

NEA Alaska Chief Frustrated With Declining School Funding

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Jay Barrett/KMXT

Each summer over 10,000 National Education Association presidents and others associated with the union gather to discuss issues facing education. They are in Atlanta this year, they will consider positions on education policy, and conduct union business. Ron Fuhrer, president of NEA-Alaska is at this year's assembly. He said a lot of the national issues discussed there apply to the state, as well. He expressed concern about how those outside education are always trying to "reform" it.

"We believe, unfortunately, that those folks outside of education that are trying to reform education don't understand it's the students; it's all about the students," Fuhrer (pronounced "fer") said. "For example in Alaska, unfortunately, we are now facing a fourth consecutive year of no net increase to the base student allocation.

The base student allocation is the minimum amount of money the state gives schools, based on enrollment. He said it is an especially frustrating issue in Alaska, given the state's oil wealth:

"It's been highly frustrating to have one of, if not the only, state that has seen billion dollar surpluses in revenues to the state and at the same time not putting one dollar increase into the base student allocation, which funds the classroom," Fuhrer said. "You know, we keep hearing that until better results are achieved, we're not going to increase education funding, but at the same time by not increasing the base student allocation, is a one to two percent decrease in education funding in four years. And how anyone can believe we going do more with less, how they can see that as a realistic plan for public education it's... I can't see it at all."

Fuhrer says one of the byproducts of reducing student spending include more crowded classrooms, which then lead to more problems down the road. He said he hopes school districts around Alaska value what teachers do enough that they don't axe instructors first when cuts are needed.

"While, yes, we need to have effective supervisors, we believe that if the priority is the opportunities for students to be successful — they're not going to be successful without a teacher," he said. "And yes, some districts may have excess administration or excess administrative costs. But the bottom line is, 'How will students be impacted by the actions take as a school board?' I hope that's their guiding principal."

This past winter the Alaska Legislature considered creating school vouchers, where the state would give public funds to parents to spend on their choice of private or religious school for their children. While it went nowhere this year, it will come up again in January. Fuhrer said the state constitution forbids such a move without an amendment, which he says is a long-shot. He says education reform can't be achieved through taking funds away from public education.

Another development this year in Alaska is the governor finally applied for a waiver offered by the Obama Administration that would let the state skirt the No Child Left Behind

mandates.

“I think that’s a good thing,” Fuhrer said. “Alaska has always struggled with that, if you will, one-size-fits-all legislation. Alaska is quite different in many aspects, especially in rural Alaska where teachers have to teach multiple courses. And of course under NCLB, No Child Left Behind, teachers had to be highly-qualified in the courses that they thought, and that made it almost impossible in rural Alaska to be highly qualified in all areas.”

Fuhrer taught social studies at Clark Middle School in Anchorage for 26 years and another four teaching economics and math at McLaughlin Youth Center. He has been president of NEA-Alaska for one year.