

Final Legislative update

It has been a long and drawn out Legislative Session – certainly longer than anyone could have bargained for. Facing a budget crisis the Governor and the Legislature started a dramatic round of cuts that targeted recent gains for education as the largest single target for budget-cutting. The losses to education were significant – the spending of the long-fought for Education endowment, the elimination of the promised increases to BSA and one-time funding, mentoring, STEM and the list goes on. But there is a silver lining of sorts and, as far as our CEAAC priorities, we were able to hold the line and even make some gains. But first lets review the current and future situation.

What has become most clear this Session is that there is a significant difference in opinion between the Majorities and Minorities as to the value and importance of education. Given the choice of optional deposits into the tax credit fund for the oil industry and deep cuts to education, the Majorities opted for the latter. The Minority (in the House) this year had the additional leverage of three new members and consequently was able to use their control over expenditures from the Constitutional Budget Reserve (CBR) to drive a different set of priorities. Working closely with the House Minority leadership, we played a critical role in the preservation of the \$2 million in Pre-K funds (partially cut in the Governor’s budget and eliminated in the initial legislative budgets) and the preservation of the increase to the Base Student Allocation (BSA) secured for last year. This latter was critical to planning for all our member districts and – with Pre-K – was our highest legislative priority on the Operating side. I might add that we also saw funding for Parents as Teachers increased to \$750,000 and Residential School stipend funding retained.

On the Capital side we were quite successful as well. Our overall highest priority remained the full funding of the Kasayulie agreement which, this year, is now nearly complete. Working with the Governor’s Office, the superb Legislative team of the Northwest Arctic Borough and School District, Superintendent Annemarie O’Brien and Mayor Reggie Joule, we were able to get an appropriation for \$43 million for the Kivalina School. While there is a dispute still as to the amount for the full funding of the school (the State and we contend that the amount is at least \$50 million, the Legislature disagreed), we are pleased that the Senate acknowledged the force of law carried by the Kasayulie decision and look forward to a final year of funding for the Kivalina school in the next budget cycle. I should add that the critical role of the Kivalina Road was recognized throughout the budget negotiations and will remain a priority of the House Minority and key Majority members in the coming session. Despite the funding situation, we were also able to secure the \$10 million slated in the Major Maintenance budget for the Demoski school and we retained the integrity of the REAA School Construction Fund ensuring its statutory deposit was secured.

Kudos to all the Superintendents and their staff that supported our work this year. The House Minority has thanked us for our support and involvement and we look forward to continuing our efforts to stabilize education in the coming years, despite the even more difficult environment we expect to face.