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Three Alaska districts to pilot flexibility in parental options

Alaska is one of five states in which selected school districts will have flexibility in the choices they offer students in schools that do not make adequate yearly progress and that receive federal anti-poverty funds, the U.S. Department of Education announced Wednesday.

The federal government's goal is to steer more children from low-income families to free after-school tutoring.

The Alaska Department of Education & Early Development applied for this flexibility on behalf of the Anchorage, Matanuska-Susitna and Ketchikan school districts. The U.S. Department of Education approved flexibility agreements with all three districts.

Specifically, the federal government is providing flexibility for the order in which "public-school choice" and "supplemental educational services" are offered to students. Under the federal No Child Left Behind Act, those are two options for parents if their children's high-poverty school (Title I) is not making adequate yearly progress in meeting proficiency targets.

Under the law, if a Title I school hasn't made adequate yearly progress for two consecutive years, its district must offer all of the school's parents the option of transferring their children to a higher-performing public school, if practicable.

If a Title I school hasn't made adequate yearly progress for three consecutive years, its district must notify all of the school's low-income parents about the availability of supplemental educational services. Those services, most often tutoring, are offered free to students outside of the regular school day and generally are not provided by the school.

Districts must set aside an amount equal to up to approximately 20 percent of their Title I funds to pay for those options.

As a pilot for a limited number of schools for next school year only, the federal government will reverse the law's sequence of offering parents school choice before offering tutoring. Instead, it will allow tutoring first.

In addition, the U.S. Department of Education will allow the Anchorage School District to join Boston and Chicago in a pilot program in which the districts are allowed to offer the supplemental educational services themselves.

“We asked for this flexibility for several Alaska school districts because it makes sense to try to address the specific needs of struggling students through tutoring before districts move students to another school,” said Alaska Education Commissioner Roger Sampson. “Tutoring is a less-intrusive option for families and the schools. We have found that more eligible families prefer to receive tutoring for their children than attend a school outside their neighborhood.”

The flexibility in offering options to parents helps Alaska meet one of the main goals of the State Board of Education & Early Development: Continuous academic growth for all students, including closing the achievement gap in reading, writing and math.

Alaska previously has taken steps to offer parents a practical option for improving their children’s academic proficiency. Because many Alaska districts don’t have more than one public school for each grade level, they can’t offer parents a choice of public schools. Under Alaska regulations, those districts must notify parents of the availability of supplemental educational services after a Title I school has not made adequate yearly progress for two years, rather than wait for the federal requirement of three years.

“The willingness of the U.S. Department of Education to identify Alaska as one of the few states to receive such flexibility reflects favorably on our state,” Commissioner Sampson said. “It shows that federal officials have confidence we can meet the needs of our school children.”

The U.S. Department of Education’s news release and other materials are available at:
<http://www.ed.gov/news/pressreleases/2006/07/07262006a.html>.

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