

Legislation attacks education problems

by Sen. John Binkley
for the Tundra Times

JUNEAU — A report produced earlier this year by a joint legislative committee shows we are not doing a very good job of educating our school children in Alaska.

OPINION

The committee, headed by Rep. Eileen MacLean, D-Barrow, and Sen. Lloyd Jones, R-Ketchikan, found that far too many Alaska schools are operating at an "unacceptable level of performance." Even more alarming, we found that this is not just a one-year dip in student test scores; school achievement in Alaska has been declining steadily over the past several years.

And while some Alaska schools are producing students capable of scoring at or above the national average on standardized tests, no one ought to take much comfort in that finding.

The American test scores average at the very bottom of the list when measured against school performance achieved by the rest of the developed countries of the world. That means even if all Alaska kids scored in the 99th percentile nationally, they'd still be running far behind much of the rest of the industrialized world.

This is a dismal report card on Alaska's education system. And, while the committee estimates it would cost some \$65 million over the next five years to correct our unacceptable levels of achievement, if we do nothing to correct this situation, the estimated costs of public programs to help these under-educated students later in their lives is estimated at 10 times higher.

Clearly, we must start taking some steps now if we're going to help young people escape this rapidly escalating slide toward mediocrity.

The Joint Committee on School Performance has produced two bills and

a resolution as first steps. These bills won't win the war, but they could represent some potent opening shots.

House Bill 469 would meet a basic need by putting a state education policy into law. We've never had such a policy statement on the books, and if you don't know where you want to go, how are you ever going to get anywhere?

Under terms of the bill, our education policy would be simple enough: to help ensure that all students succeed in their education and work, shape worthwhile lives for themselves, exemplify the best values of society and help improve the character and quality of the world about them.

Our school officials must clearly understand that we expect them to pursue this policy and do a better job for our children. To that end, HB 469 also would require both the State Board of Education and local school districts to adopt goals and priorities for improving school performance, put together plans to achieve these goals, and come up with a means of measuring how successful they were when it's time to review and plan for the next year.

And, in response to parents in many communities who complained to the joint committee about their inability to have any input in their children's education, the bill would require every school district to create regional advisory boards to give advice on all education matters, including maintenance of school facilities.

Districts also would be required to solicit comments on school performance from students, parents and other community members.

Finally, HB 469 would establish a "Fund for the Improvement of School Performance." The commissioner of education would use the fund to make grants to school districts — or to principals, teachers, local governing bodies or nonprofit organizations — who have applied to the commissioner with a persuasive plan for specifically improving school performance.

The other bill in the package, HB 470, proposes to establish a committee on early childhood and parenting



education within the Department of Community and Regional Affairs, with the commissioner of education serving as chairman.

The committee, which also would have two practitioners from these fields as members, would develop a statewide plan for early childhood and parenting education. Among other questions to be answered, the committee would be charged with determining which students would be best served and what they should be taught.

House Concurrent Resolution 46 is the final part of the joint committee's proposals. It would request the governor to establish a committee of state agencies, including the university system, to identify critical social and health barriers to learning, establish plans to overcome them and then take responsibility for carrying out the plans.

There is one last bill that isn't part of the joint committee's formal legislative package, but deserves mention and has my support. MacLean, who worked long and hard on the

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school performance project, has a separate bill — House Bill 203 — to provide for state certification of teachers in certain fields where standard college degrees are not available.

There are extremely competent teachers of Native languages and culture, for example, who have been teaching important skills but cannot be certificated — and therefore can't get state retirement or benefits — under current law.

The Joint Committee on School Performance plans to issue a final report next January. I can tell you now that it won't show Alaska has caught up with the rest of the world in school performance.

But I hope the report's findings can show that while we may not have turned around this unhappy situation, we've at least turned our full attention to it. If that happens, we still may not deserve an "A," but we will be able to take a measure of pride in the fact that we've finally started putting in the effort to raise our grades.