than in kindergarten. And while we deliberately chose a home that was zoned for the highest-performing neighborhood school in the district, it took seven weeks for the teachers and administrators at this new school to accept our son's gifted placement from another state so that he could attend IGNITE classes.

Seven weeks is a really long time for a kid like ours. The reality of moving from a class of 14 students to a class of 31 was that our son's new teacher didn't have the bandwidth or support to tailor her instruction to students who fell outside the normal range on the bell curve. In those first 7 weeks at his new school, our curious, intense, hungry learner became frustrated and angry. He slipped into a depression and had to be convinced to walk into school most mornings.

Watching his love for learning disintegrate so quickly was heartbreaking. My husband and I felt powerless - and against our strong commitment to public education, we started looking into private schools and even

homeschooling options –despite both of us working full-time jobs.

THIS is how public education systems lose kids and families. Not because we think a private education is better or because we are excited to quit our jobs and become homeschool teachers. We move our kids out of the public schools because they are not meeting their needs, because they are falling through the cracks, and because they are suffering.

Officially, gifted students make up almost 5% of learners across the state of Alaska and about 8% of learners in the Anchorage School District. However, nationwide research shows that many gifted children are never identified, especially minority learners and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Gifted students, many of whom are twice exceptional - have uniquely wired brains and unique learning needs that can be challenging for teachers who are already stretched with too many students, too much testing, and inflexible standards and requirements. Asking them to differentiate their lesson plans for a few students is simply not feasible in most public school classrooms.

Over time, gifted kids whose learning needs are not met can become disengaged, frustrated, and disruptive. They often earn - and then internalized - a reputation as the "classroom troublemaker" and are too often mislabeled as having a behavioral disorder. This lack of appropriate engagement, enrichment, and accommodation during these critical early years when kids either learn to love learning or learn to hate school can have devastating future consequences for our brightest children - especially boys. Gifted education is not a nice to have. It is not elitism. Gifted education is equity.

I wish you could have seen the transformation in our son once he was finally allowed to attend IGNITE. He found a teacher that nourished his intellectual curiosity and a space that became a refuge from his boredom.

While it was only 1-2 times a week for a few hours, IGNITE, under the direction of Doug Weimann, provided a lifeline for Sam. He learned to play chess, undertook structural engineering projects, grew microgreens, debated climate change, and became adept at using a 3D printer. He learned to ask questions, research answers, and figure out solutions to real challenges put before him. By Christmas, we had our happy, inquisitive kid back.

But as you all know, IGNITE and other programs designed for gifted learners are some of the first to be cut when ASD attempts to fix its huge budget deficit - as if these programs are auxiliary, nice to have enrichment activities for smart kids. But for our son (and so many other students over the years), IGNITE is the thing that rekindled his love for learning and made his time in school feel a little bit brighter.

ASD claims that it cannot afford programs like IGNITE at every school or extra teachers needed to decrease the student-teacher ratio in highly gifted classrooms, but I am certain that saving this money today will cost the state of Alaska much more in the end.

Given our state's real conundrum of outmigration, Alaska cannot afford to waste this potential and the wonderful human resources that are living right here. We cannot afford to lose these kids who will one day lead our state and fill jobs in critical industries like healthcare, teaching, technology, and engineering.

Both of my sons moved to the Highly Gifted program at Roger's Park for the 2024-2025 school year - a school that we were led to believe would be the right fit for learners like them. But what we found was overcrowded classrooms, combined grades, inflexible teaching, higher level math classes without live teachers, opaque, inconsistently applied policies, lack of / no desire for parent engagement, a lack of leadership (which was just filled by a wonderful educator), and most noticeably, a recent history burnt out, unsupported teachers that have left the classroom. The RPHG program does not have the funding or benefits to recruit, retain, and train teachers who are uniquely qualified to support these learners, and our kids are not thriving.

This is ASDs only school for highly gifted students, and just like every other program in the district, it is operating with inadequate resources to support the needs of the kids it was designed to serve. Families like mine are still wondering if it makes sense to stay in a state where this is the best we can expect.

Ultimately, the best way to support gifted learners is to provide adequate, predictable funding for Alaska's schools by increasing the BSA and by putting the resources in place to recruit and retain qualified, experienced educators. All of our students need talented teachers and smaller class sizes where they can receive appropriate, effective instruction. They deserve educators who are well compensated, feel valued, are professionally fulfilled, and who are supported rather than burnt out. And right now, very few of them have that.

If we continue down this path and fail to invest in our schools and in our most important resources, we will continue to lose families, talented workers, and economic investment to states that genuinely value education. Increasing the BSA is the first step in

ensuring all students in Alaska, including gifted learners, have access to the resources, teachers, and programs they need to succeed.

Madame Chair, our schools have no more "fat" to cut. We - the parents, teachers, school counselors, principals, nurses, resource aids, and PTA members are all exhausted by this predictable cycle of unpredictable funding. Nearly 80% of Alaskans support significantly increasing school funding. Many of you are here because you are former educators and school board members- because you are passionate about children fulfilling their potential. We can make this happen with appropriately funded schools and educators.

I urge you to take bold action, to do the right thing - even in the face of political pressure - and vote to increase BSA funding so that Alaska's schools can provide the quality education every child deserves.

Thank you.

[9:53:57 AM](#)

CLAYTON HOLLAND, Superintendent, Kenai Peninsula Borough School District, on behalf of Co-Chair Himschoot, gave a PowerPoint presentation in support of HB 69 [hard copy included in the committee file]. He began the presentation on slide 13, which highlighted the unique geographic and fiscal hurdles that the Kenai Peninsula Borough School District (KPBSD) faces. He moved through slides 14-15, which emphasized various budget cuts that have been made due to inadequate funding from the Alaska State Legislature and the impacts that the cuts have had on the KPBSD. He highlighted that his 26-year-old son chose not to come back to Alaska because the state is "beyond its days."

[9:59:14 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY thanked the invited testifiers, delivered committee announcements, and set the amendment deadline for HB 69 to Friday, January 31, 2025.

[HB 69 was held over].

[10:00:55 AM](#)

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Education Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 10:00 a.m.