UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
OFFICE OF ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY

JAN 0 8 2009

Honorable Larry LeDoux
Commissioner of Education
Alaska Department of Education and Early Development
801 West 10th Street, Suite 200
Juneau, Alaska 99801-1894

Dear Commissioner LeDoux:

As we approach our seventh year of implementing the accountability provisions of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, I want to take a moment to thank you and your colleagues for all your hard work to help realize the goals of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB) which has led to real and meaningful improvements in student achievement. These outcomes are due, in no small part, to the efforts of the dedicated educators in your state. We have seen an increased attention on high expectations for every child, an improvement in student performance across the board and a decrease in achievement gaps.

As Secretary Spellings is fond of saying, "what gets measured, gets done." With that in mind, I want to take this opportunity to update you on the status of some NCLB cornerstones with respect to Alaska. Detailed information on specific components of your state's assessment and accountability system is contained in an attachment to this letter.

- Assessment system: An assessment system that produces valid and reliable results is fundamental to an accountability system that holds schools and districts accountable for educating all students. Please accept my congratulations on Alaska's standards and assessment system meeting all statutory and regulatory provisions required for reading/language arts and mathematics as of 2006-07. Information regarding both the reading/language arts and mathematics assessment system used in determining adequate yearly progress for schools and districts in your state as well as details of the 2007–08 administration of science assessments are attached.

- Accountability components: The Department's new Title I regulations provide for greater scrutiny to states' accountability systems, including establishing a uniform and more accurate measure of calculating high school graduation rate that is comparable across states and requiring that states ensure that statistical measures maximize the inclusion of students and student subgroups in accountability determinations. Hence, the regulations also require that all states submit portions of their Accountability Workbook for peer review. In the attachment to this letter you will find information on Alaska's minimum group size, annual measurable objectives, confidence interval, full academic year definition, and graduation rate.

- Departmental flexibilities: Over the past several years, the Secretary has offered several flexibilities to states, such as growth model and differentiated accountability pilots, assessing students with disabilities and recently arrived limited English proficient (LEP) students, and discretionary grant programs, such as the Teacher Incentive Fund, Enhanced Assessment Grants, and State Longitudinal Data System Grants. I am pleased to note that Alaska is participating in several of these endeavors.
  - Growth Model Pilot: The Department first approved Alaska to use its growth model in making AYP determinations in July 2007 and renewed this approval in July 2008 on December 22, 2008 granted a four year extension for use of the growth model through 2011–12.

- Supplemental Education Services Pilot: All districts in Alaska were approved to reverse the order of supplemental educational services and public school choice in the 2008–09 school year.
- Districts in Need of Improvement Pilot: The Anchorage School District has been approved to be a supplemental education services provider for schools in the district since 2006–07.
- Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) Grant: Chugach School District; Amount $3,529,079 ($1,278,773 in Year 1, $1,204,256 in Year 2, and $1,046,050 in Year 3).
- Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems Grant: Alaska Department of Education and Early Development Unity Project: Data Mining for Student Success; Amount: $3,506,757

In addition, for your information, I am enclosing a file that provides information across all states on the current assessment status, participation in flexibilities offered by the Department, AYP information, and discretionary grants. I wish you continued success in raising the achievement in Alaska. NCLB has focused our attention on closing achievement gaps and increasing the awareness of those students who have often been left behind: economically disadvantaged, limited English proficient, and students with disabilities. I have enjoyed the opportunity to work with you and all your colleagues across the country on such important issues.

Sincerely,

Kerri L. Briggs, Ph.D.

Enclosures

cc: Governor Sarah Palin
Les Morse

Assessment System

Your assessment system met the requirements to be considered *Fully Approved*. This means Alaska's system includes academic content standards in reading/language arts, mathematics, and science; student achievement standards in reading/language arts and mathematics; alternate achievement standards for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities in reading/language arts and mathematics; and assessments and alternate assessments in each of grades 3 through 10 in reading/language arts and mathematics and meets all statutory and regulatory requirements. I encourage you to consider whether there are any areas in which the Department can provide or facilitate technical assistance to Alaska as you consider changes to your current assessment system.

- Alaska's science assessments are not yet fully compliant.
  - In 2007–08, the Department required that the state meet four minimal criteria related to the content area of science: have science content standards; have a general and alternate science assessment; include all students in one of the science assessments (i.e., either the general or alternate); and report the results of the science assessments. Alaska has met these requirements.
  - In 2008–09, the Department will conduct peer reviews of science assessments and expects the assessments to be fully compliant. Beginning with the 2008–09 school year, science assessments will be included in the states' assessment status. For additional detail, please see the enclosed fact sheet. I know that Alaska submitted evidence regarding the science assessments for peer review and will be receiving feedback shortly.

Accountability System

- Minimum group size (the state-defined minimum number of students necessary to have valid and reliable AYP determinations): Alaska's minimum group size is 25. (The average across all states is approximately 30 students.)
- Annual measurable objectives (AMO) (the yearly target for the percentage of students required to be proficient or above for a school to make AYP):
  - 2008–09: Alaska's goal for this year is 77 percent of grades 3-8 and high school students scoring proficient in reading/language arts and 66 percent of grades 3-8 and high school students scoring proficient in mathematics.
  - AMO type: Alaska set its AMOs consistent with the statutory requirements, using a mixed method. This means that Alaska's AMOs first increased after two years, then in three-year increments, then annually starting in 2010-11 through 2013–14 to reach 100 percent proficient.
- Confidence interval: The state applies a confidence interval of 99 percent.
- Full academic year definition (for purposes of determining whether a student's score must be included in AYP determinations): In Alaska, a student must be enrolled on October 1 in order to be included in AYP determinations.
- Graduation rate:
  - Currently, Alaska is using a graduation rate that can be described as a completer rate, which is the number of graduates divided by the number of graduates plus number of dropouts for each of the past four years.
  - As required by the recently issued Title I regulations, states must report graduation rate data, in the aggregate and disaggregated by subgroup, using the four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate beginning with report cards providing assessment results for the 2010-11 school year.
  - The graduation rate target Alaska requires for the district or school to make AYP is 55.58 percent or improvement from the previous year.
  - According to the National Governor's Association (NGA) 2008 report *Implementing Graduation Counts: State Progress to Date, 2008*, Alaska "is taking steps to implement the NGA Compact 4-year graduation rate by 2008."

SUMMARY OF ADDITIONAL EVIDENCE THAT ALASKA MUST SUBMIT TO MEET ESEA REQUIREMENTS FOR SCIENCE STANDARDS AND ASSESSMENTS

2.0 - ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT STANDARDS

GENERAL AND ALTERNATE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT STANDARDS IN SCIENCE ASSESSMENTS

Evidence of final academic achievement descriptors and cut scores, a description of the process used to establish these descriptors and cut scores, and evidence of their formal adoption. (2.2)
Evidence of science content experts and diverse stakeholder involvement in the development of the academic achievement standards. (2.6)
Documentation that reports include the number and percent of the students with disabilities assessed on alternate assessments based on alternate academic achievement standards in science, and included in the general science assessments (with appropriate accommodations). (2.3.2.c)

4.0 - TECHNICAL QUALITY

GENERAL AND ALTERNATE SCIENCE ASSESSMENTS

Documentation of validity and reliability. (4.1 and 4.2)
Evidence of consistency of scores over time. (4.2.c)
Evidence that the science assessments are fair and accessible to all students. (4.3)
Evidence that the use of accommodations and/or alternate assessments yield meaningful scores. (4.3.d)
Documentation of criteria for scoring, analysis and reporting. (4.5.a)
Documentation that the State has a system for monitoring and improving the on-going quality of its science assessments. (4.5.b)
Evidence that the State monitors the availability and implementation of accommodations for use during science assessments. (4.6.e)

5.0 - ALIGNMENT

ALTERNATE SCIENCE ASSESSMENTS

A plan and timeline for strengthening the alignment of the ExGLEs to the PSGLEs and the AA-AAS items to the ExGLEs on operational test items where the alignment study, which was conducted on pilot items, indicates any potential weakness.

6.0 - INCLUSION

GENERAL AND ALTERNATE SCIENCE ASSESSMENTS

Evidence that all students in the grades tested are included in the science assessments.(6.1)

7.0 - ASSESSMENT REPORTS

GENERAL AND ALTERNATE SCIENCE ASSESSMENTS

Evidence that the State's reporting system facilitates appropriate, credible, and defensible interpretation and use of its assessment data. (7.1)

Copies of the State score reports for each grade tested for the general and alternate assessment showing:

Number of students enrolled and percent or number tested/not tested; and

Participation and assessment results at the school, LEA, and state levels for all students and for all required subgroups. (7.2)

Copies of the State score reports for the general and alternate assessment at the student level showing:

Results in terms of the State's academic achievement standards;

The inclusion of information for parents, teachers, and principals that helps them understand and address the specific academic needs of students, including a description of what students know and can do at different performance levels, in a format and language that is understandable, and is accompanied by interpretive guidance. (7.3)

The timeline for delivering score reports to districts. (7.3.c)

Evidence that electronic transmissions of score data are secure. (7.4)

Documentation that the State provides itemized score reports by subdomains or standards. (7.5)