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## Regime change needed at school district

When folks talk about economic development in Juneau they rarely mention the quality of Juneau's schools. That's a mistake.

As I noted in an earlier column ("The recession and Juneau's economic prospects," March 9) Juneau has a lot going for it in the economic development sweepstakes - magnificent scenery and an unpolluted environment; a good airport, a university, and good medical infrastructure. What Juneau doesn't have is quality high schools, and that deficiency is now Juneau's No. 1 economic development problem.

Attracting and keeping the high-paying jobs that are key to Juneau's growth will be increasingly difficult if the people holding those jobs don't wish to continue living here when their kids reach high school age.

The roots of the quality problem go back years, but the first step in fixing it is saying goodbye to Peggy Cowan, Juneau's personable but ineffective superintendent of schools. Under Cowan's tenure academic performance in Juneau's high schools has plunged.

Consider graduation rates. The state Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) reports that of eight urban school districts in Alaska - Juneau, Anchorage, Fairbanks, Kenai, Ketchikan, Kodiak, Mat-Su and Sitka - Juneau, at 65 percent, is dead last in the percentage of high school students it graduates. Ketchikan and Sitka graduate 83 percent and 87 percent respectively. That Juneau's two neighboring communities have less per capita wealth and lower incomes than Juneau makes this disparity even more deplorable.

"It's definitely a problem," Cowan admitted in an interview, but cited a new federally funded cooperative program she says will improve performance.

Consider the proficiency tests administered to 10th-graders across the state. In 2006, among the eight urban districts, Juneau's 10th graders were in the

lower middle of the pack, ranking 5th, 6th and 2nd respectively in the percentage of students testing proficient in reading, writing and math. But in 2007, 10th graders' proficiency in reading and writing nosedived to the bottom, ranking 8th out of eight in both subjects.

Or consider the annual yearly progress (AYP) requirements established by Congress. Juneau-Douglas High School doesn't meet them, and has failed to meet them for five years in a row. It is fortunate JDHS doesn't receive any federal Title I education aid, because if it did, the state would have been required to step in and take corrective action, potentially taking over administration of the school.

Cowan suggests the AYP requirement really doesn't mean much because other urban high schools also are falling short of the standards. DEED reports show some comparable high schools also have failed to meet the targets.

Not everything is bad at JDHS or at the district. There are good teachers and good administrators working there, though not as many as there should be, nor is there evidence that Cowan has provided the leadership they need to do their best.

Students continue to do well in math. But if Cowan has figured out what it was that the district has been doing right in math, she has not transferred that success to other subjects.

Academic performance is not the only area where Cowan's leadership has been questioned. Many in Juneau believe the school district misrepresented the cost and demographic reasons for building a new high school, revealing the full story to the public only after the project was underway. Cowan disagrees, but did not dispute that the district has lost credibility with voters and the borough Assembly. That loss will make it difficult to gain assembly and voter support for future school capital projects, even if they are properly planned and badly needed.

Critics fault Cowan for a style that they say focuses on crisis management to the neglect of longer-term planning. They say getting the new high school working has become an overriding crisis priority, diverting resources that should be used to insure that third-grade kids can read at third-grade level, a top predictor of later high school graduation rates. They also fault her for being lax on accountability.

"Once a program gets funded, it rarely has to justify its continued existence," said Margo Waring, a Juneau School Board member who decided to call it quits when her term expires later this year.

Cowan's contract with the district expires in June 2009. With the departure of Waring and another member who decided not to run, voters have two

vacant School Board seats to fill in the October municipal election. Three good candidates are running for those seats. Let's hope the new members and at least a couple of incumbents on the seven-member board recognize that the time has come for new leadership at the Juneau School District.

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