



The “R Word”: Why It’s Not Okay

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In recent national headlines, there has been a resurgence of a certain “R word” that has been out of favor for more than a decade among state, national, and international organizations that work with individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The Governor’s Council on Disabilities and Special Education (Council) would like to remind everyone: it’s not okay to use this word.

“It hurts people’s feelings and makes them feel bad about themselves just because they were born with an intellectual disability,” — Sabrina Richmond, Juneau resident and Chair of the Alaska Council, and experiences a developmental disability.

This is not about political correctness—it’s about human decency and respect. When the “R word” is used, it dehumanizes an entire group of people, reinforces stigma, and perpetuates exclusion from everyday life. It causes real harm. People with intellectual disabilities and their families report feeling deeply hurt, sad, and devalued when they hear the word.

The Council, along with many other state advocates, urged the Legislature to permanently remove the “R word” from all state statutes, regulations, and policies. With their help, the Respectful Language Bill (HB 88) was passed and signed into law in 2013.

“We purposely decided to remove the ‘R word’ from our state language once and for all, and replace it with ‘intellectual disability,’ ” — Patrick Reinhart, Executive Director of the Council.

Alaska’s law was modeled after Rosa’s Law (2010), a national effort to replace the “R word” with “intellectual disability” in all federal medical and educational laws, regulations, and policies. Nine-year-old Rosa Marcellino and her family inspired this legislation. Her advocacy played a key role in promoting inclusive, people-first language for individuals with intellectual disabilities.

“We are all human beings, and human beings deserve respect and dignity.” — Scott Lindbloom, Palmer resident and Council member who also experiences a developmental disability.

Please join Alaska’s Governor’s Council on Disabilities and Special Education in saying NO to the use of this harmful word.

“Unless, of course, it’s ‘Respect’—we like that word,” — Sabrina Richmond