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Opinions

Opinion: Anchorage's shrinking schools aren't inevitable — they're the result of policy choices

By Jesse Bjorkman

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I've taught in Alaska's public schools. I've watched students succeed when they're supported and fall behind when they're not. Today, as a legislator and a parent, I hear the same concern everywhere I go: Are our schools delivering for our kids?

The [ADN editorial board](#) recently argued that Anchorage, and by implication other communities, must “face reality” when it comes to declining enrollment and shrinking schools.

They're right about one thing: The numbers are real.

But the conclusion that school closures and cuts are the responsible path forward is wrong.

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Shrinking enrollment is not the root problem. It's the result of years of policy decisions that have left our education system underfunded, overburdened and under-measured.

If we want different education outcomes, we need to start telling the truth about what's driving K-12 education outcomes.

Public education succeeds when two things are in place: resources and accountability. Right now, Alaska has neither.

Last year, lawmakers increased the BSA and passed reforms with much fanfare. But hidden cost shifts in the education funding formula meant municipal school districts, where most Alaskans live, received millions less in state aid than the year before.

That's right. The big BSA increase that folks talked about delivered millions of dollars less money to school districts than the previous year because of increased assessed property values.

Combined with rising costs, the fiscal impact has been severe. We need to stop penalizing school districts for rising property values and expecting local taxpayers to pick up the tab. That's why I've introduced a solution to choke back this cost shift through the Senate Education Committee in [Senate Bill 278](#).

On top of funding increases that deliver less money for the students in Alaska's largest school districts, the state has passed major mandates like the Alaska Reads Act without fully funding them. Districts are forced to redirect limited resources to comply, often at the expense of middle and high school programs.

That's not reform. That's robbing Peter to pay Paul.

Unfunded policies have real consequences. Larger class sizes. Fewer electives. Reduced support for students who need it most. Families notice. When they lose confidence, they make different choices. They leave our schools and communities.

Alaskans are right to expect a return on their investment in public education. But we have failed to define, measure and communicate what success looks like, especially for high school students.

In early grades, we've made progress at confirming individual reading and math growth. But beyond that, we still lack a clear, statewide system to measure whether students graduate ready for college, careers or technical training. Forty-two other states have established those measurable benchmarks. Alaska has not.

I have introduced [Senate Bill 209](#) to establish tangible, accountable statewide goals because their absence creates a vacuum. It fuels skepticism about whether our schools are working. And it makes it harder to build public support for the investment our system needs.

Here we are in a destructive cycle: underfunding and unclear outcomes lead to declining confidence, which leads to declining enrollment, which is then used to

justify more cuts.

The ADN editorial accepts that cycle as reality. I don't.

Closing schools without fixing the underlying problems is not “facing reality.” It's accelerating decline.

Yes, we need to have honest conversations about efficiency. But if consolidation is the only tool we reach for, we're not solving the problem — we're promoting decline.

Alaska needs a different path.

We need to fully fund the policies we pass instead of pushing costs onto local taxpayers. We need to fix the funding formula so communities aren't penalized for economic growth. And we need to establish clear, measurable college and career readiness goals so parents and taxpayers can see whether our system is delivering results.

That's why I've introduced legislation to stabilize school funding and to bring real accountability to student outcomes.

Because Alaskans deserve both.

Alaska's shrinking schools are not inevitable. They are the predictable outcome of choices we've made.

We can choose differently.

But that starts with rejecting the idea that decline is something we simply must accept and committing instead to building a system that earns the confidence of the families it serves.

Sen. Jesse Bjorkman, R-Nikiski, represents the Kenai Peninsula's District D in the Alaska State Legislature.



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