



Education: Demand Excellence

Education is the backbone of a strong society. Moreover, in Alaska education is a constitutional mandate: Article VII commands the legislature to ‘establish and maintain a system of public schools open to all children of the state.’

During my six years in office we have made improvements to how education is funded, and to seeing to it that the funding is more fairly shared across the state. Per student funding has grown from \$4120 in FY 2003 to \$5882 in FY 2009 and a new study by the Institute of Social and Economic Research on the differences in school operating costs is being implemented, putting behind us the divisive legacy of older, unbalanced approaches. Creating the same opportunities for rural and urban students is something I have pushed for years, as in this article, co-authored by myself and Senator Lyman Hoffman of Bethel.

I have also fought to fix our teacher retirement system. In 2005, after a long legislative battle and a fifteen day special session, Alaska adopted a defined contribution retirement plan, against my and many other legislators’ strenuous objections. I have signed on as a co-sponsor to a bill that would fix this error, and return us to a defined benefit retirement, which is something practically every other public schoolteacher in the nation takes for granted. You can’t attract first class teachers with a second class benefits package.

There is still a long way to go. We need more pre-Kindergarten capabilities, for example. The studies are so clear about the powerful beneficial effect of pre-K that we simply must find a way to make this available statewide.

The challenges to creating a first class education system are not small. I believe they can be overcome. My grandfather was an educator all his life, and there are times I can still hear and feel his admonitions to concentrate, study and learn. Together we can do it!