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Home News Voices Features Sports Community Obituaries More

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 Guest contributor
 Jan 26

Alaska legislators lead the way to better governing



The Alaska State Capitol on Jan. 15, 2026. (Laurie Craig / Juneau Independent)

By Lisa Weissler

The winter of 2026 is a time of unsettled and unsettling politics for Alaska and the country. In Alaska, a deepening fiscal crisis is exacerbated by the federal administration's cuts or holds on federal funds appropriated by Congress, including funds for education, work programs, health care, energy projects, disaster relief and food assistance programs.

Gov. Mike Dunleavy has found common cause with the federal administration even though the federal cuts are worsening the state's budget predicament and hurting Alaskans' quality of life. As in years past, in place of a sensible budget plan, Dunleavy continues to push for large Permanent Fund dividends for individual Alaskans to the detriment of funding for public

Archives

February 2026 (122)

January 2026 (323)

December 2025 (285)

November 2025 (257)

October 2025 (285)

September 2025 (285)

August 2025 (259)

July 2025 (319)

June 2025 (101)

services and Alaska's communities.

Yet all is not lost. Last year, state House and Senate members put aside their differences and organized as multi-party majorities. Passing a balanced budget and increasing education funding topped the majorities' priority list for the 2025 legislative session. Though they were unable to reach agreement on new revenue measures, legislators succeeded at ending the session with a balanced budget that included funding for various education-related programs and projects, and a much-needed boost to the base rate amount of state funds allocated per student.

When Gov. Dunleavy vetoed the legislation raising the per student base rate, legislators took the rarest of legislative actions and overrode the governor's veto. Even rarer, the 46 votes for the override featured a mix of Democrats, Republicans, independents and unaffiliated members.

In a House Majority press release, Majority Leader Kopp said of the override vote, "Rejecting an 'all or nothing' gridlock, this is a beginning. Compromise is essential; continued division only hurts our children. It's time for progress over posturing."

Following the end of the regular legislative session, Alaska legislators continued to defy the odds. During a special session last summer, they restored education funding vetoed by Dunleavy. They also overrode the governor's veto of a bill to ensure public oversight of oil and gas tax audits, helping protect potentially billions of dollars in state oil and gas revenue.

Balancing the budget, increasing education funding and passing public interest legislation were notable actions in that legislators of different political persuasions did their job in a way not often seen in today's political climate. They disagreed, they debated, they compromised. They did what they could to keep Alaska's economy afloat, maintain public services and fulfill their commitment to Alaska's children's education. They stood together against a governor who put his own dogma above the public good.

The 2026 legislative session is off to a less auspicious start with Republican minority members failing to provide the needed votes to override the governor's veto of legislation to increase state corporate income tax revenue from out-of-state online companies. Still, the multi-party majorities all voted yes for the override and continue to work across party lines. That bodes well for Alaska.

Most importantly, Alaska legislators are setting an example for how to govern as representatives of the people. Alaska is often an outlier when it comes to national politics. This time, it's Alaska leading the way to a more reasonable approach to governing, one that other states and the country would do well to emulate.

• *Lisa Weissler is a retired State of Alaska oil and gas attorney, former legislative staffer and author who lives in Bellingham, Washington, after residing in Juneau for 44 years. Portions of this commentary are from Weissler's book, "Capitol Crude: The Impact of Oil on Alaska Politics," 2nd Edition 2025.*