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Senator Shelley Hughes

District M – Palmer, Butte, Lazy Mountain, Gateway, and Knik-Fairview

May 10, 2023

Dear (Acting) Commissioner of the Department of Education and Early Development:

I am proud to support the conditional approval of Alaska Bible College's Elementary Education Program by your department and respectfully request that you grant it.

This new Bachelor of Arts program at Alaska Bible College (ABC) will provide a new pathway in our state for Alaskans to pursue a teaching degree. As you are well aware, there is a national dearth of K-12 teachers and the number in the training pipeline at universities and colleges across the states has dwindled compared to previous decades. The high vacancy rate in teacher positions in Alaska is even more acute than in the lower 48, especially in the rural areas. In addition, our "pipeline" suffered a setback when the teaching degree program at our state's largest university lost its accreditation at its Anchorage campus. Adding an option for college-bound students in Alaska to become teachers right now is timely and would be tremendously helpful.

I cannot recommend your conditional approval of the elementary school teacher training program without emphasizing the attentiveness ABC gives to understanding the culture and needs unique to Alaska, Alaska Natives, and our rural villages. Many of their students are from the rural areas of the state and hope to return to their communities. A teacher training program at ABC would help prepare students to fill positions in rural districts with a culturally relevant understanding. This is essential if we are going to reverse the high turnover rates in villages and rural hub cities, but more important – and extremely pivotal at this point in time – is that teacher preparation that includes this component will benefit our children to help improve their learning outcomes.

Sadly and currently, student proficiency rates are hovering at a rate of only about 30% in Alaska in various subjects and at various grade levels. In some communities, even fewer students are proficient. We need teachers who can relationally connect with students, understand and relate to the uniqueness of our communities, as well as offer high-quality and inspiring instruction to elementary students. The program at ABC will be geared to train teachers in this way.

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By adding the Elementary Education Program to their degree offerings, students graduating from teaching training will provide value to our education system and our state now and for years to come. Your conditional approval of this program will help make this a reality.

Respectfully,

Shelley Hughes

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