



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

OFFICE OF ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY

MAY 17 2006

The Honorable Roger Sampson
Commissioner of Education
Alaska Department of Education & Early Development
Goldbelt Place
801 West Tenth Street, Suite 200
Juneau, Alaska 99801-1894

Dear Commissioner Sampson:

Thank you for submitting a proposal for the U.S. Department of Education's (Department) growth-based accountability model pilot project. I realize that our timelines were tight and sometimes inconvenient; I appreciate the work you and your staff have done to participate in this effort so far. The Department continues to believe that this pilot project can help determine whether growth models will, most importantly, provide a fair, reliable, and innovative mechanism for holding schools accountable for ensuring that all students reach grade-level standards in reading and mathematics by 2013-14.

As you know, the Department determined that the Alaska growth model proposal seemed poised to meet the seven core principles outlined by Secretary Spellings in her letter on November 21, 2005. As such, Alaska's proposal was forwarded to a group of peer reviewers who met on April 17-18, 2006. The range of changes and the number of conditions that the peer reviewers indicated would be required for Alaska's model to be acceptable would be tantamount to writing a new proposal. On that basis, the Department is not approving the Alaska proposal. To explain our decision, in addition to the information in this letter, I am providing two pieces of information: 1) the peer report for Alaska; and 2) a document produced by the peer review team that outlines several general themes and cross-cutting concerns raised during the peer review, although not necessarily specific to Alaska's proposal. My staff and I are willing to discuss this information with you to help refine Alaska's proposal.

The peers identified several strengths in Alaska's proposal: the model was simple and easy to understand, thus ensuring that educators, parents and the public would better understand accountability, and the overall proposal demonstrated a commitment to education reform. However, the peers also raised significant specific concerns regarding

Alaska's proposal. (Please refer to the enclosed peer report for details.) The peers were particularly concerned about the rigor of the individual growth target of one year's growth plus $\frac{1}{4}$ of the gap towards proficiency combined with annually resetting these targets. In effect, some students could be counted as "proficient" (i.e., meeting the growth target) every year but never actually achieve grade-level standards (represented by the proficiency score of 300). As a result, the growth model proposal did not support the goal of ensuring all students reach grade-level standards in reading and mathematics by 2013–14. Since Alaska's model only applies growth calculations to students who are not proficient, the model effectively ignores students who are currently proficient but whose growth estimates put them at risk for becoming non-proficient. Empirical data from several States suggest this is a problem because a substantial number of students who are currently achieving on grade level do not seem poised to continue achieving at such a level in future grades. The peers were willing to entertain a model that calculated growth for all students even if the trajectories were not used for all students in adequate yearly progress (AYP) determinations; however, their other concerns with Alaska's proposal outweighed their interest in this approach. These and additional concerns are presented in the peer report that is enclosed.

The Department will rigorously evaluate the approved proposals, review information on how the pilot project is working, and share the results with other States, policymakers, and the public. With the knowledge gained from the approved growth models, the Department will be able to make an informed decision on whether to expand the pilot project beyond the 2006–07 school year.

In addition, the Secretary's initial announcement made clear that approval of a growth model for the pilot would also be contingent upon meeting several "bright line" principles. As you have been recently notified, Alaska is not currently in compliance with the requirements of Title II of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act*, as amended by the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, because the State has not yet submitted data on the number and percentage of special education classes taught by a highly qualified teacher. Before we can consider a second proposal from Alaska, please work with René Islas of my staff to resolve this matter.

Assuming this Title II matter can be resolved, with this letter I am inviting Alaska to consider the peer reviewers' feedback and submit a revised proposal by September 15, 2006. Our intent is that the Department will again conduct an initial review and advance acceptable proposals to a second peer review to take place in mid-October that will be organized solely for Alaska and the five other States who have advanced to this point in the process. If successful, Alaska's growth model could be approved for implementation for the 2006–07 school year. If Alaska decides not to revise its current proposal based on this feedback and submit a revised proposal by September 15, or cannot resolve the Title II matter in time, please note that the Department would welcome a new proposal from Alaska along with other States later this year. These proposals would be due to us by November 1, 2006. The limit of approved plans through this pilot, however, will remain at ten.

Again, I appreciate your interest in the growth model pilot project and your continued efforts to ensure quality education for all children.

Sincerely,



Henry L. Johnson

Enclosures

cc: Governor Frank Murkowski
Les Morse