

Alaska's education debate has always focused on how much money we should spend. That's not working. Spending more, without discussing doing what works, is like stepping on the accelerator when your car is stuck in deep snow. We need to be smarter about how we approach education. It is time for an education policy that helps all children, regardless of privilege, to succeed.

The Democrats' legislative platform shoots for this goal. While we've always demanded an education budget that reduces class sizes, the unfortunate truth is the political will to substantially reduce class sizes doesn't exist in either the administration or the Republican legislative majority. For example, Governor Murkowski's budget proposal, like last year's, does nothing to reduce class sizes in most schools. It's time for a smarter education policy. Here are some things we need to do.

**Increase Parental Involvement.** Numerous studies show that when parents are actively engaged in a child's education, the child has a better chance to succeed. However, teachers with overcrowded classrooms need help getting parents more involved in their children's schooling. That's why we've proposed House Bill 332. It grants every school a parental outreach staff member to help contact and work with parents whose children need more help in school. This is an inexpensive way to help students and will pay great dividends.

**Early Education Reform.** Most states have started to heed the growing body of research showing children who begin their education early, before age five, do better in school than children who only start in Kindergarten. A young child's capacity for intellectual growth is phenomenal. As Sue Urahn, Education Director at Pew Charitable Trusts, states, "Research shows that children who have access to high-quality pre-K do better in school and in life."

But our state is frighteningly behind the curve. According to the National Institute for Early Education Research, Alaska is one of only 11 states with no significant state funded pre-Kindergarten education program outside of the Head Start program.

To make things worse, Alaska's Head Start pre-Kindergarten funding for low-income children will dwindle this year under the Governor's budget proposal. Democrats will work to prevent this cut, which is due to a reduction in federal funding and a level state funding proposal that does not account for inflation. Until Alaska has a statewide early education program, we cannot afford to close more pre-Kindergarten classrooms again this year.

We've proposed House Bill 333 to provide education starting at age four for all families who want to participate. If the Legislature doesn't act this year, then it will hopefully fund a study being spearheaded by the Humanities Forum to promote a

statewide pre-Kindergarten education system. The problem with the latter approach is that nothing will be implemented this year. We should act now.

**Better Financial Aid For University and Vocational Education.** Alaska sends a smaller percentage of children to college than any other state – a stunningly low 28%. And because Alaska provides less need-based financial aid to low income students than any other state per capita, we’ve “earned” an “F” for “affordability” on the National Report Card on Higher Education.

Until recently, the University of Alaska provided no need-based financial aid. The state has now instituted a limited aid program, but committed very little funding to support it. The average need-based grant provided by the University is roughly \$1,000, but the cost of tuition, room, board, and expenses is roughly \$10,000/year for a full time student. A University Regents study estimates our financial aid program is underfunded by \$3 million or more.

Lack of privilege or wealth should never prevent a person committed to bettering themselves from achieving their goals. That’s why we’ve introduced House Bill 340, expanding financial aid to all who need it. The bill would assist students attending the University of Alaska for college, vocational education, or for certificates such as those required in the booming field of air cargo logistics.

We know how to create more opportunity through our schools. We should start doing it.