

Investment in public preschool reaps high returns for our children and our economy

During a time of fiscal uncertainty, our organizations would like to highlight an investment Alaska can make that has a projected 7-10% per year return on investment. The long-term impacts of this investment are great enough that it is one of the best we can make. What is it? Investment in public preschool.

For years, a significant amount of research has accumulated that demonstrates the critical benefits of quality pre-elementary programs. These include a reduction in the need for special education and remediation, reduced rates of grade retention, higher school achievement, and increased rates of high school graduation. One of the most important questions we should be asking is not “should we be funding pre-elementary programs in Alaska?” but rather, how can we get our quality pre-elementary programs to more of our children?

In his recent budget proposal, Governor Dunleavy eliminated all funding for our Pre-K programs. If this budget were to pass, Alaska would join only seven other states in the country that offer no public pre-school program. At a time when we are focused on how to improve education outcomes for all Alaska children, eliminating public pre-school seems misguided at best. We must retain funding for our Pre-K programs.

The people of Alaska agree. In a recent survey conducted by a coalition of education advocacy groups called “The Great Work of Alaska’s Public Schools,” 74% of Alaskans polled say they support state-funded public pre-school. You can find a link to survey results at <http://www.alaskaacsa.org/new-survey/>.

The most recent data from Alaska’s Department of Education and Early Development shows that nearly 70% of our current-year kindergarten students were not able to meet developmental goals that would be considered age appropriate for kindergarten entry, yet only about 10% of Alaska’s 4-year olds are enrolled in our state-funded public pre-school programs. We must ensure access to high quality pre-school programs to more of our children.

When students arrive at kindergarten several years behind their same-age peers in academic readiness, schools are asked to help them make up years of academic progress during a single school year. Frequently, these students are unable ever to catch up. High-quality early childhood education is particularly important to meet the needs of students in chronically struggling schools and districts. Access to these programs can help close achievement gaps, putting students on a more successful school trajectory. We support Senate Bill 6, which would expand Pre-K to our highest need school districts, and eventually throughout the state.

National long-term studies demonstrate that investment in the developmental growth of at-risk children is one of the most effective strategies for economic growth, even

during a budget crisis. High quality pre-school has been shown to have long-term impacts on socioeconomic, behavioral, and health conditions including employment, better health outcomes, reduced need for social services, lower criminal justice costs, and increased self-sufficiency and productivity among families.

Eliminating our public pre-school programs would move us in the wrong direction and demonstrates a lack of vision for Alaska. Let's sustain our pre-school programs and seek opportunities such as Senate Bill 6 to expand access to pre-school for our highest-need students. Investing in Alaska's pre-school programs is one of the most critical investments we can make in the future success of our children and our state.

Submitted by:

Dr. Lisa Skiles Parady is executive director of the Alaska Council of School Administrators, a nonprofit umbrella for the Alaska Superintendents Association, the Alaska Association of Elementary School Principals, the Alaska Association of Secondary School Principals, and the Alaska Association of School Business Officials.

www.alaskaacsa.org

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Elizabeth Skiles Parady". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized 'P'.

Norm Wooten is Executive Director of the Association of Alaska School Boards. Our membership consists of more than 330 school board members statewide who are responsible for students attending Alaska's public schools. <https://aasb.org>

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Norm Wooten". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized 'W'.

Sarah Sledge is the Executive Director of the Coalition for Education Equity a statewide organization representing Alaska school districts, organizations, and individuals to champion a quality, equitable, and adequate public education for every Alaska child.

www.ceequity.org

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Sarah Sledge". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized 'S'.