

Quality school initiatives

By Shirley Holloway

State Commissioner of Education

Alaska's schools are moving toward what it becoming a performance-based education system.

This means students will have to meet higher education standards. And it means that everyone else involved in schooling will need to be more accountable for making sure our children meet the higher standards. This includes teachers and other educators, families, school board members, employers and others in the local community.

We need to build a performance-based system of schools because the world is more economically competitive. Many nations have placed high priority on student achievement in math and science as part of an overall national economic strategy. They know that the

key to prosperity is a well-educated workforce. If we decide not to set high standards, we do so at our own peril and our children's peril.

Students in our schools now advance through our education system largely on a time-based schedule. When another year is gone, the child moves on to the next grade or the next subject.

Under a performance-based system, educators and the public are very specific about what students need to know and be able to do. They set clear benchmarks so that a child acquire specific knowledge and skills at defined stages of the child's development. Students advance after mastering a certain level of knowledge and skills.

Performance-based schools have a variety of ways to accurately measure whether students are meeting the standards at every level

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of their schooling. Schools and educators are held accountable for assisting each student to attain the high results we expect. And I mean every student.

Our state has not yet built such a statewide system. In November, the State Board of Education granted the request of the Chugach School District to be the first school district to become a performance-based system. Chugach, located along Prince William Sound, received permission to scrap the state's 21 units of credit in order to graduate. Instead the district will advance students when they meet predetermined district performance standards.

There are other pockets of excellence where promising things are happening. But they are not happening in every school, in every classroom for every child. We need to make it happen.

Governor Knowles and I have endorsed the

Alaska Quality Schools Initiative to encourage schools and communities to move in this direction. The 1996 Alaska Education Summit was held in October to build support throughout Alaska for high student academic standards.

We invited teams of business leaders, government officials, parents and educators, and other community members to the summit. We asked the teams to return home, expand their membership, and build action plans to transform our schools into performance-based organizations. Juneau and Kake held their local summits and are on the road to accomplishing this. Other communities have set their summit dates or have summits on the drawing board.

I am excited about this effort. It's important that we take these steps. We need to do it for our children's sake.

Reprinted from BP Exploration's Juneau Report.