

# Panel targets pre-school programs

by Rep. Eileen P. MacLean  
for the Tundra Times

The Joint Committee on School Performance, which Sen. Lloyd Jones, R-Ketchikan, and I chair, held a public meeting recently in Kotzebue to review the past accomplishments of the group, as well as to discuss strategy and its goals for the next legislative session.

## Inupiat Paitot *People's Heritage*

## OPINION

Although the committee praised its progress last session in improving schooling in Alaska, we all agreed that one of our top priorities next session and in the future is to address greater equity in educational funding in Alaska and the need for continued development of early childhood/Headstart programs statewide.

Last session we were successful in passing two measures that created a state education policy that mandates the Alaska Board of Education to adopt statewide goals implemented by each school district, requires the compilation of a school report card to better assess the performance of schools, sets up a fund for the improvement of school performance, establishes advisory boards in unincorporated areas and provides for the development and implementation of a physical preventative maintenance program for school facilities.

In addition, a special interagency coordinating committee on schools was formed to aid social and health services within school districts in iden-

tifying and helping students at risk.

The bill requires the Department of Community and Regional Affairs, the State Department of Education and the Department of Health and Social Services to implement the provisions of the bill.

Another bill sponsored by the committee that did not pass the Legislature last session would have set up an early childhood and parenting education committee to provide training for school districts and set up early childhood programs for municipalities that do not have Headstart programs.

Even though the bill did not pass, \$5 million in Headstart funds were awarded through welfare reform to start new programs and/or serve some of the 964 children currently on waiting lists throughout the state with existing Headstart programs. The committee vowed to pursue the early childhood and parenting education portion of the measure next session.

The meeting focused on the state foundation funding formula, the mechanism for distributing \$70 million to single- and multiple-site school districts.

Last session, several measures were introduced to correct the inequity inherent in the foundation formula's method of distributing funds for education. However, only technical changes to the formula were approved.

The mechanism is based on the average daily membership of kids, identified by grade levels or enrollment in special programs. The formula assesses basic need where education is taking place in the state, minus the resources that local government contributes to education. Funding is granted accordingly.

However, because the same formula

is used for funding both single- and dual-site school districts on a per child basis, the foundation funding formula does not provide equity.

Increased cost of providing education in rural multiple-site districts allows these areas to receive more state assistance than some incorporated school districts due to an inability of unincorporated areas to generate revenue through property taxes.

However, children who live and attend school on Native lands receive federal impact monies that contribute to education, rather than state funds from the foundation formula.

Therefore, there is tremendous discrepancy in per child funding. For example, funding ranges from \$27,926 per child in the Aleutian Region to \$5,988 per child in the Mat-Su area.

Further, because the funding mechanism was put into law several years ago, changes in the economic situation throughout the state have skewed the formula as it applies to funding currently.

The funding formula alters assistance to an area if there are attendance changes or property value depreciates or appreciates. This provision of the formula has allowed for additional money over the past few

years to be distributed to areas where there is property devaluation, primarily urban areas.

Rural school districts have received far less because generally property values don't change in these areas.

However, most of the areas receiving increases in funding have continued to contribute the same amount or have increased local contribution to education, even though property in these areas assessed at less value. The end result is that the larger municipalities in the state have more money overall for education.

The Joint School Performance Committee intends to continue to focus attention on improving methods of educational funding, especially for pre-school and Headstart type programs, with the idea of ultimately capturing funding to serve all kids that need these programs.

We feel this would be the single biggest contribution to improving school performance in the state of Alaska. Everything else aside, if kids start out right in the educational system they will have a better chance of success all the way through school. The first introduction to school is crucial to impress a kid with the education process for life.