

Cameron Blackwell, June Nelson Memorial Scholarship 2020

Serving as the sole Student Representative for the Kenai Peninsula Borough School Board has truly been enlightening. In a time period when our state's budget is constantly in flux while the Governor, legislators, and borough assembly members try to make ends meet, I have learned a tremendous amount about the give-and-take process of helping govern and representing people. As a student in the fourth largest school district in Alaska from kindergarten through senior year, I have witnessed the ongoing struggle of allocating funding for education first-hand. I am truly passionate about education and the budget challenges Alaska faces truly hits close to home. Aside from my family and friends, my schools and district are my strongest community and I am extremely passionate about trying to help ensure everyone experiences a good quality of life through education and living a healthy lifestyle. You can imagine my reaction when the issue of teacher healthcare coverage becoming a deal breaker for teacher contracts; I was very concerned.

As I ran for the position of Student Representative to the School Board, I knew I would thrive due to the strength of my listening skills. Whether it was listening to a classmate who was having home troubles or taking calls from distressed friends, listening has always been a strong characteristic I possess. This skill, though seemingly simple, has the potential to prevent conflicts, make friendships, and, prominent in my case, help and represent people. I feel honored to represent my peers and community in a multitude of ways through my work as the Site-based Council Student Representative, Student Body President, Bishop's Attic Board of Directors Student Representative, as well as other elected positions I have held. However, my work as my School District's Student Representative to the board of education has truly put my leadership skills to the test.

As I walked into my second meeting as an official board member, I had multiple people warn me about what I was about to witness. Hearing this really concerned me and made me apprehensive. I knew that negotiations regarding teacher and administrative contracts were occurring due to the high cost of healthcare but what I did not know was the intensity that this meeting would produce. After hours of teachers, many of whom I would see at school the next day, voicing their concerns and suggestions of striking, there was no consensus. It was such a difficult position to be in because I care so much about my teacher and support staff's quality of life. I agree healthcare costs are exorbitant, but I also understand the precarious state of Alaska's budget and the fact that we are deficit spending. I felt it was incumbent on me to be conservative when it came to spending money that is not in the budget, but I also felt strongly that the outrageous cost of healthcare was resulting in some of the best teachers in my district to leave. I also knew it put the district in a position where recruiting quality teachers was challenging if not impossible.

Education is a crucial factor in creating a thriving community, state, and society, and committed, passionate teachers prove to be vital to that success. Teachers can create an excitement for learning which influences students' entire lives. Many meetings, disagreements, and debates later and thankfully, a compromise was accomplished. Even though my vote was just an advisory vote, I believe I honed the important skills of compromise and empathy. I also learned to listen to both sides of an argument and how to govern in tumultuous times. These meetings reiterated a tremendously important issue to me as I plot my career path going forward; the importance of a strong healthcare system and why I want to pursue a career in the medical field.