

In March of 2019, Alaska Governor Dunleavy proposed a sweeping list of cuts to the Alaska State budget including a significant slashing of public education. I had an issue with this and knew that many of my peers did as well. I looked on as several schools across Alaska staged walk-outs as protests. My peers and I wanted to have our voices heard, but to me, leaving school seemed counterintuitive to defending it.

And so I composed a statement on the matter, actively denouncing these cuts. I paralleled shrinking resources to an earlier era of Alaskan education, one of one-room schoolhouses in which students were all funneled into the same category of needs and abilities as the funds for personalized learning are diminished.. I spoke on the great detriment which reducing the education budget would bring to the future of Alaska, reducing the levels of education and ensuring the state would never be able to diversify its economy and progress beyond a majority hard labor workforce. That night I printed numerous copies of the letter and signature sheets. I contacted over a dozen people from within my student government organization to aid me with the next step. Over the next few days we set about gathering signatures from the student body. I spent every passing period and every lunch period talking to people about the situation, sharing the letter, gathering signatures. What I found were people truly interested in the future of their community and in having their interests heard.

I personally spoke with over one-hundred individuals. I would start by asking if they had a minute to talk about something very important. Out of everyone I asked, not one person said no. Every single person was willing to hear what I had to say. Then as I would go on to ask if they had already heard about the situation, I was pleasantly surprised to find that nearly half of them had and already held an opinion on it. Those who hadn't, listened attentively as I

summarized the situation, before then thinking carefully on the matter. After I had finished presenting my summary, my audience would overwhelmingly then choose to read the letter itself, before signing their name to it and wish me luck in collecting more signatures.

I did meet a few people however who didn't agree with my sentiments for various reasons. I would listen to their reasoning and then often respond with my own. I may not have convinced them to change their or even had my own mind changed, but I walked away from each of those discussions with a greater perspective on the issue and now able to address the issue from alternate directions than I previously considered.

After a few days of collecting hundreds of signatures I signed it myself as Student-Body President and consolidated all of the signatures and the letter into one document which I sent to both the office of the Governor and the North Pole area Senator and Representative. I received responses from both of my locally elected officials, thanking me for the letter and expressing similar concerns; the Governor's office sent no response.

I believe this experience was invaluable to me personally. After so many years of being told that the general populous, especially young people, couldn't care much less about the direction of their government, the opposite was proven. Everyone I talked to wanted to hear what I had to say. Everyone I talked to wanted to consider the issue before signing their names to it. Everyone I talked to wanted to have their voices heard. I walked away from this not with some promise from the Governor that education would never be cut again, but an understanding of the relationship between people and their government. I believe firmly that people generally do care about their communities and do want to help them in any way possible, but they often don't know how to. They sometimes need to be actively engaged with. That's what we've seen time

and time again throughout history, the most effective movements are built on the foundation of amplification of the people's speech through a community, not single individuals. Civic engagement is of benefit to a community, but it cannot exist without a community in the first place.