

Alaska Superintendents Association

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August 7, 2020

Dr. Michael Johnson, Commissioner
Alaska Dept. of Education & Early Development
PO Box 110500
Juneau, AK 99811-0500

Dear Commissioner Johnson:

On behalf of the Alaska Superintendents Association we are writing to express strong support for using the November 2019 estimated student count data to determine the amount of state aid under the public education funding program for Fiscal Year 2021. We need to ensure schools can operate over the long term, not simply get through this current crisis. Please allow me to share a range of thoughts.

One example of these needs regards smaller schools. What if a school drops below 10 because of parents homeschooling or leaving a village to be closer to medical care? Beyond enrollment decline impacts on budgets, the situation goes even further if districts have to close schools that most likely would have made it if not for COVID-19.

Returning specifically to student counts, these estimates are the basis for state aid to school districts through the Foundation Program allocation. The state's operating budget (HB205) was signed into law on May 18, 2020 with funding from the Foundation Program allocation based on student count estimates. School districts were required to submit budgets on July 15th. Note that these dates occurred as the pandemic was but beginning to unfold.

The funding formula for state aid to school districts is based on a 20-day student count period ending on the fourth Friday in October. The issue that arises is that this is a static period, but we are in an unprecedented year. Because of the timing of the pandemic and subsequent revision of delivery of instruction, school districts will undoubtedly experience significant losses in revenue due to decreased enrollment - at a time when they already lack sufficient funding to implement required safety and other COVID-19 mitigation measures.

As an example, the Anchorage School District reported that enrollment is significantly down, only two weeks before school is to start, by an estimated 5000 students. Using the basic need portion of the foundation formula of \$5,930 results in an estimated loss to ASD of \$29,650,000, without accounting for the other elements of the formula that are based on enrollment. Such a loss would be devastating for our largest district, and similar impacts would be devastating to rural and urban districts across the state.

An idea we would like you to consider would be to allow districts to submit this year's numbers if a specific school is above the estimate. Some correspondence programs are seeing a large influx, as are some small communities as people leave larger communities. There are districts

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with enrollment considerably above their projections and will possibly not have enough cash flow to make it through the year. We need to acknowledge that reality as well and increased needs to those programs which also need financial support. Essentially, we need a floor of support (last year's count) but not a ceiling or limit (for those districts whose counts and accompanying demands are increased). We need to support schools strongly through this crisis.

The enrollment swings are likely temporary, hopefully for just this year, and we will need our existing educational infrastructure to remain whole, so that when things get back to normal, (whatever that ends up meaning), we will be able to operate effectively. Getting systems up and running after a shutdown will be very difficult.

By the Alaska Constitution, the state must provide equitable access to public education for all students. Especially during this crisis, it is imperative that we take every step necessary to sustain our schools. We owe it to our students, communities and our state to allow this transformation of education to succeed in all public schools by fully funding education at the levels we know are reflective of the true and eventual enrollment for FY2021.

Cordially,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Shawn Arnold', is written over a light blue horizontal line.

Shawn Arnold, Superintendent
Valdez City School District
ASA President

cc: ASA Board of Directors