

WORKING TOGETHER, SOLVING EDUCATIONAL ISSUES

Since I last reported to you I have spent many hours looking at the educational issues facing us. As a parent I have taken my children's education very seriously. As a family we worked very hard to make sure each of our children got through high school and earned a diploma. I wanted our children to have a good education. I felt their high school diploma was a "spring board" in their life that opened up future opportunities.

I know our family is not unique. Education is very important to all of us. Like my neighbors, I feel our children are entitled to a solid and constructive learning program that will prepare them for a productive future. We must have accountability in education. New federal and state legislation is being proposed to help gear up our schools as well as provide guidelines for accountability through academic testing.

Many Alaskans have expressed concern regarding the High School Graduation Competency Exam. As a member of the Senate Health, Education and Social Services (HESS) Committee I have been involved in an in-depth study of the situation. The committee has gathered information from numerous meetings, as well as teleconferences, e-mails, letters and phone calls. A majority of people in our area support the idea of a competency exam, but aren't sure the diploma should hinge on the results of the current test.

I've recently drafted a bill that reflects your input. Under this bill the competency exam will continue to be administered as previously scheduled. An Alaska high school diploma will be issued to all high school students who have met academic requirements established by the state. Those who pass the competency test components will have endorsements of proficiency added to the diploma. For those who do not pass any of the three tests the endorsements will be blank. Much work still needs to be done by the HESS Committee, but I feel we are working together to come up with a plan that will be in the best interest of Alaskans.

President Bush is exploring a system of school choice that may have some merit. In order to gather reliable data on who's falling behind and who needs help, President Bush has proposed a federal educational plan requiring students to pass yearly standardized tests in math and reading. He is hoping to have a new plan in place by this summer.

His plan proposes additional funding, gives local districts more control over federal funding, and imposes new school accountability standards. The President stated, "Once failing schools are identified, we'll help them improve. We'll help them help themselves." They will have three years to get up to standards, so that pupils are able to achieve passing scores. Parents will have the choice to move their students to a passing school. Under President Bush's plan students attending a failing school could be allowed to use federal funds for transportation to a public school with a better record. Students who have attended a school rated as failing for three years in a row could also be eligible for \$1,500 toward payment of tuition at private schools, including religious schools. President Bush's plan stimulates thoughts for discussion. Currently, the Competency Exam is for public school students only. Private schools have their own diplomas.

If private schools receive funds under Bush's plan for students that transfer over from failing schools would that mean private schools would be required to administer the test?

Other state legislation of interest in regards to our schools has been introduced in the Senate. Senate Bill 94, puts \$70 million in new dollars into Alaska schools. Highlights of this bill include: all school districts pay the same amount for education, contributing the equivalent of a four mill tax; increasing the base student allocation by \$210 per student; require the Department of Education to establish the cost of "doing business" for each district and updating it every two years; reducing the number of students in the definition of a funding community from 750 to 400; providing separate funding for vocational education programs increasing it by three percent; crediting one hundred percent of eligible federal aid that districts receive toward the local effort required of each community.

One thing is certain, we need to focus more on the basics in education and make sure it prepares our children for the future. I will keep you updated on the progress of the committee's work as the legislative session continues.

Please feel free to contact me with your comments and ideas. Constituent teleconference meetings are held at 6:00pm on the 2nd and 4th Thursdays of each month at the Legislative Information Offices (LIO) which is located upstairs in the old court house in Kenai. If you can't attend, call in to the teleconference operator from your home or office at 1-888-363-1555. Another way to contact me is through a public opinion message (POM). You can submit a POM by calling the LIO (283-2030) and it will be sent directly to me.

Thanks again for the opportunity you have given me to serve you! You can reach me any time by calling 283-7996.

Jerry Ward is a Republican elected to the Senate in 1996 and represents Kenai, Nikiski, K-Beach Road and South Anchorage.