

## Coalition for Education Equity

*presentation for Senate Education Committee*

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### Slide 1

Good afternoon. My name is Sarah Sledge. I am the executive director of the Coalition for Education Equity.

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We are a member-based, statewide nonprofit organization representing Alaska school districts, organizations, and individuals concerned about the quality and breadth of educational opportunities available to Alaska's children. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

Our organization, formerly known as Citizens for the Educational Advancement of Alaska's Children, litigated, and successfully settled both the Kasayulie and Moore lawsuits. These landmark education court cases continue to guide our work today.

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We were asked to present to you today on what is needed to adequately support education in Alaska. Our membership has identified adequate investment in public education, addressing the teacher and other education staffing shortage, and significant investment in school construction and major maintenance as their most urgent priorities for education.

**Coalition for Education Equity** believes that a successful education system is essential to having a thriving state. There have been multiple thorough articles in our Alaska news media outlets that have detailed the impact of the budget squeeze on our schools. It is clear that continued flat funding of our education budget is not in the best interests of a successful education system and that it is, in fact, doing damage to our education structure.

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Current education funding levels are insufficient. Most school districts have been preparing for and are already experiencing a significant deficit in their budgets. Historic 40-year high inflation has resulted in rising costs in all areas.

*Note slide contents.*

One of our member school districts reports a \$6-700,000 shortfall. Another states that costs have gone up for their district between \$800,000 to \$1 million since the last BSA increase in 2017.

From 2011 to 2022, the BSA has increased only 4.29% while Alaska's urban consumer price index has risen 24.6%. As you can see, these rising costs and budget shortfalls have an impact on multiple aspects of delivering an education in Alaska: fuel and energy costs, facilities maintenance and repair, capital improvements, teacher housing, insurance premiums, funding for teacher and other staff salaries. Funding shortfalls affect the ability of our school districts to provide counselors, nurses, special education aides, arts and sporting programs, and career and technical education for our children.

Additionally, budget uncertainty and late decision-making mean that schools are unable to plan effectively and efficiently, losing purchasing power, increasing fuel and maintenance costs, and often leading to teacher turnover.

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We ask the legislature and administration to ensure that education funding sources are reliable and adequate and that funding decisions are made in a timely manner that enables school districts to plan efficiently and responsibly.

Stability in annual PreK-12 education funding will enable our public-school districts to budget effectively and efficiently, which contributes to their ability to recruit and retain quality educators and provides greater capacity to focus on maintaining and improving quality instruction for our children.

We urge our State leaders to consider and act on revenue measures to support public education. Coalition for Education Equity supports efforts to develop and pass a fiscal plan for Alaska.

Most urgently, increasing the Base Student Allocation (BSA) is a critical need for our school districts and our students.

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##### **Teacher and other staffing shortages**

Education funding has a direct impact on the ability to hire and retain teachers as it affects salaries, and also other factors associated with teacher satisfaction such as available instructional resources and support staff, building conditions, and available housing.

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Recruiting and retaining quality educators has a significant impact on student outcomes and we often see the highest teacher turnover in the highest need schools. Virtually every CEE school district member has reported that it is becoming nearly impossible to fill all of their teacher vacancies and we know this is true across the state. Stability for principals and superintendents has also become volatile, which influences overall institutional stability.

I'd like to share an anecdote from one of our school districts to demonstrate what this actually looks like for them.

We currently have three certified vacancies - one elementary teacher, one SPED teacher, and one administrator (middle/high assistant principal). To address the elementary teacher vacancy, we had to collapse three classes into two; both class sizes are now larger than optimal. The SPED teacher vacancy is being addressed by the two other SPED teachers taking on additional caseload responsibilities with stipend pay, and our SPED director is spending a part of the day providing services to our pre-K and homebound students, as well as picking up IEP writing responsibilities for some students. The administrator vacancy has played havoc with our discipline system at the middle/high school, exacerbated when we also lost our behavior specialist for about a month. Our principal is brand-new and has not been able to do some of the key work with instructional coaching, relationship building with staff, parents and students, and our out of school suspension rate at the beginning of the year was very high, as we had no place to put students for ISS. We have finally managed to hire a new assistant principal who is coming on board in a week, but there has been a lot of fallout in terms of staff morale, the principal's self-efficacy, etc.

We have also had to cut several positions over the last few years due to flat funding, and the expiration of COVID funding, including our elementary school counselor (for next year), our music teacher at the elementary school, and the behavior specialist position at the elementary school. This puts a lot more strain on the administrators to support students in a time when mental health issues are rising. Arts and music are also a crucial part of student education, so cutting those impacts both our students, and our community at large which looks forward to student performances each year.

We have seen a large amount of turnover in classified positions - continue to struggle to hire special education paraprofessionals, custodians, and the substitute shortage is REAL. We've had to shut down our high school twice and do remote learning days because we had too many staff out and not enough subs to have any safe way to hold school.

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Affordable available teacher housing is an increasingly prevalent issue for school districts on and off the road system, with appropriate housing simply unavailable in some villages and out of reach for teachers in urban areas due to high housing costs. There is a continued issue with the teacher retirement system, which is one of the top cited factors affecting teacher turnover. Compounding these other issues is the ongoing concern around the lack of perceived value of and respect for educators, education as a profession, and our public education system.

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##### **Condition of school facilities**

Between 2015 and 2022, 1,047 school major maintenance projects were requested and 114 (or 11%) of those have been funded. While the FY23 budget included funding to backfill a serious backlog of REAA construction and major maintenance and school bond debt reimbursement (due to previous years' governor vetoes), the number of projects currently on the major maintenance list is huge (97 current requests total \$217.6 million). There remain many school facilities in serious disrepair, resulting in unsafe, unhealthy environments for children and school staff. Materials costs are skyrocketing, contractors are scarce and expensive, and even routine maintenance has become a challenge.

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The CIP application process is thorough and is set up to ensure that school capital projects are needed, well planned and designed, and a good use of state funding. However, this process, depending on the scope of the project, can cost school districts between \$2-3000 up to \$75,000-\$100,000 to prepare for and submit the CIP application. Getting design teams to rural village schools for these assessments and to prepare cost estimates can be especially expensive. Many school districts use outside assistance to help them put their grant application packets together, which can range from \$2500-10,000, depending on the number of projects. In addition to this initial cost, there is an ongoing cost to reapply when projects are not funded. The application must be updated and the cost to resubmit can run around \$8,000 every two years. This can add up to a significant amount of money for school districts over the years.

But there are also the costs involved with making do in the meantime – working with district maintenance staff or hired contractors to make fixes or repairs that are temporary and insufficient. The costs involved in taking these actions don't solve the problem and are sunk costs for school districts.

What is this like in reality for our school districts? I'd like to share with you just a few scenarios:

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Just so you can see what this looks like in action, I have some photos here of one school to demonstrate some of the maintenance issues that can build up over time and the kind of damage they can result in when not addressed quickly.

- 1.) This school built in 1979 and has never been renovated. The roof is so damaged from snow and ice during the winter that it continually leaks when the temperatures rise above freezing. Rain during the warmer seasons further aggravates the problem. The roof has 3-inch ribs, spaced 8 inches apart, and has over 12 "valleys" which trap precipitation. We have done everything in our capabilities to repair and stop the leaks. The design of the roof does not allow the water to flow down naturally. The snow must be shoveled off every winter by the maintenance crew, who have spent untold hours doing so. During the summer we spend many hours working on large portions of repairing those winter damages, summer after summer. The repairs only seem to last one season.

Insulation has been added in the attic space; we thought we were losing heat through the roof causing the ice dams, but the added insulation made no change. The heavy amount of snow insulates it, then melts causing the leaks.

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- 2.) The school's foundation is deteriorating very quickly. There is so much moisture in the soil underneath the school building and surrounding the school property, that the weight of the building is causing the entire school to sink several inches a year. That same moisture is causing dry rot and warping the building's supporting structure. Hours have been spent re-leveling and replacing the rotting foundation sections every year. It is a losing battle, as more and more moisture damage occurs each year. The leaking roof adds to the problem as the water flows down the wall and onto the foundation. With improper substrate being used (with the foundation) when the building was built, and the added water being placed on the foundation due to the leaking roof, the problem grows rapidly.
- 3.) The school building is located about 500 yards away from the Kuskokwim River. Due to the moisture associated with the river, we have large sections of the school's exterior walls bowing and causing the outside trim to pop off. The continued bowing has increased to the point of warping the window frame, causing window breakage.
- 4.) Also at this school, due to bowing of the building walls and pressure buildup from the sinking ground, the main power box often rips off the side of the school building when the winds blow.

For many of our school districts, these projects once completed will result in significant cost savings due to improved energy efficiency and reduced need for ongoing maintenance and repair. The need for major maintenance for our school districts is real and it is significant. For many schools the need is urgent. For all school districts, the financial impact is substantial, and our children deserve a safe, healthy environment in which to learn.

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I am deeply grateful to you all for your time today and for the time you give every day in service to our State. Thank you for giving your attention to this critical matter