

Our view: Make grade, tuition paid

Governor aims to help Alaskans with generous scholarships

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Gov. Sean Parnell wants to reward good high school performance with scholarships that could cover 100 percent of in-state college or vocational tuition -- and pay for it with an endowment from the state's \$8 billion in reserve funds. This would be a sound investment in Alaska's present and future.

The Governor's Performance Scholarship would pay for 100 percent of college or other accredited post-secondary tuition for students with an A average in high school.

B students would earn 75 percent tuition coverage.

C-plus students would qualify for 50 percent.

All students would have to earn their grades in a curriculum that included four years of math and language arts and three years of social studies. The idea is to have students better prepared for college or other advanced schooling -- and to provide Alaska with a smarter work force.

Our state now beats the national average for high school graduates among residents 25 and older -- 91.6 percent of the population versus 85 percent. But a middling 27.3 percent of Alaskans -- slightly less than the national average -- are college graduates.

Alaska can afford to do better.

To pay for the scholarships, the governor wants lawmakers to set aside \$400 million from the Constitutional Budget Reserve. Earnings from that endowment -- say \$20 million a year at 5 percent -- would send high-performing Alaskans to further schooling. That's a reasonable and wise use of our reserves, although it will require some thinking outside the usual budget-reserve box -- the kind of thinking you get with a well-educated legislature.

Parnell's plan is based strictly on merit. There's no consideration of financial need. Make the grade, and the state pays for more schooling in Alaska.

Sen. Johnny Ellis, along with Rep. David Guttenberg in the House, has for three years been working on an aid bill that would award achievement, but make those awards based on financial need. Despite the differences, Ellis was delighted that the governor has made financial aid to Alaska students a priority.

"It's exciting to me that the governor has put his personal horsepower behind this," Ellis said Tuesday. "He's made it more of a bipartisan issue."

Bipartisanship should help the governor and lawmakers work out debatable details. For example, should four years of math be mandatory? Some otherwise talented students may be excluded by that requirement.

Strictly merit-based scholarships will help many hard-working students who couldn't otherwise afford tuition -- or who would have to take out thousands in loans and graduate in debt.

But other hard-working students of meager means could be left out in the cold even with partial help. That C-plus student who may not have 4.0 ability and tries to work, pay rent and go to school to make a better life for herself is worth the investment, too.

Sen. Ellis' needs-based approach and Gov. Parnell's performance-based proposal don't need to be mutually exclusive. The emphasis on merit and achievement in a solid curriculum is good. But every young Alaskan who's willing to learn and has something to contribute should be able to go on to school. We have the means. And with the governor in the game, now the Legislature should have the will.

BOTTOM LINE: Scholarships for Alaska students who make the grade should be a priority for lawmakers in 2010.