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Press Release

COMMISSIONER'S OFFICE

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Legislative session is a success for education

JUNEAU – The just-completed legislative session lays the groundwork for significant improvements in Alaska's public schools, Education Commissioner Larry LeDoux said today.

"We are grateful to Governor Palin and the legislators for their leadership in taking steps to address the needs of Alaska's school children," Commissioner LeDoux said.

Among other education-related accomplishments, the Alaska State Legislature approved a pilot preschool program and authorized more money for Head Start; appropriated the second year of a three-year increase in school funding; financially supported efforts by the Department of Education & Early Development to assist struggling schools; and took steps to ease the transition of military families to their new schools when they move to Alaska.

Governor Sarah Palin praised the Legislature for approving funding for numerous education initiatives and programs she requested, including the \$2 million pilot preschool program.

"This is great news for Alaska," said Governor Palin. "Working together, we have made decisions that are going to positively impact the lives of many children. My goal is to try and make sure education funds actually produce measurable improvements in student achievement, particularly for minority and special needs students."

In the pilot preschool program, school districts, in some cases in partnership with the private sector or nonprofits, would apply for state grants to operate preschools and provide educational resources to parents of young children who educate their children at home.

The pilot will serve up to 500 children, mostly four-year-olds, in a half-day program during the school year before they enter kindergarten. The programs would offer age-appropriate opportunities for learning and socializing, health screenings, and nutritious meals.

A large, faint watermark logo of the Alaska Department of Education & Early Development is visible in the background. It features a circular emblem with a hand holding a pencil, surrounded by the text "ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION & EARLY DEVELOPMENT". Below the emblem, the words "EDUCATION & EARLY DEVELOPMENT" are written in a large, bold, sans-serif font.

EDUCATION
& EARLY DEVELOPMENT

Additionally, the pilot programs will support parents -- both those who use child care centers and those who educate their young children at home -- with library materials, instructional materials, or home visits similar to “parents as teachers” programs.

The pilot has four purposes: to serve children who are not now being served by preschools; to help parents who want more guidance in educating their young children at home; to form partnerships that would strengthen existing child care providers; and to try out different ways of achieving quality preschool care.

Additionally, the Legislature added \$600,000 to the state’s contribution to Head Start, allowing the program to serve approximately 60 more children.

The legislature also funded year two of a three-year increase in education funding. Details include:

- An increase in the base student allocation of \$100, from \$5,480 to \$5,580, for a combined increase of up to \$23 million, depending on enrollments.
- An increase in funding for intensive-needs students from \$49,320 to \$61,380 per student, for a combined increase of up to \$21 million, depending on enrollments. Intensive-need students are children with disabilities who require the care of an adult throughout the school day.
- An increase in the district cost factors for districts other than Anchorage, for a combined increase of up to \$12.4 million, depending on enrollments. District cost factors account for the higher operating expenses of school districts outside the transportation hub and population center of Anchorage.

The Legislature approved \$824,000 to fund state efforts to work with school districts to improve chronically low-performing schools. Often these improvement steps include using better methods of instruction, implementing the state’s academic standards in the classroom, and using assessment data about children to help adjust instruction to meet each child’s needs. All of these improvements require well-trained staff and local leadership.

The Department of Education & Early Development will increase its own staff and employ contractors to provide support services -- such as Alaska experts in reading, math, social studies, science, the arts, and career and technical education -- to assist school districts.

The funding also will allow the department to hire a Director of Rural Education, who will work with communities, organizations and schools to improve the academic success of rural and Alaska Native students. The director also will supervise the school districts’ implementation of the state’s cultural standards, which were created in 1998 and designed to ensure that students are well-grounded in their community’s traditions.

“The position of the Director of Rural Education is an important step in building bridges between rural schools and their communities,” LeDoux said.

The legislature approved a number of additional Palin administration education requests, including: \$350,000 to allow the Galena School District’s boarding school to serve 55 more students; an increase of \$150,000 for an autism resource center, for a total of \$350,000; and an increase of \$50,000 to help rural secondary students transition from school to adult life, for a total of \$150,000.

The Legislature approved the administration-supported bill for Alaska to join the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children. The multi-state agreement makes it easier for military children to transition to public schools when they move to a new state. Although Alaska school districts already do much to help military students make that transition, the interstate compact will provide an opportunity to share effective practices with other states, and it relieves military families of some of the anxiety about moving to a new state.

The legislature also funded the first 23 school district projects on the state’s major maintenance list, at a cost of \$42.4 million, and appropriated \$1 million for major maintenance projects at the state-operated boarding school in Sitka, Mt. Edgecumbe High School. In the supplemental budget is approximately \$18 million to rebuild the school that burned in Kalskag.

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