

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

August 4, 2010

The Honorable Tom Harkin
Chairman
Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions
731 Hart Senate Office Building
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510-0001

Dear Senator Harkin:

Thank you for your continued leadership on education reform and for this opportunity to share my thoughts and priorities for reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). As you know, many elements of No Child Left Behind are a poor fit for Alaska. I have argued for starting over with new education policies better recognizing and respecting the importance of local communities guiding reform.

As the Senate moves forward on this important policy, I am concerned about Alaska's very unique education circumstances – and propose possible solutions to design an ESEA that is more realistic and more meaningful for my state. I look forward to discussing these issues with you and, of course, will stand by to assist you and the committee in any way I can.

Here are my priorities for education reform:

ESEA reauthorization that works for Alaska

Foremost for my constituents is an updated education law not only recognizing the challenges of geography, weather, culture, language and workforce in Alaska but also addressing these issues fairly and effectively. I do not think the solution is to exempt Alaska students, educators, or schools from standards and accountability, but I do believe the way we measure progress and assign consequences must be realistic and fair. As we move forward I will support a stronger emphasis on measuring individual student growth and want to build into the law ways to reward cultural and non-traditional forms of “progress.”

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No matter what the measurement tool, the Obama administration's "turnaround" ideas of firing the principal and as many as half the staff or closing a school entirely simply cannot work in Alaska's very small and remote school districts. Research from the University of Alaska tells us principal and teacher turnover in Alaska's dozens of rural school districts averages more than 20 percent annually. In lower-performing remote districts teacher turnover is typically 40 or 50 percent or more each year. Further, closing down the only school in Alaska villages accessible only by air or boat would be akin to closing down the center of community life. Children would somehow need to be relocated to other villages miles away from home. Rural Alaska needs a smart and comprehensive plan to improve student performance, not solutions seemingly designed for big urban districts.

I am enclosing a separate document with more detailed suggestions for writing an ESEA reauthorization law that is truly productive for Alaska's students and families.

Realistic, consistent and adequate funding

The brightest new ideas and best innovations are only as good as our commitment to full and adequate funding of our nation's education system. All of our work to update and improve ESEA will only be effective if we commit the resources necessary to give students, teachers and principals the tools they need to succeed.

Better support of Alaska Native, American Indian and Native Hawaiian programs

Current law recognizes the educational challenges facing indigenous Americans. In Alaska, funding through the Alaska Native Education Program has fostered locally-designed, community-based initiatives to preparing youth for improved learning. This is especially important to allow the innovation and flexibility needed in our smallest and most remote schools. In reauthorizing ESEA, we must not only strengthen the existing program but also make other funding streams more accessible to tribes and organizations working to improve educational outcomes for America's first peoples.

A strong commitment to early learning

Few would question the common sense view that children who enter the K-12 system fully prepared to learn will do better in school and their careers. There is mounting research substantiating this. Not only does early learning help students, it also provides economic benefits to entire communities. Alaska has continued to experiment with quality early childhood learning programs, including a current two-year pilot program. I will support legislative language and funding to move America's education system past the pilot or demonstration stages of early childhood learning. I appreciate language in the administration's ESEA blueprint regarding coordination by states and school districts with early learning programs to improve school readiness. Let's use this reauthorization

process – and congressional appropriations authority – to make quality preschool programs available to every American family.

The highest expectations for each student

While designing a more flexible and nuanced approach to student and school achievement, especially for rural Alaska and America, we must set high standards and continue to demand results and accountability. This revised and updated approach should better account for positive change in schools, from allowing rolling averages to more focus on student growth models. Technical assistance is important to help smaller districts better manage and use the data they collect on student outcomes. Expectations matter. When supported by motivated educators, involved families and committed communities, students, when challenged, will rise to the occasion. These high expectations should include instruction in history, arts and other topics to give students every chance to become informed, involved and well-rounded citizens.

Expanded support for teachers in underserved areas

We know experienced, committed and creative teachers make all the difference in student learning. Unfortunately, there are many challenges in attracting and retaining quality teachers for rural Alaska. Turnover in rural areas is double that in urban Alaska. Clearly, the primary responsibility for attracting strong teachers lies with the school district and state. However, I believe ESEA reauthorization must support creative approaches to expanding support for teachers in underserved areas, including adequate bandwidth to support distance education and other technologies used by teachers. Also, there must be greater emphasis on recruiting and training homegrown teachers, and new support to improve teacher living conditions in rural areas.

Safe schools and students who are healthy and ready to learn

The highest standards and the best teachers and principals are not the sole determinants of student success. Schools must offer a healthy and safe learning environment. I support regularly published surveys of school climate so families and communities are aware of what awaits students when they walk through the schoolhouse door. The Association of Alaska School Board's *School Climate and Connectedness Survey* is a model example – some of our districts have five years worth of data to identify problems, test innovative solutions for improving the school environment and see actual results. Reauthorization of ESEA must reward a commitment to such surveys while striking the proper balance between required reporting of school climate and the local flexibility needed to effectuate change. One rural Alaska superintendent tells me the first predictor of improved academic achievement is a positive school climate report. Teachers tell me we can improve classroom technique but can't force a child to learn if he or she comes to school hungry, tired and unprepared.

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In addition, students must be physically prepared to learn. The next version of ESEA should include more required physical activity as part of the school day, funding for more physical education teachers and the availability of nutritional foods and meals at school. One-third of entering kindergarteners and first graders in Alaska's largest school district are considered overweight or obese. Districts should be rewarded for adopting provisions outlined in S. 634 (*the FIT Kids Act*), including annual state and school district report cards on school health and PE programs. I also support funding for a definitive national assessment on the effect of good health on student learning. Let's confirm with sound science what common sense already tells us: healthier students are better students.

Again, thank you for your commitment to education reform in America. Please feel free to contact me at any time if you have questions or comments.

Sincerely,



Mark Begich
United States Senator

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