

Legislature Stands Firm on Education Priority

By: Representative Kevin Meyer

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Ask a teacher at Service High School what problems face education in our state and the response is likely large classes, competitive salaries and benefits for teachers and support staff, and a lack of funding for schools. Ask a parent of a child at Kasuun Elementary School what their primary concerns are and you will likely hear recruiting and retaining quality teachers, providing safe schools, and sufficiently funding education. These same problems and concerns faced by education professionals and by parents are the concerns that I share as a state legislator.

As I reflect on the discussions I have had with parents and teachers, I realize the importance of keeping our constituencies informed of the decisions that we make at the State level. The accomplishments of the 23rd Alaska State Legislature emphasize that state leaders are in touch with the concerns of Alaskans, and that we are working hard to continue providing quality education to our children.

At the forefront of the education discussion is funding. As Chairman of the House Finance Education Budget Subcommittee, I worked diligently with my colleagues to ensure full funding and a significant increase in the Foundation Formula for funding K-12 education.

The biggest accomplishment in fully funding education was the passage of legislation that rolled \$32 million in Learning Opportunity Grants into the Foundation Funding Formula. Each year, the grants were at the whim of the Governor and the Legislature, and could be eliminated during the budget process. With the passage of Senate Bill 202, this money can no longer be decreased, redirected, or eliminated through legislation.

This year, the per student allocation was raised by \$159 per student to \$4,169. This is an increase of almost 4%. All together, education was funded at \$831 million. K-12 education is by far the largest general fund expenditure the State makes.

What does this mean for the classroom? Needs such as textbooks, classroom supplies, and technology can be met. Teachers can be hired to fill vacancies and added classrooms. Also, teacher pay can remain competitive, continuing the trend of keeping Alaska's teachers in the top 10 nationwide, and number 1 in starting salaries.

As state reports on benchmark exams and the High School Graduation Qualifying Exam become available, one factor becomes clear: there is a shortage and a high demand for highly trained and quality teachers in our classrooms. The Legislature worked hard to find creative and sustainable methods of recruiting and retaining the best and brightest teachers for Alaskan schools.

Legislation that provides further incentives for trained teachers and personnel to fill education positions throughout Alaska was passed this session. Senator Gary Wilken

sponsored [Senate Bill 25](#), which provides teachers, counselors, and administrators no-money-down financing for homes in areas where teacher and personnel shortages exist.

Last year, the Legislature placed before the voters one of the largest new school construction bonds. With the passage of this bond measure, more schools can be built and class size reduced.

Have we done enough for K-12 education? Some critics would say no. There is always something new and different to learn, research, or discover. The accomplishments from this year highlight the priority that the 23rd Alaska Legislature has placed on improving the quality of education in our state. I feel confident that we will continue to work with the Murkowski Administration, in the year to come, to ensure that education will remain a top priority.

The 2003-2004 school year is upon us and we will begin to see the results of these accomplishments. I encourage everyone to remain involved in the education of our children. Engaging in discussion and working towards a first-class education system is the goal of state leaders, parents, and teachers. Working together, we will achieve greater results for the future of our state.