

Don't Try Ignorance

Although older Alaskans may deserve the government we voted for, it looks like the younger ones won't get the education they deserve. Governor Walker and Education Commissioner Hanley first sounded the education retreat when they asked the Legislature in January to remove \$50 million dollars from public schools without a plan. In the Capitol this month, House legislators told the NAACP that they had cut budgets for schools and pre-schools further because the Governor started it. And while we were asking individual senators about last year's promise to maintain funding, Senators Dunleavy, MacKinnon and Kelly were down the hall reducing the schools' budget by a total \$97 million without a plan.

<http://www.adn.com/article/20150403/senate-budget-cuts-exceed-those-proposed-house-and-governor>

Let's see. For perspective, a cool hundred million pays the salaries and benefits for more than one thousand teachers for a year.

Instead of cutting the schools' budget, the Legislature rather needs to fund a plan that will increase school performance. After all, adequately funding the public schools is one of the few requirements the constitution imposes on the Legislature. You'll remember Ann Lander's advice, "If you think education is expensive, try ignorance." <http://www.quora.com/Who-said-If-you-think-education-is-expensive-try-ignorance>

Instead of taking money from the public schools to bail out the state's cash-flow crunch, the legislators should put down their free sandwiches and plan how to raise the grade-level proficiency of our school kids. Legislators and the Governor all recently told the NAACP that they were big supporters of public schools. However, we found most weren't walking the talk. They had no plan to improve student performance across the state. Instead, officials were competing to make deeper school cuts. As Shannon Moore said in these pages, don't tell me what you value, show me your budget and I'll tell you what you value. <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/10478-don-t-tell-me-what-you-value-show-me-your-budget>

Among the states, Alaska is already floating toward the bottom in reading and math skills. Our school kids' reading proficiency has been flat, like the inflation-adjusted school budgets from the Legislature over the last decade. Fourth grade reading proficiency here is among the worst in the USA. Eighth grade proficiency is not much better.

In contrast, other states like Florida, North Carolina and Maryland, have figured out how to raise students' grade-level proficiency, some by as much as twenty percent and one to two grade-levels in a decade or two. Some of the gains cost them more money and some didn't. However, the gains came only from deliberate, broad-based, often messy, efforts to take their poorly prepared students and raise them up. As surprising as it seems, the USA's school kids' reading proficiency is up overall in the last twenty years. Raising up poorly prepared students, and we know Alaska has many, is why we have public schools in the first place.

https://education.alaska.gov/tls/assessment/naep/Fall2013/snapshot_RED2013AK_4.pdf

http://education-consumers.org/pdf/4th_Grade_Reading_Chart_Revised_4-8-15.pdf

What do you say the Governor and Legislature steal the best methods from successful states, put them to work here, and close the reading and math skills gap with the USA? We certainly have plenty of room for that kind of improvement, although it will take a statewide plan and a different way of doing business. Other states, with less oil money but lots of poorly prepared children, figured out how to catch up their students. So can we.

The NAACP thinks that statewide grade-level proficiency gains of two percent per year for a decade is an urgent goal. How about Representatives Gattis, Pruitt, Neuman, Vazquez, and Keller pass a state-wide plan to raise student proficiency and then fund it, rather than willy-nilly eliminating reading programs? After all, we can't cut our way to better schools.

http://www.hks.harvard.edu/pepg/PDF/Papers/PEPG12-03_CatchingUp.pdf

<http://www.adn.com/article/20150225/legislative-committee-targets-education-programs-cuts>

But more immediately, should we really expect the Legislature to restore its hundred million dollar cut? You bet we should. First, it can shift \$50 million from the Legislature's own \$77-million-per-year bureaucracy and become as frugal as North Dakota, a state similar to Alaska in its population, oil production and rural character. We can no longer afford free sandwiches in the Capitol, first-class offices in Anchorage, and hundreds of legislative agency staffers analyzing stuff and writing wonderful reports. See Luke 4:23. Secondly, the Legislature can borrow from the billion-dollar-plus Public Education Fund to tide over the schools; that's what the fund is for. As the Governor said, the state has plenty of money, it's just a cash management problem.

<http://www.legis.nd.gov/fiscal>

https://www.omb.alaska.gov/ombfiles/15_budget/15enacted_5-28-14_deptsummary_compare_nodebt.pdf

If you want Alaska kids to become competitive in a few years' time, in spite of who you voted for, then tell your favorite politician and school administrator to raise students' reading and math skills up to the rest of the USA. Hold them accountable for showing big gains in grade-level proficiency in the school nearest you by the time they're out of office. After all, kids don't wait.